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English Pedagogy at Eastern Illinois State Normal School:
The Unique Evolution and Effect of an Adapted Composition Course
By Jacob Smith
Major: English
Purpose for Pursuing This Research:

This project represents my part of the research for a collaborative project between me, Dr. Angela Vietto of the English Department, and an English Graduate student, Kim Hunter-Perkins. I received independent study credits for my first semester (Fall 2010) as an undergraduate researcher on the project. While my main interest lies in Contemporary American Literature, this project appealed to me in at least two ways: 1) I aspire to become a professor of English, so I was naturally interested in the history of my chosen profession, and 2.) I will be working on my Departmental Honors thesis in the Fall of 2011 and Spring of 2012, a project of a scope and caliber that I have not yet attempted. This project served a little as a learning experience in larger research projects (at least larger than you are typically asked for in an normal English course which usually just asks for a literary analysis.) I viewed the process involved with completing this process as a sort of practice run for my much larger project to come. Not only did I become acquainted with the type of research timeline/schedule that will be necessary, but I also learned my way around much of Booth Library’s resources. I used Microfiche, the archives, the databases, the book stacks. I had had limited experience with some of these, and no experience with others prior to this project, but after completing it I feel very confident in my ability to use Booth Library’s resources to enhance my research and education..
In his book, *Professing Literature*, Gerald Graff discusses that from 1890-1915 there was disagreement between generalists, who, as Graff states, “tended to dispense with elaborate pedagogical theories and... let the great masterpieces of literature teach themselves” (Graff 86), and scholars, who were primarily philologists. While the generalists believed the study of literature should result in appreciation and a more cultured student, the scholars were primarily researchers. Graff goes on to describe the additional conflict between critics and scholars that grew out of the development of criticism between 1915-1930. Within the group of critics, Graff identifies humanists, who supported a generalist approach to literature, and aesthetic formalists, who focused on the structure of a text to better understand it. By determining where the Eastern Illinois State Normal School faculty stood on these issues, it will become possible to begin to put together a picture of how the Normal School pedagogy may have evolved differently than that of faculties at the research-based schools Graff focuses on. Isabel McKinney’s articles in the Normal School Bulletin, as well as two textbooks for both middle and high school English, which she wrote with Thomas Briggs, have been useful in determining the answers to these questions.

In her article, *The Study of Literature in the Upper Grades*, McKinney attacks both the philological approach, saying that “the use of a poem for grammatical analysis is the study, not of literature, but of grammar,” (McKinney 2) and the humanistic notion that literature should teach itself, condemning it as “not productive of the same results as thorough study,” (McKinney 3). McKinney’s stance here is interesting because it does not align with
either of the prominent positions Graff presents in the research-based schools. Graff does state that, "in theory, professional research was only a vehicle of general humanistic culture, but in practice very few individuals and fewer departments managed to integrate the two" (Graff 81). McKinney's rejection of both extremes, philology and a strictly generalist approach, suggests that she may have been a proponent of this middle way. She states in her article that, "the study of literature should lead first of all to a comprehension of [life experience], and an appreciation of its expression in words" (McKinney 3). This is close to the generalist goal of literary appreciation and acculturation. However, as stated, she advocated for "thorough analysis", or "read[ing] closely to get the meaning from a page or line" (McKinney 9), over what she called the "exclusively reading method" (McKinney 3). The philosophy she suggests then is one that utilizes scholarly scrutiny of a text to achieve a humanistic goal. Graff states that the crisis in research-based schools of not knowing what to do with the subject "required a different kind of literary education from either the old liberal culture or the new philology and literary history, but no such agreement materialized" (Graff 99). McKinney's approach suggests that perhaps this agreement did begin to form in the Normal Schools.

McKinney's stance in the question of critics versus scholars is less ambiguous. She is very clear in her rejection of philology as a form of literary study, so it is safe to group her with the critics. Though McKinney expresses humanistic goals, her statement that "thorough study" is the means by which to achieve the proper appreciation of literature complicates the question of whether she was a humanist or a formalist. However, her definition of "thorough study" as, "read[ing] closely to get the meaning from a page or line" (McKinney 9), places her firmly in the camp of aesthetic formalism.
Briggs' and McKinney's coauthored textbook, *A First Book of Composition for High Schools*, provides a clear picture of the priority they placed on style, figures of speech, structure and other analytic approaches to literary studies. The book outlines writing exercises and offers suggestions for analyzing prose so that students may competently critique their classmates writing as well as be more mindful of their own composition. An exercise may ask a student to pay attention to the chronology of a story and discuss what "the economy of events" reveals or to determine "what one thread of interest would be sufficient without complication in so short a theme". In an exercise titled "Telling an Interesting Anecdote to Bring out a Point" McKinney and Briggs instruct students to "notice how...a slightly different wording misses the point entirely. " Additional chapters ask students to define specific words and "find out what simpler form a word is derived from [...] to illuminate [...] its meaning. All of this aligns strongly with McKinney's definition of thorough study.

While it is easy to place McKinney into the group of formalists, it may be more difficult to determine if that was a trend among Normal Schools or unique to Eastern. The complication lies in the relationship that the early faculty at Eastern had with Columbia. Joel Spingarn was, according to Graff, an advocate for aesthetic formalism at Columbia. Both McKinney and Briggs have a connection to Columbia, Briggs as a teacher and McKinney as a student. It is highly likely that Spingarn had an influence on both of these Eastern Faculty members. It is difficult to say whether the uniqueness of McKinney's approach, formalist criticism as a means to an appreciation of literature, was a result of pedagogical trends in Normal Schools that didn't occur at research-based schools, or whether it was unique to Eastern because of the connection to Spingarn and Columbia.
Regardless of the possible Spingarn connection, Briggs and McKinney show the effects of other influences from professors and practices at research-based schools, specifically Harvard Professor Barrett Wendell’s English Composition course, which he outlines in his 1891 book, *English Composition*. A coauthored book, *A Second Book of Composition for High Schools*, from Briggs and McKinney shows striking similarities, the implications of which place the Eastern Illinois State Normal School in a unique position among institutions of higher education.

Wendell, who graduated Harvard in 1877, returned as a faculty member in 1890 following his failure of the Bar, and in the midst of a failing career as a novelist (Meyers 46). The course he designed and, as D.G. Meyers states in his book *The Elephants Teach*, perfected became extremely influential, his methods finding their way to universities such as Columbia and the University of Chicago (Meyers 47). Wendell’s course was unique in that it “set pupils to writing, and [made] the subject he was trying to teach the subject of instruction” (Meyers 48). Wendell’s course centered on daily themes written by students and was meant to “stimulate curiosity, aspiration, a willing, almost spontaneous effort” (Meyers 49) as Wendell himself stated. Meyers simply phrases this same goal as “inspir[ing] the desire to work” (Meyers 49). Wendell outlines his course in his 1891 book, *English Composition*.

A quick comparison of simply the prefaces of Wendell’s book and Briggs and McKinney’s 1913 *A Second Book of Composition for High Schools* reveals many similarities. Wendell’s book begins:

Inquiries concerning the use of this book in teaching lead me to add this statement of how I have used it at Harvard College. In the course
where I regularly use it as a textbook, compositions, called themes, of from five hundred to a thousand words, are written every fortnight. On the introductory chapter, which I direct the class to read at once, I do not formally examine the students at all; but I expect them to have read it intelligently before writing the first theme. Between the first theme and the second, I direct them to read the chapter on Words, the suggestions in which they are advised particularly to consider in writing the second theme. When this theme is handed in, each student takes the theme of a fellow student and devotes an hour to making, in the classroom, a written analysis of its vocabulary. (Wendell 1)

Wendell’s course, from this description appears to be one focusing more formalist concerns. However, knowing his goal for the course makes it possible to suggest that Wendell, like McKinney may have found an agreement between the formalist and the humanistic, making him a novelty among instructors at research-based schools. Briggs and McKinney’s book, published twenty-two years later, shows a very similar style:

The specific purpose of every exercise is made clear, so that the students are led not merely to compose but to compose for some definite and worthy end [...] Oral composition is emphasized both by the large number of oral themes demanded and by the articulation of such exercises with principles previously learned and with the subsequent written themes [...] By the variety of its offerings the book explores the interests, aptitudes, and abilities
of the students in several of the major fields of expression […] The exercises are arranged in the most economical order possible for both students and teacher, with regard for the laws of learning and for the preparation and correction of written work. (Briggs/McKinney 1-2)

Briggs and McKinney explain the use of themes, oral compositions, and student grading to obtain a better understanding of writing principles, very much like Wendell. In addition, the idea that “students must compose for some definite and worthy end” (Briggs/McKinney 2) bears resemblance to Wendell’s of instilling a drive to work. All three appear to be figures who managed to use formalist practices to obtain humanistic goals. Although these similarities dilute the argument that the Eastern Illinois State Normal School faculty was early in creating this kind of integration, they do reveal a much more profound effect that Eastern and other Normal Schools with similar programs had on education.

Because courses such as McKinney’s were modeled after Wendell’s, a course that in the late 19th century was revolutionary not only for Harvard, but also for many other leading Universities in the country, their presence in Normal School thought was much more significant than in research-based schools. Students of Normal Schools who studied with professors such as Briggs and McKinney would enter the world of teaching younger children, but they would do so following the guidelines of a textbook like McKinney’s and drawing from what they learned from her or a similar professor. The result would be that students would receive a Harvard-like English Composition/Creative Writing
education at a much earlier age. Instead of simply getting a semester or two to exercise creativity and composition skills near the end of a college career, students of Normal School instructed teachers (at least Eastern Illinois State Normal School instructed teachers) would enter their college career already possessing the skills that such a course would offer them. This situation almost urges universities to adapt their programs further to meet these students growing needs. Theoretically Eastern Normal School had a very large impact on not only the teachers it produced and the students they instructed, but on higher education as a whole in a way that research-based schools could not have.

Although Normal Schools’ exclusion from institutional histories such as Graff’s have left it harder to find what differences existed at such schools, and passively downplayed the impact such establishments could possibly have had on higher education, close attention to the structure of courses and the ideologies of faculty at schools similar to the Eastern Illinois State Normal School may reveal that it was these institutions that took the innovations of a select few individuals at the research-based schools and adapted them for uses that had much more significant effects on their students directly and on the larger institutions that dominate most institutional histories.
Bibliography

Briggs, Thomas H., and Isabel McKinney. *A Second Book of Composition for High Schools.* Boston: Ginn and, 1913. Print. This book served as a comparison to Wendell's *English Composition.* The two proved to be very similar. The connection revealed that instructors at Eastern Illinois State Normal School were training their teachers to use courses that resembled a breakthrough course in English Composition/Creative Writing at Harvard. This early exposure to such an education as the result of the efforts of the early Eastern faculty indicate a large impact on education and set Eastern Illinois Normal School apart from research-based schools as doing something very different.

Briggs, Thomas H., and Vida Sutton. "A Catalogue of the Eastern Illinois State Normal School." *Normal School Bulletin* [Charleston, IL] 1 Apr. 1907: 38-41. Print. This source was found in the Eastern Illinois University Archives. The authorship of this section of the bulletin is questionable; none is specified, but all Professors are named before the course descriptions. In this citation, it has been assumed that each instructor wrote the description of his/her course. These descriptions helped to form an idea of what was being taught in Eastern's classrooms and also helped to create stronger comparisons to programs like Wendell's at Harvard.

databases provided by Booth Library, pointed out the cursory discussion of Composition and Rhetoric in Graff's *Professing Literature*. This led to research regarding the use of Rhetoric and Composition/Creative Writing courses at Eastern Illinois State Normal School, which led to reading D.G Meyer's book, *The Elephants Teach*, as well as Briggs and McKinney's *A Second Book of English Composition for High Schools* and Wendell's *English Composition*, all of which have formed the bulk of the latter half of the research for this project.

Graff, Gerald. *Professing Literature: an Institutional History*. Chicago: University of Chicago, 1987. Print. Graff functioned as the starting point for this entire project. His institutional history focuses primarily on research-based schools. This project was an attempt to present the ways English pedagogy may have evolved differently in Normal Schools as well as interpret what that evolution may have meant to higher education. Many of Graff's key points, especially the inability of English programs to find an agreement between a liberal approach and formalist approach to the study of literature provided a contrast for Eastern Illinois Normal School's program, which sources reveal to have integrated the two schools of thought.

Eastern did find an agreement between liberal and formalist approached to literature, something Graff claims did not occur at research-based schools. This discovery led to speculation regarding where this influence came from, which led to the discovery of McKinney and Briggs' connection to Joel Spingarn and Columbia.


Wendell, Barrett. *English Composition*. Chicago: Scribner, 1891. Print. This source provided a contrast for Briggs and McKinney's book. By comparing the two sources, I was able to determine that the courses students at Eastern Illinois State Normal School were being trained to teach resembled Wendell's Harvard course