

## English Education

### Our Background, Mission and Vision

Ever read a poem or a story and come to your English class wanting to share your responses? Also remember being filled with curiosity about what your fellow students would have to say? But in the midst of your enthusiasm, the teacher suddenly shut down discussion, making it clear what the “correct” interpretation of the story should be. Similarly, when it came time to write, the teacher-directed routines continued. While you had a number of things you wanted to explore and express, the teacher only droned on, emphasizing proper form and correct grammar, ignoring your concerns and interests. There was always a right answer and most of the time was spent getting ready for some examination. We hope your experience with English has **not** been exclusively with such teacher-centered instruction. All too often, however, students suffer through English lessons that wring the life out of reading and composition. Very little joy or inquiry is present and certainly in this commonsense world of education there is no time for creative drama or student initiated projects.

The English Education Program at NYU’s Steinhardt School of Education has always stood for something different. We have been committed to cultivating teachers who want to make literacy flourish in their classrooms—from *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* to *The Crucible*, from autobiographical pieces to essays exploring today’s commercial pressures on youth. By truly making English a space where readings come alive and students investigate issues of personal and social significance, teachers extend and refine the very communication skills that everyone seems to be worrying about these days.

Thus as we see it, an important goal for us as English teachers is to know our students in the context of a rich and complex world of information, both literary and expository. This allows us to plan engaging lessons that include challenging material and purposeful activities. In this way our students develop both confidence and competence, seeing their own responsibility to participate energetically in our ongoing social democracy. Yet beyond preparing teachers who are dedicated to making a difference in the literate lives of their students, historically NYU’s Program in English Education has been a leader in

helping to theorize and construct dynamic, collaboratively negotiated methods of teaching and learning in literature, writing, and the language arts.

In the 1940s, we were led by Louise M. Rosenblatt, whose *Literature as Exploration* (1938) provided a groundbreaking perspective on the reading and teaching of Literature. Literature study, of course, has always figured centrally in the English classroom, but prior to Rosenblatt's powerful ideas about the *transactional* process that occurs when one reads a text, English instruction was mostly characterized by a conventional search for "correct readings"-- readings that, of course, were established by the teacher or some other "expert" critic. Rosenblatt dramatically shifted our perspective on reading and thus on what English teachers might do. By demonstrating how each reader was responsible for enacting a reading *response*, she showed that it was the teacher's task to help evoke these personal responses that in turn, through the give and take of discussion, would evolve into more complex *interpretations*. This process of social reading allowed students to explore the worlds of inner and outer experience in a safe environment, one in which a variety of meanings and their consequences might be shared and questioned. In this way, the English classroom proved to be a continuing experiment, one in which democratic scripts and values were tested, practiced, and strengthened.

Another early educational leader in our Program was Lou LaBrant. Her work complemented Rosenblatt's by connecting the process of student understanding and meaning-making with writing instruction. Just as reading demanded that the teacher be open and supportive of student response, so writing required authentic and creative assignments, real audiences, and a process that allowed meaning-making to evolve through social conversation and feedback. Together, Rosenblatt and LaBrant paved the way for English teachers to take student voices seriously, so that the English curriculum might be a place where literature and other media served as a bridge to pursue students concerns, even as communicative competence and critical skills are being developed. In a negotiated curriculum and classroom an English teacher is responsible for much more than just providing students with access to the canon and some privileged view of "culture." The task equally involves validating the various experiences students bring with them to the learning situation, while encouraging a wide range of cultural contacts and *transactions* from adolescent literature to the latest rap lyrics.

Over the past thirty years our English Education Program has also been shaped by its close association with outstanding scholars in England and Australia, most notably, James Britton, Nancy Martin, Geoffrey Summerfield, and Douglas Barnes in Great Britain and Garth Boomer in Australia. Their research, writing and teaching contributed

to refining our approaches to the English curriculum. In *Language and Learning*, James Britton provided a seminal theoretical frame for understanding the important role of active language use on the part of all learners, both in terms of narrative imagining and analytical inquiry. Nancy Martin helped us recognize how writing and the composing process was a crucial component of instruction across the curriculum, while Douglas Barnes continued to illustrate the inestimable value of social and critical exploratory talk in learning. Our association with Garth Boomer continues as an inspiration as he clarified the negotiated nature of the English curriculum in ways that located it in the center of the democratic enterprise. Educators such as these (including Geoffrey Summerfield, Gordon Hodgeon, Barbara Davies, John Dixon, and Denys Harding) played significant roles in the direction of our Study Abroad Program which began in 1975, and we were also pleased to welcome a number of them as visiting faculty, who spoke during our Summer Conferences at Washington Square and taught summer courses for us.

Today's faculty carry on this tradition of English teaching and learning that focuses on mediating the world of the text with the world of the student. We are proud to promote the progressive views of English articulated at the 1966 Dartmouth Conference and subsequently expressed in John Dixon's *Growth through English*. Together, our three senior faculty members have had more than a century's experience teaching English and educating teachers. Their teaching and scholarly work has been devoted to the proposition that a professional interest in teaching a subject can only proceed from ongoing reflection into what it means to learn that subject from a student's point of view. [John Mayher](#) and [Marilyn Sobelman](#) in particular have focused on ways teachers might transcend conventional teacher-centered approaches to instruction and curriculum organization. John's book, *Uncommon Sense* (1990), encourages teachers at all levels to recognize the unfounded assumptions that underlie so many unproductive classroom practices, while Marilyn's *Inquiry into Teaching & Learning* (2002) establishes the basis for the foundational course for all students in the Department of Teaching & Learning. [Gordon Pradl](#)'s *Literature for Democracy: Reading as a Social Act* (1996) has extended the work of Louise Rosenblatt, and Gordon has also edited the selected essays of James Britton, *Prospect and Retrospect* (1982). The program is also fortunate to have [Sarah Beck](#) who brings new perspectives on literacy research, including her concern for how academic literacy develops, especially among inner city youth. Finally, Maureen Barbieri, the author of *Sounds from the Heart: Learning to Listen to Girls*, adds a particular expertise in helping the program address the concern middle schools and their students.

The community of English education at NYU would not be complete without its group of dedicated and tireless adjuncts: Tim Fredrick, Pat Juell, Rebecca Packer, Susan Schlechter, Susan Sutton, and Cynthia Shor. Rebecca and Cynthia have worked in supporting poetry and creative writing, Susan Schlechter has been especially helpful in advocating for gender equity, and Pat has contributed greatly to our efforts to improve writing instruction. Tim and Susan Sutton have helped reframe our methods courses and student teaching seminars. In tandem, undergraduates, characterized by their having been inspired by their own “meaning-centered” secondary English teachers, masters and doctoral students provide a place where the English classroom can be questioned and re-visioned, where old texts join with new, and language both spoken and written is honored as the most powerful tool for realizing the occasions and opportunities of our private lives and our public democracy.