Changes in Minnesota English Teaching: 1960-2010

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I started teaching English in 1967 in a suburban, middle-class high school outside of Hartford, Connecticut. Then, some 37 years ago when the Minnesota winters were "real winters," I began teaching English education at the University of Minnesota in Fall, 1973 and began attending MCTE conferences.

Since my first efforts to teach high school English, I've witnessed considerable changes in English teaching during my career.

During the past 50 years with the founding of MCTE, *who we are* as English teachers reflects changes in the prevailing practices and values of our times. We are no longer the didactic purveyors of values based on moral lessons extracted from literature, a role derived from the 19th century. And, we are no longer the arbiters of correctness, doting on errors, constituting the role of the English teacher of the first half of the 20th century.

Who we teach has also changed. The class-based, tracking labels of "high-ability" versus "low-ability" or "remedial" has given way to greater diversity in our classrooms related to ability, race, class, and gender.

This societal diversity has led to changes in *what* we teach. Since the 1950s, the relatively narrow high school literature canon of white male authors (*Julius Caesar, The Scarlet Letter, Red Badge of Courage,* etc.) has broadened out to include young adult literature and writers from a range of race, class, gender, and global perspectives. Writing instruction has evolved from the formalist essay written primarily to the teacher to writing multimodal, interactive discussion or blog posts or wiki entries for multiple audiences.

How we teach has also changed, changes reflecting a shift to from more teacher/text-centered instruction to more student-centered, constructivist, inquiry-based learning. The straight rows of desks facing the front of the rooms, raising their hands to answer teachers in the traditional initial-response-evaluate IRE ritual, have been replaced by students in small group or online discussions, or actively engaged in drama activities or media productions.

And, *why* we teach English has certainly changed since the 1960s with economic and cultural shifts towards life in the global, knowledge economy. While in the 1960s, we prepared middle-class students in the literary canon and the "college essay" for success in college and working-class students for "workplace literacies" for a job in the local factory, we must now prepare both groups of students for the knowledge economy that demands relatively high levels of literacy. And, we've always hoped that our students would learn to appreciate literature and writing as a way of valuing the reflective, aesthetic, and ethical experiences afforded by creative uses of language.

To track some of these changes since the 1960s, at the risk of overgeneralization, I've identified one prevailing focus or theme that best characterized English teaching for each of the decades since the 1960s, recognizing that lots of other changes occurred within each of these decades.

1960 – 1969: The Autonomous Text

When I started teaching in 1967, I taught literature the same way I had been taught in college. I adopted a New Critical stance that the text was an autonomous entity divorced from the influence of readers' purposes or agendas. I was the master explicator, modeling analysis of the intricacies of figurative language. My students were far more engaged when we connected

their responses to novels like *Catch-22* to the protests occurring in their school over the Vietnam War or when we examined initiation experiences in their own lives as portrayed in literature and film.

Similarly, writing instruction consisted of drawing on formalist rhetorical models of form, so my students wrote outlines, single rough drafts based on the ideal five-paragraph essay template, and then made minor editing. They therefore perceived writing as largely an exercise in filling in the template boxes, so they didn't have a strong reason to write to voice their ideas. Because they were writing largely about literature, and because most of my students were not comfortable writing literary analysis, they weren't engaged in their writing. As later composition research indicated, because they were making few major revisions requiring self-assessing, their writing showed little improvement over time (Beach and Friedrich).

There was also little focus on media or popular culture texts—the equipment was quite antiquated. I recall showing a 16 millimeter film and making the mistake of sitting in the front of the class. Towards the end of the film, I looked to the back of the room to witness a huge pile of film on the floor, much to the snickering amusement of my students.

Our classes were organized by "ability levels." I actually enjoyed teaching my "low ability" students because they were continually sharing their everyday experiences with the class, sharing that often led to some engaging discussions and writing.

In teaching "high-ability" 12th grade literature, I was also caught up in the popularity of the "Spiral Curriculum" of the 1960s—the idea of building the curriculum around teaching conceptual frameworks. I therefore taught my students Northrop Frye's archetypal narrative patterns--tragedy, comedy, romance, and irony—in a very top-down manner, failing to recognize that without extensive knowledge of a lot of literature, that my students did not really understand these narrative patterns.

1970 – 1979: The Response and Composing Process

In the late 1960s, educators began to challenge New Criticism's focus on the autonomous text, as well as its need to approach literary criticism in a top-down manner. Participants in the 1968 Dartmouth Conference, drawing on earlier transactional theory of literary response (Rosenblatt) and theories of learning through drama and language use, as well as research on literary response, argued for the need to focus more responding to literature through valuing and sharing students' individual responses, particularly their engagement, autobiographical, and intertextual responses. This adoption of a reader-response approach wasn't necessarily widespread, given the continued use of those ten-pound literature textbooks with largely canonical texts accompanied by recall questions about character, setting, storyline, and theme. At the same time, there was a growing awareness of the emergence of the young-adult novel as an engaging alternative to these canonical texts, particularly for early-adolescent students.

The 1970s also witnessed the development of the composing process approach to teaching writing through prewriting, drafting, revising, and editing, along with the later realization that these processes are not necessarily linear, but can be recursive. This focus on the composing process drew on research such as Janet Emig's study, *The Composing Processes of 12th Grade Students*, which found that students, as well as writers, didn't employ the traditional outline, draft, edit formalist model.

During the 1970s, there was also a growing recognition that many students were having reading difficulties. The first assessment of students' reading abilities conducted by the National Assessment of Educational Progress in 1971 found that many 13- and 17-year-olds had difficulty

interpreting texts. That same NAEP assessment conducted in 2008 found that 17-year-olds showed no significant improvement over their 1971 peers (Rampey, Dion, and Donahue), suggesting that students continue to have difficulty interpreting texts. On the one hand, this concern with students' reading difficulties led to an increased focus on the need to teach reading comprehension strategies, as well as attention to students' positive interest in reading emerging young adult literature. On the other hand, given the prevailing skill-based methods of reading at that time, this led to a "back-to-the-basics" movement focusing on teaching of isolated, decontextualized reading comprehension skills. Unfortunately, this skill-based approach that focused on summary and informational recall neglected student learning of what Russell Hunt defines as a "point-driven" reading stance—the ability to infer thematic and symbolic meanings, as opposed to simply summarizing the storyline or recalling information.

1980 – 1989: The Social

With all of the attention on response and composing processes in the 1970s, educators began to recognize the need for students to do more than just employ these processes. Educators realized that they also needed to create social contexts with an engaging purpose or audience that motivated students to respond or write. This led to devising writing assignments such as the I-search assignment, family-history writing, or persuasive writing activities which involved a clearer sense of social purpose and audience constituting a social context. During the 1980s, I did research on use of role-play activities to foster persuasive writing to other roles about issues—for example, whether students at Rosemount High School should be able to go off campus for lunch. Students were relatively engaged with this writing because they were using writing to convince audiences to support their positions on this issue. And, as teachers encouraged students to write for peer audiences, writing instructors increasingly employed peer feedback groups as a means to help students reflect on how their writing engaged their peer audiences.

This focus on the social also led to an increased interest in how to effectively facilitate literature discussions through use of higher-order questions and small-group discussions. Teachers were also adopting more reading-writing workshops (Atwell) and individualized reading activities related to the growing popularity of young adult literature. Additionally, middle-school language arts teachers built cross-disciplinary curricula that focused on early-adolescents' social needs.

During the 1980s, fueled partially by the electives movement and improvements in the technology for showing and accessing media, there was an increased focus on teaching film, media, and popular culture, as evident in the rise of English elective courses such as "The Mystery Novel and Film."

1990 – 1999: The Cultural

The attention to the social context and students' prior knowledge and experience in the 1980s, as well as the increasing diversity of student populations in Minnesota schools, led to increased attention to cultural differences through the infusion of multicultural literature in the curriculum, as represented by the publication of *Braided Lives: An Anthology of Multicultural American Writing (Minnesota Humanities Society).* Teachers also focused on portrayals of race, class, or gender differences in literature as reflected in Deborah Appleman's book on the application of critical lenses, as well as addressing issues of institutional racism portrayed in literature (Beach, Heartling-Thein, and Parks).

Writing teachers, often working in conjunction with the Minnesota Writing Project or the College in the Schools program, continued to expand the genres and topics of writing assignments. Students began writing ethnographies about local cultures or engaging in multi-genre writing. Teachers such as Jan Mandell at Central High School in St. Paul were using drama to engage students in critical inquiry about issues of race, class, or gender differences in their everyday lives.

At the same time, during the 1990's, politicians and business leaders called for schools and teachers to be held "accountable" to standards and test scores. This led to the development of high-stakes reading and writing tests for all Minnesota students, as well as the Minnesota Profile of Learning and later attempts to impose content-driven standards by former Commissioner Yecke, a shift that would continue to challenge English teachers' professional status and autonomy to the present. Our 2000-2001 research with Minnesota English and social studies teachers found that teachers had difficulty adopting performance assessment techniques associated with the Profile of Learning, particularly if they had not received adequate preparation for using performance assessment (Avery, Beach, and Coler).

2000 – 2010: The Digital

This past decade has witnessed a shift from an English curriculum focus on primarily print literacies to uses of digital tools such as blogs, wikis, podcasts, and online discussions in the classroom. This focus reflects students' increased use of digital communication tools outside of school. A 2010 Kaiser Family Foundation report found that adolescents are now spending about more than seven and a half hours a day using some sort of digital or media device. In one survey (National Council of Teachers of English), 52% of English teachers indicated that their students spend at least an hour a week outside of school writing in such environments.

This increased focus on digital literacies is evident in teachers' use of blogs, online discussions, or wikis to foster students' literary responses, as well as students' use of digital video production for communicating their ideas (Beach, Anson, Kastman-Breuch, and Swiss). Students used these digital tools to communicate and interact with wider audiences beyond the school walls. Students shared their responses to literature using a variety of online discussion techniques, including wikis and blogs. They created digital poetry, storytelling, and comic books as multimodal forms of communication. They created digital videos that engaged multiple audiences. And, they used e-portfolios to reflect on their learning over-time. Recognizing the lack of focus on media/digital literacies in the Common Core Standards, Minnesota teachers added their own additional standards to that focus on analysis and production of media and digital texts (Minnesota Department of Education).

Building on the cultural, Minnesota teachers continued to diversify the literature curriculum by treating authors of color not as token add-ons, but at authors within the canon. They also incorporated spoken-word poetry and rap as evident in the *Teens Rock the Mic* project at Minneapolis North High School. And, they continued to redesign the curriculum around inquiry-based projects for engaging students in place-based writing or service-learning experiences in their communities (Beach, Campano, Edmiston, and Borgmann).

However, the effects of testing continued, with a return to the focus on formalist "five-paragraph essay" writing instruction of the 1960s designed to prepare students for standardized writing tests. And, these test results revealed that in 2009, while 84% of white students passed this writing test, only about half of students from non-dominant cultural groups passed the test, a disparity that can be attributed to a 60 percent disparity in opportunities to learn between high

support/performing versus low support/performing schools (Schott Foundation for Public Education). So, while English teaching continued to change since 2000, a larger economic inequality in American society persisted that fostered disparities in students' performance.

Summary

As we celebrate the 50th anniversary of MCTE, we need to recognize that many of these changes over the past 50 years occurred because Minnesota English teachers were willing to take risks and experiment with new approaches. In many cases, they acquired these new approaches from attending MCTE Fall and Spring conferences or reading the *Minnesota English Journal*. As a precipitator of these innovations, MCTE deserves thanks and congratulations for its 50 years of service to our profession.

What changes will occur in the next decade? Whatever they are, we can all depend on MCTE to foster future innovations for Minnesota English teachers.

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