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Submitting to the Disciplines of Liberation: A Second Look at Mark Van Doren's *Liberal Education*

Bill Koch

There is no more perfect situation than teachers teaching teachers.... Good teachers do teach each other, naturally and continuously.....and the discussion itself should be a work of art, a work of liberal art. – Mark Van Doren

For a few years now I've been describing to colleagues in the UNI English Department some of the ways I've been trying to engage students with their writing in the sections of College Writing and Research that I teach, and more than once they've said, "I wish I could take your class." And as I've continued to reread Van Doren's 1943 book on liberal education (on which I wrote an article that was published in *UNIVERSITAS* a couple years ago), I've found that his thoughts help me to explain some of these concepts and activities, ways to engage students with what I call the "phenomena of words."

For one thing, Van Doren writes that any educated person "knows how to read, write, speak and listen – four major arts," but he then goes on to comment that "few are evenly proficient" in these arts (15).

I then emphasize to students that what they consider to be only a means of conveying what they already know – words, are really art forms, though our society has not encouraged students to see this about words, and I suppose even education before college has not encouraged students to see words this way.

I also ask students to identify what is common to these the major arts, and eventually someone will notice that all four deal with words, words in spoken form (speaking and listening), and words in written form (writing and reading). Furthermore, I have them note that two of the major arts deal with the conveyance of words – speaking and writing – and two of the major arts deal with the reception of words – hearing and reading. I think those distinctions are worth reflecting on.

I also have them reflect on the age of these various arts or skills. Notice that literacy – reading and writing – arose with the era of commercial civilization, which began 6,000 years ago. The fossil record suggests that speaking and listening began much earlier than that, and we can't really identify when speech – shaped sound – arose. But we do know when the written word began and as we examine that historical record we can arrive at another distinction – alphabet literacy arose even more recently – just around 3,000 years ago. As I was having students copy out a passage of good writing a couple years ago, it occurred to me that perhaps we have yet to feel the full power of literacy in its alphabet mode. After all, Heidegger has said (somewhere) that it might be we haven't felt the full power of Literature yet (Van Doren says something similar in *Liberal Education*).



Indeed, I feel that that we in the twenty-first century of the Common Era are still feeling the explosion of flexibility and insight caused by the introduction of the alphabet into Greek and Hebrew written forms. Not only are we feeling the effects, but we are part of the re-organization of thought that began with the introduction of the alphabet to written language systems of that time. After all, geologically speaking, 3,000 years amounts to a few seconds (six?).

I don't share too many of those observations early on in Critical Writing and Research, but at some point I do. But I do tell them this in the first day of class:

While this course is about writing and research at the college level, I think it might be helpful to get a critical distance on that which we write with, and that which we read – words. I would like you to think about these observations and see if they have any merit:

First, we are born into a verbal environment. Think about that. As soon as we are born, we hear sounds that later we come to know as words, shaped sound. It is as if we are born from a physical womb into a psychological womb, a womb of words that we are submerged in until we are birthed by liberal education.

In liberal education, we become conscious of unconscious habits of thinking, reading, and expression. Indeed, I tell students, I have written this statement in your syllabus so that you can reflect on the cogency of that statement as you journey through your academic career.

Here is one habit of thinking that we are not aware of, until we “think” about it: Our experience of thinking isn't what we assume it is. We assume that when we think, we think with the words we hear or see, but it is likely that those words are conjuring up images in our minds, and we are thinking with those images more than with the words. In addition, those images are from our childhood, when we first were taught these important words about life and society. And so those images contain emotional baggage, and our thinking might be more a reaction to the emotions in these images than it is a calm deliberation of ideas, unfettered of emotions. In addition – here is another distinction – those images are likely to be simplistic compared to the realities that they are supposed to be helping us understand.

I suggest to students, that all of this unconscious stuff going on is ok, until we begin to think at the adult level that liberal education represents, and we must then recognize the simplistic nature of the images that words trigger in our minds almost automatically.



Now, since first year students hear me say this in a writing class, they are skeptical that what they heard is true. So I encourage them to test out my claims on their own. I explain that these images get conjured up in two ways: many of our words conjure up images on purpose, and we call those words metaphors. The example I use in class is the word “spotlight.” But words can also trigger images though they are not overt metaphors. For example, the word “God” conjures definite images, though the word “God” as we now use it isn’t a metaphor.

In any case, I ask them to write down a description of the image that occurs to them when they hear the word “spotlight.” Or they can draw the image. Many see a theatrical spotlight shining on a stage (I don’t mention it then, but this phenomena suggests to them that we think more alike than our sense of individualism has led us to believe). The light tower on a sea coast is seen by several. Others – for some reason – see a police car spotlight.

Then I ask them to draw a picture that is triggered in their mind by the sentence, “Science spotlights a part of reality,” or, “Science is a spotlight on reality.”

.....

– Hey – you, reader – yes, you reading this text sometime after the moment I’m writing this – stop reading this article and write down the images in YOUR mind that are triggered by those sentences, or draw a picture, and then read on.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

Ok - I trust you haven’t skipped ahead but have drawn a picture or written down a description?

In class, I draw on the chalkboard a primitive picture of a square that represents a theatrical stage, with the word REALITY written across it in big letters, and then the letter A illuminated by the circle of light coming from the spotlight hanging from the rafters, I ask students, “If only a part of Reality is illuminated by the spotlight of science, how can we get more of reality illuminated?” And one frequent response is – widen that spotlight circle. Then a question arises – how do you do that? Answer: read, take classes. Another question based on the image – that’s one spotlight, can there be other spotlights? Would they shine on the same area or a different area? What could we call these spotlights?

Such questions, I tell them, arise from our engagement with words and they constitute a key kind of critical thinking that is encouraged by liberal education. Indeed, Kieran Egan says that when we know about the power of metaphor, we can examine the implications



and entailments of the metaphor, and this examination produces key knowledge as important as what we get from quantitative studies that we associate with the experimental scientific method (163).

The entire issue of metaphors is crucial for the development of mature thinking – of liberated and liberal thinking – in college students (whether tenured or other, I like to say). And Van Doren feels that the modern mind doesn't appreciate the metaphorical dimension to its words. He writes that our age "lets its metaphors go undetected because it supposes it has hold of the fact, because it rests in psychology and sociology" (19). We do not recognize, he writes, that metaphors "are a function of our speech. Perhaps there is no better explanation for the absence of irony in our art, or for the poor uses we make of poetry and history" (21).

Besides making them aware of unconscious mental habits related to their engagement with words, I also ask them to consider their *attitude* about their engagement with words.

I tell them that it is my theory that students fresh out of high school enter a college classroom with a set of assumptions that are different from those that faculty bring. And I list a few assumptions and ask if they think students see things this way. For instance, it is my impression that students think art and literature are just for entertainment and distractions from one's troubles. Most students agree that I've described things accurately. Then, when it comes to language, it seems to me that most students think that words are used to just convey what they already know. And, they think that one has to have an idea in one's mind before they start to write. And that the first draft has to be very good.

Now, when I list these assumptions, I don't criticize students for having these views. Except that last one. Instead, I tell them (kind of like what Whitman says in his poems) that what they have is good, but there's more to it than that. They have half the story, as it were. Except that last assumption — NEVER think that your first draft has to be good. Why do you think we call it "rough," for God's sake?

But since they assume that it takes work to produce a written text, I encourage them to engage with their language playfully. And on day one I introduce them to an activity I made up called *Letter Linkage*. The activity is similar to word association but instead of linking words based on images, you link words that share some of the same letters. So, the student puts one word – like, "example" – at the top of a clean sheet of paper, and then "watches" the mind come up with a word that uses some of the letters from that first word. Here is a list I just made up:

example

ample



apple

staple

stable

staff

taffy

after

aft

bat

battle

batter

antler

and

anaconda

condor

corridor

corral

coral

color

colorful

colander

calendar(etc.)



I had an earlier list that included a letter reversal (I think the words were reel and leer), and I joke to students that letter reversals are worth double points, but I goofed around with the software and lost that section of this draft. I'd said a couple other related and insightful things but that too got deleted when I hit the wrong button.

But that situation is itself an object lesson for us that if you are engaged with your language at a certain depth of commitment, the mistakes or foibles one makes are not fatal, because your liberation from unconscious habits of *thinking, expression, and reading* (what I call TEAR) has let down some flood gates so you are virtually always flooded with ideas relevant to the task at hand, and ideas that are testable.

I then give students one minute to come up with their letter linkage list. Some catch on and get a list of 15 words before the minute is up. Others are more – to use the word from the movie *Finding Forrester* – “constipated.” But it doesn't matter, I tell students, because as you practice this activity, your conscious ego “loosens up” and your mind tells you what it sees.

I suppose that last assertion is pretty metaphysical – and using scatological imagery! – but it comes out of Van Doren's own description of what happens to an educated person, someone who has submitted to the disciplines of *Liberal Education*.

“The powers of the person,” Van Doren writes, “are what education wishes to perfect. To aim at anything less is to belittle men. The person is not machinery which others can run. His mind has its own laws, which are the laws of thought itself” (40).

The process that brings about the perfection of these powers is interesting: Van Doren agrees with Pascal that ““To deny, to believe, and to doubt well are to a man what the race is to a horse”” (22).

“To believe and doubt well,” Van Doren echoes: “That is at least a program for the person whose perfection we have had in mind as the aim of education. Perfection, yet within the limits of his knowing nature. Those limits are harsh and final. There is nothing like them, however, in all the creature world” (22).

The fact of “knowing” that one knows is what sets humanity apart. Because the human “intellect may have no counterpart elsewhere,” the liberal arts, says Van Doren, “are specifically the intellectual arts, and therefore are keys to all of man's operations as man” (74). He finds that the liberal arts are “in a middle position” between the fine arts and the practical arts, “between those with which we manipulate objects and those with which we create them” (73).

He will also provide some cogent observations about the trivium and quadrivium, but



here I'd like to keep the focus on the phenomena of words and liberal arts, or liberal education.

Van Doren argues that "an educated society is one whose members know the same things, and have the same intellectual powers" (111). This doesn't mean that the people believe the same things: "Education will be saved only when it is agreed that men must know the same things – which doesn't mean that they will believe the same things" (95).

What he says next is powerful, given the anxiety of our times and the tendency to reach for straws that are more and more socially acceptable: when all people [within liberal education, I'd suggest] know the same things, "they will be protected, in the only way education can bring this about, against mass judgments at the eleventh hour" (95).

I keep thinking that we are fortunate to be examining this issue in these terms when the Mayan Long Count is three years from completion (and beginning again). We in liberal education have time to organize our thoughts on matters related to our engagement with such speculation on time and society, and we can lead the way on December 22, 2012 – the first full day of winter!

Van Doren distinguishes the content of a discipline from "intellectual skills" learned during the practice involved with learning the discipline's content, and notes that "it is now in fashion to make fun of what used to be called 'formal discipline' in education" (120). But he feels there is something important conveyed in this term. Even though one picks up content, one has also developed and disciplined "an intellectual skill which can be employed to advantage in other studies" (120). But when one has identified and submitted to those "studies that are good for the mind" (120)," then one possesses "intellectual virtues" that "free the person in understanding and in discourse [another word for "words"?]" (122).

Alluding to his comments earlier in the book, Van Doren writes, "The freedom of the intellect gives us possession of our last and greatest powers, the powers most characteristic of us as men. That these powers had been unsuspected renders their possession all the more miraculous" (122).

These days, I sense within myself these powers which we may or may not want to call "miraculous." Certainly unexpected. But we also see that these powers are what the educated person needs (in terms of attitude as well as skills) to, as our *UNI Catalogue* words it, lead students to "the advancement of humane learning and the preparations of all students to cope intelligently, effectively and reasonably with the complex and changing conditions of life in modern society" (41). Furthermore, besides providing the student with "substantial content," the Liberal Arts Core seeks to develop skills in students such as "rigorous methodology and an active engagement with the societal,



ethical and practical implications of our learning” (49), skills that can be applied to any discipline or career.

And yet I would submit that such powers are to be released in the student in his or her first year of liberal education, by the end of their work (and play) in the Liberal Arts Core. I think that we should conceptualize the goal of the LAC as not just making a student “well-rounded,” but also “integrated,” which means that they have a powerful sense of proportion and rigor to their intellectual vision. And I like to think that my early activities dealing with the phenomena of words spotlight the existence of these powers in the student.

I think that students who leave LAC should be able to say that they feel “different,” transformed, and now approach their studies in their major differently. Instead of thinking that their major will give them just marketable skills, the transformed liberal education student, having had transformative breakthroughs while in LAC, will now – as I say in “An Outline of Key Aspects of Liberal Education the First Year Student Should Know,” (which I include in my syllabus) — also understand this: “This LAC discipline transforms the student’s matrix of understanding and matrix FOR understanding, which he then applies to the modern global world that his Major prepares him or her to be embedded into.”

Again, I don’t share with students in Critical Writing and Research the above remarks from Van Doren, but I do show them the quotation in which he calls reading, writing, speaking and listening “four major arts.” I ask them to reflect on why he would give such lofty labels to what we have considered to be pretty unimpressive (because we virtually swim submerged in a verbal ocean). And “we do not believe in language today,” perhaps, “because we do not believe in intellectual character” (131).

So my early classes are meant to engage students with the intellectual dimension of the phenomena of words. Doing this, they experience and so “get this power [of intellect] by practice, and by a study of it” (131).

But even with these noble cerebral sentiments, students are not prone to dive into writing with a lot of relish (or mustard or ketchup! – sorry, the word “relish” conjures up diversity of images)....The students need another “attitude adjustment” experience, one related to the process of generating a written document, and which I think William Stafford provides in his essay on writing, which I include in the *Mercury Reader* that I compile for the class.

It has been my experience, as I’ve suggested above, that students assume that they have to be critical of their first efforts. Nothing is further from the truth, I tell them. After they read the Stafford essay, I feel that they understand why they should not be critical of their first efforts at writing (and reading). Stafford notes that “for anyone who follows with



trust and forgiveness what happens to occurs to him, [one enters] an unexplored realm of human vision” (in MR, 3). With this article, and one by Paul Roberts, students understand that critical thinking (and reading and writing) allows for messiness of thought and expression in the early stages. You have to start somewhere, I tell students—why do you think we call a first draft “rough.”

And so I think that this course’s early sessions can be subversive towards the typical societal expectation that students grew up in, that any attempt at a public activity has to be perfect (and making your thoughts visible on paper, even in the privacy of your room, is a kind of public activity). Instead, I tell them that the perfect process “that brings about new things one would not have otherwise created” (Stafford) allows for imperfection in its early stages, allows for messiness of thought and expression in these early stages. Indeed, the perfection that Van Doren also says is possible – within “the limits of our knowing nature” (21) – because the process wants us to be messy at first, to play with our words, and THEN to use tools of the intellect to convert the rough into – ah, less rough, maybe polished.

And the student learns many valuable insights about the self and the mind while converting a first articulation into one that communicates with others. The student receives an education while practicing, an education about how to study education.

Well, maybe the teacher is learning about the process of education while showing students the steps that lead from a chaotic rough draft to a clear and structured final draft. As Whitehead writes (and which I quote in my syllabus), the university “functions as a place where young and old come together in the imaginative acquisition of knowledge” and in “the imaginative consideration of knowledge” (93). Faculty, already intimately engaged with their words, and doing so within a balance “breakfast” of intellectual pursuits (and so includes the practice of a non-verbal language, public service, hopefully the suspension of all intellectual machinery that meditation attempts to produce), are also in the midst of constructing an “intellectual vision of a new world” (93). And they seek student input, as students demonstrate that they have submitted to the disciplines of the word as outlined in this essay (maybe).

In any case, while I like Whitehead’s description of the purpose of the university, I think Northrop Frye articulates the psychological experience of the educated person in liberal education even more concretely:

The new world that Whitehead believes liberal education attempts to construct, a new world which (I conjecture) is valuable because it maintains personal freedom but also public order, is already articulate, says Frye, “in the arts and sciences, [which are] the forms that the human intellect and imagination have achieved, [and which] can provide such a vision” (On Ed 90).



Frye's observations about the popular understanding of freedom are very important and any student of liberal education (tenured or other) should be aware of them. Not necessarily to agree with them, but to realize that our words related to word "freedom" and the word "freedom" itself conjure up images that we must examine.

For example, Frye notes,

Most of us never outgrow the childish notion of freedom as freedom of will, freedom from the external constraints that other people put on us.....But freedom exists in the vision itself, not in the means of reaching it, because the goal to be attained in the future is, in the intellect and imagination, already there. [For this reason,] the university is the only place in society where freedom is defined. (89)

This quotation is taken from a convocation address he gave while Dean at the University of Toronto. And I'd like to offer a few more passages because they seem pertinent to our own discussions at UNI about the nature and structure of our Liberal Arts Core. In addition, I think all incoming students to Liberal Education should know about these assertions, and then test them out in their own experience of college:

About the role of Rationality:

The university [Frye notes] doesn't claim that anybody ever has, ever could, or ever ought to order his life entirely by reason. It merely says that there is a reason beyond rationalization, that if we pursue it we develop philosophy and science, and that if we develop these, we get something more useful than the rationalizations of thugs and ditherers. (89)

About the role of the Arts:

The university doesn't say that we should learn how to live from poetry or fiction, or how to see from painting. It merely says that there is in the arts an imagination better than the melodrama and poster-painting of our ordinary social imaginations. (89)

In much of Frye's writing, he discusses the person's social imagination, as distinct from one's personal imagination. Van Doren also discusses the role of the imagination in Liberal education: "The imagination is natural in the sense that it can be enriched by use and discipline. The more we think and feel, the better our imaginations are furnished" (126). And I would submit that when we are aware that our words trigger images, we have begun to think more imaginatively and so more realistically.



And later on, we understand that this intellectual imagination will show us the depths to which literature can bring out our full humanity. I refer to one more statement by Frye on this phenomena dealing with words and images, in another collection of essays that any scholar will find – to say the least – interesting:

The arts, which tell us how the human imagination operates, are thus an untapped source of mental energy, a means of achieving social and individual freedom. Once we have recovered our imaginative birthright, we can look down on the world we have left behind and see that it forms a demonic parody of the world we are now in. (Spiritus 89)

It has often been noted that social unrest and protest often have their origins on university campuses. Why? Because students are introduced to a vision of urban life and social engagement that present day society seems to thwart. But student activities in response to this perception have been ineffective, inefficient – not even correct. They use tactics that are shared by those who frustrate their goals.

But I think that a “kairos” has come upon those in liberal education and the time might be propitious for faculty in Liberal Education to articulate not just a balanced vision of the new world, but an integrated one, one that has the right proportions of intellect and emotion, rationality and imagination, rigor and looseness.

And I think that the LAC College Writing and Research course is central to introducing students to this imaginative and integrated engagement with words. When students are so engaged, they can bring about the end game for our present matrix of problems that have existed since commercial civilization was born, since the cradle of civilization was constructed – just 6,000 years ago.

As I told students after they had completed the annotated bibliography, their reading of these books [they can only use Rod Library books for their research project] has become more sensitive and intense because of the living language that they have begun to experience within themselves, and because of they are now more sensitive to the way that words can trigger images. And now as they read, it is always possible that their minds will recognize good metaphors as they come across them in their reading, and sometimes that metaphor could touch off in their minds a whole series of implications and entailments they would have missed had they not been sensitive to this word-image dynamic. And I would call that experience good critical thinking – liberated thinking, what liberal education can make more available to all students.

And now, as they write explanations of these texts, they should be aware that the rough draft can be full of clichés, of dead language, and that is ok, since in the revision stage (what I now call Development Stage) they can recognize such dead language and replace it with puns, with word play, which are signs of a living language inside the writer. And



the experience of this living language is an emotional experience as well as intellectual. And so I suggest that they can experience peace, even though they cannot rest. One recognizes that the intellect now wants to engage itself with the language of other minds, and see of other minds are conceptualizing these major words learned in childhood with more complex images. One wants to make breakthroughs part of the social imagination, part of the institutions of commercial civilization, in its science, art, economics, governance, religion, commerce, etc.

We have peace, but we don't rest; I think, because we see that even though we are closing one transition, achieving one major goal, from this vantage point we only see that we are half way to another larger goal, and that we are in the middle of a great phenomena of biology, as Biology attempts to bring order, as Teilhard de Chardin says, "to its inner dispositions" (17). And we human beings who are so fortunate, so fortunate to be on a campus of liberal education, realize that we are not so much pinnacles of human consciousness, as its most humble and responsible servants.

Even then, one wants so much to just keep working, and even though there is work to be done, we can whistle and hum as we work . . .with words . . .and its world. . . .



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