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Why Johnny Can't Write: The Illiteracy Crisis

by Hugh Cook
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Hugh Cook is in his eighth year of teaching at Dordt. He is presently working towards an M.F.A. degree in fiction writing in the Writers' Workshop at the University of Iowa. The following is the text of a speech given last October to the convention of the Ontario Christian Teachers' Association.

Just as we educators all across North America were enjoying our last moments of freedom before the end of summer signaled the annual autumn onslaught, we were treated to an unexpected, ironic back-to-school present: tangible, indisputable proof that we have not been doing our job.

For years we had been hearing rumors that student scores on Scholastic Aptitude Tests were dropping steadily and that students could no longer read, write, and do arithmetic, but we were always able to rationalize the criticism by explaining that it came from perennial pessimists who were

able to marshal only vague proof.

We even managed to overlook—at least, those of us who still do any reading at all—a steady stream of articles in major publications such as *Newsweek*, *The National Observer*, *U.S. News & World Report*, and *Harper's*,¹ all of which warned of increasing student illiteracy.

But we can overlook such warnings no longer. While charges that we are producing a nation of illiterates may be overstated, there is no longer any doubt, after the report commissioned by the College Entrance Examination Board, that not only high school graduates but even college graduates in large numbers are now unable to meet even minimum competency requirements in verbal and mathematical skills. I shall leave the mathematicians to bewail and improve their own plight. I am an English teacher, and I shall, therefore, direct my observations toward that part of the problem, namely the dramatic decline in reading and writing skills, and hope that those who do not teach English are still interested enough either as educators or as practitioners of the English language that they can also profit.

Evidence of Illiteracy

For fourteen years, verbal scores on Scholastic Aptitude Tests have been declining, from a high in 1963 of 478 to a low last year of 429. When the scores took their most dramatic drop two years ago, the College Entrance Examination Board decided to investigate. It appointed a panel of 21 top educators, headed by former U.S. Secretary of Labor Willard Wirtz. Two years, \$600,000, and an eight-inch-thick volume of evidence later, as *Time* reports,² the panel justifies conclusively the fears of many in the last decade—schools in North America have not been doing the job.

We should have known, of course. There were even earlier signs of increasing student illiteracy. For years, officials at graduate schools of law, business, and journalism have been reporting that the

graduates of even the best colleges and universities have failed to master the skills of effective written communication crucial to their fields.³ *Newsweek* reports that at the University of California at Berkeley, where students come from the top 12.5 percent of high-school graduates, nearly half of the freshman class of three years ago demonstrated writing skills so poor that they were forced to enroll in remedial or "bonehead English" courses. At Temple University in Philadelphia, the proportion of freshmen failing an English placement exam has increased by more than 50 percent since 1968.

Officials at Michigan State University are so concerned about writing incompetence that they are considering requiring all undergraduates to pass a writing exam demonstrating minimum literary skills before they receive diplomas. In the state of Georgia, the Board of Regents were so distressed at the lack of writing skills evinced by graduates of the state's 32 colleges that they began to require such a basic competency test—and a compulsory remedial writing program for those who cannot pass.⁴

Some states are taking even further measures. Arizona, New York, Oregon, and California have now mandated that high-school graduates' diplomas be withheld until students demonstrate competence in basic skills.⁵ *Harper's* reports that applicants to journalism programs at Wisconsin, Minnesota, Texas, and North Carolina flunk basic spelling, punctuation, and usage tests at rates that vary between 30 and 50 percent. A survey conducted by the Association of American Publishers shows that college freshmen now read on what was formerly considered a high-school-freshman level.⁶

A recent item in the news is pertinent here. A Professor Prado of the State University of Potsdam, New York, is reported by *Christian Home and School* to have decided on early retirement because he felt he could not continue to accept his present salary for the work he was doing. "I am supposed to teach French and

Spanish languages and literatures," Professor Prado said, "but the great majority of my students cannot be said to speak or write English correctly. . . . What are supposed to be college-level classes quickly bog down, and I spend my time teaching elementary concepts and skills. . . . I hope the time is coming when teachers will be held accountable for what they do in the classroom."⁷

That time may soon be here. Last month a \$5,000,000 educational malpractice suit was brought by Edward Donohue,

September, the majority of whom are Christian high school graduates. One of the questions asked students to identify the noun in the following sentence: "He graciously accepted the sincere apology." Of the 427 freshmen tested, only 211—less than half—could correctly identify the noun. Oh well, you say, we're teaching them to be creative; they're studying literature now. Guess again. When the students were asked what literary device is used in the sentence "She is an angel when she sings," only 146 of the 427 freshmen were able correctly to

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a 19-year-old-high school graduate, against a school district in New York. He claimed that his high school had allowed him to graduate despite his being functionally illiterate. The judge dismissed the suit only because there was no precedent in New York of a school district's being sued, but he did say that the case ought to be reviewed by a higher court. That may indeed happen. Donohue's lawyer says he will appeal, right up to the Supreme Court if necessary.

Perhaps we may think, "Yes, indeed, the public school system sure is in trouble! And it's a good thing our Christian schools at least are on the ball." Well, we need not be complacent. I devised a questionnaire that was given to each of the 427 freshmen entering Dordt College this past

select *metaphor* out of the multiple-choice options. While it may be true that our Christian high schools are not teaching students the basics of language, it does not appear to be because we are so busy teaching them the fundamentals of literature.

Reasons For Illiteracy

What has happened? Why should a continent that has long prided itself on its educational system begin to graduate students who are incapable of using language, a gift that lies at the heart of what makes us uniquely human?

As self-examination is an oft-recommended first step when one detects a problem, let me begin by pointing the

finger at a source very close to home. Isn't it true that the English departments of most colleges—Christian colleges included—have come to believe that we are being paid primarily to teach students to probe the symbolic richness of *Hamlet* or *Slaughterhouse Five* rather than to teach them to write a clear sentence? In an incisive article in *Harper's*, Gene Lyons describes the situation well:

Teaching individual students to read, write, and think is surely not what the American university is about. . . . In English departments, where one would expect a concern for literacy to be located, the attitude of self-interest appears to be all but universal. Far from resisting the general dissolution, English professors as a group pay almost no attention at all to such mundane topics as literate writing. If they have the misfortune to get stuck in a school that forces them to teach that horror beyond contemplation, freshman composition, they teach it against their will.

The business of the American English department is not the teaching of literacy; it is the worship of literature. . . . I am every day more astonished by the increasing distance between most English departments and the everyday concerns of the society that pays their bills. So accustomed have they become to thinking of themselves as the very vanguard, if not the salvation, of Western culture, that the average member of "The Profession," as it likes to call itself, believes that society exists to serve literary scholarship rather than the other way around. . . .

It is no wonder that the profession of teaching English has developed a rhetoric of transcendence very nearly resembling that of a priestly sect. Like all

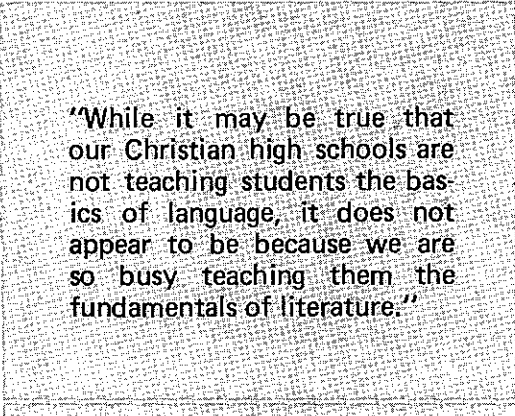
academics, English teachers have no objective standards for measuring books or each other. So it has been but a logical progression from an infatuation with the Joycean religion of art to the existence of an elaborate hierarchy that devotes most of its time to the intricacies of caste. The miseducation of the majority of American students thus confirms the academy in its monasticism. If the barbarians are at the walls, then the last thing the monk is about to do is take up his prayer book and reason with them. What he must do is see about protecting the holy texts.⁸

Cherishing this belletristic ideal, it is no wonder that college English departments are perpetuating the problem simply by graduating students who take English teaching positions and whose mission in life becomes gaining the necessary seniority that will enable them to avoid having to teach composition. Massive evidence exists which shows that high-school students cannot write partly because their teachers cannot. According to the National Council of Teachers of English, it is now possible for people who teach high-school English to go all the way through high school, college, and advanced education programs without taking a single course in composition.⁹ Moreover, some researchers estimate that more than 50 percent of the nation's high school English teachers did not specialize in English at all during their college years.¹⁰ The assumption has often been not only that almost any one ought to be able to *pass* an English course, but that almost any one ought to be able to *teach* one as well.

A further complication is that overcrowded classrooms and heavy teaching schedules have often forced teachers to drop essay tests and to rely instead on more easily marked objective tests. The result is another instance of students not having to write.

One particular villain identified by

the commission's report is television. The panel estimated that "by age 16, most children have spent between 10,000 and 15,000 hours watching television, more time than they have spent in school,"¹¹ time that formerly may have been spent on reading. The National Assessment of Educational Progress, which has been testing the writing skills of Americans between the ages of 9 and 35 since 1969, reports that most children and adults tested in the assessment have been strongly influenced by the simplistic spoken style of television.¹² Perhaps Marshall McLuhan was right ten years ago, when he said that literary culture was dead



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and that we now live in the age of electronic media.

When we discuss something as basic as the direction that education has taken in the last fifteen years, we begin to sense that the matter goes beyond our individual role, and that we are actually dealing with the direction that our whole culture has been taking. Just as education has not only shaped culture in the past but has also reflected its deeper values, so too when one searches for reasons for the growing illiteracy, one discovers causes that point to the very core of North American culture and the traumas it has experienced during the last fifteen years.

Many of today's teachers are products of the turbulent sixties and early seventies when culture was rocked by a counter-

culture that questioned the most basic assumptions of what was pejoratively called "the establishment." And let me say immediately that I agreed with a number of those fundamental critiques; I too am a child of the sixties. But in its zealous attack on *all* institutions, the counter-culture swung towards the opposite extreme and brought us no closer to a proper understanding of what our culture ought to be.

I said that many of today's teachers came out of that counter-culture—enough, apparently, to cause a basic shift in social values and, therefore, also in educational philosophy. I quote Bartlett Giamatti, professor of English at Yale, on the effect of this shift:

I believe that of all the institutions attacked in the past dozen years—governmental, legal, and educational—the one that suffered most was the institution of language itself, that massive, living system of signs that on the one hand limits us and, on the other hand, allows us to decide who we are. This institution—language—was perceived as being repressive. It was thought to be the agent of all other repressive codes—legal, political, and cultural. Language was the barrier that blocked—blocked access to pure feeling, blocked true communal experience of the kind that flowered at Woodstock, blocked the restoration of Eden.

Language was what was circumvented by drugs and music—those agents of higher states whose main virtue was that they were not verbal but visual or aural, the pure association of pure shape or sound unencumbered by words—which is to say by meaning. Language disassociated us from primitive impulses. It polluted us with ambiguity; it was not pure. Language impeded freedom.¹³

I believe that Giamatti's analysis is accurate. I also believe that the attitude towards language which he describes has become so popular in North American education that the stress is away from a rigorous use of the written language, to an emphasis instead on "relevance" and "creativity." Those words have become rallying cries, and in their name we have seen a shift toward the "elective" system, in which basic courses in composition and literature

The Modern Language Association reports in a recent issue of the *Chronicle of Higher Education* that from 1972 to 1974, undergraduate enrollments have dropped 14 percent in German, 13.4 percent in French, 11.6 percent in Russian, and slightly less in Italian and Spanish.¹⁴ Obviously, an increasing lack of interest in using their own language well is mirrored in students' disinclination to study *any* language at all. Perhaps they are more sinned against than

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are placed on the same level as courses with names such as "Sports Biographies," "Science Fiction," "Mystery Novels," "Television and Cinema," "Journalism," "Pop Lyrics," "Mod Com," and "Photography and You." As a member of my department has said, "In most high schools the 'relevant' courses are more popular—what high school kid wouldn't prefer Joe Namath's autobiography to *Paradise Lost*, Books I and II?"

Closely related to this demand for relevance is an increasingly pragmatic spirit which has ruled that education ought not so much to be preparation for life as it ought to be preparation for a specific job. One of the first sacrifices on this altar of immediate relevance has been foreign language study. What proof will satisfy the person who is convinced that a future truck driver does not need a knowledge of French?

sinning, for we educators have been all too ready to debate whether foreign language study is really necessary for the voc tech student in high school or the elementary ed major in college.

Furthermore, a pseudo-democratic instinct that students ought to be permitted a right to their own lingual mediocrity has caused educators and structural linguists to announce that one form of language is as good as any other, and that spoken language is primary, written language secondary. The pervasive influence of this belief, reports *Newsweek*, "has led many teachers to take the view that standard English is just a 'prestige' dialect among many others, and that insistence on its predominance constitutes an act of repression by the white middle class."¹⁵ One no longer speaks, therefore, of "bad" English, but "substandard" English; not of "bad" usage, but of "bidialectalism"; not of "cor-

rect" grammar, but of "prestige dialect." And so on. In the meantime, no matter what we choose to call it, our students suffer while we play with euphemisms.

What Can We Do?

We who are involved in Christian education, and who are aware of the financial sacrifices made by parents, ought to be very familiar with the doctrine of accountability. I believe, however, that we have to develop even greater accountability; I shall therefore propose a number of specific, practical steps that we can take to eliminate some causes for the growing illiteracy.

First, colleges must assume the leadership and must place much more emphasis on giving all students (and future English teachers in particular) a solid background in language study and composition. At Dordt College we have tried to do so by offering, in addition to compulsory freshman composition, two courses in advanced expository writing, two courses in creative writing, and single courses in advanced grammar, linguistics, and language. Of the eleven-course English major, one course must be in advanced expository or creative writing, one in linguistics, and one in advanced grammar. These courses are in addition to the foreign language study that is required of all students.

High schools will have to take a similar approach, for it is evident that students are just not required to do the writing that they should be doing. In the freshman questionnaire I mentioned earlier, only 153 of the 427 students had had any systematic writing program that involved more than two of their four high-school years, whereas only 97 of 427 indicated that they had had any sustained study of grammar.

We hear much today of "going back to the basics," and I can understand the thinking of parents and teachers who simply feel that we must return to a much more rigorous reading and writing program. I am personally not sure whether the answer

lies in going back to the basics, for that often consisted of an inadequate system which rightfully, at times, earned the scorn of the liberal educators. No more than in the political realm ought we in education to subscribe to a false liberal-conservative dilemma. So what ought grade schools and high schools to do?

It seems to me that teachers should use their summers to begin to make a frank assessment of their present programs. They will have to sit down, staffs *within* schools and staffs *among* schools, and begin to define their goals and how these goals may be practically implemented. What very specific language skills do we expect students to have mastered by the end of grade 5? Grade 9? Grade 12? What kind of books do we want them to have read by that time?

I believe that this fundamental exploration of goals and procedures ought not to be left up to those teachers whom we consider especially enlightened. We are *all* going to have to increase our enlightenment; that's how far behind we are. We are *all* going to have to become involved, to make a start—somewhere—even if only to a unanimous commitment to the idea that we are *all* responsible for teaching good writing and reading, not only the English teacher, but the history teacher and the physics teacher as well. We have given too much justification to the belief of students that good writing is required only in the *English* classroom or in the *English* term paper, and not in the biology report.

Regarding television, I don't necessarily agree with the famous essayist E.B. White, who says that short of throwing away all the television sets, there is really not much we can do about writing.¹⁶ *Newsweek* suggests, wisely, that "audio-visual techniques, as well as television itself, are here to stay, and now a number of concerned teachers and researchers are beginning to suggest that they be used to promote—not replace—the study of the written language,"¹⁷ through assigned reading and writing exercises based on television shows which the students watch. In that

way, the quick impression-reaction of students to television programming could be developed into the more reflective, thinking skills demanded by the written language.¹⁸

Finally, we must develop in ourselves and instill in the minds of students a love for language. A society that is unable to express itself with eloquence is not fully human. Or, as my Calvin colleague Stan Wiersma says, any society that does

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not have its own literature has not yet moved out of a state of "niggerdom," or slavery to its own cultural impoverishment. A society which has no creative use of language, which has no oral and written tradition that is continually being made new has no knowledge of its own history, and is therefore paralyzed in achieving any worthy destiny.

Do not think that I am speaking theoretically or abstractly. For here is one of the cultural crises of our time. When a society loses direction, its language often does the same and hastens the demise. Haven't we seen an almost unprecedented impoverishment and distortion of language during Viet Nam and Watergate? Students should be made to realize that not only does language possess a tremendous power for evil when it is misused, but that it also gives man a power for good when it is used with honesty, precision, strength,

beauty, and grace.

Students should be taught to realize that language is God's gift to man alone, and that our full creatureliness is therefore intimately related to our ability to communicate effectively with each other and to write poems, stories, essays, plays, and novels which use language in such a way that even the God of heaven and earth is Himself pleased. Surely the creative Word by which God made the cosmos and the Word who became flesh and redeemed that same cosmos demand the most eloquent, fear-and-trembling response with words that man can achieve. Denying our students the opportunity to give such a response of praise may come close to tying millstones around our own necks.

Footnotes

1. "Why Johnny Can't Write," *Newsweek*, December 8, 1975, pp. 58-65; A. Bartlett Giamatti, "Why Young People Today Can't Write," *The National Observer*, April 17, 1976, p. 14; "A Drive To Make High School Diplomas Mean Something," *U.S. News & World Report*, June 21, 1976, pp. 47-48; Gene Lyons, "The Higher Illiteracy," *Harper's*, September, 1976, pp. 33-40.
2. "Why Those Falling Test Scores?" *Time*, September 5, 1977, p. 40.
3. "Why Johnny Can't Write," p. 58.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 59.
5. "A Drive To Make High School Diplomas Mean Something," p. 47.
6. "The Higher Illiteracy," p. 33.
7. "Potsdam, NY," *Christian Home and School*, March, 1977, p. 2.
8. "The Higher Illiteracy," p. 34.
9. "Why Johnny Can't Write," p. 61.
10. *Ibid.*
11. "Why Those Falling Test Scores?" p. 40.
12. "Why Johnny Can't Write," p. 59.
13. "Why Young People Today Can't Write," p. 59.
14. *Ibid.*
15. "Why Johnny Can't Write," p. 61.
16. *Ibid.*, p. 60.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 62.
18. *Ibid.*