

The English Teacher

When the lack of a cohesive curriculum comes back to bite

BY THOMAS WAGNER

I retired in 2002, after 29 years as a public-middle-school English teacher in Jackson Heights, Queens, a stable working-class neighborhood in New York City. During the course of my teaching tenure, I came to some conclusions about my beleaguered profession (more careworn as the years progressed), including that learning to use language could not be entirely

unlike learning to dance, repair computers, or do brain surgery. I noticed that it required a rigorous, continuous sequence of concept building through listening, practicing, memorizing, and repeating, and that English teachers, like physics teachers or math teachers, had to be focused, well-prepared, and *specific* about what must be taught. Just telling teachers to “use their creativity” and hoping that all particulars would be covered was institutionalized wishful thinking.

Yet at no time during my 30 years in the classroom had I ever been informed what I was actually supposed to teach. Poetry? Transitive verbs? Letter writing? “Do what you want,” I was, in effect, told. “If in doubt, go to the language-arts book room and see if you can find a complete set of some textbook and use it as your guide.”

In my final year, the assistant superintendent dropped by my class with the principal and later told her that it was nice to see a teacher still teaching grammar. There was no hint that a curriculum policy might be re-examined—just a wistful comment about the winds of change. To get to the point, there is *no* sequential program of language development that can be assumed in the New York City public-school system. While the word “curriculum” is now in vogue, there is little awareness that this might require the actual specification of academic content to be taught in each grade.

That this near-anarchic approach to teaching English had repercussions was brought home to me in the year following my retirement, when I was hired by my union, the United Federation of Teachers, to teach two sections of a six-session course to prospective teachers. The class was designed to help them pass the essay part of the New York State Teacher



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Certification exam. My students—all college graduates—were generally bright, dedicated, decent people, but most of them had a lot of difficulty organizing their thoughts into the form of a short essay and a limited knowledge of the mechanics of writing.

In fact, most of my students had already failed the licensing exam. Why? This was not rocket science: sentence patterns, paragraph structure, punctuation, transitions. But, then, why should they have been expected to be capable writers when the Department of Education, which had these same folks as a captive audience for more than 2,400 days of schooling when they were students, had never considered that subject-verb agreement or use of the comma might have been squeezed in among the “activities” as essential requirements? And apparently nobody in their schools of “education” seemed to think that preparing a person to teach might include knowing how to write a paragraph. But now the real world loomed large. They had failed the teacher’s exam and the fluffy jargon about “enhancing group activities” had to be put aside so that I might prepare them to get a teaching job.

All of this was to be accomplished in six three-hour sessions.

Of course, this instruction should have been prescribed when they were in elementary school. There is now great pressure to lift scores in writing and reading, but still little interest in determining how.

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