Anglo-American Seminar on Teaching of English

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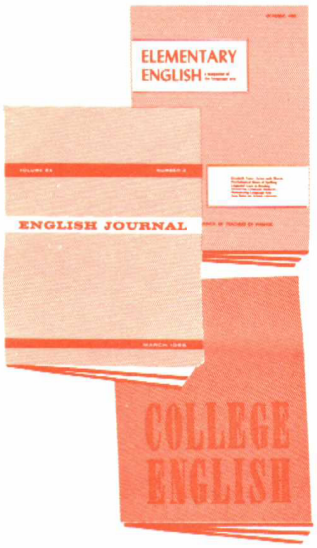
September 23, 1966



Mr. Peter J. Caws
Chairman, Department of Philosophy
Hunter College
New York, New York

Dear Peter:

The attached news release, which we are sending out this week tells as much of the Dartmouth story as we are in a position to release, but to get the message you need to read between the lines. As you anticipated, the conferees got a real "work out." With niceties of the opening sessions out of the way, forceful speakers and thinkers representing all shades of opinion in the English world unblushingly challenged many of the basic assumptions on which most English instruction is based. Few participants who really cared about the teaching and learning of English escaped searching self-analysis; few, I think, remained unshaken in some of their basic convictions. For most of us, Dartmouth provided an experience unlike anything we have had before. We are grateful to you and to the Carnegie Corporation for making the seminar possible.

The ultimate effect will not be apparent for some time to come. Each participant in his own way will surely sift the wheat from the chaff, will find some convictions strengthened and others radically shifted. The potential import of the deliberations is very great indeed. It remains to be seen which of the plethora of new ideas may have the greatest effect.

We are fortunate, I think, that John Dixon will prepare the report to the provession. If he manages to convey his personal sense of excitement, as well as his sensitivity to the ideas of others, his should be a splendid volume. Herb Muller can be counted on for a report that is readable and sound. We plan to have the manuscripts in hand by early December so that the steering committee can meet early in the new year. Shortly we shall make arrangements with a publisher.

In the meantime, we are preparing for participants a collection of Seminar papers, edited only lightly to provide greater readibility. I shall send you a copy of these documents as soon as the report is prepared. Once we know how heavily the writers draw on this material, we can make a decision concerning separate publication of the various items.

Far more agreement was achieved than I anticipated early in the meeting. The sense of the Seminar ran strongly against curriculum construction which concentrates on parcelling out segments of content to various grade levels, against prepackaging units of instruction, and predesigning sequences for learning which ignore the unique capacities of individual students. British and American scholars alike questioned the conception of presenting to young people an inert, established "content," be it literature, language, or rhetoric. College models for school courses were summarily rejected. The pupil's own intellectual and emotional involvement in the uses of language and his active exploration of human experience in both literature and life seemed to provide the central themes for much of the discussion.

Experiences in literature (rather than literary criticism or history), more imaginative writing (a possible road to better expository writing?), a stress on creative dramatics, improvisation, and informal class discussion--these were stressed.

Far from a return to the child-centered concepts of progressive education, the emerging insights seem more closely linked to the work of Piaget, the "discovery methods" advocated by some of today's educational psychologists, and - not unimportantly, I think - to the reassessment of the students role in higher education so evident on our college campuses as a result of the Berkeley revolt. Somehow I also see a connection with the Hunting Writers Conference, the Tufts Seminar, the MLA Ph.D. Study, and the NCTE restudy of undergraduate English programs. I only hope that the message can be stated in a convincing manner. It will be a useful corrective.

On some issues the Seminar was divided. Paramount was disagreement on the extent to which the teacher should provide direct and explicit instruction in the forms of the language (sentence patterns, usage, rhetorical patterns), as distinguished from oblique, indirect instruction. Many Americans, particularly those with backgrounds in English Education and the schools, felt that some direct teaching was necessary. Obviously then participants disagreed on the introduction of grammatical analysis of whatever kind. Except for possible bona fide experiments, participants agreed that instruction in grammar had no effect on the writing of pupils and should not be introduced for that purpose. Some, but not necessarily all, of the linguists argued for the study of language as a humanistic endeavor, but even here the sentiment seemed to be cautionary. The Seminar strongly agreed, however, that teachers at all levels should inform themselves about the English language, so that their classroom approaches could be modified in the light of such knowledge.

Even sharper disagreement marked discussions on the teaching of English to children with deviant dialects. The issue was not whether children (ages 8-18) should speak in school in their own dialects; participants agreed that these dialects should be respected and that one obligation of the English teacher was to help all young people learn to understand and respond to dialects other than their own. Rather the issue dealt with the extent to which schools should attempt to change dialects to accommodate social pressures which some American and British participants viewed as reflecting prejudiced views. Many expressed doubts about current inner-city language programs. Others agreed that children with dialect problems must learn to read and listen to "standard English" (because they will need such skill in our society), but that efforts should not be made to change their patterns of speech and writing. A sizeable group supported the conventional view that the school provide young people with sufficient skill to make possible economic and social mobility.

On two important issues agreement was manifest. With only two exceptions, Seminar members adopted a strong stand against the undesirable impact of present examination systems on curriculum and teaching in English. The British examination system prompted this reaction, but even relatively conservative Americans spoke of the less obvious, but no less pernicious effect of examinations in this country. Also, the Seminar almost univerally questioned rigid patterns of "streaming" or "grouping" students which tend to provide a restrictive environment for language development.

All of these ideas are discussed in the papers and will be developed in the reports. The implications for teaching English are very great indeed. Talk about innovation!

We gave some attention to future cooperative activities, liaison between projects in the various countries and the like. A proposal for an international journal met instant approval. Most of these proposals will be reviewed by the planning committee in December.

One possibility for international cooperation has already arisen. James Britton, London Institute of Education, and one of the most thoughtful participants from the U. K., is beginning a sizeable five-year study of student writing in the schools. It is the largest single grant yet made by the British Schools Council. Several participants suggested that considerable value might accrue were James Moffett (or some American of equal ability) able to work with the British project for a year, then return to this country to interpret some results and, if it seemed worthwhile, initiate a similar project over here. Is there any possibility that the Carnegie Corporation would consider supporting Moffett for a year at the London Institute, either by extending his present project or by a special grant when his work is completed. (He turned out to be one of the most interesting and influential participants at Dartmouth.) When I left Hanover, Jim felt he *had to discuss the possibility with Dean Sizer. I have heard nothing since, but I did agree to advance the idea to you and*

to ask Jim to communicate directly if you think it worth discussing.

This is a long letter but one you asked me to write. I find it difficult still to assess the total impact of the sessions on my own thinking, and from communications I have from Jim Miller, Fred Cassidy, Wally Douglas, Wayne Booth, others seemed to be responding in the same way. They would be worth checking if you want more information. Probably such confusion is a good sign.

Cordially yours,

JAMES R. SQUIRE
Executive Secretary

JRS:pb

Enclosure