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The Selection and Organization of Content for Secondary English: Sources for Teachers' Knowledge¹

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Although factors such as district and state guidelines, textbooks, and school or departmental policies necessarily affect the nature of the English curriculum in secondary school (Barnes, Barnes, & Clarke, 1984; Hawthorne, 1988; Protherough, 1989), it is a teacher's own knowledge and beliefs concerning the teaching of English that continues to exert a major influence on the particular version of English appearing in any given classroom. This central core of the knowledge of teachers of English includes their purposes for teaching English, their curricular knowledge of language and literature, and their knowledge and beliefs about students' abilities and interests—all components of teachers' pedagogical content knowledge (Shulman, 1987). Yet how do beginning teachers of English develop this knowledge? And what role does professional preparation play in the construction of pedagogical content knowledge?

One way to investigate the influence of professional coursework on the knowledge of beginning English teachers involves contrasting teachers with and without teacher preparation. Because numerous research studies have shown that teachers attribute most of their professional knowledge to student teaching, it becomes difficult to disentangle the effects of coursework from classroom experience as sources of learning to teach. On the other hand, teachers who enter teaching without professional preparation have only their own experience from which to learn, and so contrasting them with "prepared" teachers is one way to help clarify what value, if any, is added by professional coursework.

In this article, I contrast the knowledge and beliefs concerning one aspect of curricular knowledge, the selection and organization of content, held by six first-year English teachers, three of whom graduated from a strong program of teacher education and three of whom entered teaching without professional preparation. The two groups of teachers in this study differed in their beliefs about the appropriate content for

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secondary English and how that content should be organized. These two groups also had in mind quite different kinds of students when they completed a task calling for an instructional plan.

Theoretical Framework

I have drawn my theoretical framework from the emerging work on the knowledge base of teaching (Shulman, 1987; Shulman, 1986). Research on teachers' subject matter knowledge reveals that teachers also hold more subject-specific knowledge about teaching particular subject matter, termed pedagogical content knowledge. The purpose of the larger study from which I have drawn this analysis was to investigate the sources of pedagogical content knowledge among first-year English teachers.

Beginning teachers can draw upon a variety of sources as they construct their knowledge and beliefs about teaching English. Potential sources include teachers' own apprenticeships of observation as students (Lortie, 1975), their subject matter knowledge, their classroom teaching experiences, colleagues, and professional preparation. Subject-specific coursework, such as "Curriculum and Instruction in English" or "Methods of Teaching Writing," represent the component of teacher preparation most logically connected to the development of pedagogical content knowledge. Relatively little research exists, however, on the influence of subject-specific coursework on prospective English teachers (O'Donnell, 1979); the literature consists primarily of surveys to professors asking what is or should be taught in English methods courses (Quisenberry, 1981) or prescriptions for what should be taught.

Methodology

This research used case studies as its purpose was not to generalize across all teachers with and without teacher education but to build a theoretical framework concerning the sources of pedagogical content knowledge. The informants for this study were six first year English teachers. Four of the six possessed B.A.'s in English or comparative literature from elite colleges or universities, while a fifth teacher switched her college major from English to journalism. The sixth teacher was completing a doctorate in literature at the time of the study. Three of the teachers, Megan, Steven, and Vanessa, graduated from the same program of teacher education, while the other three, Jake, Kate, and Lance, entered teaching without formal professional preparation. Two of the three graduates of teacher education taught at suburban public high schools, while two of the three teachers without teacher education taught at private schools. Vanessa, who graduated from teacher edu-

cation, and Jake, who did not, taught at the same private school, which allowed for one instance in which teaching context was controlled.

The study used five in-depth, structured interviews and classroom observations of a unit of instruction as sources of data on the teachers' knowledge and beliefs. Three of the interviews included structured tasks. In the interview drawn upon most extensively for this analysis, I asked teachers to plan three hypothetical courses: a general track ninth-grade English class; a tenth-grade composition course; and a college preparatory eleventh grade American literature class. During the interview teachers talked about their goals for the courses, their concerns about teaching the courses, and their expectations of what students might know or find difficult. Teachers were also asked about the content they would select for the course and how they would organize that content. Teachers selected texts from a hypothetical bookroom list² and critiqued a small sample of textbooks. All interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Data for this study also included five hours of classroom observations for five of the six teachers. Observations sampled a unit of instruction and were preceded by interviews with the teachers.

Finally, data were collected on the subject-specific coursework taken by the graduates of teacher education. Data included observations of two quarters of "Curriculum and Instruction in English" and interviews with the professor and teaching assistants associated with this course (See Grossman, in press).

All interview data were coded according to category of knowledge and sources of knowledge, when identified; coding categories were developed from the conceptual framework guiding this study. The first round of data analysis took the individual teacher as the unit of analysis and resulted in extended case studies of the six teachers. A second round of analysis looked across individual cases within each of the two groups of teachers, identifying patterns in the pedagogical content knowledge held by the teachers and the sources of that knowledge. The final cross-case analysis looked across the two groups of teachers.

² *The Scarlet Letter*, *Spoon River Anthology*, *A Separate Peace*, *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, *Old Man and the Sea*, *The Sound and the Fury*, *Cannery Row*, *The Contender*, *Catcher in the Rye*, *Norton Anthology of Poetry*, *Julius Caesar*, *Grapes of Wrath*, *Points of View* (short story anthology), *Introduction to the Short Story*, *Walden*, *The Crucible*, *Great Expectations*, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, *The Unvanquished*, *Paradise Lost*, *Hamlet*, *Native Son*, *Last of the Mohicans*, *My Antonia*, *Dandelion Wine*, *Things Fall Apart*, *Jane Eyre*, *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf*, *The Awakening*, *The Woman Warrior*, *The Outsiders*, *Long Day's Journey into Night*, *Fahrenheit 451*, *Farewell to Arms*, *Moby Dick*, *Billy Budd and Other Stories*, *King Lear*, *Streetcar Named Desire*, *Black Boy*, *Pride and Prejudice*, *Animal Farm*, *Reflections on a Gift of Watermelon Pickle*, *Death of a Salesman*, and *Huckleberry Finn*.

The beginning teachers included in this study are not typical, as all six teachers were academically very successful and well prepared in their subject matter (Kerr, 1983; Schlechty & Vance, 1983). The atypicality of the teachers, however, has theoretical advantages. By holding subject matter knowledge and teaching experience relatively constant, the research was designed to discover what, if anything, subject-specific coursework could contribute to the pedagogical content knowledge of prospective teachers who were already well prepared in their subject matter.

Selection and Organization of Content: Ninth-Grade English

Teachers' knowledge and understanding of the curriculum of a hypothetical general-track, ninth-grade English class proved to be a strategically valuable focus for investigating the nature and sources of pedagogical content knowledge, as ninth-grade English has no disciplinary analogue in the college curriculum. The teachers' goals for this class generally mirrored their more general conceptions regarding the purposes for teaching secondary English and reflected the differences in preparation for teaching between the two groups. All three graduates of teacher education stated that they would focus primarily on the writing process and would organize the class according to the development of students' writing. In contrast, the three teachers without teacher education planned to organize the course around the study of literature (see Table 1).

Megan, one of the graduates of teacher education, commented on her emphasis on writing in this course:

Start out writing and bring in readings that are related to what kind of writing they're doing . . . start with stuff they've done before and they feel comfortable with, like maybe letters or journal entries, things like that. Writing about personal stuff and experiences and descriptions, and read some of those kinds of things, and comparing them . . . and then move into description and then move into arguing a little bit, and comparing some things.

Two of the teachers without professional preparation suggested that they would organize the course around the construct of genre in literature. Kate commented that the structure of the course might be somewhat "haphazard," as students would be "dabbling" in different genres. Lance first considered focusing on a "typology" of different genres and structures of literature, but later decided to organize his course around the development of the novel:

Well, I'd probably do two kinds of themes. One is structural themes, like what's a novel, what's a short story, or what's a play and what's a tragedy versus just any old kind of play. And then

Table 1
Primary Goals for Ninth Grade English

	Teacher ed.	Non-teacher ed.
Focus on writing	3	0
Focus on literature	0	3

also within those broad structural limitations, talk about, well I might continue more with genres, like within the novel, different epistolary, novels, and early novels, modern novels, stuff like that. I would definitely try to present some kind of huge typology—different genres and structures for literature.

As the teachers held different underlying purposes for this course, it is perhaps not surprising that they also selected different texts. Certain texts, such as *To Kill a Mockingbird*, and *Reflections of a Gift of Watermelon Pickle*, were selected only by graduates of teacher education, while other texts, such as *Great Expectations*, were chosen only by teachers without teacher education. The teacher education graduates had twice as much agreement concerning the choice of texts among themselves as did the other three teachers (see Table 2).

The degree to which teachers' selections of texts overlapped can be considered as one indicator of possible consensus concerning the content of a general track ninth-grade English class. According to this indicator, the graduates held a more common understanding about the texts they would consider appropriate for ninth graders.

The differences in text selections, however, also reveal the different grounds on which the teachers based their decisions. Steven, Megan, and Vanessa, the graduates of teacher education, used their general understanding of students' interests and abilities, and the likely diversity of these factors, in making curricular choices. Both Steven and Megan focused upon the description of the class as "general track" and worried about the degree of motivation and variety of ability levels likely to exist among the hypothetical students. Megan and Vanessa each addressed the issue of possible motivation for reading. Megan commented, "They're a pretty low ability level and it'd have to be something they're interested in and they're going to want to finish," while Vanessa considered a similar issue:

I mean, 90% of the kids like *To Kill a Mockingbird* or *Mice and Men*. But things they have difficulty with, it's hard for them to accept it, and if they've already not accepted it, then it's really hard to get anything done with it.

In contrast, Jake and Lance used disciplinary concerns, such as the

Table 2
Patterns of Inter-Group Agreement on Selection of Texts

	9th grade	American lit.
Within teacher ed.	12	10
Within non-teacher ed.	6	11

literary worth of texts or cohesiveness within a body of literature, when making their choices. In including *Great Expectations* in his list, Jake described it as "one of the greatest classics of all times." Lance included texts almost solely according to disciplinary concerns, choosing texts that were central to the development of the novel. When asked what he would include if he could choose any text he wanted, Lance replied, "I'd want to choose something continental, but everything else is American, Anglo-American, so I don't know if I would do it or not."

The teachers' responses to planning this ninth-grade English course suggest that they hold differing knowledge and beliefs regarding the nature of English curriculum. The teachers differed in the relative emphasis they placed on writing and literature, the organization of material, and their criteria for selection of texts.

Selection and Organization of Content: American Literature

American literature differs from ninth-grade English in that it does have a disciplinary analogue in the college curriculum. The teachers' plans for this course, while still reflecting their underlying conceptions of the purposes for teaching secondary English, also responded to the disciplinary construct.

The two groups of teachers again differed in their goals for and organization of this course. The graduates of teacher education still saw the development of writing ability as the central purpose of the course, while the teachers without teacher education wanted to expose students to the different periods in American literature; Jake said he would "hit the classics," or as Lance commented, "hit the main books." Steven, one of the teacher education graduates, argued that the coherence of the course would reside in the development of writing ability, rather than in the study of literature:

We'll deal with this book and this idea in this book, but really our main object is to get you to write better and that's what I'm going to be working on . . . If you look at the whole year, I mean there isn't a whole lot of continuity between these various books that I teach or these concepts or ideas that I try to stress in the

course of a unit, but if you look at their writing, that's where things begin to fall into place.

Two of the graduates of teacher education planned to teach the course thematically, while the other four teachers all planned a chronological organization. The teacher's decisions about how to organize the course reflect their underlying conceptions of English as a school subject and the different grounds on which they based their decisions, as the comments of Megan and Lance indicate. In arguing for a chronological organization, Lance talks about the influence of authors upon each other:

And because I have the sense—because for me literature is always social—that American authors read American authors, and so that they're basing themselves, at least partially on what came before . . . And also because history is important to me. So the issues you see in one period change or come into life in another period too, and you can kind of keep them grounded together that way . . .

Lance's rationale for the chronological organization reflected his disciplinary knowledge and beliefs about literature. In contrast, Megan defended her decision to organize the course thematically from a more explicitly pedagogical perspective:

[The units] would be thematic. For a number of reasons. One thing is that I think it's important that they realize that this isn't just school for school's sake. And that they're not reading this book because it's good for them. That they're reading this because there's something there that's got meaning for their lives . . . that way there's some personal attachment to what we're doing. It's not just another book . . . it's got some connection to their lives.

Table 3
Percentages of Canonical Texts Chosen

	9th grade	American lit.
Non-teacher ed.		
Lance	100	92
Kate	67	71
Jake	50	89
Teacher ed.		
Megan	29	56
Steven	22	44
Vanessa	14	89

In looking at teachers' selections of possible texts for this course, patterns from the data on ninth-grade English reappear. Certain texts, such as *My Antonia*, are chosen only by the graduates of teacher education, while other texts, such as *Moby Dick*, and *The Sound and the Fury* are chosen only by the teachers without teacher education. The pattern of overlapping selections, however, differs dramatically from the earlier pattern in ninth grade English (see Table 2), as the two groups agree on a similar number of texts for American literature.

The distinction between texts which are generally accepted as part of the canon of Anglo-American literature and those which fall into the admittedly loose category of adolescent literature helps explain the curricular choices of these six teachers. In a secondary analysis of the data, all of the books on the hypothetical bookroom list were coded as either canonical or adolescent literature.³ Table 3 presents the percentages of canonical and adolescent literature chosen by each teacher for each course.

This analysis suggests that the graduates of teacher education chose a greater percentage of adolescent literature, while teachers without teacher education chose a greater percentage of canonical texts. This pattern is clearest in ninth-grade English, but persists in the American literature course. Lance, the teacher with the most graduate level work in literature, chose the greatest percentage of canonical texts for both courses. Vanessa, the teacher who was least confident of her subject matter knowledge, made the most radical shift between the two courses. Attributing her decisions to her lack of confidence in her knowledge of American literature, she chose both an organization and a set of texts for the American literature course that represented the established curriculum at her school. This pattern persisted when the teachers were freed from the constraints of the bookroom list and were allowed to select any text they wanted for their courses. Lance, for example, selected *The Apprenticeship of Wilhelm Meister*, *Magic Mountain*, and *The Sorrows of Young Werther* for his ninth grade class, while Steven selected *Identity* and *Alas, Babylon* for the same class.

The analysis of the selection and organization of content by these teachers demonstrates the inter-relationship of subject matter knowledge, professional preparation, and teaching context as they influence the teachers' curricular knowledge of English.

Sources of Curricular Knowledge and Belief

These six teachers all drew upon a number of sources in constructing their curricular knowledge of secondary English. Kate drew heavily upon her own experiences as a student to inform her selection of texts:

³ Two outside reviewers coded the texts on the bookroom list. One coder was a professor of English and English Education; the other was a former English teacher and supervisor of student teachers. Inter-rater reliability on this task was over 90%.

When I'm answering this right now, I'm thinking more about what tradition says than my actual thinking about it, what I'm about to say. I know that ninth-grade kids often read both *Huck Finn* and *Catcher in the Rye*. I know *Catcher in the Rye* is a big favorite with a lot of kids. I read that maybe in tenth grade and liked it a lot . . . *Great Expectations* is not something I had in high school, but I'm thinking so much of my [choice] is shaped by what I had in high school.

Kate also recognized, however, the limitations in relying upon her own experiences and preferences:

I should say that for a lot of these [books], because I read them in high school, what pops up for me are the ones that I really enjoyed. "Oh, I liked that one so that would be good." But I have to be careful because I don't want to just choose what I related to, because other students might relate to other ones.

Jake and Lance drew extensively upon their disciplinary knowledge of literature to select texts. In planning the ninth grade curriculum, Lance used his own knowledge of the development of the novel to guide his curricular choices. Jake also relied upon his subject matter knowledge to inform his selections of text. In all of these cases, the teachers naturally gravitated towards texts that they had already encountered, either in high school or college. The nature of their own educations in English, then, helps explain their selections of primarily canonical texts.

In the subject-specific coursework, the professor and supervisors in English Education introduced Steven, Megan, and Vanessa to a variety of texts they felt were appropriate for adolescent readers. The influence of these courses can be seen in the persistence with which these teachers selected texts that were explicitly mentioned in their methods courses. The texts chosen by all of the graduates of teacher education—*To Kill a Mockingbird*, *Reflections on a Gift of Watermelon Pickle*, *My Antonia*, and *Grapes of Wrath*—were all texts that were discussed explicitly in their subject-specific courses. *Reflections on a Gift of Watermelon Pickle* was a required text for the class, while *To Kill a Mockingbird* was emphasized as a novel appropriate for high school and served as the basis for a number of different unit plans that were available to students. The consistent selection of *My Antonia*, a book none of the teachers had actually read, also illustrates the power of encountering new texts within the context of teacher education. As none of the teachers had read the book, they clearly were not relying on their disciplinary knowledge nor experiences as students. One of their peers, however, had presented a unit plan based on this novel to their class. The consistency with which the graduates selected texts mentioned in their coursework suggests the power of encountering new texts presented from an explicitly pedagogical perspective in the process of learning to

teach. Teacher education, then, seemed to broaden the teachers' knowledge of potential curriculum materials for use in secondary school. The influence of the subject-specific coursework helps explain the differential selection of adolescent and canonical literature among the two groups of teachers.

emphasize writing instruction and to organize literature thematically to their subject-specific coursework. Steven attributed his conception of teaching literature to his subject-specific coursework:

The ideas that [the professor of English Education] was putting the students have to have a handle on it. The readings that we went through and the ideas there I thought were, well, they were radical to me and very helpful as well.

While disciplinary knowledge, experiences as a student, and teacher education all contributed to the teachers' developing curricular knowledge, the contexts in which they taught also served as a source of knowledge. The curriculum guides and departmental expectations influenced the teachers' knowledge and beliefs about the selection and organization of content, as did their colleagues within the English departments. The particular students with whom they worked also helped shape these teachers' curricular choices. In fact, the differing texts selected by the teachers suggest that the teachers had different hypothetical students in mind as they planned these courses.

Planning for Different Students

The two groups of teachers differed in the extent to which they paid attention to possible variations in student ability or motivation while planning their courses. While the ninth-grade English course was described to all of the teachers as "general track," only Steven, Megan, and Lance explicitly commented on this designation in their planning. Steven reflected on his impression that the general track often encompasses a wide variety of student ability levels and worried about how to organize the curriculum so that it would be both accessible and stimulating for all students. Megan mentioned that students in the general track are likely to be unmotivated and planned to include material that would be inherently interesting for adolescents. While not mentioning the track explicitly, Vanessa also expected the students to be unmotivated and selected texts she felt would be interesting and accessible to unmotivated readers.

In contrast to the teachers without teacher education, only Lance mentioned the designation of the course as "general track" and commented not on the students but on the content of the course: "I

mean general track, that's not even world literature, but it's just kind of English." None of these teachers talked about the problems of tailoring the curriculum to a potential variety of student abilities and

interact

All of the graduates of teacher education responded to the designation of the American literature course as college preparatory and commented on the need to prepare students for "the kinds of things they'll need to be able to do in college." Of the other three teachers, only Kate addressed the description of the class as college preparatory, commenting that the students would need to know how to put literature within an historical context.

The two groups of teachers seemed to hold differing types of students in mind as they planned these courses. Vanessa, Steven, and Megan all worried explicitly about students who lacked motivation for reading and who needed help with written and oral expression. Even as Steven acknowledged the American literature class as college preparatory, he qualified his working definition of college preparatory to include a wide variety of students. He argued that college preparatory courses include students who are heading for four-year elite universities, as well as students who are heading for the local community college; in making his curricular choices, Steven made sure that the texts would be

reveal a similar pattern:

a general track class:

Steven selected six of the same books for both courses; overlapping titles included *To Kill a Mockingbird*, *My Antonia*, *Fahrenheit 451*, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, *Points of View*, and *Reflections on a Gift of Watermelon Pickle*. While Lance also selected overlapping texts for the two courses, his titles, including *Moby Dick*, *The Sound and the Fury*, *Grapes of Wrath*, and *The Scarlet Letter*, were considerably more difficult to read. These choices reflect divergent underlying conceptions of students' reading abilities and interests.

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