

RADICAL TEACHER

A SOCIALIST, FEMINIST, AND ANTI-RACIST JOURNAL ON THE THEORY AND PRACTICE OF TEACHING

FROM RADICAL TEACHER #5 (1977)

English in America: The Next Twenty Years

by Richard Ohmann

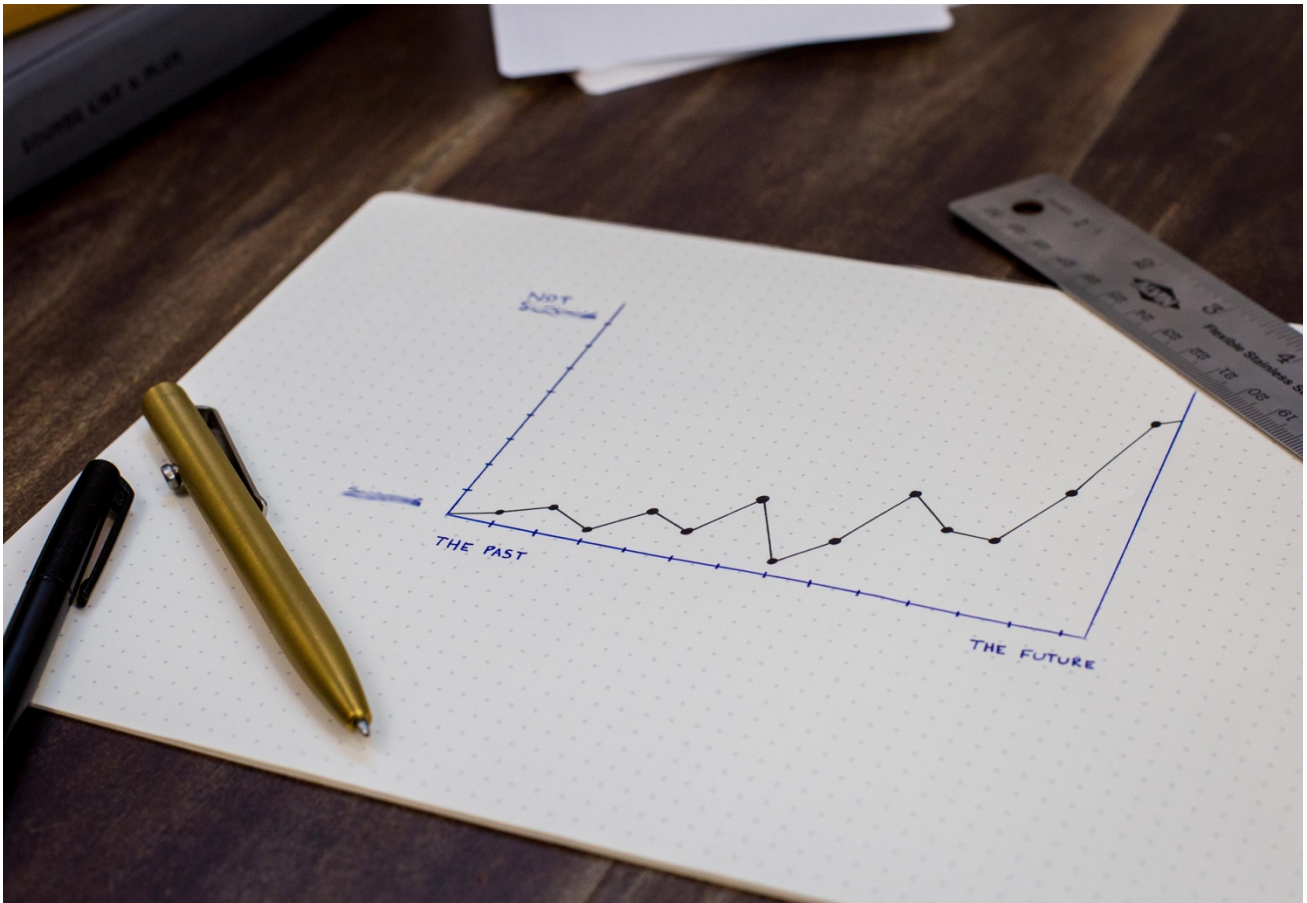


IMAGE BY ISAAC SMITH VIA UNSPLASH

In 1969 Edmund Farrell of NCTE did a fascinating piece of research. He asked four panels of experts—in learning theory, educational media, secondary curriculum, and English—to estimate, for each of some 200 possible developments, the likelihood of its occurring in a sizable number of schools by 1975, 1980, and so on to the millennium. So in Farrell's book, *Deciding The Future*,¹ we have a consensus on everything from the likelihood that teachers will be more accepting of the language children speak (a better than even chance that 20% will be so by 1984) to the likelihood of "food rewards during the day, e.g., ice cream, modifying behavior in the classroom" (only a 13% probability of 20% implementation by the year 2000).

The first five-year period has ended, and it is possible to do a little second-guessing. My point is not to mock the experts or dismiss Farrell's study: on the contrary, I'm grateful for the experts' willingness to speculate about the future, and I think Farrell's book of continuing value—almost more so, as some of its predictions go wrong and allow us to learn in what specific ways the future surprises us as it becomes the past. That may help us to think more powerfully about the part of 1969's future that is still future to us in 1977.

Let me take just two pairs of predictions, of special interest to me. Bear in mind that Farrell's subject was secondary education, but I believe that most of the forecasters would have extended their predictions to higher education.

The first set: the panel on educational technology saw "taxpayer revolts, leading to fewer books, fewer support personnel," etc. as a small likelihood in the earlier '70's, and a declining one through the remainder of the century, so that taxpayer revolts were seen as easily the least likely, by 1999, of all the 49 developments on which this panel was questioned. Farrell summed up their answers to this and other questions by saying, "Citizens will continue to support the schools financially and ideologically, though funding will not be as generous as educators might desire" (126). I wonder if, eight years later, any one would make the same prediction. The other one in this pair: the experts assigned a relatively high probability to a one-fifth reduction in teaching loads. Just now, such an outcome seems unlikely, if we are to count on the support of citizens to achieve it.

Those two predictions bear on financial support for education; the other two bear on content. (1) Of all 42 possibilities offered them, the curriculum panel thought least likely a greater emphasis at all levels on "communication skills," and a reduced emphasis on "literary appreciation." (2) The English panel's choice for least probable was a decline in the status of the humanities at the university level (153). I need hardly say that such a decline has already occurred, with no sign of reversal: between 1967 and 1973 there was already a 25% drop in the portion of all B.A. degrees that were granted in the humanities.² As for the balance between communications skills and literary appreciation, that outcome is far from certain, but I'll bet the panelists would make a different forecast now, in light of the back-to-basics movement that has sprung up since 1969.

All those predictions looked reasonable, at the end of the 1960's. Our educational system had been growing, seemingly without limit. With something between perplexity and relief, English teachers had been relaxing traditional requirements and giving first place to literature. Faculties and students apparently agreed that the humanities deserved to resume their ancient place at the heart of liberal learning. Where did the forecasters go wrong? Primarily, I imagine, in two assumptions: that present trends were a satisfactory guide to the future, and that what educators thought best would prevail. Or, to put it the other way around, they minimized the chance of historical discontinuity, and the dependence of the educational system upon the economic and political system as a whole. Farrell offered a similar surmise: "that the panelists suffered from being specialists, that they were perhaps insufficiently aware of or concerned about forces at work in the society which, though not within the traditional province of education, may nevertheless determine much of its substance and structure during the next three decades." As Galbraith put it, "It is the vanity of educators that they shape the educational system to their preferred image. They may not be without influence but the decisive force is the economic system"³—a point elaborated in convincing historical and materialist detail by Bowles and Gintis in *Schooling in Capitalist America*. Or, to climax this parade of authorities: "Men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given, and transmitted from the past."⁴ It is to the implications of that idea, for teachers as we forecast our future and create it, that I now want to turn.

Educational forecasting has passed rapidly through a series of failures and sophistications in the past fifteen years. In the euphoric old days, we had forecasts grounded in plain extrapolation: if the universities and colleges were expanding at such and such a rate, they would continue to do so indefinitely. This approach—obviously inadequate, but beguiling to most of us in the prosperous sixties—gave way to a more realistic and less encouraging one around the end of the decade. The "trend-demographic" technique of Allan Cartter and the Carnegie Commission still projected forward the increasing portion of college-age people going to college, but took into account the by-then obvious fact that our birth rate was declining and that in time the college-age cohort would also decline in absolute numbers. This method produced a much more sobering set of predictions. But not nearly sobering enough, according to Stephen Dresch,⁵ Director of Research in the Economics of Higher Education at Yale. Dresch calls his own method "demographic-economic"; his model of our future includes the information Cartter used, but also two other factors: the capacity of the economy to absorb college-educated workers; and what has happened and will happen to the supply of such workers, as a result of the universities' growth during the fifties and sixties.

In a rather dense article, Dresch shows that this growth has owed to a unique historical situation. First, in the post-war period great economic change occurred: not only the fact of rapid absolute growth in the economy, but the nature of that growth, had an impact on higher education. Much of

the growth was in new industries—television, electronics, computers, aircraft, space, etc. —that required large numbers of highly-educated workers. As this happened, the college-age cohort—from which new educated workers had to be drawn —was at first relatively small because of low birth rates during the depression and war years. And through the entire boom period—even after post-war children began arriving in college—those newly recruited by schools and colleges to teach them came from the small age cohort born during depression and war. As a result, the portion of the age cohort in college rose from 20% in 1960 to 30% in 1970. And of course, the portion going into college teaching rose even more swiftly. Hence the dramatic expansion and prosperity of our ranks during this period. One more factor needs to be reckoned in, according to Dresch: inertia. Lacking foreknowledge like Dresch's, young people keep going to college (and I would add, to graduate school in English) for a while after the economic reasons for doing so have weakened. The "wage-differential" between college-educated entrants to the work force and others peaked in the late sixties, but larger and larger percentages of young people continued to choose college even though the economy is glutted with educated workers. (Dresch believes that the lag, before people catch on, is about six years.)

We are, of course, seeing the dismal result of these ebbs and flows right now. But I have the impression that many lay people and some forecasters still think that our current troubles will last only a short while. Dresch's model predicts otherwise, and I'll mention a few salient points of his forecast.

- 1) The percentage of entrants to the work force who had a bachelor's degree was 13, in 1960. That will rise to a peak of 33% in the early 1980's, and then fall back to 16% by the year 2000.
- 2) The absolute expansion of our college and university system is nearly at an end. The system will not remain level, but will contract by 40% in the 1980's, and another 12% in the 1990's.
- 3) By 2000, the entire doubling of capacity in the system, which has taken place in the last fifteen years, will be redundant.
- 4) Clearly this means little need for new faculty members. By 1990, only about 3% of college teachers will be under age 35. In short, there will be in effect no new academic jobs during the 1980's.
- 5) For several decades, high school completion has varied quite directly with college entry: 50% of those finishing school go to college. Hence, as smaller portions of the age cohort choose college, more and more will drop out of high school. I would add that this in turn means little need for new teachers of high school English: and since a large proportion of college students in English (by comparison with other fields) are on their way to high school teaching, a collapse

of that market should affect our profession more than it will affect, say, sociologists or even chemists.

I don't want to suggest that Dresch has now handed us the final truth. Forecasting is a dim science at best, and I'd expect Dresch's argument to be amended both by other, still more sophisticated forecasters and by reality. Allan Cartter, for one, has absorbed that argument and, in response to it, adjusted his own view of our future; but he remains less gloomy than Dresch.

Too, cultural and political events can and doubtless will bollux up the workings of iron economic law. People do make their own history. Even now, for instance, the public's sudden, distorted concern over literacy offers a chance for our profession to make some gains that Dresch's model could not predict—depending on how opportunistic we are. But on the whole, Dresch is, in my amateur opinion, the most comprehensive thinker to date about our future. Even if it's a matter of choosing among oracles, we'd do well to listen to this one.

We find ourselves, then, in a vicious eddy of American economic history. Our fortunes as an occupational group have, for a hundred years, been closely bound to the evolution of industrial capitalism, for reasons I tried to analyze in *English in America*. Because our society expresses its values through the market, a sudden change in the market makes itself felt as a change in values. You can find in just about any of our professional publications now expressions of dismay that society does not seem to care about the humanities, about the full cultivation of the mind, about the higher literacy, about what we value most and are prepared to offer. Yet I doubt that American society, taken as a collection of individuals with personal values, holds literature or literacy any less dear in 1976 than in 1966. The point is that society determines our fortunes as a profession, not mainly through direct purchase of our services, but through the labor market where capitalists buy one or another kind of labor power. Right now they do not need nearly so much educated labor power as we, along with our colleagues in other fields, have been producing. This is the main fact about our present and future. The economic system is shaping our educational choices, and providing us the circumstances within which we will make our piece of history.

So long as we (along with the rest of the citizenry) accept those circumstances, we may have an illusion of choice, but. the choices we make are bound to implement—one way or another—the larger choice that the economic system has made for us. In the recent joint issue of the *ADE* (Associated Departments of English) and *ADFL* (Associated Departments of Foreign Languages) *Bulletins*, on Employment and the Profession, John Gerber imagines a future 50 years hence in which English teachers are happy and prosperous, owing to the determination of our profession, from 1984 on, to "render service to the entire public, not just a selected portion of it" (p. 17). I endorse Gerber's stand against elitism and special privilege, but from the perspective of this talk, it's clear that even during the boom years we did serve the entire public in the way dictated by the economy and our professional institutions.

We will probably continue to do so, though service is going to feel more like slavery than like humane learning, for a stretch.

Consider some of the suggestions made by Gerber and his fellow authors in the *ADE/ADFL* issue. Quentin Hope, along with many others, makes the most obvious one: admit fewer graduate students, and sift those few even more finely through the sieves of course work and apprenticeship in teaching. Now plainly the result of such planning—a drop in the number of entrants to our profession—is foreordained. That result may be achieved in the way Hope recommends, though so far our graduate departments have not displayed such enlightenment (Ph.D. admissions were up 15% in the humanities from 1971 to 1973, up 6.5% in English last year over the year before—cf. Physics, where the number *dropped* 30% from 1965 to 1975—*ADE/ADFL*, p.67). But if departments don't move toward such a restriction, it will occur (is occurring) in other ways: students not applying to good schools, dropping out from graduate work, failing to find jobs after getting their Ph.D.'s. Needless to say, some means are less nasty than others, but we should understand that the debate is about means, not outcomes.

Hope and Marilyn Williamson recommend, as another strategy, combining teaching assistantships into full-time jobs for Ph.D.'s. "This simple action would reduce the size of graduate programs," says Williamson, *and* employ more Ph.D.'s (p.27). Yes, indeed. And Williamson is one of those who sees, in the job crisis and in such tactics as these, "a rare opportunity to raise the quality of the profession." I would amend this only by changing the word "opportunity" to "command." Yes, we will be raising our standards, like it or not, for whatever consolation that is.⁶

This outcome would be reached more systematically if we adopted an idea of Neal Woodruff's: a national quota system for graduate admissions. This would constitute an orderly retreat, led by the graduate departments—and would afford the rest of us an interesting spectacle, as those departments tried to agree amicably on the goring of one another's oxen. The upshot (in the unlikely event of such agreement) would differ only slightly from that of the other proposals.

Carl Woodring recommends something rather different—that we ease senior professors (especially the lazier and more senile among them [us?]) into partial early retirement, and extend the normal probationary period before tenure or termination beyond seven years. These measures, taken together, could keep more young faculty members in the profession without reducing the number of jobs for fresh Ph.D.'s. But they would in no way change the shape of our problem—and I needn't comment on the certain outcry against and resistance to both proposals.

I could go on, but need not. These are tactical suggestions, some better than others and all better than pure anarchy, for getting where we are almost certainly going: toward a smaller profession with fewer young people in it, and occupied more than we are now with instruction in reading and writing of kinds that our clientele finds practical. (John Gerber's plan for eventual prosperity includes this shift in our work, as well as much more teaching off campus, and

outside the B.A. program. Fine; but again, this strikes me as endorsing the inevitable.)

I must say that what we've seen so far of the profession's response to economic change makes me think pure anarchy more likely than any of the coordinated actions I've mentioned. It's seven years since the job market in English collapsed, and that market is still the main agency for identifying the many who will be denied entry to the profession and the many others who will be forced out after losing one or two or three jobs. As I said a while back, initial graduate enrollments have actually been increasing during this period—not a cheering sign of the profession's will and ability to act as a body. So the painful adaptation is left to individuals—in the normal capitalist way. And they are doing what they can. Dropping out of graduate school, for one thing. While *admissions* went up 6.5% last year, *completions* of the Ph.D. *went down* 10%, and total graduate enrollments in English also declined. (Allan Cartter chooses to call this decline the "brighter side," and I guess he's right. He also concludes, from these figures, that "there is still considerable student demand for postbaccalaureate study, but less staying power beyond the master's level" [*ADE/ADFL*, p.61]. Apparently, by "staying power," he means the determination to commit economic suicide.) We're counting on young people to weed one another out, in the war of all against all. Most of them will go into other kinds of work, far less suited to their interests and skills than college teaching. There are stories in the *ADE/ADFL* collection of people making that adaptation—with "humor and ingenuity" according to Dorothy Harrison. She seems to be one of those optimists like the boy in the old story: when he found only a hunk of manure in his Christmas stocking, he concluded he's been given a horse, and set out looking for it.

Harrison points out that up to now most humanists have been "pocketed" in universities, to the detriment of the rest of society. "If students continue to flow through graduate schools in the next two decades, humanities doctorates will become more common in other sectors of American life, with advantage to the institutions which they serve and to the country as a whole" (p.68). A happy vision indeed: workers on the assembly line inspirited by Shakespeare's mighty iambic line, as intoned by their Ph.D. coworker; the used car lot transformed by the humane values of the Miltonist salesman; Platonic dialogue in the queue at the unemployment office.

I digress. And the point is not to mock Harrison, who is aware that some will think her a Pangloss, but to stress that the crisis in our field has causes beyond our control, and will almost certainly be resolved by processes in which we take only a rather passive role. Our profession—any profession—is organized well to certify our privileges and insulate us from the rigors of the market in good times, but not to defend us in bad times. (Remember, professional ideology declares us to be non-political.) Our future will feel as if it's being done to us, for the most part.

Not that all the acts will be personal decisions to drop out. There will of course be many institutional decisions that contribute more dramatically to the process. Last fall, 60,000 teachers did not return to their jobs,⁷ through no

choice of their own. New York City alone has laid off 15,000 in two years. In higher education, the agonies of CUNY have gotten most national publicity: last fall, establishment of tuition charges and admissions requirements ended an attempt there—admirable or quixotic, depending on your point of view—to equalize educational opportunity. And that decision was made not by teachers, but in effect by bankers. They will be doing much of our basic educational planning, I imagine, as the fiscal crisis of the state deepens. And helping them to shape the educational system will be powerful institutions of bourgeois hegemony, like the Carnegie Commission—with, for example, its recommendation that our policies de-emphasize the four-year college, and enhance what it appropriately calls "other channels—on-the-job-training, proprietary schools, apprenticeship programs, education in the military, off-campus extension work, and national service opportunities."⁸ Our course is being set, and not by ourselves.

So far I've accepted the framework supplied by Stephen Dresch, for thinking about our future. Socialist critics will remark that the analysis is rather undialectical. Indeed, I've made it sound as if iron economic law would grind out its results in a mechanistic way. History doesn't work like that. There are some large holes in my analysis, and I'll mention two.

First, although Dresch's forecast is more sophisticated than those of his predecessors, mainly by virtue of including a model of the economy and the work force, it does not attempt to anticipate dramatic changes in the economy itself. His is what the futurists call a surprise-free scenario—no wild economic fluctuation, no nuclear war, no environmental disaster, no basic change in our society. But all of these are at least possible, and the first—erratic change in the economic system—seems likely. For 40 some years, free enterprise has been in a continuing crisis: most obviously it cannot on its own operate at anywhere near capacity, or prevent intolerable inequality. If it were not for a vastly enlarged military establishment, according to some estimates, unemployment would still be at the level — about 25% —which was taken as evidence of total collapse in 1933.⁹

Warfare and welfare have been the capitalist remedies, along with a tremendous surge of neo-imperialism in the 50's and 60's, mainly through export of capital and gathering of profits abroad that have been unattainable at home. None of these remedies, I think, will work forever and they may be failing now. The costs of warfare and welfare have produced a "capital shortage" and a debt crisis that reach beyond the state, and into the private sector.

Some parts of the third world have defected from the capitalist system entirely, shrinking the outlets for capitalist expansion; while other parts are organizing—through resource cartels like OPEC and through proposals for debt moratoria—organizing politically to end their economic servitude. As a result, the so-called "Phillips Curve" (which models the trade-off, through Keynesian policies, between inflation and unemployment) has stopped functioning. The economic growth of the entire capitalist world is slowing down. And capitalism must grow or die. Furthermore, the crises threatened by capitalism's waste and its subordination

of resources to the profit motive, are still mainly to come. All this is a fulfillment, beyond anything Marx dreamt of, of his theory that under capitalism, as under all previous systems, the forces of production come into stark contradiction with the relations of production, until a new society is born within the old.

But—and here I come to the second flaw in my forecast for English in America —no contradiction shapes history independently of human effort. The situation I've been describing, like the one in our profession, is a fluid one, in which people can act to shape change. As I see it, the crisis of monopoly capitalism vs. liberal democracy is fatal, but by no means bound to produce democratic socialism—fascism is an equal possibility, and one that will be sought, whether they know its name or not, by many of the most powerful in our society. We, on the other side (I hope), need not stand by and watch our values defeated. But to do otherwise requires a political awareness and a political conception of ourselves and our work far beyond what the profession has now—only one of the contributors to *ADE/ADFL*, an unemployed ABD, was able to say that political and social action, finally is the only alternative to fatalistic retreat (George Karnezis, "A View from the Other Side," p.10).

What strategies make sense, for radicals in the profession? It's evident that if the analysis given here is right, we cannot be politically adequate to our own future if we restrict ourselves to local resistance against cutbacks or to pursuing narrow guild interests. A national union of college teachers might be a help— if it went beyond trade union consciousness—in fighting for the principle that education should be a universal right, rather than an adjunct to the class system and the needs of employers.

In addition, I think that there are important daily tasks for us: all the ones described in this news journal, for instance, and also directly teaching, in our colleges and out, a systematic understanding of capitalism and of the possibilities for a democratic society. I agree with Gramsci about the centrality of ideological institutions in holding an irrational system together by enlisting almost everybody in the "party" of the ruling class. Fighting for control of ideas and of these institutions is urgent, and possible. In my own teaching, anyhow, I've never experienced a time when there was so much unfocused malaise and distrust of capitalist institutions, so much desire to understand what's gone wrong with the old American project of development, and to know how we might replace it with a better one.

Notes

1. Urbana, Illinois: National Council of Teachers of English, 1971.
2. From 13% to 10% for men, and from 21% to 15% for women. Allan Cartter, "Statistical Trends," in *Employment and the Profession*, a special joint issue of the *ADE* and *ADFL Bulletins*, September, 1976, p.67. Hereafter, page references to this issue are in the text.
3. John Kenneth Galbraith, *The New Industrial State* (Boston: Houghton-Mifflin Company, 1967), p.238.

4. Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*.
5. "Educational Saturation: A Demographic-Economic Model," *AAUP Bulletin*, October, 1975.
6. I predict that this "raising of standards" will run right through the system: proficiency tests, minimum competency requirements, grade deflation, tighter admissions standards. E.g., for an account of how the University of Colorado used the decline in test scores and the perception of a literacy crisis to set a minimum SAT verbal score as requirement for admission, see Elissa S. Guralnick and Paul M. Levitt, "Improving Student Writing: A Case History," *College English*, January, 1977.
7. Council-Grams (National Council of Teachers of English), November, 1976, p.l.
8. Quoted in Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis, *Schooling in Capitalist America* (New York: Basic Books, 1976), p.208.
9. Douglas Dowd, *The Twisted Dream; Capitalist Development in the United States Since 1776*.



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