

Growth through English Revisited

PETER SMAGORINSKY

To make way for some new office space, my department recently cleaned out a collection of books left by long-departed colleagues. Most, it turned out, were worthy of the dust-bin: books from the sixties and seventies that did not withstand the test of time. While scavenging through the piles of hoary books, however, I came across a few classics that I added to my own shelves. Among them was a book I had often seen referenced but had never read, John Dixon's *Growth through English*, originally published in 1967. The version I salvaged was the third edition from 1975, including

the new subtitle, *Set in the Perspective of the Seventies*.

For those unfamiliar with this book, *Growth through English* was an elegant summary of the ideas generated through the Anglo-American Conference at Dartmouth College in 1966. This conference brought together representatives from the United Kingdom, the United States, and Canada to reexamine the English curriculum in schools and universities. It was the first and most significant of a series of conferences among representatives of English-speaking nations designed to reconsider the English curriculum. Until the English Coalition Conference in the late 1980s (itself informally known as "Dartmouth II"), it was the only one of these meetings that generated landmark publications whose aim was to change the field. *Growth through English* succeeded notably toward that end. The Dartmouth Conference found its imperative in its opposition to the teacher-and-text-centered tradition that dominated schools at the time and that has endured through the ages. Indeed, strengthened by policymakers bent on standardizing instruction and assessment, teacher-and-text-centered instruction is now imposed on the profession much as it was for Dixon and his Dartmouth colleagues over thirty years ago.

Most current English teachers had not yet entered the profession in the summer of 1966 when the Dartmouth Conference took place; many were not even born. I myself toiled in a school, but as a callow thirteen-year-old more concerned with improving my jump shot than with the state of the art of the field of English. As I anticipated reading *Growth through English* in my twenty-fifth year as an educator, I wondered: What would still sound fresh and invigorating nearly thirty-five years later? What would sound quaint and dated? Was this long-out-of-print book still worth reading?

Vision

Shortly into my reading I began to see why this book had been so important then and why it is still so important today. Dartmouth and *Growth through English* have been credited with major changes in the teaching of English: the launching of the National Writing Project in 1974, renewed attention to Rosenblatt's transactional theory of literature, a shift in attention from learning product to learning process, and other changes based on the British "growth model" for viewing the discipline of English. What was common to all of these changes was

a shift in attention from the subject matter of English to the learners in English classes. The Dartmouth participants, particularly those from the United Kingdom, argued that the purpose of engagement with an English curriculum was to promote the personal growth of individual learners. This emphasis was a dramatic departure from what was more typically practiced: a teacher-directed emphasis on the texts themselves. John Dixon argued that emphasizing texts at the exclusion and expense of the learner prevented students from growing as people through their engagement with literature, writing, language use, drama, art, and other aspects of a dynamic curriculum.

Indeed, often Dixon's illustrations sound as though they are taken from post-millennium schools rather than schools of the 1960s.

Although these ideas were quite familiar to me by the time I read *Growth through English* in the year 2001, I found myself excited and inspired by the passion and urgency behind Dixon's appeal. I began to marvel at how pervasive the influence of this book had become; it anticipates virtually every student-centered idea generated since. The teacher-and-text-centered curriculum Dixon critiqued back then was much the same as the centralized and standardized curricula decreed by many current school districts.

Indeed, often Dixon's illustrations sound as though they are taken from post-millennium schools rather than schools of the 1960s. He says, for instance, that when culture undergoes rapid change, "there is a tendency to panic, to define an external curriculum—a system into which teacher and pupil must fit—instead of helping teachers, in departments and larger groups, to define for themselves the order and sequence that underlies their best work" (84). This description could fit many present-day school systems that are resorting to centralized curricula and standardized assessment as a way to force uniformity upon increasingly pluralistic communities. Dixon continues by saying:

It seems an elementary mistake to demand a list of skills, proficiencies and knowledge as the basis for an English curriculum. Demands of this kind produce two wrong kinds of answer: answers so detailed that we determine, let's say, the books every child should read by a particular stage; or answers so general that the skills, etc., described are not amenable to being put in order one after the other. (85)

Yet fact-and-skill-based curricula are what we continue to see, including those mandated by state departments of education. And they are frequently tied to curriculum-driving high-stakes tests that have consequences for students (promotion), teachers (merit pay), and schools (censure, consolidation, and closure).

The Dartmouth conference was set in a climate where schools followed the sorts of authoritarian traditions described above. *Growth through English* is therefore an argument against what we have come to think of as traditional teaching, what Dixon refers to as a curriculum built around *skills* and *cultural heritage*. To Dixon, the consequence of these predominant approaches to curriculum development was that it

left an uneasy dualism in English teaching. Literature itself tended to be treated as a given, a ready-made structure that we imitate and a content that is handed over to us. And this attitude infected composition and all work in language. There was a fatal inattention to the processes involved in such everyday activities as talking and thinking things over, writing a diary or a letter home, even enjoying a TV play. Discussion was virtually ignored, as we know to our cost today on both sides of the Atlantic. In other words, the part of the map that relates a man's language to his experience was largely unexplored. (Think of the trivial essay topics that still result from this ignorance.) The purposes and pressures that language serves tended to be reduced to a simple formula—a lump sum view of inheritance. (4) [Author's note: I retain Dixon's use of masculine language, recognizing that he was following the conventions of his time.]

In reaction against the skills and cultural heritage approaches to teaching English, the Dartmouth participants proposed a curriculum based on *personal growth*. As readers of educational debates are aware, the type of curriculum that Dixon and colleagues opposed has many influential supporters today. These include William Bennett, Allan Bloom, Chester Finn, E. D. Hirsch, Diane Ravitch, Sandra Stotsky, George W. Bush, and others whose political

and policy efforts have helped to institute the kind of curriculum that Dartmouth participants argued so strongly against. In *Growth through English*, Dixon outlines the tenets of the personal growth curriculum that was emphasized at Dartmouth:

- Discussion should play a greater role in classrooms. These discussions should involve the students speaking to one another about things that matter to them. They should also allow for expressive or exploratory talk; that is, discussion in which the process of talking leads to new insights. This emphasis moves away from classrooms in which the recitation of correct answers is the rule.
- Writing should similarly take on an exploratory character rather than always following formal conventions. Writing can thus lead to a process of discovery rather than simply reporting correct or approved information. It can also be informal, creative, and appear in various and hybrid genres.
- Attention to exploratory language processes suggests awareness of the process of writing and thinking, rather than focusing only on the finished products of student work. Dartmouth Seminar participants “moved from an attempt to define ‘What English is’—a question that throws the emphasis on nouns like *skills*, and *proficiencies*, set *books*, and the *heritage*—to a definition by process, a description of the activities we engage in through language” (7).
- The lives of the learners ought to play a central role in their education. Thus their writing might concern personal experiences and their discussions might draw on knowledge outside the range of formal academic knowledge. Dixon says, “A teacher of English, one could well say, spends his time in his better hours discovering *through* his pupils. . . . It follows inevitably if we accept personal experience as the vital core of English work” (48). An emphasis on personal connection inevitably requires attention to students’ feelings: “The structure of experience that we aim for in English certainly involves the affective as well as the cognitive” (80).
- Teachers should be less authoritarian in the classroom to allow “the liberation of pupils from the limits of the teacher’s vision” (48).

This liberation would include freedom from strict adherence to textbook language. Speaking and writing ought to focus more on students’ expression than on the correctness of their language; “pupils should be freed from *disabling conceptions* of ‘correctness’ and ‘dialect’” (77). When students share in setting the direction of learning, a continuity in the curriculum will follow, consisting of

a flow of talk between pupils and teacher, a questing exploratory atmosphere, a sensitive ear to emerging feelings and ideas and a rich sense of their thematic possibilities and connections. At this level, a teacher’s art lies in taking a pupil where he is interested and in some sense sharing with him the search for new possibilities. (86)

- School ought to provide abundant opportunities for students to engage in drama. By drama the Dartmouth participants did not mean the formal theater. Rather, they saw drama as a means for students to engage in a kind of talk unavailable through most classroom activities. Douglas Barnes is quoted as saying that drama

differs from other talk in three ways: movement and gesture play a larger part in the expression of meaning; a group working together upon an improvisation needs more deliberately and consciously to collaborate . . . ; the narrative framework allows for repetition and provides a unity that enables the action more easily to take on symbolic status. (Dixon 37)

Taken together, these recommendations suggest the need for what the British called a “growth” curriculum, one that centered on the individual student’s personal growth through engagement with the texts, activities, and processes of English language arts. These beliefs undoubtedly sound familiar to anyone who has regularly read the *English Journal* or other NCTE journals in the last thirty years, who attends NCTE-sponsored conferences, or who participates at all in professional discussions about the quality and process of education. And now, as then, the skills and cultural heritage curricula provide the monolith against which this discussion takes place.

A More Social View

Thus far I have expressed my great admiration for the vision and urgency that Dixon provided in

Growth through English. What I would like to do next is focus on what I feel is a shortcoming in the vision of student-centered learning that he presents and that I feel has been perpetuated in much popular writing about education since. That shortcoming is the way in which personal growth is valorized without attention to the social responsibilities that accompany growing and participating in a society. In *Growth through English*, personal growth is viewed as an educational end in itself. Both Dixon and many contemporary educational writers appear to assume that this growth will always be noble, respectful, and socially constructive.

This assumption permeates the writing that emerged from the Dartmouth Conference. In their foreword to the third edition of *Growth through English*, Dartmouth participants James Squire and James Britton, among the titans of English education in the second half of the twentieth century, see “the impact of the Dartmouth ideas—perhaps the Dartmouth ideal—in the enterprise of individuals” (x). They continue by saying that the developmental view of student-centered education outlined by Dixon suggests that “self-discovery through language and in self-expression, with writing to realize oneself, has occupied the attention of teachers” since the book’s original publication (xvii). The subject of English, they argue, comprises “the sum total of the planned and unplanned experiences through language by means of which a child gains control of himself and his relations with the surrounding world” (xviii). These relations, as expressed in *Growth through English*, are always gratifying and harmonious. They are also byproducts of realizing oneself, which should become the central occupation of school.

My concern with this axiom—that personal growth and realization are the primary purpose of education—comes from the fact that the personal growth curves of individuals often come at the expense of the goals and growth of others. I am tempted to excuse this oversight in Dixon’s writing by considering that *Growth through English* is a work of rhetoric designed to establish the legitimacy of learners’ concerns and constructions as a countermeasure to the ubiquitous skills and cultural heritage curricula. He therefore needed to make a strong case, one unencumbered by attention to the power relationships through which each person’s growth affects that of others. Yet the absence of attention to this fact has led, I think, to a romantic con-

ception of the individual student in much educational writing since. By elevating the individual’s growth as the object of education, the Dartmouth tradition has overlooked the need to take a more social view of teaching and learning.

My concern with this axiom—that
personal growth and realization
are the primary purpose
of education—comes from the
fact that the personal growth
curves of individuals often come
at the expense of the goals
and growth of others.

I would like to illustrate my concerns with some examples from classes I have taught, observed, or read about where students’ personal growth became a problem for other members of the community, usually the classroom but sometimes beyond. In all cases the individuals involved were concerned with their own growth. I hope to show, however, that their growth came at the expense of others.

In the 1970s and 1980s I included a lot of opportunities for drama in my high school English classroom. I shared the belief of Dixon that “drama is central to English work at every level. . . . it is the most direct representation of life. . . . ‘Drama’ means doing, acting things out rather than working on them in abstract and in private. When possible it is the truest form of learning, for it puts knowledge and understanding to their test in action” (43). Drama was related to other ways of learning in my English class. As Dixon says:

Just as we take up an overall meaning from a play by internalizing each of the characters and feeling the sum of their relationships, so in class the individual takes up from the discussion of experience

what will make sense of his own world. This process of internalizing is developed and extended by writing. To write then is to move from the social and shared work to an opportunity for private and individual work. (44)

I wholeheartedly agreed with Dixon's ideal of the potential for drama. Over time, however, I saw enough examples of students' use of drama to know that more was taking place than students making sense of their own worlds. As they acted out their dramas, they were also acting on other students. One example illustrates this point well. I taught sophomores for many years and included some kind of drama in each unit. One group of boys in one of my classes was charming, funny, and very well-liked. They were also devoted fans of the misogynist and raunchy standup comic Andrew Dice Clay. During one of their dramatic performances, they launched into a parody of Clay that included many of his trademark targets, particularly women. Even though their performance was toned down for the classroom—Clay's appeal derives from being obscene and repellent—the material was sufficiently abusive and offensive to make most of the girls in the class uncomfortable, their giggles notwithstanding. Because I did not know where their performance was headed, I did not cut it off. But at the end I made it clear that we had seen the last of Clay in my classroom and that any future performances needed to be respectful toward the feelings of their classmates.

I have no doubt that in planning and performing their material, the boys were engaged in the processes that Dixon describes. They were making sense of their worlds through a process of doing. Yet in doing so they were exercising a form of power in the classroom that worked to the detriment of others, both the girls who felt belittled and hurt and the boys whose ability to form healthy and respectful relationships with girls might have been damaged. By prohibiting further performances of this type, was I violating their right to free speech and failing to achieve “the liberation of pupils from the limits of the teacher's vision” (48)? Guilty as charged. My concern was for the ways in which their personal expression affected the relationships of the whole class, however.

This first example is perhaps one where most teachers would agree that the students were offensive and deserved censure, no matter how personable and witty they might ordinarily be. Other demonstrations of power in the classroom are less

obvious and undoubtedly would raise greater disagreement over the right thing to do. For instance, I recently observed a high school English class in which the teacher was white and most students were African American. The class was reading Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men*. The teacher overheard students saying that they didn't like the language of the book, particularly the use of the word “nigger.” The teacher asked the students to explain their concerns. One girl said that she found the language to be offensive. In response, a white boy said that they were all old enough to handle it, and if people found it offensive then they should just deal with it. The teacher followed by explaining that the author is putting those words in characters' mouths to give readers an idea of their personalities. “This is not a politically correct environment,” she said. “It's not a point of whether it should or shouldn't be used. It's not John Steinbeck talking. He may be trying to turn a light on the way people are. This book is a classic. In *Gone with the Wind* they use house N and field N, and that's the way people talked.” She then asked:

Does anyone want to discuss it further? We're not trying to offend you. In my mind, the person who's put down is the person who's using it, not the person who's called it. We think worse of the person who uses the word than the person who's called it. It shows the speaker's ignorance. I know it's significant to those who have been called the word, but you're giving it too much attention. It's a good book and you shouldn't blow it out of proportion. Don't let one word affect your reading of the whole book.

The class did not discuss the issue further. One interpretation of their agreement is that the students were persuaded that one word should not affect their reading of this classic and that they became engaged in quiet appreciation of its virtues. Another is that they felt silenced and chose not to pursue the matter further, at least in the forum of the classroom. From my position as observer, I saw one student's developmental trajectory endorsed—the white boy who said that the language was inoffensive and that students who found it abusive should “deal with it.” Those students whose life experiences led them to find the language offensive had little choice but to yield (at least in the classroom) to the norms that structured the white participants' life experiences.

Later that morning I sat in the school's faculty lounge and talked with some other English

teachers. All agreed that students tended to find the language of books like *Of Mice and Men* and *Huckleberry Finn* offensive, and all said that their solution was to explain to students that the author himself was not racist, only the characters were. They agreed that students always accepted their explanation, and they were able to move on. No doubt many readers of this article feel the same way; I'm often outnumbered when I discuss this issue with teachers. I would like to raise the possibility, however, that dismissing students' affective response to a novel's language valorizes some students' experiences at the expense of others'.

A third type of developmental conflict I'm familiar with comes through the performance of writing. Dartmouth participant Douglas Barnes argues that "a wide definition of literature was used throughout the [Dartmouth] Seminar. Thus, when pupil's stories and poems, though necessarily private activities, re-emerge as experience to be shared and talked over with teachers and classmates, they become the literature of the classroom" (55). In this view, a student's stories and experiences ought to contribute to the texts that make up the narrative of the class's experience. This belief assumes that the stories will contribute to a sense of classroom community, and quite often they do. I always encourage teachers to treat students' writing seriously and respectfully and to make their texts important parts of their engagement with a unit theme.

Like the other kinds of performances I have reviewed, however, student writing can create a power differential in classroom relationships. A sobering example was reported in the April, 1994, issue of the NCTE journal *College English*. In "Fault Lines in the Contact Zone," Richard E. Miller reported on an incident that took place in a California community college in which a student wrote a paper for an open-ended class assignment. The assignment, taken from a widely-used college composition textbook, asked students to write a report on some incident of group behavior. Miller describes the paper as follows:

One [student] responded with an essay detailing a drunken trip he and some friends made to "San Fagcisco" to study "the lowest class . . . the queers and the bums." The essay recounts how the students stopped a man on Polk Street, informed him that they were doing a survey and needed to know if he was "a fag." From here, the narrative follows the students into a dark alleyway where they discover, as they relieve themselves drunkenly against

the wall, that they have been urinating on a homeless person. In a frenzy, the students begin to kick the homeless person, stopping after "30 seconds of non-stop blows to the body," at which point the writer says he "thought the guy was dead." Terrified, the students make a run for their car and eventually escape the city. (392)

As it turned out, the student knew that the teacher, who was gay, would find it offensive. The student himself came from Kuwait and held a culturally-learned contempt for homosexuals. Dixon says:

Part of our work in written English, then, is to foster the kind of looking and the kind of talk and writing that direct observation of experience demands. We do so, not in the detached systematic way of a scientist, but by watching for, and even helping to provide, moments when such experiences are of personal importance to pupils. For it is their involvement in the experience that will draw them into writing. (51)

This student's narrative undoubtedly worked for him in the manner that Dixon describes. While fulfilling his personal needs, however, the writing was quite odious to his teacher and those with whom he shared it.

I should reiterate my profound respect for *Growth through English* and the energy, initiative, and vision of those who contributed to it. It is well worthy of its status as a landmark publication and, though written for a different era, holds much for the modern day reader. The curricular disagreements that Dixon outlined in 1967 are not much different today than they were in his time. As the saying goes, the more things change—and much has changed in terms of technology, demographics, popular culture, litigation, and other areas—the more they stay the same. One nice change is that we can now make out-of-print books available for free on the Internet. You can download *Growth through English* and other canonical publications at <http://www.ncte.org/rte/Downloadable%20Books.htm> and continue this conversation with your colleagues.

Like any provocative book, *Growth through English* provides room for disagreement. My disagreement comes from the romantic notion of children that it portrays, which I feel results in a neglect of the power relationships that affect any social group's dynamics. I have given a few examples here; others who have documented the "underlife" of classrooms include Margaret Finders, Susan Hynds, Timothy Lensmire, Cynthia Lewis, and

Cindy O'Donnell-Allen. Most teachers who are tuned into their students' interactions can think of abundant examples from their classroom experiences to add to this storehouse of illustrations of students using their reading and writing to control the discourse and values of the classroom.

The Challenge

The Dartmouth participants, like many current educators, recommended that the teacher yield authority to the students. The assumption behind this suggestion is that each individual student will then have greater authority as he or she follows a personal muse and direction, without the ball-and-chain of the teacher's priorities. As Cynthia Lewis has observed, however, "When the teacher gives up power, powerful students will take up the slack" (198). I agree with her view that authority will always exist in classrooms, whether imposed by the teacher or taken up by the students. The question then becomes how to embrace a student-centered, personal growth approach, while raising awareness of power relationships so that they are less imposing. I think that doing so requires the belief that classroom dynamics are not benign and that students are not necessarily noble and pure in intention, as I think is suggested in *Growth through English* and many publications that follow in its tradition.

In making this observation I am simply assuming that kids are human after all. If being human involves gaining some degree of control over the world, then we can expect issues of control, power, and authority to be present in students' literacy and relational practices. In educational writing about such student-centered approaches as writing workshops, we see nice, wholesome kids writing about nice, wholesome topics. We never see these nice kids doing things like writing about explosives, as a nice group of boys did in one school where I taught, prior to using this personal growth experience in a paramilitary operation in which they blew up a good bit of personal property around town. Nor do we see them more subtly reinforcing social class, gender, or gender hierarchies through their literacy practices (e.g., using "gay" as a pejorative term). While educational writers often refer to students' using literacy to bring order to their worlds, they neglect to describe how one person's sense of order can impose limitations on others.

My argument with the emphasis on individual growth, then, concerns the absence of attention

to relationships and responsibilities to others while pursuing a personal developmental path. For those who embrace the growth model and student-centered curriculum it implies, the great challenge is to encourage individuals to reconstruct the curriculum toward personal ends, while also growing as socially responsible citizens of a respectful and democratic society.

Works Cited

- Bennett, William J. *The De-valuing of America: The Fight for Our Culture and Our Children*. New York: Summit Books, 1992.
- Bloom, Allan D. *The Closing of the American Mind*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987.
- Dixon, John. *Growth through English: Set in the Perspective of the Seventies* 3rd ed. Yorkshire, UK: National Association for the Teaching of English, 1975.
- Finders, Margaret J. *Just Girls: Hidden Literacies and Life in Junior High*. New York: Teachers College Press, 1997.
- Finn, Chester E. *We Must Take Charge: Our Schools and Our Future*. New York: The Free Press, 1991.
- Hirsch, E. D. *Cultural Literacy: What Every American Should Know*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987.
- Hynds, Susan. *On the Brink: Negotiating Literature and Life with Adolescents*. New York: Teachers College Press, 1997.
- Lensmire, Timothy J. *Powerful Writing, Responsible Teaching*. New York: Teachers College Press, 2000.
- Lewis, Cynthia. "The Social Drama of Literature Discussions in a Fifth/Sixth-Grade Classroom." *Research in the Teaching of English* 31 (1997): 163–204.
- Lloyd-Jones, Richard, and Andrea A. Lunsford. *The English Coalition Conference: Democracy through Language*. New York and Urbana, IL: MLA and NCTE, 1989.
- Miller, Richard E. "Fault Lines in the Contact Zone." *College English* 56 (1994): 389–408.
- Ravitch, Diane, and United States Department of Education. *Developing National Standards in Education*. Washington, DC: US Dept. of Education, 1995.
- Smagorinsky, Peter, and Cindy O'Donnell-Allen. "Idiocultural Diversity in Small Groups: The Role of the Relational Framework in Collaborative Learning." *Vygotskian Perspectives on Literacy Research: Constructing Meaning through Collaborative Inquiry*. Eds. Carol D. Lee and Peter Smagorinsky. New York: Cambridge UP, 2000. 165–90.
- Stotsky, Sandra. *Losing Our Language: How Multicultural Classroom Instruction Is Undermining Our Children's Ability to Read, Write, and Reason*. New York: The Free Press, 1999.

PETER SMAGORINSKY teaches in the English education program at the University of Georgia, Athens.