WHEN A DISCIPLINE MEETS A CHILD

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As I comtemplated this moment with you, I found myself drawn irresistibly to old copies of *Spectra* in search of the thoughts and feelings of others who had served as your President and who had looked forward to and experienced a moment such as this. I took some consolation from Donald Bryant's observations, in his 1970 Presidential Address, that it is "a very formidable undertaking and a humbling responsibility to address a body of . . . educational colleagues" and that it is "easy to search for wisdom, but hard to come by any."[1] I share the same feelings. I found it reassuring to learn that Ted Clevenger, in preparing for his Presidential Address in 1972, found it necessary to fight the temptation "to spend these last few minutes . . . reviewing the high points of a Presidential term that . . . (he would) never forget."[2] I experienced the same impulse. And I found it easy to empathize with Bob Jeffrey's discovery "that accepting the demands of professional activity has proved utlimately to be its own reward."[3] These three years have been both personally and professionally rewarding and for this I thank you.

In perusing the Presidential Addresses of my predecessors, I found cause to pause with the speech given by Sam Becker to the 60th Anniversary Meeting of our Association in 1974. As a specialist in speech education, I was pleased by Professor Becker's concern for the communication education of the young. I found it easy to applaud his observation that:

> "If we had been as successful as we should have been, communication training today would be so well-developed in the secondary and primary schools that only the rare secondary school graduate would need more training at preparing and delivering a speech, participating in discussion, or writing an acceptable essay."[4]

To which I would append an enthusiastic Amen!! But Professor Becker spoke of means as well as goals. He praised what he termed:

> ". . . a constructive historic trend in most academic disciplines: what is taught in graduate school to one generation moves to the undergraduate in the next generation or two, to secondary schools in the next and, to some extent and in some disciplines, to the primary schools in the next. . . . We teachers have a responsibility to facilitate and even to push this downward movement. . . . we must develop more press from the top, press caused by the sheer weight or mass of knowledge being developed."[5]

As I read on, I found my professorial self applauding his call for the maintenance of scholarly values and his quest for the central intellectual core of our field. But as a specialist in speech education, I was drawn, again and again, back to the notion that curricula for the young ought to be determined by a downward thrust of knowledge from the academic disciplines. Is this really what ought to happen *when a discipline meets a child?*

This afternoon I will ponder this question by considering the general wisdom of a discipline-oriented school curriculum and the special wisdom of speech communication curricula organized around a downward thrust of knowledge from on high. In the process, I hope to invite your continuing interest in speech communication instruction for the young—interest in what James Winans, borrowing from Charles Woolbert, called ". . . the simple and delightful task of helping boys and girls to be more useful when they talk."[6]

So what role ought the disciplines play in defining school curricula? By way of preface, one must note that the disciplines, or at least some of them, have exerted *substantial* influence on school curricula in the past. The majority of American secondary schools are organized around departmental clusters of teachers and a subject-by-subject curriculum plan. "This approach reflects," in the words of noted educator Benjamin Bloom, "a relatively ancient and to some extent outmoded view of the specialization of scholarship and research at the university level."[7]

One must also note, as has Professor Becker, that the disciplines have exerted *an ever increasing influence* on school curricula in the recent past. The curriculum reform movement of the past two decades reflects, in no small part, "the concern of learned societies for pre-collegiate curriculum reform."[8] The products of this reform are well known to every parent in this room of a college bound high school student; the new mathematics, new physics, new biology, new economics, and new anthropology are the commonplaces of dinner table talk that begins with the question, "What did you learn in school today?" and terminates with premature parental silence. And while somewhat less apparent, "the increasing emphasis today upon the disciplines as basic sources for the content, scope, sequence, and teaching-learning strategies of new curriculum designs for the elementary school"[9] has been experienced dramatically by every parent of an elementary school student who is invited to "help" with a take-home mathematics assignment.

It is clear then that the disciplines, or some of them, have exerted and continue to exert a profound influence on school curricula. So what's wrong with that?

Some critics have argued that discipline-oriented school curricula reflect the concerns of teachers and scholars rather than the needs of children. When curricula are organized around subject matter clusters, teachers may specialize in narrow areas of content, college academic departments may prepare teachers by merely tinkering with standard liberal arts majors, and scholars, through handsomely funded curriculum development projects, may seek to clone themselves through school curricula "proposed and developed primarily to produce academics."[10] But what about the child? Bloom has observed that "the problems that the individual encounters in life or society do not fit neatly into the course organization found in the schools."[11] Jane Martin, another critic, queries, "How much light can the disciplines shed, for example, on war and peace, marriage and divorce, violence and poverty, love and friendship?"[12] While the new subject curricula of the sixties and seventies breathe freshness into school curricula long gone stale, they still seek to fit the child to the subject matter rather than the subject matter to the child. And some would suggest that the basic skills of children have suffered in the process.

Discipline-oriented school curricula have also been faulted for providing a fragmented view of the world. As a discipline approaches the school curriculum, it experiences a strong impulse to "maintain a clear and separate identity . . . with the objective of teaching its own disciplinary structure as an end in itself."[13] As a consequence, students are more likely to search for differences than for similarities in cognate fields of study. For example, in the social sciences students are often introduced to chunks of knowledge and/or habits of inquiry related to history, economics, political science, sociology, and psychology without pondering the interrelationship of these disciplines or the general nature of the social fabric that each seeks to describe. But happily, in the social sciences and elsewhere, an increasing number of teachers and scholars are urging that curricula be organized around broad fields of knowledge permitting "the curriculum to escape from a very narrow and pedantic view of knowledge. . . . (allowing) a variety of related disciplines to enter into the consideration of a problem, be it

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a view of man or nature, or an approach to inquiry."[14]

The last general criticism that I will mention comes very close to home—the discipline-oriented school curriculum perpetuates established fields of knowledge at the expense of newer or less popular disciplines. When curriculum planning begins with the disciplines rather than with desired learning goals, the outcome is highly predictable. As Goodlad has observed:

> "Such an assumption almost automatically implies that those subjects already well established in the curriculum determine what the schools ought to teach. The schools' curriculum, then, is closed to new subjects, and to old subjects that have been poorly represented in the political market place."[15]

As representatives of a discipline not well established in the school curriculum, we know how difficult it is to place even one semester-length speech communication course in all secondary schools and how easy it is for our colleagues in English to perpetuate their claim on ten and even twelve semesters of instruction in the lives of most secondary school students. We have not profited from the discipline-centered school curriculum nor have we found such a curriculum susceptible to our efforts at influence and reform.

Which brings me to my second question: Is it really wise to organize speech communication instruction in the schools around knowledge that is pushed down from on high? I think not.

In the first place, such a conception implies that a ready conduit exists through which such knowledge may flow. Since we are not a well established subject in most school systems, the conduit is a highly imperfect one. In the small percentage of senior high schools offering a number of courses in speech communication, staffed by teachers who have extensive training in speech communication, the downthrust of knowledge notion is not without appeal. I have visited senior high schools that have a rich speech communication curriculum with courses largely parallel in content to those found in the early undergraduate curriculum of colleges and universities. More often, however, I have visited schools with a single elective course in speech communication that would be hard pressed to accomodate even a miniscule portion of the growing knowledge of our field. Ten years ago, William Brooks observed that "Despite the fact that a high percentage of American high schools offer speech . . . a large majority of high school students receive little or no speech training."[16] I have no cause to question the validity of this conclusion today.

And as one moves from the senior high school to the junior high school to the elementary school, one finds even fewer teachers who are knowledgable about speech communication and the means through which it is taught. The imperfect conduit of the senior high school becomes mere fragments in the junior high school and disappears almost completely in the elementary school. Even were it desirable to do so, it would be nearly impossible to push speech communication knowledge, in any reasonably pure form, deep into school curricula.

Now my second reservation: Would we really *want* to push speech communication knowledge deep into school curricula even if it were possible to do so? As I pondered this question, I was plagued by a recurring vision of speech communication knowledge—terms like epistomological stance, phrases like "ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny," whole treatises like Aristotle's *Rhetoric*—hanging heavily over the head of an apprehensive little bugger squirming in his tiny first grade chair.

And as I pondered the meaning of that vision, I concluded that when *our* discipline meets a child, we ought to be more interested in helping the child than in merely disseminating the knowledge of our field. This is not, of course, a blinding new revelation. As Donald K. Smith has observed:

> "For more than 2,000 years, persons interested in the teaching of human communication skills have understood the special force of philosopher Gilbert Ryle's distinction between 'knowing *that*' and 'knowing *how*.' We in the speech field have never doubted that our ultimate concern was with knowing *how* and with the knowledge that takes root in the behavior of our students and affects the way in which they manage themselves in the 'sea of language in which all men live suspended'."[17]

As a discipline and a profession, we remain committed to the goal of teaching children how to function competently in the myriad of oral communication situations in which they find themselves.

This goal, however, may experience some stress when it intersects with the notion that we ought to encourage the downward thrust of knowledge. Roger Brown has observed:

> "Study of the theory of the language is probably completely irrelevant to the development of skill in the use of the language. . . . Languages are not content subjects . . . they are symbol systems and the great thing to learn about symbol systems is how to manipulate them not how to analyze them."[18]

Similarly, one may conclude about oral communication instruction, as did Robert Hopper and Nancy Wrather, that "at the elementary school level, providing wide varieties of situations and letting students themselves discover ways to be effective seems preferable to explicit emphasis upon principles of communication."[19]

One senses that as the child matures, the downward thrust of speech communication knowledge may intersect more happily with the goal of developing functional speech communication competence. One also senses that we have been impatient for that moment to arrive. When I asked my son John a few years ago what he had learned in his seventh grade speech communication class, he replied "Stuff about communication models and encoders, decoders, filters, channels, noise, feedback, and junk like that." I would rather that he had learned how to relate to a younger brother in the back seat of a car on a family vacation.

Many of us have applauded James Moffett's observation that "I don't see how we can justify giving priority to the content specialties of English over those of other subjects, or teaching these specialities before students have thoroughly mastered the large English skills" and his companion observation that "there is a discouraging amount of evidence that this often doesn't occur by the time of college."[20] Having applauded these remarks, we must surely question our own impulse to push speech communication knowledge deep into the school curriculum.

Having questioned the general wisdom of organizing school curricula around the disciplines and having questioned the specific wisdom of the downward thrust of knowledge principle for speech communication instruction, one may inquire about an alternative way of thinking about our discipline as it prepares to meet a child.

As a beginning, in this, the International Year of the Child, we should place children and their communication needs at the forefront as we make decisions about school curricula. Communication is *basic* to the lives of our nation's young. Children seek to communicate in a variety of circumstances—at home, in school, and on the playground. They experience "the agony and frustration of not being able to describe something so that a father understands, of not being able to comfort a friend, of not being able to 'talk' to a teacher or principal."[21] We must provide opportunities for children, at all educational levels, to engage in rich interaction in varied contexts and in purposeful ways in order that they may become happier and more successful when they talk. In the words of the National Project on Speech Communication Competencies:

> "Children should be exposed to a variety of communication opportunities—opportunities for interacting with a wide range of participants, opportunities for talking about topics of interest to them, opportunities for engaging in a wide range of communication acts, and opportunities for communicating in diverse environments.

However, children should also be

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given the opportunity to talk *about* their talk. They should be encouraged to identify, analyze, and modify criteria for *selecting* strategies. They should have the opportunity to discuss their verbal and nonverbal choices in *implementing* strategies. They should be given the opportunity to participate in *evaluating* their own communication behaviors and the communication behaviors of others.

What is called for, in sum, is a participatory classroom environment in which students are given the opportunity to experiment with communication behaviors that are important to them."[22]

As representatives of the speech communication discipline we must strive to ensure that all teachers, but especially elementary school teachers, are "sensitive to the communication needs of their students and . . . (are) capable of structuring learning environments that promote rather than constrain student communicative involvement."[23] The SCA Inservice Education Project and the outreach work of Gerald Phillips and others of the Pennsylvania State University have demonstrated that we can teach elementary school teachers to provide a classroom rhetorical environment in which the communication skills of children may prosper.

Second, we must learn to work with cognate disciplines in defining and implementing responsible school curricula. Earlier in this address, I referred to the fragmentation that occurs because of discipline-centered school curricula. It is my belief that the effects of such fragmentation are nowhere more apparent than in school English Language-Communication curricula. For years we have been told that the English curriculum is designed to improve the reading, writing, speaking, and listening skills of children and young Americans. We know that this is not the case. Moffett's exalted goal, that we enable students, through school curricula, "to play freely the whole symbolic scale," is belied by contemporary school curricula. If the primary goal of the English Language-Communication curriculum is to prepare the competent communicator, one wonders why we expend so much energy in separate curriculum projects in English, Speech Communication, Theatre, and Mass Communication and why we prepare teachers who are ill-equipped to rise above their own narrow specialization.

Our disciplinary heritage has taught us to think competitively rather than cooperatively about school curricula. If students are to "understand" what it means to inform others, for example, they may profit from the comparative analysis of an informative essay, an informative speech, a TV documentary, an instructional film, and a newspaper column. Students have much to learn from a number of disciplines as they grow in communication competence. As you may know, we are doing painfully little as a discipline to inspire reform in teacher preparation and certification and to promote the development of unified interdisciplinary curricula.

Finally, we must recognize that there is a knowledge of speech communication that doesn't have to be shoved down into school curricula from on high. It is possible for scholars to study the communication skills, habits, and needs of children. It is possible for scholars, working with teachers, to devise alternative strategies and programs for speech communication instruction and to test these strategies and programs in school and non-school settings. It is possible that both the discipline and the child may learn when we seek to mesh the learner with that which is to be learned.

It is possible, but it has not yet happened. As a discipline we have not given high priority to communication research involving the young. But times may be changing. The new basic skills legislation has identified speaking and listening as vital basic skills for children. One may hope that this external nudge may inspire thoughtful research programs related to the communication skills and needs of children and to intervention strategies that enable children to communicate more effectively.

And so there is some cause to question the wisdom of the "downward thrust from the disciplines principle" as the central organizing strategem for school curricula. For the disciplines may serve the welfare of scholars and teachers better than they serve the needs of children, may offer to the young a fragmented view of the world, and may perpetuate curricula which exclude new areas of knowledge and insight. And the downward thrust of speech communication knowledge may be thwarted by an imperfect conduit and by our own deeper realization that it is more important for children to know "how" than to know "that" in matters of communication.

As Goodlad has noted:

". . . planning from the top down has in some instances brought with it a straight jacket, a straight jacket that is incongruously ill-suited to childhood schooling. A really significant reform movement . . . looks ahead to a time when the curriculum will be planned from the bottom up, with knowledge of students and their achievements built into the sequence of subject matter in the curriculum design."[24]

So as our discipline meets a child, let us learn to think about children as well as knowledge; to think about disciplinary cooperation rather than competition; and to think upward in order that the child will grow in communication competence as the school years unfold.

NOTES

[1]Donald C. Bryant, "Retrospect and Prospect 1970," *Spectra*, February 1971, p. 3.

[2]Theodore Clevenger, Jr., "Communication and the Survival of Democracy," *Spectra*, February 1973, p. 3.

[3]Robert C. Jeffrey, "Ethics in Public Discourse," *Spectra*, February 1974, p 15.

[4]Samual L. Becker, "For a New Age of Enlightenment," *Spectra*, February 1975, p. 11.

[5]*Ibid*., pp. 5 and 11.

[6]James A. Winans, "Of Conventions," *The Quarterly Journal of Speech*, April 1936, p. 301.

[7]Benjamin S. Bloom, "Alternative Appoaches to the Organization of Curriculum and Instruction," in Elliot W. Eisner, ed., *Confronting Curriculum Reform* (Boston, Mass.: Little, Brown and Company, 1971), p. 196.

[8]John I. Goodlad, *School Curriculum Reform in the United States* (no city given: The Fund for the Advancement of Education, no date), p. 6.

[9]John U. Michaelis, Ruth H. Grossman, and Lloyd F. Scott, *New Designs for the Elementary School Curriculum* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1967), p. 30.

[10]James B. MacDonald, "Responsible Curriculum Development," in Eisner, *Op Cit*, p. 122.

[11]Bloom, *Op Cit*, p. 197.

[12]Jane R. Martin, "The Disciplines and the Curriculum," in David E. Purpel and Maurice Belanger, eds., *Curriculum and the Cultural Revolution* (Berkeley, California: McCutchan Publishing Corporation, 1972), p. 107.

[13]Robert D. Barr, James L. Barth, and S. Samuel Shermis, *Defining the Social Studies*, Bulletin 51 (Arlington, Virginia: National Council for the Social Studies, 1977), p. 45.

[14]Bloom, *Op Cit*., p. 197.

[15]Goodlad, *Op Cit*., p. 54.

[16]William D. Brooks, "The Status of Speech in Secondary Schools: A Summary of State Studies," *Speech Teacher*, November 1969, p. 281.

[17]Donald K. Smith, "Speech for Tomorrow: Concepts and Context," *The Speech Teacher*, January 1966, p. 31.

[18]Roger Brown, "Introduction," in James Moffett, *Teaching the Universe of Discourse* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1968), p. vii-viii.

[19]Robert Hopper and Nancy Wrather, "Teaching Functional Communication Skills in the Elementary Classroom," *Communication Education*, November 1978, p. 320.

[20]Moffett, *Op Cit*, p. 4.

[21]R. R. Allen and Kenneth L. Brown, eds., *Developing Communication Competence in Children* (Skokie, Illinois: National Textbook Company, 1976), p. 247.

[22]*Ibid*, p. 254.

[23]*Ibid*, pp. 254-255.

[24]Goodlad, *Op Cit*., p. 59.