3

Making Schools Pay Off or A Student-Centered Language Arts Curriculum

Background

At the same time that I was being dragged by the heels into the educational politics and economics of the '70s, so thoroughly enshrined today that few struggle much anymore, I was signing on—with eyes wide open, I thought—to direct a large and intricate kindergarten-to-college language arts and reading program called *Interaction,* destined to be published in 1973. I had decided that school curriculum really issued from commercial corporations, and so that was where I was going to place myself. I became a capitalist lackey. For once, I resolved, a publisher was going to do a program the way it ought to be. Like my many brave co-authors, I knew such innovative materials would be a financial risk. (If you want to make money in textbooks, it's obvious how to do it, and if you can't see, the publisher will tell you.) For me personally, this meant becoming one of those dangerous people I had described as making the educational-industrial complex what it is. But I was going to save true language learning in this country by incarnating it in school materials that would make a revolutionary approach respectable to those outside the classroom and feasible for those in it. The real risk was that I wouldn't know until after the three or four years it would take to produce the program whether I had sold my soul or not. (Old Faust had to deal only with the Devil, whose contract stipulated very clearly in advance what you would have to pay, whereas corporation deals are more ambiguous or, if you like, more sporting.)

While I was senior-editing some 275 paperback anthologies replete with recordings and senior-authoring some 800 activity cards, two film series, and dozens of games, I was fighting alongside other English educators in California the now rapidly rolling movement toward state-leg-

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islated (but federally "inspired") fiscal accountability based on locking behavioral-objectivized standardized tests directly into educational decision-making and hence into curriculum determination. We debated in special forums against proponents of PPBS (Planning, Programming, Budgeting Systems), gave talks and wrote articles on the folly of applying Detroit/Pentagon cost-benefit systems approaches to human learning, and even presented our cause before the State Board of Education, which didn't know much about how the state legislature's commission on school evaluation was, in effect, taking curriculum sovereignty away from districts through "accountability" bills. I was rewarded for addressing the Board on this by having my hand shaken afterwards by the rascally Max Rafferty, who was still California's Commissioner of Education and who opposed accountability for reasons very different, I suspect, from ours. Soon I found myself on mailing lists for right-wing groups in Southern California who believed not only in curbing centralized government, as I did, but also in militarism, abolition of sex education, phonics, and "literal" interpretation of the Bible.

We won the battles but lost the war. PPBS as such was never adopted in California and hence nowhere else in the nation, and before the end of the '70s we ceased hearing much about behavioral objectives. But only the names changed. PPBS took other forms. Behavioral objectives became performance objectives, and the whole movement goes today by the labels of "minimal criteria," "competencies," or "proficiency standards." The more educators combated the virus, the more virulent a strain of it evolved. It was hellbent, and nothing ever stopped it, because too many forces in government and industry wanted it and could exploit for their own motives the public's cry to make schools pay off better.

The following article says nothing directly about any of this struggle. Rather, it's about the kind of learning I was trying to protect, make a way for, keep a door open on. Essentially a nonpolitical person, I had lobbied and jousted only because I knew the curriculum that I had developed and that *Interaction* embodied was headed on a collision course with the technocratic management of youth being railroaded through schools over the heads and behind the backs of teachers. I wrote this piece as the lead statement of the curriculum in the *Interaction* teacher's guides at all four levels of the program. I entitled it "Making Schools Pay Off" to connect the philosophy of the program as directly as possible with the chief educational issue of that day, 1973, as it still is today. While writing it, I was invited to address in Miami a joint conference of the Florida Association of Teachers of English and the Florida affiliate of the International Reading Association. Many educators there knew that *Interaction* was about to appear, in time to be a candidate for upcoming state adoptions in language arts and reading, so in assigning me the topic "A Student-Centered Language Arts Curriculum" they were asking me to present the philos-

ophy underlying the program. Under this title the *Florida English Journal* published the piece in the issue of Spring, 1973. To retain the original connection I affix both titles here.

Children do their most difficult and important learning before they come to school. Researchers constantly tell us this, but we can also see it for ourselves. Learning language, for example, is not new to the child entering kindergarten or first grade. In learning to speak, he or she has already accomplished a feat far surpassing learning to read or write, or any other task attempted in schools.

Speech occurs during the first year of life, with no specialized teacher, no curriculum and methods, no planning, and without even a fully developed nervous system—and also with no failures, no dropouts, and no underachievers. This marvel happens simply because the child is human and is therefore especially gifted for making sense of the kaleidoscope of life. From the crib on, this organism is busily processing data—classifying, relating, inferring generalizations. If it did not, it would never speak; for in order to speak, the child must: perceive and classify in the chaos around him those things to which words refer; discriminate human speech from other sound and one vocal sound from another; match these classified vocal sounds with the things they stand for; infer from dialogue all the basic grammatical rules that enable him to interpret and make up sentences he has never heard before. Motivation is the best ever—to join the human race and survive.

Preschool children have already done superbly some of the very things that we in schools arrogantly list as our goals for them. We are going to teach them all about auditory and visual discrimination, comprehension, composition, how to classify, how to draw conclusions, how to think. The fact is that we cannot teach any of these faculties, because they are part of being human and account for evolutionary survival. It helps not at all to play God. We would do very well just to avoid playing the Devil. What schools *can* do is open up all the ways and means by which a child can *continue* to exercise these faculties.

This view of children is not romantic or sentimental or permissive. Both homely observation and the best scientific findings fairly shout at us to abandon, once and for all, the notion that children come to school as empty vessels to be poured into, blank clay to be imprinted, or passive products outputted by a programmed assembly line. The real truth, as everybody knows, is that students are entirely too full of themselves for schools to bear. Instead of trying to make kids do something different from what they have been doing, we should be helping them to carry to

maturity the very successful, if limited, knowledge structures they have already evolved. Instead of making them shut up in school, we should show them more ways to talk and more things to talk about. Children have been comprehending and composing all their lives. Quite literally, to comprehend and to compose mean to "take together" and to "put together." They are two sides of humanity's chief talent, which is to make sense of things by selecting and ordering experience into useful symbols.

If schools have too much ignored what the students are and what they know in favor of other, nearly disastrous approaches, the reason may lie less in some lack of insight than in some classic problems of institutions that hamstring and blindfold their staffs. As an institution, a school has an honest problem of numbers. As a *public* institution, it also has some not-so-honest problems of tampering by selfish or unthinking interests in government, industry, and community. If you multiply one set of problems by the other, you get a curriculum determined by mere standardization and politics, not by the practical realities of learning. So it fails, the public cries that it is not getting its money's worth, tighter accountability systems are installed, the original problems of standardization and politics are thereby worsened; and so the cycle goes. You do not solve a problem of numbers by playing numbers games. You solve it by *offsetting* quantification with qualification, mechanization with humanization. The great irony of performance-contracting was that school systems paid outsiders to do what they did not permit their own personnel to do—get out from under their own institutionalism.

Long analysis with many other educators has thoroughly convinced me that the famous problems of learning to read and write so plaguing public schools are not *learning* problems at all, but *institutional* problems. Learning to read and write is far easier than learning to speak, being merely a media shift from ear to eye, but *appears* much more difficult when attempted in school. Kids for whom, in fact, literacy is no problem learn it mostly at home. Those students unsuccessful at it are mainly those dependent on school for literacy. In other words, the most effective language learning requires precisely the spontaneous, responsive, personal, small-group circumstances of the home that seem impossible in any institution.

But such favorable circumstances are not impossible. Furthermore, numbers are not all bad. School has one great advantage over the home—more people and other resources. After basic speech has been acquired, a youngster can develop language power better outside the home, by communicating with a variety of people. Also, where numbers congregate, there also can be assembled more media and materials than at home. So an institution is not a hopeless place to learn in: the trick is to make numbers work for us instead of against us. This is, after all, the original purpose of any institution.

So far, public schools have been losing this struggle. In a nutshell, we have drastically overcontrolled the learning resources, in an effort to simplify management. We should *use* numbers to generate the vast quantities of practice that kids require in order to continue to develop language. The result of tidy uniformity is only chaos, of course, because everybody is prevented from doing what the institution exists to do. When reading has to be chosen, administered, and monitored by the teacher, students cannot read nearly enough, and furthermore they dislike reading. When the teacher has to process all the writing, students cannot write nearly enough, and furthermore hate to write. When speaking is outlawed as bad behavior or restricted to "class discussion" led by the teacher, students can't exercise the chief means of developing both oral and written expression. The more these target activities thus stagnate or regress, the more we feel we have to look for new methods, or ride herd on accountability. But the real problem is that making the teacher the center makes the teacher a stumbling block.

Programmed materials do not solve the problem, because, for one thing, they shunt the teachers aside instead of allotting them a more creative role. Programmed learning utilizes new technology and managerial ideas to cinch up old failures. It flies banners of "individualization," but it is merely *isolated* learning. Like other traditional approaches, it tries to wish away numbers instead of capitalizing on them. That is, it resorts to standardization. Students all do virtually the same things, and in the same order, but at somewhat different speeds. To vary pace alone is to trivialize the idea of individualization, which, to mean anything, must mean that students pursue different and unpredictable courses. What is efficient is to accommodate *all* individual differences in background and in makeup, not just speed. Furthermore, language is so thoroughly social in origin and function that it cannot be learned without interaction. We can capitalize on numbers only by making full use of people resources—the teacher, other students, and other adults—and by making the classroom a cornucopia of ways and means to learn.

Trends toward the open classroom in elementary school and elective courses in secondary school show that many people are trying to make school adjustable to individual differences in motivation and modes of learning. These individual differences derive largely from out-of-school learning of some sort; so any efforts to individualize schooling will strengthen continuity between life in and outside the classroom. The same rich variety of materials, methods, modes, and media needed to ensure each learner's finding his right way will also permit him to keep his life whole.

As variety must offset an institution's natural drift toward uniformity, wholeness must offset the tendency to fragmentation. Again, to simplify management, many schools have broken down learning into unreal units that nobody can learn. Each long-vowel spelling is made a teaching

target for beginning reading, even though we know that learning to read often happens with no phonics instruction at all. Or, even with phonics instruction, it happens by *pulling together* different phonetic understandings. Later reading is broken down into scores of "skills," such as "singling out details," that are psychologically meaningless. Composition is decomposed into artificial particles like "transitions" or "topic sentences" or "paragraph structures" that can no more be factored out of the total composing act and separately taught and tested than the pound of flesh can be cut out of the body without killing both. After all, we are not dealing with carburetors or mufflers that can be taken out, fixed up, and replaced without damage to anything. Learning is organic in the true sense of being a live organization, a system of interrelationships. Further learning is *reorganization.* It may be handy to *speak* of parts of an organism, but to try to isolate them out *in actual practice* is a mad scientist's kind of fatal play.

The fragmentation of reading and writing cuts in several deadly ways. It cuts at the roots of language learning by separating reading from "language arts" and both from "oral skills," "creative writing," and "drama." "English" becomes just literature and therefore rules out huge areas of reading and writing treated nowhere else in the school curriculum. Because isolated words and sentences are easy to check out, vocabulary is thought to be learned by memorizing words out of context, and sentence structure is thought to be learned by analyzing separate sentences, whereas in truth vocabulary and sentence structure are expanded far better by pulling out all the stops on talking, reading, and writing. To atomize reading into "skill-building" passages, or composition into "practice paragraphs" simply severs action from motivation, because purpose and meaning have only wholes as goals. If these unreal units must, in addition, be sequenced, the unreality is multiplied. Although done in the name of scientific objectivity, this way of proceeding is thoroughly unscientific. All that results is a self-defeating overcontrol.

Again, we really know better, but the institutional need to monitor and account for itself pushes schools to such excesses. It seems easier to check out and report on what's going on if the action is chopped up fine. But this is the tail wagging the dog, in the worst way. Ironically, the public, in whose name these vivisections are committeed, does not assess schools in this mincing fashion but rather in a gross-gauge, rule-of-thumb way. "Can my child read?" "What does he read?" "Can he express himself well?" "Does he talk the right way for getting a job?" "Does he like to write?" etc. When parents talk accountability, they do not mean what management-by-objectives, cost-effectiveness specialists mean by it. Parents, in fact, clamor about their money's worth, but their goals are wholes—broad and humanistic—like students', and like most perceptive and experienced teachers'. Schools would do well to assess on the basis of goals as whole, motivated acts.

The program I have been working on attempts to restore wholeness—whether it is the totality of the writing act, the interrelation of reading with speaking and writing, the continuity of personal life with school life, the unity of will and action, or the integrity of individual growth. What can make this possible is a classroom array of materials and activities that are themselves wholes—that is, complete acts for common language motives. Second, each learner sequences these activities and materials differently according to the interplay of forces acting in and on him as he or she goes about evolving his or her own knowledge structures. So what this program does is set up such a powerful field that virtually anything that happens in it produces language-learning.

Personal choice is at the center, not only so that the learner *cares* about what he is doing, but so that good judgment will develop—whether the option is which book to turn to next, which activity card to select, which medium to say something in, whom to ask for help, which phrasing to express an idea in, or which way to interpret a line of poetry. But personal choice does not operate in a vacuum; in this program it operates as elsewhere, influenced by peers, elders, alluring variety in the environmental array, and intrinsic connections among things and actions. Thus, the student-centered curriculum is never "permissive" or "unstructured." It is not based on some empty and faddish notion of "doing your own thing." An individual is always a force in a field of other forces and very hard-put indeed to tell inside from outside.

Nothing can be "unstructured"; when we say that, we mean that we don't *recognize* the structure of what we're looking at. The word only expresses our ignorance. A bystander, observing a truly individualized classroom in action, may be tempted to call it "chaotic," because it is impossible for him to know what each student is doing, what he has been doing, and what knowledge structure he is building within. But any learner using this program will be learning to exercise language choices wisely, which has surely been the main goal of any traditional curriculum. The wisest decision for educators to make is to stock a classroom with as many things as possible to *choose among.* The traditional classroom has not had *enough* structures. This is one way in which it has been overcontrolled. One lesson plan for all each day, one sequence for all for the year—that is not to structure *more;* it is simply to let a single structure monopolize the learning field. This monopoly rules out any real possibility of learning to develop judgment, which requires that the learner be structur*ing* in school, not structur*ed* by the school. Structuring is choosing. Comprehending, composing, making sense of the world—these are structuring. School should be harder and more fun. It should be a place where youngsters can structure for themselves, not have it done for them before they arrive. For one thing, we can't *stop* a child from structuring. For another, we have already tried that way.

The classroom should be a microcosm of what is most positive about America—its diversity and flexibility. The hybrid strength that comes from continued synthesis seems to be humanity's chief adaptation for survival in a very rapidly changing world. And the youth of the nation that serves as the growing edge of this world cannot afford to be hung up by false problems at our present rudimentary level of language teaching. There are simply too many other things schools must start teaching that we don't now have time for because language learning gets stalled in institutional problems. The future will require that children not only learn language well and fast but that they *transcend* language, liberate themselves from it, that is, go all the way through and out the other side to subtler, more powerful ways of proving and communicating that lie beyond and beneath language.