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## They'll Need This in College: Teacher Beliefs and the Construction of the Secondary English Text

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### Abstract

Despite the complex and evolving ways in which contemporary texts are produced, mediated, circulated, and engaged, secondary English texts in the United States remain predominantly canonical and paper-based. Why such a resolutely stable classroom canon, and *at the beginning of the twenty-first century* a singular medium? While the answer to this question is no doubt far-reaching and complex, in situated classroom practice teacher beliefs are one important component of curriculum conceptualization and implementation. *Belief* is a uniquely resilient form of meaning making, and English teacher beliefs about the purposes of school and of their subject, and about the relevance and function of *literature*, are crucial pieces in the construction of secondary English texts and curriculum.

This project draws on ethnographic research to explore how teacher beliefs inform the construction of and purposes for English texts in one secondary English department. This paper will briefly overview components of belief and the significance of the secondary department, discuss the project context and method, and analyze the project data in light of belief structures.

*Keywords:* English curriculum, media education, secondary school curriculum, secondary department, belief

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Despite the complex and evolving ways in which contemporary texts are produced, mediated, circulated, and engaged, secondary English texts in the United States remain predominantly canonical and paper-based. Why such a resolutely stable classroom canon, and—at the beginning of the twenty-first century—a singular medium? While the answer to this question is no doubt far-reaching and complex, in situated classroom practice teacher beliefs are one important component of curriculum conceptualization and implementation. “Belief” is a uniquely resilient form of meaning making, and English teacher beliefs about the purposes of school and of their subject, and about the relevance and function of “literature”, are crucial pieces in the construction of secondary English texts and curriculum. As Jan Nesper (1987) argues, “To understand teaching from teachers’ perspectives we have to understand the beliefs with which they define their work” (323). Thus, although secondary English can be understood, to some extent, though its professional history, influential theories, and sociocultural and economic contexts, teacher beliefs—emerging within and against such factors—play an important role in curricu-

lum conception and enactment.

Yet individual teacher beliefs provide only a partial window through which to view the local construction of a secondary subject. Although teachers bring with them beliefs about subject content and its educational purposes and potentials, these beliefs are contextualized by, and in dialogic relationship with, their secondary departments. With its close relationship to subject matter, its potential for the collective negotiation of curriculum, policy, and practice, and its location as a professional home for teachers, the secondary department is a crucial context in which to understand the negotiation and practices of English curriculum and domains (Siskin and Little 1995). Indeed, as Grossman and Stodolsky (1995) argue, “Shared beliefs about the possibilities and constraints offered by different school subjects help contribute to the ‘grammar of schooling’ in high schools (Tyack & Tobin 1994) and complicate efforts to restructure schools or redesign curriculum.” (5) The design—and/or redesign—of English, then, is a question not only of individual teacher beliefs, but of shared ones, and the department becomes a significant location for belief articulation and exchange.

Thus, this research project explores, in the form of a departmental case study, how teacher beliefs across one secondary English department inform text choices and purposes. This paper will briefly overview components of belief and the significance of the secondary department, discuss the project context and method, and analyze the project data in light of belief structures.

### **The Role of Teacher Beliefs in Conceptualizing English**

In his article “The Role of Beliefs in the Practicing of Teaching,” Jan Nespors (1987) asserts that teacher beliefs “play a major role in defining teaching tasks and organizing the knowledge and information relevant to those tasks” because “the contexts and environments within which teachers work, and many of the problems they encounter, are ill-defined and deeply entangled, and that beliefs are peculiarly suited for making sense of such contexts”(324). Given the potentially diverse purposes, media, and representations that construct and inform “English” itself, secondary English teachers may find themselves not only working with the “ill-defined and deeply entangled” contexts and problems of classrooms, but also with a particularly “ill-defined” discipline (Applebee 1993; Barrell, Hammett et al., 2004; Brauer and Clark 2008; Fecho 2004; Luke 2004; Pirie 1997; Willinsky 1991). In *The Trouble With English*, Alan Luke (2004) observes:

*What counts as English’ has become somewhat unclear to many, a classification problem. Where this is the case, the current policy debates on classroom methods risk driving us towards a situation where we politically and academically polarize between families of instructional practice...while remaining in search of a field that, quite literally, is being pushed and pulled and reshaped below our feet by the dynamics of rapid socio-demographic and economic, cultural, and linguistic change. (88)*

“Belief” and belief systems as ways of knowing, then, might be particularly well-suited for work not only in the context of the classroom, but within a disciplinary tradition struggling to articulate a coherent curricular domain (Applebee 1996).

Drawing on Ableson’s (1979) work on constructions of knowledge, Jan Nespors describes four properties of belief. First, beliefs include an *existential presumption*—propositions or assumptions about the existence or nonexistence of entities”(318)—such as beliefs in God, conspiracy, or student ability. Importantly,

Nespors underscores that, when presumed, “such entities tend to be seen as immutable—as beyond the teacher’s control” (318). A second element of belief, according to Nespors, is *alternativity*—representations of ‘alternative worlds’ or ‘alternative realities’” (318). For example, in classroom studies, Nespors found that teachers often aspired to idealized classroom experiences which they themselves had never directly participated in. Third, beliefs often include *affective and evaluative loading*, where “belief systems can be said to rely much more heavily on affective and evaluative components than knowledge systems” (319). Finally, beliefs often emerge from an *episodic structure*; as Nespors observes, “beliefs often derive their subjective power, authority, and legitimacy from particular episodes or events” (320). For example, in terms of teacher practices, teachers often draw from seminal school experiences as templates for their work and as sources for their beliefs about teaching, their subject, and school.

Belief systems, according to Nespors, also include two other crucial elements. First, such systems reflect a certain *non-consensuality*. Nespors clarifies, “Part of the consensus characterizing knowledge systems is a consensus about the ways in which knowledge can be evaluated or judged. By contrast, much of the non-consensuality of beliefs derives from a lack of agreement over how they are to be evaluated” (321). Indeed, folklorist Marilyn Motz (1998) defines belief as “a process of knowing that is not subject to a verification or measurement by experimental means within the framework of a modern Western scientific paradigm”(340). Thus, beliefs—involving entities over which the believer has little control, alternative realities, affective responses, and based on episodic structures—emerge from different systems of knowing than empirical data or bodies of educational research.

Second, belief systems include *unboundedness*, or lack of obvious connection to circumstance. Nespors argues that “there are no clear logical rules for determining the relevance of beliefs to real-world events and situations,” and that connections between beliefs and circumstance are “bound up with the personal, episodic, and emotional experiences of the believer” (321). Thus, the relevance ascribed by teachers to secondary English texts, literacies, and purposes, for example, becomes important data through which to understand the nature—and the resilience—of their curriculum paradigms.

### The Role of Secondary Departments

Teacher beliefs about the texts and purposes of English do not exist in isolation; they are in conversation with local constructions of English. In most secondary schools in the United States, a significant disciplinary context in which teachers work is the department—although despite this prevalent structure, educational researchers have often thought in terms of either school or classroom as units of study, conflating elementary and secondary structures. In fact, through its identification of teachers by subject rather than grade, the department structure is one of the signature and most salient differences between elementary and high school (Siskin 1991). As Siskin and Little (1995) observe regarding their five year study of departments with the Center for Research on the Context of Secondary School Teaching (CRC), “Research has traditionally framed teaching as pedagogical practice and the school as the relevant organizational context, yet these teachers framed their work in terms of the subject, and their organizational environment in terms of the department” (2-3). Indeed, departments are defined by subject, making their relationship to the discipline a defining feature. As Siskin notes, “As the empirical evidence accumulates, it increasingly reveals extant theoretical frames and conceptual models to be inadequate—especially those that separate concerns for teachers’ conception of subject and subject teaching from their experience of the department and other school contexts” (17). In addition, departments are sites where policy is negotiated, filtered, and implemented (Ball 1995; Ball and Lacey 1995; Grossman and Stodolsky 1995; McLaughlin and Talbert 2001)—policies that through their targeting of subject standards, can work to reify subject and department boundaries (Siskin 1995). The secondary department, then, becomes a significant context through which to understand curriculum construction and the paradigms of knowledge from which curriculum emerges.

### Research Questions

Thus, this research project explores, in the form of a departmental case study, how teachers in one secondary English department conceptualized, negotiated, and constructed their subject—particularly the role of literature—over the course of one academic semester. This context not only brought to bear the role of the department in reifying and shaping curriculum, but also seemed to better reflect the average high school student’s experience with the discipline, which would

likely involve several English teachers across a department rather than a single English teacher or classroom. A willing secondary English department was located and over the course of one spring semester, ethnographic methods were used to explore the following three questions:

1. In what ways do English teachers in one high school department conceptualize their discipline, particularly the role of literature, through oral statements, written curriculum, and classroom practices?
2. In what ways do teachers in one high school department conceptualize popular culture and its relationship to their curriculum and classrooms?
3. What do English teachers in one high school department experience as important influences and constraints in their curricular decisions throughout an academic semester?

While the project data reflects the breadth of these questions, this paper will explore the particular relationship of the data to structures of teacher “belief,” and the utility of “belief” as a way to understand teacher commitment to particular purposes and texts.

### Research Contexts

The English department in this study is located in Anderson High School (the name has been changed, and teacher anonymity maintained), the only high school in a small suburb of a large midwestern city. Founded in 1837, Anderson remained a small rural community and by the mid-1980s had a population of about 400; however, over the past two decades, Anderson has experienced profound, rapid population growth and demographic shifts (Berger 2005). Indeed, by 2003, the population was estimated at 14,124, and is projected to reach 22,000-25,000 by 2025 (Anderson Chamber of Commerce 2004). While the community’s racial profile is fairly homogenous—92% white (Anderson Chamber of Commerce 2004)—the growing population reflects a distinctive demographic shift in class, as corporate CEOs joined the longtime farming community (Berger 2005). The student body of approximately 800 is predominantly white, college bound, and achieves above state average on both proficiency scores as well as the recently piloted State Graduation Test

At the time of this study, the Anderson English department was comprised of eight members: three males, five females, and all white. Most (although not all) grew up and/or went to school—high school,

undergraduate school, and/or graduate school—in the same Midwestern state in which Anderson is located, and one Anderson English teacher actually attended Anderson High School. The department also represented a range of teaching experience: one teacher was in her eighteenth year of teaching, while another teacher was in her second, although no teacher had more than seven years at Anderson (one was even in her first year at the school).

Grade Level	Untracked	College Prep	Honors	Advanced Placement (AP)
9th Grade	Humanities			
10th Grade		World Literature	World Literature, Western Humanities	
11th Grade		American Literature	American Literature	American Literature
12th Grade		British Literature	British Literature	British Literature
Other	Journalism Speech & Debate			

Table 1: Anderson High School English curriculum

The Anderson English curriculum was organized by grade level, and after freshmen year, differentiated between college prep (one teacher's preferred substitution for "regular") honors, and in junior and senior years, advanced placement (AP). While World Literature, American Literature, and British Literature are familiar organizational units for secondary English curriculum, the freshmen year humanities program was considered by department members to be a foundational experience at Anderson High School. Team taught by an English teacher and a history teacher, the humanities course was broken into eight units across the year and integrated the study of both history and literature. The department also offered a course on journalism and a course on speech and debate.

### Research Methods

Methodologically, this project draws from ethnographic methods and grounded theory to understand how English texts are constructed by secondary English teachers in one high school department, and to explore the purposes secondary English teachers ascribe

to their text practices. Data collection methods for this project included participant observation, interviewing, and archival research (Wolcott 1995). Data sources included fieldnotes from classroom observations; transcripts from staff and faculty interviews; memos detailing events such as lunch conversations with department teachers, informal conversations, and attendance at the eighth grade orientation; research memos reflecting on-going analysis of the data and research process; and curriculum artifacts including formal curriculum documents, classroom materials and handouts, portal websites, and photographs of classroom decor. All department members participated, and each was observed between nine and twenty-one times, depending on the schedule and comfort of the teacher. Observations included seven of the twelve department courses, prioritizing the courses students were most likely to take. Finally, each department teacher was interviewed individually twice (one at the beginning and one at the end of the semester), and the department was interviewed once as a group.

### Curriculum and Belief: Existential Presumption

"Cultural literacy" emerged as a significant data code and was often explicitly used by department members as a frame for the texts and purposes of Anderson English curriculum. Concepts of cultural literacy seemed to give the curriculum coherence, purpose, authority, and cultural capital (Bourdieu 1986). Indeed, during the department interview, six teachers included cultural literacy on curriculum concept maps used as part of the interview protocol, with one teacher placing cultural literacy in a center hub. In addition, teachers often talked about cultural literacy during their classes or individual interviews; as one teacher said, "I'm a cultural literacy person, I really am, especially for these students at this type of school, this is so important, to have, be able to get all of those allusions." Another teacher cited cultural literacy as part of the rationale on an assignment: "There is a cultural literacy among scholars that includes knowledge of or at least exposure to staple pieces of literature, many of which are British. This assignment will enhance your knowledge of British Literature authors, styles, content and genres so you delve into the world of scholars." Anderson English teachers wanted students to know, appreciate, and make connections between certain canonical literature, in particular classic works which teachers described as forming the foundations of many literary allusions. When describing how he might approach English cur-

riculum if he alone could design it, one teacher underscored the centrality and intertextuality of this kind of classics-based work:

*It would look like this curric—, this, this curriculum, we'd, we'd have, all 9th graders would get a broad base of knowledge in the classics, in understanding cultural literacy, in being able to identify great allusions and, and understand comparative mythology, because that's what we take with us when we go on to the, to read literature of the canon.*

Anderson teacher belief in the existence and importance of “cultural literacy” might be considered an *existential presumption*—propositions or assumptions about the existence or nonexistence of entities.” Teachers believed that there was a cohesive, relatively stable body of texts with which to be familiar (the canon), and that engagement with these texts, and the ways in which these texts at times engaged each other, was a signature disciplinary discourse. Significantly, the substance of an existential presumption is often seen to be outside of the believer’s control (Nespor 1987, 318), evidenced in this case by the canon itself as well as text meanings. The teachers did not perceive themselves as producers of a canon, but instead saw themselves as reflecting it and selecting from it. In addition, not only was the literary canon outside of teacher control, but text meanings were also stable and decontextualized, often framed as “universal themes.” One teacher explained, “We teach the classics because they embody universal themes, and when we have universal themes then we can, you know, try to make connections between student’s lives and these things.” Thus, the department’s curricular foundation in “the classics” remained an important part of their work to cohere their discipline, in part because they saw classics as by definition texts that conveyed universal truths—an interpretation that, like the canon and the classics, appeared self-evident rather than contextual and constructed.

### **Curriculum and Belief: Alternativity**

In both interviews and classroom observations, college preparation loomed large as a curriculum influence, ranked in the top three by department members who ranked their influences, and appearing on all of the teacher concept maps during the department interview. In fact, as noted earlier, even the “regular” English courses were called “college prep.” Anderson English

teachers had good reason to expect that most Anderson students were going to college, as the department chair noted:

*We have a...94% college attendance rate, yeah it's very high, very high, and that's everything from a two year degree clear up to Ivy league students, so they're all over the board.*

During the department interview, some discussion emerged about their college focus relative to student futures, as one teacher observed, “I wonder if we taught at another school that didn’t have such a high percent of kids going on to a career college if we wouldn’t be more focused on vocation.” English teachers who had taught for a while at Anderson noted that this post-secondary education rate was relatively new:

*Between the administration and the, the demographics, there is less focus on the trades and the notion of a general high school, and much more focus on big name colleges and college prep, so I think that's part of it.*

Interestingly, teachers did not specifically connect concepts of “cultural literacy” to college preparation, but rather as an embodied capital (Bourdieu 1986); they often made comments in class acknowledging the general relevance of their curriculum and pedagogy to the academic discourse of college. For example, in one observation, the teacher gave her twelfth grade students advice on how to signal the end of their presentation, saying, “You will be presenting a lot in college.” In another class, the teacher prepared 9th graders to take notes for the entire class period, explaining that this would be “a real lecture” with no stopping for questions and something that they would encounter in college. During the department interview, one teacher described the ways in which English as a discipline played a unique role in preparing students for all kinds of college course work:

*And when you look at what, you know, when we see colleges complaining about, oh freshmen don't do this and don't do this, it always are things that come out of the English classroom. They never say, oh my gosh freshmen today can't you know, do tinctures or whatever in science class, it's they can't read, they can't write, they can't analyze, and those are all things that come out of us.*

In sum, college preparation seemed an important factor in Anderson English curriculum decisions and purposes, and appeared frequently in both teacher interviews and classroom practices. College, then, emerged as the

definitive “alternative reality” in which teachers believed their curriculum had relevance and capital, and for which their curriculum prepared students.

### **Curriculum and Belief:**

#### **Affective and Evaluative Loading**

For the Anderson English department, texts printed on paper—particularly novels and poetry or short story collections (newspapers and magazines were rarely mentioned, young adult literature was considered too accessible, and comics were introduced only in an extracurricular club)—were the conduits of important tactile, sensory, and temporal reading experiences. Indeed, pleasure and passion around books was a common theme for Anderson English teachers. Anderson teachers often spoke of the passion they had for reading—for example, when asked what she did on her down time, one teacher responded, “I read, I read and read and read and read and read”—and teachers often described the cultivation of this passion as one of their primary curricular objectives. One teacher said of her senior class:

*For the 12th graders, honestly, I want them not to hate books when they leave, that's my goal. I want them not to hate books. Yes, I want them to be great writers and I want them to be great thinkers, but I want them to feel later in their life that reading is fun, and if, if they're on vacation at the beach they're going to take a book to read, and if they, if it, that they'll go to the library or they'll go to the book store and that they don't just think oh, I hated English in high school, I, I don't want to read...I want them to see that reading is fun, as an entertainment, as something that they can enjoy doing.*

However, teachers also made distinctions between books or texts that entertained and books that challenged (often canonical or classic). Despite their passion for reading, most Anderson teachers did not talk often in general terms about books, but instead more specifically about literature:

*I think it's important that we, we maintain a sense of, of, of passion for literature and I think that's my calling as a teacher to, to maintain that, to, to help foster that in the classroom.*

At times teachers even worried that their college prep approach to text deconstruction might hinder passion, rather than foster it.

*So, now it's based on the majority of the students are going to go to college, they're going to go to really good colleges, they're going to go far in life, so we really have to make sure they know all these terms and definitions and sometimes I think I've got a little bit of, I don't want to say grudge against it, because I, I think it's good that they know this, but it's been hard for me to say I've got, sometimes I feel like I'm almost tearing everything apart, just to make sure they know these terms, and I don't, I didn't really give them a chance to really just enjoy what they were reading. So, I kind of felt like I did that a lot. So if I taught some of those books over again, I would just say, let's, let's read this, and then come back and dissect it at some other time.*

In sum, the Anderson English teachers expressed great pleasure in books and reading. Their conceptualization of their subject in terms of text (book), kind of text (literature), and curricular goals (cultivate a passion for reading, for literature) reflected a strongly affective stance, as department members used words like “love” and “passion” to describe their relationship to their subject and their goals for their curriculum.

#### **Belief: Episodic Structure**

Interestingly, Anderson teachers did not tell stories about the power of literature in their lives, or stories that might inform or affirm their commitment to cultural literacy or to their English curriculum. There may be several reasons for this absence in the data; perhaps the interviews did not seem to invite such stories or provide the appropriate prompts or opportunities; perhaps teachers did not want to share such stories with the interviewer; or perhaps they did not have those stories to tell. However, two other narrative silences suggest potential insights about the longevity of Anderson English curriculum paradigms. First, despite multiple and varied discussions about their work with the department, Anderson teachers did not describe any paradigmatic shifts when joining the school. While the Anderson English department proved a salient and significant influence on teacher curricular practices—most Anderson English teachers reported that their colleagues and the department criteria were significant influences on their curriculum, and several teachers described being inspired by the department culture to continue their own scholarship in particular ways—the teachers seemed to join a community with which they

already felt curricular synergy. This silence around “conversion” narratives, then, might suggest that the Anderson English department did not convert teachers, but instead developed and implemented a curriculum from already shared paradigms.

Second, Anderson teachers did not accord their teacher education programs with significant influence on their curriculum or pedagogy. Most Anderson teachers, in fact, expressed disappointment and frustration with their programs; in fact, during the department interview, three of them crossed off “teacher certification program” on a list of potential curriculum influences, eliminating it entirely. One teacher noted that her program seemed to offer philosophies that were counter to the culture and expectations of Anderson High School, and thus, rather than informing her work at Anderson, instead seemed irrelevant: For another, the seeming disconnect between her program and her beliefs about curriculum was only validated once she began teaching:

*And I feel like in the program cultural literacy was a taboo, you know, don't force the white majorities ideas on anyone else, well guess what, sadly, everyone in this school for the most part's going to go into jobs where they need to have this type of, of information in their brain, and you know, I just, it's very frustrating to me, and it was frustrating in class just to bite my tongue knowing, why even start this conversation, you know.*

The Anderson teachers seemed ambivalent about the efficacy of teacher education programs, and did not view them as substantial influences on their practices. In general, they seemed to appreciate programs that offered concrete pedagogical strategies, but if the program offered strategies, philosophies or theories that did not match the academic culture and curriculum they already valued, then those ideas lost any sense of utility, and were subsequently viewed with suspicion and frustration.

These narrative silences (in the data) raise questions about the absence, rather than presence, of particular episodic structures. Such silences potentially reveal curricular paradigms uncredited to an otherwise influential department, and unmoved by (indeed, often surviving in spite of) teacher education programs. Belief systems have a unique resilience when faced with

new paradigms (Motz 1998; Nespor 1987), and while the absence of episodic structures is not characteristic of belief, this kind of paradigm longevity and resilience is.

### **Curriculum and Belief: Non-Consensuality**

According to Nespor, non-consensuality “refers to the fact that belief systems consist of propositions, concepts, arguments, or whatever that are recognized—by those who hold them or by outsiders—as being in dispute or as in principle disputable” (321). For Anderson English teachers, the value of books, literature, and cultural literacy were threatened by contemporary technologies and texts, and the teachers described working to preserve particular traditions around literature and literacies.

For example, English teachers at Anderson High School were not fans of the internet. Indeed, their primary concern regarding student use of the internet for coursework was that students would access information without rigor or discernment. How would students be able to identify authoritative information, or discern between levels of reliability or relevance? The wide variety of information and sources on the internet makes salient the challenges of postmodernity, raising questions about what/whose knowledge to privilege. In classroom curriculum and practices, what/whose knowledge gets authorized, and why? One teacher noted this tension in her response to her teacher education program:

*When I first came out of grad school, what we learned in grad school is it's all student driven, student driven, and they, they just don't know where they're going, they, I mean it's really hard to put them in control when they're not experts, you know, if it was up to them we'd be watching movies all the time.*

Many Anderson English teachers found themselves prepared by programs they perceived as decentering the teacher's traditional role and authority (“student driven,” as described above) and destabilizing concepts (one teacher remembered “the whole idea of like sliding definitions of literacy”) in ways that seem disconnected to their beliefs about the ways teachers and academics authorize knowledge. In the midst of contemporary postmodern tensions—the destabilization of old criteria, and within that vacuum, the quest for questions about new—the Anderson English teachers were primarily positioned as arbiters of such authorization, determining text choice and text interpretation,

particularly the text lessons regarding character and universal truths. The Anderson English teachers knew they worked in a time where there is more access to information and to texts than ever before, and where ambiguity about the legitimation of knowledge does not easily provide them with a recognizable place from which to move and in which to define their expertise or role.

Importantly, teachers rarely described visual or aural media as producing texts that could be read or that were part of any valuable cultural literacies or social capital, and expressed uncertainty about the implications of new technologies, especially in regard to books, quality, and reading. One teacher worried that new technologies and pleasures may be shortening attention spans, and saw student engagement with technology (cell phones and MP3 players, for example) as a potential threat to the kind of work and practices English teachers advocate with books, rather than as sites of textual inquiry themselves. In the following quote, another teacher equated reading books with a certain temporal experience—an extended time of singular engagement, concentration and physical stillness—and engagement with other media with briefer, and more frenetic, attention:

*Primarily, a fear of los-, of it being lost in this rapidly increasing world where everything is shortened to some pithy advertisement, and, and we're teach, where, where parents are saying that their children shouldn't be expected to read for more than twenty minutes a night, I, I feel like I'm more of a, an advocate of, of, the, the classic style of teaching and I feel it's vital to, to stick with tradition and to make sure that these children don't waste away with multi-tasking and, and lose sight of the importance of being able to sit still and enjoy a great novel, and they will have an, an attention span that will last more than 12 minutes. I really, it's become a passion of mine really that that that's one of the main reasons I teach, and I, and I will read for, well you've seen it, we will read for 45 minutes, and I love to see that these kids who need to have their MP3s and their walk, you know and their, their cell phones and have to be IM-ing each other can still sit and read a great novel or a great short story, analyze, explicate a long poem for an entire class period. As long as they can still do that, then I'm going to stay in this job.*

New technologies were also perceived as generally requiring minimal critical skills to access, and the information transmitted via such media was credited with an ease and naturalness to understand, compared to the close reading skills facilitated by the Anderson English teachers and that they required in their attention to literature. As one teacher noted:

*And students have a wonderful facility with media, I mean they're far more computer savvy than most of us, but yet they're also used to getting their information so easily, that's the facile aspect of it, that they don't have to work for it, and close reading is becoming a lost art, they really need to be taught, even my 11th graders, still do not have the patience, and they don't have the skills to read a text closely, they don't.*

Indeed, when a student complained to a teacher that the reading assignment was boring, his teacher seemed to imply that television and commercial culture had affected the student's ability to engage with books, saying "Your whole generation is desensitized if you don't have a commercial every 2 minutes." (To which the student responded, "Your generation had Chia Pets and Pong.")

In fact, many teachers saw books themselves as potentially changed, replaced, and/or diminished by new technologies. When asked how he envisioned English curriculum in twenty years, the department chair foresaw similar definitions of literature and text (for example, no inclusion of television, radio, or film), but perhaps mediated in different and diminished ways that eliminated some of the physical intimacy and interaction he valued with books:

*And one of the arguments I had with the curriculum director is he wants to get rid of textbooks and, and books and have everything on line, you can call up all these texts, I said there is a personal interaction between a reader and a book, yes you can take a wireless laptop someplace and do it, I said but, you can't have that interaction, you don't turn the page, you don't highlight, he said well you can highlight on the text, you can do this, I said there's a difference..I said what kind of library are you going to have when it's forty four little disks as opposed to walls of books, where I can walk up and pull something off and read one poem and interact with that book in the warmth of my library and stick it back on..I said there's something about walking into a book store of antique books and*

*opening a copy of Great Expectations that was published in 1910 with the old plates with the tissue paper and smelling that mildew-y nutmeg-y smell.*

Like MP3 players and cell phones, television was also framed as another competing media that might distract or take away from the experience of reading books. One teacher stated:

*I've kind of made it more of a personal goal that I don't feel like students are reading, willingly, and I've sort of made that my own personal goal that somewhere in my lifetime I'm really going to have students who open up a book just because they want to in lieu of watching some stupid show on TV, which I admit I have those days where I just want to zone out and veg and watch TV, but I think it's just getting the students reading, and not just reading and going, I don't understand, explain it to me. But that they get involved in the book and they're really asking questions about this character and what's going to happen next, because they're so excited about it. I think that's a goal I've set for myself, to really get them engaged in reading again.*

Anderson English teachers also needed to be careful about how frequently they mentioned television to each other. For example, after a Law & Order conversation during lunch, one participant clamped his hand over his mouth saying, "No TV talk"—apparently an explicit, if playful, lunchtime conversation code. More importantly, however, several teachers mentioned television talk as anti-intellectual, which ran counter to the values of the department. When asked what advice she would give a new Anderson teacher, one teacher responded:

*To be as serious and as hair pinned up, glasses librarian-ish as possible for the first couple months. Don't joke around, don't talk about the fun things we do, you know don't talk about shopping, don't talk about TV, don't talk about music, don't talk about those things, talk about teaching and the literature.*

Another teacher concurred:

*The first year here, keep your mouth shut and read everything you can get your hands on, because we are very, we respect intelligence, and you kind of have to build your reputation among the staff before you can be goofy...as a first year teacher, you have to be very careful of your reputation here, just because we, we value*

*intelligence and intellectualism so much, you know, there, there's a certain kind of teacher who doesn't fit here... Anyone who's, you know, if there, we don't ever want to dumb down anything for the kids, you know, we're always kind of reach higher, be an intellectual, you know, don't talk about television every day of the week, don't, you know, everything we read, like once in a while fine, if it relates to a movie, fine, you know, I told my freshmen about the 13th Warrior when we reading Beowulf just as a connection, but you, I feel like if we relate everything to pop culture, then we're not really teaching them anything, we're just, I don't know, contributing to the, the lack of cultural identity in our country.*

Unlike the internet or television, however, film held an ambiguous place for teachers, who saw films simultaneously as "mere" entertainment, useful bridges to classroom texts, and sometimes (although rarely) points of study in themselves. Both teachers and students expressed much pleasure and engagement in movies, and references to films occurred both in and out of classroom contexts. During lunch with several Anderson English teachers, conversation often included discussion about films; movie references and paraphernalia also appeared in some teacher's classrooms; for example, one teacher had a *Lion King* tissue box and a *Lord of the Rings* poster near her desk, while another collected and displayed small plastic toys near her desk, including figurines from *Monsters, Inc.* and *Toy Story*. However, sometimes movies were strategically used as helpful connections to the literature in the curriculum. For example, when discussing a reference to Greek mythology, one teacher clarified, "Remember Triton? *The Little Mermaid*?" Students also made connections, saying things like, "That's just like in Braveheart!" or "It's like *Pleasantville* people who start to have emotion get color". Indeed, two classrooms had posters that used the movie poster genre to highlight or "sell" a book (*Night and Catcher in the Rye*), a genre adaptation which was incorporated into an assignment for one class where students created their own book poster that included a "tag lines". Occasionally, literature was also framed as a helpful connection to films; when talking to parents during eighth grade orientation, one graduating senior described how her 9th grade humanities course provided her with a background in the classics that allowed her to make a variety of connec-

tions: “*Troy* the movie came out and we were so excited because we already knew about it” (8th grade orientation), and similarly, when a humanities teacher showed *O Brother Where Art Thou* to her class, she prefaced it by saying that it “has a storyline that will make you feel enormously smart.” In fact, during a discussion of *Heart of Darkness*, the teacher pointed out that a particular passage read by a student was the favorite passage of the director of *Apocalypse Now*, Francis Ford Coppola.

In general, however, film was rarely taken as an object of formal study in Anderson English curriculum. Books and reading seemed central to the work of the English classroom, and film was rarely approached as a body of texts which participated in scholarly conversation and references. Showing movies also seemed to have a reputation as poor pedagogy—used only as a replacement for the teacher, not a point of study in and of itself. One English teacher seemed to refer to this kind of pedagogy as she explained why electronically mediated texts weren’t necessarily part of how she conceptualized “English”:

*The only one I crossed off would be electronically mediated texts, just because it doesn't enter into my decision making process at all; I just hate using, I, I just have that cliché English class, watch a movie, in my head; I don't want to do that or be that.*

In sum, Anderson English teachers seemed to view books as the definitive, almost singular, English text, and to value literature as particular kinds of books. Anderson teaches reflected the liberal notion that schools offer mobility (Giroux 1983), and looked to firm hierarchical structures, rather than more fluid notions/processes of knowledge and power, to cohere their curriculum and pedagogy. While expressing some interest in studying movies, teachers suggested that media such as television and the internet seemed easily accessible and somewhat anti-intellectual, as well as threats to the time, pleasures, and critical work of reading books. Overall, most teachers seemed to view media and student engagements with them as threats to student abilities to read, communicate, research, discern, and concentrate—skills which the Anderson English teachers felt they were fighting an important but challenging battle to preserve.

### **Belief: Unboundedness**

Anderson English teachers seemed to fluctuate between preparing students for college, preparing students for careers, inspiring a love of books and literature, and facilitating personal growth through the study of universal human themes. This fluidity of curricular relevance reflects the characteristic “unboundedness” of belief systems. Nespor explains that belief systems are “loosely-bounded” with “highly variable and uncertain linkages to events, situations, and knowledge systems.” (Nespor 1987, 321). Anderson teachers believed that cultural literacy (familiarity with a particular, self-referencing canon) was necessary for college admittance and/or will help students in the workplace (“Are they going to be culturally literate enough to sound intelligent when they meet their future bosses?”), and while they acknowledged that such a canon is limited and embedded in social inequities, they felt compelled as teachers to prepare their students for the opportunities where they believe this knowledge will be valued—to provide students with the appropriate cultural capital (Bourdieu 1986). However, the Anderson teachers also seemed committed to inspiring a love of books and of literature, and to the power of narrative and the study of “universal human themes” to help students understand themselves and their experiences. Such diverse outcomes reflect the history of the discipline and the range of traditions that inform contemporary constructions of “English”; however, they also make possible the “unboundedness” of curricular objectives.

### **Conclusion**

The Anderson English teachers described the subject, purpose, and outcomes of their curriculum in ways embody many of the characteristics of belief structures. Emerging and evolving text media and practices, and theories about the subjects and purposes of secondary English curriculum in teacher education programs, often collided with Anderson teacher beliefs about the importance and function of literature, cultural literacy, and college preparation, and their department became a place beliefs about cultural literacy and college preparation were affirmed. Folklorist Marilyn Motz (1998) uses the metaphor of haunting “to explore traditional ways of knowing that have been displaced in academic discourse by the prevalence of science and reason but have remained viable aspects of daily life” (339). Thus, despite shifting text modalities and practices in both ac-

ademic and non-academic settings, secondary English classroom practice might be “haunted” by teacher beliefs about English texts and their purposes as subjects in school.

Perhaps even more importantly, the Anderson teachers did not have a pressing reason or crisis that might precipitate the kind a paradigm shift that would open their curriculum to new texts and contexts. As Nespor notes in his work on teacher beliefs, “Belief systems are less malleable or dynamic than knowledge systems...when beliefs change, it is more likely to be a matter of a conversion or gestalt shift than the result of argumentation or marshaling of evidence” (321). Thomas Kuhn (1992) argues that for individuals such shifts are unusual and that collectively, paradigm shifts generally occur in the wake of “crisis-provoking problems,” or when young or new members less wedded to older views enter the field (376). In the case of the Anderson department, however, the younger or newer members might have had favorite texts or strategies, but did not come with fundamentally “new” paradigms that they might argue for or implement. In addition, without an immediate sense of problem or crisis regarding their work or students, Anderson teachers did not find reason to challenge the foundations of their work or assumptions. Indicators that might suggest they were not meeting their objectives—problems such as low state or AP test scores, disappointing college acceptance rates, high drop out or failure rates, or parent or administrative concerns/complaints—did not exist in large (or really any) proportion, and thus in their absence such challenges did not bring to the fore teacher curriculum paradigms or beliefs. Finally, Nespor reminds us that “crisis alone is not enough. There must also be a basis, though it need not be rational or ultimately correct, for faith in the particular candidate chosen” (387). Not only didn’t the Anderson English teachers have the need to pursue new texts or practices that are were at odds with their current paradigms, but they didn’t have a cohesive new model that might justify “faith in the candidate chosen.” Instead, rather than see their curriculum as broken or ineffectual, the Anderson teachers perceived it as threatened.

The concept of belief provides an interesting challenge to English educators and English teacher educators. As Nespor notes, “This is the crux of the problem: we do not know very much about how beliefs come into being, how they are supported or weakened, how people are converted to them”(326). Teacher educators might encourage pre-service teachers to articulate

and reflect upon their beliefs regarding texts, purposes, power, and the roles of teachers and schools—particularly as this research suggests that traditional English curriculum and teacher positions offer a familiar, coherent, and often respected place from which to move. In addition, teachers and teacher educators might attend to the local constructions of English that inform, affirm, and/or challenge understandings of English—particularly the models pre-service teachers have encountered in secondary and post-secondary English curriculum. (Importantly, none of the Anderson teachers described academic contexts in which they studied television or “popular” texts.) Finally, if conceptions of English are to change, our pre-service programs should not only articulate, denaturalize, and problematize familiar paradigms (Agee 1998), but explore and consider new paradigms for English curricular domains. As Luke (2004) observes, “At issue is not whether or how we can recover English education as unitary field and profession, at best a theoretically and industrially vexed task. The question is how we might reinvent it in relation to an understanding of its own social and cultural complexity and dynamics” (87). For example, media education—a field whose subject, like English, is text-based—is a strong contemporary curricular model that includes many of the new literacies some English educators are already addressing. With its dialogic approach to the study of production, text, and audience, media education provides secondary English curriculum not only with an inclusive conception of text, but with a broad range of questions through which to understand the sociocultural and economic contexts in which texts inform and are informed by the world.

Exploring and articulating teacher beliefs about English is a crucial component in understanding English curriculum texts, purposes, and stasis. As neo-liberal market models find greater utility in education, secondary English may have to increasingly articulate itself in relationship to economic processes and outcomes; yet if cultural literacy continues to be connected with these outcomes, and if teachers are not offered new, cohesive models which address the ways in which the postmodern crisis in authority positions teachers in complicated and potentially contradictory roles, such curricular paradigms may continue to be entrenched, preventing English from reconceptualizing itself in more inclusive, relevant, and contemporary terms.

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