CHAPTER ONE

A Structural Curriculum in English

> The structure of a thing is the way it is put together. Anything that has structure, then, must have parts, properties or aspects which are somehow related to each other. In every structure we may distinguish the *relation* or *relations,* and the items *related.*
>
> — *An Introduction to Symbolic Logic*
> SUZANNE LANGER

"Structure"

To do full justice to the concept of "structure," we must understand it in the formal sense that a logician such as Suzanne Langer would hold it to, for the value of the concept lies in its emphasis on relations rather than things. The distinction is difficult to maintain, however; in the act of talking about struc-

Reprinted with slight alterations from the Harvard Educational Review, Vol. 36:1 (Winter 1966), 17–28.

ture we reify it into substance. The form of one man's short story is the content of another man's critical essay. We begin by envisioning lines of force that magnetize a whole field and point the pedagogical way; then the first thing we know, we are beholding a mere "main idea" or "principle," which, even if it is new, is still a something like any other old piece of content and thus risks being treated the same old way. Any English teacher could drum up a grandiose thesis (such as, "Great literature reflects man's tragic conflict with himself"), illustrate it with selections from literature, and say that he had created a structural curriculum. I have four objections to this: it is old hat; it encourages a pre-digested, moralizing approach; it reveals more the structure of psychology and sociology than of literature; and even the structure of literature is not the structure of English. How, then, *do* we arrest the subtle transformation of structure into substance?

Anything is a structure. If we presuppose that some things are structures and other things are substantive elements which go into structures, we have trapped ourselves at the outset. Everything is both, which is to say that things and relations are matters of conceptual option. To understand the option one is playing one must be aware of where one has mentally placed himself. A tree is an element of a landscape, a thing, until we choose to isolate the tree, at which time it becomes a structure (if we talk about it at all) or set of relations among trunk, limbs, and branches. By calling something a structure, we mean that we are preferring to strip it of context, in fact to make it itself the context for some smaller structures. A molecule is a structure of atoms, which are structures of smaller "things," etc. A word is an element in a sentence, which is an element in a paragraph, which is an element in a composition. The physicist must consider his atom, the grammarian his sentence, as a structure, even though he knows perfectly well that in the next biggest context it is only a particle. In this "infinite regress of contexts," as Gregory Bateson has called it, elements stake out the field of vision, and relations among the elements rope it off; one does not see beyond, because "beyond" is where one is looking from.

Now, it is not hard to find *a* structure in English. All the particles — word, sentence, paragraph, compositional whole, literary "form" — offer us structures, a regress of increasingly larger contexts. But what are they *sub*-structures of? For the regress is only theoretically infinite; our conception is always finite. Some ultimate context or super-structure is exactly what English as a school subject has always lacked.

"English"

Untidy and amorphous as it is, "English" seems like a very unattractive candidate for a structural curriculum, which undoubtedly is a main reason for its being the caboose on the train of educational renovation. Sometimes it is defined as contents — literature, language, and composition (a non-parallel series if I ever saw one, since composition *ought* to be an activity). At other times it is defined as "arts" or skills — reading, writing, listening, speaking. (I think we should add thinking to this list.) Right away we confront the main dilemma, parallel to the dichotomy of substance and structure. How much is teaching English a matter of covering content, and how much a matter of developing skills, which are independent of any particular matter? Frequently the dilemma has been resolved by claiming that certain contents are essential to learning the skills. That is — to write one must know, as information, certain linguistic codifications and facts of composition; to read literature, one must be told about prosody and "form." But learning "form" this way is really learning content, and the result is quite different than if the student *practices* form or feels it invisibly magnetize the whole curriculum. *Learning* and *learning how to* result in very different kinds of knowledge. (Compare the psychiatrist's telling the patient, "You have an Oedipus complex," with the deep liberating reorganization that takes place gradually through the transference process.)

But, partly because it is easier to tell somebody than it is truly to lead him, partly because we assimilate English, by false analogy, to such subjects as history and science, we have misconstrued it and mistaught it. Although it is certainly the busi-

ness of the English teacher to know as information the history and science of language and literature, it does not follow at all that he should teach these as contents to his elementary and secondary students. If he does teach, say, the history of literature or the science of language, organized as a corpus, he must justify doing so either on grounds that they improve certain skills or that they have value in their own right. Although some filling-in of historical context may be a reasonable adjunct to the reading of some works of literature, that is very different from organizing the whole literature course in historical-survey fashion or from assigning books of literary history. As for the science of language, the evidence from research indicates that teaching grammar, old-fashioned or new-fangled, has no effect on the skills. When I taught French I found that students did fine with *qui* and *que* until we got to the chapter that explained the difference, after which they constantly confused them. Certainly, on the other hand, we wouldn't deny that literary history and linguistics have value in themselves. But in this case a critical problem of priority arises. Why should physics be an elective and literary history required? Why offer linguistics in high school rather than psychology or anthropology, which might be deemed equally "basic"? The same problem exists for the science of literature and the history of language. I don't see how we can justify giving priority to the content specialties of English over those of other subjects, or teaching these specialties before students have thoroughly mastered the large English skills (there is a discouraging amount of evidence that this often doesn't occur even by the time of college). If one does believe that skills pre-empt contents in English, then a structural curriculum is already in sight, for teaching functionally, teaching *how to,* keeps the operating relations of the field from becoming things.

Today the approach is far too substantive. Take up practically any textbook on language or composition and you will find it organized in this way: categories, and therefore units of study, are derived by analytically decomposing language into the "elements." This is what I call the particle approach — sound,

perhaps, for research, but not for teaching. Although this approach pays lip service to the interrelations of elements, it cannot escape its own format. To cash in on current slogans like "sequential development," publishers often arrange these particles in an order of smaller to larger — from the word to the sentence to the paragraph to the whole composition. I do not know what development this corresponds to — certainly not to the functioning of either the language or the student. For one thing, only in the largest context — the whole composition — can meaning, style, logic, or rhetoric be usefully contemplated. Secondly, little particle to big particle is not even an order of simple to complex, since each sub-structure is as complex as the next largest. What *does* count is that, as context for the next smallest, each of these structures governs everything of significance in the one below. For the same reasons, units on style, logic, and rhetoric can teach little more than abstract information if these things are not kept as functions of each other, and they can be kept so only in the ultimate context of somebody-talking-to-somebody-else-about-something.

To the extent the English teacher has an obligation to familiarize the student with what has been written in the past, he rightly has a problem of content-coverage. But any approach that entailed plenty of reading could accomplish this. We no longer agree very much on what every gentleman ought to have read, and the survey of literature seems to have placed us more in the role of historian than we thought appropriate. Virtually any curriculum could sample the range of literature. Genre divisions satisfy a passion for taxonomy. Though perhaps the best classification of literature so far, genres are too cavalierly equated with form and structure. Actually, the structure of a novel or play is at least as much unique to itself as it is shared by other novels and plays. And some stories are poems, some poems stories, some plays essays, and some essays are stories or poems. Perhaps more than anything else, genres are marketing directives. As such, they provide convenient rhetorical bins. Pedagogically, they constitute a hazard by making both teachers and students feel that they have to "define" what a short story

or a poem is, i.e., find something similar in all the examples. Even if this were not futile, one would be left with only a definition, another substantive reduction that does not help one to read or write, or even appreciate. Since a definition would have to be of the form, not content, the very difficulty of definition suggests that we exaggerate greatly the formal similarities among members of the same genre.

At the risk of disparaging what a lot of English teachers, including myself, have relied on as curriculum guides, I have emphasized the ways we have unnecessarily deformed our subject to make it into a content like other subjects. But English, mathematics, and foreign languages are not *about* anything in the same sense that history, biology, physics, and other primarily empirical subjects are about something. English, French, and mathematics are *symbol systems,* into which the phenomenal data of empirical subjects are cast and by means of which we think about them. Symbol systems are not primarily about themselves; they are about other subjects. When a student "learns" one of these systems, he *learns how to* operate it. The main point is to think and talk about other things by means of this system.

In insisting on a major division between symbol systems and what is symbolized in the systems, I am attempting to break up the bland surface of our traditional curriculum, whereby the Carthaginian Wars, the theorems of Euclid, irregular German verbs, the behavior of amoebas, and the subordination of clauses all come dead-level across the board if they were the same kind of knowledge. The failure to distinguish *kinds* and *orders* of knowledge amounts to a crippling epistemological error built into the very heart of the overall curriculum. The classification by "subject matters" into English, history, math, science, French, etc., implies that they are all merely contents that differ only in what they are about. The hidden assumptions of this classification have taught students to be naïve about both symbols and the nature of information; even very bright students are apt to leave high school not understanding the difference between em-

pirical truth and logical validity. Furthermore, we have fooled ourselves.

Fortunately, the curriculum builders of mathematics and foreign languages have made some progress in overcoming this confusion. They have done so by reconceiving their subjects in terms of relations and skills. The most natural assumption about teaching any symbol system should be that the student employ his time using that system in every realistic way that it can be used, not that he analyze it or study it as an object. (In this respect an English curriculum would not differ basically from any other first-language curriculum; what I have to say in this essay applies as well to French for the French or Russian for the Russians.) If such an approach seems to slight literature and language, I can only say that this is a mistake of the substantive view. A student writing in all the same forms as the authors he reads can know literature from the inside in a way that few students ever do today. If the student has to work with language constantly in the functional way the professional does, he will come to know it in the professional's intimate way. Through reading, writing, and discussing whole, authentic discourses — and using no textbooks — students can learn better everything that we consider of value in language and literature than they can by the current substantive and particle approach.

As it is now, I see us turning out glib Advanced Placement students who know all the critical jargon and can talk about writing endlessly, but who do not write well and are not truly sensitive to style, rhetoric, and logic. In many of our writing assignments, I see us feverishly searching for subjects for students to write about that are *appropriate for English;* so we send them to the libraries to paraphrase encyclopedias, or they re-tell the plots of books, or they write canned themes on moral or literary topics for which no honest student has any motivation. Although asking students to write about real life as they know it is gaining ground, still many teachers feel such assignments are vaguely "permissive" and not as relevant as they ought to be. Once we acknowledge that "English" is not properly about itself,

then a lot of phoney assignments and much of the teacher's confusion can go out the window. Speaking as one of many university professors who have to stop and teach their graduate students to write, Wendell Johnson has relieved his exasperation in this way:

> The second, and more grave, reason for their [English teachers'] failure is that they appear to place the emphasis on "writing," rather than on writing-about-something-for-someone. You cannot write writing.[1]

Johnson catches here just my point about teachers feeling that they have to do "English" about English. Clearly distinguishing symbolizing subjects from symbolized subjects would eliminate such nonsense.

Having said this, however, I must now enter a great paradox: in trying to separate symbol from symbolized, one discovers their inseparability. Ultimately, we cannot free data from the symbols into which they have been abstracted, the message from the code. All knowledge is some codification by man of his phenomenal world. This is precisely what many incoming college freshmen and even graduate students have never learned. The fact is that languages *are* about themselves, in a greater measure than we usually suspect; but this is a wholly different matter from the English teacher's fear that if he does not keep English self-contained it will slip through his fingers and become as big as all outdoors. The ambiguity I am after is that while we speak in English about non-English things, we are using invisible syntactic relations as well as words like "although" and "because" that are not about the phenomenal world — at least not the external one. Every code or language says something about itself while delivering its message. According to communications engineers, codification is the substitution of one set of events for another. The set of events which we substitute for outer phenomena when we talk about them is an inner set of neural events — activities we learn when we learn

[1] "You Can't Write Writing," S. I. Hayakawa, ed., *The Use and Misuse of Language* (New York: Fawcett Publications, Inc., 1962), p. 109.

the language and about which we are normally unaware. The purpose, I take it, of teaching linguistics and semantics is to make the student aware of how much people's words are about people and words and how much they truly recapitulate outer phenomena. But this is best done by letting students *try* to symbolize raw phenomena of all kinds at all levels of abstraction, and then by discussing these efforts under the guidance of a teacher who is linguistically and semantically sophisticated. I think it will be found that what we might tell the student or have him read about concerning the reflexiveness of language will be much better learned through his own writing and discussion. By this method, teachers may more readily learn what kind of understanding of language the student can take at different ages and in what form they can take it.

Yes, language is about itself, but, in accordance with something like Russell's theory of types, higher abstractions are about lower abstractions, never about themselves. That is, some English words refer to the outer world, other words (like relative pronouns) refer to these first words, and all syntax is about tacit rules for putting together the concrete words. Some notion of a hierarchy of abstraction, defined as greater and greater processing of phenomena by the human mind, is indispensable. Thus, the more abstract language is, the more it is meta-language, culminating in mathematics as the ultimate language about language. So we imagine a symbolic hierarchy going from the codification of our world that most nearly reflects the structure of that world to codification that more and more resembles the structure of the mind. Basically this is what abstraction is all about. To enable the student to learn about this process, we must first separate in the curriculum, and hence in the student's mind, symbolic systems from empirical subjects, and then help him discover both the dependence and independence of one and the other.

I hope it is clear at this point that I am construing English as all discourse in our native language — any verbalizing of any phenomena, whether thought, spoken, or written; whether literary or non-literary. Seen as packets of heterogeneous content,

on the one hand, and as skills on the other, English does indeed seem unwieldy and resistant to structure. But if we smelt back down to the simplest relations of discourse all substantive categories, we may be able to re-cast the curriculum so as to accommodate all that we agree is important.

The Structure of Discourse

The elements of discourse are a first person, a second person, and a third person; a speaker, listener, and subject; informer, informed, and information; narrator, auditor, and story; transmitter, receiver, and message. The structure of discourse, and therefore the super-structure of English, is this set of relations among the three persons. But in order to exploit this venerable trinity, we must get beyond its innocent look.

Within the relation of the speaker to his listener lie all the issues by which we have recently enlarged the meaning of "rhetoric" — what A wishes to do by speaking of such and such a subject to B. Within the relation of the speaker to his subject lie all the issues of the abstractive process — how the speaker has symbolically processed certain raw phenomena. But of course these two relations are in turn related: *what* and *what for* are factors of each other. As with all trinities, the relations of persons is a unity — somebody-talking-to-somebody-about something. And, lastly, within the relation of the listener to the subject lie all the issues which we call comprehension and interpretation.

In proposing this structure, I am thinking that the student would learn the skills of operating our symbol system by role-playing first and second persons in all the possible relations that might exist between the student and a subject, and between him and a speaker or listener. For the set of relations is of course not static, and, as the ultimate context, this structure governs the variations in style, logic, and rhetoric of all the sub-structures beneath it — the word, the sentence, the paragraph, and the compositional or literary "form." This amounts to proposing that curriculum units and sequence be founded on different kinds of discourse, a "discourse" being defined as any piece of verbali-

zation complete for its original purpose. What creates different kinds of discourse are shifts in the relations among persons — increasing rhetorical distance between speaker and listener, and increasing abstractive altitude between the raw matter of some subject and the speaker's symbolization of it.

There is one thing that no grammar book will ever tell us about the trinity of discourse: first and second persons are of a different order of reality than third person. Whereas *I* and *you* are existential, unabstracted persons, *he* or *it* has merely referential or symbolic reality. That is, *I* and *you* inhabit some space-time, but, in a given communication situation, *he* or *it* inhabits only the timeless realm of abstraction. Thus if Tom and Dick want to exclude Harry, even if he is standing right before them, all they have to do is *refer to him.* This says clearly, "You do not exist in the same way we do." When the servant addresses His Highness, he uses the third person to deny the actual *I-you* relation and thereby maintain the discontinuity of their realities. Perhaps — in a somewhat simplified sense — Martin Buber's distinction between an *I-it* relation and an *I-thou* relation best expresses the two different orders of reality. That is, when something or somebody is an *it* for me, I am manipulating the idea of them I have in my head, which is to say that I am relating only to myself; whereas when something or somebody is a *thou* for me, I am meeting directly their unabstracted, existential reality, which is independent of me and equal to me. Buber rightly associates the *I-it* relation with verbal, discursive, scientific knowing, and the *I-thou* relation with non-symbolic meeting or action. This corresponds in the structure of discourse to the abstractive relation between first and third persons and the rhetorical relation between first and second persons.

My reason for establishing this difference in kind of reality is that it helps us clarify the innocent opaqueness of the conceptual scheme of "persons" so that we can better discriminate between the action relation of human-to-human and the symbolic relation of human-to-referent. *I* and *you* pre-empt the communication process, just as transmitter and receiver exist before message, although they are defined as such only by virtue of sending and receiving messages. The starting point, then, of

teaching discourse is "drama": interaction between the communicants, who are equal and whose relation is reversible. (Within a given communication situation, *I* and *it* cannot reverse roles.) One failure of English teaching has been to consider only messages, or consider them before or without placing them in the whole context of the communication frame wherein the student can see the operation of all relations.

Viewing the student for a moment as an *I* asked to write something, let's think about *what* and *what for*. His *what* does not usually entail his abstracting raw phenomena from the ground up, and as for his *what for* — his motivation for writing the theme, his audience, and how he wishes to act on that audience — we find slim pickings indeed. He is writing always to the same old person, the English teacher, to whom he has nothing to say but who has given him a *what for* by demanding the assignment and by holding the power of grades and disciplinary authority over him. No wonder that what he learns most is to dope out the idiosyncracies of the teacher and give him what he wants — a fine lesson in rhetoric which Harold Martin once called somewhere the "nice-Nelly" school of writing. While acknowledging that artificiality cannot be eliminated completely from the classroom situation, somehow we must create more realistic communication "dramas" in which the student can practice being a first and second person with better motivation and in a way more resembling how he will have to read, write, speak, and listen in the "afterlife." I recommend training the student to write for the class group, which is the nearest thing to a contemporary world-at-large; accustoming him to having his themes read and discussed workshop fashion; and asking him to write about raw material from his own experience which he is motivated to write about and to invent an appropriate rhetoric for. It is amazing how much so-called writing problems clear up when the student really cares, when he is realistically put into the drama of somebody with something to say to somebody else.

I have suggested structuring English curriculum according to the relations of speaker-listener-subject as the ultimate context within which all our other concerns may be handled func-

tionally and holistically, moving the student in his writing and reading from one kind of actual discourse to the next in a sequence which permits him to learn style, logic, semantics, rhetoric, and literary form continuously through practice as first or second person. Ideally this sequence would correspond both to his own intellectual and emotional growth and to some significant progression in "symbolic transformation," as Suzanne Langer has called the human processing of the world. The structure of the subject must be meshed with the structure of the student. A major failure of education has been to consider the logic of the one almost to the exclusion of the psychologic of the other. To paraphrase Earl Kelley, we build the right facilities, organize the best course of study, work out the finest methods, create the appropriate materials, and then, come September, the wrong students walk through the door. Atomizing a subject into analytical categories, inherent only in the subject, necessarily slights the internal processes of the student or language-user, who in any given instance of an authentic discourse is employing all the sub-structures, working in all the categories, at once. We must re-conceive the subject in such a way that we can talk simultaneously about both the operations of the field and the operations of the learner. The title of a paper by Warren McCulloch expresses splendidly this transactional approach: "What Is A Number, That A Man May Know It, and A Man, That He May Know A Number?" We should ask the same question regarding our native language. What assures me that a correspondence is possible between phases of discourse and stages of growth is that all man's artifacts reflect him, and discourse is man-made. I think that in exploring all the shifts that can occur in the rhetorical relation of *I-you* and the abstractive relation of *I-it,* we will find sequences of activities that can be embodied in a curriculum doing justice to both learned and learner. But it is only in the largest context — any instance of a whole, authentic discourse — that the nature of the two can meet. The concept that seems most likely to enable us to think simultaneously about discourse and the learning of discourse is that of abstraction, redefined so as to apply to whole discourses and the rhetorical process behind them.