3. Content and Process in the English Curriculum

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Every few years, English specialists ask themselves “What is English?” The question is not frivolous, but a sign of continuing self-criticism and an acknowledgment of change. Questions of identity are common in all school subjects, from physical education to ecology (or is it from “movement science” to “environmental studies”?). In discussions of English, there is a great temptation to bypass questions of content and talk only about teaching methods or learning processes. I will begin and end this chapter with a discussion of connections between content and process, but the main focus will be on the “English” in “English instruction.”

English as Content (Knowing) and as Process (Doing)

Advocates of process-based instruction might argue that the question “What is the content of English?” is loaded to begin with, and perhaps unanswerable as stated. They hold that English is not a content subject but a process subject. English is not primarily something students learn about, but something they do. The old model of English as a tripod—with mutually supporting and converging “legs” consisting of literature, composition, and grammar (Figure 3.1)—fails to make this process-content distinction.

Literature and grammar are substantive content areas—relatively definable bodies of scholarly knowledge—but composition is predominantly a...
process. So the truer theoretical representation would be a "bipod" of two substantive legs with a composition component somehow nailed on (Figure 3.2).

Of course, that is a pretty shaky visual model. In fact, English curriculums that treat composition as an adjunct to the content areas of grammar and literature are not very serviceable. Overwhelmingly, research indicates that teaching grammar as a body of knowledge does not improve the writing performance of elementary and high school students. In 1969, John Mellon and Steve Sherwin did independent, intensive reviews of 20th century research on the teaching of grammar in relation to composition. Neither could find evidence that knowledge of grammar aids students' writing. George Hillocks' 1986 meta-analysis came to the same conclusion. Hillocks noted that grammar instruction might even be harmful.²

²George Hillocks, Research on Written Composition (Urbana, Ill.: ERIC Clearinghouse on Reading and Communication Skills and the National Conference on
It does not help to substitute "language" for "grammar" on the tripod. The result then is that literature is the central content area, with language as part process (e.g., oral communication) and part content (e.g., grammar, history of language). Composition (again, a subset of language-as-process) must then be tagged on somehow.

Odd as such an approach sounds, literature-centered English programs are often imbalanced precisely in the direction of heavy analysis of literary structure, with speaking and writing focused almost wholly on vicarious experiences. The personal experiences of the students, and the potential of language for helping them organize and understand those experiences, are neglected. Arid formalism dominates. Concerns such as audience and an

authentic expression in the student's own voice are downplayed. The visual
analog for such a program, terrible to contemplate, might be a literature
"unipod," with splinters to represent the particular skills and information
needed for improving oral and written language.

A view of English that favors process instruction is the idea of the four
language arts—listening, speaking, reading, and writing. But this pro-
cessed-based conception, in itself, provides few clues to content. What are
the students listening to? What should they be speaking and writing about?
And what in the world are they reading?

It is tempting to waffle on these questions by emphasizing process and
saying that the content of English need not be specified as long as the
processes are being nurtured—all the more tempting because our under-
standing of processes has become much more sophisticated in recent years.
Instruction in writing processes has received greatest attention, moving
from basic theory and research to instructional models to the educational
marketplace, where even grammar-based texts often make bogus claims
about teaching the writing processes.

However, process instruction in English and language arts ranges far
more broadly than the teaching of writing. Its scholarly roots are in philos-
ophy, cognitive psychology, psycholinguistics, and sociolinguistics. An
important instructional thrust is in reading and literature, areas in which
schema theory and reader response theory have redefined the reader-text
relationship. The reading process is seen not as a mere grasping of informa-
tion and ideas contained in the text. Rather, reading is a meaning-making
process in which the background knowledge and personal experience of the
reader interact with the text. The content of The Scarlet Letter, then, is not

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3Arthur Applebee, Writing in the Secondary School, Research Report no. 21,
(Urbana, Ill.: National Council of Teachers of English, 1981; James Britton et al.,
The Development of Writing Abilities (London: Macmillan Education, 1975); Ken

4See, for example, Linda Flower and J.R. Hayes, "The Dynamics of Compos-
ing: Making Plans and Juggling Constraints" in Lee Gregg and Erwin Steinberg
(eds.), Cognitive Processes in Writing (Hillsdale, N.J.: Erlbaum, 1980); Janet Emig,
The Composing Processes of 12th Graders, Research Report No. 13 (Urbana, Ill.:

5See, for example, Jackie Proett and Kent Gill, The Writer in Action: A Hand-
book for Teachers (Urbana, Ill.: National Council of Teachers of English, 1986);
Charles Suhor, "Thinking Visually about Writing: Three Models for Teaching Com-
position. K-12" in C. Thaiss and C. Suhor (eds.), Speaking and Writing, K-12:
Classroom Strategies and the New Research (Urbana, Ill.: National Council of Teach-

6See Umberto Eco, The Role of the Reader (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana Un-
iversity Press, 1979); Ulric Neisser, Cognition and Reality (San Francisco: W.H.
Freeman, 1976); Frank Smith, Psycholinguistics and Reading (New York: Holt, Rine-
hart & Winston. 1973); M.A.K. Halliday, Language as Social Semiotic (Baltimore:
solely contained within the book’s covers. In a real sense the content is created in the act and the process of reading.⁷

The process of oral communication, sometimes called oral discourse or dialoguing,⁸ is perhaps even more complex and multidimensional. Everyday oral communication involves subtleties of body language, vocal inflections, variant subcultural vocabulary, syntax, usage, and a host of pragmatic elements like turn-taking and other tacit rules of conversation.⁹ Small wonder that fascination with the complexities of processes in oral and written communication has drawn attention away from the question of what is being communicated.

But the question of content—of that which is to be processed—persists, and traditionalists do not find the question hard to answer. There is an acknowledged core of great literature, they say, from works for children to adult classics. There are universal themes and fundamental issues and values that can be identified as central to the human condition.

Fancher, for example, holds that “every important literary work addresses important questions and makes claims about them. These claims are the source of much of the best knowledge that humanity possesses. Most often, ‘classic’ works are classics because of the depth and penetration of the visions of reality that they contain” (p. 55).¹⁰ Such matters are certainly worthy subjects for listening, speaking, reading, and writing. We need only look to the best in our cultural heritage and then find appropriate places for this content in the English curriculum, K-12. Advocates of a classical curriculum believe that every normal child can succeed in a rigorous, more or less standardized curriculum if English teachers are knowledgeable in their disciplines and sufficiently willing to engage students in intellectual discourse.

Of course, there is more complexity in both the process and the traditional views of curriculum than I can describe here. Since my own approach to delineating content will be quite different, I recommend that readers interested in classical curriculums see works by Fancher, Adler, and

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Hirsch. A useful text by Mandel presents three curriculum models in English—heritage (traditional), process, and competency models, with variations thereon. 

**Content of the Literature Program**

Let me restate clearly the idea of content explored in the rest of this chapter, since my focus is probably less expansive than that of other chapters in this book. I will not discuss “content” in the broadest sense of “that which is taught in English” or “what we should teach at each grade level.” As noted above, the debate over content instruction in English has been shaped by the emphasis on English as process, to the considerable neglect of the kinds of knowledge that are appropriate in the English curriculum. Admittedly, language processes and skills can be viewed as curriculum content in the broad sense; but these matters have been widely treated in the professional literature in the past decade. This discussion will deal mainly with the “stuff” that is taught rather than the communication processes developed through English instruction.

Literature is a reasonable starting point for any discussion of content of the English curriculum, because it is the one area in which there is almost unanimous agreement on two points: it is a body of knowledge (a content area) and literature as content has a place in the English curriculum. Figure 3 represents all literature that I believe should be eligible for inclusion in the English language arts curriculum.

“Literature” is defined broadly here to include magazines as well as books, expository writings (e.g., formal essays, newspaper articles, certain technical documents) as well as poetry, the novel, drama, and the other genres usually called “creative.” Some commonsense exclusions from the literature eligible for school programs are in order: expository writings such as corporation reports to stockholders (and most other technical documents written for adult specialists); pornography outright, in whatever literary medium. There is not sufficient space here to explore interesting questions such as the nature of literary genres or the boundaries of pornography.

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14. The 1986-1987 NCTE *Catalog*, for example, contains 14 pages of books on composition, 5 pages on literature, and 3 on curriculum. While the profession has welcomed the coming of age of process instruction, an imbalance clearly exists, to the neglect of content.
Suffice it to say that in outline, the universe of school literature should include a wide range of literature for children, young adults, and adults in a variety of print formats.

As the dotted lines in Figure 3.3 suggest, distinctions between the literatures are by no means absolute. For example, Robert Cormier's excellent story, "Guess What? I Almost Kissed My Father Last Night," can be read with interest by adults and teenagers alike. St.-Exupery's *The Little Prince* and Shel Silverstein's poetry cut across all age levels.

Few would quarrel with such an analysis. Questions of the *quality* of works eligible for inclusion in English curriculums are more difficult, however. Figure 3.4 deals with qualitative questions through an overlay that
plicitly places popular literature (upper left quadrant) and great classical and contemporary literature (upper right quadrant) in the program. Good-quality literature, which comprises most of the works from which teachers and textbook writers might normally select materials for study, is represented in the remaining (bottom) half.

The division into segments in Figure 3.4 is not intended to represent recommended proportions of popular, average, and great literature in the English curriculum. The essential point is that materials representing a wide range of quality should be eligible for inclusion in literature programs and available to English teachers.

Neither specialists nor laypersons have trouble distinguishing between materials in the upper quadrants of the model, between the worst and the
best. We instantly recognize differences between a pulp magazine love story and *Wuthering Heights*; hence, the solid line between popular literature and great classical and contemporary literature. Things are less clear, though, at the other borderlines of quality. Most Gothic romance series and popular astrology books are surely in the popular category, but a novelist like Irving Wallace or a playwright like Neil Simon will straddle the line between fluff and good literature. Similarly, the line between good and great literature is highly debatable. In my estimation, Hemingway’s *A Farewell to Arms* is a great novel, but *For Whom the Bell Tolls* is merely excellent. Other English teachers would argue about all of these borderline categorizations, but that is the point. The lines of demarcation will be fuzzy in many judgments about quality.

Even after acknowledging such ambiguities, though, most teachers I have met agree that some great works drawn from children’s, young adult, and adult literature should be part of every K-12 English curriculum. Most would also acknowledge the necessity of drawing from a wide pool of average-to-good literature. The real controversies are centered on two ideas: the belief that popular literature—from pop/rock lyrics to flimsy adolescent novels to gimmicky choose-your-own-plot adventure books—can play a useful role in school programs; and the notion that literature study should essentially be the study of great works. I will deal with these questions as problems of *cultivation* and *carryover*, and will suggest that a solution lies in connecting the world of the student with the world of ideas.

Popular literature was in greatest vogue in our schools during the neo-progressive movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s. The buzzword “relevancy” was often invoked uncritically to sweep vast amounts of bad popular literature into English classes. Critics of the movement complained, with some justification, that the reading of trivial materials was too common and that many English programs were catering to the undeveloped tastes of students. The goal of cultivating students’ responses to literature was frequently ignored.

At the other end of the scale, literature programs that draw predominantly on classics and other excellent works assure that students will have a certain amount of exposure to important works. But there is no evidence that classics programs succeed in making very many students into lifelong readers of fine literature. In fact, classics dominated the English curriculum for generations before the “relevancy” craze of the 1960s. Yet in the “good old days,” Americans did not typically become avid adult readers of the classics or of anything else. Most teachers will acknowledge that even when standard works like *Silas Marner, Julius Caesar,* and *David Copperfield* are

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14Although surveys of reading habits can be interpreted in a variety of ways, it is clear that we have become, overwhelmingly, a more literate society over the last
brilliantly taught, it is rare for high school students to go out and read, on
their own, The Mill on the Floss, King Lear, and Bleak House. The essential
element of carryover into personal reading simply has not been effected in
the classics-based program.

What kind of literature program reckons with the need for cultivation
and carryover? The term “cultivation” is relative, implying a nurturing
process in which students’ intellectual and emotional responses are ad-
vanced methodically, in accordance with their present state of growth. If
cultivation is to go beyond mere exposure to culture, the teacher must find
vital points of connection between the personal world of the student and
the larger world of vicarious experience. For tens of thousands of reluctant
readers, teen romances or adventure paperbacks are potentially the first
point of personal engagement with printed-word narratives. Happily, many
other students will enter the world of ideas through more richly organized
works such as the poetry of Eve Merriam or the novels of Paul Zindel. A
few come to school with the readiness to devour the great works that we
wish everyone could read with relish. The literature program suggested in
Figure 4 permits teachers to seek out, for each student, a door into the
world of ideas that the student will willingly enter. It includes exposure to
some great works—presumably, those most accessible to contemporary stu-
dents—but provides a usable framework for connections and carryover.

Cultivation must be consciously pursued if the teacher is to avoid simply
running in place with students’ present reading habits. To carry the list of
C’s one step further, a “cut-above” strategy is necessary. That is, students
who follow sports in newspapers and magazines can be led to read simple
short stories and poems about athletes—materials that are a cut above their
present tastes. From there, the connection can be made to biographies like
Eleanor Gehrig’s My Luke and I or autobiographies like those of Wilma
Rudolph or Joe Garagiola. A knowledgeable teacher can then engineer the
move to excellent works like Shaw’s “The Eighty-Yard Run” or Malamud’s
The Natural. When the level of engagement is high, the chances of carryover
into lifelong reading are much greater. Moreover, the teacher need not
two generations. See, for example (a) Book Industry Study Group, The 1983 Con-
sumer Research Study on Reading and Book Publishing, prepared by Market Facts,
Inc. (New York: Book Industry Study Group, 1983); (b) Gallup Organization, Book
Reading and Library Usage: A Study of Habits and Perceptions, report of a survey
for the American Library Association (Princeton, N.J.: Gallup Organization, 1978);
(c) Thomas M. Sawyer, “Why Speech Will Not Totally Replace Writing,” College
Composition and Communication 28, 1 (February 1987): 43-48. Of course, calls for
higher levels of literacy are clearly justified on two important bases: the remaining
group of hard-core illiterates and the need for ever-higher literacy skills in contem-
porary society. See Irwin Kirsch and Ann Jungblut, Literacy: Profiles of America’s
Young Adults (Princeton, N.J.: National Association of Educational Progress, 1986);
Sylvia Read Taber, “Current Definitions of Literacy,” Journal of Reading 30. 5