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Dr. Clinton S. Burhans

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Is English An Endangered Species?

by **Dr. Clinton S. Burhans**, Department of English, Michigan State University, East Lansing, Michigan

The basic assumptions, methods, and requirements of English have changed very little in almost a century. The roots of English are in classical and Renaissance rhetoric and in the cultivated study of belles lettres. In the nineteenth century, rhetoric disappeared into elocution, and belles lettres became the pseudo-scientific study of literature, especially after the establishment of graduate schools late in the century. To support its graduate programs and their students, English grudgingly created the Caliban of freshman composition.

What English did not do in this development and still has not done is to generate in many of its professors a serious interest in the teaching and learning of writing or the teaching and learning of reading. Indeed, in most English Departments, status accrues in direct proportion to one's distance from these concerns. What English has done and continues to do is to focus its primary and most extensive attention to lectures on the minutiae of literary history, scholarship, and analysis, assuming that the brilliance of these performances will stimulate students to a passion for reading serious literature.

The assumption that literary study will stimulate desire to read literature has succeeded only in making wealthy the creators of Cliff's Notes.

For years, the response to this sorry record has been to demand more of the same, to solve the problem by increasing the problem, to improve the chances of running through quicksand by adding more quicksand. It doesn't have to be this way. If we can recognize the real mission of English, especially in the contemporary and approaching world, and make use of the vast richness of relevant new knowledge increasingly available to us, we can make English the central discipline in education, the vital pulse that makes all else flourish.

Whatever purpose traditional English may have served, apart from supporting the hobbies of English Ph.D.'s, the mission of English today is clearly a different one. Traditional literary study can justifiably be viewed as a valuable service to a print culture and useful in many ways for the relatively small group of students who bring to it similarly literate backgrounds. But what are the values of literary study in itself for an increasingly pluralistic society most of whose members have less and less voluntary experience with print?

Surely it is way past time to recognize that the apparatus of literary history, scholarship, and analysis, however brilliantly applied and presented, never has and never will stimulate most students to love literature and want to read it. This fundamental assumption of traditional English has got it precisely backwards. If we want people to love literature and perhaps to study it, we must first help them learn to read it, to make it their own as a meaningful and pleasurable personal experience.

So, too, with writing. For a century, English has too often regarded the teaching of writing as a damage-control approach to grammar and usage, something to be taken like castor oil and then put aside for important matters. Consciously or unconsciously rooted in the teaching of Latin and Greek, traditional English has taught writing as though it were a dead language, focusing on abstract grammar systems and rules, isolated workbook handbook exercises, and artificial techniques sentence like diagramming and the five-paragraph essay. It is difficult to identify anything else that people learn like this, which helps to explain why traditional English has been so spectacularly unsuccessful in teaching writing. If we want people to learn how to write well and to value doing it, we will have to help them learn writing the same way they learn other important functions and give writing a much higher priority throughout English and across the curriculum.

The real mission of English today, then, is to move from a primary concern with studying literary history, scholarship, criticism, and analysis to a central focus on language arts which includes these activities. Our true mission and

exciting opportunity is to help people become better readers and writers, as well as able to find personal meaning and value in many kinds of reading and writing and therefore to see them as desirable alternatives among the multiple distractions of contemporary life. Indeed, without such readers, who in the end will be able to read or care about reading the serious literature we would like them to study?

What is even more exciting are the increasing availability and rich variety of ideas and information which can make this opportunity unprecedentedly fruitful. Like any discipline, traditional English developed from a matrix of shared beliefs and practices. And, until recently, this traditional matrix has gone basically unchanged and largely unquestioned—except, perhaps, in some of its results. In the last twenty-five years, however, ideas and information have begun to radiate from a great many sources, including English, providing a new and more fruitful matrix for an English rich in a balanced interaction between reading, writing, and literary response.

Thus, cognitive psychology and learning theory, linguistics, language acquisition, developmental psycholinguistics, semantics, semiotics, neurobiology and brain research, and theory and research in reading, writing, and literary response have joined in developing increasing and exciting new knowledge, much of it bearing directly and significantly on language arts and on what we can do with them in English. We have begun to understand human beings not as passive recipients of behavioral stimuli but as dynamic and creative learning organisms, acquiring and using language naturally to make sense of and control their various environments and experiences. With this growing understanding, we have begun to look anew at reading, writing, and literary response as psycholinguistic processes and to recognize the epistemic relationships between them.

Reading

We are beginning to understand that reading, except in very special circumstances

is neither sounding out syllables and words nor word identification. Instead, it is a complex process in which readers interact creatively with print using their visual and non-visual resources to make meaning. There is not the slightest evidence or reason to believe that reading differs in any essential way from the processes by which we perceive and comprehend the rest of our environment. Through experience and feedback from others, we learn to label the objects of our perception, identify their distinctive features, assign objects with similar features to categories and interrelate the categories.

All of this becomes the content of memory, the context of thought and feeling, the materials of language; and the more we have, the less we need to rely consciously on visual stimuli to comprehend our environment and what happens to us in our transactions with it. By drawing primarily on our prior experience and on our tacit knowledge of language, we perceive and make meaningful—we read—the trees, the buildings, the vehicles, and the people around us without usually being particularly aware that we are even looking at them.

We perceive print and make it meaningful—we read it—in precisely the same way. The more we can bring our own resources of experience, knowledge, and language to our perception of print, the less we have to waste time and energy on its visual and aural features and the more quickly and richly we can make meaning from what Louise Rosenblatt calls our transaction with it.

Clearly, this understanding of the reading process has many and profound implications for language arts and for what we do with them in English. It suggests, for example, that we need to make extensive changes in the ways we have been teaching people to read. This in turn implies that if we in English become more actively involved in bringing about these changes, especially in training teachers, we could ultimately find ourselves working with many more students for whom reading would be a more personally meaningful and pleasurable experience. And this could make our classrooms at once more exciting and more

likely to achieve both our practical and our humanistic goals.

In the meantime, we can draw on the contemporary psycholinguistic understanding of the reading process to help our students become better readers. Instead of assuming that they can and want to read with intentions and expectations similar to our own, we can recognize that many if not most of our students approach reading much differently than we do and seldom read—especially the kind of texts we are likely to assign them—unless they must. In our enthusiasm for presenting works we love, we can easily fail to see that for many students reading—except for frivolous escapist fare—is likely to be hard and frustrating labor, largely because of the way they have been taught to read.

Students reflect a crippling incapacity, a severely limited intention and expectation, in a variety of ways. I have seen it often, for example, in students who dismiss Hemingway as a writer with nothing to say because he writes in such a simple style. Anyone could write like that, they sometimes argue; it's just like a newspaper. Or, in a more common version of the same complaint, students will ask, sometimes angrily, why Shakespeare or James Faulkner doesn't just come right out and say what he has to say instead of talking all around it. For too many students, serious reading has become merely a method for gathering information on which they will be tested; and Shakespeare, James, Hemingway, and Faulkner are only classics, another kind of textbook to be studied and then avoided once school is over.

Thus, we can help our students learn to approach a literary text with a different set of intentions and expectations than they do a newspaper story, a magazine article, or a textbook. We can help them become better and more interested—and therefore more interesting—readers by showing them that their reading is conditioned not only by the verbal structures of a text but also by their own intentions in reading it, by what they expect from their transaction with it, and by their own resources of experience, knowledge, and language which they bring to that transaction.

We can help students see that a writer's meaning is not the same thing as the text he or she writes, that there is no meaning in the text, and that meaning is what readers create in their own imaginations in their transaction with the text, constrained only by its verbal structures. Thus, following Stanley Fish and Wolfgang Iser, we can help students ask not what a text means but what it does as they interact with it, help them see that what it does and what they do with it is what it means. In short, we can return reading to our students by helping them develop the capacity to make personal experience and meaning from the texts we assign them and perhaps they might even want to read such texts on their own.

To the extent that we can accept this understanding of reading, it will, of course, carry profound implications for what we do in teaching literature. Traditionally, English has focused on the study of literature, on its texts and their canonical importance; on their historical, cultural, and biographical provenance; and on analyzing them from various critical positions. Anyone studying English can affirm how richly successful has been this long and continuing endeavor.

Literature

Still, our contemporary understanding of reading raises some disturbing questions about this traditional focus in English. How successful have we been and are we being with that growing majority of students in our classes who will not go on to become students of literature, for whom the study of literature will end with one or two or three courses? Whatever value the study of literature may have had for students in the past, can we expect that value to continue unmodified by the cultural changes of the past half century? Can reading as we are now beginning to understand it help the teaching of literature adapt to these changes and thereby flourish even more richly in the future?

Most of us who teach literature do so out of love and enthusiasm—love for what the texts we teach have meant to us as personally meaningful and beautiful reading experiences and enthusiasm for the enrichment which the

study of literature has brought to these experiences. Moreover, we have given considerable amounts of time and energy to our reading and study. Not surprisingly, we wish to give and enjoy giving our students the benefits of our commitment, to share with them the meaning, beauty, and enrichment we have found.

In the process, however, we are likely to assume either that our students can and will read the texts we assign in the personally meaningful way we have read them or that the critical and analytical riches we share with our students will stimulate them to such reading. Neither assumption will abide much scrutiny. Most students will follow the lead of the course outline and goals, see the teacher's apparent emphasis, and view the texts as objects of study but not of personal experience. Moreover, most students, puzzled or dazzled by the teacher's historical, scholarly, and critical riches, will conclude that this is what reading serious literature means and believe therefore that such reading is for trained experts, not for them. Reading surveys, year after year, reveal that most people never again read the kinds of serious literature we teach them in English.

This being true about our teaching of literature, how long can it continue? Only two or three generations ago, our college populations were relatively small and homogenous, one or two percent of high-school graduates. Now, however, nearly twenty percent of high-school graduates go on to college of one kind or another; there are far more high-school graduates, and they bring to our classrooms the heterogenous backgrounds of a vastly diverse pluralistic society. Moreover, reading is now only one of a multitude of alternative activities, most of them far easier for most people than reading or studying literature. Unless we recognize and adapt to these conditions, how long can it be before the study of literature goes the way of the study of classics and becomes the specialized concern of an elite few?

Few of the people we teach will go on to become students or critics of literature but more of them might choose to read more often and even to read serious literature—if we did more to help them by making reading a mean-

ingful and beautiful experience in their own terms. And, in helping them learn to use their own experience, knowledge, and language in creating and exploring meaning in their transactions with a text, we can go on to show them how the study of literature can enrich that meaning. We can help them to see that knowledge about writers and their worlds, about genres and verbal structures, as different critical perspectives increase their responsiveness to textual clues, can open up exciting possibilities for extending and deepening the meanings they create.

In short, our growing understanding of the reading process can help us give the reading of literature at least equal time with the study of it and thereby establish an organic and dynamic relationship between them. We can avoid setting the personal experience of literature apart from its formal and analytical study, as Professor Bryant in the film *Educating Rita* told his eager student she must do if she wanted to pass the exams for a degree.

If we can help students with the natural process of creating their own imagined worlds from a text and then help them study those imagined worlds by reference to the verbal structures from which they evoked them, we can more easily make the study of the text and its provenance a natural and exciting expansion of reading it. And, in so doing, we may have a better chance of giving more of our students a kind of experience that will transcend our immediate influence, of making both the reading and the study of literature the inseparable personal imperatives they are for us.

Writing

In seeking thus to synthesize the reading of literature with its study, we can also make fruitful use of the contemporary view of writing as a psycholinguistic process. Traditionally, we have been primarily concerned with the final product of this process. We have viewed writing and composition as a set of abstract and absolute rules of syntax, mechanics, usage, structure, and a variety of modes of development which our students must learn in order to edit and correct a written product. Now, however, we

are beginning to understand that a written product, whatever its strengths, weaknesses, and errors, cannot be divorced from the processes that produced it and that the rules, conventions, and modes of written language can best be considered in their functions within the writing process rather than abstracted from it.

Thus, in the same way that theory and research in a variety of fields have begun to focus our attention on readers and on their transactions with texts, similar and related theory and research are helping us focus not only on written products but also on writers and on what they do, on the psycholinguistic processes from which their writing emerges. We are beginning to understand that writing is not a relatively simple matter of think-it-out and write-it-down but instead is perhaps the single most complex activity any human being ever ventures upon. Writing begins in and emanates from the writer's intangible but very real and central intentions related to a personal or public situational context; proceeds as writing and thinking interact to stimulate, create, shape, and reshape meaning satisfactory to the writer and likely to meet the needs and expectations of potential readers; and concludes with a final product quite different and usually better than anything the writer imagined at the outset.

This, in effect, is what contemporary theory and research in writing and many related fields are saying about writings. Moreover, we have begun to study what writers, both novice and professional, actually do when they write; and these studies amply reinforce the implications of relevant theory and research. Successful writers—and novice writers, too, if not taught otherwise—involve themselves in generating ideas, composing and revising rough drafts, rewriting and revising subsequent drafts, editing, proofreading—not as separate and linear steps but as constant and interactive processes involving both projections and reviewing. In this complex process, writing becomes not only expressive and communicative but even more fundamentally epistemic—as we create and shape language in writing, it becomes a way of learning what we know and mean. As E.M.

Forster puts it, “How do I know what I think until I see what I saw?”

It is almost commonplace by now to point out that writing in the broadest sense of this epistemic function has made it possible for our civilization and culture to become what they are. By separating ideas from their immediate contexts, by arranging ideas propositionally in linear and logical relationships, and by making possible a critical rereading and reordering, writing has shaped our thinking into the abstract, rational, and analytical forms and patterns which have made our civilization and culture possible and has been as well a principal method of discovering and creating new meaning and knowledge.

Still, we have not yet done much in our schools to take advantage of this epistemic function and value of writing. Arthur Applebee and others have demonstrated that, on the average, only three to five percent of class time involves writing of at least a paragraph and that most of the writing done in school is recording information for future reference. Similarly, James Britton and others have shown that the vast majority of school writing is expository and directed only to the teacher. Note-taking and testing what has supposedly been learned constitute most students' primary experience with writing.

One way in which English can benefit from this epistemic understanding of writing is to use writing more fully as a link between reading and literary study. Writing can help students become more conscious of and expand the imagined worlds they create as they read a literary text. We can ask them to explore informally in writing both the internal extent and consistency of these worlds and also their relationship to the verbal structures of the text. We can amplify this epistemic function of writing by offering critical and editorial assistance as the students develop aspects of these informal explorations more formally through the full writing process. And we can help students enrich the imagined worlds of their reading still further by using the full writing process again to explore textual problems or sources or varying critical views and perspectives. In these and other ways, we

can use writing as a primary means of experience and learning both in reading and in literary study and thereby reinforce the functional link between them.

Conclusion

Synthesizing reading, writing, and literary study and thereby making English more responsive to the problems of teaching and learning may bear directly on the survival of English. In a study forthcoming in **English Education**, I document the failure of traditional English to give its education majors either a contemporary knowledge of reading, writing, or literary response or a sense of obligation to explore this knowledge in professional reading after certification. Partly as a result, the failures of traditional English continue to be perpetuated in the public schools. A broader recognition of this connection seems unlikely to remain obscured much longer.

In another study I conducted, I found that in many colleges and universities, writing and composition have split off from English into separate departments of writing and rhetoric. Moreover, I found that nearly ten percent of our colleges and universities no longer have English Departments at all, their functions having been divided among departments of communications, humanities, and liberal arts ("The Teaching of Writing and the Knowledge Gap," **College English**, 45, 7, November, 1983, 639-656). For all its apparently solid establishment, English may well be on the way to becoming an endangered species.

But English need not follow the example of Classics. As Frank Smith and many others have conclusively shown, reading is the principal way in which we acquire the tacit knowledge we need to write effectively; and writing can be a vital way to explore and enrich our reading experience. However, a balanced interaction between reading, writing, and literary response is the most fruitful way to teach the language arts. And, apart from forming a new Department of Literacy, English remains the discipline which comes closest to providing that balanced interaction. The opportunity and the knowledge are ripe for a more viable English.