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MAINTAINING THE HUMAN ASPECTS OF ENGLISH: ELECTIVES IN THE CURRICULUM

Jean E. Brown
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Rationale for Electives in English

Recent calls for a return to the "basics" have signaled a shift away from elective English courses in secondary schools. In their place many English departments have returned to the traditional curricula of year-long courses, which typically, but not exclusively, are organized around a literature sequence and a grammar handbook. In this type of curricular organization, writing instruction is usually coordinated with literature study. A return to this curricular approach has in part been the result of the laissez-faire policy of developing elective courses in the past. Decision-making about elective courses was often seemingly random and often reflected the obscure interests of individual teachers rather than the needs of students. These abuses have led to criticism from administrators, the public, and even thoughtful English teachers; however, the current effort to eliminate elective programs is shortsighted.

Some English departments are now taking time to scrutinize their elective offerings rather than mindlessly eliminating them from the curriculum. Indeed, often the elective courses within a curriculum give the English program the vitality it needs. A carefully conceived elective program is an effective way to meet student needs; courses can be designed to provide concentrated study organized around a theme, an author, a genre, or a skill. Through this type of study, students gain an in-depth understanding of the subject. And through this intense study a useful vehicle is provided for students to strengthen their basic reading and writing skills; therefore, a well-conceived elective program defuses public and administrative criticism that students are not being taught basic literacy skills.

As the research repeatedly demonstra-

tes, motivation has a positive influence on student performance. Students usually enroll in elective courses because, for any number of reasons, they want to be there. For instance, students might elect to take a course in science fiction because that is their favorite type of reading; whereas, others might elect a course in college writing because they recognize their need to be better prepared for future studies. In both of these cases, the elective courses are meeting the needs of students. Many student benefits are derived from English electives; therefore, it is essential that the public, which usually promotes wholesale abandonment of these elective programs, understand these benefits.

Any major examination of the English curriculum, educators agree, should focus on its content and quality. In 1984, the National Council of Teachers of English did address the issue of quality in English programs by expressing concern about the narrow curricular perspective of programs designed to help students attain mastery and competency of language skills. The narrow emphasis ignores the more humane aspects of our discipline. The Council's response is expressed in the following 1984 resolution, entitled: "On the Humane Aspects of English as a Discipline":

Resolution

RESOLVED, that the National Council of Teachers of English discourages a narrow pedagogy which focuses on specific language skills, and reminds its many constituencies that, while language proficiency is essential, we must continue to emphasize the importance of the full, humane discipline of English including the aesthetic, affective, and cultural aspects of written and oral expression as well as literature and the theater.

Human Aspects of English

A well-structured and thoughtfully conceived elective program, therefore, is one response to the significant need of providing students with experiences in thinking and feeling. English/language arts teachers at all levels need continued support in the belief that teaching English is not simply a series of discrete language skills, but a vehicle to demonstrate the power of both oral and written language as it reflects the essence of human experience and chronicles the thoughts and hopes of our past, present, and future. However, to ensure a successful elective program it is necessary that English departments work toward a logical and profitable inclusion of electives within a total program. Therefore, the following guidelines are suggested with the intention that they will help teachers in the development of meaningful electives within a **total** English curriculum, one that integrates cognitive learning of all literacy skills (reading, writing, speaking, and listening) with affective learning about the value of literature and the power of written and oral communications.

Guidelines for Developing Electives

The elective system is most likely to succeed only where certain conditions prevail within each English department:

1. The English department must have a well-articulated rationale of what the **total** English curriculum involves and how it is implemented in the program.
2. Each elective must include within it the vehicles for fostering a **total** English curriculum in which writing skills, reading skills, listening skills, and speaking skills are improved.
3. The department must then develop a brochure clearly discussing the rationale for the program and listing all course offerings. This brochure should be made available to both students and their parents and it should include, clearly stated, each course title, prerequisites, and course objectives. Much of the current criticism of elective programs has been the result of misconceptions about the content and purposes of the courses.

4. When viewed in its entirety, the English program must make it impossible for students to select only one type of elective, i.e. only courses in literature during all four years of high school.
5. Electives offered in the secondary schools must be considered in the context of the total English/language arts program, grades K-12.
6. The guidance department and English teachers must work closely with students to advise them to make appropriate selections based on their interests, the courses they have already taken, and their future plans.
7. Electives should be offered only when faculty members demonstrate an appropriate academic background to teach the course.
8. Writing standards for every class must be developed cooperatively by the members of the English department. The elective program must reflect the teaching of writing as the result of a process approach in which there is continuous, sequential skill development.
9. Curriculum planning must provide a wide variety of books, audiovisual materials, and other instructional aids available for both student and teacher use. In this way, the elective program will be able to meet the various student needs and skills for which it is designed.
10. All students should have the opportunity to take electives.
11. Standards must be maintained in all classes. High quality expectations on all levels and a commitment to enhance both academic and basic skill development promote learning.
12. Even in an elective program, remedial courses must be offered for those students who do not demonstrate an adequate command of language arts skills. Students must be required to take these remedial courses simultaneously with the elective courses.

13. The widening social, cultural, and economic differences of students must be included in the design of an elective program.

14. Elective courses must reflect a **balanced** curriculum in which students are helped to develop personal awareness, and social responsibility, as well as cognitive learning.

15. The elective program must be evaluated periodically to determine whether or not present and future student cognitive, social, and personal needs are being met.

Conclusion

The development of an elective program must reflect the needs of each individual school. Realistically, there is no one elective program that will meet the needs

of all or even most programs. For an elective program to be effective, both teachers and students must give their time and creativity in tailoring courses most appropriate to their particular situation. Additionally, the success of an elective program also depends on the involvement and support of administrators, counselors, and parents. Each of these groups must have an understanding of the purpose and the objectives of the program as a whole and of the individual courses that constitute it.

Finally, the basic objectives of all types of English courses remain the same: to provide for experiences through which students will become proficient in the uses of language and to help students discover literature and life in such a way as to foster their potential for living and for understanding themselves and others. Elective programs reflect the humane dimensions of the discipline of English.

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