
RECAPTURING A SENSE OF COMMUNITY

Integrating the Past and the Present

The past four decades have seen real changes in both the faculties and the curricula of college English departments. Starting in the late 1950s, as a byproduct of an explo-

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sion of knowledge in the sciences and the arts, most extremely small English departments began to expand their staffs. Formerly one teacher would have taught the whole range of courses from Freshman English to Shakespeare to Advanced Grammar. Now departments look for experts in periods, creative writing, or linguistics.

There has been undoubted improvement in the quality of teaching and in the resulting sense of professionalism. And while very few English teachers these days escape altogether from the need to staff Freshman English courses, most at least try to keep up to date in

their areas of specialization, reading recent scholarship and attending conventions in their areas of expertise.

Specialization Versus Community

Unfortunately, this has led to a kind of separation among us. College English teachers now seem to attend only those meetings in their specialization and then disappear. We seem to have lost a place and time to be a *community* of scholars, involved with a central body of thought, and specifically concerned about the similar experiences of teaching in our own consortium of colleges.

BY OTTILLIE STAFFORD

We have certainly benefited from thinking of ourselves as specialists. Forty years ago we were undoubtedly too unwilling to think of ourselves as part of a profession that extended

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beyond our own institutions. But I regret the loss of a sense that while we may specialize, and find challenges and

continuous dialogue in so doing, we are still a part of a community of scholars. In this connection we share both a body of knowledge and a commitment to a belief that gives us a particular reason for associating.

Is it only my seeing darkly that makes me think our students have lost some of the sense of a common discourse inside English departments that once made those departments infamous for breeding cliques? The cells of specialization have walled teachers in from the academic community in general, and from one another within departments.

A Loss of Intellectual Interest

Even more worrisome, though, is the loss of intellectual interest among students, a situation that has seriously affected the departmental community. Are we still feeling the effect of student repudiation of disciplined education 15 years ago? Or is this the result of stu-

dents being less interested in acquiring a body of knowledge than in obtaining a road to career development? Perhaps the events are really two phases of the same process of change.

In *Spiritus Mundi*, Frye comments on the change among university students, saying:

In education one cannot think at random. However imaginative we may be and however hard we try to remove our censors and inhibitions, thinking is an acquired habit founded on practice, like playing the piano. How well we do it depends on how much of it we have done, and it is never autonomous. We do not start to think about a subject; we enter into a body of thought and try to add to it. It is only out of a long discipline in continuous and structured thinking, whether in the university, in a profession, or in the experiences of life that any genuine wisdom emerges. The fox in Aesop was wiser than he knew: grapes prematurely snatched from the highest branches are sour.¹

What Frye pictures here as the road to wisdom is a fusing of study, profession, and experience, so that they con-

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stantly interact. He insists that this should occur through a continuous conversation. By reflecting on a period of time in the past through study, experience, and a network of associations, each participant in such a thought-stimulating occasion experiences change that affects his or her structure of thought and feeling. Ideally, that is what a class ought to do. But some kind of continuous setting for conversation outside of classes is also needed.

I am not talking here about students sitting around before and after class regurgitating the day's events, but of a kind of structured thinking that continuously brings together reading and reflection and reconstitutes them.

Thinking Requires Practice

Such conversations need the participation of a faculty. If the process of thinking about a body of knowledge needs practice, then this practice should include those whose thinking has had advanced training as well as those who are learning. In order for

this to happen, departments need to give as much attention to what goes on in halls, lounges, and offices as to what happens in classrooms.

Perhaps the problem here is the effect of technology on learning, or a reaction to the days when discussions turned into sensitivity sessions and lost their rigor. Perhaps our ideas about the

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nature of knowledge have changed. At any rate, we seem to have abandoned the idea that education takes place in the reshaping of patterns of thinking emerging from the mind and imagination of a student. Instead, we seem to

have settled for believing it is the mastery of bodies of knowledge.

The Gift of Imagination

"The gift the university has to offer," said Whitehead, "is the old one of imagination, the lighted torch which passes from hand to hand. It is a dangerous gift, which has started many a conflagration. If we are timid about the danger, the proper course is to shut down our universities."² Perhaps it is the risk he refers to that makes us reluctant to enter into the body of thought and add to it. We fear failure, making fools of ourselves, or being led into error, so we extinguish the light.

The special ability to push knowledge beyond its present bounds demands that something must happen in colleges besides the mastery of material. Ideas and facts must go somewhere that matters. All knowledge encountered needs to become part of new structures of thought and feeling. The function of academic dialogue is crucial in this process, and the mixing of memory and knowledge. This interaction constantly revitalizes what is learned. New information, the structure of past knowledge, and the encounter between them creates a new vision.

This is true in the study of any subject that really becomes a part of the pattern of thought of the student—or the teacher. It is so obviously a part of the study of literature that it should not need to be stated, yet the way to make it happen is not so obvious. Two teachers can be equally knowledgeable. Yet one may present material as a body of knowledge, without the interaction of memory and experience effecting change in it. Another teacher continually finds new discoveries in material that he or she has taught many times.

At its best, teaching communicates such an experience, and encourages it. Loren Eiseley quotes Sir Eric Ashby's remark that "to train young people in the dialectic between orthodoxy and dissent is the unique contribution which universities make to society." Eiseley goes on to say that

our lives are the creation of memory and the accompanying power to extend ourselves outward into ideas and to relive them. The finest intellect is that which employs an invisible web of gossamer running into the past as well as across the minds of living men and women and which constantly responds to the variations transmitted through these tenuous lines of sympathy.³

A Haunting of Memory

I originally titled this talk "This Mention Is Hunted," a phrase from a

composition written by a foreign student at Atlantic Union College. The class had been told to find a corner of the White House (the English building at AUC), and to write a description of something while looking at the subject. We were all charmed by the student's opening sentence, "This mention is hunted." Though the words were slightly askew, we could hear the real voice speaking behind the lines. The mansion is haunted, the people in it are haunted; this anatomical house in which I dwell is haunted; haunted by memories of voices speaking from lecture halls over the past 40 years. Haunted too by conversations with associates in our department and other departments; by students whose questions, discoveries, and frustrations have been part of my life.

What haunts the White House is not to be found in hidden passages or secret closets. It is the sense of memory, past presences, those who have been there through their words and influence.

The interweaving of past and present, when young minds and older ones of greater experience meet in a conversation about a subject, stretches those tenuous lines of sympathy into a gossamer web connecting today's teachers and students with the past. Communi-

cating this truth to students, helping them understand the sense of the "play behind the play," is as central as any concern of teaching.

An Additional Dimension

I believe that the basis of Adventist beliefs out of which we teach adds an additional dimension to this interweaving of memory and discovery. To the bodies of information we teach, we add the sense that the process of Creation lies at the very center of life. In addition, we combine the constant discovery of a Creator in our own experiences.

Such a central belief should shape our sense of constantly renewed creative discovery so that our teaching is both a response to it and our participation in it. If we can aim at that accomplishment, we can draw ourselves and our students into a community of true scholarship. □

FOOTNOTES

¹ Northrop Frye, *Spiritus Mundi: Essays on Literature, Myth, and Society* (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1976), pp. 46, 47.

² Alfred North Whitehead, *The Aims of Education* (New York: The Free Press, 1967), p. 101.

³ Loren Eiseley, *The Star Thrower* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1979), p. 267.