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Interview with John Schultz, 1998

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John Schultz

OK, today is March nineteenth, 1998. And we are interviewing John Schultz, Professor Emeritus of Fiction Writing at Columbia College Chicago.

If you could tell us first, when did you come to Columbia and what were the circumstances that brought you here?

I came to Columbia in the Fall of 1966 as a part-time teacher teaching one workshop in creative writing. I was brought here by Mike Alexandroff, President of Columbia College at that time, and through the early '90s he was also President. I had just developed a wholly new way of teaching writing called Story Workshop approach, and started using this approach with classes, private classes, on the North Side of Chicago in the Lincoln Park area. And we attracted a good deal of attention due to the ways of teaching, which were that of using exercises that interrelated speech and writing that developed imagination, seeing in the mind in relation to speech, audience form, writing voice. In writing, voice is a very important part of the concept of the approach. It was the ways of teaching and the quality and the vividness of the writing that was coming out of these workshops that attracted a good deal of attention. And there was some articles that appeared, first of all by Herman Kogan with Chicago Daily News, in Panorama—he was Editor of the Arts section of the Daily News. And Hoke Norris, with the Chicago Sun-Times, and others. Mike knew some of these people very well and they were telling him—as he'd told me—that they must get in touch with this guy John Schultz in Lincoln Park. So

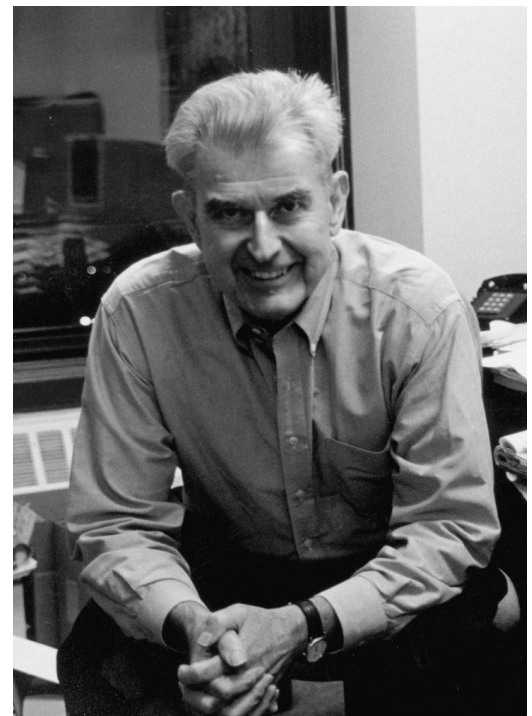
Mike wrote me a letter somewhere in 1966. I was involved at that time in doing a program, a federal program, called Operation Encouragement. We were working with many dropout kids, that sort of thing, but also any teenager who wanted to come off the streets and join the workshop. So we had kids from all walks of society. You know, they were upper-middle class kids, ghetto drop-outs, everybody all in the same workshop. And the work that was being done was pretty exciting stuff. We published a book called "Summer of 1966" and this got a lot of attention. So Mike had sent me a letter and I hate to say it, but I didn't even respond to the first letter.

Why not, what was in the letter?

He was just, it wasn't him or anything else, it was just... It was partly because I had an idea that writing shouldn't be taught in colleges. It's very ironic to say that at this time, you know, since I've spent much of my life developing within an academic context. But at that time I had a very strong idea writing should not be taught in a college context; it should be taught outside the college, it should be developed in a kind of living relationship with whatever kind of life events, careers, were going on for various people. An idea that academia was, in some way, separate from life itself, which was very much present in the academy, and also an idea that we were going to start to break down at Columbia and try to bring some merger of life outside with the life inside the academy. So I didn't respond to the first letter and then he actually had the nerve to write me a second letter in August, after Hoke Norris

had written a column about the approach and about the success we had in the Operation Encouragement program.

And, so, I did answer this one. I said, "Well, I'll see what this guy's about." And this time he was a little more specific, I think, and what he was saying interested me, in terms of—whatever, just what his own interests were. So I talked with him, and the very first talk we began talking about some pretty provocative, radical issues of educational philosophy and how these things might be implemented within the structure of education as we knew it, particularly higher education. We were also curious about what could happen among other levels too, secondary and... but of course Columbia was on a college level. And he was much taken by the Story Workshop approach for the fundamental philosophy of accepting people, voices and backgrounds, no matter who they are or where they come



from, you know, which is a central assumption of the Story Workshop approach, very important to it—voice, background, imagination. You have to hope that there is some fluency in English, but we've been able to work fairly well even with people who don't have perfect fluency in English. So that was an idea that most intrigued him, and that's fundamental to the Story Workshop approach, and also the fact that we had a very active, hands-on, essentially you could call it a dramatic approach. Everyone was in a semi-circle in the Story Workshop, in some sort of way was participating in the activity, to whatever degree they can participate. Actually, as exercises go, you're required to participate and it just becomes an automatic thing, you know, because of the way the workshop is structured

So this all very much intrigued him and he wanted to try it out, and so he offered me a chance to try it in a college situation. And we got some pretty interesting students in it, so we ran the workshop. Now Mike says he came and saw one of my private workshops at a studio that I had on Armitage. I don't actually remember that myself, but in any case, he had also come to sit in, for a while, at our workshop we were running at Columbia. And he felt that the Story Workshop approach had solved one of the major riddles or conundrums of higher education, which was how to involve [students]. When you have a diverse classroom, how do you involve everyone in what's going on and guide them in the process of discovery in some sort of integration, achievement of the work at hand, you know? So in this case of imaginative work it involved writing, reading, speech telling, all

those sort of things. So in the first workshop we got excellent writing, we got a great response from the students, and he was much intrigued with it, so we expanded it the very next semester to include two freshman English workshops, Story Workshops, classes that were being taught by Betty Shiflett. And I continued with two creative writing workshops and the both of us, Betty and I, were part-time filling in. So by this time Mike was really very interested in not only the Story Workshop approach itself, but also interested in the ideas that were implicit in it and how those ideas might be employed on a broad scale in the development of higher education in arts and communication, you know. This, in the 1960s, was a new area, you know, so many of the assumptions that we ended up working with are now, pretty much, broadly accepted throughout higher education. At that time we were truly radical. So I proposed a full-time position or I talked about it with him; in any case, it was a full-time position, and he said that the way the school was at that time structured, I had to be made a chair, so I would be made chair of the then English/Writing Department. And I was the only full-time employee of this department that was just coming to be. There were a couple of other people who were full-time on that basis: Thaine Lyman, I think Robert Edmonds in Film, Lily Strauss in Theater, but most of the teachers were part-time and a chair was—it was not at all defined as to what the chair was, you know. So because of the nature of the school, I mean, we had to survive every September, every February. We had to survive; we had to bring people through the door.

Can you address the nature of the school? Can you describe for us what it was like, in the mid '60s? I mean, now that puts you back early in the institution as we know it, of its modern history. What was it like, did you feel you were part of some experiment?
Oh yes, oh, definitely.

Could you talk to that, speak to that?

Oh yeah, it was, we were... In the beginning there were those conversations that I was having with Mike in 1966, '67, and conversations that he was having with other people at the time: Bill Russo, I think Russo was also full-time in Music/Theater, conversations with Harry Bouras, and a few others. Al Parker was chair of the Radio Broadcasting Department. But most of Mike's conversations at this time in developing this new school at Columbia were conducted with, I think with me, with Jon Wagner and Robin Lester—who came from the University of Chicago and from the Christian Action Ministry Academy on the West Side, where they were doing some very interesting work with kids who were dropouts, high school dropouts—and then a few others at this time, but it was a fairly, very small group. And a great deal of the mission was really thrashed out, I think, by, well, by us in conversation with Mike, by me and Mike in conversation, by Mike and some others he was talking with. But it still came down to this notion of being able to open your doors to anybody who really wanted a college education in arts and communication, to offer them truly professional training, but also to accept them, their voices, their backgrounds—wherever they came from—to accept them as they were, as they came through the door, and

to try to work with them as they were.

One of our working principles at the time, the way we put it was: Working with the students as you find them, as they come to you, you know. I used to ask teachers not even to look at previous records of the students, you know, not even to look at high school records or college transcript records. Just take the student as you find the student right before you. Sometimes I'd have remarkable results because it altered, completely, the teacher's expectations of what would happen, or what could happen with the student and the students who somehow had not been able to do well in other contexts flowered, you know, they really came out here very strongly. It was pretty exciting to see. And then you found out later so and so had this rough time at another college or was unable to do this and that, seemingly, and then they show they have all this talent, all this ability, and it could be developed and they were able to take the training and run with it. This was very exciting stuff. And this was exciting throughout the school. So, it was in the summer, not summer, April of 1968, Mike held a retreat on the North Shore. People who took part in this retreat were me, Harry Bouras, Jon Wagner, I'm not sure if Robin Lester was there or not, we had a fellow Tanenbaum from New York, another guy Birnbaum, I believe that's right, from Staten Island Community College, a fellow from what was going to be the new SUNY at New Paltz, Staughton Lynd, who was a non-violent new left theorist and practitioner—all gathered for this conference, you know. And we talked for at least about three days all together at this

retreat. There was a lot of fascinating talk, I don't know if it came to any conclusions, you know, in the talk. But what came out of it was a kind of general trend or a thrust for the school, which began to be increasingly refined into what we called the mission. And the mission of the school comes down—at its very core it means, at its very integrated core, it means: Accepting the students as you find them, as they come to you. Accepting their voice, their background, whatever they bring with them. Giving them as much of a chance as you can to thrive, providing them with the opportunity for professional education in arts and communications. And to do it within a liberal arts framework. And to teach the liberal arts through the arts and to teach the arts through the liberal arts. This sort of, somewhat seemingly paradoxical but really highly integrative approach, this is at the core of the mission, you know. The mission was fashioned in this way because we thought it was the right thing to do, you know, it seemed to be serving the needs of humanity, the needs of the nation as they were being expressed at that time. And it was something that seemed to be really pushing for realization in the arts and communication. This seemed to be the right way to go.

So, when we put it into operation it became, I think we knew it was going to be appealing to students, but as soon as we put it into operation, it became obvious that the students were flocking to it. You know, they were coming from all sides of it, and the school began to grow by leaps and bounds. So the mission is actually the educational thrust of the school, the educational justification of the school, but it also showed itself immediately to be the generator of the economic well-being of the school. You know,

the generator of the economic potential, possibility, and support of the school. So in that sense, the mission proved itself to be extraordinarily powerful. Well, it began to develop in all sorts of ways after this, various departments were developing, had to develop in a very entrepreneurial way. It had to. I mean, I was the only chair, I was the chair of English/Writing, and there was no really defined authority structure in the school. I mean, there was Mike's office and then it just sort of shades off into... And when it shades off, this is an area that, it's like exploring new country, you know. A turf is declared and people begin to raise new operations and classes. I can remember inventing classes right in the middle of registration, right then and there, you know, and some of them working very well. I remember we prized this spin on a dime flexibility where, you know, where we could implement a class, kill a class, do this or that with great speed, ease, efficiency. It was highly efficient.

How long did that last?

It went on for quite a long time. I mean, the school was very much like a rapidly developing economy. Some departments were doing very well and then you find that some departments were languishing for lack of leadership. We didn't have full-time faculty, you know. We had—at one point Betty Shiflett and some others were teaching four part-time classes so they were in effect full-time, but they weren't even, the school didn't even have a concept of full-time faculty. So we had to create the notion of full-time faculty. I think five or six people in the English/Writing Department were amongst that first group of full-time faculty for

this and other departments in the school. There'd always been that core of people in Radio Broadcasting and Television, you know. But the school had almost, by the early '60s, had almost ceased to exist. And at that point, now, I came in '66, but Mike was trying to find a way, you know, and found the way to begin to see that it was not to be strictly a trade school in Radio Broadcasting and Television, but to become, as much as possible, a comprehensive arts and communications college, you know. And to do it as a liberal arts institution. So you had to have a strong liberal arts framework, a strong liberal arts contribution. And you had to, in some way, wherever possible, be implementing this notion of teaching the arts through the liberal arts and liberal arts through the arts, you know. And we had to have the advantage, of course, that at least—there's always a joke about everybody in a small town knows each other, you know. But it's not true, everybody in a small town does not know each other; I come from a small town, they don't. But to a large degree, you know, you do. And so the structure could run on personal relationships for a while, you know. But then that got not only cumbersome, but there also developed serious misunderstandings, all sorts of conflicts. And it was pretty obvious that structures had to be developed and brought into place, and structures that were useful to the kind of unique institution that it was and determined to continue developing as.

So these were both very exciting times; they were also—sometimes—very contentious times. I don't think there was so much contention there in your late '60s and very early '70s. Back then, as it

began to get larger, then there did begin to be contentions of one sort or another within, which I think was probably pretty inevitable. And you began to need other structures, you know. I made some contribution toward developing a structure of responsibility that Mike, you know, or extended from Mike. That included the development of the Chairperson's Council, the early Chairperson's Council and what we call the ERCC, which, in its first incarnation, meant the collective representatives of the Chairperson's Council, which was supposed to handle grievance proceedings of the school. And there had been a grievance that had come from the chair of the Photo Department at that time, a colorful fellow. And he—out of several intense meetings and our dialogue got down to the point where sometimes we did things like throw chairs and—literally, I mean it. It's something you would never think of today. Instead of it being thought of as a normal part of dialogue, what have you, somebody would call the police now. But at that time this happened when emotions got very high. So anyway, we developed this, I think I had some instrument in developing the notion of the ERCC, and I remember working to convince Mike that it would be a good thing for him to have this group that he could depend on to air grievances, to handle them, to act as a council. And originally, we had some idea of giving advice to the President on certain issues, too, but it pretty quickly became a grievance procedure, largely. So, sometime after that, then the original Columbia College Faculty Organization began to develop, and then the CCFO developed out of that. So the formal structures, I mean, actually written down structures of these things, probably didn't come about until the early '80s.

A couple things before we leave these early years: can you briefly tell me the origins of the Story Workshop?

Story Workshop approach?

Yeah. Where did that come from from you that ultimately attracted Mike Alexandroff?

Well, I don't know, I don't know Mike was particularly—I don't know if I ever even told him until a couple of years ago, the real process of coming to that and developing the Story Workshop approach. What interested him was the way it worked and the assumptions that were underlying it, you know. But how I came to it was, at the time, in Lincoln Park there was several things that came together all at once for me. One was a certain theory of story that I'd been developing for a few years; this predated everything else when I was at the University of Chicago. Then that joined with—in the May of 1964 I went to my mother's class. My mother was a sixth grade teacher and she was a very good one. And we come from Missouri, but my family moved to Michigan; I didn't grow up in Michigan, I grew up in Missouri. But she was teaching there and we walked into this classroom and it's probably the liveliest classroom that I've ever walked into, you know. There were things going on everywhere and the walls were full of all these colorful projects that students were doing and their poems tacked up on the blackboard—framing the blackboard—and projects going on in every corner. What she was operating was what's called a modified open classroom, you know. And she had two principal rules here: One was that you can't do anything that is going to disrupt the activity of anyone else, and the other is that you do need to make your choice,

belong in some way. And it worked very well. She had groups in every corner of the room and a group in the center of the room. And one of the things that I was really struck by the liveliness of it, and my then wife and I, we were looking at, I was reading the poems, you know, and they were so lively. None of the stilted imitation of Whittier or Longfellow or anything like that. They were just very lively, lively poetry, often having three or four good lines in a row, things like that. And a couple poems that were just plain good from beginning to end. And I was so struck by that and there was one which was a kind of a complete telling in this young woman's own language, own voice, of the refrain from the folktale "The Juniper Tree."

It was from the area of Michigan where there are these Mexican bean pickers that come there every year. So this was a daughter of a bean picker's family. And suddenly she's writing this poem and she wrote right there in the class: My mother she killed me/ My father he ate me/ My little sister Marjorie gathered up all my bones/ Wrapped them in a white silk handkerchief/ And laid them under the apple tree. You could recognize the various parts of this from the general structure of the refrain in "The Juniper Tree" but it's changed totally in her language, you know. And it really just leaps right out at you. As a matter of fact, she must have, at some point, been told the story. But in any case, that poems and a couple of others were just so striking. So I asked my mother, "What did you do?" And she said, "Well, I told them they were free to write whatever they wanted to write." And I said, "Well, that's no different from any writing teacher in the

country," which is not true; that was very different from many writing teachers in the country at that time, but there were a lot of people who say that and they never did what they say they're after, because the students are always trying to second guess the teacher: what is it the teacher really wants, and if the teacher's not saying what he or she wants, then the teacher obviously wants something over here. And they're using, choosing some formal, distant model, what have you, that's getting in the way of what they might really have to say. And I said, "Well, the remarkable thing is not that you said that but that they believed you," you know. And so, well, it was a very striking experience.

Well, after that, I got involved in, I've been off and on working with Paul Sills, who is a Director at Second City—and we had developed a conversation from the very early '60s to over the last three years. And this was very important for me and important for him. And I became acquainted with the Theater Games approach to the teaching of theater, you know, which is used to a certain extent over in our Theater Department. And the current chair of the Theater, Sheldon Patinkin, worked at Second City at that time; he was very familiar himself with the games and with Viola Spolin, was the originator of the games and so forth. I didn't really have that much to do with the games themselves. I went to two sessions that Viola conducted before I took off for Mexico in the Fall of 1964. But I was very struck by two things: One was that basic principle of establishing a point of concentration and the use of an exercise or activity that was structured in some ways to meet the needs of the discipline, if you want to put it that

way, the discipline of theater and what have you. So I'm not quite sure what started me thinking but I went Mexico, I went to Cuernavaca where I had been before and I was planning on being there for a while... So I was just wandering around doing some writing in my journal at one point in this garden in Cuernavaca—and, of course, it's a beautiful place. And I started writing in the journal and I suddenly began seeing this whole approach to the teaching of writing that integrated this idea of story that I thought was at the root of story and human experience, that the way human beings use story to make sense of their lives, to contain and further the wisdom of their lives, and to provide, also, an engaging experience. The sense of story in having some way this independent and yet social movement in context seemed to join with what I'd seen in my mother's classroom and also join with some of the basic, what I've seen in a couple of these Theater Game sessions. I also joined, if I may dare say it, with an experience with concepts of Zen, which I had when I was in Korea and met this guy in Japan who sort of led me down this road. We used to walk Tokyo until four or five o'clock in the morning talking about all sorts of things and doing things—and with the concept of John Dewey's, that idea that you don't just replace bad habits with another good habit, you know, that's not the way it's done, you know. Anybody's who's had to go through quitting smoking or anything else knows that this is the case. What you do, as Dewey put it, I thought very well, was you start something else growing beside it until that something else that's growing becomes stronger and eventually the other begins either

to wither or becomes less and less important. So I thought that was pretty central to it too.

But still, you know, these are all disparate things and what came together was something very different from any of these. Maybe similar in some ways but also very different from any of these. It was a workshop approach which is based on recall activities which had to do with memory—there's a relationship to learning, word activities—which initially were described simply as Word Play, oral telling activities. The relationship of oral telling—of course, you've got an immediate audience with oral telling; oral telling, the relationship of this to writing—to writing within this context in the class, the relation of this to oral reading of published literature—and of the reading of published literature, you know, on your own, and then to writing that would be done outside the group, and eventually to writing that one would do on one's own.

So, I remember sketching this out and I had the impression that I spent an hour or so doing it and I looked up and the sun was going down. You know, this is the way, people tell me this is... this is the way it was, you know, I was surprised; a high-energy feeling, and it had such an expansive grasp to it. There was a friend of mine in Cuernavaca who was very interested and I talked to her about this and she was—I sort of began to work some things out talking with her and when I got back to Chicago I put it all into a kind of news release, not all, but I sort of sketched in a news release. Herman Kogan picked it up and wrote his column on it, a good Panorama in the Chicago Daily News, the Arts

section, which was a very prominent place to secure; you know, I could not have asked for better. But he was using it to answer somebody about how, whether or not you could teach writing. And he was trying to tell this guy it doesn't look like Schultz is trying to do all those evil things you're talking about, in terms of teaching writing. So, several students, I mean, several people responded to that article or column that Kogan wrote and got in touch with me, and the first workshops were formed

And out of that, the work became known almost immediately. I began to develop the word activities along with the very specific Story Workshop activities that were developed in the first six months. I'd just sort of see these activities; they'd really just pop out as we were doing the Word Play. And so we developed activities like One Word, Take A Place through words, some of the oral telling activities, the Person-Action/Person-Object and the Meeting the Eyes, One Word, One Word Voice, individual verb exercise: all of these are orally done activities which have a direct relationship with writing. And so it was pretty exciting stuff, very exciting. It was—and then from there, of course, we moved to not only the adult private workshops but to the workshops we were doing with the high school kids, the drop-out kids, in the summer of 1966.

The whole period, at the same time, was a period of great ferment in this country, you know. It was truly, fairly characterized as a revolutionary period. I mean, they say all sorts of things about the Civil War, you know, and say this happened and that happened and this didn't happen and that didn't happen, but the fact of the matter

is that nothing is the same after the Civil War, you know. And the fact is that after the '60s nothing was the same either, even if whatever happened didn't happen or some other things did happen, you know, because as a result of all of the unforeseen consequences of many actions that were taken and many unforeseen benefits, good things that happened. So these were exciting times in general in the country. There were exciting times in Chicago; there were exciting times in Lincoln Park—which was one of the most adventurous areas of the city, everything had been pushed out of Hyde Park when urban renewal went to Lincoln Park. Of course it became immediately a favored area, because it was the area where the artists were and so forth, and how it is what it is today, an area highly gentrified.

I wanted to also come back to what you said about that Mike Alexandroff didn't want Columbia to simply be a trade school. How important was accreditation? And again, you'd be one of the few people that saw the whole road. Was there a debate over, you know, is that becoming too mainstream? Describe that period, maybe.

Well, of course we were ambitious, for we were proposing something that really hadn't been done, you know. There were people in the school who wanted it to be a trade school or a conservatory. But it's pretty obvious, as a trade school or a conservatory, it wasn't going to do what we wanted to do, in terms of giving people training nor in terms of developing this wide range of humanistic values in arts and communications. We felt very strongly that you couldn't divorce arts and communications training

from the values associated with them, with human endeavor of all kinds, you know. We did have certain broad ideas of social participation, of liberating individual creativity, and we were also strongly entrepreneurial at the same time, all of these things together. We wanted, if possible, for people to have a broad background in world and Western cultures; we wanted this, we wanted a good background in philosophy and social science, which is very ambitious. And we wanted this along with full professional training and whatever arts and communications discipline is being developed in whatever department, whether it was Film or Fiction Writing or Photo or Theater or what have you. This was a very serious part of the school. But this was something that hadn't really been tried before and North Central was skeptical about it.

So a lot of things happened in the Spring of '68, starting the Fall of '67 into the Spring of '68 and then on from there. In the Spring of '68 some of the North Central examiners came to the school, you know. And one of the guys who came in to interview me—and I had some members of the faculty there with me—and I remember he was asking me questions which I thought were not relevant to what we were trying to do. And so I just answered him with what I wanted him to hear and leave with, you know. And I heard afterwards that he went into Mike and said, "My God, that man just sat me down and read me one position paper after another." He seemed to be both attracted to it, and at the same time it didn't fit with any of their predispositions, you know. And that was pretty much the way they were approaching Mike too.

They were attracted to the notion but it didn't fit their predispositions, what they had set up, their framework they had set up for accreditation. So they worked out with us that we would seek some consultants, you know. And we got a fellow from Earlham College in Indiana, Joe Elmore, as well as a couple of others who came in and out too, but they were very helpful just in terms of relating, helping us to relate what we were doing to North Central. And Elmore got very attracted. He came to sit in on Betty Shiflett's workshop and some other Story Workshop class. He gave us a very nice... quote, you know, on what he saw there and what he saw in the student writing, the progress in the student writing, which he said he thought was more remarkable or more marked than what you'd see in most school and universities, you know, which was a very nice thing to say. And the fact that we were, again, dealing with this wide range of students, this was very impressive to him. So Elmore was very helpful to us.

And we had some other kind of trial consultations and then the big time came in the visit in the Winter, Fall, of 1973. I was, again, in Mexico at this time, but Betty was here, Betty Shiflett was here and she had just published her College English article on the Story Workshop approach, and it was a lead article in that issue of College English. Of course, you had a super academic publication, you know, its lead article dealing with an approach, Story Workshop approach that's being developed—through teaching and writing—at Columbia College. And she was put right there in the elevator with the article in her hand to meet the examiners as they came into the school, you know; this was at the old 540 North Lake Shore. So that

was very—of course, that was very impressive. They were all given copies of the article, a way of saying, "We are also a part of the academic mainstream, you know, and this is where we want to be. We want to be in an academic mainstream; we want to bring arts and communications into the academic mainstream." Well, by that time I think we had also got some people in the North Central who were interested in this too, you know. We saw it as a way to broaden North Central. And then we were meeting their criteria now, I mean, what Mike had postulated to them that we could do this, this matter of teaching the arts through the liberal arts and liberal arts through the arts. And he used the Story Workshop approach as a prime example of that. And there were other examples, of course, that were being offered, both in what was the Social Science and Humanities area and courses that were being offered in the so-called majors departments themselves, you know, that were doing this sort of thing. And it was a persuasive case. And that's how the first accreditation was finally delivered in the Spring of 1970.

OK...

We realized that self studies are just a terribly serious matter. I mean, it's something that involves a scrutiny of the whole institution and something that involves the survival of the whole institution, the thrust of the whole institution; that everybody gets together and takes it seriously.

You said earlier that part of the mission of the institution was accepting students where they were at. Has this gotten harder as the College has grown, and

maybe you could, you know, speak to other challenges that Columbia's had to face over the years or is facing now?

Well, it was controversial from the very beginning. As a matter of fact, the whole mission was controversial from the very beginning. There's no—this was not a democratic revolution, this was a top-down revolution, you know. If we had taken a vote among existing faculty at that time, I think we probably would've been split right down the middle; that's just a guess. We didn't take a vote, there wasn't even a motion towards taking a vote, you know. It was something that arose out of conversation with most of the people who were involved, at least really interested in furthering the development of the school, that this was the way to go, you know, this was the right thing to do. But it was controversial from the start. I mean, the fact that you have people who suddenly find themselves in a classroom situation facing someone who is imperfectly fluent in the English language, and they suddenly felt themselves very much adrift, they felt very frustrated, they expect a certain kind of communication, they're being asked to go to other kinds of communication or other levels of communication and they find it very difficult. So this was, so as I say, it was controversial from the beginning. It was also very successful from the very beginning. And as the school grew, the controversy grew with it. And, if I understand correctly, the controversy is still with us. So far as that goes, the controversy now is not just confined to Columbia College, but it is at every college and university in the country. So, in the '50s and '60s, most schools—unless they were really up against the wall in

terms of declining enrollments, which Columbia was in the very early '60s—retention was not a serious issue, was not at the top of the agenda. And at many schools, screening of a fairly ruthless variety was practiced, you know. Freshman English teachers, for instance, at many universities were absolutely expected - expected, mind you—to flunk fifty percent of their students. And that was regarded as a major screening device, that was what made sure that those students who continued were going to be people that the teachers would be relatively comfortable working with, you know. Well, you change the political equation here—where these pressures start to come from all sides, from all sorts of constituencies in the voting population, from the legislatures themselves—then you change the whole nature of the educational process, particularly in higher education. And so when retention becomes a major issue, then you have to find some way of working with the students who don't fit the training of the teachers, you know. Some teachers may be able to break out of the training or to expand or modify the training that they received, but people do have a tendency to kind of stay with the training that they received of seeing the world. They want the world to reflect the training that they had, you know, so that was limiting. But I think Columbia's really been an expanding experience for very many people from all, from many, many, many disciplines. And there's still a great deal of controversy about how you work with the students.

The English/Writing Department developed the first tutorial program because of the issues we were seeing of students not having adequate backgrounds or not being able to

write as well or not able to read as well as they should be, what have you now. So we developed the first tutoring program in the school; this was in '75, '76. And it did very well. We developed a peer tutoring program with faculty supervision. And now some forms of peer tutoring are done, I think, in almost all departments. And it's very helpful. When you get up to ten thousand students, you're starting to strain resources on all sides, you know. And you still see a very substantial percentage of those students who are brought through the door who might be judged by some criteria to be lacking in certain background skills or lacking in the grades you would want students to have, or the SAT scores or what have you. They come into, I don't know, maybe a class, let's say in Film or in some other discipline, where they're allowed to lay their hands on that camera for the first time and suddenly everything comes together for them, you know? I mean, that's marvelous to see. I mean, they understand their machine and they understand it very well and they understand a lot of values that go with it and what it can do. And the same thing happens in writing, the same thing happens in other disciplines. And I think that's worthwhile in itself. We used to pose a question in many faculty discussions, Dostoyevsky's old question, which was: If one cannot be saved, then the whole shebang is wrong. So I said, "Is Dostoyevsky right or not?" And this is what we have to face every time. If we do bring people through the door who cannot be saved, does that mean the whole shebang is wrong? Or are you actually doing something for many others who are coming through the door that weren't even [thought]

of? And I think we can be weighted toward the latter.

You talked about what, particularly looking at the Story Workshop, something that is a contribution that you brought to Columbia. Has Columbia, and being here so long, you know, and now as Professor Emeritus, has it influenced your work or has your point of view, prospective changed in regard to education, higher education, youth, you know, whatever?

Well, this gets to be a very involving, it's involving time, the availability of time. Everybody is involved in doing their own work, whether it's writing a novel or a work of history or doing a film. Heaven knows, I mean, you need time...

Those trips to Mexico.

Right, being an artist, a scholar, whatever needs, sabbatical—we didn't have a sabbatical. For the first few years I practically ran the department out of my hip pocket, literally, actually carried it with me in my pockets, you know. There was no office, there was no phone, there was no secretary, nothing of the sort, you know. And I think Mike had an office, the Dean had an office—and the deans tend to come and go—and then there were, at the phones that was used by everybody, the receptionist/operator of the school. Then people began to get offices that were really kind of in the corners of the warehouse, you know, things like this where everybody gathered, you know, impossible to have any kind of time to yourself; the loudest voice is going to dominate, the idea of being able to do any thinking on your own is out of the question. And it wasn't until we really moved to the 600 Building, where I had an office by

myself, where things began to develop. By that time, structural relationships of chairs—chairs to the administration, chairs to faculty, chairs to part-time, full-time faculty chairs to part-time faculty—on and on, you know, these things began to develop. And in actual fact, at this point Columbia became much more absorbing all of one's time, you know. So in many ways, in the first several years, I would say there was—I don't know whether it was because of my energy level or what have you, I was able to do quite a bit of my own work at that same time. And I was doing things very intensively in the school. I sometimes am flabbergasted to look back and say, "This thing happening in the school was happening at the same time that I was writing this story or this book or what have you." You know, and it seems almost impossible that this was so; they'd have to be at a different time, but they weren't, they weren't a different time, they were happening at the same time.

But it became more frustrating later as the school got bigger. But actually in terms of developing the Story Workshop approach, there was an enormous chance here to do that. Mike was extremely interested in a revolution in education, a revolution in the teaching variety. And we were able to do things. I've had people in other colleges just gape at what we were able to do. They would give their eyeteeth with anything to have that kind of freedom, that kind of support. So, in that sense it was marvelous, we were certainly able to bring a high degree of professional development to the practice of the Story Workshop approach. So, and the sabbatical became absolutely essential, sabbatical policies and stages. And I think a school like

Columbia, perhaps in any school, but in an arts and communication college, the faculty need to have very significant support for their professional development because it's important to the health of their teaching, to their standing in the field, to just their comprehension of what's going on in their field. And it obviously benefits the school in many ways. It's sometimes as simple as publicity, and in lots of subtle but powerful ways that permeate the whole institution.

What do you think's on the horizon? We just have a couple of minutes left. Mike Alexandroff now is not gone from the institution but no longer is heading it. Where's the visionary leadership going to come from, the large institution, do you have...

Well, I think we'd like the visionary leadership—or certainly the administration of the College, President John Duff—would like the leadership to come from a kind of generalized democracy through the faculty. And I think this is a good idea up to a certain point but there comes a point where someone has to make some decisions. And I think actually the growth of the school has brought us to a point where some issues of structure need to have attention paid to them. I think the school for a long, long time has depended on personal relationships of chairs to part-time faculty, which is a very important relationship in the school, but has needed attention for a long, long time. There are many chairs who have been clamoring for full-time faculty. The relationship of the various departments to the so-called general education area. There is a tremendous professional opportunity for this matter of the relation of the humanities to arts and

communications, disciplines to develop. I can't imagine anything more important in this media age, you know. So I would say that the future, in that sense, has tremendous prospects for Columbia, simply tremendous. But we really need to focus our efforts in restructuring the school in some ways to be able to get the faculty as much as possible into the classroom and into doing their own work and into, well, solving many of the problems that the school seems to have. The fact that we're in a media age where there just about has to be this interplay between the humanities and the arts and communication discipline is a kind of focal point in the grail to go after with some vigor. I think we can do it better than anyone.

I want to ask about the arts in the inner city.

Well, that's where we started

Yeah, Bert Gall asked me to ask you about that.

Oh for heaven's sake, I have only seconds left?

I'll have to get permission to come back and interview you again for the second hour.

Arts and the inner city? OK, well, the arts in the inner city idea was one that was inherent in Columbia from the very beginning. And that came with the Operation Encouragement program that Jon Wagner and others had done at the Christian Action Ministry on the West Side. And there we saw some really dramatic results with using arts and sciences as a way of bringing students into discovery and education. Well, the arts, the arts and communication discipline can be particularly attractive to students in the inner city just the way sports are attractive, you know. It's because of the initial glamour,

which we're gonna have to get over, but at the same time it is exciting. They know it and those involved in it know it too. And it is the way in which modern society is organizing itself. So it offers a wonderful opportunity to enlist the students. It also offers very special ways to give them immediate, hands-on experience in a particular art and to begin to involve them in all kinds of learning. So I think it's been much, too much ignored or set aside. When you get to questions of what's basic in education, you know, in many ways those basic principles of many of the arts and communications disciplines are about as basic as you can get, and yet they are...