On the Nature and Future of English Education: What the Grayhairs' Gathering Was Really About

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Dan Kirby: We’re losing sight of pedagogy, for English Ed and for the schools.

Steve Koziol: Where do we talk about it anymore? Has CEE become a mini-NCTE in the spring? People forget there was a drought, a dip in English Education programs that was devastating.

Diane Shugert: Who is in charge of pedagogy in English Ed? The politics in my state want it in the schools...it is appalling how little we know about ourselves. How many English Educators are there? What’s in those programs? What are their philosophies?

In late February, 1988, a group of English Educators gathered at Florida State University for what was billed as a “Senior English Educators Conference.”\(^1\) The meeting had been called by the Florida State English Education faculty and alumni in response to widespread feelings that it was time to re-examine the English Education enterprise as it relates to current developments in education and society: an impending teacher shortage, the Holmes group and other initiatives in teacher preparation, a renewed interest in the disciplines and the content of instruction, and the development of new research strategies and methods in both the social sciences and the humanities.\(^2\)

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\(^1\)The conference was conceived and organized by Jim Hoetker of Florida State University and Bill Smith of the University of Pittsburgh. Participants quoted throughout this article include: Mike Angelotti, University of Oklahoma; Margaret Early, University of Florida; Jim Hoetker, Florida State University; Dan Kirby, University of Georgia; Stephen Koziol, University of Pittsburgh; Miles Olson, University of Colorado; Carolyn Piazza, Florida State University; Diane Shugert, Central Connecticut State University; and Jerry Walker, University of Illinois.

\(^2\)This paragraph and the first paragraphs which introduce Working Group 1 and Working Group 2 are taken from a summary of the conference prepared by Jim Hoetker for a Florida State University College of Education internal publication.
The Context for the Conference

Because one motive of the conference was to capitalize on the collective experience of colleagues who had been in the profession through the flush times (the fifties and sixties) and the tough times (the seventies and eighties), some of the participants had affectionately dubbed the gathering “the grayhairs’ conference.” The common thread, however, was that the group had been active together in English Education and CEE conferences in the sixties and seventies. What follows is an attempt to describe the conference and comment on some of its particulars.

We had going in the flush times what we might now call the classic English Education model. Embodied in the tripod curriculum of literature, language, and composition as represented in *Freedom and Discipline in English*, English Educators sought to upgrade the content knowledge of English teachers and to professionalize the education of future English teachers by educating a new generation of English Education professors. Times were good, funding was available, and energy and interest were high.

Something happened. Maybe it was a matter of supply and demand: the 70’s recession devastated much of the country; education funding dropped; school districts increased workloads and slowed hiring as the student population dropped; a teacher “surplus” developed; English Education enrollments dipped; power to contend for budget weakened; numbers of English Education faculty diminished; English Education on many campuses faded into the wallpaper.

In combination with these factors, CEE was no longer able financially to mount its own separate conference, and so we diffused into NCTE’s combined Spring Conference with the Elementary and Secondary Sections. Once deprived of our separate meeting time, we somehow ended up losing an intangible sense of a group striving together to achieve common goals — with the recession and the diffusion, CEE sessions seemed to lose focus on critical issues of English Education at a time of dramatic social and educational change. Often we seemed little more than a composite NCTE. But admittedly NCTE itself had changed — more power and respect had been allocated to practitioners at the expense of the former leadership group of English teacher educators. And more “pure” research became fashionable, which, when coupled with the rise of composition studies and of the writing projects, came to absorb much of CEE members’ energy and expertise. Then the recession ended; still, the diffusion remains.

The cumulative effect of these changes was to diminish English Education as a profession in the Universities. For many, survival
replaced revolution. There was a need for coming together again to take stock and to do something about the profession. And so, the rallying first step: the grayhairs’ gathering.

One consensus of the group was that we had been out of touch with each other as English Educators talking English Education for too long, and in the interim, the game had changed. But equally strong was the feeling that we still had a chance to re-invigorate the profession, if we got in the action now. It is not surprising, then, that the conference was mainly one of brainstorming: comparing perceptions, sorting out the big questions, talking through possible solutions and lines of research, and seeking a redefinition of English Education to fit the new contexts for teaching and learning.

The Conference

The conference intended to stress informal talk and brainstorming: there were no speakers and there was no agenda. The participants were senior faculty from Universities awarding doctorates in English Education. They divided into three working groups: Graduate programs and research, Teacher education, and English studies. As the introductory dialogue suggests, questions of English Education pedagogy, or rather our lack of concerted attention to it, pervaded the discussions. But other issues were there as well: identity; knowledge base; graduate and undergraduate programs; research; curriculum; student demographics; and the education reform movement, particularly collaborative models of English teacher education and professional development schools.

The three groups were determined on the basis of a questionnaire identifying pressing issues sent to participants in advance, but as will be seen in the group reports, the conversations in the groups were spirited and wide-ranging, rarely limiting themselves to their topic. Part of the reason for this was that the questions do all connect: research to the content and processes of the curriculum, graduate programs to preservice programs, English studies to English Education and so on.

Although the overall group agreed that we needed to create forums for continuing the dialogue around the issues discussed in Tallahassee, the group by no means achieved unanimity on any of the issues themselves. Although civility and politeness prevailed, the positions taken in discussions were marked by significant disagreements. While a careful reading of the group reports would reveal some of these
disputes, it may be important to point out some of the most lively areas of debate.

Perhaps the deepest divide occurred at the level of definition of the related terms: English and English Education. Although participants at the conference ranged across the spectrum, the debates stemmed from two broadly characterized positions which, following Douglas Barnes, might be defined as the Transmission and Interpretation perspectives. The Transmission position stemmed from a literature-centered model of English teaching where the primary content and goals of English teaching derive from a combination of transmitting the literary heritage along with acquiring mastery of the standard written language. While the Interpretation perspective does not deny the importance of literature, it emphasizes a variety of other concerns: a recognition of the transactional nature of reading, a commitment to developing all aspects of language using ability in all modes and genres, a recognition of the need for students to be responsible for their own learning through the ownership of their own texts and their responses to the texts of others.

The Transmission position is most comfortable with the traditional focus of English Education — the preparation of secondary English teachers and the nature of the secondary English curriculum. It derives its authority principally from that of the canon as endorsed by university English departments. One of the major concerns identified by adherents to this position was the growing ferment in canon definition and approaches to literary studies currently convulsing the nation’s English departments.

Adherents to the Interpretive position see English Education more as Language Education from birth to death, and are equally concerned with primary and tertiary teacher education as with secondary schools. They look to a wide range of disciplines including linguistics and its various hyphenated offspring, to cognitive psychology, to composition theory, and to socio/anthropological studies of the culture of schooling. Problems of most concern to them, therefore, include integrating teacher education from kindergarten through the adult years, the particular problems of students for whom standard English is either a second language or a second dialect, and problems resulting from the de-skilling of teachers by mandated curricula, text series, and standardized tests.

While these perspectives were rarely made explicit, they undergirded most of the discussion just as a similar split had characterized the Dartmouth Conference of two decades earlier. It influenced such issues as the definition of the necessary knowledge base needed for English
teachers which in turn helps to define what teacher education programs should require. Similarly, it influenced the discussion of what research is needed in the field and how English educators should relate to English departments as well as to other university colleagues.

**The Working Groups**

1. *The Graduate Studies and Research Group*³

The graduate studies and research group noticed the general shift in the social sciences away from research methods based on a natural science model and toward methods using techniques developed by ethnographers and literary critics. A good deal of discussion considered how future doctoral students should be trained in methods of inquiry. There was general agreement that outcome-oriented experimental research was unlikely to produce any more useful knowledge in the future than it has in the past, and that the better course would be to concentrate efforts on understanding teaching and teacher education, especially how teachers are launched upon their careers and how teachers think, plan, and develop.

Part of the research group's concern with the methodology and focus of research stemmed from a growing recognition of the complexities of language development and language education. Research studies which emphasize the complex interaction of many contextual variables come closer to capturing the real world of English classrooms than do those which isolate and manipulate single variables. The logistics of carrying out such naturalistic/ethnographic studies are such, however, that the findings seem more difficult to generalize than the traditional experimental paradigm has assumed. The research group discussed ways of educating administrators and the public about the strengths of small-N studies and the weaknesses of those which crunch numbers without regard to context.

Related to the recognition of the complexity of the classroom context where teaching and learning occur, was a parallel concern with broadening and integrating the knowledge base required for both English teaching and English Education research. While a great deal of research has been done in the last two decades on student learning and theoretical descriptions of such areas as composition studies, language develop-

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³This commentary was composed by Rita Brause of Fordham University and John Mayher of New York University from the discussion on graduate studies and research.
ment, and reader response to literature, this research has not been successfully integrated into a comprehensive theory, nor have its implications for classroom practice been sufficiently studied. Many of these studies have suggested implications for teaching and learning and some of these have been implemented in various ways in classrooms. What is lacking, however, are studies of how all this works out in practice or the effect of this knowledge on preservice and inservice teacher education. The group agreed that we need more integrated research on teaching and learning in English classrooms with a particular emphasis on re-examining the conventional wisdom about the teaching/learning relationship: how, for instance, it functions reciprocally, rather than unilaterally; how learners access and depend upon their prior knowledge and experience; and how the act of teaching can encourage one's own learning.

Another aspect of our concern for neglected areas of research in language teacher education focused on our interest in the stages of professional development of English teachers, and on the school contexts within which they work. We don’t know enough about how teacher education influences beginning and experienced teachers. Further, we have little research from an English Education perspective on how the socio-political climate constrains teachers from testing to censorship, from curricular control to professional autonomy.

In the group’s discussion of the nature of graduate programs in English Education, one of the central issues was the role of English Educators in the profession in general, and in NCTE in particular. The group wondered whether English Education could become the intellectual center of a democratized NCTE? Could we develop an integrated theory of language education which would recognize commonalities from kindergarten to adult and in first and second language teaching? Could we help English Educators and English Teachers develop an historical perspective on our field and its evolution within the social context of American schooling? Could these integrated and historical perspectives provide the basis for more holistic approaches to teacher education which are beyond the bits and snippets of a series of courses? And particularly, could these perspectives encourage us to practice what we preach in our teacher education programs?

The group was marked by both lively disagreements and a vigorous competition for the floor. (One of the problems of getting so many professors together in one room is that it’s hard to give equal time for them to enjoy the sound of their own voices!) One thing that did mark all of the discussions was a commitment to reflection on the meaning
of practice and a conviction that English Education, or better, Language Education, was a distinct synthesis of a wide range of perspectives and disciplines which was not parasitically "applying" any of them. While we continue to be interested in developments in other disciplines, as Miles Olson put it, we do generate our own distinctive knowledge and we should continue to do so. The discussion revealed that English Education research is alive and well — but far too fragmented and in need of a more integrated perspective in order to have the impact it could have on both teacher education and teaching practice.

2. The Teacher Education Group

The following excerpt from the teacher education group discussion reveals that they felt it imperative to identify the critical questions of teacher Preparation as the first step to creating a rational framework for re-envisioning English teacher education at subsequent meetings and through research and considered papers.

Early: Where should the pedagogy of English take place? English departments? Education colleges? Public schools? Where do we educate English teachers?

Walker: Educating English teachers for what? What are the powerful ideas?

Piazza: What is the content of English Education?

Early: How much time? Four years? Five? What are the effects of various methodologies for teaching teachers? We need more CEE sessions on this.

Shugert: There are pressures to do the generic, to turn over more teaching instruction to classroom teachers.

Walker: What can a classroom teacher do that a university person can’t, or a professor do that a classroom teacher can’t? We can help our preservice teachers pull together this thing called English. One way is to ask our students to define their own positions: what effect do you want to have on kids? So when they go out, they can be secure enough to be themselves and not be forced to become the teacher next door.

Hoetker: Don’t teachers who have been out there for a couple of years respond better in methods classes — why can they now reflect? Look critically?

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4This commentary was composed by Mike Angelotti of the University of Oklahoma from the discussion on English teacher preparation.
Angelotti: Because they have context. That is what makes expert teachers. They can recognize and respond effectively to many different contexts because of repeated, qualitative experiences in the subject area with them. They know what they can do and what troubles them day after day. They have a sense of what they want to learn. Are we using the teacher "expertness" knowledge base to shape what we do in our programs?

Koziol: It is interesting that "expertness" in teaching is increasingly being recognized as highly contextualized rather than generic. At the recent AACTE convention, Shulman and Berliner both discussed expertise in relation to subject matter and classroom contexts. That's an encouraging prospect for English Educators and English Education programs.

Angelotti: To take that thought a bit further, why can't we make better use of "expert" teachers to help student teachers?

Walker: We want good teachers for our student teachers, but it is not the good teacher's ordinary job to teach student teachers. They are there to teach kids. That will always have priority. So what is the real potential of quality student teacher education based on in the schools? Why should districts pay money to educate possible teachers who may never help them? Maybe we ought to stop looking in classrooms for answers, ease off of "ethnographics." There are many ways to prepare teachers that are good. We ought to study them. We ought to study how we as English Educators teach students, what we should do with student teaching programs.

The group determined that there is a need for status studies intended to bring the profession to a common awareness of the nature of English teacher preparation today and the knowledge base currently available to English Educators. Their focus eventually settled on addressing education reform agendas and implications of the changing student demographics for the preparation of English Educators. Although many aspects of English teacher preparation in present and future contexts were probed, in the end the group was not satisfied that in its brief encounter all, or even most of the significant questions regarding the preparation of English professionals had been examined carefully enough at this meeting. Clearly, a comprehensive set of questions or responses or recommendations representative of group thinking was premature, although the unanimous sentiment of the group was that it continue the project in some way in the near future. The following set of questions drawn from group discussions may serve, however, as a starting place for considerations of the present condition and future direction of English teacher preparation.
Who are we? Literally, how many English Educators are out there? Who are they? What part are with a university, college, junior college, school district, state department of education? In education, in English departments? Supervisors, classroom teachers, consultants, other? What is the present model for a professorship in English Education? How should new models be shaped for the future? How do we define appropriate teaching, research, and service? What can we do to further the scholarship in English Education?

Whom do we serve? Kids in schools? Their teachers? Graduate students? The public? Legislatures? Education reform advocates? How do we address the changing demographics of school children when college students and their Professors persistently continue to be white, middle class, with the number of minority professionals dwindling as school populations increase? How do we recruit/prepare multicultural/multietnic professors and teachers to match school populations? Do we need to?

What do we do? What is in the programs, the course work? What are the powerful ideas? What should a methods course be? What should the whole of the course work look like? What should be the balance of process, content, and pedagogy? What English Education pedagogies are operational now? In what contexts? What ought to be out there? Is there a distinctive Pedagogy in English Education? If so, what are its critical elements? What should a beginning professional be equipped to do? With whom? What differences in elementary, junior high, and senior high instruction are a part of teacher education pedagogy? Do we differentiate instruction for the various English Education job roles? What does it take to educate an English teacher successfully? Are we up to the task?

Where do precertification experiences happen? Arts and Sciences English departments? Colleges or Departments of Education? Public and private schools? Where do we do student teaching? How much are we into professional development schools? Collaborative teacher education? What can a classroom teacher do to educate English teachers that we can’t? What can we do that a classroom teacher can’t? What are the best collaborative models? Can we generalize the National Writing Project model to collaborative English teacher education? Is a collaborative model best? If so, who controls the teacher trainee’s learning contexts? Who trains the cooperating teacher? To do what? Can a school system whose first priority is educating kids properly administer teacher education?
Why do we do what we do? What are our philosophies? Our purposes? Our models? Which ones suit today’s contexts? Tomorrow’s? What needs changing? How do we address external and internal pressures? How do we respond to educational reform agendas?

How long should it take to educate a person to be a teacher? Four years? Five? Six? Professional lifetime? Is the “becoming” an English teacher a finite period of time? Is it realistic to assume that a person is a teacher on the basis of course work and student teaching? If not, when? Under what conditions should “certification” occur? Is a supervised entry-year the answer? Graduate-based teacher education? Extended inservice education? Should a master’s degree terminate a five-year program? Should an internship experience be required? Who will pay for the extended teacher education internship? Who will pay the cooperating teacher (mentor)? Is the clinical professor concept viable for English Education? Who will pay the higher salary for a graduate-level, first-year English or elementary teacher? Will university reward systems accommodate collaboration (professional fieldwork, curriculum development) on the same basis as research and publication?

3. The English Studies Group

The English studies group noted that the nature of English as an academic discipline has changed drastically in the past two decades: the canon of great works of British and American literature has lost authority; literature itself has lost status as a distinct or privileged discourse; continental literary theory, with its concern for textuality and social power, has replaced Anglo-Saxon empiricism and formalism. Discussions centered on how these developments in one of the parent disciplines of English Education would affect content and instructional methods in teacher preparation programs, and in middle and secondary school English programs. The group also noted that successful English teachers in the future will need knowledge and skills not commonly available in English departments, especially skills related to teaching

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5This commentary is taken from a draft of a statement on the future of English studies and English Education composed during the conference. Gordon Pradl of New York University and Bruce Appleby of Southern Illinois University drew many of the ideas from a discussion on English studies, with major contributions from Eugene Crook of Florida State University and help from Nancy Thompson of the University of South Carolina.
English as a second language and those associated with clinical psychologists and social workers.

The group focused, finally, on "the fundamental question for the English teacher" and produced the following statement:

In English studies we celebrate and explore our fundamental human need to textually represent our experience. Such representations must be viewed reciprocally: reading cannot be separated from writing, nor speaking from listening. Nor can any of these language arts be separated from thinking/feeling, the ultimate language experience. Students engaged in these language arts are, in part, constructing and creating their value systems and world views. This means that, whether consciously or unconsciously, directly or indirectly, teachers enact specific values and perspectives in their classrooms. The fundamental question for the English teacher thus becomes: which ideology to reinforce? Further, what teaching choices determine both the classroom environment and the learning outcomes?

Perhaps it is easiest to view these choices as arising out of a model of English which focuses on the triangular relationship of teacher, student, and text. (See Figure 1.) In the past, the teacher-text relationship dominated the classroom. This meant that the teacher's interpretations were privileged and that the teacher was the final judge of the appropriateness of all the language activities in which students participated. Imagine, however, a future in which the student-text relationship has equal prominence. Yet if this is to occur, the relationship between teacher and student, which is basic to all learning, will need re-examining.

With respect to this triangle of relationships, the first crucial teaching decision involves the connection between the teacher and the text: what the teacher sanctions for students to read and write. The canon of admitted texts needs to be simultaneously broader and deeper. To do this, the perspectives introduced into the classroom by the canon need to be made explicit. These perspectives include: gender, culture, age, ethnicity, social class, time period, and genre. Just as not to choose is to choose, not to include a perspective such as works by women or Blacks, about children or the aged, is to deny students access to the full range of life's possibilities. Thus, the previously limited range of texts allowed into the English classroom, so defined by the traditional canon and the technology of print, must be dramatically expanded. The media of communication have changed and students reflect these changes in their visual and aural awareness — text is more than print
on paper. Because film, television, and the computer are textual media by which our students create and recreate their views of existence, these media must become a legitimate part of all English language arts classrooms.

Similarly, an implicit canon has come to dominate writing and speaking assignments in the English language arts classroom. Assigning and accepting the critical essay as the sole form of student writing, or discussion as the sole vehicle of oral expression, is to deny students a rich range of language experiences. For instance, the writing of a poem may be the appropriate response to the reading of a poem, just as some form of creative dramatics may aid in the understanding of a Virginia Woolf short story. To encourage these broader perspectives, teachers need first to be involved in such experiences themselves and then they must explicitly model both their understanding and production of texts. This means students need to see the teacher, on occasion, confronting texts for the first time (primary acts of reading), just as they need to see the teacher writing along side them (primary acts of writing).

Changing the teacher-text relationship implies, of course, changing the second leg of the triangle: the student-text relationship. Recognizing that students come to the classroom with interests, abilities, preferences, and knowledge backgrounds means that their responses to texts must be the beginning point to all instruction. All students belong to some interpretive community which allows them to comprehend and use language outside the classroom. The language and experiences of the English/language arts classroom should both build on and extend these communities and purposes. To do this, teachers must be sensitive to how accessible texts and assignments are for their students. How an inner city youth might connect to a Willa Cather story or a rural adult
to a novel by Fitzgerald must be considered in text selection, just as what determines an appropriate writing assignment must be related to the student’s own intentions. For a teacher to ignore the interpretive and discourse communities students bring to the classroom is to deny students a proper place to begin their creation and recreation of the texts provided in the classroom.

The most important and most delicate of the relationships exemplified by the triangle is found in the relationship between the teacher and the student. Contemporary learning theory emphasizes that knowledge is received and understood only in terms of the knower’s ability to reconstruct it. Knowledge in other words, is constantly transformed by the knower’s perceptions. Awareness that knowledge is socially constructed obliges teachers to view their classrooms as sharing communities predicated on bonds of mutual freedom, respect, and dignity. For example, in the creation of a text — be it a poem, an essay, or a video — the creator is the owner. The student/writer owns the text, having created it, and the teacher must be careful not to appropriate this ownership. To take the text from the student by demanding that the student change it in the direction of the teacher’s “ideal” text is to ensure that the student no longer is responsible for it. To compromise ownership and self-expression in text is to destroy both text and community.

To see English teaching in terms of the triangle, in terms of the ways a particular ideology is being passed on, is to recognize that these classroom learning environments are part of the overall set of influences which produce a future English teacher. Put in another way, what an English teacher ends up doing in his/her classroom is the result not just of a particular “education” training but of the accumulated past experiences with English instruction (and with life!). Because of this, English Educators have a primary responsibility for helping to determine the nature of these English experiences. All learning in all classes loosely labeled as English/language arts, be they literature, writing, linguistics, media, or what have you, must provide a model for the type of behavior described here and must come from the theoretical framework established here. As the Coalition of English Associations’ statement on the English major asserts: “The restructured English major we propose, with its emphasis on how to do English rather than what English is, will better address the needs of preservice and inservice teachers. The models that college English teachers will offer teachers preparing to work at all levels will have a self-conscious emphasis on the issues of
the disciplines...The questions that teachers ask, in accord with this model, will become ‘How does the teaching of texts in particular ways affect the ways students learn about them?’; ‘How does the classroom construct knowledge?’” Seen as an ongoing dialogue between inquiry and celebration, English can radically demonstrate a commitment to democracy by offering a negotiated space wherein the text- and meaning-making abilities of the learner are both honored and extended. In doing this, both students and the communities which they compose become empowered in their use of language.

Conclusions

At the conference wrap-up session much of the discussion was directed to closure, to re-viewing the rubric of English Education. The following dialogue suggests that movement toward a more precise definition of the profession very likely has begun:

Walker: Our role is a conscience for all that now is the education of English teachers. The role of the college English Educator is to make sense of all disciplines as they relate to English teaching. We’re the only group who cares about the whole — the synthesizers.

Olson: We are more than synthesizers, more than applications of other disciplines. We are also originators of knowledge.... If we could define text (all that happens that is English teaching) in our classrooms, we could define our discipline. Are our texts that different?

Walker: We must know what is different about the teaching of English to find our identity. Can we get about the business of teasing that difference out?

Much good happened at the Senior English Educators Conference. For two and one-half days interactions were rich as participants attempted to interpret present conditions for teaching and learning English and set in motion processes that would involve more of the profession in exploring possible new directions for English Education.

Questions were identified, issues probed, and solutions posed. And besides beginning a discourse on re-visioning English Education, we resolved to create more open forums on issues in English Education that would invite participation from all stakeholders in the education of English professionals. We rediscovered the pleasure of talking with concerned colleagues about these issues and we are determined to create more opportunities for such open and unstructured dialogues.
It was clear that the challenges facing us will necessitate considered response and the quality of that response will depend on the quality of coming together, of concerted effort. Subsequent meetings will occur and papers will follow. In these and what they provoke will be measured the value of the 1988 grayhairs’ gathering.

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