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On Language and Rarity

“The limits of my language mean the limits of my world.” (Ludwig Wittgenstein)

The Power of Language

Writers honor the rare thing in our mundane lives. Whether we write challenging novels, post witty statuses on Facebook, or jot down insightful marginal questions or clarifying comments on student papers, we all use language to signal our uniqueness. We hope to communicate what has often been communicated before in a wholly original, artistic manner; we hope to surprise or enlighten others by sharing a link or idea that has not circulated before; we hope to finally phrase the editorial comment in such a way that our student’s writing is forever after improved. Emily Dickinson captures our hope for our words: “‘Hope’ is the thing with feathers – /That perches in the soul –.” We hope that our words will take flight, but we recognize that this hope “perches.” Static written language embodies hope in finite form. Our use of written language is essential to our lives and essential to our practice as teachers of reading and writing; its stillness invites concentration and contemplation.

What happens when that hope leaves its perch and takes flight? The written word carries a heavy burden in our society, since it is the medium— whether printed or digital— that transmits what is most valued in our culture. It is indeed where we perch our values and our ideologies so that all may see and appreciate it. However, another form of communication that is less privileged but nevertheless as important as written language occurs far more frequently and is relatively unexamined. Our speech takes flight and unravels our thoughts second by second, often surprising us with its rapidity, connectivity, and power. Like a flock of birds that suddenly, communally changes direction in mid-air, our words spill out in vigorous, active associations, often advancing headlong into argument before doubling back to pick up a caveat or swerve into anecdote. Verbal communication is an event-oriented occurrence that is predicated upon a specific set of circumstances and a specific

audience; a conversation is intensely particular and intensely rare. Nowhere is this more true than in a classroom.

Recognizing Rarity

Nicholson Baker notes in his essay, “Rarity,” that a rare thing is a true conundrum, since its very condition, coupled with human nature, is what precipitates its demise. One is so enthralled by the rare thing that one is compelled to share it with others, hence diminishing its rarity and possibly the truth of its beauty, or the beauty of its truth. The rare thing thus becomes less rare and more mundane, which strips the thing of its newness, its glory, and its joy. Indeed, simply noticing its rarity puts the thing in jeopardy, since, like a physicist observing the experiment, one minutely alters the composition or performance of the thing. The thing is irrevocably lost, and we desire to recover it.

But going in search of it is no good either, since, as Walker Percy argues in his essay “The Loss of the Creature,” we all bring complex networks of associations and information to bear on any situation, which virtually obscure the thing itself. No, the rare thing must create itself, as the universe did, from nothing: so much dark matter must, on some truly infinitesimally elemental level, recognize itself and birth consciousness from nothing. A rare thing can reinvent itself in every age, for in every age we translate the rare and wonderful according to a unique set of circumstances. As Jacques Derrida notes in *Specters of Marx*, “A striking diversity disperses across the centuries the translation of a masterpiece, a work of genius, a *thing* of the *spirit* which precisely seems to *engineer itself*” (18). The rare thing or situation evolves from commonness, as all things do. It is the exceptional combination of commonness that forms the rare thing, and it is always a true surprise to recognize it and name it in any age, thereby bringing it into the realm of the real, of logos, of beauty and truth. And, consequently, starting it on its inevitable journey to its end.

As we pass through time and space on our journey towards the inevitability of cessation, we construct clear and deliberate attempts to make conscious what is unconscious, to verbalize the

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dark matter of our brains. Our literary predecessors are consumed with speaking consciousness to us as signposts on our journey from and towards silence. Polonius asks, “What do you read, my lord?”; “Words, words, words,” says Hamlet, who, while reading absence—the words on the page—speaks presence—the words in the air. Into the air we launch our words, every combination of which is infinitely rare: a unique mixture of voice, intention, emotion, cadence, meaning, subterfuge, and truth.

Perhaps, like Hamlet, we (or our students) take a special joy in endowing our words with more life and art than necessary in order to amuse ourselves or to eviscerate our enemies or lesser friends, or perhaps not. Perhaps instead we (or our students) are drawn to the sumptuous language of Keats, who reveled in his own mortality and was able to work his words into a lush frenzy simply due to his knowledge of his eventual immense lack of them. Or we (or our students) may appreciate Virginia Woolf’s work with interiors and the various correspondences our inner life may have with our exterior life. The resonances our literary artists create in the warp and woof of language and space are meant as markers for the ineffable: they speak rarity to the rare in order to instruct us in our conscious human condition, rare as rare can be.

Classroom Conversation: Rigorous Rarity

Rarity perpetually occurs in the classroom, and a teacher only has to be open to the experience to recognize it. What we say to students and how we say it is determined by their own expression of curiosity or boredom, by their ability to perform on-level or somewhere above or below the mark, and by their more or less complex universes of associations and prior knowledge or experience. We must articulate for our students what they cannot say themselves; we must encourage those who are able to express themselves to do so with clarity, precision, and creativity. We need to honor their language, teach them to hone it, and model what our society deems competent so that they can act in accordance with themselves.

As Rousseau notes in *Emile, or On Education*, “To be something, to be oneself and always one, a man must always be decisive in making his choice, make it in a lofty style, and always stick to it.” The “lofty style” comes from

the essence of the English classroom. How do we inculcate it, and why is achieving it so rare? By teaching reading and writing, we try to allow our students a lofty expression of their interior lives; we want to help them to shape their expressions to fit various contexts in their world so that they can have power and live intentional, successful lives. Our teaching involves language on its most fundamental level: we must constantly immerse ourselves in various versions of linguistic trial and error, model effective language in speech and writing, and talk to our students about how language works while simultaneously working with and within it. We have these conversations every day, but they are never identical, never mundane, never ordinary.

What can be more rare than conversation? Two people, who speak the same language and who generally agree on the meaning of the words they use, use them together and create a temporary symbiosis through which accord is either achieved or destroyed. It is intensely rare for Hamlet to be able to have a decent conversation with anyone other than Horatio, yet Shakespeare speaks to us across the centuries through him. We do not speak the same language as Shakespeare – a fact bemoaned by high school students on a daily basis – but we are able to sync our own language with his enough to approximate his meaning and then watch the 10,000 linguistic explosions that occur as we read deeply and verbalize the words of the characters “trippingly on the tongue.” We do not speak the same language as our students, who are well versed in the vernacular of their own time, but we can absorb it, relate to it, and occasionally—and often hilariously—use it. Sometimes students will explicitly teach vocabulary to teachers; this give and take of instruction and learning embodies the structure of a conversation.

Conversational Conundrums

Time spent in conversation with any individual develops a unique language. Words are spoken, questioned, refined, spoken again, beat upon the anvil of trial and error until they effectively *mean* what we say they do, what we hold in common. In the community of the classroom, we can avoid the problem that Paul Auster identified in his novel *City of Glass*: “You see, the world is in fragments, sir. Not only have we lost our sense of purpose, we have lost the

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language whereby we can speak of it” (92). We must work with our students to actively construct meaning from the wildly fragmented world in which they, and we, live, and teach them to view both spoken and written language with a sense of inquiry and a respect for the change upon which words are built: “Unless we can begin to embody the notion of change in the words we use, we will continue to be lost” (Auster 94).

One can easily get lost in all of the specialized, technical, and pedagogical language that circles the English classroom, but we must take special care to beat a clear path for our students so that they can begin their journey. Oddly, the goal of spoken or written language—shared language—seems to be to use it so much so as to eventually not need it. At an intermediary stage, one may be able to simply allude to another shared experience or text to convey precisely what we mean; however, such an allusion necessitates a mutual understanding at its core. After so much verbalization, exposition, and allusions, one is finally able to communicate with a sigh, a gesture, a glance. The system of communication becomes internalized completely, and one need not even translate the glance into its component words; one may simply acknowledge its meaning and continue.

The Discourse of Discovery

Yet academic discourse demands the opposite. Effective language must be taught explicitly in order to achieve verbal coherence; writing instruction must foreground the fact that, unfortunately, there are no shortcuts to clear exposition, argumentation, and narration. Some of our students may sympathize with the creature in Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*, who, while watching the DeLaceys, finds communication to be a mysterious and powerful invention:

“By degrees I made a discovery of still greater moment. I found that these people possessed a method of communicating their experience and feelings to one another by articulate sounds. I perceived that the words they spoke sometimes, produced pleasure or pain, smiles or sadness, in the minds and countenances of the hearers. This was indeed a godlike science, and I ardently desired to become acquainted with it. But

I was baffled in every attempt I made for this purpose” (106-107).

As English teachers, we have the daily opportunity to clarify the usage of language and remove the obstacles that baffle our students so that they can join the ranks of the literate and the successful.

In order to connect in classroom conversation with our students, we may find the following techniques helpful or productive:

- *Make Eye Contact a Must.* In order to engage successfully with speaking and listening skills, a student and teacher must learn to make consistent eye contact with his or her auditors when explaining, questioning, or discussing any information verbally. Reading from prepared comments is a useful method of transmitting ideas, but this can also be accomplished silently, with a document camera. When verbalizing ideas, looking at those with whom we are communicating is essential to check for understanding. We can easily read our listener’s face(s) and tell when we need to start over, rephrase, offer an example, or simply stop. Practicing eye contact with students makes them very uncomfortable – they are much more acclimated to conversing via text message, where visual cues are either absent or shorthanded with emoticons and abbreviations. Developing this skill will help them to make more fluent choices in their speech and in their writing, since they will develop immediate audience awareness. They can then reconsider their strategies for presenting their information more consciously and competently.
- *Practice Sustained Silence.* When a student or teacher is developing an idea verbally, all other auditors should focus on attending to his or her words with sustained concentration and refrain from calling out, interrupting, or making any other kind of editorial noise, such as sighing, coughing, shuffling papers, clucking, or what have you. Communicating verbally is a very difficult process, and distractions from one’s auditors are rude behaviors to be addressed and rooted out. We should consider what Benjamin Franklin tells us in his essay “Remarks Concerning the Savages of North America”: “He that would speak, rises. The rest observe a profound silence. When he has finished and sits down,

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they leave him five or six minutes to recollect, that, if he has omitted anything he intended to say, or has anything to add, he may rise again and deliver it. To interrupt another, even in common conversation, is reckoned highly indecent” (Baym 227). Since the Native Americans in question belong to an oral tradition, respect for the spoken word is as engrained in their culture as it is for the auditors of *Beowulf*. While waiting five or six minutes after someone speaks is not tenable in a modern classroom with only 40 to 60 minutes to work, silence during speech is definitely a goal worth working towards.

- *Take Notes.* Student speakers as well as teachers present interesting, thought-provoking ideas that bear questioning and further discussion. When one must wait to make a comment on what is being said in classroom conversation, one needs a record of points to address and should therefore take notes on the discussion. Here is where we have the opportunity to demonstrate the interplay of written and verbal communication and the ways in which they can inform each other.
- *Quote Each Other.* Once a speaker has finished making his or her point, it is good practice to acknowledge what he or she has said before launching into one’s own comments. Teaching our students to link their comments to the previous speaker’s comments, whether supportive or contradictory, not only teaches them to follow the narrative thread of the conversation, but also teaches them implicitly that good transitions are necessary features of both spoken and written language.
- *Check for Accuracy.* Encouraging students to ask each other and their teachers for clarification is a valuable skill that encourages both consensus building and logical reasoning. Beginning with phrases like, “If I understand your point correctly, you mean that...” or “Let me see if I’ve got this right. You think that...” and then allowing the previous speaker to agree, disagree and clarify, or modify his or her statement will help students to engage with each others’ ideas fully and hold them accountable for the things that come out of their mouths. When they recognize that they will be responsible for

their words, they will learn to construct clearer arguments and support them with pertinent examples – skills that will serve them well in written work as well.

These are techniques that align with the Common Core Standards for Speaking and

Listening, which are included under the English Language Arts Standards that will take effect this summer. Verbal communication is indeed within the purview of the English teacher, and explicit attention to conversations in our classrooms will soon be a codified reality (see Appendix). They are not only standards that we must address with our students; they are also standards by which we should conduct ourselves as teachers.

Looking at our students consistently throughout class models engagement and demonstrates that we care about them; not interrupting them shows them that they have something valuable to contribute; taking notes on their contributions honors their thoughts – even more so when it is done publicly, for instance, on a record sheet used with a document camera; quoting them in our summaries and segues models research writing skills; and checking for accuracy allows them to move into a position of authority as the owner of their thoughts and words. Keeping all of these issues in mind, while at first a daunting task, becomes second nature to both teacher and student and prepares all those involved in these engaged conversations to participate in the world of ideas with a sense of curiosity, efficacy, and wonder.

Continuing Conversations

Hopefully we will be able to equip our students to move beyond the creature’s state of bafflement to Joseph Conrad’s narrator’s position in *Heart of Darkness*: a sensitive listener/reader who knows that there is something more to the story than what is available on the surface. One must only be awake enough to be able to catch its importance, and being awake and aware is a rare thing in and of itself in any age, especially in an age of darkness when all we have to attend to is the power of each others’ voices:

“It had become so pitch dark that we listeners could hardly see one another. For a long time already he, sitting apart, had been no more to us than a voice. There was not a word from anybody. The

others might have been asleep, but I was awake. I listened, I listened on the watch for the sentence, for the word, that would give me the clue to the faint uneasiness inspired by this narrative that seemed to shape itself without human lips in the heavy night-air of the river” (237).

The conversation one may conduct in a classroom is intensely rare – it lasts just minutes within a student’s day, but has the potential to

mediate infinite connections throughout the student’s day, as well as the potential to form a framework for daily language and life beyond school. The regularity of such conversation—of shared language and lexicon, whether explicitly taught or implied—creates a community, creates a microcosmic world in which our students can live and learn to make sense of their larger world. Hopefully, this will be a community and a world in which linguistic success is not a rarity.

Appendix

English Language Arts Standards » Speaking & Listening » Grade 11-12

The CCR anchor standards and high school grade-specific standards work in tandem to define college and career readiness expectations—the former providing broad standards, the latter providing additional specificity.

Comprehension and Collaboration

- [CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.11-12.1](#) Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grades 11–12 topics, texts, and issues, building on others’ ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.
- [CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.11-12.1a](#) Come to discussions prepared, having read and researched material under study; explicitly draw on that preparation by referring to evidence from texts and other research on the topic or issue to stimulate a thoughtful, well-reasoned exchange of ideas.
- [CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.11-12.1b](#) Work with peers to promote civil, democratic discussions and decision-making, set clear goals and deadlines, and establish individual roles as needed.
- [CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.11-12.1c](#) Propel conversations by posing and responding to questions that probe reasoning and evidence; ensure a hearing for a full range of positions on a topic or issue; clarify, verify, or challenge ideas and conclusions; and promote divergent and creative perspectives.
- [CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.11-12.1d](#) Respond thoughtfully to diverse perspectives; synthesize comments, claims, and evidence made on all sides of an issue; resolve contradictions when possible; and determine what additional information or research is required to deepen the investigation or complete the task.
- [CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.11-12.2](#) Integrate multiple sources of information presented in diverse formats and media (e.g., visually, quantitatively, orally) in order to make informed decisions and solve problems, evaluating the credibility and accuracy of each source and noting any discrepancies among the data.
- [CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.11-12.3](#) Evaluate a speaker’s point of view, reasoning, and use of evidence and rhetoric, assessing the stance, premises, links among ideas, word choice, points of emphasis, and tone used.

Presentation of Knowledge and Ideas

- [CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.11-12.4](#) Present information, findings, and supporting evidence, conveying a clear and distinct perspective, such that listeners can follow the line of reasoning, alternative or opposing perspectives are addressed, and the organization, development, substance, and style are appropriate to purpose, audience, and a range of formal and informal tasks.

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- [CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.11-12.5](#) Make strategic use of digital media (e.g., textual, graphical, audio, visual, and interactive elements) in presentations to enhance understanding of findings, reasoning, and evidence and to add interest.
- [CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.11-12.6](#) Adapt speech to a variety of contexts and tasks, demonstrating a command of formal English when indicated or appropriate. (See grades 11–12 Language standards 1 and 3 [here](#) for specific expectations.)

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<http://www.corestandards.org/ELA-Literacy/SL/11-12>

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