Project English

J. N. Hook

Dr. Hook is Professor of English and Counselor in Teacher Education at the University of Illinois. Recently he has been on leave to coordinate Project English in the U. S. Office of Education. From 1953-1960 he was Executive Secretary of the National Council of Teachers of English. Among his best-known publications are three books, The Teaching of High School English, Modern American Grammar and Usage, and Guide to Good Writing.

In an endeavor to do for English teaching some of the things that are already being done by various agencies for the improvement of instruction in foreign languages, mathematics, and science, the U. S. Office of Education has developed a program designated as Project English.

The former Secretary of Health, Education, and Welfare, Abraham Ribicoff, referred to English as the "keystone" of American education. Sterling M. McMurrin, the former Commissioner of Education, expressed repeated concern for the improvement of instruction in English, while emphasizing the role of the Office in conducting research and disseminating information without any desire or attempt to create a national curriculum. President Kennedy said in his message to Congress on February 6, 1962:

> The control and operation of education in America must remain the responsibility of State and local governments and private institutions. . . . But the Congress has long recognized the responsibility of the nation as a whole—that additional resources, meaningful encouragement, and vigorous leadership must be added to the total effort by the Federal Government if we are to meet the task before us. For education in this country is the right, the necessity, and the responsibility of all. Its advancement is essential to national objectives and dependent on the greater financial resources available at the national level.

Although Johnny and Joanne probably write and read better than many critics of education believe, few elementary teachers or secondary and college teachers of English believe that they write and read as well as they could under ideal conditions. English teaching has long been hampered by insufficient research, too little controlled experimentation, insufficient dissemination of what is known, and unsureness of best ways to deal, in the classroom, with the tremendous complexities of the language, the multitudinous literary selections that might conceivably be grist for the educational mill, and the great differences among children themselves.

NEEDS FOR IMPROVED ENGLISH TEACHING CITED

For a number of years, teachers of English have been aware that significant improvement in the teaching of English in the nation's elementary and secondary schools and colleges can be attained only through more massive and coordinated efforts than have yet been possible. Local school districts, States, and the Federal Government must all have a role in such improvement.

In 1958 the National Council of Teachers of English, which now enrolls over 70,000 members and subscribers, went officially on record as favoring national leadership in solving some of the most pressing problems, such as inadequately prepared teachers, overloads, recruitment, and the implications for English of television, team teaching, lay readers, programed instruction, and other innovations. In 1961, in cooperation with other groups, the NCTE spelled out many of the existing deficiencies and needs in *The National Interest and the Teaching of English,* a book that has been favorably reviewed from coast to coast.

Also in 1958, with a grant from the Ford Foundation, administered by the Modern Language Association, a group of prominent teachers and administrators, representing all levels of instruction, held a series

of conferences to classify and clarify the basic issues in the teaching of English. This statement appears as part of the conclusion of that report:

> What is needed is financial support for several large articulated programs, with suitable means of testing and evaluating acievement at the various levels and facilities for disseminating the fidings throughout the profession.

It is in such a context that Project English has been developed in the Office of Education, in consultation with representatives of State agencies, organizations of administrators and librarians, and experts in the field of English teaching, curriculum, and supervision on all academic levels.

So much for background. What is Project English doing now, and what are its future possibilities?

PROJECT ENGLISH PLANS AND PROGRAMS

A limited budget has been available for 1962 and 1963. The Project is authorized to consider requests from colleges, universities, and State educational agencies for financial support for three kinds of studies. In terms of Public Law 531, a local school district must necessarily channel its request through a college or university or, perhaps more likely, through the State office of education. Because of budgetary limitations, only a relatively low proportion of requests can be granted, and it is probable that many execellent ones must be denied. Requests may be presented for:

a. *Curriculum Study Centers,* sponsored by colleges or universities or by State educational agencies. A very limited number of these have been established. Each center will attempt, over a period of about five years, to develop a curriculum spanning several school grades. Although exchange of information and consequent cross-fertilization among the Centers are desirable, the Centers will follow divergent paths and have different emphases. Several good curriculums, not a single good one, are the goal, so that local school districts may adopt or adapt as many or as few of the facets as they wish.

b. *Basic and applied research.* Through colleges, universities, or State educational agencies, individuals or groups may present proposals for research that promises to have implications for the improvement of instruction of English on any level. Funds may be available for 20 or more such proposals each year.

c. *Research planning and development.* A limited amount of support is available for a few conferences or seminars dealing with needed research in English teaching. These also are arranged through requests submitted by colleges, universities, or State educational agencies.

Activities already going on in the Office of Education, or supported by funds supplied through the Office, are also related to Project English. For example, one study deals with improvement of reading and another with analysis of published and unpublished research in readding in the past several years; still another is a study of the curriculum in English and other subjects in the nation's colleges. The Division of Higher Education has a clearinghouse dealing with studies on higher education, including English. One study supported by the office, called Project Able, is uncovering, among other things, data about the English of academically talented students; another is analyzing the levels of talent, both high and low, that students possess in many fields. Still other studies, often bearing only indirectly or in part upon Project English, will make their contributions.

The activities so far described, important as they are, cannot come close to improving English instruction to the extent that teaching of science, mathematics, and the foreign languages is being bettered by national support. One cannot buy a diamond with a dime.

If the general public and the administrators and teachers in the nation's schools feel that the improvement of Johnny's and Joanne's writing and reading abilities is important enough, and if Congressional support is obtained, an extended program may follow somewhat the lines already established in other subjects.

POSSIBILITIES FOR THE FUTURE

Among the long-range possibilities for Project English are these:

a. Institutes for elementary and secondary teachers to acquaint them with recent advances in study of the English language, literary criticism, the psychology of learning, curricular practices, and other subjects. These may be supplemented by an increased number of evening or Saturday seminars on nearby campuses.

b. Encouragement to State educational agencies to secure the services of English specialists. Ten States which now have such specialists are finding that they are making splendid contributions, comparable to those already being made by specialists in such subjects as foreign languages or driver education.

c. Special scholarships, fellow-

ships, or loans to teachers for professional improvement.

d. Refresher seminars for college teachers.

e. Study of college programs designed to prepare elementary and secondary teachers.

f. Assistance to liberal arts graduates to enable them to meet certification requirements.

g. Recruitment of additional able young persons into the profession.

h. Work on the problem, existing in many schools, of an inadequate supply of books and other materials.

i. Examination of the roles of such innovations as programed instruction, television teaching, team teaching, and lay readers.

j. Study of "fringes": slow and bright children; culturally deprived and culturally rich areas; special content in special situations.

k. Demonstration centers: several schools in each State to test and to exhibit various curricular practices of apparent value.

l. Dissemination of the significant findings of the Project.

How many of these possibilities will become realities is not known. Other possibilities may be added to the list upon the substantiated advice of interested members of the profession.

In an increasingly complex society, Johnny and Joanne must and can learn to read and write—and think—better than they do. They can and must learn more about man's life and dreams and potential, as revealed in literature. Project English, it is hoped, will substantially supplement the steps already being taken toward these goals.

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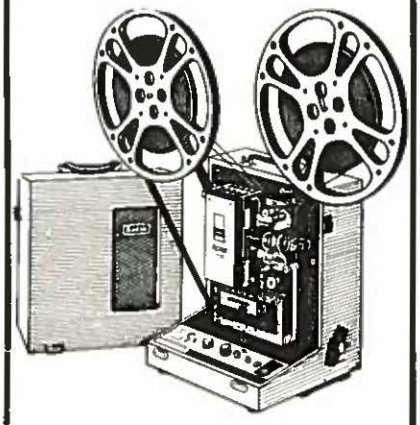

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HAMILTON—*Con'd from page 3*

that universities should occupy an ambivalent place in a society even though it creates, supports, and at times praises them. A university is established by society to insure that the values to which that social order subscribes are perpetuated; there is, in effect, an orthodoxy at stake. And yet, in its rare moments society also acknowledges that it is equally important to examine and, indeed, modify that orthodoxy. Thus the university is mandated to question the value system which it is also supposed to preserve. Problems inevitably arise, however, from the fact that the whole society does not uniformly subscribe to both these ends. There are always some to whom it appears that the university ought to be preserving instead of questioning. And to others the reverse is true. This is why universities are so often misunderstood by the society which sustains them. This is why a public university is not like any other agency of government and cannot be so regarded if it is to achieve the excellence of its nature. And the proper treatment of a university cannot await universal agreement that it has achieved excellence, for the former is a prior and necessary condition of the latter.

The only proper stance for a university as it faces the paradox of its nature is the fundamental premise of the vocation of scholarship—that truth is always preferable to error. This does not mean that at all times the university can be confident it possesses the truth. A little humility here would help. With the best of intentions universities have, with all their solemnity and tradition, taught error, whether it be the astronomy of Ptolemy or the theory of ether. But the validity of the premise is not by such facts disproved.

Finally, it seems to me that no good university can exist unless it contains within itself a sense of purposiveness which is shared by all who make up the university community. It must know its nature, it must know its purposes, it must know the needed means and it must have a plan which relates means to its purposes. The possibilities of planning can, of course, be over emphasized. What physics department chairman in 1940 could have foretold his need for a reactor and an accelerator just ten years later? But the general sense of direction related to time and means, the University must develop. If it does not, others will do the job, and understandably so.

Keeping all these matters firmly in mind is perhaps most difficult in an institution such as this. This is the people's University. Being such, it must be both responsible to the society of which it is a part and responsive to the needs of the peoples of that society. But this does not mean that it should sway with each new gust of the wind of public opinion.

These remarks may seem sobering. They were meant to be. It does no good for either you or me to underestimate the magnitude of the task with which we jointly are confronted. And yet I am not pessimistic. Given determination, we can, I think, by combining the assets of the State with Federal assistance, and a great increase in private giving, muster the resources necessary. Time is always available for wise use—use which avoids both imprudence and complacency. I shall use my influence, as others have and will, to see that the University exhibits poise and maturity and self-respect. We can hope with some confidence that the proper nature of a university becomes increasingly clear and concern with purpose and means will be at the University a first order of business.

It is important that this be done. Given a society, such as ours, dedicated to human dignity and the equality of men, a society which must remain free and open, safe and productive—there exists no better investment than a university of quality. For it is a great university which can make of our society what Athens was in the eyes of Socrates. Maxwell Anderson described that vision in these words which I have quoted before, which I shall quote again and with which I close.

> Athens has always seemed to me a sort of mad miracle of a city, flashing out in all directions, a great city for no discoverable reason. But now I see that Athens is driven and made miraculous by the same urge that has sent me searching your streets! It is the Athenian search for truth, the Athenian hunger for facts, the endless curiosity of the Athenian mind, that has made Athens unlike any other city. This is a city drenched with light—the light of frank and restless inquiry—and this light has flooded every corner of our lives: our courts, our theaters, our athletic games, our markets—even the open architecture of the temples of our Gods! This has been our genius—a genius for light . . . Shut out the light and close our minds and we shall be like a million cities of the past that came up out of mud, and worshipped darkness a little while, and went back, forgotten, into darkness!