

## 4 Dora V. Smith: A Legacy for the Future

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Dora V. Smith  
1893-1985

Such a daunting task—attempting to summarize the career of Dora V. Smith. How does one accurately portray in a single chapter this remarkable woman who has left such an indelible mark on the English teaching profession? Perhaps the best way is the simplest—to discuss Dora V. Smith the professional, whose work foreshadowed many of the current trends in English education, and Dora V. Smith the person, whose indomitable spirit energized all with whom she came in contact. Reading what she has written, talking to those who knew her well, and listening to her tape-recorded voice as she

discussed teaching, teachers, and students reveals a woman whose personal qualities are inherent in her professional philosophy. In his introduction to *Dora V. Smith: Selected Essays*, Robert C. Pooley wrote:

Important as she is as researcher and author, it is Dora V. Smith the person who delights all who knew her. Possessed of a happy, outgoing nature, a genuine and all-embracing liking for people, a loyal and unselfish giving of her time and energy to friends and students, she has a radiance that attracts and holds admirers. But beneath this genial exterior there is a firm and staunch character, strong of mind and powerful of will, eager to form principles and convictions and to fight for them with energy and determination. She has done much because she knows how to get things done. (D. Smith 1964, vii)

And so this chapter will focus on Smith's "knowing" and "doing," connecting her work to much of the research and scholarship being done in English education today, and on her "being," suggesting a true symbiosis of the personal with the professional.

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In order to appreciate fully the evolution of Dora V. Smith's career, it is necessary to start at its beginning, a teaching position in Long Prairie, Minnesota, where she taught English and history from 1916 to 1917 after graduating Phi Beta Kappa from the University of Minnesota. Three years later, in 1919, she earned a master's degree in English from the same university, titling her thesis "A Study of the Use of Accident in the Novels of Thomas Hardy." Nine years later, in 1928, she earned her doctorate, also from the University of Minnesota. Her dissertation, "Class Size and the Efficiency of Instruction in English," examined a topic on which she was to write prolifically in ensuing years. Smith was teaching at the University of Minnesota's University High School at the time, and she used as her research subjects the students of Rewey Belle Inglis, who was then the English Department chair at the school. During the 1920-1921 school year Smith taught at St. George's College in London, England, followed later (1928-1929) by a stint at Lincoln School of Columbia University, where she taught such noteworthy students as Winthrop Rockefeller and the Guggenheim children. She then began a teaching career at the University of Minnesota which was to last until her retirement in 1958.

Dora Smith's parents came to Minnesota from Scotland, and she attributed much of her interest in English to them. In a 1968 interview with Robert Boyle of the University of Minnesota Department of Radio and Television, she commented, "We had access to a good many things that had been written for children, and somehow it seemed a normal part of life to enjoy books and literature." This interest grew throughout her education in the Minneapolis public schools and directly influenced her decision to pursue her three academic degrees—B.A., M.A., and Ph.D.—in English and English education.

A "progressive" in the truest sense of the word, Smith believed that the child should be at the center of education, and her inaugural address upon beginning her presidency of the National Council of Teachers of English in 1936 soundly reflected her beliefs. Titling her speech "American Youth and English," she discussed our true mission as English teachers, as she saw it: "to build a meaningful program" by always keeping in mind the needs and interests of our students. Deploring uninformed criticism of English and English teaching, she began her speech with words that may sound all too familiar to us today:

It is a wholesome experience to be teaching English when all the world questions what we are doing and why we are doing it. There are those who believe us so far behind the times in our purposes and our program that it will take us fifty years to catch

up with a modern era. On the other hand, there are those who tremble lest we have thrown ancient standards to the winds, who warn us that boys and girls will never speak and write as they used to do until we return to the parsing and analysis of former days; and they will never read as they are reputed once to have read in the halcyon days of fifty years ago until we restore the minute analysis of a few great classics.

In the midst of this attack and counterattack upon our platform it is of supreme importance that we, as individual members of the National Council of Teachers of English, should know where we are going and be able to justify our course; that once having chosen the way, we may keep our vision clear despite the smoke screens of emotional criticism which tend to blur the path. (1937, 99)

At the end of her speech she reminded her audience that education “can be achieved only by taking boys and girls where they are and building gradually toward where we want them to be. . . . Forced development has never yet brought sturdy maturity” (112).

Dora Smith’s interest in and knowledge of all facets of English teaching—language study, composition, reading, literature, and curriculum development—are evident in her writing and in her speeches. Though she was always true to her progressive philosophy, advocating active, experiential learning, she never sacrificed excellence and high standards to the gods of educational reform.

In her discussion of language development Smith echoed the ideas of people like Jean Piaget and John Dewey. For example, in her essay “Growth in Language Power as Related to Child Development,” she emphasized that children search for meaning in their experiences as they interact with their environment (1964, 17). Her idea relates closely to Piaget’s contention that children maintain what he calls “equilibrium” through interaction with their environment, forming the basic structures which contribute to intellectual development. Smith stressed that learning must have a relationship to life: “Defining lists of words on the blackboard, filling in blanks in exercises, and writing themes on topics which have little relationship to what is going on at the moment in school or at home can never be a substitute for development in the classroom of a wealth of opportunities for exploring the world in which children live and for stimulating them to thought and discussion concerning it” (17). Smith’s comment is obviously similar to that of Dewey and other progressives who advocated active learning through experience, and it is remarkably akin to the philosophy behind today’s whole language movement. In his book *What’s Whole in Whole Language?* Kenneth Goodman asserts

that in whole language programs, "what happens in school supports and expands what happens outside of school" (1986, 8). Smith recognized the importance of this kind of language learning over sixty years ago.

Smith's stance on the role of formal grammar instruction in language study is also very clear. In "The Problem of Teaching Grammar," written in 1947, she commented on the importance of teaching English usage by continuous practice in what she called the "thought method," as opposed to the grammatical method of teaching, and cited the following example from a study as support:

Suppose the sentences were: "All my life I have wanted to be a doctor. They do so much good in the world." The thought groups said, "A doctor cannot be 'they.' We must change 'they' to 'he' or revise the first sentence to read 'doctors.'" The second group approached the error in the same way, but learned in addition that "doctor" is the antecedent of the pronoun "they." Pronouns agree with their antecedents in number and gender. "Doctor" is singular. "They" is plural. The pronoun must be "he." The explanation, by the way, shows clearly what poor sentences can result from this kind of attack, for one would scarcely say, "All my life I have wanted to be a doctor. He does so much good in the world." (1964, 252-53)

Smith reported that the longer students were removed from instruction, the greater was the superiority of the thought approach, where students really had to understand the meaning of the sentence. Claiming that for some students grammatical science is actually a stumbling block to the mastery of language, Smith felt that only superior students profited from such study.

To further support her position, Smith pointed out one of the reasons why grammatical science affects usage so little: "In Latin, one must know the case of the nouns in order to get the meaning of the sentence. In English, one must get the meaning of the sentence in order to find out the case of the nouns: and after one has the meaning why should he bother to do so?" (265). She emphasized that we must get out of the clutches of Latin grammar and become students of our own language to see how it works.

That Dora V. Smith recognized and was writing about this problem in the 1940s is interesting in light of the fact that little progress seems to have been made in grammatical instruction since then. By and large, schools still prescribe traditional grammar, assuming it will help students become more precise users of the English language. Yet high school teachers, college professors, and employers continue to complain that young people do not know how to use the language well. A

look at the English classroom may reveal, as Smith saw years ago, that students are getting little practice in classes where they sit passively listening to the language of the teacher. In calling for a reexamination of the relationship of sentence structure to meaning rather than to a set of prescribed rules based on another language, Smith was ahead of her time and a member of a small minority of educators with similar views.

True to her professional spirit, Smith obviously kept up with developments in the field of language instruction. In 1964, six years after her retirement, she wrote "Should We Pay Any Attention to the New Linguistics?" (1964), an essay about the role of the new linguistics (structural and transformational grammar) in classroom instruction. Because the new grammars were developed directly from an observation of English, Smith felt they helped students better understand how words work together to form sentences. She used as an example the fact that word order is used to convey meaning in English: "John hit Mary" is quite different from "Mary hit John." In the same way, "an awful pretty dress" is different from "a pretty awful dress." Traditional grammar, she pointed out, had little or nothing to say about word order because relationships in Latin are indicated by inflectional word endings. Because the English language is dynamic rather than static, Smith believed usage cannot be looked upon as a matter of right and wrong. Rather, it is a matter of what is acceptable and unacceptable at particular times and in particular circumstances.

Further evidence of the progression of Smith's thinking on the matter of language instruction is her discussion of dialectal differences, an issue that gained importance in the 1960s. Though she saw the necessity of helping students adjust to the language of the school and to society's accepted norms, she also stressed the importance of accepting the dialect or usage of their community. In this way students could become aware that they habitually vary their speech patterns, depending upon their audience, and that they must add the dialect preferred in school to their repertoire.

It is not surprising that Dora V. Smith's writings would reflect the ideas of people like Piaget and Dewey, for they were her contemporaries. What is remarkable, however, is that she also touched upon concepts that have only recently been "discovered" by modern theorists. Still discussing language growth, she turned her attention to writing, emphasizing that error is individual and must be treated as such. She commented on the importance of diagnosing and treating the causes of error rather than using meaningless drills to help improve student writing (1964, 53). Over three decades after Smith's essay was written, Mina P. Shaughnessy won acclaim for her book

*Errors and Expectations*, which addressed the same problem. At the end of her introduction to the book, Shaughnessy stated, "A teacher who would work with BW [basic writing] students might well begin by trying to understand the logic of their mistakes in order to determine at what point or points along the developmental path error should or can become a subject for instruction" (1977, 13). Dora V. Smith was evidently doing this very thing years before.

As a progressive, Smith saw composition as a means of socialization—of enriching the experience and broadening the interests of students (whom she always referred to as "boys and girls"). In 1927 she published a book in collaboration with Edward Harlan Webster entitled *Teaching English in Junior High School*. The title is a bit deceiving, if we think of "English" as encompassing literature, composition, and grammar. This book is entirely about the teaching of writing, and the social aspects of composition teaching are discussed in nearly every chapter, with one entire chapter devoted to and entitled "The Group Method." In the preface to the book the authors wrote:

The group method supplies the machinery for socializing within a class period all the compositions that the children write in and for that period. This method provides in the interpretation of composition—as the little theater does in dramatic presentation—an opportunity for an intimate, close relationship between the entertainers and the entertained. It produces a friendly spirit of cooperation and helpfulness rarely found in procedures that require the attention of the whole class. Its value in producing just the right atmosphere for reading and discussion makes it an indispensable adjunct to nearly every lesson in literature and composition. (Webster and Smith 1927, v)

Webster and Smith described a classroom where writing assignments grew out of natural situations, like the children's discussion with their parents of some of their early childhood experiences. They demonstrated the importance of socialization, as the students divided into small groups and read their compositions to each other, commenting upon one another's papers and selecting the best essays to be read aloud to the entire class.

What is so remarkable to the modern teacher of writing in reading this book is that over sixty years ago Webster and Smith were advocating methods of teaching composition that are being rediscovered by theorists and teachers today. Though this realization reinforces the old axiom that "there is nothing new under the sun," it does give cause for wondering why such obviously sensible methods have not been more widely used by English teachers over the years.

We speak today of the importance of audience and purpose in writing. Webster and Smith, though they did not use these exact terms, were essentially talking about the same things. They could very well have been the forerunners of modern theorists like James Moffett, who goes a step further in stressing the importance of socialization in the writing class, where he sees conversational dialogue as verbal collaboration, which goes hand-in-hand with cognitive collaboration to promote awareness of problems like egocentricity in writing (1968, 73).

In a 1960 essay, Smith wrote about teaching language as communication, lamenting the fact that not enough writing was being done in the schools. She suggested that instruction in formal grammar took up valuable time that would be better spent by having students do more writing. To support her claim, she cited a report from the Modern Language Association which stated that research clearly indicated no correlation between the understanding of grammatical science and effectiveness of expression or correctness of usage. To underscore her point about the absurdity of substituting "formalities" for practice in real communication, she gave the example of a tenth-grade honor student who was required to write 137 sentences containing adverbial clauses. Said Smith, "Apparently, if twenty sentences are enough for the average pupil, the gifted, who must be taught to work hard, need 137 to establish the pattern!" (1964, 256).

It is obvious that Dora V. Smith would be entirely at home in today's composition classroom. Her advanced ideas and modern methods would fit well into today's discussion of rhetorical strategies and collaborative discourse. As early as 1932, in an article entitled "Teaching versus Testing in Composition," she was calling attention to the problems that existed in the teaching of writing:

It is generally conceded that the teaching of composition with its attendant burden of paper correcting has to its credit more nervous breakdowns in the teaching profession than any other phase of instruction in English. Quantities of red ink, obliterating whatever of sense or of human value the content may originally have had, bear witness on the part of boys and girls to a naive and blissful unconcern for the mysteries of comma and semicolon. At the same time, they speak with tragic forcefulness of hours of discouragement and toil among teachers conscientious and self-sacrificing in their earnest effort to improve the writing of the pupils entrusted to their care. . . .

What I should like to propose to you . . . is that this situation exists because composition as it has been practiced in the past has been for the most part a *testing* rather than a *teaching* process. The teacher announces a topic or finds one in the experiences of boys

and girls, and sends them home to produce a composition. . . . The technique [is] the same in every instance: to test the pupils' ability to write without the assistance of the teacher, to analyze the results, and to reprove the pupils *afterward* for what they did not know, instead of preventing by one's own preliminary teaching the errors which one knew in advance were bound to occur. Everybody is testing composition. Whose business is it to teach it? (1932, 22)

She went on to point out that "the procedure is vicious for many reasons," stating: "In the first place, it ignores the essential factor of composition, the stimulation of thought, the provoking of ideas, the putting them together into an organic whole. . . . In the second place, it violates all the known laws of how men learn" (23).

Not one to offer criticism without suggesting a remedy, however, Smith then described an alternative assignment to "How I Spent My Summer Vacation" which enticed students to create an advertisement for the summer camp they attended (a common summer pastime in Minnesota) and had them vie with each other for the best-written, most pictorially vivid ad. In the process they discussed sensory words, colorful verbs, and well-placed adjectives, resulting in a piece of writing created and completed in the classroom by interested students who were proud of their work. Smith obviously understood the importance of creating authentic rhetorical situations which enabled students to write with authority.

Dora Smith wrote many articles on various aspects of composition, and her foresight is equally apparent in her discussion of literature. She frequently wrote about reading interests, suggesting that teachers pay more attention to the psychology of childhood and adolescence in selecting books for children. Writing in 1939, she described a 1928 study which revealed that only one-fourth of the students understood the average classic that was required reading in high school (1964, 105). Yet teachers persisted and still do persist in presenting these books to students. Smith observed that from the fifth grade on, the great "divorce" begins between the normal interests of childhood and the prescribed course of reading. She emphasized the need for teachers to understand adolescent longings and how students seek books to satisfy them. "Above all," she stated, "they need to understand how inadequate to the normal needs of the junior high school, for instance, are the emotional patterns of *Evangeline* and *The Man Without a Country*" (101).

Smith also wrote frequently about literature as aesthetic experience, where she leaned strongly toward reader-response theory in her

views. As G. Robert Carlsen commented: "She looked at literature as a transaction taking place between the work and the reader so that the reader was every bit as important as the work. Louise Rosenblatt had just written the first edition of *Literature as Exploration*, echoing the philosophy that Dora V was presenting in a more concrete form" (1984, 28). Smith herself underscored the importance of personal reaction in reading: "Appreciation begins within," she wrote. "It is both emotional and intellectual. It is determined largely by the experiential background of the individual which makes it possible for him to enter into the aesthetic experience with enjoyment and understanding" (1964, 107). Smith claimed that teachers approached the literary experience backwards, giving students a term like *simile* and asking them to look for examples in the text. She saw this technique as promoting facility in what she called a "literary stunt" rather than increasing appreciation for the work of literature. "Books are not written to illustrate literary techniques," she commented, "but to bring intimate revelation of human experience" (108).

Dora V. Smith had a strong interest in books for children and adolescents. In 1936 she wrote of her disenchantment with the narrowly prescriptive curricula of America's schools, suggesting improvement in the teaching of literature:

. . . we can begin by determining to approach literature as it is approached by intelligent, cultured people in everyday life. We can put pleasure in reading first; we can aim constantly at enjoyment and the development of hunger for more. We can test the success of our program by the desire of boys and girls to continue more reading of the same sort under their own direction. We can associate books with ever-widening interests and increased understanding of human nature and experience . . . and relate literature to the limitless interests of life itself. (Quoted in Applebee 1974, 132)

In her search for the best in children's literature, Smith traveled the world for an entire year in 1956, looking for books that would accurately depict the cultural heritage of children from different lands. She explained in her interview with Robert Boyle that "there are a great many good books today which reveal children of different countries to each other. . . . a child in India is revealed in a piece of fiction to American children, and in that piece of fiction children discover that the child in India is not very different from themselves" (D. Smith 1968). During her sabbatical year Smith opened the first book fair in Turkey and was responsible for introducing American books to children in Pakistan, India, China, and countless other countries.

Even after her retirement in 1958 Smith continued her interest in children's literature, publishing *Fifty Years of Children's Books* (1963), a pleasant, chronological trip through children's literature from 1910, "Moral Tales from Earlier Generations," to 1960, "Children's Books in a Bursting World." Interspersed with illustrations from various works of children's literature, this is an admittedly personal evaluation of what Smith considered "significant" literature for children. Her purpose in writing the book was to bring "happy recollections and a few new facts to those who have enjoyed a lifetime of reading and [to encourage] those new to the field to taste its joys" (vi).

Dora Smith's work with children's literature naturally led to her interest in literature for adolescents. As Arthur N. Applebee pointed out, the first serious professional attention to adolescent literature came from Smith's concern that literature teachers gave too little thought to the literary interests of high school students (1974, 155). She believed that it was unfair to students and to their teachers to send out from the colleges and universities people trained only in Chaucer, Milton, and Browning. In an effort to do something about this problem, she instituted the first course in adolescent literature at the University of Minnesota, aiming to supplement the training in the classics given by the English Department. This course may well have been the first of its kind ever offered at any college or university in the country.

Stanley Kegler, a former student of Smith's, described how she would come into the Saturday morning class with her assistant behind her, each lugging a huge cart full of books to be used in her lectures and as part of her hands-on instruction. "There would be a hundred people in this room. [They] would be clamoring for books. Then at the end of the hour people were expected to take some of the books home, read them, and bring them back the following week. And they did. They were all willing. She left with an empty cart, usually" (1988).

Smith had extensive booklists for both her children's and adolescent literature classes, containing titles of novels, short stories, poems, plays, essays, and biographies. Part of her list was divided into "Books for Boys" and "Books for Girls," a questionable distinction today, but a seemingly logical one at the time. The list also contained special sections entitled "Biography of Women" and "Life Stories of Famous Women," perhaps indicating an effort on her part to help students see that achievement knows no gender boundaries.

Though Smith had organized her adolescent literature course by 1930, it took a decade for her program to generate interest. The 1940s, however, eventually saw the development of this new literary genre, and more attention was paid to the need for such a course. In the 1950s

Dwight Burton, one of Smith's students, became a leader in the movement to legitimize adolescent literature, devoting considerable attention to the genre during his editorship of *English Journal* (Applebee 1974, 155). Stephen Dunning, one of Burton's students, continued to promote interest in adolescent fiction, writing a pioneering dissertation on the adolescent novel in 1959.

Back in the days of Dora V. Smith, adolescent books were commonly called "junior novels," a term which may have contributed to some of the poor attitudes toward the books. Certain words do carry negative connotations, and in the case of "junior novel," the implication was that these books somehow fell short of the "real" novel and were therefore to be taken less seriously. While it is true that many of the adolescent novels written during the 1940s and 1950s were rather shallow and formulaic, it is also true that there were exceptions, such as Maureen Daly's *Seventeenth Summer*, Esther Forbes's *Johnny Tremain*, and Florence Means's *The Moved Outers*. In spite of the fact that Smith encountered resistance from critics about the nature of adolescent literature, she continued to promote the genre because she believed in its importance to the adolescent's social adjustment and psychological development. If she were still alive today, she might be delighted to see that the genre now referred to as "young adult literature" has come a long way and has a bright future. As excellent authors create works of quality and sophistication for young adults, more and more people are beginning to view this genre as a body of literature with value beyond its sociological or popular appeal.

Dora Smith may have been one of the first people to see the connection between the teaching of literature and the teaching of reading. As today's whole language approach takes hold, the teaching of reading moves closer and closer to what Smith envisioned. And she was anything but reticent about her views. In a 1955 article she openly criticized Rudolf Flesch and his highly acclaimed book, *Why Johnny Can't Read and What You Can Do about It* (1955). In her rebuke, entitled "What Do We Want 'Johnny' to Do? To Pronounce Words or to Read?" Smith condemned Flesch's phonetic approach to reading instruction, charging him with being uninformed and sloppy in his research. She summarized her criticism by referring to an article appearing in the *London Times Educational Supplement* on 14 August 1953 ("Backward Readers") that attributed retardation to a process of "barking at print." Smith called this "a very apt description of the method Dr. Flesch is advocating. When such children reach the modern school, we think they can read, but they can't. They only make noises at print" (D. Smith 1955, 16).

Over and over again in her writing Smith emphasized the importance of reading for meaning. We hear in her words the voices of contemporary theorists like psycholinguist Frank Smith, who declares that reading is not a sound activity: "Phonics works if you know what a word is likely to be in the first place," says Frank Smith (1985, 54). "Readers can recognize words and comprehend text without decoding to sound at all. . . . We recognize words in the same way we recognize all the other familiar objects in our world . . . 'on sight'" (55). Smith goes on to say: "It is not necessary to say what a word is to comprehend its meaning. Quite the reverse, often it is necessary to comprehend the meaning of a word before you can say what it is. In other words, *meaning* is directly related to the spelling of words rather than sound. How otherwise could we be aware of many spelling mistakes?" (56). Clearly Dora Smith would agree with Frank Smith, deploring the fact that "the child is not asked whether he knows the meaning of the words, but he is merely to learn to sound out the letters . . . sounding out each separate letter in a word is bound to interfere with the process of seeing the word at a glance and getting its meaning instantly" (D. Smith 1955, 13).

One of Smith's major concerns was that teachers were ill-prepared to recognize and deal with student difficulties in reading. In a presentation to a discussion group on remedial reading at the University of Minnesota (1936), she cited six major developments in the field of reading which she felt were "vitally related to classroom method":

1. the relationship of experience to meaning
2. a growing recognition of the value of extensive as opposed to intensive reading in the development of word meanings
3. the importance of motive in reading
4. the utilization of natural cross-curricular course materials in determining solutions to reading problems
5. attention to individual differences
6. the importance of teacher education in keeping abreast of developments in the field of reading research

Smith addressed individual aspects of these six developments in articles she wrote for various journals over the years. In one, "'Lose Not the Nightingale'—A Challenge and Counter-Challenge," she commented on the often-unchildlike nature of the reading curriculum:

It is true that in numbers of schools in recent years there has been imposed upon children a curriculum most unchildlike in

nature, dealing in many instances with the means of life and not with its ends, encompassed on the north, south, east, and west by food, shelter, clothing, transportation, and communication—with the things of the spirit all but completely forgotten. I have myself visited schools within the last six months where boys and girls are in danger of spending the six years of the elementary school reading about nothing save the fire engine, the creamery, the grocery store, the railroad, the Indians, the Pilgrims, and the Dutch—no one of them a ruling passion in adult life any more than among children, and few of them calculated to give that hunger for more, without which lifelong association with good books is impossible. Not a bookshelf but has its *Story Book of Things We Use*, but on how few do we find *Winnie the Pooh*, whose ineffable spirit of joy in life burst forth in murmuring murmurs to himself “in a singing sort of way.” The older boys and girls know Hans Brinker because he “teaches something about the Dutch,” but they are on less familiar terms with Tom Sawyer, who (Heaven be praised!) correlates with nothing but a good time! (1938, 8)

The reading curriculum was not the only point of concern for Dora V. Smith, however. She spent most of her career studying and writing about the overall English curriculum in America’s public schools. Her views about the teaching of literature, composition, and language were no doubt formed and strengthened by participation in various studies of English teaching over the years, one of the best known of which is her 1933 study of high schools. In her monograph *Instruction in English*, Smith analyzed 156 courses of study from 127 cities in 35 states. She had visited seventy schools that she felt offered an exceptional mixture of content and method. At the time of her survey, Smith found a mix of traditional and progressive approaches in teaching. Though the yearly list of college entrance texts no longer dominated English courses, as they did before 1900, 50 percent of the schools still presented a list of classic texts for study. Smith’s research disclosed:

Literature of English authorship takes an overwhelming lead in the classics taught in American high schools. *Silas Marner* ranks first and *Julius Caesar* second. . . . *The Idylls of the King*, *Ivanhoe*, and *The Tale of Two Cities* [sic] compete for third place. Five of the titles are dramas, and all of them are Shakespearean. Eighteen of the 30 titles are from English literature, 7 from American literature, 2 from other foreign sources and 3 from a combination of all. (“English Monograph,” 408)

Comparing her results with a study done in 1890, Smith found that only one or two titles had vanished from the list of college entrance texts (1934, 114). The study revealed that although preparation for

college was at the bottom of the list of objectives for courses of study, teachers were still teaching to college demands, in spite of the supposed movement away from such pedagogy. In her conferences with teachers throughout the country, Smith learned that they continued to labor under the fear of college requirements, real or imagined (Applebee 1974, 125-26).

Reading the results of Dora V. Smith's studies, we might ask, How far have we really come in half a century? Just as Smith and others struggled to introduce American and world literature into the narrowly prescriptive curricula of the time, so we struggle today to include literature by women and minorities and literature for adolescents in the courses of study still dominated by the classics. College entrance examinations still loom large on the educational horizon, and professional accountability is frequently questioned by those who believe the English teacher must keep alive our "literary heritage."

In a 1940 article entitled "Problems of Articulation in the Teaching of English," Smith explained why the curriculum must change to fit the times and the student population:

In 1890 high-school pupils represented largely professional and clerical classes. Today an influx of boys and girls from laboring and industrial groups makes our enrolment [sic] more truly representative of the population as a whole. In 1890 four-fifths of the pupils in high school were preparing directly for college. Now only one pupil in seven has such an ambition. (147)

Addressing the curriculum controlled by college entrance requirements, she continued:

The problem of articulation begins with the establishment of a philosophy of education which centers attention upon the growth of the pupil and not upon the attainment of standards set from without. . . . conditions prevail in some school systems which indicate that both the nature and needs of boys and girls are forgotten in an effort to secure the approbation of those who direct instruction in the institution to which these pupils will be promoted. (147)

In the same article Smith called for more articulation between college/university faculty and high school teachers, citing the frequent complaint, "If we didn't have to teach what they should have been taught . . . we might get something done!" (154). "The purpose of any such movement," she continued, "is not to give one institution a chance to make known its wants to another but to give both of them an opportunity to study co-operatively the stage of development reached by the pupil and the reasonable next step in standards" (154).

How pleased Dora V. Smith might be today to see the strides that have been made in university-high school articulation and the countless benefits that have accrued to students.

Having directed the work of NCTE's Commission on the Curriculum, organized in 1945, Smith further demonstrated her foresight and steady conviction in a 1958 article, written the year of her retirement. Entitled "Re-establishing Guidelines for the English Curriculum," it addressed the public anxiety evident in the age of Sputnik about the quality of education in American schools:

Advice for curriculum makers is the cheapest commodity on the market. We are besieged these days from every direction by critics of the schools . . . "Import Europe's school system," we are told. "Aim your program at the gifted and let others get what they can—or get out." "Look at Russia. Copy some of her order and discipline into our schools." . . .

It never was more important to keep one's head in the language arts than it is right now. Educational systems are rigorous. They cannot be imported wholesale from other countries. The United States has attempted a program of universal education up through the secondary school which has long been the envy of other nations around the world. In fact, the whole story of comparative education in the last twenty years is one of gradual progress in the direction in which we have moved further than any other country. We need to strengthen the faith that is in us and move forward to perfect what we have begun, not cast it aside for a worn-out pattern. (318)

In some ways we are faced with the same kind of criticism today as a time when the "mediocrity" of America's schools is being criticized and the curricula being questioned. Some would even like to see the kind of standardized curriculum that Smith spoke so firmly against.

Though the American educational system has historically seen a swinging of the pendulum back and forth between traditionalism and progressivism, the question remains, How much progress have we really made? Certainly we have made great strides in the teaching of composition and in articulation programs, and reading instruction is improving with the whole language approach. But formal grammar is still being taught in isolation in many schools, and literature classes are still largely teacher centered and dominated by the classics.

In addition, some significant obstacles to effective English programs pinpointed in Smith's studies still have significance today. The most serious problems included poor teacher training, heavy course loads, inadequate book supplies, and time-consuming, extra-curricular programs (Applebee 1974, 127). We need only look at the findings and

recommendations of current studies to see that these problems still exist today in American schools, along with others indicative of the times.

Class size, too, continues to be the subject of heated discussion. When Smith did her dissertation research from 1925 to 1927, she found that class size was not as significant a factor in student learning as were the methods used by the teacher. Similarly, a recent analysis of existing research on class size, conducted by the NCTE Task Force on Class Size and Workload in Secondary English Instruction, concluded that "class size by itself, especially in English classes, is not the primary determinant of learning, but that *class size, when combined with mode of instruction, is a powerful determinant of learning*" (W. Smith 1986, 2). Though NCTE has advocated a class size of twenty to twenty-five students and a maximum workload of one hundred students per teacher per day, most classes and workloads exceed these numbers; and teachers are forced to find ways to deal with larger classes, just as they did in Smith's day. If anything, history tells us that progress in education is slow; and, of course, to some, "progress" is a relative term. But if we think of progress in terms of Smith's philosophy, we see that much of today's successful reform and innovation is based largely on the principles and theories that Smith advocated and in which she truly believed.

While Dora V. Smith was at the forefront of education nationally, she was also actively involved in innovative programs in her own state of Minnesota. In 1941 she initiated the first Children's Book Institute at the University of Minnesota, which soon became an annual event. In November of each year, to celebrate Children's Book Week, parents, teachers, and librarians from various parts of the state would gather for a series of meetings and book exhibits at which children's authors, teachers, librarians, and parents would discuss ways of guiding children's reading and of keeping up with the best books in the field. Smith presided over the institute, with local parent and teacher organizations assisting with promotion and planning. In charge of the book exhibit was a committee of University of Minnesota students from the library school, the Child Welfare Institute, and the Department of English Education. Table decoration and book arrangement were done by another committee of art education students.

Meetings were arranged so that the elementary school parents and teachers attended the afternoon session and the dinner, and the high school parents and teachers attended the dinner and the evening session. Approximately eight hundred people took part in the first institute in 1941, with similar interest being shown in ensuing years.

In addition to directing the fall institute, Smith also coordinated the annual Spring Conference on the Language Arts at the University of Minnesota. This was a two-day affair, again directed toward local teachers and librarians. The program consisted of small-group and large-group discussions on such issues as interdisciplinary learning, techniques of group discussion, and reading in an age of mass communication. Among the discussion leaders were such people as Luella B. Cook, Dwight Burton, and Harold Allen, along with other Minnesota teachers and librarians. The conference culminated in a general meeting, with Smith presiding, where reports and summaries of group discussions were given (Dora V. Smith papers, University of Minnesota Archives).

That Smith was doing all this work locally while at the same time directing and participating in national studies, teaching classes, writing for publication, and supervising the work of countless master's students and doctoral candidates suggests a woman undaunted by hard work and impervious to criticism. But her career was not without its difficulties. On 6 April 1950 the following headline appeared in the *Minneapolis Tribune*: "'U' Professor Barred from Speakers' List; Denies Link to Reds." The professor in question was Dora V. Smith. She had been invited to speak at a teacher-training program in Washington, D.C., during the Joseph McCarthy era, so the list of speakers was checked with the House Un-American Activities Committee. Smith's name had somehow made its way onto a list of people involved in "subversive investigations"; therefore, officials announced that she would be dropped from the list of speakers. As it turned out, the superintendent of Washington schools later admitted that the list of prospective speakers had been checked with the Un-American Activities Committee by phone, and someone had apparently misunderstood Smith's middle initial ("Dropping of 'U' Professor"). The committee maintained a listing for Dr. Dora B. Smith, who was a correspondent for *The Daily Worker*, the New York City Communist newspaper. Obviously English educator Dora V. Smith had been mistaken for the Dora B. Smith with the Communist leanings. Ironically, Smith had initially declined the invitation because the engagement conflicted with her Children's Book Week celebration at the University ("'U' Professor Barred"). After more than a year Smith managed to clear her name, but not without anguish on the part of a woman who prided herself on an honorable reputation.

In spite of difficulties such as this, Dora V. Smith enjoyed national and international renown. In demand as a speaker even early in her career, she received far more invitations than she could accept. And

she was loved and respected for her personal qualities as well as for her professional expertise. A wonderful tribute to Smith is an *English Journal* article written by her former student Richard Alm in which he captured the essence of Smith in a way that only one who knew her well ever could, particularly in relating one of the favorite stories about her:

Dora V's students knew that God kept a careful eye on her, especially when she was behind the wheel of a car. It was commonplace for her to drive down Nicollet Avenue, grandly pointing out to passengers various items in the store windows. Our favorite story deals with her driving five of us to downtown Minneapolis to a meeting of the Minneapolis English Club. Driving on the inside lane with two lanes of traffic on her right, Dora V. leaned over and said to Dwight Burton (now at Florida State University) seated next to the door, "Dwight, would you please ask those cars to let me turn right on the next corner?" She then went back to the conversation she had interrupted assuming Dwight would do as she asked and that the other drivers would cooperate. He did, and they did. (1984, 30)

Discussing Smith's efficiency, Alm stated: "Dora V. could be businesslike. When she telephoned one of us, she usually spoke her piece and then hung up. We had to be particularly adept to get in a word of our own. Most often, we had to call her back to give her our message. It wasn't a lack of courtesy; she was just being efficient" (30). According to Alm, Smith was too busy to think much about money, either:

Money was never a problem for Dora V., but it was never much of a concern, either. In the late 1940's, when she was an established national leader in English education, the members of the University High English Department were horrified to learn, by accident, how low her salary was. There was no malice toward Dora V. She was a woman, and the College knew that she lived with her mother and sister and was not likely to move anywhere else. When Walter Cook became Dean, he was horrified, too, and substantially raised her salary. Although Dora V. faithfully attended and appeared on the program of the NCTE Convention every year, she never asked the University of Minnesota to underwrite any of her expenses.

Over the years Dora V. wrote most of her publications for love, not for royalties. (32-33)

Alm's reminiscences not only demonstrate Smith's dedication and unselfishness, but also reveal commonly held attitudes toward women in the profession at the time—attitudes which Smith and others did not seem to question. Yet in spite of such inequities, Smith and the

other women included in this volume managed a degree of success quite unusual for their time.

In discussing Smith's career, many of those who knew her commented on her appearance, which gave her a "presence" difficult to forget. G. Robert Carlsen recalled: "I always remember my first methods class in Burton Hall. She came in, a tall, imposing woman with a mass of white hair and that kindly face. Though they did not look alike, she had the same kind of presence that was Eleanor Roosevelt's" (Alm 1984, 32).

But there was no "Franklin" in Dora Smith's life. According to Stanley Kegler (1988), when asked once why she had never married, Smith replied that she had never found a man who interested her very much. At a time when few women had such illustrious careers, there might well have been a choice involved between family and profession. Those who knew her, however, felt Smith never indicated that she consciously made such a choice. According to her former student Dwight Burton, "She was completely career-minded, the prototype of the career woman" (1988). Kegler believes that the lack of a husband and family gave Smith a kind of freedom she would not otherwise have had, explaining: "She would spend a day or two out of town almost every week traveling somewhere, and this was not on airplanes. She would ride a train from here to Chicago, Kansas, and other places, conduct an afternoon workshop, catch a late evening train, and teach an eight o'clock class on Saturday morning back here" (1988).

A professional in every sense, Smith expected the same of her students, encouraging them to attend professional meetings, even sometimes lending them her car to make the trip. Kegler recalled:

We felt terribly privileged. We'd go to the National Council of Teachers of English meeting, and Dora would introduce us to everybody. . . . There I was, 26, 27 years old, working on my M.A., and I was meeting all the people who were really big names in the field. . . . The only thing that was difficult with Dora was when you appeared on the program. She'd introduce you to someone: "This is Stan Kegler. Stan is working on a master's degree. He's speaking tomorrow at 9:30 in room such-and-such." Dora roped them all in Angela Broening, Stella Center and they'd all come and sit in the front row. . . . and you'd be so nervous—absolutely frightened to death! . . . You were just like her child. She was showing you off. (1988)

Smith's nurturing kindness extended even further. She once loaned Betty Jane Reed, her secretary and graduate assistant, the down payment on a house so that Reed could move her mother and sisters to Minneapolis from Pittsburgh after the death of her father. Reed

recalled: "It was typical of Dora that she agreed to take a second mortgage on the house—in fact *offered* to. . . . One day she appeared very embarrassed and told me her attorney told her she should at least *look* at the house, so we drove out and she took a quick walk around just to satisfy her attorney" (1988).

It is tempting to speculate on how Dora Smith managed to be so successful in a profession largely dominated by men. Burton (1988) indicated that she was one of three women out of one hundred faculty at the University of Minnesota's College of Education. Smith's brother, George Baxter Smith (1988), spoke of how she would come into the University Faculty Club when there were no women there, and she would appear to be on an equal basis with everyone else. Reed, doubting that Smith ever thought of herself as a successful woman in a man's world, commented that she "just went ahead doing what she felt needed to be done" (1988).

This statement seems to characterize Dora V. Smith well. Never self-conscious about her professional role, she seemed secure in her knowledge and ability. Kegler described her as "sex blind" in her dealings with colleagues and students. In addition to her intelligence, energy, and drive, he felt that her success was due in part to her fine character. Calling her "probably the most perfect human being i have ever been privileged to know," he spoke of how she always managed to keep herself above the fray where politics were concerned, being involved in controversy, yet emerging unscathed, without enemies (1988).

It is no wonder that this hard-working, much-respected woman was the recipient of so many honors and awards. In 1957 she received the W. Wilbur Hatfield Award for long and distinguished service to the teaching of English in the United States. That same year a scholarship was established in her name at the University of Minnesota. Theodore Blegen, dean of the Graduate School, praised Smith's energy and dedication in announcing the scholarship:

I rise to pay a tribute of gratitude and affection to a gallant lady . . . I speak of a human dynamo whose energy can bore one over and leave one breathless. There is an absurd rumor afloat. People say that Dora Smith is to retire. This of course is ridiculous. We may indeed read about her retirement some time, but we know her too well to be fooled by any such report. The next day will carry a story about a Dora V. Smith book fair, with a dinner and an assemblage of local authors, in darkest Africa.

Then, before long, one will read of a Dora Smith expedition to the moon to introduce the children of the moon to some of the brighter products of American and Minnesota authors. (1957)

In 1958, the year Smith officially retired after forty-one years as professor of English education, she was honored three times in one day: as one of ten teachers selected during the centennial year as "Maria Sanfords of Today," as Minnesota's Teacher of the Year, and as a retiring faculty member from the University of Minnesota's College of Education. Assistant Dean of Education Marcia Edwards, in a retirement tribute to Smith, fondly recalled "the time Dora went home and to bed with the flu—and took the dictaphone along so she could finish a research report and an article while waiting for her temperature to come down." Edwards also spoke of the time Smith "went to a photographer to have an official picture taken for a national program, and on reminding the photographer that she wanted to look intelligent in this particular picture, received the answer, 'Madam, we leave that to the subject.'" Edwards concluded her speech by saying, "To honor Dora V. Smith is to honor all good teachers—she is their symbol!" (1958).

In 1961 Smith received a special commendation for outstanding achievement as a University of Minnesota graduate. Civic leader Viola Hymes, a former student of Smith's who was also honored on that occasion, wrote in a letter to her former teacher:

That I was presented the Outstanding Achievement Award at the same time it was presented to you is to me as high a tribute as the receipt of the Award itself. . . . You have been the kind of teacher who, I am sure, has influenced the lives of thousands of students who have had the privilege and opportunity of studying with you. As one of those who have been so privileged, I want to take this special occasion to express my deep appreciation to you not only for teaching me how to teach English, but for sharing with me your compassion for and understanding of our fellow human beings. (1961)

This compassion and understanding was at the heart of Dora V. Smith's philosophy of an education for everyone in a democratic society. Her work in all aspects of English education reflects this philosophy, as does the work of many of the "Smith legacies" who hold or have held positions similar to hers in colleges and universities throughout the country. Dwight Burton and his student, Stephen Dunning, now retired from the University of Michigan, did much to advance the cause of English teaching and were especially influential in the cause of adolescent literature during the 1950s. Another student of Burton's, James E. Davis, continues to take a leadership role in the Council and will ascend to the position of Council president in 1992. G. Robert Carlsen, now retired from the University of Iowa, was

mentor to such Council leaders as Ken Donelson, Ben Nelms, and Ruth Cline, among others. Add to this list other luminaries, such as Walter Loban, who wrote the foreword to this book, Richard Alm, whose research on Smith has proved invaluable, and the countless others who can be so proud of calling themselves one of Dora Smith's "descendants."

In his book *A Long Way Together: A Personal View of NCTE's First Sixty-Seven Years*, J. N. Hook described the ribbon-cutting ceremony which opened the new NCTE headquarters in Urbana, Illinois, almost two decades ago:

On May 13, 1971, Dora V. Smith cut a red ribbon, an act symbolizing the official opening of the Council's new home. . . . It was appropriate that Smith—the beloved "Dora V."—cut the ribbon. She was the senior surviving past president; she had begun writing for *English Journal* almost fifty years earlier, in the 1920's; she had served on uncounted Council committees and had given countless speeches across the country; she had guided research projects and for more than a decade had headed the Curriculum Commission. Some of her academic offspring had followed her in major Council roles. . . . No one else present on that brisk, sunny May morning could claim so many professionally illustrious descendants as Dora V. (1979, 260-61)

We may never know how proud Smith was that morning, but we do know how proud she *should* have been.

Just a few years later, in 1975, Dora Smith entered a nursing home when her sister Jean, with whom she had lived for many years, suddenly passed away. Smith had become rather frail and needed constant care. In a letter to NCTE Executive Secretary Robert F. Hogan, Smith's brother explained: "She is not able to write and has little interest in reading although she is strong and well physically" (G. Smith 1975). Unfortunately, her health declined over the years, and her mind became less and less sharp. She no longer recognized her former friends and associates when they visited her. A poignant account of such a visit was given by Walter Loban: "Since she gave no indication of knowing me, I said who I was and that I'd come from California. 'Oh, yes,' she said, 'I have many friends out there. I go there fairly often.'" Subsequent mention of her former students and even her brother and sister elicited no comment. "Dora said, 'I had brothers. It's strange I don't remember them.'" But when Loban began to talk about professional matters, she seemed to become more alert:

I expressed my appreciation for all she had taught me and told her that I still use her ideas and philosophy in my classes at the

University of California. She looked right at me and said, "Oh so much time has passed. I doubt that those ideas could be so useful now." Surprised, I remonstrated and said that my colleague, Grace Maertens, felt the same way about what she had learned from Dora. Dora replied quite clearly, "That's nice of you both." . . . When I said goodbye, she nodded pleasantly, and I thought: Dora V. could easily be turning back to her desk or to her next appointment, and I could be descending the steps of Burton Hall. The walk back to Nicollet Mall is long, but I decided I needed time to think about the riddle of time and personalities, for I felt exactly as if the year were 1932, half a century ago. She hadn't really changed, nor had I. Despite what has happened to each of us, our essential natures haven't altered. I really didn't know whether to be dismayed or reassured, and I still don't. (1982)

Upon reading Loban's account, Constance McCullough, Smith's former student and colleague, responded in a letter to Loban: "The miracle is that her personality is not changed one whit. She is the same lovely, outgoing, great-spirited person" (1982). When Dora V. Smith passed away on 28 January 1985, less than a month before her ninety-second birthday, she remained gracious and courteous to the last, "even to a 'thank you' and a smile to the nurse who was with her when she died" (Reed 1988).

But it is on the life of this remarkable woman that we focus today and on her many contributions to the field of English education. And in remembering these contributions we cannot overlook one that needs to be emphasized strongly—Dora V. Smith's status as a role model for the women and men teaching English today. She was working at the time in a field largely dominated by men, yet in her efficient, unassuming way she commanded the respect of all who knew and worked with her. She was tireless, dedicated, and accepted nothing but the best—because that was what she always gave. She was a woman who paved the way for those of us who follow. We owe it to Dora V. Smith and to ourselves to carry on her tradition of excellence as we work to make our own contributions to the history of English teaching in America.

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