

DEVELOPMENT OF COMPOSITION COURSES AROUND FUNCTIONAL CENTERS

An examination of courses of study shows two prevailing tendencies in the construction of composition curriculums around functional centers.

AT PRESENT there is rather general agreement that social utility should be the primary consideration in selecting and organizing the materials of instruction in composition courses. Research studies in the field of English have sought to facilitate the application of this principle to curriculum construction through systematic investigations of the language needs of practical daily life. The report¹ of Clapp's Committee on the Place and Function of English in American Life marks a definite step in this direction. After ascertaining the language activities reported by 2,615 adults representing an impressive sampling of various occupational, educational, and geographical groups, the Committee recommends:

The schools might well devote more attention to a number of language activities which, according to the returns, are widely used by persons of the many callings and social groups reporting, and which are reported as giving much difficulty. The activities in particular are: Interviews: word-of-mouth inquiries, reports to a superior, instructions for subordinates, conferences. Conversation: with casual acquaintances, at social gatherings, over the telephone. Public speaking: informal discussion, preparing addresses. Writing: informal notes and memos for one's self; formal notes of invitation, introduction, etc. Reading: legal documents. Listening: to an interview, a conference, or a public meeting.

Even more definitely helpful because of its practical illustrations is Roy Ivan Johnson's *English Expression: A Study in Curriculum Building*.²

Recognizing that "human needs, measured by individual and social standards, must be the ultimate justification of the school's curriculum," Johnson secured from 208 women lists of life activities involving the practice of either oral or written composition. Not only activities which had actually been performed but also those which the individual "had been called upon to perform and would have performed if she had been capable of doing so" were listed. After compiling a list of seventy-three type activities in order of frequency, Johnson classified them into nine functional centers, or major types of English expression: (1) letters, (2) conversation, (3) group discussion, (4) formal discussion, (5) reports, (6) personal memoranda, (7) special-occasion talks, (8) directions, instructions, and explanations, (9) story telling. These centers account for approximately eighty per cent of the English usage recorded in the individual lists.

According to Johnson,³ the use of expressional activities as criteria for the determination of the content of the course results in restricting subject-matter to (1) principles involved in the effective performance of the activities and (2) practice in the application of the principles of effectiveness by performing the activities as frequently as needful for the cultivation of the desired abilities. Johnson then uses his first functional center to illustrate the activity analysis technique, attacking the problem from two points of view: (1) the characteristics of a good letter and (2) the difficulties students encounter in writing letters.

That the value of such an approach to curriculum-making in composition courses is being generally recognized is evident from the report of the North Central Association Committee on College Entrance Re-

¹Clapp, John M. (Chairman)—*The Place of English in American Life*. Report of an Investigation by a Committee of the National Council of Teachers of English. Chicago: National Council of Teachers of English, 1926, p. 46. See also *English Journal*, Vol. XV, No. 2 (February, 1926), pages 110-134.

²Published by the Public School Publishing Company, Bloomington, Illinois, 1926.

³*Op. cit.*, p. 40.

quirements in English.⁴ The Committee stresses the importance of activity patterns as the basic principle of organization for the course in composition. A somewhat extended list of functional centers is an integral part of the report.

The growing use of the functional centers of expression in the construction of composition curriculums is definite evidence of a recognition of the inherent soundness of this principle and its practical usefulness. In general, two types of procedure have been followed: (1) the allocation of selected centers to particular grades for intensive development, and (2) the cycle arrangement of centers within each grade, with stress upon cumulative development.

The new Denver course-of-study monographs represent conspicuous examples of the application of the functional idea in the organization of composition activities according to the first procedure described.⁵ In Grade 7B, for example, the principal oral functional center for pupils of medium and superior ability is story-telling, based on personal experiences; conversation, announcements, and meetings appear as supplementary centers. The principal written functional center is the friendly letter, with excuses and minutes of meetings listed as supplementary centers. In Grade 7A the principal oral centers are explanations and directions, with social courtesies, group discussion, and story-telling as supplementary centers; the principal written center is the business letter, with explanations, directions, and short, simple narratives as supplementary activities. Selected items of grammar, usage, and mechanics of form are also listed for specific grades.

⁴Miller, E. L. (Chairman)—"College Entrance Requirements in English: A Committee Report." *English Journal*, Vol. XX, Nos. 8 and 9 (October and November, 1931), pp. 626-640; 714-729.

⁵*English: Junior High School*. Course of Study Monograph No. 9. (Second revised edition.) Denver Public Schools, 1931. *English: Senior High School*. Course of Study Monograph No. 10. (Second revised edition.) Denver Public Schools, 1931.

The second type of procedure is exemplified in the *Tentative Outline for English, Grades 7-8-9*, for the Highland Park, Michigan, schools. No attempt is made to classify separately the activities included in oral and written composition, since it is felt that many are common to both forms of expression. The uses of composition as determined by various analyses have been synthesized and condensed into seven functional centers, which appear in each grade of the course:⁶ (1) conversation and discussion; (2) instructions, directions, and explanations; (3) announcements, reports, and speeches; (4) story-telling; (5) writing explanations, stories, and poems; (6) letter-writing; (7) word study and spelling. Under these centers are classified, for each grade, activities representing progressive gradations of difficulty. For example, the sixth center, "Letter-writing," provides for cumulative development through the following allocation of activities to successive grades:⁷

- 7B Study of social letters; writing: news letter and notes of invitation, acceptance, refusal, explanation.
- 7A Study of business letter forms; writing: business letters of order, request, and inquiry.
- 8B Study of informal and formal social letter forms; writing: letters of invitation, acceptance, regret, thanks, condolence, congratulation.
- 8A Study of business letter forms; writing: letters of inquiry, complaint, application, and explanation.
- 9B Study of informal social letters; reading of famous friendly letters; writing: steamer or train letters, letters of invitation and response, "bread and butter" letters, notes of apology; formal social note writing.
- 9A Study of business writing; writing business forms: bank deposit slips, checks, receipts, money orders, telegrams; writing business letters: answers to advertisements, orders, and sales letters.

As Johnson is careful to emphasize in a

⁶*Tentative Outline for English, Grades 7-8-9*. Department of Instruction, Public Schools of Highland Park, Michigan, 1931, p. 7.

⁷*Op. cit.*, p. 10.

recent number of the *English Journal*,⁸ the functional centers are simply "categories under which numerous expressional activities may be classified." It is only when the centers of expression are analyzed and expressed in terms of social situations calling for activities of communication that a really usable curriculum is secured.

In the teacher-training classes conducted by the University of Virginia the composition units in grades eight and nine have been reorganized to provide for the grouping of learning activities around socially useful types of English expression.⁹ Certain functional centers have been allocated to each grade for intensive practice; the other centers appear as marginal or contributory. Two rather perplexing problems have been encountered in carrying out this program: (1) adequate provision for the development of correct language habits, and (2) adequate provision for training in rhetorical principles of effectiveness.

Both problems may be regarded largely as matters of integration. Unless some provision is made for instruction in language usage in connection with speaking and writing situations selected primarily for their social value, the course in composition may become merely a program of activities, with no clearly defined teaching purpose other than general improvement in the art of communication.

It is customary to allocate certain items of instruction in grammar and correct usage to specific grades for especial emphasis. To the extent that these specifics of instruction are made an integral part of the program of expressional activities, the probability of developing correct language *habits* is materially increased. In other words, a mere listing of items of usage for drill in a par-

ticular grade is insufficient. For practical purposes, some definite provision for drill on selected items of grammar and usage in connection with expressional activities that would tend to reveal such weaknesses is not only highly desirable but actually necessary if instruction in these aspects of the course is to receive reasonable emphasis. For example, a unit on "Conversing" may present an excellent opportunity for intensive work on vocabulary building, since the expressional situations selected for the development of the unit will doubtless reveal numerous deficiencies in vocabulary. Word study may then be undertaken when there is a felt need for a greater store of words to meet adequately a real social situation. Similarly, activities involving "Story-telling" may reveal decided weaknesses in the correct and effective use of verbs. If there is a definite understanding on the part of the teacher that verbs are to receive especial emphasis in connection with a unit centered around narration, it is possible to contrive expressional situations that will tend to reveal weaknesses and provide opportunities for remedial instruction and the necessary drill.

The procedure outlined above does not contemplate a subordination of expressional activities to a program of routine drill upon common errors. It simply means a more definite provision for instruction in grammar and correct usage in connection with expressional situations that tend to reveal certain types of deficiencies. Obviously, at the secondary school level the teaching procedure as it relates to these usages is largely a matter of diagnosis of language difficulties, with provisions for remedial instruction of the type needed. Nevertheless, there is reasonable certainty that mastery of items selected for emphasis is achieved as the pupil completes successive units in the course. Unquestionably, this degree of definiteness is desirable.

The second problem is concerned with

⁸Johnson, Roy I.—"Functional Centers of Expression," *English Journal*, Vol. XXI, No. 4 (April, 1932), pp. 275-280.

⁹See "Organizing Units Around Functional Centers," *English Journal*, Vol. XXII, No. 2 (February, 1933), pp. 119-127.

adequate provision for progressive training in rhetorical principles of effectiveness. This, too, seems to resolve itself into a matter of planning the course. First of all, it is necessary to allocate specific rhetorical principles to the several centers of expression for successive grades, with careful provision for proper gradation. An analysis of recent composition texts and courses of study will serve to indicate the best current opinion with reference to the proper placement of specifics of instruction in rhetoric. Again, it is highly desirable that these items of instruction be integrated with expressional activities of various types. The new Virginia Curriculum for Secondary Schools,¹⁰ which is now being tried out experimentally in selected schools, attempts to facilitate such integration through the listing of specific abilities for development in connection with the functional centers selected for emphasis in each grade.

A second step is the preparation and use of score cards for both pupil and teacher evaluation of the extent to which rhetorical principles of effectiveness have been applied in the various activities. Several recent composition texts developed according to the functional idea provide score cards for pupil appraisal of progress. Perhaps the most effective device is a co-operatively planned scoring sheet for each unit, listing items selected for emphasis by both teacher and pupils.

Finally, learning should be measured not only in terms of increased facility in expression in various life situations but also in terms of progress toward the attainment of desirable language habits, both grammatical and rhetorical, that are selected for emphasis in a particular series of activities essentially social in nature.

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¹⁰Published in tentative form by the State Board of Education, Richmond, Virginia.

THE NEW-TYPE REPORT CARD FOR KINDERGARTEN AND PRIMARY GRADES

Three sample report cards are offered to show how social, physical, and emotional development may be rated as well as intellectual growth.

THE co-operation of parents is needed today in order to attain the maximum of child growth and development in school. One method of gaining such co-operation is through use of the report card sent to the home. Since learning is no longer considered as merely the accumulation of knowledge and skills in the using of tools of subject matter, but a question also of social adjustments, thinking clearly, facing facts courageously, and making wise judgments, the report card should tell something of such habits and attitudes. It also should express the objectives of the school program and rate the child's progress in all learnings of the school. The new-type report then should give a practical method: (1) of offering constructive and suggestive help to the parent, the child, and the teacher; (2) of rating all phases of growth and development—social, physical, emotional, and intellectual; (3) of administration, so that too much time in marking is not expected from the teacher.¹

Two years ago, recognizing the need of a more satisfactory type of report than the one used at that time in the training school, a committee² of four teachers undertook to construct a report card which would meet the above mentioned criteria. The following form is the result of this committee's work.

The report is printed on thin cardboard,

¹See Leaflet No. 41, Report Cards, by Rowena Hansen, U. S. Department of Interior, Office of Education, Washington, D. C.

²Miss Ruth Thompson was chairman.