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Queens College, CUNY: The Queens English Project

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The Queens English Project (QEP) is a collaborative program designed to create a "bridge curriculum" in writing and reading between Queens College and selected "feeder" high schools in New York City's Queens County. Our purpose has been to improve the writing skills of college-bound high school students during their junior and senior years of secondary school and their freshman year in college. We have sought to develop a group of students who would enter college intensively trained in reading and writing skills and who might risk taking college courses that demand sophistication in these skills, courses that for several years have shown declining enrollments at Queens College. In the six years since it was first funded by the Fund for the Improvement of Post-Secondary Education (FIPSE), the Queens English Project has benefited from the support of virtually every constituency in secondary and higher education: college faculty members, chairpersons, and administrators; high school teachers, chairpersons, principals, district and city-wide supervisors; graduate student instructors; graduate and undergraduate tutors, as well as high school and college students.¹ And more than twelve years after the first conversations that led to its development, the Queens English Project remains a workable testament to the principles and results of spirited, professional collaboration.

Background

Queens College of the City University of New York is a commuter school. Most students who enroll as freshmen have attended one of ten feeder high schools. In examining the scores these

students received on the English Placement Test, and later on the CUNY Writing Assessment Test, we found that between forty and sixty percent of our entering students placed in the prefreshman writing course and that a substantial number were so deficient in their reading as to disable them in courses demanding careful and heavy reading. Our colleagues in the high schools supported this view and wanted to improve their students' training.

The Queens English Project had its genesis in two prior projects: Common Concerns of English Educators and CUNY's Open Admissions Program. In 1973, while meeting with a member of the college's secondary education department as part of the routine task of supervising student teachers, a high school English department chairperson asked why so many honors high school English students were placed in the basic, prefreshman English course. This simple question eventually led to a series of meetings with high school English chairpersons and college English and secondary education faculty members. Those early meetings were intense. The high school chairpersons were convinced that the college faculty members would blame them for failing to teach high school students to read and write effectively. The college faculty members, in turn, anxiously tried to avoid being blamed for maintaining unrealistic standards for incoming freshmen. Gradually, the joint efforts of the group (formalized in 1974 by a calendar of monthly meetings and called Common Concerns of English Educators) bore fruit. The results are best exemplified by an agenda of topics important to all teachers of English (e.g., "Exactly what do we mean when we say we teach English?") and a collaborative leadership, with a high school chairperson and a college faculty member as cochairs. After several years of meeting, talking, and establishing mutual respect and professional trust, we decided to figure out how we might both extend our collaboration to teachers and implement some of the innovative ideas we wanted to test out in our classrooms. We realized that we needed financial help. We spent

nearly a full year exploring and discussing a grant to expand our work, but we had trouble getting beyond the talking stage during that year.

Meanwhile, we had been working for more than six years with open admissions students at Queens College, directing our energies toward improving the chances of these basic readers and writers for success at our college. We experimented with teaching techniques; we read the available literature; we wrote articles; we developed special courses. One of these special courses designed for incoming freshmen was first offered in the summer of 1975. Thirty-two students who scored extremely low on our writing-reading placement tests were invited to participate in a program intended to improve their writing and reading skills so that they might begin the fall semester in English 110, the first of our required two-semester freshman sequence, instead of English 105, our prefreshman course. Students in that program wrote and read intensively every day. Tutors were available nine hours a week for individual tutoring. Class time was given over wholeheartedly to a carefully sequenced curriculum in writing and reading, and these activities proliferated. Student attendance during this six-week summer session was nearly perfect; student responses to the program were uniformly enthusiastic.

Finally, in December 1976, several Queens College faculty members attended a meeting of Networks, another FIPSE project, in Washington. At this conference, speech after speech and workshop after workshop reminded us that underpreparedness was to be expected of college-bound students. We considered carefully the ways that underpreparedness had become institutionalized, and we resolved to design a project in collaboration with our feeder high schools that would combine what we had learned through the Common Concerns and Open Admissions projects about teaching writing and reading. The convergence of these interests and components led us to apply to FIPSE for funding.

Objectives

We proposed to collaborate initially with the English departments of five representative “feeder” high schools--Beach Channel, Flushing, Grover Cleveland, John Adams, and John Bowne--to “deinstitutionalize” remediation at the college level and to demonstrate the educational, social, and financial benefits of a productive professional relationship between a college and the secondary schools whose graduates constitute a sizable percentage of its annual enrollment. We aimed to develop an English curriculum that would span the third and fourth years of secondary school and the courses in which a student acquired the basic skills now required for graduation from college. We recognized that such a curriculum might well be replicated at other colleges and schools to produce similar results: increases in student proficiency in writing and reading, appreciable gains in student sensitivity to the lifelong pleasures of these particular skills and to the humanistic disciplines in general, brighter student prospects for participating in the verbal dimensions of American experience, and, with all this, a corresponding reinvigoration of faculty morale.

Graduates of the five cooperating high schools constitute a cross-section of students entering the college each year: most come from lower- and middle-class working families; many are first-generation college students. And it has been our experience that most were generally neither very active nor energetic readers and writers. The Queens English Project set out to change these attitudes by developing a detailed sequence of interrelated curriculum models for teaching writing and reading more effectively throughout the “bridge” years of high school and college.

After numerous conversations, the founding QEP participants agreed on the following

specific objectives for our collective work:

1. To reduce the number of students from the “feeder” high schools who would be required to complete so-called remedial courses before enrolling in Queens College’s two-semester sequence of required composition (a decline that would decrease the cost of remediation to the college and increase the college’s retention rate)
2. To return to the secondary schools the concentrated activities of readying students to do college-level work.
3. To minimize the personal ‘costs’ of remediation (by making students more familiar with the discipline and pleasures of writing and reading in their high school classes and less likely to suffer from the anxieties, embarrassments, and incapacities that attend a lack of preparation for college courses)
4. To use reliable information to build realistic expectations for student performance in both basic and elective courses
5. To help students acquire the skills that will enable them to enjoy the rewards of more challenging elective courses
6. To enable students to develop a greater sensitivity to the many ways language can serve various personal and professional interests
7. To reverse the decline in faculty morale, occasioned by a lack of confidence in teaching writing and reading to underprepared students
8. To have college faculty members work productively with their colleagues in the secondary schools to expand their collective knowledge of how, what, when, and where students learn to read and write, as well as to identify and implement the abilities needed to teach these enabling activities

9. To formulate a curriculum considerate of student accomplishment rather than error
10. To articulate the rationale and to coordinate the instructional techniques and curricular materials that lead to more successful and replicable teaching and learning.
11. To institutionalize articulation between the college and the secondary schools, thereby creating a more spirited community of intellectual inquiry in which professional collaboration can flourish.

Structure and Procedures

These are the main activities through which we pursued our objectives.

Teacher Seminars

A significant outcome of the QEP was institutionalizing high school-college articulation at both administrative and instructional levels. We accomplished this double articulation through carefully planned collaborative seminars, whose participants included administrators and teachers from the high schools as well as the college: chairs of high school English departments, participating high school English teachers, directors of the Queens College Writing Program and the Academic Skills and Resource Center, teachers of college courses in the required freshman composition sequence, and doctoral candidates at the Graduate Center, CUNY, who were engaged to establish a writing-reading laboratory in each of the participating high schools. Our seminars tested and adjusted the model curriculum developed by the grant committee; it was therefore essential that they include those who would have a primary connection with students in both the high schools and the college.

Members of the seminars were always active participants rather than observers.

Participants entered a process that engaged them in a sequence of reading-writing activities that included, among other exercises, free writing, writing and rewriting whole structures (such as sentences, fables, and academic essays), responding to the writing of peers and students, discovering syntax, and observing “live” classrooms. In summary, participants in the seminars focused on the whole piece of writing as well as on its abstract and concrete elements. They read published and student writing to elicit ideas about student writing as literature, responded to writing by making observations and inferences, and repeated the few activities central to developing skill as a reader and writer. They also practiced a friendly interchange about skills and attitudes with colleagues who taught students at higher and lower levels; created daily strategies and assignments for a learning-centered classroom; erased arbitrary distinctions between high school English and freshman composition, turning eleventh- and twelfth-grade English and freshman composition at Queens College into a continuing sequence; and devised valuable connections between teaching writing and teaching reading and grammar.

Department chairs, teachers, laboratory supervisors, and members of the grant committee attended the seminars for one year. As new schools joined the project, new seminars were organized. By consistently requiring the attendance of chairpersons as central figures in the unfolding seminar dramas, we produced a cadre of trained administrators who could be counted on to do two things: induce change in other members of their staffs and influence principals to designate a portion of their budgets to the continuation of the project after external support for the project came to an end.

Seminars were held weekly at the college in the late afternoon, after the end of the high school day. During federal funding, all participants (except the members of the grant committee) were paid stipends for attending; after federal funding, the stipends were discontinued.

Tutors attended a separate training seminar led by a member of the grant committee.

Articulated Curricula

The grant committee devised a provisional curriculum based on Marie Ponsot's syllabus for basic writing and adapted to the particularities of a school's circumstances by its participating teachers. The curriculum teaches reading and writing through whole structures, that is, units of discourse, complete in themselves, that instruct or delight readers. The curriculum reduces drill work and other exercises that tend to fragment reading and writing into isolated and meaningless skills. Through prolific reading and writing, the curriculum aims to teach students to read and write habitually and competently. Reading textbooks and writing exposition are a significant, though not an early, feature of the curriculum. We found it inefficient to separate the teaching of reading from the teaching of writing; we found it efficient to teach both subjects through the identification of abstract and concrete elements in whole structures with such impressive forms as riddles, fables, aphorisms, parables, and anecdotes. After mastering these structures, the students applied them in writing essays, proposing ideas (often abstract) and supporting them with concrete examples, anecdotes, comparative analyses, and so on. Our use of these concepts was strengthened by the influence of ideas discovered in the work of Josephine Miles, Northrop Frye, and Leo Rockas.

The collaborative seminar, then, became a place to identify recognizable written structures and to develop day-to-day strategies with which to teach these structures to students. Some of the principles underlying these pedagogic strategies should be noted:

- Writing extends and develops thought.
- Reading is inseparable from writing.

- Continuing practice strengthens the learner.
- Writers identify what has been done well by the responses of their peers.
- Comments on what is read aloud take the form of observations; writers revise according to the inferences they draw from the collected observations.

These principles were arrived at in the seminar inductively only after the group had worked together as a writing-reading class. Participating teachers then adjusted the syllabi to the needs of high school and college students.

Laboratories in the High Schools

Principals and chairpersons in the high schools committed themselves to arrangements of space, scheduling, and staff assignments to accommodate a writing-reading laboratory in each participating school. Laboratories were staffed by college-trained tutors--undergraduate and graduate students at Queens College who were supervised, during the years of FIPSE funding, by doctoral candidates studying at the Graduate Center, CUNY. After funding had ended, the services of doctoral student supervisors were discontinued, and each high school supported a reduced class load for one of its own teachers to supervise its laboratory and coordinate tutoring. Because individual attention is a crucial aid to mastering writing-reading skills, especially among those served normally by large, impersonal institutions, our curriculum integrated weekly small-group or one-on-one tutoring for every student as a regular feature of the project.

The way undergraduate and graduate tutors worked varied from one high school to another. The chief patterns of instruction follow, with some schools combining two or more of these practices:

1. Two to four participated in every QEP classroom, working with class-room teachers to

help carry out the syllabus, lead small groups, and respond to student writing. Small groups enabled every student to read his or her own writing at every class meeting and get responses from four or five peers, in addition to a tutor, and allowed every student to present an immediate observation--usually in written form--on the essay or literary work under class discussion.

2. The English class was frequently divided into halves, one-half remaining in the classroom with the teacher, the other attending the lab with tutors. Through carefully prepared syllabi and day-to-day collaboration between tutors and teachers (usually practiced on the fly in school corridors), both groups covered identical work, with students alternating from lab to classroom each week.

3. A laboratory was put into place in a convenient, attractive location in each participating high school. Supervised by doctoral candidates, the labs were staffed by tutors. Students in QEP classes arrived by appointment before or after the school day or for scheduled visits during class time, having been excused on a regular weekly schedule from their English classes to meet with tutors in the lab.

4. The laboratory was open to any high school student--not only those in designated QEP classes--having difficulty learning to read and write effectively. In some schools students learning English as a second language came to the lab for help.

Wherever possible, we attempted to place laboratory tutors who were graduates of our participating high schools in their "home" schools. Thus they often had the advantage of firsthand knowledge of the unique circumstances of that school, its students and faculty. The collegiality of such tutors presented high school students with a live and highly accessible model: a college student often just a few years older than they and from their own neighborhood

interested in reading and writing and who exhibited the rewards of these activities.

Tutors were trained in the curriculum and in the decorum of collaborating with high school teachers. They were paid approximately the minimum hourly wage for time spent tutoring, traveling to and from the schools, and attending training sessions. Graduate students received a small supplement.

Chief among those who benefited from the participation of tutors and doctoral fellows in the high schools were the tutors and fellows themselves. Asked to evaluate their experiences in the Queens English Project, many wrote that the project profoundly altered the way they thought about writing, the teaching of writing, and the acts of mind involved in learning.

Staffing

College faculty members. Six college faculty members wrote the proposal for the QEP, obtained FIPSE funding, designed the project, and administered it. They formed the grant committee, under the coordination of a director and codirector. They were Janet Brown, director of testing and research (secondary education dept.); Judith Fishman, director of the Writing Skills Workshop (English dept.); Betsy Kaufman, director of the Academic Skills and Resource Center (Secondary Education dept.) and now dean of students; and Donald McQuade, Marie Ponsot, and Sandra Schor, all of the English department. Each received a reduced teaching or administrative load to allow time for his or her QEP duties. The committee was assisted by a part-time administrative assistant.

CUNY doctoral fellows. During the first two years of funding, a doctoral fellow--a candidate for the PhD in English at the Graduate Center--was appointed to establish and supervise a writing-reading laboratory in each of the five participating high schools. All doctoral

fellows participated in the teacher seminars.

Undergraduate and graduate tutors. Undergraduate and graduate students at Queens College were screened, trained in the QEP curriculum, and placed as tutors in the high schools according to the needs of students in a particular school (see “Laboratories in the High Schools,” above).

High school chairpersons. The project required that the chairperson of the English department in each participating high school become an active member of the teaching seminar, doing all writing and reading assignments, responding to the work of peers, and devising strategies for instruction.

High school teachers. The number of teachers participating in each high school varied from one to eight. With five participating high schools, the total number of teachers in a given year ranged from twelve to sixteen. All were experienced writing teachers; all volunteered to learn a new curriculum geared to strengthening the writing and reading skills of students; all participated in the teaching seminars. During the first two years of funding, each participating chairperson, teacher, and doctoral fellow received a stipend. Attendance at the seminars was excellent. Teachers wrote the syllabi that were finally put into use in their classrooms.

High school and college administrators. The QEP committee made a point of arranging frequent lunches, conferences, and evaluation sessions attended by the superintendent of high schools in the borough of Queens, principals of participating high schools, the provost and assistant provost of the college, the chair of the college English department, chairs of high school English departments, and members of the grant committee. The climate of collegiality that these regular occasions created between the high schools and the college finally broke down many of the barriers that had separated them and upset the hierarchical biases that have always existed

between secondary and postsecondary institutions. They discovered that they had the same students, separated by a few months in age or overlapping in age, and that educators at the two levels were in fact counterparts of each other. The growing successes of the project in the schools and its national prominence through FIPSE soon became a shared pride among the various regional administrators, who looked with respect on this important example of articulation between urban institutions.

Funding

Federal funding. In 1978-80 the QEP operated under an award totaling \$218,293 from the Fund for the Improvement of Post-Secondary Education: in 1978-79, \$98,293; 1979-80, \$120,000.

Disbursements were chiefly for the following: the salary of a part-time administrative assistant; adjunct replacements for the six college members of the grant committee; stipends for high school chairpersons, teachers, and doctoral candidates to participate in the teacher seminars; hourly wages for undergraduate and graduate tutors, covering tutoring, training, and travel time to and from the high schools; testing and evaluation materials; and joint conferences on the progress of the project in the schools for high school and college administrators.

Post-FIPSE funding. After federal funding ended, the Queens English Project became institutionalized under local support. From 1980 to 1984 the project continued in the schools under collaborative funding by the New York City Board of Education and Board of Higher Education.

In the first two years, the superintendent of high schools in the borough of Queens budgeted approximately \$10,000 per year for tutors to continue their work in the schools. At the

same time the superintendent authorized an expenditure of another \$20,000 per year to apply and extend the syllabus and principles of the project to a writing-across-the-curriculum program in Queens. The Board of Higher Education, through the office of the provost at Queens College, absorbed the cost of a reduced load for one college faculty member to continue as director of the project.

From 1982 to 1984 the superintendent no longer provided funding from the central budget. Each participating school had to support the continuation of the project out of its own discretionary funds. Three high school principals (two former participants and one new one) agreed to undertake this responsibility and budgeted somewhat less than \$10,000 to pay for tutors in their schools. The college continued to support the cost of a college-based QEP director, paying a \$10,000 adjunct salary for part-time duties. Local funding provided no stipends for attendance at teacher seminars.

Problems and Prospects

With the withdrawal of stipends for teachers and chairpersons who attended the seminars, attendance fell off sharply, and within a short time the teacher seminars disbanded.

Undergraduate and graduate tutors continued to be trained in the principles of the QEP by the project director, but the absence of a teacher-development program dissipated their contribution, rendering their work in the schools a general tutorial service. Tutors were asked to strengthen the skills of students whose teachers had no training in the QEP curriculum.

In 1982, however, the Teacher Center program of the United Federation of Teachers invited a member of the original grant committee to give an in-service course based on QEP principles. That course has been offered each semester since, though attendees have chiefly been

elementary and junior high school teachers.

A conference for teachers of writing, conducted under QEP sponsorship and held in April 1984, attracted teachers from all levels; a permanent committee has been organized to continue the discussion of QEP principles in later conferences and workshops. In addition, the QEP syllabus has become central to English instruction in the new demonstration school of Queens College, Townsend Harris High School; teachers there receive training through a special seminar conducted by faculty members experienced in the project. More recently, one of the directors of the QEP has taught the undergraduate methods course in English in the secondary education department at Queens College. Faculty members regularly assigned to that course have taught a section of freshman composition instead.

Several years beyond federal funding, then, the Queens English Project continues to help develop more fluent writers and readers in the secondary schools--and in the elementary and junior high schools--of New York City and in several adjacent suburban school districts. From all accounts the principles of the project still help nourish the professional lives of the teachers who took the risks necessary to ensure its success. But from this now fairly distant perspective, we can better view--and perhaps evaluate--the problems that still nag us and the potential that still excites us.

All of us who participated in the Queens English Project thought we knew—going in—how complex a project we had designed. But none of us could ever have imagined how much time we would spend on the administrative and pedagogical details that continually affect literally hundreds of people--many of whom face quite different anxieties and fears in each phase of the project's work. We would strongly recommend as a fundamental requirement for designing--or replicating--any program as complex as this one that the schedule allow sufficient

time for administrative change and pedagogic adaptation. The institutional change we have encouraged simply took longer to prepare for--and effect--than we had anticipated.

Large collaborative programs like the Queens English Project, which necessarily contain many strands, require shared funding. Each actively interested institution and professional agency must underscore its endorsement by providing enough funds for faculty released time to permit the training, implementation, support structure, evaluation, and research indispensable to produce lasting change in the high schools and colleges. Appropriate stipends to ensure professional treatment of all participants are fundamental to the project's success. The QEP was fortunate in this respect during the time of federal funding. When funding ended, local monies only partially supported our work. Despite our efforts from the outset to secure continued funding, the program was substantially altered by the reduced support. In addition, our faculty participants overestimated what they thought they could accomplish with the released time available to them. The project succeeded because of the unusual professional and personal commitments and sacrifices of those who participated in it.

Yet for all its success, the Queens English Project remains a testament to the stark reality that programs are, finally, people. Convinced that the project had been institutionalized, its success ensured, many of the project's architects--in both the secondary schools and the college--gradually began to explore other professional interests. The complex web spun by our mutual interests and collaborative efforts has frayed at least at the edges, if not at the center. The problem is nothing that more money alone could fix. What the project needs now is a rededicated collaborative effort to redefine--and energize--its goals and procedures. And a truly collaborative enterprise is the best reassurance that such an effort is both practicable and desirable. In such a guilt-free, nonhierarchical professional environment, the questions we as

high school and college teachers respectfully ask each other and ourselves will change as we discover what it is that we know and what it is that we now need to ask.

For a copy of the final report of the Queens English Project, readers are referred to the Fund for the Improvement of Post-Secondary Education, Grant Number G007804605.

¹ The Queens English Project has been a collective professional enterprise. We would like to acknowledge the presence of all our colleagues' work in this essay, and in particular that of Janet Brown, Judith Fishman, Betsy Kaufman, and Marie Ponsot. The project's success has depended on the continued support of our founding group of teachers and administrators: Louis Accera, Melinda Altman, Shirley Budhos, Robert Byrd, Saul Cohen, George Cohn, James Costaris, Eunice Danto, Jean Edison, Beverly Fenig, Carl Field, Eleanor Friedman, Robert Fullilove, Milton Gordon, Virginia Gray, William Hamovitch, Eileen Hudson, Lois Hughson, Jack Jacobson, Jay Kaplan, Myron Liebrader, Mitchell Levenberg, Aaron Maloff, Maureen McFeely, Neddy McMills, Esther Meisell, Stephanie Medina, Richard Mikita, Saul Novack, Patricia Owen, Eileen Petruzillo, Nathaniel Quinones, Robert Rappaport, Charles Roemer, Raymond Schaevitz, Sarajean Sherk, Nathaniel Siegel, Willard Smith, Madeline Staffenell, Marvin Taylor, Steven Tribus, Philip Vitali, Paula Weil, and Dominick Yezzo, as well as the many talented undergraduate tutors who helped make writing pleasurable for many high school students.