

# Stasis and Change: English Education and the Crisis of Sustainability

Robert P. Yagelski

**E**arlier this year I had an informal reunion with some former students, all of whom had graduated from the teacher education program I work in. We gathered for dinner to catch up and hear stories of their first year as middle and high school English teachers. Most hadn't seen each other since finishing our program in 2004, but they quickly lapsed into familiar conversation about the challenges of teaching secondary school English. Although this group of new teachers found jobs in a variety of teaching situations—from very small rural schools to large urban ones—the stories they shared were strikingly similar: stories about funny or frustrating moments with their students, complaints about problems with colleagues, worries about state-mandated tests, and descriptions of activities or assignments that went well or didn't. As much as I relished being with my former students again, I was struck by how different the evening's conversation was from the intense and sometimes contentious discussions we had had a year earlier in my course on teaching writing in secondary schools. Little of our latter conversation focused on the kinds of pedagogical, theoretical, and ethical issues that had previously seemed to energize them; mostly, the conversation sounded like the teacher lounge gossip that they complained about as student teachers just a year before. I came away from the evening feeling overwhelmed by the power of institutionalized education and the pervasive and resilient culture of schools.

I am fond of telling the preservice teachers in my courses that ultimately teaching comes down to the interaction between student and teacher. Curriculum guidelines, standardized tests, state education mandates, funding shortfalls, scheduling pressures—all these profoundly shape teaching and

circumscribe what individual teachers can do. But in the end, the interpersonal engagement with an individual student provides the opportunity to make a difference. You can change the world, one student at a time, I will say, and literacy instruction is your vehicle. To punctuate the point, I sometimes call up the Zen image of the pebble in the pond: one small pebble creates ripples that radiate throughout the pond. Your careful, committed, one-on-one work with your students matters in the same way, I'll tell them. For most of them, this is a compelling and satisfying idea. And it seems to remain so even in the midst of the bewildering challenges facing first-year teachers.

But after all the clichés, after all their hard work as student teachers, after the frustrations and celebrations, and after the first teaching job is accepted and begun, all our talk about promise and possibility is swept away in the torrent of conventional school practice. Most of them understand, at some level, the need to fit into the school culture, but fitting in is no struggle for them. They're already comfortable with that culture. They're products of it. For most of them, "going with the flow" isn't a compromise. For all its problems, they believe, schooling is generally a *good*; so is English as a school subject. These propositions are beyond question. So after working hard in my classes, humoring me by engaging in intense discussions about literacy and the importance of the theory-practice dialectic, talking the talk about reflective practice, and doing the same in their other required courses, they go back to the schools they know, rather than the ones we wish they could see, and, with impeccable intentions and a genuine commitment to be good English teachers, they help make those schools become more like they are.

This would not be a problem for me if I believed, like most preservice teachers in my program, like most teachers I know, that schools as they currently exist are indeed good. And it would not be a problem if I didn't believe that literacy is centrally important to our lives. But schooling, which is shared to the extent that Americans share no other cultural or institutional experience, is perhaps the single greatest influence on how we understand the world around us and our places in it; and English instruction, required as it is throughout formal schooling, constitutes perhaps the most powerful vehicle for shaping our sense of ourselves as beings-in-the-world. And therein

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lies the central paradox: schooling, and especially English instruction, offer great possibilities for change even as they are perhaps the greatest obstacles to change. That paradox shapes my sense of where English education is today and where it should go.

My vision for English education, which I have discussed more fully elsewhere (see especially forthcoming; see also 1994, 1997, 2000), is unabashedly Utopian, and in that regard will not appeal to many in the field. It is a vision that relies on Paulo Freire's (1993) belief in "education as the practice of freedom" (p. 69) and his understanding of literacy as a transformative and "creative act that involves a critical comprehension of reality" (1987, p. 157); it relies as well on the perspective of cultural theorists like Pierre Bourdieu and Henri Giroux, who see institutionalized education as both a reflection and producer of culture and as a subject-forming enterprise. Most important, my vision for English education emerges from a growing sense of a need for profound change in the face of what David Orr (1992) has called the "crisis of sustainability," that is, "the fit between humanity and its habitat." As Orr puts it, "Sustainability is about the terms and conditions of human survival, and yet we still educate at all levels as if no such crisis existed" (p. 83).<sup>1</sup> I see this crisis not as an environmental problem but a social and ethical one; it is about the kinds of communities we wish to create and inhabit—just and sustainable communities that reflect our best hopes for living together on the earth. I believe English education can—and should—play a central role in shaping those communities at a time when the world is being redefined in unprecedented ways.

## What We Know

A few days after my reunion with my former students, the U.S. National Intelligence Council (2004) released a report titled "Mapping the Global Future," in which a diverse array of experts identified globalization as the main influence on world trends in the next twenty years: "We see globalization—growing interconnectedness reflected in the expanded flows of information, technology, capital, goods, services, and people throughout the world—as an overarching 'mega-trend,' a force so ubiquitous that it will substantially shape all the other major trends in the world of 2020"; the report continues, "At no time since the formation of the Western alliance system in 1949 have the shape and nature of international alignments been in such a state of flux." In addition, the authors note, "environmental and ethical issues" are likely to come "even more to the fore" during this period.

A year earlier, in a report called *An Abrupt Climate Change Scenario*

*and Its Implications for United States National Security* (Schwartz & Randall, 2003), Pentagon analysts described the possible social, economic, and geopolitical implications of global warming, which many scientists believe is the greatest environmental challenge facing humanity. The authors asserted that “the plausibility of severe and rapid climate change is higher than most of the scientific community and perhaps all of the political community is prepared for” (p. 19); they concluded that “while the U.S. itself will be relatively better off and with more adaptive capacity, it will find itself in a world where Europe will be struggling internally, large number of refugees washing up on its shores and Asia in serious crisis over food and water. Disruption and conflict will be endemic features of life” (p. 22). These two momentous developments—global warming and globalization—are not the same thing, but they are inextricably linked. Indeed, it is likely that the social and economic forces associated with globalization will exacerbate the potential problems arising from global climate change. In short, globalization, as a set of economic, cultural, and political developments, is reshaping contemporary life in ways that are likely to be as sweeping as the reconstruction of Europe and Japan and the emergence of the great East-West divide following World War II. And the crisis of sustainability that is arising from globalization is likely to define our collective existence in the coming century.

This is the first thing that English educators should know.

The second thing we should know is that formal schooling is not changing. Despite the momentous developments of the 20th century and despite the disappearance of the East-West divide that characterized geopolitics for most of the 20th century (see Ohmann, 1995), the structure of formal schooling and the conventional K-12 curriculum have not changed substantially since the advent of widespread compulsory education in the U.S. in the late 19th century. Moreover, the K-12 English curriculum, despite influential reform movements such as whole language and the writing process movement as well as significant developments in literary and cultural theory, remains essentially the same as it was half a century ago, with its focus on “great” literature and formulaic writing instruction.<sup>2</sup> For the most part, we teach English in schools more or less as we have been doing at least since the end of WWII.

An important corollary to this point is the fact that during the past century formal schooling has become more central to American social and cultural life. More than 90% of children between the ages of 5 and 17 attend school today (as compared to about 72% in 1900),<sup>3</sup> and with very few exceptions they study English. In most states, English is a required school subject

for all 12 years of schooling. That means that for all practical purposes, the vast majority of Americans learn the same basic lessons about writing and reading. These lessons, which are shaped by the centrality of literary discourse in secondary school English and which tend to focus on form and convention, convey powerful messages about the self and its relationship to the wider world, as Paulo Freire and others (e.g., Ohmann, 1979; Berlin, 1988) have shown. The specific lessons that students learn about, for example, the rules of grammar or the form of an essay are ultimately less important than the implicit lessons they learn about themselves as knowers and agents in the world: lessons about knowledge as objective and separate from them; lessons about passivity and conformity; lessons about the self as fundamentally intellectual and separate from the physical world.<sup>4</sup> These messages, which convey a Cartesian worldview, are antithetical to the interconnected sense of self and world, what philosopher David Loy (1998) has described as a nondualistic self, needed to address the crisis of sustainability.

The third thing we English educators know is that we already know the most important things we need to know about language and literacy:

- › that literacy as a set of social practices is central to how we live;
- › that acts of writing and reading always occur in complex social, historical, and ideological contexts;
- › that writing as a technology has enormous power to shape how we understand ourselves and the world around us;
- › that literacy is both empowering and potentially limiting and oppressive;
- › that language and literacy are wonderfully, insufferably complex and resist control (and human beings, the more so).

I could cite studies and scholarly treatises to support each of these assertions, but they would be familiar enough to most English educators. However, they wouldn't be familiar to many teachers, administrators, politicians, parents, and others who have a stake in schools and who help determine what happens there. We have a mountain of research and a world of experience on which to base our understanding of literacy, and we have sound studies to help us understand and manage the complexities of teaching and learning literacy. Yet the conventional English curriculum remains mired in a tradition shaped by positivist, Enlightenment values that not only diverge from the best of what we currently know about literacy but also cre-

ate a daunting obstacle to change. Political platforms and school mission statements proclaim the need to prepare students for a rapidly changing global workplace, and at the same time education policies impose backward-looking measures like rigid, standardized curricula, “back-to-basics” pedagogies, narrowly focused high-stakes tests, and limited measures of “accountability” that are based on outdated beliefs about teaching and learning and on nostalgic notions about how schools should function. This is one way in which the nearly universal nature of the experience of formal schooling in the U.S. works against substantive reform: Americans seem to want schools to be more or less like the schools they attended, despite unavoidable evidence that such schools simply cannot address the needs of such a diverse student population at a time of such dramatic change. In delivering the conventional English curriculum, we are very nearly ensuring that the next generation of students will experience the same curriculum. But the world they must live in will be nothing like the world their parents and teachers grew up in.

Obviously, I don’t think this state of affairs is a good thing. I don’t believe conventional English education addresses the crisis of sustainability. It should. I don’t believe conventional literacy instruction undermines the fundamental dichotomies—between self and other, between mind and body, and between knower and object—that lie at the heart of Western culture and inform the emerging global consumer culture that has given rise to the crisis of sustainability. It should. I don’t believe conventional schooling fosters the kind of self that can imagine and help build the just and sustainable communities we need. It should.

## What We Need to Know

If English education is to serve a transformative, Utopian function, if it is to become a vehicle for reimagining and creating just and sustainable communities that reflect our highest ideals for living together on the earth, it will have to address two fundamental sets of questions, the first set focusing on *community* and the second on *literacy*:

1. *What kinds of communities do we wish to create and inhabit?* How do individual communities relate to the emerging global culture? What

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characteristics will those communities share? How will those communities define and enact fundamental principles of justice and sustainability? What kind of “selves” should we try to foster who will be able to imagine and create such communities?

2. *How do writing and reading shape our understanding of ourselves as beings in the world?* In what ways are literate practices central to the building of just and sustainable communities? How can we engage in literate activity in a way that fosters connection rather than separation? In what ways can literacy instruction help students develop, as David Orr (1992) has written, “the capacity for clear thought and compassion in the recognition of the interrelatedness of life?” (p.100). What literate practices should we encourage in our efforts to imagine and create just and sustainable communities?

These questions assume that English instruction is part of a wider project of possibility, that it is both an academic discipline and a crucial component of the larger social, economic, and political structures within which we live and work. They assume, too, that our work as English educators should be conceived within this broader framework, that we should always conceptualize and engage in the many different aspects of English education with an eye toward this wider project. And they assume that we, as professionals and as members of complex and diverse communities, share a vision for a just and sustainable future. Obviously, the specifics of that vision must be worked out through the messy and uncertain political process that characterizes our form of democracy. My argument is that we should teach English and educate English teachers as if our primary role is to prepare students to engage in that messy and uncertain process.

### **Where We’re (Possibly) Headed**

The vision I have begun to lay out here would require important changes in the way we understand and engage in English education. But the most chal-

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lenging change has to do with how we understand our roles as professionals. Fundamentally, we need to abandon the idea that our primary task is to prepare English teachers for contemporary classrooms, and we need to conceive of our work as building a future together. We are

fostering a way of understanding literacy, which is at heart of way of interacting with each other and the world around us through language and the

technology of writing. We are not gatekeepers; we are gate openers, who help students imagine possibilities for themselves and for all of us. And we are keepers of hope, with Freire (1994), who wrote, “I do not understand human existence, and the struggle needed to improve it, apart from hope and dream” (p. 8).

It goes without saying that this project of hope and dream is not the province of English education alone. We are inextricably part of a sprawling, complex, and often contentious society, and for better or worse, we are an integral part of the status quo. That position carries with it great risk, for if we challenge the status quo, we risk compromising our authority and losing the power we do have. (Think, for example, of our power as agents of the state to certify teachers, a power that the current administration has been attacking through legislation like the No Child Left Behind act, the Reauthorization of Higher Education Act, and related bills that undermine the role of education professionals in the preparation of teachers and call into question the kinds of knowledge-making we English educators engage in [see McCracken, 2004].) But our position within the status quo also provides opportunities to effect change. There is little question that this project involves political and ideological struggle, but education has always been a site of such struggle. The alternative is accepting a problematic status quo, going with the flow, and maintaining English instruction as it has been.

At my reunion with my former students, Jenn, an unfailingly upbeat young woman who teaches at a large suburban high school, described her “difficult” class: a group of low-achieving juniors who resist her every effort to teach the assigned curriculum. Her students routinely fail at school-assigned tasks and seem to have no desire to do otherwise. Jenn considers it a success that she “got them through” *Macbeth*, the required Shakespeare play for that year, though she says in exasperation, “It took all of nine weeks!” How, she asks, can she get students like these to engage a work like *Macbeth*?

We can be pleased that a new teacher focuses her concerns so appropriately on her students. But Jenn’s question is also the wrong question to ask. It unintentionally positions the student as the “empty ‘mind’ passively open to the deposits of reality from the world outside” that Freire (1993, p. 62) pointedly described. Our challenge, I believe, is to reshape English education so that caring teachers like Jenn are not asking old questions that ignore the most pressing challenges before us. We need to pose questions that place literacy at the center of our efforts to face those challenges, re-imagine the status quo, and build a future together.

## Notes

1. For a useful discussion of the idea of sustainability, see Prugh and Assadourian (2002).

2. See, for example, Applebee (1995). Although Applebee's study is now more than a decade old, no recent studies have shown that the literary content of the secondary English curriculum is substantially different from what Applebee observed in the early 1990s. Obviously, some titles have been added to the secondary school canon, but the point is, first, that such a canon continues to characterize English instruction in secondary schools, and second, that many of the titles taught half a century ago are still routinely taught today. In other words, the fundamental components of the English curriculum are unchanged. See also Scherff and Piazza (2005) for a limited but more recent and revealing study of secondary school writing in Florida; the authors surveyed 1801 students in four representative schools and found that response to literature was the most frequently reported writing activity in high schools, that "little process writing occurring in classrooms" (p. 288), and that "in spite of advances in writing research, little has changed in many high schools" (p. 290).

3. See *Digest of Education Statistics, 2002*, Table 36, National Center for Education Statistics, available at <http://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d02/dt036.asp>. If these figures are broken down by smaller age groups, the rise in school attendance over the past century appears even more dramatic.

4. For a fuller discussion of this analysis about the connections between literacy and the classic Cartesian self, see Yagelski (2001). For related critiques of the positivist foundations of schooling, see the first chapter of Giroux (1981) and chapters 1 and 2 of Bowers (1995).

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