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# Professional Concerns: English for Despisers

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## PROFESSIONAL CONCERNS: ENGLISH FOR DESPISERS

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*Professional Concerns is a regular column devoted to the interchange of ideas among those interested in reading instruction. Send your comments and contributions to the editor. If you have questions about reading that you wish to have answered, the editor will find respondents to answer them. Address correspondence to R. Baird Shuman, Department of Education, Duke University, Durham, North Carolina 27708.*

Do some of your students view the book as enemy? Are some of your students completely turned off by English? Do you have trouble getting some of your students to read?

Ruth Van Arsdale, a teacher at Salina High School South in Salina, Kansas has faced up to some of these questions and has found answers to them. In the following account she tells how she made reluctant students more enthusiastic readers, and—perhaps more importantly—how she brought her turned off students to the point of wanting to learn the basic skills which most educators would agree should be a part of the English curriculum. Ms. Van Arsdale has worked within a rather conventional framework. She has not relied on exotic or expensive materials in order to achieve her ends. The elective course which she describes here is one which can very easily be adapted to almost any middle school, junior high school, or senior high school teaching situation. Perhaps the unique honesty of the course's title helps to establish the climate of trust between the teacher and her students which is a necessary concomitant in any teaching situation.

### English for Students Who Despise English

English can be a traumatic experience for students who have never had success in it. By the time these people reach the junior or senior year, they are trying desperately to pass some English course to get their diplomas and get off the educational treadmill. In homogeneously grouped classes they are accustomed to defeat, to being labeled by everyone as poor students. Even worse, they consider themselves hopelessly unable to handle their language in anything other than conversation. But because these students are people, they deserve more than drudgery. How can their language experiences come alive?

Discussing these problems with my principal helped me to devise a course known in our curriculum as “English for Students Who Despise English” or simply “English for Despisers.” Far from shunning the class when it was placed on the electives list, students asked for it. Careful as we had been not to group these people together on a “level,” they quickly grouped themselves by admitting their attitude toward English.

I must admit that I began with some trepidation, for the course was run by an open-contract system, throwing the responsibility back on students who had never taken much responsibility for school work. Also I was traditional enough to feel that English needed to involve reading, writing, and oral skills, not just fun and games. A preliminary survey quickly showed me that the students really wanted success in the same skills I felt were important; they simply despised English because of the prescribed materials they were required to read, write about, and discuss. With the assurance that our goals were compatible, I began to load the table with *Better Homes and Gardens*, *Newsweek*, *Time*, *U.S. News*, *Reader's Digest* and *Scholastic Scope* magazines. Added to these was a set of *Illustrated Classics* from Pendulum Press.

Most of the students began with *Reader's Digest* or the classics, in the latter recognizing the titles of books they wanted to know about but found too formidable to approach even in paperback. Soon they felt they knew the basic plot of such books as *Call of the Wild*, *Moby Dick*, *Huckleberry Finn*, and *Frankenstein*. Almost everyone read and discussed the articles in *Scope* magazine within two days of its arrival. Many also worked the crossword puzzles and the cryptograms. After about a month, most of the students were finished with the classics, but all the magazines were still consumed each week as they arrived. I was amazed. Were these students really changing their ways?

A questionnaire I prepared recently answered some of my questions. Seventy percent of the students felt that their attitude toward reading had changed. Some of the comments were as follows: “It isn't quite as bad . . . I really don't feel like I have to read; this just makes it easier for me to enjoy the book more . . . I don't think it's boring as I usually would . . . I read what I want and keep interested in things that I read and learn at the same time . . . I'm not forced to read what everyone reads but what I myself enjoy reading about . . . I used to not be interested in it at all, but now I find I can learn from it if I try . . . I now realize that you can learn something from reading . . . I read more than before.”

Only one student of the thirty said he was beginning to dislike reading more (the one student who failed the class). Those who said their attitudes hadn't changed generally commented that they had always liked reading when they could choose what to read.

Six of the thirty students felt that they were succeeding in other classes because of their reading experiences in English for Despisers. Some of the books read by students indicate that many of these people are capable of reading challenging material but have been discouraged by something in the traditional approach. Sample titles are *To Sir With Love*, *Bury My*

*Heart at Wounded Knee, Looking for Mr. Goodbar, Jane Eyre, Wuthering Heights, One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest, Mountain Man, The Unquiet Death of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg, and The Wilk Are Among Us.*

Many students read the news magazines; others read consumer guides to find the best buys in tires, appliances, or stereo equipment. Almost all use the *Reader's Guide* as a practical source of information and have learned to save time by using the card catalog; others have discovered the purpose of the vertical file. Recently I've had reports on the Manson family as portrayed in magazines and on TV in "Helter Skelter," on Jimmy Carter's personality, and on the Quinlan Case. A young man who last semester had reported on Karen Ann Quinlan came to me to find out if I'd learned that the doctors "could pull the plugs" on Karen now.

I can't claim a revolutionary change that has carry-over value in the total school experience, but I see students eagerly reading books and magazines, really using the library, conversing about things they've read and recommending books and subjects to other students. Even if these students have learned only that reading isn't drudgery, I take heart; for they have opened up for themselves a valuable source of lifelong pleasure and learning.