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Two examples of student prose are analysed as instances of the unreasoned, illogical thinking which the author considers prevalent at the university level today. Causes for student inability to communicate by means of objective argument are explored, and a course, "Investigation, Thinking, and Arguing," is outlined as a suggested replacement for freshman composition. (CW)



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To Encourage Reason on the Campus:

A Proposal for a New College Course in Thinking and Writing

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By A. M. TIBBETTS

Readers of the AAUP *Bulletin* are famous for their patience. Over the years they have read dozens of articles suggesting curricular changes of all kinds, but still they have not (noticeably) rebelled. "I approach every such piece of special pleading," said a Johnsonian friend of mine, "with passive patience and frigid tranquillity." He can hardly be blamed for his irony—little ordinarily comes of the suggestions. Curricular crises are announced; old courses are revised; new courses are put in; they don't work, or work badly; and the new courses are in turn revised or dropped. Then the cycle starts again. How can I justify getting on this tired curricular merry-go-round for the hundredth time?

My justification is simply this. American universities are always in some kind of trouble. But it seems to me that they are in deeper trouble today than ever before because to a startling degree many students are failing to learn the art of consecutive, logical thinking and writing. On most issues of importance that arise in university life, students are failing to investigate fully, clarify premises, define terms, think logically, use evidence properly, and write (or speak) precisely, truthfully, and to the point. As a consequence of these failures, many universities are moving toward the very antithesis of what they are supposed to be. They are gradually becoming places of untruth and unreason.

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I

If you have not already rebelled at my too-familiar sounds of alarm, do imitate my friend and consider with patience and tranquillity the following discussion of unreason on the campus. I begin with a quotation.

There are quite a few students who have attended school at Berkeley who went South to work with the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee, and who have been active in the civil rights movement in the Bay Area. At the end of last summer, some of these students returned from Mississippi, having taken part in the COFO Summer Project. I was one of these returning students. We were greeted by an order from the Dean of Students' Office that the kind of on-campus political activity which had resulted in our taking part in the Summer Project was to be permitted no longer.

It is a lot easier to become angry at injustices done to other people than at injustices done to oneself. The former requires a lower degree of political consciousness, is compatible with a higher political boiling point. You became slowly, painfully aware of those things which disturb you in the ways society oppresses you by taking part in activities aimed at freeing and helping others. There is less guilt to suffer in opposing the arbitrary power exercised over someone else than in opposing the equally unjust authority exercised over yourself. Thus, the order banning student politics on campus was an ideal locus of fierce protest. It combined an act of bureaucratic violence against the students themselves with open attack on student participation in the Bay Area civil rights movement. The seemingly inexhaustible

energy which the Berkeley students had so long devoted to the struggle for Negro rights was now turned squarely on the vast, faceless University administration. This is what gave the Free Speech Movement its initial impetus.

These are the first two paragraphs in an essay written by a graduate student who was a major figure in the great student revolt at Berkeley. At first glance, the thinking here may appear logical; but if you examine the paragraphs closely, you will discover that there is something unusual about the reasoning. Although he does not say so explicitly, the writer assumes as a premise that a university campus is analogous to a civil state and that students are citizens of that campus state. He comments that students returning to the campus from political work in Mississippi were not to be allowed "the kind of on-campus political activity which had resulted in our taking part in the Summer Project. . . ." This implies that on-campus and off-campus political activities are or should be analogous. In his second paragraph, he implies that the administrative judgment was an injustice and calls it "an act of bureaucratic violence against the students themselves. . . ." He refers to an "order banning student politics on campus," although it appears obvious that the order banned only one kind of "politics." At the end of the second paragraph he compares, by implication, the oppressors of Negroes in the South and elsewhere to the administrators at Berkeley.

The essay from which these two paragraphs were taken was not merely dashed off on a moment's notice by a busy student for a paper in a college course. It was written for publication by one of the best known of the Berkeley activists, Mario Savio.¹ What strikes the reader about the essay, of which these opening paragraphs are a typical sample, is that Savio consistently ignores certain important principles of reasoning and argument. He refuses to analyse his implied premise that the university is a civil state, although his argument is mainly built on that premise. He does not explore his implied analogy between undergraduates as "citizens" in the university and mature adults as citizens in the civil society outside the university. He does not explain specifically why the actions taken by administrators were "injustices" or why the reader should accept an implied comparison between administrators and oppressors of Negroes. Nowhere in his essay does he implicitly or explicitly define terms—he uses words like *student*, *education*, and *university* time and again, but without any clear referent. "We found,"

¹ "The Berkeley Student Rebellion of 1964," *The Free Speech Movement and the Negro Revolution*. Detroit: News & Letters, 1965, pp. 15-18. Future page references to Savio's article will appear in the text.

he writes later in the essay, "we were being denied the very possibility of 'being a student'—unquestionably a *right*" (p. 17). A strong charge indeed. But even by looking carefully at the context of the assertion, the reader cannot tell what Savio means here by *student*, unless he is using the term broadly to mean "political activist." Even more important, the reader cannot judge the meaning—much less the truth—of undergraduates' "being denied the very possibility" of studenthood. Savio gives no explanation or evidence of how this was done. He merely says it was.

Here is another example of thinking and writing, this time from a student (a college junior, feminine) who happens to be a political conservative and an anti-activist:

The time we live in is out of joint and different than all other times. It is neither calm nor filled with believable platitudes. It is a time of beginning space travel and mental as well as physical exertion. It is a time of living faster than before and slower than the rapidly approaching future. It is a time without measure and a time with hopeful climbing on prosperity's ladder up the cliff of success to tumble over the unexpected narrowness of the pinnacle. It is a time when Uncle Sam is challenged to be a man beyond men—a super human—a big-fisted do-gooder—a true uncle. It is a time when we must decide, like Hamlet, to have confidence in our beliefs and act. We must believe in our parent-country and protect our country to the limit and avenge any rotten tomatoes thrown on or at it. It is our duty not to remain undecided and wait until doomsday to act in behalf of our country. As Kennedy said, coining a modern platitude: "Ask not what your country can do for you, but what you can do for your country." Although this super-patriotism makes many of us a little sick, the cold war boils down to one point focussed on the individual. If an individual is to keep his country and his traditional idealistic platitudes, he must act.

In this girl's argument, written for an advanced course in composition, we recognize some of the problems that we found in Savio's essay. Behind her ideas are premises that are not only unstated but actually unconscious, as I discovered when I talked to her about her essay. She fails to define terms, like *super-patriotism* and *platitude*. She employs bad analogies, particularly far-fetched figurative ones. And she tends to think in large, vague generalities that seem unrelated to specific fact. Unquestionably, she is a weaker stylist than Savio and uses words more carelessly than he does, although her mixed metaphor, "the cold war boils down to one point focussed on the individual," is only a little less appropriate than Savio's figurative comment on Clark Kerr: "He is the person directly

charged with steering the mighty ship along the often perilous course of service to its many publics in government and industry. Not to *the* public, but to its many publics, the Kerrian whore is unlawfully joined" (p. 17).

My conclusion, after reading a great deal of student prose, both published and unpublished, and after talking at length to undergraduates in several universities, is that the bad thinking of the modern student is something relatively new in American higher education. Of course we have always had vagueness, illogic, carelessness, and a love of conclusion-jumping among undergraduates. None of this is new, as anyone who has ever taught can testify. But when before have we encountered so much unreason among the "better" students in the universities? When Savio was a popular leader at Berkeley, that university had some of the best-trained undergraduate minds in the United States.² Yet many of them followed him without a second look at his arguments. The young lady quoted above had nearly three years' training in one of the best state universities, and a check of her record showed that she had a B— average in her college work. Furthermore, she had published something in a minor journal, had taken four courses in composition and rhetoric, and planned to be a professional writer. I checked her record myself, and I gave her the first D she got in college.

These "better" students are part of an elite group. They attend universities which take most of their students from the top half of high school classes, and in some cases from the top tenth. These students are more successful in their academic careers than most of their peers. They tend to be highly verbal and politically minded. After a time one can identify certain intellectual qualities in their thinking, speaking, and writing that indicate a surprising lack of concern with reason, logic, and honest argument.

They lack skepticism, and often appear to be able to swallow any generalization on any subject, if it suits them to do so, whether the subject is Viet Nam or LSD or the quality of medical care in the university health service. They are their own authorities, and ordinarily don't question their right to orate on sociopolitical questions of the greatest moment and

complexity. Their typical mode of argument is the unsupported assertion, which some of them spit out with such celerity that discussion becomes impossible. I taught a Phi Beta in an advanced course who used to raise his hand in a class discussion and utter eight to ten sentences rapidly and then stop. Other students used to answer him using his own technique, which turned the discussions into a shouting match. Since he was not amenable to instruction in the art of oral argument, I had to stop calling on him. After failing his first paper in the course, he did A or B work, but always bore himself with an air of condescension. After class he once said: "In not letting me, as a student, help run this university, they are taking away my civil rights." When I asked him to define *civil rights*, so that we could discuss his assertion, he answered: "Definitions are irrelevant; I'm talking about *facts*." Many such students are emotional moralizers, given to outbursts of anger about issues that irritate them, but they seldom examine their moral premises, believing that they are personal. As one student told me, "My morality is my life." When they demonstrated against the Dow Chemical Company on my campus, several students stated that they were demonstrating "for a higher morality," but their discussions of this higher morality in the student newspaper were mainly badly disguised pieces of name-calling: the use of napalm was evil, and Dow was an outfit run by evil men.

II

The new unreason practiced by undergraduates can be traced in large part to three specific failures in their high school education. (For lack of space and simple courage, I will not take up the failures of family, religion, or society.) First, they have not been taught in high school that objective facts exist and that there are certain useful methods for investigating and ascertaining them. Facts are slippery, and investigations often lead nowhere; such truisms should keep sensible men from shouting that they have found ultimate truth. But men should not be prevented from searching for facts and truth, nor should high school students be prevented from learning how to research a subject and to think.

The second failure in high school education is that students have not learned how to argue and to express themselves precisely. One never finds, for instance, university students who have been specifically trained in high school to examine or validate premises. They have never learned the necessity of rigor, logic, and sequence in defending or attacking propositions. In expressing themselves, they write as if they believe that words have no specific meanings in a context; note the young lady's use of

² Wrote James Cass in an article called "What Happened at Berkeley": "Because of its size (about 27,500 students are enrolled, roughly 18,000 of them undergraduates) and its standards (students who rank in the top 12 per cent of their high school class are eligible to apply to any one of the university's campuses, but Berkeley gets more than its share of the very best students), the Berkeley student body includes the largest number of very bright, well-prepared students of any university campus in the world." *Saturday Review*, XLVIII (January 16, 1965), p. 67.

platitude in the example given above. And they tend to switch meanings of words when it suits them and to use them as weapons rather than as units of meaning and communication.

The third failure is the hardest to describe clearly, but it may be the most important. It is the failure of the high school to teach that the objective use of the mind must be put above egoistic feelings and vague emotions. Students have been indoctrinated by their early training to believe that their feelings, emotions, desires, and very beings are the center of the universe. The commonest questions in high school classes are directed to the students by the teacher: "How do you feel about this? Do you like that? What's your opinion of something or other?" In endless bull sessions that pass for class discussion students are asked to manufacture instant judgments on subjects ranging from the ambitions of the Chinese Communists to the causes of juvenile delinquency—but they are seldom asked to think or argue logically about these subjects.

Most of what students read in high school English classes is poetry or fiction. In the study of fiction, they seem to be most influenced by what might be called the *salinger*, a novel or story modelled after J. D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye*, which presents the rebellious adolescent as the possessor of truth and goodness and the adult members of the outside world as bad or phony. In all high schools, students read a certain amount of older literature, but, to judge from their comments as college freshmen, the older works make far less impression on them than almost any modern novel that glorifies the adolescent ego.

Teaching students to write logical compositions is the English teacher's most important job in high school, but a recent survey shows that of five "areas" of English (literature, language, composition, speech, and reading), teachers "spent more time emphasizing literature than all other areas of English combined."³ This emphasis on literature, and particularly the emphasis on salingerized fiction, produces high school students who believe that the best way to express themselves is through a vague, disordered spilling out of emotions. Given an opportunity, they will write almost anything but logical arguments or even expository themes with a beginning, middle, and end. Last year, a committee at my university

³ From a printed announcement called "National Study of High School English Programs: Facts about the Teaching of English in Selected High Schools," Cooperative Research Project No. 1994, USOE, cosponsored by the National Council of Teachers of English. The announcement, which is unpagged, was issued in 1966.

read 417 essays written by top high school students in the state—this was for a contest sponsored by the state association of English teachers. The overwhelming majority of these essays were either fiction or mood sketches with the salingerized sensibility of the adolescent as hero. There were few expository or argumentative essays in the group.

The three failures I mentioned have their effect on the attitudes of university students. For example, in an upper-division class in literature, I assigned a brief paper on a small topic. After class, one junior objected to the assignment, commenting, "I would much rather write fiction, as I despise expository writing."

III

I have been a long time getting to my main point, and perhaps you have by now lost both your tranquillity and patience. Please understand that I have not been deliberately trying to bore you with Casandran cries from the ivory tower that modern college students cannot spell, punctuate, or write decent sentences. The facts before us imply that something more important is at stake. Ten years ago, the chairman of Princeton's English Department, Willard Thorp, commented upon

a sinister change in the kind of writing we have lately been getting from our students. . . . We are now too often presented with a kind of prose—if that is the name for it—which is inviolable. A red-pencil used against it becomes as impotent as a sword in a folk-tale which has had a spell put on it. Sometimes this prose resembles remotely a bad translation from a foreign language. Sometimes it suggests that the writer has squeezed together under pressure the jagged ends of several assorted ideas. The only name I have for this monstrosity is *No-English*.

The writer of *No-English* is unconscious of the fact that his pages resemble nothing else under the sun. If you say to him, "This is not English. You must tear this up and try again," he will answer plaintively: "But you know what I mean, don't you?" He will be indignant if you reply, "I can guess, but only because I know what you are supposed to mean."⁴

In the ten years following Thorp's observations, the situation has worsened to the point where reason and truth are under constant attack from the very part of the intellectual fortress which should be

⁴ "The Well of English, Now Defiled, or Why Johnny Can't Write," *Princeton Alumni Weekly*, LIX (September 26, 1958), pp. 6-9. Thorp gives several examples of *No-English* that he took from sophomore exams in American literature. One of his examples: "He was a man who had dispared to the nature of man and although he had these tendencies of subjection he soon gained aspirations and broke away from the school of disparants and strove on his own beliefs."

defending them. In the best recent discussion of this problem, Wayne Booth, Dean of the College, University of Chicago, had the following to say:

When we consider how much time teachers spend insisting that students exhibit genuine arguments in their papers, it is perhaps surprising to find, as I think we do find, that the very notion that such forms of proof are desirable, or even obtainable, is under scathing attack in our time. The simple painful task of putting ideas together logically, so that they "track" or "follow" each other, as we say, doesn't seem to appeal to many of us any more. I once heard Professor George Williamson of our English Department explaining his standards for accepting articles for *Modern Philology*. "I can't really insist on anything that could be called a 'standard,'" he lamented. "I'm happy if I can find essays which show *some* kind of connection between the conclusions and the evidence offered."

You don't have to read much of what passes today for literary criticism, or political argument, or social analysis, to recognize that the author's attention has not been primarily, or even secondarily, on constructing arguments that would stand up in a court of law. Leslie Fiedler spoke at Chicago a couple of years ago and said that all the younger generation is really imitating Negro culture, and that the cultural warfare between what he calls palefaces and redskins accounts for our literature today. I protested to a student afterward that Fiedler had offered no evidence, no proof. "But that doesn't matter," the student replied, "because it was so interesting."⁵

Truth "doesn't matter," nor does reason. At no place in our entire educational system have we teachers firmly made the student understand that truth and reason matter above all. We have allowed to come into existence a cycle of unreason: the untrained high school student comes to the university, where he is taught "composition" by an untrained graduate assistant, or untrained young Ph.D.; the untrained student graduates from the university and returns to the high school to teach. The result of the cycle is a country full of college graduates who are often highly verbal but incapable of *thinking* their way through even the simplest social and political problems of everyday life.

The operation of this cycle of unreason tends to draw into it not only students but also many others who may be influenced by its intellectual gyrations. The quality of thought in the conjoined worlds of university and government has generally declined. In these worlds, the typical modes of persuasion employ less a sequential logic than masses of verbal static or noise, an Orwellian jabber of unexamined

generalities full of words like *concept*, *escalate*, *poverty program*, *ghetto*, *student power*, *credibility gap*, and so on. We seem to have borrowed from both the Nazis and the Communists the strategies of simplistic propaganda in which certain cacophonous noises are uttered, followed by a conditioned response on the part of the audience. If one puts enough of the right noises into a persuasive statement, he can get two graduate students, one professor of English, three girls from Vassar, four men of God, and a famous baby doctor to march on [fill in the blank] bearing angry signs saying "America must [fill in the blank]."

IV

I propose that university teachers try, in whatever small ways they can, to break this cycle of unreason. I propose a new college course for freshmen as a small means to that end. The course would be called *Investigating, Thinking, and Arguing*, and it would replace the old freshman composition course. It would teach the nature of facts, general statements, and statements of value. It would teach the student how to investigate and look into subjects and how to determine their nature. Here he would learn to answer the question: What are we talking about? He would learn how to perceive the differences and similarities between, for instance, subjects for investigation like "emotional responses in married men," "earthquakes in Japan," and "crime in the suburbs." The course would teach the student how to define terms and to think in logical sequences about the subject he is investigating. He would be taught to evaluate evidence and authority, and to deal with the levels of probability implied in the terms *hypothesis*, *theory*, and *law*. He would learn the major logical and verbal fallacies and how to avoid them. In preparing to create his argument, the student would learn how to sort out issues, to decide which terms need explicit definition, and to create theses or propositions (both of fact and of action). Finally, he would learn how to present in written form a rigorous, logical, sequential, and factual argument, giving his specific reasons for supporting, attacking, or critically analyzing a particular thesis. The course would not directly teach grammar, spelling, sentence structure, punctuation, paragraphing, and the dozen or so other things that the high schools are supposed to take care of. All freshmen would take it, with no exceptions. It would be taught by professors from many departments in the university, a point to which, after a digression, I shall return.

Many of the course subjects in my proposal sound like material already being taught in freshman

⁵ "Now Don't Try to Reason with Me: Rhetoric Today, Left, Right, and Center," *The University of Chicago Magazine*, LX (November, 1967), p. 12.

English composition courses, which should include the study of exposition, logic, and argument. It is true that catalogue descriptions of freshman composition may include a few of these subjects, but what is described in the catalogue and what goes on in the classroom are not always the same thing, as one can discover for himself by making a few visits at random to classrooms. Over the years, I have discovered teachers who were supposed to be teaching composition discussing obscure novels, delivering political harangues, doggedly teaching poetry, grammar, style (whatever that is), punctuation, spelling, and foreign movies. The most popular activity in such classrooms was the bull session, usually about the students' feelings, insights, or ambitions.

Are such teachers incompetent? Not in the ordinary sense of the word. I once asked two intelligent and hard-working teaching assistants in the composition course why they had abandoned the official course syllabus and started teaching literature—both had turned to works of modern fiction. At first, they answered that their classes had become dull, and they wanted to liven them up; the students did not like work in exposition and argument; both they and the students wanted variety. But later, after some questioning, it turned out that these answers, while truthful enough, were not the real ones. In reality, the teaching assistants felt uncomfortable teaching composition. They had never had a course in it themselves, had no feel for it, didn't like it. Their undergraduate major was completely in literature, as was their graduate work. After they got their Ph.D.'s, they would probably never have to teach composition.⁶ Their training, interests, experience, even their personalities, pulled them away from the content of the composition course.

Many English departments are changing the composition course to a course in literature. Some departments are dropping it entirely, partly because there are no rewards for teaching it, and partly because they, along with the rest of the university, are bored with it. The course has been around since before the turn of the century and has never been very successful or popular, perhaps because nobody has been able to decide precisely what kind of course it should be or how it should be taught.

One advantage of my proposal is that it would change the composition course from a weak thing,

⁶ The chairmen of major English departments have a standard promise (and they usually keep it) which they make to new Ph.D.'s being interviewed for a job: "You will never have to teach composition—graduate students teach it, you know." When a friend of mine went on the market a few years ago, he threw several chairmen into a trauma by announcing that he preferred to teach the course. One chairman said as he walked into an interview: "I've heard of you—you're the nut who *wants* to teach composition!"

which has for more than half a century been vaguely concerned with literary matters, to a course centered on the main purposes of the university: finding, reasoning about, and stating truths. English departments are generally not much concerned with these matters, being (like art departments) deeply involved with esthetic understanding, appreciation, and explication. With certain important exceptions, to be found for example in the work of established specialists in English literary history, who never teach or supervise composition courses, the interests of most English professors are in esthetics and criticism.

To return to the problem of staffing, I suggest that the new course be made a university-wide affair, with teachers taken from every academic department on a proportional basis. Every tenured professor should be required to teach one section of the course once a year, a practice which might maintain interest throughout the university. The chief administrator of the course should be an experienced man with enough scholarly reputation to command respect. A serious weakness with the old composition course is that traditionally in most universities it has been administered by academic politicians, assistant professors with no power, prestige, or special knowledge of composition or rhetoric but with plenty of ambition to get ahead administratively by making whatever compromises that were necessary. One could name on the fingers of one hand the recognized scholars who have administered freshman composition courses in American universities.

In the beginning, it would be wise to start the course on a small experimental basis for several years, working out syllabi, choosing texts, and solving problems of staffing and financing. After a time, if the university as a whole agrees that the course has merit, it might be expanded according to an agreed-upon schedule.

The proposal has certain disadvantages or drawbacks. The most obvious one is that professors, who are rightly suspicious of change, may not be convinced that the new course will work any better than the old ones did. In addition, the new course will be expensive to teach and administer. Established professors may not be eager to leave their laboratories, cubicles in the library, or light six-hour loads to do a kind of work that they consider beneath them. But will they really consider it beneath them? There is a growing belief among many scholars that the university has badly failed the student by not teaching him how to conduct himself intellectually in the civilized world. It is no exaggeration to say that we now graduate twenty-one-year-olds with the ability to discuss the sym-

bolism of Joyce's *Ulysses* or the geological history of the Cretaceous, but without the ability to think about important subjects outside their narrow specialties.

Such overspecialization, without a correspondent training in the general uses of the mind, is a form of slow intellectual suicide; and there is evidence that many professors are beginning to realize this and are willing to take whatever steps are needed for correction. American universities have typically had a way of coming up with the money, space, teachers, and administrators necessary for any in-

novation or new activity that they and society have thought valuable. Innovations that were thought impossible twenty years ago—like sharply limited freshman enrollments in major state schools—are now a commonplace. In these times of great social, political, religious, and philosophical upheaval, I suggest that the new proposed course, which is not now being taught in the high school or college curriculum, has great intrinsic and practical value. It is fundamentally a course in responsible rhetoric, and rhetoric has been in the past at the center of great educational systems and endeavors.

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