

1987

## Teaching English: The Heart of the Matter

Robert Root

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/lajm>

---

### Recommended Citation

Root, Robert (1987) "Teaching English: The Heart of the Matter," *Language Arts Journal of Michigan*: Vol. 3: Iss. 2, Article 7.  
Available at: <https://doi.org/10.9707/2168-149X.1721>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by ScholarWorks@GVSU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Language Arts Journal of Michigan by an authorized editor of ScholarWorks@GVSU. For more information, please contact [scholarworks@gvsu.edu](mailto:scholarworks@gvsu.edu).

**TEACHING ENGLISH:  
THE HEART OF THE MATTER**

**Robert Root**

The origins of our profession record the conflicts of change in Socrates' lament that the increasing tendency toward writing among younger scholars would undermine the oral tradition. Now, roughly two millennia later, in an age more headlong and accelerated than even the darkest, most hallucinogenic classical myth, change is still the greatest challenge in education. Continually we struggle to learn what to let go of, what to hang on to, what of value still lies at the heart of the matter after the friction of change has worn away transitory facades.

In our time the challenges of change have come **between** generations, as a print generation is succeeded by a media generation, as those broadly educated are followed by those encouraged to specialize; they have also come **during** generations, in the changes that come over students between kindergarten and college. We need to acknowledge and understand these changes if we are to get to the heart of the matter.

The changes between generations are the most obvious to discuss and the most encouraging, because the signs are all around us that the education community at large is mobilizing to counteract some of their

more troubling effects. Film director Steven Spielberg can serve as an example of the kind of change I mean.

On a recent Academy Awards telecast, Spielberg was given this year's Irving Thalberg Award, presented for his lifetime contribution to film. In the past the great directors belonged to print generations, and their films were, even at their most original and cinematic, deeply indebted to traditional literature. But Spielberg is only the most prominent of a whole generation of filmmakers who grew up in a media age, entranced by and devoted to movies and television. For print generations film has been an extension of literature—it tells stories, discusses issues, dramatizes conflicts; it's about something. For the media generation film is self-inclusive, both source and result—it imitates earlier cinematic techniques and forms, focuses on visual effects and impact, and aspires chiefly to be self-reflexively cinematic; it's about itself.

Significantly, at the moment when giving Spielberg the Thalberg Award symbolically passed the torch to a media generation of filmmakers, Spielberg himself seemed troubled by the generation gap. In his acceptance speech he emphasized the need to return to the values of a print generation:

Most of my life has been spent in the dark watching movies; movies have been the literature of my life. The literature of Irving Thalberg's generation was books and plays. They read the great words of great minds and I think in our romance with technology and in our excitement at exploring all the possibilities of film and video we have partially lost something that we now have to reclaim. I think it's time to renew our romance with the word. I'm as culpable as anyone of having exalted the image at the expense of the word but

only a generation of readers will spawn a generation of writers.

For someone whose lifetime achievement has been centered on the image, it was a remarkable and encouraging speech.

But the change in direction in film, the most graphic example I know of the succession of a print generation by a media generation, is also an example of a trend affecting succeeding generations of practitioners in many fields: the shift from a broad background to a narrow one, from generalization to specialization. Spielberg's remarks also suggest that educational specialization and compartmentalization have been counterproductive even in highly specialized fields.

His comments come at a propitious moment for English language arts educators, for they epitomize concerns which permeate a wide spectrum of disciplines. The pendulum swing in education toward earlier and more intense specialization has begun to swing back toward the center. Leaders in almost every academic, creative, and commercial field have announced a similar realization that a neglect of English language arts has undermined the quality of the work being done. In recent years widespread support for a revival of language arts teaching has arisen in a variety of forms: the development of primary, secondary, and college writing across the curriculum programs; the establishment of national, state, and local writing projects; communication skills workshops in education, government, and business. We are almost unanimous in every discipline in recognizing that a heedless infatuation with change has led us to neglect the heart of the matter—the language arts. However, while that

recognition may be cause for celebration, it shouldn't be cause for complacency. Resistance to writing across the curriculum programs still arises, usually from misperceptions of what needs to be taught in writing and what value writing has for disciplines outside of English.

For example, content area teachers often complain that they haven't time to teach both their subject matter and English in one course; they suggest that if English teachers only taught English better (by which they usually mean standard usage, spelling, and research formats), then other teachers would be free to concentrate on their own disciplines.

Such teachers need to recognize the difference between "English as a content area" and "English as communication skills." English teachers are very often every bit as much content area teachers as someone in chemistry, art, or history when they help students learn about literary history and form or about language history and structure. That aspect of English teaching isn't the center of other disciplines, but the use of reading and writing skills is the heart of the matter for all content areas. The best minds of all disciplines have always been the best learners and communicators in those disciplines, and the job of helping them achieve that status has never been the sole responsibility of the English teacher.

Taking that as granted, content area teachers still dread incorporating English communication skills, because they see them merely as editing, proofreading, and documentation skills. But writing is nowhere near so static, tidy, and packagable; it's a rhetorical art that changes with the aims of the discourse, the audience to which it's directed,

the writer's familiarity with the topic. If we could discover and describe the one absolute universal foolproof plan to develop writing ability, it would be no trick to teach it. But there is no such panacea, and it's past time that teachers in every discipline, including our own, admitted it.

At the heart of the matter of teaching English is the training in processes— the process of reading, the process of writing, the process of learning to use and manipulate language. Like every other content area teacher, English language arts teachers, even as they help students to learn **about** their subject, have to simultaneously help them learn **how** to read, **how** to write, **how** to become skillful and independent users and interpreters of language.

At the very moment when so many disciplines are beginning to recognize that their students' deficiencies in these abilities are their responsibility too and that competence in them is as vital to learning in **their** disciplines as it is in the language arts, it becomes necessary for us to accept those processes in the English classroom and to stress the importance of these skills as essential ingredients in student learning. Reading and writing are at the heart of the matter for learning as well as for communication of what has been learned. By de-emphasizing writing assignments as a means of measurement and evaluation and by stressing the need to use writing as a means for students to interact with their lessons and their texts, we can recruit the content area teacher in the campaign to make students active learners, involved in their own education, instead of passive spectators standing by while teachers attempt to do all the work.

Moreover, now is the time to do that recruiting, while the climate is favorable for the return of reading and writing as a central part of learning in the content areas, before the pendulum swings away from us, as it inevitably will. We can't count on very many Steven Spielbergs to make the kind of self-discovery that helps push the pendulum **towards** us; the generations after him are already less affected by reading, more deeply influenced by media, particularly by the visual impact of the five films for which Spielberg was given the award. We need to be creating a new generation of readers and writers now.

Equally important, we need to be aware of, and more adept at, preventing the kinds of changes that seem to be occurring within a generation of children over the course of their schooling. In the beginning children are active learners. They come to school eager to learn, fresh from five years of spontaneous and independent learning, still energetic, enthusiastic, and endlessly curious. Although being plopped in front of a television set for their pre-school years without the counter-active modelling of parents who read and write may incline them toward it, passivity in the face of learning is a trait they have to acquire.

At a recent Young Writers' Workshop, I had the chance again not only to observe beginning writers in action but also to reflect on the ways they differ from college age writers, the people they will become in a dozen years or less. Elementary school writers, from kindergarten through sixth grade, approach writing differently than college age writers do. College creative writers are a pretty moody, intense, morose lot; they tend to see themselves as a breed apart, the only serious people on the planet. College non-

creative writers see themselves as non-writers, people victimized by academic bureaucracy every time they have to write. Elementary writers, on the other hand, are generally lively, bubbling over with ideas, and so eager to share their work that they sometimes create it and exhibit it simultaneously.

I introduced the workshop to the forty kids participating and the students in my section of our course in "Teaching Writing in the Elementary School" by telling the story of my earliest writing experience. I date my writing career from the time when I was eight years old and Bobby Hall and I had just come home from a matinee showing at the Rialto Theatre of *Superman and the Mole Men*. Thrilled with the on-screen adventures, we pried open the lock on my mother's typewriter and started writing our own adventure stories, each no more than fifty words long. My stories were about Tiger Boy, who lived on the Tiger Planet and had wonderful superpowers.

While I was speaking, a hand shot up, and a fourth grader announced that she was writing a book called "A Hole in Time," a science-fiction tale about a time-travelling monster. The workshop wasn't five minutes old and somebody was sharing her writing already. Her eagerness seemed to spread across the auditorium, so I cut short my remarks and sent them out to write and share.

Young writers not only like to share their work, they like to attend to the sharing of others. Later that workshop morning I watched a group of fourth graders listening to a story one of my college students had written

years earlier, at the age of seven. The children listened eagerly, laughing in all the right places, alert and interested, and a bond grew between them and the college students as they realized that the college students were writers too.

Few of the college students facilitating that workshop would describe themselves as writers, nor do they necessarily see any relationship between being a writer and being a teacher of writing, partly because they accept the stereotype of people who write as a breed apart and partly because teachers throughout their schooling have seldom modelled writing for them, merely lectured about it or evaluated it. But sitting in the workshop, quietly writing at the same time the elementary children do, they come face to face with the challenge of making words take on meaning, of committing thoughts and fantasies to paper, of becoming writers. The comments that they make to the elementary kids about writing begin to take on a pragmatism learned by experience, making their understanding of writing more vivid and urgent than they could acquire vicariously from composition texts and handbooks.

In a sense the college students in the elementary writing class have to learn what the elementary school children take for granted and what the college creative writers have forgotten— that writers aren't a breed apart. At base all of us are writers; everyone has something to say, an imagination worth developing, a world view worth exploring and expanding in the ways that only writing allows for, a need to communicate with others. The readiness, even eagerness, to communicate ideas, dreams, and fears is a quintessential element of our humanity. Spontaneously, unself-

consciously, willingly, elementary school children communicate because **not** thinking of themselves as writers is something they have to be taught.

Unfortunately, the odds are good that, by the time these kids finish high school, they will have stopped seeing themselves as writers and have been taught that most of the things they value writing for aren't valued by most of their secondary teachers. They'll be asked to write only to repeat what teachers, texts, and library resources have told them; they'll be evaluated for the accuracy of those repetitions and the thoroughness of their conformity to rules regarding format, proofreading, usage, and transcription skills. By the time they reach college, the majority of them will see writing as something tedious, mechanical, and irrelevant; a few—the toughest or the most inward—will become college creative writers, composing entirely for themselves, as a breed apart. Such a drift from the heart of the matter isn't attributable to a change in the culture between generations; it's been happening to young people for generations.

The influences on children's world views crop up in their writing all the time; they appeared when I told the workshop about my earliest memory of writing. During the workshop the students themselves kept revealing that they too were influenced in form, theme, and invention by the same kind of forces that had inspired me. Thinly-veiled television shows, movies, comic books, and video games showed up in their writing. One boy wrote a story about a Jewish prisoner in a Nazi concentration camp; another wrote a new adventure for Rambo; a girl incorporated figures from Saturday morning cartoons in her story. Listening and reading I had a sense of what the kids watched, what they read, what they heard about. At

their ages the vicarious worlds of popular media were a much greater resource than their own experiences, and necessarily so. Their reading—or far more often, their viewing—provided the themes, characters, formats, and value systems of their writing.

The workshop wasn't about reading, but reading—and the lack of it—was surely a subtext for the workshop. And if we ask what kinds of writers these students will become when they're old enough to be college students in a methodology class, then it's equally appropriate to ask what kind of readers they'll become. Unfortunately, I think I have some clues about that.

Sometime last year a suburban Detroit high school asked college English professors to recommend titles they most felt would prepare high school students for college. Far and away the most often recommended book was Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, followed by, in order, *The Odyssey*, *Oedipus Rex*, *Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, *Great Expectations*, *The Scarlet Letter*, *Walden*, *Gulliver's Travels*, and *Romeo and Juliet*. In addition to these ten, there were sixty-three other titles on the list, a good many of which may in fact already be taught in high school.

However, college students actually read on their own is a far cry from the kinds of works on that list. For example, in 1981, according to the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, the top ten best sellers at campus bookstores across the nation (including MSU and CMU), were, in order from 1 to 10: *The Official Preppy Handbook*, *101 Uses for a Dead Cat*, *What Color Is Your Parachute?*, *Garfield Gains Weight*, *The Simple Solution to*

*Rubik's Cube*, *Princess Daisy*, *Rage of Angels*, *A Confederacy of Dunces*, *The Third Wave*, and *Garfield Bigger Than Life*. Nothing by Twain, Homer, or Shakespeare in the lot. In fact, with the possible exception of *A Confederacy of Dunces*, a critically acclaimed novel, the list may be seen as particularly **anti**-literary.

Recently, in my own composition class, discussing an assignment to do research on film or book reviews, I discovered that everybody had seen a pretty good film recently, but nobody had read a piece of literature since high school, except in a college literature class. Of contemporary writers they were most familiar with Sidney Sheldon, Danielle Steele, V.C. Andrews, and Stephen King, none of whom made it onto that recommended list.

Perhaps this obvious gulf between what students read and what teachers think they ought to read suggests that they need more exposure to "Great Books" in high school and college. But I suspect it suggests that students see great literature and personal reading as two entirely separate categories-- great literature is the stuff you read in school, that you can't understand without an English teacher to explain it to you; personal reading is what you do when you want to enjoy reading that has meaning for you. That so many of my students could only dredge up book titles from high school literature classes when asked about their reading indicates that, for some of them at least, the act of reading itself has become merely an academic exercise, unrelated in their minds to their real lives. The English teacher who think of literature in terms of Great Books, of canonical museum pieces of Great Ideas, help to widen that gulf when they

turn students away from reading literature for personal as well as academic reasons.

Moreover, the likelihood exists that college students no longer read at all, except when assigned, and then often with the difficulty that comes from being indifferent or inexperienced readers who don't know how to interact with a text. Before readers become a breed apart, we need to encourage reading across the curriculum as much as—and in the same ways as—we encourage writing across the curriculum, by making it an integral part of learning in the content areas, not something extra or separate. Like writing, we can't teach reading separate from the reader; it will be even harder still to teach it to generations of children who see themselves only as viewers, particularly if the young people we recruit to teach them don't think of themselves as readers and writers.

Steven Spielberg's testimony reminds us that the center of the body of new technologies and rapidly changing media lies in a fundamental core that may change its shape but not its elements. At the same time that we remember that English language arts have always been the heart of the matter in learning in every discipline, we should also recognize that they will stay at the heart of the matter even as the places we apply them alter.

Even in the intellectual *terra incognita* beyond this rapidly ending century some fundamental elements of education will endure. Nearly four hundred years ago Francis Bacon wrote that:

Reading maketh a full man, conference a ready man, and writing an exact man. And therefore if a man write little, he

had need have a a great memory, if he confer little, he had need have a present wit, and if he read little, he had need have much cunning to seem to know that he doth not.

Taken too literally, Bacon may be too limited in his account of the value of studies. Yet if we examine what we now know about the role of reading, speaking, and writing in learning, he seems pretty close to the mark, because these language arts, interacting with one another and with content matter, take learners deeper into their education, help them to learn more thoroughly and lastingly, and prepare them as well for the expression of their learning.

Bacon also wrote that "expert men" (by which he meant "specialists") "can execute and perhaps judge of particulars, one by one, but the general counsels and the plots and marshalling of affairs come best from those that are learned." Four centuries later, we still need to be reminded of this fundamental truth. Across the curriculum, throughout the continuum of grade levels, as important to the process of learning as to the process of communicating, as essential to learning and communicating in the future as it has been throughout the past, the English language arts are truly the heart of the matter.

**Robert Root is a Professor of English at Central Michigan University. This article is a revision of an address delivered at the 1987 MCTE/MSU Spring Conference on Language Arts.**