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Coming on Center

Background

Delivered on the very eve of the '70s, at the convention of the National Council of Teachers of English in November 1969, this talk interweaves rapidly many of the themes developed by later essays in this book. So it may serve well as overture.

Convention programmers had assigned me the topic "A Student-Centered Curriculum" in reference to my methods textbook of that title published the year before. Although I appreciated this reference and this opportunity to expound my curriculum, I couldn't resist reacting to the implications of the program title under which my talk had been placed—"Alternative Centers for English Curricula"—which seemed to reflect euphemistically the traditional prejudice that a curriculum daring to center on the student was second-class. At any rate, fussing with their classification helped me organize my thoughts around notions of centering.

Behind this effort to whirl together many matters not usually dealt with as a whole lay an equal diversity of personal experience both remote and distant. I had just moved with family from east coast to west coast, Cambridge to Berkeley, after recuperating from finishing two books at once by spending a year relatively idle on a Caribbean island. From there I watched with some detachment the cresting and repression, in '68–'69, of reformative forces in my native land. Then suddenly we were in Berserkeley, as columnist Herb Caen calls this subtropically gorgeous hometown of radicalism (more deeply rooted in maverick middle-aged people than in students).

Three years before the convention, I had served as one of fifty participants in the Anglo-American Seminar on the Teaching and Learning of English, held for a month at Dartmouth in the summer of '66. This meeting had fallen in the middle of two years afforded me by a Carnegie Corporation grant to work full time at the Harvard Graduate School of Education on the development of a new English curriculum, which I was writing up as the two books of theory and practice. From many of the British at Dartmouth I received a gratifying corroboration of my approach, which included much drama and other peer interaction and which resembled the open classroom, though I had known nothing of what the British were doing. Many of the American participants were involved either in government-sponsored curriculum centers that were more often

than not perpetuating wrongheaded tradition or in efforts to found a new English on recent linguistic triumphs.

For ten years before that I had taught English (and for a while, French) at Phillips Exeter Academy, an old boys' boarding school in New Hampshire, where I had done everything from personal counseling in the dormitory to coaching lacrosse to directing drama and debating. During my later years there, Exeter flirted with coeducation in their summer school, which was open to public high school students. There and in the local town high school I transferred experiments in writing and in selection of literature to average students. The teacher's freedom at Exeter to experiment tempted me so deeply into curricular innovation that I left to carry my ideas out where they were needed more—in the public schools, first around Boston and then points west.

Having cleared my head underwater around the reefs of Barbados, I plunged back into the maelstrom of changing America as it emerged from the '60s and, barely uncrated in a new end of the country, tried to pack all I could into a carefully worded half-hour talk. It was published in the *English Journal,* April 1970.

Why are you here today? What do you hope to get from me? From *any* speaker on English teaching? Bright ideas? New techniques? But is it bright ideas or new techniques you need most?

A new focus? Student-centered? What other kind of focus *can* there be, what*ever* your philosophy? Isn't the learner the active ingredient? And isn't the subject, his native language, already within the student, one functioning in fact of the student as human being? So why take an organic part of a person, thingify it, process it, package it, and lodge it back in him as a foreign object? Shall I *tell* you why? Would that be what you came to hear? Tell you why a student-centered curriculum is an "alternate" curriculum? Eccentric?

But what's the hurry? Let's take the case of the blue-eyed black, once a student of mine, hanging fire between his ghetto origin and his gentleman role in a famous prep school. When he talked, I understood him. When he wrote, I was lost in a bastard language no one ever heard before, a tortured syntax of false starts, obscure fusions, and never-ending self-collisions that perfectly uttered this Caucasian Negro of Mother Harlem and Father Exeter. E for English. So O.K., give our blue-eyed black a language-centered curriculum and show him what real sentences are like. You know, the kind his standard-dialect father would probably speak to him, had he stayed. Learn about our language heritage and how our language changes under the impact of social change. Or a literature-centered curriculum. Show him the masterpieces his "forefathers" created and how they can be reduced to a few mythic types for easy handling as he wends

his way toward the white college of his mother's choice. Let him find himself in whichever literary selections the textbook adoption committees and their scared constituencies will permit publishers to put into literature series for him. It's a seller's market for black writers, but no vulgar language please, or sex, or politics, or controversy, or negative emotions—or even positive emotions if they get *too* high. I can center the curriculum wherever I like, but that student will center it where he must—somewhere between what people have been to him in the past and what I am to him in the present.

A freak case, this blue-eyed black. Yeah, sure. But every case is. Take a sophisticated WASP from New York City, *entitled* to blue eyes, of wealthy family, smarter than I, driven into schizophrenia. He communicates through double-binding messages as his parents taught him, sets traps for me in class, misreads literature despite his intelligence because every text is a pretext for his fantasies of abjection and domination. He stays furious at the rest of the class. They disagree with his readings and can't follow his themes . . . or smile at each other. Do I care enough for him, he wants to know after class, to immolate my other students for him? I ask him if that's the going price for love where he comes from, and he weeps and curses and is grateful. But the next day he sets another trap for me in class. And this goes on for a year.

He and I both came through, but if today—when he is himself teaching in Harlem—if today he can read perceptively, write clearly, and converse without trying to subjugate, it is not because I taught him those things. What I did was supply him with some real response to what he was expressing and support him when the response was too painful. He did the rest. His education was a lot more important to him than it was to me. Student-centered.

But the case is too freaky still. Forget minorites and neurotics and pick a normal kid (say from New Goshen, Indiana[1]). O.K. How about a nice, industrious, conscientious, Midwestern Scandinavian paper boy, eager to succeed, eager to please, thoroughly housebroken? He would bless me if I were to put into his hands a factual language book or a composition text with do's and dont's. If I were to give him five questions to answer about the short story for tomorrow. But I don't. I'm cruel. I ask him instead to write about his experience, and I don't grade his paper. I ask him to talk to the students across from him about anything in the short story, and I look toward them whenever he looks at me. To read their writing and tell them what he thinks and feels about it.

Problems come up fast. He tenses in discussion: who knows what'll get said next, and will I be equal to it? His fellows respond politely to his writing, and he understands that they are bored. Following the rules

[1]The home town of a young soldier who said he killed thirty to forty civilians at My Lai in Vietnam.

isn't enough. He's shaken. But he doesn't ask them, "What does he *want* anyway?" He asks me, "What do they *want* anyway?" I say I agree they're a hard lot but all they want is what any audience wants—you. He stares at me, and I can see the awful truth sinking in. He had me figured for the indefinite, permissive type who's a real pain because he won't come right out and say anything so you know where you stand. But it's much worse than that even. I really am tough. The course requires *full* attendance. He wants to send a stand-in, to *dance* attendance. And he wants me to give him something he has already, but I'm selfish—I want to give him something he doesn't have. Maybe by now he's forgiven me for being student-centered when he was authority-centered.

Not typical enough yet? An immigrant's grandson from the heartland? You're a hard lot too. So, next case. A tall pretty girl catches me before class and says her theme isn't ready yet because her period is on. She stands there forthright and looks level at me. She knows I'm no stickler for deadlines, and I know she's no whiner. There's just this fact of her womanhood that she wants established between us. Female first, student second. Fair enough. Besides, her steadfast look is rapidly convincing me. So I say all right, not to the late theme but to her womanhood. After all, teaching communication is my job.

The girl turns out to be a leader. She writes real and interesting stuff and reads it off in class without blinking. When she debates with boys, she doesn't act dumb and passive for fear of not attracting them. She doesn't need to cut down the other girls when they talk or write. She can like literature without embarrassment or apology. This kind of behavior bears looking into. The others do look into it. They see it's possible to be liked by both sexes even though involved in an adult-sponsored activity. She hasn't copped out, she's just exploiting me and my class for her own benefit. She can do that because I'm not trying to cover any material—nothing except what students bring up as they respond to each other and to books.

One of the people impressed by our young woman is a girl who dyes her hair one night with four cronies in a fit of fun but is mortified to sally forth the next morning. Who always grimaces in the prescribed ways, manipulates boys according to time-honored rules, and isn't about to risk losing status by showing interest in learning. But she gets taken off guard more and more, becomes rapt watching and listening, forgets her face until it mirrors each passing feeling. Kids are talking seriously to each other, *in a classroom,* about reality as she knows it. They've forgotten the teacher, and yet they do not speak as they speak in the gang. Or a girl is acting a role with a passion she shows nowhere else. It's awesome. Or that boy there reading his theme aloud, she never heard such intensity and sensitivity from him before. Where has *that* voice been? Then in her lovely,

self-forgetting face you see it dawn: they haven't *begun* to show themselves to her, these boys, on dates, in gangs. Suddenly they're more than just objects to reflect her desired image back to her. She's caught up. Freed from the code—they can't help it if I force them to do all these weird things—they catch each other up until their group contagion works to open instead of to close them. Students center on each other.

But take the case of ourselves. You remember, I promised to tell you why a student-centered curriculum is an alternate—a fourth or fifth alternate, in fact. Well, hang on, this may be a dizzy trip. You've heard of the military-industrial complex, perpetrated by those other professionals, the wicked ones over there in the defense industry. Defense, it is true, is the nation's largest industry, but do you know which is second? Yours, my poetry-loving friends. Education. A booming business that people get rich off, nearly as dirty as the defense industry, hardly more moral when you consider that those who make war to make money are graduates of our *own* industry. We're dreadfully implicated in the very dehumanizing forces that are strangling our own profession. We *taught* those crazy people. Besides shopping the bazaars for bright ideas to take home and put into action, I suggest we take a long look at the system we're a part of, to grasp why it is we have not already had these bright ideas and done something about them.

So without further ado: the educational-industrial complex. An unsavory comparison, to be sure, but after you've finished recoiling, consider this. Both schooling and soldiering are compulsory. How differently would you teach if your students did not *have* to come to class? That question should haunt teachers. Thinking about it will give you more bright ideas than a century of NCTE conventions. Second, both are tax-supported, which means that, besides a captive clientele, we enjoy a monopoly business. Why innovate when the customers have to come and there's no competition? This would be a pretty good deal except that we are accountable to the public, which has an ignorant notion of education because it was educated by us. Now, education means of course that something in somebody gets changed, but taxpayers want their children to stay the way they made them. They didn't work on them all those years for *nothing.* So to educate really means to infantalize, to retard. Defense, too, is not what it says it is. We haven't been attacked for a long time, and the last occasion or so may have been rigged. Like education, defense is a *1984* term for its opposite. To defend means to menace the rest of the world with apocalyptic weapons. Actually, despite different window dressing, both industries have the same secret function—to solve certain economic, social, biological, and psychological problems of society that no one has had a creative enough education so far to solve any other way. Like overpopulation, employment, the need for outlets independent

of the market, civil disorder, personality disintegration in our kaleidoscopic culture. Things like that. Cool the young and the poor in schoolroom and barracks. Keep the kids out of politics, jobs, and girls. Issue a uniform . . . thought and speech.

So much for vague resemblances. As a salute to systems-analysis, I'd like to break these resemblances down into five components. First, the compulsory element, the draftees or students, who do the work and in whose name a vast quantity of equipment is purchased which they use but do not choose. Proxy consumership (which, come to think of it, just about describes the status of the Vietnamese at this moment). Second is the officer class, the professionals, the teachers. For them the complex provides employment (working on those very young people who might otherwise compete with them in the labor market). These jobs are fairly secure, since schooling and soldiering are too well built into the social process to fluctuate on the market like other commodities. (Admittedly, the military has a rougher time in this regard, foreign outlets being harder to control than home consumption.)

A governing elite makes up the third component—the equivalent of Pentagon and Congress—such as school superintendents, schoolboards, education officials in state and federal government. These people usually *transcend* the profession, which is to say they are administrators and have all the power. The center of the complex—where lies the possibility of colossal mischief—is in the overlap between this group and the next, which is made up of the leaders of industry—builders and suppliers of school plants, manufacturers of learning materials, educational testers and researchers, and teacher trainers. What happens is that government officials and leaders of industry swap hats or swap favors and thus create demands which they also supply, as that radical Eisenhower was the first to point out in his own profession. This is what a complex is all about—the same people controlling the whole cycle of policy, procurement, production, and profits. There is no conflict of interest; left and right hands are beautifully coordinated. In your industry too. These two power groups, however, are dependent on the enlistees and the draftees, who make up together the effective consumership and who keep the complex running by playing along with it, one because he wants a job, the other because he has to.

The whole complex is supported by, or rather bathed in, the fifth element, which I can only call a national mystique. This is a kind of body steam given off by the mass of the taxpaying public, an aura that becomes epitomized in certain master symbols or slogans, that is to say, certain blank checks. The mystique that mandates the defense industry is "containing Communism." For education it's something like "speaking good English," or as they said when I was a kid, "not talking common." Actually both are sub-mystiques of the grand mystique called "upholding

the American heritage," sometimes amended as "common" heritage or even, in Great Books fashion, "upholding the values of Western civilization." As if someone in our culture could *avoid* being an Aristotelian or Newtonian or Freudian.

The same fear behind both mystiques. Losing status, losing identity, being a nothing. "Contain Communism" means *don't let them blend with us.* "Speak good English" means *don't sound like those others.* Keep differences because differences will define us. Color. How you talk. Foreign ideology. It is indeed very American to be unsure who you are, because look where we came from. Trauma of the frontier, trauma of the melting pot.

But I digress, or as we English teachers write in the margin, "poor organization." I'm sure you're all panting to know how this systems-analysis relates to a student-centered curriculum. Well, I'll try to pull this all together in a climactic burst of incoherence. It happens like this. Let's say you want to let students talk and write and read and act in small groups. All the time, until the fantastic power of those groups is unlocked and carries those kids way beyond the paltry standards we now stretch for. To start with, you don't know anything about small-group process or dramatic improvisation and hardly anything about writing, because you never did these things. You never did them because whoever taught you to be a teacher never did them. Teacher trainers usually don't know about such things. People who do aren't in teacher-training institutions. What your teacher trainer is going to do instead is train you to center on textbooks and to be unable to teach without something in your hands, if only by default through not teaching you any alternatives. Deliberately or not, he programs you to need the kind of materials he's just been authoring. Furthermore, he's the same person who gets government funds to run experiments and set up workshops that omit, naturally enough, what he doesn't know about and that play up, naturally enough, the kinds of things his materials feature. He reads proposals and passes on them. Writes national exams. Consults for school systems, may even have worked for one once, or for a publisher. He's not an evil person probably, but by controlling both ends of the industrial cycle he plays a part in sending the whole system out of control, from the *educational* point of view.

But you're one of the happy few. You know how to set up improvisations and dramatizations, use small-group dynamics, build pre-writing into writing, and get all these processes feeding into each other. Fine! But when are you going to have the class time to do this? You'll have to throw out the spellers, grammar-language books, composition books, basal readers, skill builders—the whole mean, miserable lot of time-filling, tranquillizing commodities designed to market your own mind back to you. But we can no more throw that junk out than we can disarm. Everyone's investments are too great, including yours and even your stu-

dents'. MIRVs and ABMs, composition texts, and practice readers—all discredited by practical experience but still around because once an industry winds up, it isn't fair to leave the poor fellow out on a limb. We can't afford peace, and we can't afford real education. They're too cheap.

But other rubbish has got to go. All those tests, you know. Second haunting question: How differently would you teach if you never had to test? But you don't have a choice, do you? There're not only those standardized achievement tests that test you, the school, and the curriculum while the kids are being tested, but teacher's turn to test comes around too. Besides your *candid* quizzes, you have your tests disguised as teaching—your book reports and research papers and essay questions. Oh, don't kid me now! We all know they're a check on the reading. Did he read it and if he did, did he comprehend it? Oh, if we could only look in their heads with a fluoroscope machine! Some way to monitor their minds.—Be reasonable. To evaluate you must see the results.—You might ask the student.—Too unscientific. The taxpayers, the colleges—they want body counts. Besides, the essay question kills two birds with one stone.—I agree with you there.

You yourself can't stop testing because you're impressed into the service of accountability, and standardized testing is no more easily dropped than cigarette manufacturing, however injurious to your health. It is packaged into materials and nested down in the souls of administrators. It evaluates curriculums and therefore dictates curriculums. Teachers teach toward the tests, and it's amazing how fast their good intentions dissolve about teaching anything else. All this has taken place haphazardly so far in English, but now that the behaviorists have teamed up with the Pentagon cost accountants imported from Ford and G.M., we're about to take the guesswork out of accountability, with the same efficiency that the Defense Department took the guesswork out of killing. We're writing behavioral goals in English which will become tests which will shrink the curriculum to observable behavior, only a lot of learning in English can't be seen unless you make the student do something to show it, so we can't teach for testing. But one thing we can say: the educational budget is well accounted for even if the education is of no account. Overt behavior. . . . Eight years out of high school a man understands in the master bedroom what his wife is saying to him, despite what she says. Are you and I going to be there to evaluate this effect of our teaching at the moment it becomes overt? Since few will get funds henceforth in English unless their project is behaviorally framed, it seems fair to say that the trend will be *self-reinforcing.* But this is necessary because we must be efficient and not waste money, in education. We must save our money to kill off those red yellow people.

Other examples I leave to your imagination. If, say, you wanted to make your homogeneous class heterogeneous, what obstacles would you

encounter? It's time for teachers to quit playing dumb and passive, even if that *was* part of their teacher training. Again and again I have found that English teachers don't believe much in what they're doing, agree with a student-centered approach, and are really quite eager to make a change. But they feel powerless and don't trust their perceptions. These are effects of the educational-industrial complex we're embedded in.

I remember a dedication in a book I have forgotten. It read: "To So-and so, who taught me what I know." No, no, it didn't read that; my cliché-ridden mind read that. I looked again: "who taught me *that* I know." Who taught me that I know. What I know that's of use to you is that you know. Sweeping aside the intervening clutter, recall yourself as a young learner, then review those learners in front of you. You know. But you must assume the power to do what you know.