

Two Kinds of Knowing in Spoken and Written Language

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Plato wanted to ban poets from the educational process in *The Republic*. This always puzzled and disturbed me because I loved poetry and always believed it ennobled souls and minds. My recent research into spoken and written language and oral and literate traditions has led me to an explanation of this seeming puzzle.

Eric Havelock, in his *Preface to Plato*, explains that Plato was ushering in an era of literacy. With his plan for the education of the young in a utopian society, Plato was preparing his contemporaries for a new way of knowing, one that would differ from the traditional way, in which wisdom was passed orally from adults to children in face-to-face communication. Plato anticipated a way of knowing information such as could be preserved only in written texts. In preliterate society, most of what children have to learn is already known by adults. Learning is therefore a matter of acculturation to society. But books and literacy make possible — in fact, require — a different way of knowing, one in which young people might very well need to know what their teachers have not known. Furthermore, as Walter Ong explains, the process of learning by acculturation is a subjective process while learning for information is an objective process (*The Presence of the Word*). While such dichotomies are never absolute, they help to highlight the key differences between the two systems of knowing.

This explains the problem with poets. Poets in classical times were oral bards, wandering entertainers who moved audiences with live performances. Such performances enabled audiences to identify with the characters in a tale, or with the poet himself. Listeners were moved by the rhythm of the performance and the charisma of the performer. They experienced the kind of mesmerization that takes over during a successful performance of any kind — theatrical, musical, oratorical. In fact, the techniques of oral poetry are those of ordinary spontaneous talk. Both include details that others can recognize from their own experience, vivid descriptions, lyrical or playful sound sequences. The images and rhythms of oral poetry and of talk move us emotionally; we feel involved; we feel that we understand; we “feel for” the speaker or the characters in the story.

Learning the new information that is conveyed in written texts is a totally different business. We want to keep our emotions out of it so we can judge the argument on its own merits. We do not ask if the people we are reading about seem real; we are not carried away by the sound and rhythm of words. Rather, we ask of written texts: Do these ideas make sense? Does this argument hang together?

By keeping poets out of the educational process in his utopia, Plato was hoping to train people to the demands of the new kind of knowing which would be required of them with the advent of literacy — new skills they would need for a fast changing culture in which new information has to be learned from writers whom one doesn't know and probably never will know. Plato realized the subjective knowing, learning for acculturation had built upon old attachments, but in the new, changing world, old attachments might obscure understanding rather than enhance it. Certainly, in social contexts, much of what people say to each other is neither new nor startling; the main point of talk is to reinforce social bonds. In an information-rich, industrialized society, the content of communication is often of central importance.

What has all this got to do with writing in and out of school?

Like Plato, we want children to learn information; and we teach them to use their objective rather than subjective powers in approaching texts. What is interesting, though, is that understanding both spoken and written modes depends on both objective and subjective powers. Just as literate adults need to approach written texts such as expository essays objectively, they also ought to apply objective and critical thinking when approaching information such as advertisements, television or radio shows, lectures, and talk about substantive issues. I think this explains why teaching composition so often turns out to be teaching critical approaches to information. It may explain as well the often repeated (if somewhat self-important) theme, that teaching writing is teaching thinking. If we teach thinking when we teach writing, we teach a certain kind of thinking — a kind of rhetorical process — which is different from the thinking that is learned and used in everyday social contexts.

On the other hand, there are many kinds of writing which require the very conventions and approaches to language associated with face-to-face communication, the knowing through identification that both Eric Havelock and Walter Ong write about in their helpful works. For example, in creative writing — poetry, short stories, drama — we find many of the features of spontaneous conversation, features which contribute to a sense of involvement between the audience and the speaker: The use of the specific references, familiar details, and vivid descriptions that make the experience real; the repetitions of words and the use of parallel constructions; the use of alliteration and assonance which are common to both poetry and every day talk. Thus when we read creative writing or when we hear it read aloud, we

feel involved; we care about the characters or the writer; and we use subjective processes in our response. Of course, we can also apply objective processes in our critical responses to creative writing; we can make objective analyses of texts in order to determine what devices have elicited our emotional responses to them.

The two kinds of knowing to which I have been referring — subjective and objective — like different kinds of discourse, are not discrete; they get mixed up and intertwined. For example, news programs and newspaper stories, which once relied largely on objective knowing to create their texts, have shifted their formats to rely increasingly on knowing through identification. The chatty news format invites us to identify with newscasters; and on-the-spot reporting invites us to identify with the people involved in the news event. Examples of our invitation to know content subjectively can be seen in advertising as well, where the advertiser seeks to influence us not so much by giving us information about the product as by devices of face-to-face interchange — repetition, catchy sounds and tunes, and reference to the tes-

timony of ordinary people with whom we can identify. Finally, perhaps the most eloquent examples of the mixing of two kinds of knowing are found in the journalism which increasingly shapes the news in the form of short stories, or even of whole novels, in which imagined events are made up of pieces of real ones.

Do we have to keep poets out of the schools if we want students to learn to know objectively?

No, but we need to be clear that there are different kinds of knowing, that there are different uses of language that can be learned to construct and understand texts that take advantage of one or the other kind of knowing. Surely no one wants to go to a school — or live in a world — in which objective and subjective knowing are completely separate, in which mind and heart are separate. What we do want is what Bruno Bettelheim calls *the informed heart*. We want our students, as well as ourselves, to know when to listen or read with an open heart and when to listen or read with a critical mind.