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ABSTRACT

A mistaken assumption held by English teachers for three decades is that there is a definite separation between a child's imagination and his intellectual discipline. When a student is assigned written themes, the assignments should stress the imaginative act as a disciplined and largely conscious process. The students must be helped to discover that the techniques employed by a good writer are employed purposely. Eventually, the student must make the crucial jump from the mere identification of terms as abstract principles to the use of these terms as vital and meaningful concepts. (CK)

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CREATION AS A CONSCIOUS ACT

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One of the particularly debilitating assumptions which English teachers have held for almost three decades is that, somehow, there is an irrevocable and profound separation between a child's imagination and his intellectual discipline. Oftentimes this has led to a naive and frantic search for "imaginative" theme assignments and classroom work with little or no thought given to the individual student's ability to learn from as well as be amused by (or "challenged by" or "interested in") what he is doing.

Not long ago as a graduate student at a large university I was confronted with a freshman class syllabus which put just such a premium on imagination. Discipline and control were not only treated as subordinate functions of the creative process, but were almost completely ignored. I had "happenings" in class, specifically designed to confuse the students and then I asked them to describe what they saw. Never once was I supposed to explain to the students how to describe or how to write expository prose. These techniques were supposed to be naturally acquired as the students' associations and experiences multiplied. I sent my students out onto the campus for thirty minutes to gather fifty specific facts and then had them write a thirty minute essay using these

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facts. Never once did I explicitly show my students *how* to arrange, order, and emphasize their facts in order to achieve even something as benign as clarity.

The results of such experiments were predictable. Some students liked them, some didn't. Some students wanted more experiences and less teacher control, some wanted fewer experiences and more teacher control. As far as I could ascertain from my own classes and from speaking with my fellow instructors, student performance was about the same. As an experiment, the semester was a commendable attempt at innovation and change. As a success, it left much to be desired.

Sadly, the experiment was predicated on a major false assumption. Imagination and discipline are not separate concepts, but equal halves of the act of creation. They do not negate or destroy each other. Quite the contrary, they support, add to, and interact with each other to form a complete whole. The imagination apprehends abstractions and ideas. But in order to make these ideas intelligible we must fix them in time and space, that is: discipline and put limits upon them. In John Barth's *The End of the Road*, Jacob Horner discovers this very fact.

To turn experience into speech — that is, to classify, to categorize, to conceptualize, to grammarize, to syntactify it — is always a betrayal of experience, a falsification of it; but only so betrayed can it be dealt with at all, and only in so dealing with it did I ever feel a man, alive and kicking.

The problem is an enormously complex one, and Barth pays his due respect to this complexity when Jacob self-consciously notes a few lines later, "In other senses, of course, I don't believe this at all." The act of speech is a paradox, at once both liberating and confining.

For the composition teacher, however, Barth has touched the central problem, and repetition is its key. If by discipline we mean the boredom of memorizing and repeating grammatical rules, then surely such discipline is destructive of the creative act. If by discipline we mean, instead, the utilization and apprehension of

organization, structure, and technique as an organic part of the creative act — writing — then it is not only a useful training, but a necessary one. Grammar and syntax are basic linguistic tools and the student cannot utilize them if he has not been taught them. He usually acquires most of these tools unconsciously through years of listening to his parents, friends, and the television set, but as teachers, we do not have this luxury of time. At best, we have one or two semesters to add to and, in many cases, reject what he has already learned. We must, therefore, teach directly and explicitly. We must emphasize that the structures of the language are tools, not ends in themselves, while continuing to realize that the desired goal of the English teacher is to develop and sustain the student's ability to repeat and vary the imaginative act.

For example, how should we teach parallelism, a basic and ubiquitous syntactical structure? Certainly we must reject rote repetition and mindless memorization. Let us instead treat the language organically. The opening of Dickens' *Tale of Two Cities* is a fine example of what parallelism can accomplish, of how it can emphasize, unify, and clarify similar ideas. The teacher need not shy away from syntax in a situation like this. It will not "turn off" the students. Here we can show that ideas are organic in the syntax. "It was a time of . . . , a time of . . . , a time of . . ." In each case the various modifying phrases are preceded by a repetition of the same types of words, and "types" is the key to the parallel's success. We have *article, noun, preposition, and modifier*. Play with this in class. Students invariably like to tinker with new toys. This particular example becomes much like a math problem. The preposition does not have to be "of" to be effective; it merely must be a preposition. Use several different prepositions within a given example: "a time of . . . , a time for . . . , and a time to . . ." would have been just as effective if Dickens' intentions had been different. The same is true of the article and the noun. The fact that "time" is repeated is secondary to the fact that a noun or nominal is repeated

in each case. "Time" is the particular concept Dickens used, but his ability to utilize the structure of his language and thus discipline his imagination is what makes the parallelism so effective. The repetition of a like "type" of word — a word or words with the same linguistic value — renders Dickens' thought emphatic and clear. Finally, to end the class period the teacher might even compose a few shoddy examples of the same Dickens' parallelism and explain why they are ineffective. Once the concept is mastered, the students themselves can do such exercises with any author they choose, be it Faulkner, Hemingway, Lowell, or Styron.

Eventually the student can work toward larger structures such as the paragraph and short essay. Indeed, smaller structures can be taught the same way. We must never insist that a student merely memorize the definition of a preposition, but lead him to discover what prepositions *do* and how they function in the sentence. He can analyze examples to discover why they are either effective or ineffective. It will build his confidence when he realizes he can tell when a piece of writing is poor. Eventually he will include what he has learned in his own style because he has acquired control over a function rather than just "emitted" or memorized a fact. The more interesting reading the composition student does, the better. But we as English teachers must not treat this reading as a separate part of the course. We must always remember that ideas are defined, qualified, and emphasized through the author's linguistic techniques. Indeed, in a very real sense, ideas and the language which expresses them are one and the same thing.

When the student is assigned written themes, the assignments should stress the imaginative act as a disciplined and largely conscious process. The following Haiku poetry assignment will clarify my point. Although it is comparatively simple and flexible in form, the class must be adequately prepared. Students who have had no training in basic poetic techniques inevitably are confused and upset by the

request of their teacher that they write a poem. On the other hand, the assignment is consistently profitable if used at the end of an introduction to poetry technique. It gives the student the opportunity not only to write some poems for himself, but forces him to paraphrase those poems and explain their structure. He thus becomes conscious of his own act of creation.

One or two class periods ought to be used for an introduction and discussion of the Haiku form. Students need not be forced to adhere strictly to the 17-syllable 5-7-5 Haiku structure, but if they are aware of its inherent strengths they usually follow it rather closely. A short discussion of the tradition and subject matter of the Haiku will not inhibit the student as much as give him a point of departure. Sometimes the best student papers are not concerned with the traditional Haiku seasonal themes, but exploit the Haiku's ability to produce strong ironic and pathetic images. Thus they often deal with modern political and social problems. *EXERCISE:* We have now finished our exploration of poetry and poetic technique. One of the most interesting of poetic forms is the 17-syllable, 3-line 5-7-5 Haiku. This form attempts to present one unified and vivid image and (through the use of surprise, irony, pathos, emphasis, and other techniques) heighten our awareness of the poem's subject. Write three Haiku of your own. Try to follow the general form of the Haiku, but if you need to alter the form in order to achieve your purpose, feel free to do so (within judicious limits).

After the poems are finished, write a detailed and analytical paragraph about each poem. Explain the meaning and theme of your poem, the reason for its particular structure, why you used the particular words and phrases you did, and even why you punctuated as you did. Feel free to explain how you wanted the reader to react to your poem and how you went about insuring that he would react as you desired. You should attempt to explain each poem and its implications with relative completeness.

Good writing is the result not only of an

imaginative, but of a disciplined, mind. Therefore, the student must be helped to discover that the act of creation is largely a conscious act and that the techniques employed by a good writer are employed purposively. Making the student aware of such techniques as alliteration, balance, assonance, parallelism, or imagery is only part of the answer. Eventually the student must make the crucial jump from the mere identification of terms as abstract principles to the use of these terms as vital and meaningful concepts which free rather than bind his imagination. He must realize that expression is indeed the conscious act of naming, delimiting, and analyzing his own ideas.