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Devoid of Content

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WE are at that time of year when millions of American college and high school students will stride across the stage, take diploma in hand and set out to the wider world, most of them utterly unable to write a clear and coherent English sentence. How is this possible? The answer is simple and even obvious: Students can't write clean English sentences because they are not being taught what sentences are.

Most composition courses that American students take today emphasize content rather than form, on the theory that if you chew over big ideas long enough, the ability to write about them will (mysteriously) follow. The theory is wrong. Content is a lure and a delusion, and it should be banished from the classroom. Form is the way.

On the first day of my freshman writing class I give the students this assignment: You will be divided into groups and by the end of the semester each group will be expected to have created its own language, complete with a syntax, a lexicon, a text, rules for translating the text and strategies for teaching your language to fellow students. The language you create cannot be English or a slightly coded version of English, but it must be capable of indicating the distinctions - between tense, number, manner, mood, agency and the like - that English enables us to make.

You can imagine the reaction of students who think that "syntax" is something cigarette smokers pay, guess that "lexicon" is the name of a rebel tribe inhabiting a galaxy far away, and haven't the slightest idea of what words like "tense," "manner" and "mood" mean. They think I'm crazy. Yet 14 weeks later - and this happens every time - each group has produced a language of incredible sophistication and precision.

How is this near miracle accomplished? The short answer is that over the semester the students come to understand a single proposition: A sentence is a structure of logical relationships. In its bare form, this proposition is hardly edifying, which is why I immediately supplement it with a simple exercise. "Here," I say, "are five words randomly chosen; turn them into a sentence." (The first time I did this the words were coffee, should, book, garbage and quickly.) In no time at all I am presented with 20 sentences, all perfectly coherent and all quite different. Then comes the hard part. "What is it," I ask, "that you did? What did it take to turn a random list of words into a sentence?" A lot of fumbling and stumbling and false starts follow, but finally someone says, "I put the words into a relationship with one another."

Once the notion of relationship is on the table, the next question almost asks itself: what exactly are the relationships? And working with the sentences they have created the students quickly realize two things: first, that the possible relationships form a limited set; and second, that it all comes down to an interaction of some kind between actors, the actions they perform and the objects of those actions.

The next step (and this one takes weeks) is to explore the devices by which English indicates and distinguishes between the various components of these interactions. If in every sentence someone is doing something to someone or something else, how does English allow you to tell who is the doer and whom (or what) is the doee; and how do you know whether there is one doer or many; and what tells you that the doer is doing what he or she does in this way and at this time rather than another?

Notice that these are not questions about how a particular sentence works, but questions about how any sentence works, and the answers will point to something very general and abstract. They will point, in fact, to the forms that, while they are themselves without content, are necessary to the conveying of any content whatsoever, at least in English.

Once the students tumble to this point, they are more than halfway to understanding the semester-long task: they can now construct a language whose forms do the same work English does, but do it differently.

In English, for example, most plurals are formed by adding an "s" to nouns. Is that the only way to indicate the difference between singular and plural? Obviously not. But the language you create, I tell them, must have some regular and abstract way of conveying that distinction; and so it is with all the other distinctions - between time, manner, spatial relationships, relationships of hierarchy and subordination, relationships of equivalence and difference - languages permit you to signal.

In the languages my students devise, the requisite distinctions are signaled by any number of formal devices - word order, word endings, prefixes, suffixes, numbers, brackets, fonts, colors, you name it. Exactly how they do it is not the point; the point is that they know what it is they are trying to do; the moment they know that, they have succeeded, even if much of the detailed work remains to be done.

AT this stage last semester, the representative of one group asked me, "Is it all right if we use the same root form for adjectives and adverbs, but distinguish between them by their order in the sentence?" I could barely disguise my elation. If they could formulate a question like that one, they had already learned the lesson I was trying to teach them.

In the course of learning that lesson, the students will naturally and effortlessly conform to the restriction I announce on the first day: "We don't do content in this class. By that I mean we are not interested in ideas - yours, mine or anyone else's. We don't have an anthology of readings. We don't discuss current events. We don't exchange views on hot-button issues. We don't tell each other what we think about anything - except about how prepositions or participles or relative pronouns function." The reason we don't do any of these things is that once ideas or themes are allowed in, the focus is shifted from the forms that make the organization of content possible to this or that piece of content, usually some recycled set of pros and cons about abortion, assisted suicide, affirmative action, welfare reform, the death penalty, free speech and so forth. At that moment, the task of understanding and mastering linguistic forms will have been replaced by the dubious pleasure of reproducing the well-worn and terminally dull arguments one hears or sees on every radio and TV talk show.

Students who take so-called courses in writing where such topics are the staples of discussion may believe, as their instructors surely do, that they are learning how to marshal arguments in ways that will improve their compositional skills. In fact, they will be learning nothing they couldn't have learned better by sitting around in a dorm room or a coffee shop. They will certainly not be learning anything about how language works; and without a knowledge of how language works they will be unable either to spot the formal breakdown of someone else's language or to prevent the formal breakdown of their own.

In my classes, the temptation of content is felt only fleetingly; for as soon as students bend to the task of understanding the structure of language - a task with a content deeper than any they have been asked to forgo - they become completely absorbed in it and spontaneously enact the discipline I have imposed. And when there is the occasional and inevitable lapse, and some student voices his or her "opinion" about something, I don't have to do anything; for immediately some other student will turn and say, "No, that's content." When that happens, I experience pure pedagogical bliss.

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