

ENGLISH HERITAGE
TRYING TO PUT HUMPTY-DUMPTY TOGETHER AGAIN

E.A. Reitan
Illinois State University

Specialization and fragmentation are characteristic of our modern world. Each of us lives a life comprised of various specialties, and our social relationships are usually with those who share our special interests. Where specialized interests do not provide a common ground, we engage in generalized discussion about the weather, the lawn, the children, sports, or the news. In our modern world it is difficult for us to engage in discussion of our common humanity because we lack a common vocabulary or perspective. Development of capacity for such discourse has always been considered the unique province and responsibility of the humanities, but those academic subjects concerned with the humanities have also become specialized, fragmented, and isolated from each other and common human concerns.

Students take specialization and fragmentation for granted. They have grown up in such a world. They expect to be highly specialized in employment, and they have already accepted the necessity of choosing a few specialized interests from among the bewildering variety of activities available in an advanced modern society. When they come to a university or college they find a faculty and curriculum as specialized as the professional football players they watch on Sunday afternoons. Such a situation may be inevitable in the last quarter of the twentieth century, and one would be naive to think that it could be significantly changed. But a university teacher who is also a humanist may be excused for trying to provide some place in the curriculum where the broad view of the human condition is presented and the isolation of the specialties broken down.

At Illinois State University the inter-disciplinary course sequence entitled English Heritage and British Civilization is one attempt to bring specialized subject matter together in broader perspective. The goal of the course is a blending of English history, literature, theatre, religion, and the arts into a course dealing with English civilization. The first semester course (English Heritage) is divided into four periods: Medieval England (to 1485), Tudor England (1485-1603), Stuart England (1603-1689), and Eighteenth Century England (1689-1783). British Civilization, which is offered in the second semester, is also divided by chronological periods: The Revolutionary Age (1783-1837), Victorian Britain (1837-1901), The Early Twentieth Century (1901-45), and Contemporary Britain (1945-Present). Three teachers from History, English, and Theatre developed the course, but it normally is taught by one of the three. Thus the course, although inter-disciplinary, is not team-taught. Perhaps that arrangement is desirable. Certainly, if the students are called upon to put various disciplines together in a synthesis, it is not unreasonable to expect that a teacher should be willing and able to give them an example of how it can be done.

This article deals specifically with the first-semester course, English Heritage. No history textbook is used; instead, handouts give basic historical information about leading persons and events. The main emphasis of the course is on reading and discussing the "monuments" of English civilization: political and social documents, works of literature, plays, political thought and controversy, and architectural works. The class meets for two two-hour sessions per week, for four semester hours credit. There is an examination at the end of each unit, consisting of multiple-choice questions to check specific knowledge and a broad essay question which calls upon students to generalize.

In developing this course sequence the first problem was finding time for the three teachers to meet and plan the course, which was resolved by a four-week Instructional Development Grant conferred by Illinois State University in the summer of 1974. No one who enters into inter-disciplinary teaching should underestimate the toughness of the separate disciplines. In the teaching of English literature, for example, ever since the emergence of what was once called "The New Criticism," emphasis has been placed upon the explication of each work in its own terms instead of its historical context. Our historical format required returning to an older approach to the study of English literature while trying to retain some of the insights and approaches of modern literary criticism. The theatre teacher taught the plays from the perspective of performance, while the historian was inclined to proceed on the assumption that if the politics were clear, everything else would fall into place. These differences were inherent in the respective disciplines and certainly not all problems were resolved, although considerable progress was made. With the course now taught by one person, it is probably fair to say that that person's subject dominates, although the teachers have found it challenging and interesting to teach material not normally found in their own discipline. The most important fact is that the students see their teacher wrestling with the problem of relationships, while they are called upon to do the same.

The second problem was to find a single principle which would serve as a guide in the selection of material. The principle which was adopted was the interaction of continuity and change. The English people are presented as a people with a strong sense of tradition, which lends continuity to their development, but also with a spirit of enterprise and imagination, which are forces for change. Resolution of the conflict between continuity and change is found in the English sense of moderation, which seeks to reconcile the old and the new in such a way as to preserve harmony and stability. For example, the medieval period is characterized as a comparatively stable period, ending with the breakdown of the fifteenth century. The Tudor period begins with Henry VII's settlement of the problems of the past, but under Henry VIII the forces of change bring a period of danger and turmoil, which is resolved in the national unity fostered by the monarchy of Queen Elizabeth and the via media of the Anglican Church. In the Stuart period emphasis is given to those elements in English society which contributed to disruption and conflict, with the Restoration and the Revolution Settlement of 1688-89 pointing the way to a new consensus. The eighteenth century is presented as another period of comparative stability, although the forces of change found in economic and imperial expansion are not overlooked. Such a formula may be criticized as too schematic, but the teachers feel it works as a loose interpretive framework.

Following this general pattern, each unit is organized to emphasize the major features of English civilization within the period. Medieval England, for example, is presented structurally, providing the institutional, social, and religious base from which English civilization grew. Magna Carta is studied to illustrate English monarchy and feudal law; Sir Gawain and the Green Knight presents the values of the nobility; Everyman outlines the doctrines of the Church; the Gothic cathedral presents the Christian faith in stone and glass; the Articles of the Spurriers, Henry Knighton's and Thomas Walsingham's accounts of the Black Death, and The Second Shepherds' Play give insight into the lives of the middle and lower orders. Slides are used to illustrate the lives of kings, knights, churchmen, merchants, and peasants. "The Prologue" to the Canterbury Tales presents a cross-section of medieval society, and one tale, usually "The Pardoner's Tale," is studied as an example of medieval values. Attention is given to the breakdown of medieval civilization in the fifteenth century, as background to the Tudor achievement and in preparation for reading Shakespeare's Henry IV, Part I. The unit concludes with a two part examination: the multiple-choice test requires the students to show specific knowledge of the

assigned material, and an essay question calls upon them to use the documents, literature, plays, and architecture to discuss the role of the Church and the Christian faith in medieval English civilization. Each of the other units follows a similar pattern.

Several special features contribute significantly to the course, although they would not be essential to teaching a similar course elsewhere. With the support of a university grant for the cost of film and processing, a collection of approximately 2,000 slides was developed, illustrating English history from the Middle Ages to the present. Some of these slides show material remains which may be seen today: Stonehenge, the Tower of London, Canterbury Cathedral, Longleat, the Banqueting Hall, St. Paul's Cathedral, Chatsworth, etc. Slides of this kind are primarily useful for the study of English architecture and decorative arts. Most of the slides, however, are contemporary illustrations of English life. Painting is included in each period, but receives its principal attention in the eighteenth century in the works of Hogarth, Reynolds, and Gainsborough.

An unusual asset of Illinois State University is the Humanities Education Theatre Company (HETCO), comprised of graduate students in theatre. HETCO provides live classroom presentations for instructional uses, including not only cuttings from plays but scripts prepared on almost any subject. Since the theatre is an important component of English Heritage, HETCO gives classroom performances of excerpts from The Second Shepherds' Play, Henry IV, Part I, and Volpone. HETCO has made videotapes of selections from Everyman and The Rivals.

The variety and quantity of material pose a special problem for many students. Students with good reading skills, who have had a solid high school course in English, will have read much of the literature, allowing them to spend more time on the history, theatre, architecture, and other aspects of the course. Students without a good high school background in literature, who are usually the students with poor reading skills, have difficulty coping. Thus one encounters the phenomenon familiar in all humanities instruction: bright students (many of them girls) with good reading skills and adequate high school background do well, while other students (often boys or minority students) flounder.

The first problem leads to the second, which is the balance between lecture and discussion. If the humanities have value, it is in their providing some understanding of the most serious questions of human existence, which can be gained only by discussion. But in a course with a large mass of material, a disproportionate amount of time must be given to lecture or explanation. Poorer students, who have difficulty handling the material, rely heavily on the teacher's explanation for their grasp of the works assigned. To some extent this problem is unavoidable in lower-division courses, which typically pump students full of information, hoping for a pay-off when they are juniors and seniors. Nevertheless, a course concerned with understanding a great civilization should aspire to being more than a "delivery system." It is possible that inter-disciplinary instruction, by virtue of the quantity and variety of material included, may be less conducive to discussion than courses which are limited in scope and more familiar to students.

The problem of integration is made all the more challenging by confrontation with a wide variety of materials. That is why inter-disciplinary courses are so important in undergraduate instruction. In our age of specialization, it is essential that instructors and students face the challenge of seeing things whole. Nevertheless, the leap is a difficult one to make. The teacher has behind him a thorough education in his own subject and presumably a more

than passing interest in the other subjects. He has given several years or more to thinking about the problems of integration. He should not expect instant enlightenment from the students when they are suddenly confronted with a large and varied body of unfamiliar material. Usually the teacher will present his own mode of integration and the students (if they grasp it) will give it back. Students, however, can discern a surprising number of particular relationships if the main line of thought is clear, and it is these secondary insights which inform the teacher that his purpose is being accomplished. The teacher's problem is the balance between his own considered judgments and extemporaneous comments from the students. If the teacher can make his presentation without taking all the time or smothering student spontaneity, he can hope for significant student contributions. But he should not be surprised if the struggle to absorb material dominates the effort to see relationships.

One last problem is the charge of "elitism," which is most likely to be raised by those least able to handle the material. Humanities instruction deals with the supreme achievements of the human mind and imagination. These achievements, by and large, were made for political and social elites and continue to be enjoyed primarily by the political and social elites of today. Critics would argue that the typical student in a large state university should study the lives and achievements of "common" people rather than the "elite." My rejoinder is that no one should be dismissed as "common" in a disparaging sense. We are all human, and we should all aspire to achieve those human qualities which were once limited to those elites favored with power, wealth, and time. The fact that the humanities were developed by and for the elites of the past should not stop us from seeking to apply them to our own lives, regardless of our present or anticipated social status. The civilization of England is a great civilization. We should all aspire to be part of the only elite that matters--not the elite of power, wealth and leisure, but the elite of civilized human beings.