Educational Considerations

Volume 2 | Number 3 Article 10

1-1-1975

Teaching English Humanely: An Experiment in Interaction in English Teacher Preparation

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Recommended Citation

Hause, Richard G. (1975) "Teaching English Humanely: An Experiment in Interaction in English Teacher Preparation," *Educational Considerations*: Vol. 2: No. 3. https://doi.org/10.4148/0146-9282.2109

Student-centered teaching techniques were used with a group of English teachers to develop interaction. The objective was to make the teaching and learning of English more palatable, more fun, and more exciting.

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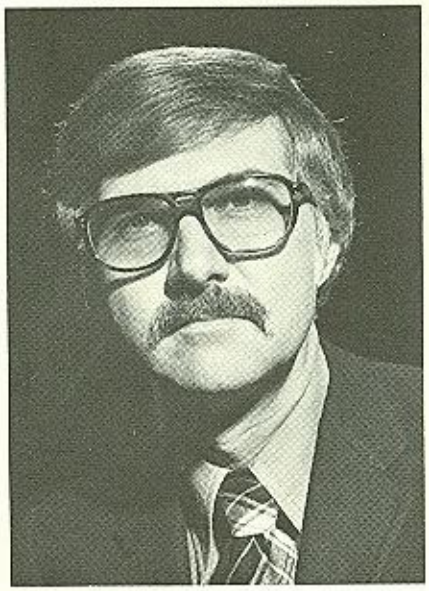

Creativity in education, educational sociology, and English methods are the specialties of Richard Hause, associate professor in the Department of Curriculum and Instruction at Kansas State University. He has also been a high school English teacher, counselor, curriculum coordinator, and supervisor of personnel in the Bakersfield, California, school district. He received his Ed.D. from the University of Colorado and his M.A. and B.A. from the University of Northern Colorado.

An anonymous writer theorized: "More people suffer from hardening of the attitudes than from hardening of the arteries. Their minds are made up, their opinions are fixed." Such is the case of many English teachers and some of them have not been teaching very long! I am a professor of English education and am very concerned with the needed competencies of English teachers. It was with this concern in mind that I established a summer workshop at Kansas State University for teachers of English. English teachers from kindergarten through higher education were invited to enroll in a three-week workshop from 8 to 12 every morning. There were two elementary teachers; several high school teachers from small rural, large surburban, and urban schools; and two teachers in higher education. The enrollment was purposely held at or below fifteen. The course description that appeared in the catalog read: "The changing scene in the teaching of English: trends, materials, and ideas in literature, composition, and grammar that have emerged from recent research and discovery."

My major objective was to encourage these teachers to interact with me, interact with each other, and subsequently interact with their fellow teachers and students in such a way that the teaching and learning of English could become more palatable, more fun, more exciting. If this major objective could be attained, more worthwhile, creative thinking and learning could take place.

My methods for attaining this objective were not new nor were they unorthodox. They were different in that they were student-centered or in this situation English-teacher-centered. Every attempt was made to get the participants acquainted with each other without the stickiness of sensitivity groups; every participant was made to feel a real sense of his or her own importance to the group and to the teaching of English; every member of the workshop worked with a smaller group but was also afforded an opportunity to "be selfish; do your own thing!"

The first activity the first day was to learn each person's name and pronounce it correctly. The participants sat in a circle and one person gave his name clearly and distinctly. Each participant in turn gave his own name and the names of all who had given names before him. In this manner the first and last names of fifteen or more people were learned by everyone in less than ten minutes. After the names of all were clear, the members were encouraged to call each other by first names as often as possible inside and outside the workshop. In the next activity each member was asked to tell

something about himself that no one would ever guess from just looking. This was not used to force them to reveal personal data but rather to give the rest of the group something to attach to the names they had just learned. Practically speaking, a classroom teacher can gain much information from this source. It would help a teacher to know for instance that one of her pupils was the oldest (or youngest, middle) child of nine or that one of her pupils had traveled extensively as the child of a career Army man. (It gave me additional insight into my "students" when one stated that she drove racing cars for her husband and another wrote love stories for slick magazines!)

Because the participants were acquainted from the start, the first discussion was much more lively; we talked in conversational tones; we talked freely about the teaching of English and the major problems faced in English classrooms. They identified some of their reasons for enrolling in the course. The majority of them felt insecure about teaching some phase of English, ranging from grammar to literature to composition to reasoning and thinking. As the "conversation" continued they began to identify with others in the group with similar problems. As these groups began to form they were encouraged to break off from the large group in order to continue their discussion in more depth. At the end of the second day five groups had been identified. The five groups concerned themselves with the major areas identified by Lazarus and Knudsen in *Selected Objectives for the Teaching of English, Grade Seven Through Twelve:* reading, listening, reasoning, speaking, and writing. It was decided by the participants that each group would meet every morning for the first part of the session; they would delineate their task; they would do research in the library using especially the NCTE/ERIC materials; they would determine a course of action for relating their findings to the rest of the participants; and they would make a presentation to the class that was totally different from any class presentation they had ever presented or had ever seen presented. Creative thinking and endeavor were encouraged.

As the workshop continued, the participants became more responsive to the student-centered teaching methods. The instructor served as a catalyst and at times as an arbiter as the group work continued. The groups met each morning for an hour and one-half and then all of the participants took a coffee break. The coffee shop was about four blocks from the meeting room and all the teachers walked over together. The conversations from the small groups continued during the coffee break. There were times of argument; there were times of agreement; there were times of enlightenment. The coffee breaks often took thirty to forty minutes, but these were times spent in sharing ideas and learning from each other. After the break, we met in a large group for activities related to the teaching of English. During one session, each person told what books he was reading (not all of them related to the teaching of English). Each person told of the books he would like to read; I jotted down the names of the books mentioned and passed out a mimeographed copy to them the following day. In one good session the participants told what character they would like to play in a movie, a play, or a television production. This activity gave added insight into the real character of the persons within the group. An additional device to encourage interactions was for the group to determine what role or roles they felt each person ought to play. Through this activity, we enhanced interaction and inadvertently discussed the plays, movies, and television productions they preferred, taught, studied, or enjoyed.

Not all of the activities were oral. One session was concerned with writing and listening. I played some current rock music and asked them to write their impressions. These writings were included in the diaries they kept during the workshop. At the end of each week, I read the diaries and wrote notes to each participant concerning the writing, not the content. The diaries were yet another attempt to get English teachers involved in the things they asked their students to do but seldom did themselves. (A majority of the participants admitted that they had not done any writing for pleasure or profit during the past school year!) The writing activities spun off into a lively discussion of current music and its appropriate place in the teaching of English. One teacher asked plaintively, "How can you teach something you don't understand?" Another teacher replied, "The same way your kids learn something they don't understand; you've got to listen carefully and put the idea together. You've also got to *want* to listen and put the ideas together. Don't do this in the classroom unless you've convinced yourself that it's important. The kids will spot you as a phony right away!" A lengthy discussion of today's kids and their interests followed. Some of the participants and the instructor had teenagers at home and added credibility to comments being made.

Games were discussed and/or played in connection with the reasoning dimension of the workshop. The participants found that many games were adaptable to the English classroom. Student interaction was the major objective in the use of games. In one game, two students left the room; the remainder of the students decided on a local, national, or international figure they would attempt to describe in order for the couple to guess the personage. The couple returned to the room and attempted to learn the identity by asking questions such as: "If this person were a flower, what flower would he be?" Or "If this person were a piece of furniture, what piece would he be?" The idea of the game is to set up situations so that the participants think in ever widening perspectives of the descriptions of people. There are commercial games that aid in student-teacher interactions. One favorite among young people is Star Power. This game uses social groups to enhance creative thinking.

Another session on reasoning dealt with the physical conditions of the classroom and what could be done to set moods and atmospheres for desired effects in the room. The group noted the wealth of posters available and actually constructed some of their own, incorporating collages in their work. The use of music in the classroom was evaluated. One group set up an experiment for the other participants in which they "bombarded the senses" with some ideas gained from reading Marshall MacLuhan's books. They darkened the stage area of the auditorium. Each student was given a small piece of candy to suck; then he was walked through an area where incense was burning; rock music was playing; color slides were flashing on a screen; great splashes of color were

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https://newprairiepress.org/edconsiderations/vol2/iss3/10
DOI: 10.4148/0146-9282.2109

FOOTNOTES

1. See in this issue of *Educational Considerations:* Bailey, Gerald Douglass, "Taking the University to the Classroom: Field-Based Graduate Programs."
2. Parker, Barbara, and A.B. Campbell, "A New Approach to Graduate Education in Adult Basic and GED Education," *Adult Leadership,* Dec. 1973, p. 208.
3. McComas, James D., and John P. Noonan, *Designing Doctoral Programs in Education,* The College of Education, The University of Tennessee, Publication No. 5, 1968.
4. Epps, Willie James, and Jordan Utsey, "A Staff Development Program in Education." *American Education.* U.S. Dept. HEW, Education Division, Fall, 1974.

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swirling on the walls (an overhead projector, a pyrex tray full of water, oil, and food coloring were used to gain this effect); and "things" brushed past their feet. When they left the experimental area they were asked to record their immediate reactions by speaking into the tape recorder's microphone. The reactions were played back later. The major objective of the experiment was the heightening of awareness through manipulated activation of the senses.

At the present time, the fifteen teachers in the workshop are trying out the ideas they picked up from the three weeks of interaction. I prepared an evaluation form to determine the changes that have come about in their classrooms as a direct result of their involvement in the English curriculum workshop. I have talked with many of them informally. I learned that more worthwhile creative thinking and learning *did* take place in their classrooms. The students (and the teachers) improved their abilities to read, listen, speak, write and reason. Other experiments in interaction were tried as a result of the teachers' involvement in the workshop during the summer. The teachers became more aware of individuals within the classes. The curriculum became more student-centered. English was taught humanely.

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been greeted with considerable enthusiasm by participants and administrative personnel from the university and public schools. The reasons for this attitude are attributed to the following: (1) The faculty at Kansas State University have been careful not to wrap an old program in new paper and fancy ribbon. In essence, the experimental graduate program has a truly innovative substance. (2) Standards of graduate program quality have not been sacrificed by moving the program off campus. (3) The program has not been viewed a gimmick to garner greater numbers of graduate students.

Participants have been the best salespersons of the program. They have related their experiences to friends and school administrators. These activities have led Kansas State University to make plans for a Second Field-Based Master's Degree Program in Salina, Kansas.[3] While field-based graduate programs warrant continued investigation and experimentation, it is clear that they have established themselves as a means to better serve the ever changing needs of a key person in the educational hierarchy—the classroom teacher.

FOOTNOTES

1. The author wishes to express his appreciation to Dean Samuel R. Keys, Dr. J. Harvey Littrell (Kansas State University), Dr. Arnold J. Moore (Youngstown State University), and Drs. Merle Bolton and Roy Browning (Topeka Public Schools). Without their support and encouragement, the cooperative effort would not have been possible.
2. Topeka, Kansas is located approximately sixty miles east of Kansas State University.
3. Salina, Kansas is located approximately seventy miles west of Kansas State University.