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## The Ethics of Words in an Ethical (Academic) World

A lecture presented at the 2015 Conference on Ethics in Higher Education:  
Ethics in Practice: Building a Classroom and Campus Culture for Academic Integrity

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I'd like to thank the Center for Academic Ethics and its partners for the chance to discuss with you the course I teach here at UNI in the light of "ethics in higher education." I teach College Writing and Research here at UNI and I've thought often about the ethical use of words by the college student, especially since the students have tools available through our technology for easy access to, for instance, buy essays, but also because college faculty have these days online tools to deal with plagiarism, too, tools like Turnitin... I've tried to use those programs but found them unsatisfactory because 1) the time it takes to set up a system and 2) the time it takes to read what the results mean and 3) the system doesn't really get at the root problem, which I think is the student's personal engagement with words.

It seems to me that students might be lifting essays and passages from other sources and passing them off as their own because they have not seen – or experienced – the deep links between words and thinking, words and consciousness, words and their sense of self. In addition, because they have used words since they were children, they do not think they can learn anything new about words.

But liberal education should be shepherding students to see new things in stuff that they are most familiar with – like words. And their sense of self. This is an interior

journey. It is worth reflecting on why universities almost universally require that students take courses on words when they enter college, speaking and writing. I think it is worth noting that the two courses that constitute the Cornerstone program here at UNI are not courses that deal with, say biology and economics, but with words – with writing and speech.

I will make a polemical claim here: I don't think that UNI or any school of higher education is really educating students very well about writing and speech because education hasn't yet correctly understood – or experienced – words. (And understanding is an interior action, inner directed activity.) Just when the students need to be more inner directed, to focus on their own internal verbal resources as a key element in learning self-reliance (a variant of self-efficacy?), the universities – with their wholesale love affair with communications technology – are directing student's precious time too much outward, getting them involved in knowing all the various digital data bases, and repositories, and into getting them into lots of collaboration spaces for discussion and group projects.

Now, I know these things are important, but let us also keep in mind that in all these venues, words are being bandied about by students and in the sources they read, and I have serious doubts that the verbal products their collaborations manufacture are much different from what they had produced before college. I would claim – again a bit polemically – that before the collaboration can be of liberal minded students, they must go through an inner directed “dark night” of the intellect.

Northrop Frye observed that students leave high school with no sense of language as “structure,” that there are differences in levels of reading and writing as

there are in math. The result is that college is not teaching students the calculus of words but keeping them in the lower verbal formulas and structures.

From what I've seen of our Cornerstone program (my exposure is limited), I don't think the calculus of words is being presented there, either. But I do know that most college handbooks on writing keep the focus outer directed, asking students, for example, to consider audience in a long list of questions that tire the student out before they start writing. Or in the area of argument, the emphasis is on finding fault with the logic of a point of view. These are appropriate aspects of analyzing a verbal text, but I have not used any college writing textbook that makes the organized march into one's interior verbal life a key part of their program, and that is why I've been experimenting with it in my course on college level writing.

I don't mean to be picking on Cornerstone, but as an example of what I'm talking about, in the textbook on writing that it uses, there was one small paragraph about the powers – no, just about the uses – of metaphor.

And yet, Susanne Langer, in her seminal book *Philosophy in a New Key*, proposes that that “metaphor is the law of the life of language, and the use of metaphor can hardly be called a conscious device.”

This claim motivated me to develop in the first edition of my own textbook for college writing and research, an essay assignment called “metaphor paper.” In this assignment, the student was to exploit the resources of a metaphor to make concrete an intellectual challenge they had. I wanted students to consciously use metaphors and

see how the images triggered by a metaphor do more than spice up writing – they seem to splice one into the essence of our species.

I think liberal education will make the term ‘general education’ meaningful again (though I’m happy with UNI’s term – LAC), as referring to those elements of thought and reason which are in the general population, when it shows students that in their minds there is automatic verbal activity going on which they can seize, manufacture on their own, explore and exploit deliberately. That would be liberation – the deliberate use of a verbal-mental tool that one had been using unconsciously, automatically.

Let me just say a bit more about this phenomena we call metaphor. Mark Van Doren wrote in his book *Liberal Education*, “We live in an age that lets its metaphors go undetected because we suppose we have hold of fact, because we have sociology and psychology.”

Even more damning is his claim that “when we are metaphorical about something and do not know that we are, we prove that we have not examined that thing strictly.”

Now there is a challenge for faculty, who are students, too and who are still submitting to the disciplines of liberal education. Do you know and perceive the metaphors that are lurking in the revered and inspired texts of your discipline? Any course in any Major would find it profitable to early in the semester point out the obvious metaphors of their discipline, and discuss the metaphors’ strengths and weaknesses. For that matter, faculty could examine passages that students find difficult to digest and

perhaps see that the passage lacks the roughage of metaphor whose presence would then make that material digestible.

Mark Van Doren quotes Aristotle as saying, “The soul never thinks without images,” and metaphors definitely create images in the mind of the reader or listener.

The search for and examination of metaphors in our thoughts and in what we hear and read should be a critical part of any programs on critical thinking. Frye’s essay that I have already quoted from also provides a useful distinction, saying that as we examine the words we use to convey a thought, we are accessing the essence of thought.

“We use the word ‘think’ in many bad, punning ways,” he observes. We use it to refer to everything our minds do but thinking is just one mental activity and it is the mental activity that manipulates words to give body to ideas, or to give ideas their body. As he says, “Most students need to be taught, very carefully and patiently, that the operation of thinking is the operation of articulating ideas until they are in the right words.”

He notes that students can’t think at random, but are only adding one more idea to the body of something that they have already thought about. Here is how I describe it – in childhood, we are taught the adult ideas that we are told we need to use in our adult years. But we cannot understand those adult ideas at the adult level when we are children. We understand them at the child level. This is reflected in the words we use – as Frye notes, we are taught verbal clichés and stock verbal formulas, and while they are good for the child as a way to install those cultural values into the child, that wording

will likely distort our reception of adult level verbal articulations about – and of – those cultural forms and values.

So when he says that we don't think at random but add one more idea to the body of something we have already thought about, I'd say that we are examining the words we have used to convey that idea or value (which are thoughts) and we then, among other things, recognize the metaphors that had escaped our attention.

The student can then do several things that amount to enlarging their interior life and getting that sense of 'openness' that is still critical, but on the basis of a perception of general verbal experience, and so can, with regards to a metaphor: 1) examine the image triggered in their mind by the metaphor, 2) see how the image represents well the reality for which the word was being used or 3) see how the image doesn't do a good job of representing what is likely the reality and 4) see implications of the imagery such that the other aspects of the metaphor do illuminate aspects of the mental reality for which the metaphor was being used.

If the student does this mental-verbal work just once, for a sustained period of time, he or she will burst into a liberated mental world and will seal themselves off from any more sustained existence in what I call inadequate adult understanding, which is child level understanding being used during the adult years.

College has a militant job to do, Frye says, to show students that the thoughts and views that they bring into college have not been constructed by themselves (nor can it be otherwise). They – naturally – bring into college or early adult years the stock

verbal formulas that they had been taught in childhood and which are the basis of achieving personal thought later on: and college should be giving them a very structured program to help them enter this interior war on error. A course like Cornerstone or my course (though I think any course would find a way to do this) can and must direct the students' attention inward to recognize that they use cliché to express their "views" and they must learn how to change these inaccurate and imprecise verbal formulas and stock responses that they brought into college into wording that is more accurate and precise – and more personal. And more adult.

Learning has to be personal or it isn't education at all. It can't be achieved just by doing a bunch of external activities. To quote Van Doren, "The person is not machinery which others can run. His mind has its own laws and they are the laws of thought."

So I am proposing that if metaphor is the law of language and the human person has his or her own laws, which are the laws of thought, and thought is conveyed necessarily with words, it behooves college to rally students around the flag of self-examination and to prepare them to dive deep into their own internal resources.

Henry Adams in 1904 stated in his autobiography that, to him, humanity's education had not advanced in 5000 years, this despite all the technological advances of the modern world. History shows us that the greatest human advances have occurred with the simplest of technologies – and words and metaphors are among the simplest – and pervasive – technologies.

There are many other aspects of words besides metaphors that students must attend to, but if we get them to have a personal relationship with metaphors, this



intellectual-verbal work can change their interior life is radically. They find their own engagement with the language is something they want to continue, and if faculty can devise writing assignments that exploit the student's new found desire to express themselves with their newly minted fresh, then issues of plagiarism might very well become moot. And faculty will look forward to reading these efforts.

So now I'd like to show some of the things I do in my class that attempt to instill in students the curiosity to be inner directed (without being self-absorbed, though), to draw upon the verbal resources within themselves so that they want to write so as to see what they are thinking and to let the words lead them to new insight.

Now, I've stressed metaphor in this paper, but at the start of a course, I list three verbal phenomena that I want students to keep in mind for the rest of their lives:

1. Words are triggering images in their heads all the time, even non-metaphor words.
2. They are using metaphors automatically when they describe their thoughts and they can seize control of that production.
3. As **readers they** have expectations about the structure of sentences and paragraphs that don't deal with grammar but which are also unconscious in our minds but which we can become aware of.

**First**, I have them examine how words are triggering images in their minds and most of the time these images flicker so quickly they don't know it is happening. I have lots of sentences in my textbook that display the results of my deliberate use of metaphor and here are a few of them (show screen)

- 1. We are born into an ocean of words and we are submerged in that ocean until we enter liberal education.**
- 2. The mind is automatically pumping out metaphors to make concrete its mental experiences and adults should seize control of this automatic production.**
- 3. Students and adults come into college with some ideas about words, thinking and education that likely need to be scrubbed off.**

I then ask them to write a description of the images in their mind caused by that sentence and its metaphors. Lots of options to choose from after that.

Notice that in #3, we can see that the metaphor "scrubbed" refers to liquid, and we can consider other metaphors, some that are the opposite of "scrubbed." For instance, fire is a contrast to water and so we can speak of burning off ideas. That imagery also elicits a different tenor or mood or emotion, too. A student in class suggest we change "scrubbed off" to "chiseled off." That imagery implied something about the attitude one has towards those ideas – chiseled in stone, hard to get off.

**Second**, I claim that they use metaphors unconsciously and we look at their writing to notice obvious metaphors. It is pretty interesting that even the obvious

metaphors escape their attention. We also examine their textbooks and notice the use of metaphors in books like psychology, business, sociology. I show them reports on the economy from the internet and ask them to name the obvious metaphors

Here is a business report from Yahoo News put online the other day. What I consider to be obvious metaphors are in bold:

U.S. stocks rallied Tuesday, on **track** for a third winning session out of the last four, led by a **rebound** in industrials, energy and technology shares.

“It appears stocks that were **hit** Monday, namely energy and technology companies are **leading** the way **higher**, likely because people are shopping for bargains,” said Kim Forrest, senior analyst and portfolio manager at Fort Pitt Capital Group.

Mixed data over the past few months as well as market **turbulences** have made the task of determining the way the central bank will move difficult.

“It’s a long two-day wait until the Fed’s decision and everything looks artificial until we know about the rates,” said Forrest commenting about the anxiety among investors.

Economic releases on Tuesday were mixed. Business conditions in the New York region continued to **slump** in September while sales at U.S. retailers **rose modestly** in August, with consumers spending far less on gasoline but more on new cars and trucks.

Industrial production **fell** slightly in August but was in line with expectations. U. S. business inventories **edged up** in July.

**Third**, when it comes to reading academic texts, I explain how the concept of reader expectations helps them see why a passage in a text might be difficult to digest. They are civilians, I say, and expect subjects to be people when at all possible and they expect verbs to convey actions, in active voice. But the academic has other preferences which involve the subject not being a person and the verbs not being in active voice but

in passive voice (though still using action verbs). Here are a couple sentences from Alfred North Whitehead that I have them examine.

Whitehead: The **analysis** of various strands of relativity **is** the analysis of the social structures of the Universe, as in this epoch.

ANALYSIS – The subject is a word that could be a verb and so the student could reword the sentence to conform more to civilian preferences. In doing so, the student increases the chances of understanding the content of the sentence

REVISION: When **we analyze** the various strands of relativity, **we are analyzing** the social structures of the Universe, as is happening in this epoch.

Here is another sentence:

Whitehead: Our **perception** of the geometrical order of the Universe **brings** with it the **denial** of the **restrictions** of inheritance to mere personal order.

ANALYSIS – again, the first subject is a noun derived from a verb (called nominalization) and the words in red are other nominalizations. The student should recognize this and so make them verbs in a revised version and see what happens

POSSIBLE REVISION: Even though **we perceive** the geometrical order of the universe, **we should not deny** the possibility that **inheritance belongs** to the universe, not just our personal DNA.

**Finally**, show how a student need only use better the words that they have already put on the page (with special attention to infinitives and nominalizations) to achieve college level writing.

STUDENT WRITING:

There will need **to be created** a screening process by the Department of Corrections **to determine** if he or she should be considered for the program.

ANALYSIS – here I show students that they might be mistaken to assume that they need a ‘bigger vocabulary’ to succeed at college level (adult) writing. First, just see the potential of the words you have on the page, I plead. Work with that, see what happens, and move on from there.

REVISION: the **Department of Corrections should create** a screening process **that can determine** if an **inmate should be considered** for the program.

COMMENT – so I hope students learn to see possible verbs in the wording they wrote down.

Here we changed to infinitives into verbs and make them active voice verbs. We kept one verb in passive voice, since we aren’t fanatical about one or the other voice. But we are – now – fanatical about knowing what we have on the page and so increase our options by a factor of – oh, let me say – ‘wow.’

When students (and adults) employ better the words they have, their interior work then has a more productive shelf life in the outside world. They experience an evolution and a revolution with words that they will want to “show off” in their other courses (whether in speaking in discussions or in writing).

Having used Whitehead as a poster child of difficult writing for the Civilian, I will end with a quotation that I think is very easy to understanding, coming from his book **Aims of Education**. I use it in my syllabus as a rallying cry for students to plunge into their verbal universe and not toy with digital universe (at least not in my course) – just their own human universe:

Alfred North Whitehead said that a university should  
“unite young and old in the **imaginative** consideration of learning...  
in the imaginative acquisition of knowledge.  
In doing this,  
The university preserves  
the connection between knowledge and zest of life.  
Imagination, he says, is key:  
Imagination is a way of illuminating the facts,  
Imagination enables us to construct an intellectual vision of a new world,  
Imagination preserves the zest of life by its suggestion of satisfying purpose.