Entrenched Pedagogy: A History of Stasis in the English Language Arts Curriculum in United States Secondary Schools

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When critiquing the development of the English language arts curriculum in United States secondary schools, Hartwell (1985, 127) is correct in arguing that ‘much current research is not informed by an awareness of the past’. Entrenched pedagogical beliefs about language and learning have dominated English instruction for the past three centuries. This domination occurs because of our inability to grasp the historicity of our discipline, allowing the English language arts (ELA) curriculum to undergo little change since the inception of English studies in public schools through the Committee of Ten report in 1894. Charting the history of English language arts, this essay will demonstrate that the ELA curriculum is essentially static. What many educators call innovation is really reinvention.

In an effort to address the many problems facing English Language Arts (ELA) in the twenty-first century, educators and researchers met in May 2006 to identify possible strategies for ELA reform. In this spirit, the editors of English Education devoted their entire July 2006 edition to reporting the results of the May Conference on English Education Summit. The timing of the conference and report could not have been better, as a 2006 International Reading Association study revealed alarming trends in students’ reading habits. While 65% of kids from ages five to eight deem reading for fun an important activity, only 40% of kids from ages 15 to 17 think so. Furthermore, 14% of kids from ages five to eight call themselves ‘low frequency readers’, while an alarming 65% of kids aged 15–17 identify themselves as such (‘Keeping kids reading’ 2006). These trends are alarming because they undermine the primary goal of ELA courses, the creation of a literate society. Bushman and Haas contend that the inverse of ELA objectives has occurred: ‘Contemporary adult society is a non-reading society, and some studies suggest that people tend to read less as they grow older’ (2006).

The consequences of a burgeoning aliterate society may be felt when over ‘3,000 students with limited literacy skills drop out of high school every day’ (NCTE 2006). Furthermore, while contemporary society demands a high degree of reading ability, only 13% of adults are capable of ‘performing complex literacy tasks’, forcing American businesses to look overseas for qualified workers (NCTE 2006, 4). In the classroom, teachers are forced to overcome the devastating outcomes of aliteracy: incompetence and antipathy. Students who lack a sense of competence disengage themselves from the learning process, afraid or unwilling to overcome their inadequacies. Students who cannot connect literature to their everyday experience become antagonistic towards reading and writing and also disengage themselves because they cannot see the value of their reading. As they inevitably fall behind,
competence issues take root. Thus, while literacy expectations intensify as students matriculate through the grades, antipathy becomes more entrenched.

Yagelski (2005, 265) made the case for an entrenched pedagogy by contending that ‘the structure of formal schooling and the conventional K-12 curriculum has not changed substantially since the advent of widespread compulsory education in the US in the late 19th century’, a fact which Tremmel (2006, 17) confirmed in his comparison of ELA standards and benchmarks from the 1920s to the present. While curricular development has been static, many intense debates about the purpose and function of English education have been waged over the years. The most passionate of these disputes has centred on the role of grammar instruction, a dispute which has cycled repeatedly for generations. A review of the grammar wars helps illustrate how little the ELA curriculum has changed, despite all the fighting.

Numerous studies superbly document the history of grammar instruction in the United States. Noble (1922), for example, traced formal study in Britain back to the seventeenth century. He also traced instruction in the United States back before the Revolution – even Benjamin Franklin called for grammar studies (Noble 1922, 152–3). Despite the many excellent studies, few language arts teachers read them, allowing the debate to continue to the next generation of teachers. Tremmel (2006, 11) is correct when he says that our historical amnesia occurs because we ‘do not, as a rule, think very much about the processes of our own thinking and how those processes shape our discipline’.

Although the grammar debate has only superficially affected the ELA curriculum, we may clearly observe the flow of the debate. Reed Smith (1938, 643) dubbed the grammar wars a ‘pendulum swing’, oscillating for and against direct instruction. An early anti-grammar swing occurred in 1874, as is evident from a teacher’s paper criticising instruction:

Strange as it may seem, there certainly exists a firm impression in the public mind that English grammar teaches the art of speaking and writing the English language correctly. Grammarians themselves have somewhat encouraged that view. But we know that it is all a mistake. English grammar does nothing of the kind. It teaches the art of finding out whether other people speak or write the English language correctly, but its assistance toward our attaining that desirable result is exceedingly apocryphal. (As cited in Nobel 1922, 156)

While Smith perceived a grammar backlash occurring at the turn of the twentieth century, resulting in the elimination of many grammar courses, ‘teachers found that grammar could not be dispensed with as safely and conveniently as had been thought’ (Smith 1938, 637); critics may have loudly expressed their disdain for grammar, but their overall ability to alter curriculum was negligible.

A significant anti-grammar swing occurred in 1963 when the Braddock Report contended that ‘formal instruction did not improve writing and could even be detrimental to writers’ (Martinsen 2000). The Braddock Report created a shift away from ‘product’ writing to ‘process’ writing (Martinsen 2000, 123) and it also instituted ‘a new grammar’ which lasted until the last half of the 1970s, when another perceived ‘crisis in reading and writing abilities occurred’ (Tabbert 1984) spawning the ‘Grammar Wars’ and the ‘Back to Basics’ movement of the 1980s. The outcome of this war was obvious, but this time the grammarians had made converts: Frank O’Hare, a leading figure against the direct instruction of grammar, published The Modern Writer’s Handbook (1992), ‘at least a third of which is traditional grammar’
(Martinsen 2000, 123). Clearly, the parameters of the grammar debate have long been established; what has changed, seemingly, are the players who debate grammar’s ability to enhance writing instruction.

While school systems can be resistant to change, it is important to understand that the ‘sacred tradition’ (Noble 1922) of grammar instruction preserves its hold on the contemporary language arts curriculum because it is a practice dating from long before the creation of public school systems – long before the formation of the United States, in fact. Tressler (1917, 584) explained this when charting the history of English grammar, classifying English grammar as ‘a lineal descendent of the Greek grammar’, a study that initially included ‘reading, literary criticism, politics, history, ethics and philology’. Eventually Latin supplanted Greek usage and dominated curriculum from the middle ages onward. Influenced by Greek models, Latin instruction was ‘not only the study of language and literature, but that of music, astronomy, and philosophy’. Quintilian – like his Greek predecessors – reduced the model so that grammar was a means of obtaining correct writing and speaking and proper decorum.

Bishop Robert Lowth’s *A Shorte Introduction to English Grammar* (1762) serves as the foundational text for grammar books in English and was widely popular until it was eclipsed by Lindley Murray’s *English Grammar* (1795). Murray’s text is highly derivative of Lowth’s; both texts set the pattern for subsequent grammar instruction and were based on Quintilian’s pedagogy. “‘Purity’ in English”, noted Halloran, ‘was to be attained through the practice of emulating classical models and internalizing the grammatical and rhetorical forms’ (2001, 153). Even though many other grammar texts were written, Murray ‘molded the mental set of millions of American school children to the study of English and bears major responsibility for the widespread misconception that “grammar” is the art of adjudicating “right” and “wrong” forms’ (Finnegan, as cited in Glau 1993). Like its Latin and Greek predecessors, English grammar, thus, has always become something to memorise, analyse and dissect in an endeavour to make the language more correct (Tressler 1917, 586). Murray’s text dominated nineteenth-century English and American schools and ran through well over 120 editions; the text became ‘the model for many succeeding grammars’ (Tressler 1917, 586).

Curricular stasis has deep philosophical roots. It may seem odd that English grammar is founded on two ancient dead languages, but the idea that the study of an evolving language would be based on methods for studying static languages does not trouble grammarians like Murray because it fits their world view that all knowledge can be ordered. The driving force behind this philosophy is the Cartesian–Newtonian paradigm, in which ‘the material universe worked according to certain fixed, mechanical laws that could be perceived by mind and counted on with a reasonable degree of certainty’ (Tremmel 2006, 12). As a result of this paradigm, knowledge – like a sentence – was parsed or fragmented, so that the parts could be further analysed (Tremmel 2006, 18). To an extent, this philosophy worked very well for the study of Greek and Latin: these languages were fixed, so they no longer evolve. Moreover, dead languages ‘could not be corrupted by the barbarous uses of the uneducated’ (Wood, as cited in Glau 1993, 421). The limitation of this paradigm is that while we may understand the atomic structure of things such as an animal, and the bits and pieces which comprise that animal, we must also understand how the animal thinks and acts. Hence, we may be able to dissect a language and examine
its composition, but we should never assume such a study to be complete. Language is not dissection; it is the creation of meaning.

Grammar, however, gave teachers of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries a method embodying ‘power and control … one that views students as passive learners who are deficient in their thinking and so are incapable of using a language without a teacher to provide and adjudicate the rules of the language’ (Glau 1993, 418). Furthermore, this same power is exercised by today’s teachers because many ‘of today’s grammars, especially the workbooks with their tear-out pages that are common in basic writing classrooms, are based on the same assumptions – and produce the same pedagogy in today’s colleges’ (Glau 1993, 418).

Reifying this ideology of authoritarian power and mechanical correctness is the social efficiency movement running parallel to the standardisation of the English language curriculum in high schools over the past century. Callahan (1962, 25) revealed how public schools were refashioned to fit business models of the early twentieth century. Scientific management or ‘Taylorism’ sought to get ‘greater productivity from human labour’ through careful analysis of industrial processes as well as the improvement of tools and machines. At first glance, schools necessitated a degree of uniformity: public school enrolment swelled at a tremendous pace from 2.5 million in 1920 to nearly 7 million in 1940 (Counts 1949) and now comprises over 80 million people (Rury 2002). With such huge numbers of students matriculating through school systems, consistent organisational schemes were necessary.

Certainly, the leading figure pushing for ‘efficient’ schools on the pattern of efficient factories was John Franklin Bobbitt, whose initial work went beyond the physical construction of the school building to the creation of the curriculum itself. Bobbitt’s conceptualisation of students being ‘raw material’ (Kliebard 2004) meant that the schools were not to be centres designed to promote learning and democracy; schools were created for ‘the manufacture of a uniform, standardized product’ (Callahan 1962, 139). When determining what was best for children, their interests were subordinate to the needs of a ‘class of individuals’ and society as a whole. Social efficiency experts carefully dissected ‘the total range of human reactivity’ in order to create curricular objectives ‘that comprised human life’ (Kliebard 2004). Since men and women were ‘destined’ for different occupations, equity had no place for education efficiency advocates. A curriculum, therefore, would be created specifically for boys, and one specifically for girls, to eliminate ‘waste’.

On the whole, Bobbitt’s work continues to shape the ELA curriculum. Tremmel (2006) demonstrated that ELA standards and benchmarks from the 1920s to the present are essentially the same. ‘What is bothersome about these parallel lists’, wrote Tremmel, ‘is not simply that they are based on the same pedagogical principals, but that over the last eighty years we are apparently unable to find a better way to represent curricular thinking than listing bits and pieces’ (2006, 17). Unfortunately, educators misunderstand how pervasive the cult of education is. Moreover, since the historical struggles to reform ELA curriculum are too often forgotten, traditional practices persist.

Since grammar is about maximising communication efficiency, it perfectly fits the principles of scientific management. ‘The unqualified teacher now had both a text (a grammar, filled with rules) and an instructional method that would provide something to do in class on Monday morning: drill’ (Glau 1993, 421). As Glau noted, ‘grammars could provide a universal and orderly model of what happened
inside the human brain, a model that could be used to regulate language use’ (1993, 422). Teachers, of course, were to be as passive as their students by applying the centuries-old practice of memorisation and drill without question. Teachers were ‘to do what they were told’ and ultimately, ‘they were to be mechanics, not philosophers’ (Callahan 1962). The grammarian was certainly the epitome of a mechanic, one who regulates and repairs language.

For teachers, ultimately, fundamentally reshaping the curriculum is not a simple thing to do. While many teachers try and are conscious of their students’ interests, their school day is controlled by innumerable external forces. NCLB mandates are not the only factors inhibiting teachers’ efforts to transform the ELA curriculum. Chronicling the application of new instructional techniques in the Iowa Writer’s Workshop, Wilson (1994) contended that teachers not only find resistance to changes in the traditional curriculum, they find outright rejection. A part of the National Writing Project, the Iowa Writer’s Workshop, encourages teachers to move beyond traditional methods in order to see ‘writing as a creative process … in which meanings are made through the active and continued involvement of the writer with the unfolding text’ (Wilson 1994, 4). Wilson found that a major cause for stasis in the ELA curriculum was that teachers lacked time and resources to institute change, so when they returned to the classroom, many failed to implement the new curriculum. One teacher who had actually implemented techniques soon came under fire from the school board for failing to teach essential skills like grammar (44). Another teacher best summarised the problem: ‘In this age of outcomes-based education and fragmentation of content into tidy teaching units, such a holistic approach is not particularly welcomed by those who hold power to institute programmes’ (as cited in Wilson 1994, 30). Ferguson and Brink (2004) have demonstrated that these problems directly affect a teacher’s employment:

New teachers will not be hired … for their ability to be creative, innovative, attuned to the needs of children or knowledgeable about how children learn, but for their willingness to implement a curriculum designed by committees that align well with what will be tested in fourth, seventh and tenth grade. (Ferguson and Brink 2004)

Clearly efficiency has embedded itself in the fabric of the public school curriculum. So, too, has grammar; hence, when anti-grammarians assert their own pedagogies, they have to combat the entire educational system rather than just their ELA colleagues. The complaint about grammar made by the teacher from Cleveland in 1874 has been reiterated throughout the past two centuries. The problem is that while the ELA curriculum represents the needs of organisations like colleges and business, it does not represent the needs and interests of the students whom the curriculum should serve. Kliebard (2004) noted that in a 1913 survey of 500 students from Chicago, 412 students ‘preferred the often-gruelling factory labour to the monotony, humiliation and sheer cruelty that they experienced in school’ (2004, 6). With 3000 students dropping out of school every day because the contemporary ELA curriculum also fails to meet students’ needs and interest, it seems little has changed since the survey. As students matriculate through the grades, a significant shift occurs in the teaching of reading and writing, so that by high school, students are reading for functional purposes, such as reading science and history textbooks, rather than reading for pleasure. According to Williams (2004) this is where student apathy towards language arts emerges: ‘Reading and writing are chores to be
accomplished, tasks to be endured. Even if students do meet the pedagogical goals of the course, there is no love for the work’.

Whether or not they are conscious of this, students are given mixed messages about the language arts. To students, schools have increased expectations while they diminish rewards. Because of the increasingly difficult effort to attain Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP), districts are willing to push students as far as necessary to achieve their desired benchmarks. Underperforming students now find themselves in summer school ‘enrichment’ programmes. Others are forced to take extra English and mathematics courses during the regular school year. These students often have three or four classes a day of maths and reading, and to accommodate this schedule they lose elective courses. Venable (2006) provided an excellent story about a grandmother’s concern for her young grandson, who no longer loves to read because of the mandated reading materials: ‘Now, he comes home each night from school with another nonsensical book to decode’, recounted Venable. ‘He hates reading, and the nightly homework session ends with tears because “the decodable book is stupid” and does not make sense to him – or his grandmother’. For kids like this grandson, frustration rises, so that by ‘high school and university, pleasure and school are often seen as mutually exclusive’ (Williams 2004).

The secondary school literature book is another example of ELA curricular stasis. The slim McGuffey Readers of the nineteenth century have given way to gargantuan anthologies that have swollen to over 1000 pages. Yagelski (2005, 270) argued that while changes in the literary canon for secondary schools has occurred over the last 50 years, ‘many of the titles taught half a century ago are still routinely taught today’. The four most popular textbook companies serving secondary schools are: Glencoe, HRW, McDougal Littel and Prentice Hall. While textbook covers vary from publisher to publisher, the vast bulk of the content is the same. Publishers’ selection of plays is the best example of their commonality: ninth grade texts feature Romeo and Juliet, tenth grade texts feature Julius Caesar, American literature texts (often the eleventh grade text) feature The Crucible, and British literature texts (often the twelfth grade text) feature Macbeth. An established canon exists for short fiction in ninth and tenth grade texts, too. Publishers are fond of such stories as ‘The Most Dangerous Game’, ‘The Necklace’, ‘By the Waters of Babylon’, ‘The Gift of the Magi’ and ‘The Cask of Amontillado’. Placement seems to be the most significant variation as some publishers place a story in a ninth grade text while other publishers will place the same story in a tenth grade text.

The significant difference in today’s textbooks from nineteenth and early twentieth-century texts is the inordinate number of ‘skills’ and objectives to support the teaching of the titles. In addition to basic reading skills, today’s textbooks provide instructional activities to support technology, writing, listening, critical thinking, maths, science, history, and grammar skills. For example, after reading the first story in Glencoe’s current freshman edition, ‘The Open Window’, students will have been introduced to the following skills: reading/thinking skills, writing skills, vocabulary skills, grammar and language skills, listening and speaking skills, life skills, and collaboration skills (Literature: The Reader’s Choice 2002). This is an impressive list, given the fact that the story itself is only three pages long.

Because there are four textbook companies serving public schools, competition is extremely fierce in the $4.3 billion industry (Finn and Ravitch 2004). Contemporary literature books are carefully designed to be all for all people. So as not to alienate
special interest groups, reading selections have been carefully modified. Additional materials are included to address Special Education and English as a Second Language needs. Teachers have a plethora of assessment options, such as computer-generated standardised tests and performance assessments. In terms of assessments, many texts now provide preparation for state assessments and national exams like the ITBS and the SAT-9. What is missing from the textbook creation process is the most crucial ingredient in getting kids to read: student involvement. Daniels and Zemelman (2003) insist ‘that most textbooks are unreadable, superficial, chaotic, authoritarian and inaccurate’, that they are devoid of ‘real reading, the kind of reading that thoughtful, curious people do outside school, that can kindle a lifelong reading habit, and that nurtures genuine curiosity about maths, science, history, literature, or art’.

Although America’s educational system is full of well-meaning and hard-working individuals, the current process of teacher training and re-training perpetuates an entrenched pedagogy of curricular parsing and restricts opportunities for innovation. This process, which has undergone relatively little change in the last few decades, starts at the more than 1300 colleges and universities (Innerst 1999, 26) that produce new teachers based upon criteria set by the university or the state. Change, however, is not the primary difficulty for ELA programmes; a clear concept of what programmes are and what programmes should become is the difficulty. Koziol et al. (2006) argued that ELA programmes lacked a ‘national portrait’, which enables us to know ‘their number, size, admission procedures, relationships with English departments, or relationships with other subject-specific teacher preparation programmes’. The study also observed that ‘less than 14% of the programmes that prepare teachers of English’ were evaluated by the NCTE (Koziol et al. 2006, 372), which itself lacks credible research-proven guidelines. Consequently, our profession is comprised of fragmented training methodologies, many of which may be so outmoded as to further alienate students from reading and writing instruction.

The creation of consistent and substantive field experiences for the pre-service teacher serves as an example of programme limitations. According to Dickson et al. (2006), while field experiences should be helpful training exercises, they are under-utilised, since ‘observations are not directly supervised, professors may be inclined to have limited involvement in those experiences, sometimes requiring no more than a log of hours’ (2006, 324). While some teacher education programmes try to maximise field experiences, the demands of earning a college degree inhibit the number and quality of hours a student can experience in a public school classroom. Even after expanding from four to five years, ‘the programmes’, according to Gardner, still ‘don’t provide enough time to develop the skills and experiences to deal with the challenges teachers face in early teaching days, including how to work with parents, colleagues, and others’ (2006).

A professor’s duties also inhibit curricular change. Committee meetings, programme reviews, student conferences, teaching classes and publishing papers complicate the process of getting researchers into public schools. Furthermore, it cannot be assumed that a professor has access to the elementary or secondary classroom. In today’s climate, the professor can be viewed as intrusive, as many school districts do not have formal relations with universities; those ties that do exist are too few to have a significant effect. Alsup et al. (2006, 270) complain that ‘the last fifty years have witnessed our futile attempts to convince overworked administrators,
cynical bureaucrats, and even our own sceptical pre-service teachers, that we really know valuable things about the teaching and learning of English’. Additionally, Dickson and Smagorinsky contend that ‘Institutions with a “publish or perish” culture make it difficult for faculty to take on a whole-hearted dedication to teacher education programmes, particularly when one’s research interests fall outside teacher education’ (Dickson et al. 2006).

As the relation between university and public school is critical to the success of school reform, barriers are created when universities initiate outreach programmes to enhance professional development for language arts teachers. Universities also have priorities that should be factored into the discussion of quality pre-service teachers. While it has its own graduation requirements to maintain, fiscal issues can dominate university policy. Schools of education are very lucrative because they draw in high numbers majoring in their programmes and teachers seeking graduate degrees. In many cases, universities owe their very existence to education departments, since many universities were conceived as teacher colleges. On balance, schools of education have to preserve a university’s fiscal health, provide a quality education for pre-service teachers, while meeting ever-changing state and federal guidelines.

The general attitude of the public towards the teaching profession does not enhance the quality of pre-service teachers, either. The rising shortage of qualified teachers is aggravated by low salaries that average around $25,000, an arduous work environment and the necessity for a graduate degree (Harrell et al. 2004, 58). Many excellent candidates turn to more lucrative majors where they may earn more than double a teaching salary upon graduation. As a result, the Department of Education expects that at the minimum, over 200,000 new teachers will need to be hired each year to satisfy teaching demands (Howard 2003, 142); the NEA prediction that over one million teachers will retire this decade (Gray and Smith 2005, 7) certainly meets DOE expectations. However, with a low salary and high debt upon graduation, one should not be confident about tremendously increasing the teaching pool.

Once pre-service teachers finally earn state licensure, larger obstacles follow. At the end of the day, the transition from college student to public school teacher embraces many factors that even ‘highly qualified’ teachers struggle with: grading, accreditation paperwork, coaching duties, curriculum committees, teacher supervision, continuing education and home life. When solving the problem of student apathy in language arts classrooms, addressing the teacher – whether he is a novice or a veteran – must be considered.

Having laboured for four or five years to earn a college degree and teaching license, the language arts teacher must first integrate his knowledge into classroom practice and then acquire new forms of knowledge in order to enhance his instructional techniques. Clearly, the success of these two goals shapes academic achievement – ultimately, how a teacher fosters student interest in a language arts course; but these goals are not easily attained, and are too often cited as the primary reason for teacher attrition. Overall, managing the rising tide of aliterate students is too much for many young teachers.

Data consistently demonstrate that for teachers, the first five years are the most important, as nearly half of all new teachers quit by their fifth year (Howard 2003, 144). Guild argued that these rates are attributable to the degree of teacher support:

The job is much harder than when I started in education 33 years ago. Teachers are dealing with a whole new level of issues, including safety. Too often, teachers feel as if
they are alone if they don’t get the support they need. (As cited in ‘Support new teachers’ 2005)

For language arts instructors, not only do they have to manage the duties prescribed to all new teachers, they have to figure out how to apply reading and writing strategies to students who already have entrenched beliefs about their own learning.

Much still needs to be done to educate teachers, administrators and school boards about the best practices for language arts teachers. When schools of education attempt to fill this void by providing professional development to enhance instruction, these rare attempts either end in failure or are not expanded. Two very interesting efforts illustrate this point. Crawford (2000) wrote about her attempt to aid a rural school district. Approached by an administrator, Crawford sought to find methods to address teacher needs. She wrote that the teachers ‘could not fathom a way of making the two-hour trek to the university on a weekly basis’. Moreover, the teachers ‘wondered where they would be able to find the needed books, journals and academic resources to complete their studies. They could not imagine finding the time to complete advanced coursework, on top of managing their already overloaded teaching schedules’. Crawford created a complete professional development programme that met teachers’ needs; in fact, she had even arranged for some professors to meet the teachers in their own buildings so that they would not have to make the long journey to the university. Unfortunately, Crawford discovered that all the time-consuming planning and coordination were to be cast aside:

the district superintendent had pulled his support due to concern that the programme would be too successful. That is, he was concerned that too many teachers would take advantage of this opportunity, thus requiring the district to reimburse tuition dollars, raise teacher salaries, and allow a newly empowered faculty to participate more fully in decision-making processes. In the words of the superintendent, ‘This thing could spin out of control. We have to nip it in the bud’. (Crawford 2000)

It is no wonder that universities can be hesitant to form similar partnerships with school districts: too many barriers turn them away, and the bottom line is that districts across the nation under-invest in teacher training. According to Dudley-Marling et al. (2006, 183), professional development amounts to only 3% of a district’s budget; funds go primarily to ‘generalised pedagogical practices’ that are ‘designed so as to reach the most teachers with the few dollars being invested’.

While successful partnerships do exist, they have not yet influenced the public school system as a whole. Zetlin, MacLeod and Michener (1998) describe an interesting endeavour called ‘Project Fuse’ (Field-based University School Education) which is designed to create a partnership between ‘a large urban school district in partnership with the local state university’. Alarmed by a 40% drop-out rate amongst Latino students, ‘each school received a full year of ongoing university support for participating school faculty’. Project FUSE created open forums for teachers to share and resolve problems in weekly professional development meetings. So that teachers’ instructional needs were fulfilled, teachers set the agenda for each of the sessions. Ultimately, ‘teachers implemented elements of the programme at their own pace and comfort level’. While both partners shared in the success of the programme, the programme has yet to be expanded in its home state. Furthermore, barriers inhibited the potential success. According to Zetlin, MacLeod, and Michener:

Barriers to implementation occurred at all levels. Although neither the district nor individual schools intentionally sought to undermine the teacher change initiative,
nonetheless, very real distal problems – salary cutbacks, continuous enrollment, administrative unavailability – served as deterrents to an already challenging process of reform. University barriers too, specifically, lack of commitment/support in terms of time and resources impeded efforts by faculty members. (1998)

In the end, schools of education, public schools and teachers are divided by too many forces; education is still subject to Callahan’s vulnerability thesis. It is evident that both aspects of the school system, schools of education and public schools, are plagued by similar problems that preserve the traditional ELA curriculum and contribute to student apathy in language arts classes. Both sides struggle to create cohesive partnerships. Universities lack the staff and time adequately to support the needs of school districts within the state. Furthermore, school districts lack funds, training and often the political will necessary to form partnerships with universities. Caught in the middle of this dilemma is the teacher who wishes to create genuine learning opportunities for his students. Below are three strategies for creating genuine curricular change.

1. Form a Professional Development Coalition

Based upon this analysis, the following solution is presented: unions and professional organisations should create a Professional Development Coalition (PDC), aimed at creating widespread institutional reform. The primary goal of this coalition would be to give teachers the best research-based methodologies for enhancing classroom instruction – the most effective strategies for eliminating language arts apathy. The resources of both entities would then be merged so that the PDC could offer programmes that enable schools of education to create opportunities to form partnerships with school districts, since PDC membership is inherently comprised of university and public school teachers.

The PDC would have tremendous resources to nurture teachers and provide current research on language arts issues. With the NEA’s lobbying organisation, the PDC would be able to draw upon state and federal funds that often go unnoticed. For example, the DOE is investing more than three billion dollars in teacher support. It has also created a 100-million-dollar ‘Teacher Incentive Fund’ (NCLB 2006); the PDC would have the logistical capability to identify and guide these resources to those districts that most need them. The NEA, itself, not only has monetary resources, it has physical assets pertinent to English education reform. For years, state agencies have had training teams and facilities for educating its members; these assets would provide the venue for PDC meetings and professional development opportunities. The NEA already has partnerships with state and federal departments of education; and these relationships will be important when the PDC implements policy issues, because without governmental support, English education initiatives could be undermined by political squabbles.

Currently, teachers graduate and may or may not join professional organisations; for some teachers, the costs of joining a state and national organisation inhibit membership. Many others are unable to attend national conferences, and they are conferences which regularly serve university professors anyway. Those who attend state conferences find themselves in a similar predicament as they do when they attend district in-service: while the content may be helpful, the knowledge lacks on-going follow-up by trained professionals. Although the NCTE has made inroads into creating quality professional development opportunities, such as offering online
and onsite consultation services, costs of the service still serve as impediments for interested teachers, especially for teachers in districts that are unwilling and unable to underwrite such expenses. Professional organisations can provide an important bridge between university and school district since the PDC nurtures pre-service and veteran teacher. Teachers will be receiving continual support; so they will not feel isolated when they first enter the classroom. Since the PDC aids the university to school transition, the high attrition rate among teachers in their first five years may be effectively combated.

Unfortunately, the primary obstacle to success is the absence of prior inter-agency cooperation. While the NCTE and IRA have collaborated on projects such as ReadWriteThink, we can only speculate as to why cooperation between unions, professional organisations and schools has not already occurred, as well as what any further obstacles and rewards would be as the PDC is created. However, by drawing upon the expertise of professional organisations, teacher support increases considerably as well as student achievement, so much so that any disadvantages are readily outweighed by the advantages of having a PDC.

Taking the first step in creating the PDC is much easier than it might sound. A collaborative team needs to be created to formulate the many details necessary to implement the programmes: details such as who will be in charge, where they will meet, what common goals need to be addressed. This is why conferences such as the spring 2006 CEE Summit are so important; many of the members are already leaders in their field and can facilitate the first steps towards PDC creation. Another step in creating the PDC is actively promoting inter-agency cooperation within each entity. These organisations actively meet member needs, and if enough people express interest in the PDC, collaboration will occur.

2. Reject Outmoded Textbooks

Textbooks should meet students’ needs, but today’s textbooks fall short. Educators at all levels need to reject current materials and demand more from textbook publishers. Ultimately, textbooks should encourage students to read. Today’s textbooks, unfortunately, do not really engage students, because textbooks do not reflect what students read. It is important to include material that advances reading levels, but it is also important to incorporate genres students love to read. On the whole, students do not read Guy de Maupassant or O. Henry. Students read graphic novels, young adult fiction, science fiction and romance. Students who are carrying 1000-page textbooks in their backpacks to and from class each day have high expectations that the material should meet their needs.

3. Involve Students

For the last 100 years educational reformers – particularly progressives like John Dewey – have advocated increased student involvement in curricular matters. Unfortunately, in terms of curricular development, students are left out of the educational process. A student’s main tool, the textbook, is a fine example of how students are disengaged from decision making. Publishers tout their wide range of programme consultants and teacher reviewers. Glencoe, for example, has over 79 secondary school teachers, and English education professors from across the country evaluate their textbooks and course materials. What is strikingly absent is student
input. Currently, publishers do not collect data about how well their stories are received. Given that publishers now have online versions of their texts as well as websites for student support, one would think that at the very least publishers would elicit comments or provide surveys to rate their reading material.

In terms of writing instruction, a complaint made by grammarians and anti-grammarians alike is that the model sentences for construction fail to match student writing. Like literature texts, grammar books fail to capture student interest. Many sentences are derived from dry, uninspiring informational texts. What students should be getting from their grammar books – if they are actually to be exposed to direct grammar instruction – is student writing. Popular publications like *Teen Ink* have demonstrated that such ventures can be marketable. If textbook companies would incorporate student publications into their literature books as well as use student models for writing instruction, they would have books that would speak to students because they were written, in part, by students. If textbooks incorporated student work, not only would they model good writing, they would model good writers. Too often, students fail to connect with authors such as Saki and Shakespeare; however, if they knew that the author of their assigned reading was someone their own age, they would feel a greater sense of connection.

Historical study of the English language arts curriculum demonstrates that American public school systems cannot independently transform the status quo. In the end, new solutions aimed at targeting the entire educational system must be examined and attempted because the trend towards an aliterate society remains unchecked. Far too little support exists for teachers, new and old, struggling to overcome apathy and incompetence. Furthermore, far too many children are being turned off by language arts classes that focus too much on standardised testing. The lamentation, ‘I Hate Reading; I Hate Writing’ will only increase in volume if we cannot find a strategy for addressing the needs of public education that is cognisant of the vast forces preserving the status quo of the English language arts curriculum.

References


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