

FEAR: A UNIT OF STUDY FOR NINTH GRADE LANGUAGE ARTS

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Part 1

INTRODUCTION

"What is most surprising of all is how much fear there is in school. Why is so little said about it?"

—John Holt, How Children Learn

In 1970 I chose to do a unit on the horror story because of the high interest potential it had. I was not disappointed: The students were interested. The realization of why the interest was so great is what led to the development of this unit.

Several of the discussions which went with the study of horror stories were successful in ways that only television teachers seem to be successful: The students were responsive, excited, and enthusiastic. Many of the students who did not normally participate were contributing. When the bell terminated the class discussion, many of the students continued with what they were talking about as they left the room. The next day the class was eager to continue the topic of the previous day.

My first reaction was self-flattery. I thought I had discovered some magical quality within myself which enabled me to conduct stimulating discussions. However, when the magic failed to emerge during other kinds of discussions I looked beyond myself to discover the reasons for the success.

It was during the second semester of the same school year that a repetition of the successful discussions on the horror story led to the realization that the topic under discussion must hold the key. What exactly had led to the excited exchange of ideas?

The students seemed to enjoy discussing the "blood and guts" issues. Though some of the students would manifest a distaste for this kind of topic, often these were the very students who shared the goriest tales. But it was not just a fascination with goriness which stimulated and sustained the discussion. It went beyond that. It involved fear: the obvious fears, the hidden fears, the fears long unspoken. I had given my students a chance to experience a mild catharsis by allowing them to share fears and fearful experiences.

As teachers we often ignore fears that students have, though as students we probably experienced many of the same fears. We give difficult examinations with staggering consequences. We expect students to perform in front of their peers without discussing with them why that can be such a traumatic experience. We use fear of grades, fear of parents, fear of humiliation to control classes, yet we do not like to live in fear ourselves.

Since fear is an important part of the innermost world of students, why not give them a chance to learn more about their fears or at least the opportunity to vent them? It was from this realization that a unit grew and changed. It is still changing as I learn more from my students about

the place fear has in their lives and what the school can do to help them cope with a complicated and often confusing emotion.

It is a good unit. It is an important unit. For these reasons I want to share it with others who might be able to profit from some of my ideas, experiments, theories and failures.

RECOMMENDED READING

Beck, Robert E. "A Case for Supernatural Literature and Communication," English Journal, Vol. 62: No. 5 (May, 1972), 673-76.

Reasons why supernatural literature should be studied. Contains a list of supernatural works to help the teacher select reading materials for students.

Evans, Verda. "The Mystery as Mind-Stretcher," English Journal, Vol. 61: No. 4 (April, 1972), 495-503.

An article recommending the use of the mystery story and novel in the English classroom. Contains a helpful categorization of the kinds of mysteries.

Part 2

THE UNIT: BACKGROUND INFORMATION

"Fear" is used as a unifying theme to develop selected language arts skills in the general areas of listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Emphasis is placed on helping the student understand and accept his/her own fears. The climax and focal point of the unit is the writing of an original short story dealing with some aspect of fear.

The unit, as presented here, is not offered as a recipe but more as a menu. Most items are offered as possibilities, not requirements. Neither a time schedule nor a sequential order of activities is given because of the great variation in teachers, students, facilities, school systems, and educational needs.

Organization of the materials is by general skill areas. This may not seem to be the most logical way to present a unit which attempts to unify instead of segregate skills. However, it proved to be the easiest and most efficient manner of organizing ideas for quick reference and use.

TIME

The unit is designed for a nine week course of study (45 class hours), though it could easily be used as a basis of study for a semester (90 class hours) or as few as three weeks (15 class hours). Three and eighteen weeks respectively are recommended as minimum and maximum time periods.

THE SCHOOL

The school at which the unit was used is a junior high consisting of 1400 plus students in grades 7,8, and 9 in a university/military/farming community of approximately 35,000. The town has only one junior high and one high school.

The building was constructed in the early 1900's for use as a high school. A few years later an adjoining junior high was added with a connecting structure between the two schools being an auditorium to be shared by them.

Since construction, many changes have been made to the original structure: A new gymnasium and cafeteria were added, with the old gym and dressing areas being converted to classrooms and the cafeteria to a library. Probably the greatest disadvantage the necessary conversions have caused is the poor flow of student traffic. Because the building was in essence two separate schools, the provisions made for going from one building to the other are grossly inadequate for students changing classes. The cafeteria and gymnasium are separate buildings with the latter located across a city

street. The students are therefore forced to leave the main building several times a day to go outside for brief periods of time to get from one class to another. During nice weather this presents little problem. Inclement weather, however, poses a health hazard for the students.

The school is old and overcrowded. The age merely detracts from the aesthetics; the overcrowding detracts from quality education. Who knows what kind of psychological effect the crowded conditions may have on students and faculty.

For my purposes the main deficiencies of the school are insufficient large group areas, no place designed for small group work or independent study, inadequate storage, difficulty in transporting audio-visual equipment from the library to the area of usage, and distractions from the busy streets surrounding the school.

On the plus side, the administration is generally supportive of innovations by teachers; the library is well supplied with helpful teaching aids and the librarians try to purchase materials which supplement the units and activities of the teachers; and though the audio-visual equipment is often of insufficient quantity for the number of users, there is a variety from which to choose.

THE STUDENTS

The unit was developed for an used with ninth grade English classes of heterogeneous academic, intellectual, and socio-economic grouping. The majority of the students are middle class Caucasian. Since the course is required, the classes contain a typical cross section of the student body.

THE SCHEDULE

The junior high is in session from 8:30 to 3:20. The school day is divided into seven, fifty-minute periods with a twenty-five minute lunch break and five minute passing periods.

The ninth grade language arts program consists of a required one semester of English and one of speech. One semester electives are offered in literature, journalism, forensics, and debate.

This kind of program presents difficulties in unifying skills, but it does not make it impossible. I incorporate skills from the various domains, but I try and approach them differently than they are approached in the regular course. Since speech is required of all students, the activities I use in this area are very informal and not as numerous as they might be if speech were not an independent, required course.

Another problem is lack of time. English is such an all encompassing discipline. One semester is such a short time. However, when time is at a premium it is easier not

to waste it. Ideally this leads to better organization and the elimination of "fillers."

A rather unusual problem is created by the schedule because of alternate day classes of which ninth grade English has two. These two classes alternate the days they meet. So instead of meeting once a day for a semester, they meet every other day for two semesters. This means that they are never at the same place in the curriculum as the regular classes, and that a unit which normally lasts for six weeks takes twelve weeks to cover.

It has been my experience that alternate day classes need to spend more time to master a specific skill than the regular classes. Evidently the longer time intervals between classes allows too much loss of learning before the proficiency of the skill is attained to such a level that only minimal loss is experienced.

There is also the problem of using films which have to be ordered. If a particular film were to be shown to all English students it would have to be in the possession of the teacher for four different days of the school year. Only two of these days could be consecutive. This makes the rental and shipping costs of the film prohibitive. For this reason I do not use films in my program though I believe there are many excellent ones available which would enhance my teaching. For the present, at least, I prefer to use the limited monies available for other educational materials.

Part 3

PHILOSOPHY OF UNIT

Educational programs should be continually adjusted to meet current needs of the students and the community.

Education should encourage students to arrive at conclusions on their own. It is good to give some basic facts because we live in an age of such vastness of knowledge. To require that students seek out all facts on their own is unfair and inefficient. However, to require that students never have to search for information and draw conclusions from their findings is equally unfair.

Formal education should be concerned with more than the teaching of the traditional academic curricula. There should be a concern with helping students develop a positive self image, a healthy mental attitude, and a greater acceptance of others.

Provisions should be made within the system for individual differences in the interests, capacities, and achievements of students.

Education should offer practical areas of learning which have direct applicability for students in nonschool areas of endeavor. At the same time, schools should not become so concerned that all knowledge imparted have a direct and immediate purpose. Schools are an excellent

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place in which to expose students to many areas of culture that may not be necessary or essential, but may add some form of beauty and/or entertainment to their lives. As one educator put it, children should be required to occasionally "taste the spinach." Many things in life cannot be judged until they have been tried. If they like it, something new can be added to their lives; if not, they have not been harmed by the experience.

A unified approach to the teaching of language arts skills better helps the student see the interrelatedness of these skills. All the while a student will study and gain a certain degree of proficiency with a specific bit of knowledge as long as the knowledge is used and used within a limited context, but as soon as the skill is needed beyond the given exercises or examinations, transfer does not occur. Through a unification of skills study, it is easier for the teacher to teach for transfer of learning by showing the various ways a skill might have.

Schools should have programs designed to foster imagination, creativity, and originality.

Students should be allowed and encouraged to express their own opinions. This should be done, however, in such a way that the feelings and rights of others are taken into consideration.

The teacher should make every reasonable effort to make learning an enjoyable experience, but all learning is not fun all of the time. If too much emphasis is placed on

entertainment education, it is easy to leave out many areas which might not be as pleasurable to study yet are important for the student.

Fear is a normal and universal emotion. It is not shameful to experience fear nor is it a disgrace to let others know when one is afraid. It is healthy and desirable to openly discuss fears, and by doing so, to perhaps aid in coping with them.

Language can be used as an effective outlet for emotions. Good skills and a rich vocabulary enable the individual to better use language in this positive way while poor language skills lead to frustration in communicating.

The main objective of the language arts department of the school system is to help students communicate better. Communication can never be one hundred percent, but improvement by each student is possible.

Reading can almost be relegated to the position of "survival skill" in our society. The individual who is deficient in reading ability is operating under a marked handicap. Therefore, great emphasis should be placed on reading. Stimulating materials should be sought. Books and magazines should be made available that are on appropriate reading and interest levels for the students. The student should be encouraged or required to occasionally read challenging materials above his/her individual reading level. For the severely disadvantaged reader, special services should be made available to improve the student's

skill as much as possible.

While writing may not be as important a skill in our society, it is the language arts skill the secondary English teacher is expected to develop above all others. If a student doesn't learn to read, blame is placed on the elementary teacher. If the student doesn't learn to listen, the school system is not blamed at all. If the student is maladjusted socially and psychologically, the parents receive the blame. But let a student graduate from high school with poor writing skills, the secondary English teachers are the first to receive the pointed finger. Therefore, this highly complex discipline should receive special attention in the English curriculum.

The best way for students to learn to write is by writing.

Grammar is an educational skill left almost entirely to the English teacher to develop and polish. Grammar should never be studied as an end within itself in the regular English classroom. In an elective English course, grammar merely for the sake of grammar is fine, but never for the mainstream course. Grammar which has an applicable function is the grammar which will best be meaningful for the student.

The school should be responsible for teaching every student a standard language but never should a student's personal speech be condemned. To condemn a person's language is to condemn that person.

Listening is a skill which can be improved with a purposeful program. It is an important skill because so much of a person's time is spend in this activity. It should be presented as an active skill which requires critical analysis of the received materials.

A philosophy of education should be a dynamic process, not a static condition.

Part 4

UNIT OBJECTIVES

Before a program can be initiated it is imperative that goals be set. Without goals, there is no direction, no criteria for evaluation; in essence, there is no program.

Goals should be an outgrowth of a philosophy and should reflect and strive to achieve the philosophy.

The debate as to whether or not objectives must be stated in terms of student behavior with the terminal performance level indicated will probably continue to be an educational battleground for eternity.

Whenever possible, objectives should be stated behaviorally with as many specifics as possible. However, to imply that all educational objectives should be stated in this manner is to oversimplify the problem.

In an attempt to be specific, behavioral objectives dealing with competency levels draw arbitrary competency standards. What skills are satisfactorily mastered at 95% correct answers on ten items and what competencies might be better stated as 80% correct answers on 1000 items? Where should the lines be drawn? Who should decide?

When behavioral objectives become the educational obsession of teachers, too many other things may be lost because of the difficulty of stating them behaviorally.

There is always the problem of objectives that deal with feeling and thinking. How does a teacher see a student appreciating a short story? The student may or may not verbalize how much he/she appreciated it. The teacher can always ask directly, "Did you appreciate this story?" The reply to which may be an accurate response of the student's feelings or it may be an expression of what the student thinks the teacher wants to hear.

What criteria can be set up to truly determine whether or not the student appreciates or understands or engages in critical thinking or likes something? Can educators mass evaluate these areas? If not, should they or should they not show up in the course or unit objectives?

Time is also a factor to take into consideration in goal setting. Should objectives be restricted to those which can be obtained within x-number of days, weeks, or months? Is it feasible to list as course goals those which may not be realized for years?

On these questions I tend to take a wavery middle-of-the-road stand since the arguments on both sides are mostly subjective. Until empirical proof is presented which unquestionable supports either the behavioral objectivist who wants a strict delineation of all goals or the you-can't-measure-the-more-important-aspects-of-learning advocates, I will continue to be momentarily swayed by whichever side is stating its case before returning to the middle.

Practically speaking, objectives should be written in terms which the instructor can utilize whether or not the wording would please Mager. For if goals are of no applicable benefit to the teacher and are not used by her, no matter how beautifully and carefully they may have been worded, they are useless.

I have tried to make objectives that reflect my philosophy and to be only as specific as I find personally useful to be. I do, however, try to be able to evaluate in some way whether my goals have made positive, negative, or neutral progress.

OVERVIEW

The main objective of the unit is that the student will be able to communicate more effectively. This very general objective would include improvement of the student's communication skills in the areas of listening, speaking, writing, and reading. Particular emphasis is placed on creative writing. Another very important area of the unit deals with helping students express internal feelings, especially those dealing with fear.

BUILDING SELF ACCEPTANCE

The student will realize that having fears is normal and nothing to be ashamed of, thereby better accepting him-/herself.

The student will be able to express his/her fears.

The student will have confidence in his/her ability to succeed in English.

The student will consider him-/herself to be a person worthy of respect.

Through discussion, fantasy, and literature, the student will realize that fears can be eradicated, controlled and/or lived with.

INTERPERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS

The student will be able to identify and work with a group of peers for the accomplishment of a common goal.

The student will show respect for the person and property of others.

The student will show respect for the feelings and opinions of others.

Through a sharing of fears, the student will accept the fears of others without passing judgment.

LISTENING

The student will listen with interest while the teacher or his/her fellow classmates talk.

The student will be able to sort out specific sounds, analyze, and be able to describe them.

The student will be able to listen to a short story read orally and be able to follow and understand the plot.

The student will be able to detect the various pronunciations which make dialects differ from one another.