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Professional Concerns

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PROFESSIONAL CONCERNS

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LITERATURE, COMPETENCY TESTING, AND THE BASIC SKILLS

Professional Concerns is a regular column devoted to the interchange of ideas among those interested in reading instruction. Send your comments and contributions to the editor. If you have questions about reading that you wish to have answered, the editor will find respondents to answer them. Address correspondence to R. Baird Shuman, Department of English, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, Urbana, Illinois, 61801.

In the contribution which follows, Collett B. Dilworth, Jr., of the English Department at East Carolina University, gets to the very heart of why literature is taught in schools. He broaches the question of how literary study relates to the basic skills, and he ties his rationale in with questions of accountability and its handmaiden, competency testing. Probably the heart of Dilworth's argument is in his statement, "The student of literature is not primarily looking for information, s/he is looking for experience."

Dilworth defends literature – and by extension all of the other arts in the curriculum – on the basis that they "can serve the basic skills by providing a very powerful incentive for their mastery." Few would disagree with this contention. Certainly the justification for the mastery of basic skills is not in the mastery itself, but in the experiences which competence in these skills will make possible and would promote.

Addressing the goals of the literature curriculum has never been a simple task in the public schools, and as the demands to perfect "basic" literacy increase, this task becomes more problematic than ever. Evidently proposals to foster students' literary insight and discrimination, and to deepen and broaden their enjoyment of imaginative experience do not seem so compelling to curriculum planners as do proposals to treat student skill

at discerning context clues and at identifying main ideas. Such an outlook is understandable in light of strong new public convictions about the priorities of schooling. In some cases, even the students themselves express doubt concerning the time they spend reading literature, for at the end of their curriculum tunnel they see only one thing: a legally mandated competency test which has nothing to do with poetry or short stories.

Language arts educators today thus find that if they are to teach literature, they not only must confront the perennial problem of developing student interest but must also demonstrate literature's curricular relevance. Of course, students who have been "hooked on books" in wide reading programs do, by their very reading, manifest the achievement of basic reading skills. Yet teachers are often not allowed to use such *prima facie* evidence as proof of curricular effectiveness. "Just exactly what *do* they get from this literature anyway?" a parent and school board member asked me once. She was mostly concerned with the pitfalls of studying values, but she also wanted me to cite some sort of explicit knowledge or insight, some specifically useful awareness mastered by students of literature in our schools. The more I tried to explain, the more nebulous and disappointing my explanation became.

Later we cleared up the matter by examining some papers written by high school students who were comparing the values of protagonists and antagonists in their literature anthology. The students appeared to have become aware of a certain selflessness which tended to characterize the most sympathetic heroes. Here indeed was evidence of socially significant insight, of specific knowledge. On reflection, however, I find that we should not have been satisfied just with social fulfillments of the literature curriculum, for literature requires responses quite different from those required by other school subjects like social studies and even developmental reading.

This difference is revealed in the fact that literature is art, and its function in the curriculum is devolved from aesthetics not science. The student of literature is not primarily looking for information, s/he is looking for experience. The pedagogic issues faced by the literature teacher, therefore, concern the optimum means of eliciting imaginative experience and coherent response to this experience, not the optimum means of imparting knowledge. And if the literature curriculum is thus seen as one of process rather than content, it must also be seen to differ from other skills curricula (such as the developmental reading curriculum) in that it fosters not the processes of intellection, but the processes of exhilaration.

Where then are we led in our search for literature's pertinence to today's accountable curricula? If we acknowledge that literary exhilaration depends at least in part on decoding and intellection, we find ourselves drawn to the conclusion that literature can serve the basic skills by providing a very powerful incentive for their mastery. Valid literary experiences are available even to the developmental remedial reader as we find in several publishers' materials, especially those of Scholastic Publishers. Consider, therefore, how much more compelling is the motivation of the developmental reader whose imagination has been

liberated by literary experience than is the motivation of the developmental reader whose imagination has been confined to the seeking of right answers.

In fact we may find an embodiment of such motivation in the title of this journal. The reading student who lacks experience in literature is like a person ambling in a closed corridor; he lacks a promising horizon. Surely one of the most basic services we can offer our students is to show them the way outside, to help them achieve the invigoration of the outdoor traveller, to reveal to them the limitless horizons of literature. Surely reading teachers who lack this goal suffer from horizons as unpromising as those of their students.