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How Writing Broadens the Mind

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In the beginning was a blank page. The writer gathered nouns and verbs, adjectives and adverbs, connectives and prepositions collected from her senses, shepherded each unto its own place, and corralled in their proper order with dots and commas. Thereby the writer created Order. She ordered the Program to check the spelling and the grammar and saw that it was good. That was the end of the First Page.

The writer looked upon her work and saw that it was good. She named it Thinking, the first-born child of Babble and Confusion. And she wrote a second page as well, and called it Story, for was it not written: "Once upon a time?"

To transcribe gibberish using the thumbs is not writing. That is called texting, the child of Nonsense and Noise. To write is to step back from the chaos of undisciplined and disordered perception and to create order. Logic and Reason are the handmaidens of writers. But first comes the writer herself, standing in a particular place at a point in time which she understands as her

viewpoint. And it is from there that the swirl of events, perceptions and noises compete for attention and cry out to be placed in order, each included in its proper place, none excluded unless consigned to Irrelevance. And from this comes the Paper, the set of thoughts set among sweet spring English countryside as a sonnet, or an explication, or a narrative of trials and tribulations of one person wandering towards her fate.

Writing is the order perceived among the chaos. Levine, Kern and Wright (2008) describe the benefits to young medical interns who wrote journals for a year, collections of stories of what each day had brought and taught. From these emerged the stories of the patients viewed not just as collections of symptoms and syndromes, but as whole people stumbling through life's rocky course, needing guidance by the physician. Through writing the interns emerged as people in the eyes of the healers-in-training. "Writing throughout the year resulted in reflection and encouraged interns to reconsider their core values and priorities. Some found that the exercise promoted greater self-awareness and provided an emotional outlet" (p. 723).

In a similar vein Howard Gardner described how writing enables a student to translate a lesson into his own sense of understanding, or misunderstanding, by reordering the words and impressions into the learner's own logic and reasoning, and thereby expanding his understanding of the world – broadening his mind (Brandt 1993).

Whether the benefits of writing can be taught, or whether they are part of a student's intellectual arsenal at the outset, remains ambiguous. At least one effort to measure the positive impacts of writing-intensive curricula among college students (Ridley and Smith 2006) found results that were "encouraging" to teachers of English, those normally charged with teaching students to "write," but short of conclusive. Students with high verbal scores on the Scholastic Aptitude Test coming into college showed relatively high scores as graduating seniors –

precisely as the SAT purported to predict, independent of subsequent instruction. Could the reason be that what is taught as “writing” is really something else – namely, “thinking?”

Writing is a process of collecting, examining and then discarding sensory evidence from every life experience, whether the subject is the flow of red blood cells through arteries or a raft carrying a teenage boy and his friend Jim down the Mississippi. Writing is about creating narratives, finding patterns in the constant flow of time of one thing after another. It is about adding value to the regurgitation of facts absorbed in lectures and reading, the value of consideration and understanding – in short, about thinking. A preliterate child does not become a writer by scrawling the alphabet or touching keys on a keyboard. Writing uses words to create an entire artificial, ordered universe, a vision shared with others. The more complete the universe the truer it will seem. It is not a process modeled after Henry Ford’s Model T assembly line – everyone filling in the same dot the same, identical every time, no questions asked (and none answered). That is learning by rote versus by writing. In writing, plagiarism is a sin; in standardized testing, it is a virtue. To write means to consider the evidence, all the evidence, and to organize it into a coherent storyline. It means imposing order on the natural chaos of the universe and finding patterns in seemingly random data.

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