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What Is Education?

A Response to the Council on Foreign Relations Report, "U.S. Education Reform and National Security"

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Losing Battles

Michael B. Prince

> *I have not to deal with war, nor yet with warlike weapons, otherwise than by way of application.*[1]

Analogy is a double-edged sword. It helps us imagine two different things as importantly related, but may also fool us into thinking the relation is closer than it is. The analogy the Council on Foreign Relations report "U.S. Education Reform and National Security" draws between deficiencies in American public education and a national security crisis provides "a clarion call to the nation, aiming to magnify the need for change" (xiv), warning that "mere tweaks to the status quo will not create the necessary transformation" (5). Yet the comparison leads the authors to propose solutions that unwittingly repeat many of the strategic blunders that got the United States into this quagmire in the first place.

Whether from political caution or genuine uncertainty, the Report does not explain how the greatest nation on earth could so mismanage its educational system that a committee comprised of leaders of government, education, business, and the military would declare that we are losing the battle to educate our young, and have been losing it for decades. The Report calls for a national audit, not of past failures, but of future results. However, until we understand what went wrong, and what continues to go wrong, we cannot expect improvement. If this really were a war, and we had suffered defeat after defeat, those in charge would order inquiries to identify intelligence failures and change misguided strategies. As a professor and a patriot, I offer a *communiqué* from the trenches, supplying vital information missing from the Task Force's report.

The most remarkable assertion the Report makes is that the failure of our educational system transcends race, class, geographical region, and type of school.[2] "Evidence is mounting that K-12 schools are not adequately preparing students who *do* graduate from high school for college or work. . . .One recent report by the ACT, the not-for-profit testing organization, found that only 22 percent of tested high school students in the United States met 'college-ready' standards in English, mathematics, reading, and science. . . .The results of

international exams do not show merely that the average U.S. student is falling behind; they also show that the top students in the United States would not be considered top students elsewhere in the world, particularly in mathematics" (21, 24-25). The Report further asserts that increased investment has had little effect on the problem:

> The tripling in inflation-adjusted spending per student suggests a misallocation of resources and a lack of productivity-enhancing innovations. Per-pupil investment in education in other countries, including in some that are now outperforming the United States, is below the U.S. level. (29)

If our crisis in education transcends class, race, geographical region, and type of school, and has not improved despite increased funding, then what factor or factors could explain such system-wide failure? Here the Report fires a blank. It fails to pinpoint the causes of our educational decline.

This lack of attention to underlying causes does not keep the Task Force from proposing rather predictable solutions. In particular, the Report calls for renewed investment in educational technology:

> It seems clear that technology has the power to help students learn in new ways, to assess more rigorously how much students are learning, and to help teachers tailor instruction to students' individual learning needs. But technology is largely still being used to advance old-style teaching and learning with old-fashioned uses of human capital. . . .[C]omputers and digital technology have thus far not been used innovatively to change the way the United States educates its students, but instead simply to reinforce past practices . . . .The Task Force recommends that technology expectations be thoroughly integrated with math, literacy, science, and foreign language curricula so that students learn how they might effectively apply technological skills in diverse and constantly evolving settings. (32-33, 46)

On the face of it, this recommendation seems reasonable. Technology is so obviously a part of our students' lives, that pedagogy today apparently needs to play catch-up to the new possibilities technology offers. However, the Report itself offers no evidence to support its conclusion. On the contrary, it maintains that recent educational innovations, in which technology has already played a role, have failed to achieve positive results. The Task Force also acknowledges that many educational goals remain traditional: "U.S. generals caution that too many new enlistees cannot read training manuals for technologically sophisticated equipment. . . .[In] surveys and interviews, most employers say the skills that are in high

demand today are the same skills that students were supposed to be learning in school fifty or one hundred years ago: the ability to write and speak clearly and persuasively, the ability to solve problems and think critically, and the ability to work both independently and on teams" (10, 42). The Report fails to connect the dots, oblivious to any possible link between increased focus on technology and decreased competence in fundamental skills. Instead, it declares that the main problem with educational technology is that it had not been taken far enough as an alternative to "old-style teaching and learning."

In addition to pushing the technology agenda, the Report advocates less time spent studying literature in grades K-12, and more time with informational texts. The Task Force notes approvingly that the "new [Common Core] standards aim to build knowledge from an early age by requiring that 50 percent of students' time between kindergarten and the fifth grade be spent reading informational texts" (37).

Although the Task Force pays lip service to goals typically taught within the humanities—"all young people—those who aim to work in national security and those who aim to work in corporations or not-for-profit organizations—must develop their imaginations from an early age" (47)—its diagnosis of the problem and final recommendations share the general anti-humanism of the system it purports to criticize.

Once upon a time, humanists confronted a situation not so different from our own. Threatened by political absolutism and superstition, and aware that a revolution in print technology was creating a new market of individuals seeking access to literacy, humanists considered how best to impart skills of reading, writing, and communication to the public. They too reached for the analogy of war to stress the urgency of the situation and the consequences of not arming oneself, rhetorically speaking. The Renaissance writing guide that supplies the epigraph to this essay offers the following advice:

> *Hee, therefore that is to play the part of the warriour, ought with his force and valliauntnesse, to joyne substantiall furniture, that the service of his naturall abilities, and the use of his instrumentall powers, may concurre and goe together, making him the more venturous to withstand his enemies assault, and fuller of force also to give him the discomfiture. . . For*, there shall be no kinde of letter, but in framing the same, thou shalt (though the gifts of nature wherewith thou art endued, be but weak and slender) have knowledge, cunning, judgement, and experience sufficient: be the person to who thou writest never so princely, never so learned, never so woorthy, never so noble, never so friendly . . . finally, be his qualities of this kinde, or that kinde, what so ever.[3]

The words sound antiquated, but look more closely. We find here a potent program for rapid assimilation of literate skills, not just for the elite, but for beginners. The soldier, like

the writer, must have courage and train for all contingencies. Such training involves mock encounters with a yet invisible enemy. How should these play-acts be staged? Through frequent exercises in imitation. Read a letter; write one like it. Read another letter written for a different audience and occasion; write one like it. Observe the similarities and differences of form, style, appeal, respect. Reproduce these and learn from the adjustments; learn to make them spontaneously. This approach combines the student's natural ability (emulation) and instrumental power (application), filling the mind with "substantial furniture," an archaic phrase perhaps, but one relevant to our analogy: "the condition of being equipped whether in body or mind; equipment in dress or armour; preparedness for action; mental cultivation, culture" (*OED*).

In this same passage, the author clarifies that he serves not as a "Martialist," but as a "Mercurialist;" that is, the comparison of writing to war holds not because writing is always an act of aggression, but because both battle and writing require skills of instantaneous adaptation. Here is the heart of the humanist pedagogy—the teaching of conscious rhetorical adjustment through the power of imitation. There is nothing strictly literary about this approach, although it uses literary models to challenge young writers. Pedagogy is attuned to practice, practice made routine through habituation, habituation made potent through imitative exercises saved from dreary repetition by the knowledge that at any moment the writer might be called on to communicate with readers across the social spectrum, on topics diverse and challenging. The goal is command of an arsenal of grammatical and stylistic options. These are some of the hallmarks of a humanist pedagogy that served students in the Classical world, early modern Europe, and America.

Our current educational orthodoxies cannot abide such ideas. We don't see students even analogically as future warriors (for better and for worse); we don't view the brain as containing "substantial furniture" (although we speak willy-nilly of "critical faculties"); we take a dim view of any pedagogy that so much as mentions *imitation*; we have jettisoned grammar instruction and the teaching of stylistic variation that grammar makes possible; we favor pedagogies that immerse students in the "process" of learning and downplay "product" (i.e. writing to a deadline, for a grade). Above all, we have reimagined the student. Once we challenged our students with frequent and ambitious graded assignments. Now we nurture and protect. We see that students are easily wounded by bad grades, and so we delay or even avoid grading. In the student-centered pedagogies that dominate English language arts and college composition nationwide, we put our students first by encouraging them to think, read, and write critically, downplaying "teacher-centered" skills such as memorization, recitation, imitation, paraphrase, and summary. While abandoning the last vestiges of humanist pedagogy, we have rejected canons and curricula that once gave substance to courses in reading, writing, and rhetoric.

Such statements might sound overblown, so let me instance them through examples

drawn from schools close to home—mine. Six years ago, I signed on to help a struggling inner city high school threatened with closure by the state. All of the alarming conclusions the Report draws were already evident to state and local officials who flooded the school with fresh resources and personnel, manifestos and educational consultants. Nothing helped. What held this school back? Not the teachers' union, whose power was limited by the declared state of emergency. Not apathy. Tremendous optimism accompanied this last attempt to turn the school around. No. Bad ideas prevented progress. The district mandated that classes meet frequently in small group workshops, not only in English language arts, but in most other subjects. Thus, some of the least prepared students in the city became each others' teachers, not because this approach met the test of common sense, but because it had become impossible to uncouple the progressive goal of helping our most disadvantaged students from the progressive commitment to collaborative learning. The district also mandated adoption of a textbook for writing instruction, based on a best-selling rhetoric used in many college composition courses. The popularity of this book had to do with its being perfectly in tune with a number of fashionable, albeit untested ideas: that it does not matter what students read as long as they learn techniques of rhetorical analysis applicable to any and every text; that the purpose of reading and writing instruction is to instill critical thinking skills through the writing of essays that analyze the rhetoric of signs, advertisements, graffiti, and others texts; that these essays should be written in gradual stages, moving through brainstorming, clustering, outlining, drafting, revising, peer reviewing, and other activities that effectively put off the day the teacher receives finished papers and undertakes the time-consuming job of commenting and grading.

The results at this school were abysmal. Because there was no other plan in place for a substantive curriculum, the lessons in the rhetoric were "articulated" to all grade levels. English classes focused on the rhetoric of argumentation, dutifully preparing their students for college writing courses whose focus would also be the rhetoric of argumentation. By the middle of the year, teachers were trying to invent a reading curriculum as they went along. They soon abandoned textbook and curriculum.

The next year, the school swung to the opposite extreme, a traditional English and American literature curriculum for which the students were woefully unprepared. However, administrators had not yet lost faith in workshop or process pedagogy. This meant that most of the first term of tenth grade English was spent reading *A Tale of Two Cities* and writing a single multi-stage essay on that text. In all of these decisions, teachers and administrators firmly believed they were acting in their students' best interest. Six years and two fired headmasters later, test scores and college acceptance rates show little improvement, and the school remains under threat of closure.

At the other end of the educational spectrum, elite colleges and universities remain in thrall to process and workshop pedagogies, now given new impetus by the portfolio move-

ment. At the university where I teach, the writing program director ended a long-standing commitment to provide all graduate student composition instructors with a crash course in grammar, prose mechanics, and the rules of usage, along with strategies for imparting these effectively in the classroom, because he viewed the "de-contextualized" teaching of grammar as out of step with best practices in the field of composition. When faculty asked why the review of grammar had been dropped, they were directed to the so-called Braddock Report of 1963, which concluded that direct grammar instruction is "useless, if not harmful."[4] Discontinuing grammar instruction freed up time for technological initiatives, ePortfolio and Digication, along with increased focus on academic argument, all likewise sold as best practice.

Recognizing that what happened at my university is part of a nationwide trend, I posed this question to a leading portfolio theorist in America and to the ePortfolio technologist at my school: has anyone published an analytical study comparing portfolio-based writing instruction to the more traditional approach of students submitting (whether electronically or in hard copy) frequent finished products that are returned in a timely fashion with comments and a grade? No one could produce such information. Instead, I was informed that recent research questions the value of graded assessment and calls for more fully "contextualized" writing and evaluation. Further, ePortfolio need not justify itself in comparison with more traditional approaches because the new benefits it brings to the classroom alter the goals of composition itself: portfolio makes learning "visible" to students; it gives them experience with new writing technologies; it helps teachers emphasize all stages of the writing process; it gives students something to carry away from class and use in future job applications, much as artists and designers do.

These assertions ignore the fact that students, like athletes, artists, musicians, lawyers, doctors, electricians, and soldiers—indeed, all who seek to master complex crafts and professions efficiently—learn through repetition of carefully sequenced tasks, reviewed by caring teachers. Ask Bill Russell how he acquired his skills as a basketball player; ask Twyla Tharp how she learned the arts of dance and choreography; ask Robert Louis Stevenson how he learned to write.[5] They all say the same thing: conscious, creative, repeated emulation of good models. It is possible that a well-designed technology might assist such an approach. But in the case of ePortfolio, as with other recent innovations, technology tends to serve whatever pedagogical theories are ascendant

Of course there is nothing wrong with technology itself. Students live and breathe in the electronic ether. What pedagogy could afford to ignore it? No one wants to subject students to Gradgrind-esque grammar drills, so let's liberate native speakers from knowledge of the structure of their own language (and then complain when they have trouble learning foreign languages). We're constantly manipulated by commercial culture, so let's make critical thinking, reading, and writing the principal goals of adult literacy. Bad grades

sometimes discourage, so let's find better ways to motivate students.

When these half-truths coalesce into a system that claims to be liberal and liberating, student-centered and up-to-date—a system, moreover, that dictates outcome goals for writing programs nationwide—then we can begin to see why we are failing to fulfill our mission in English language education, and why the crisis pervades all regions, races, schools, and income levels. Increased investment, better equipment, and even more skilled teachers cannot counteract conformity to a flawed and hopelessly politicized pedagogy.

We should take seriously the Task Force's statement that an "after-action report from a U.S. military intelligence headquarters in Iraq, found that, of a staff of 250, only 'four or five personnel were capable analysts with an aptitude to put pieces together to form a conclusion'" (10). But we should also question the way the Task Force interprets this fact. Was it critical thinking these personnel lacked? Sure, but also something more fundamental: the skills necessary to comprehend texts that present a range of stylistic and conceptual difficulties. The humanist tradition always emphasized these skills because its model of writing made accurate comprehension of texts a prerequisite for critical response. Humanists were first of all *translators* from one language to another, one genre into another. Their purpose was to make complex ideas available to a wider audience. Their pedagogies kept this goal in mind, which is why grammar, recitation, translation, imitation, paraphrase, summary, and explication were among the foundations of learning. The critical thinking movement rushes our students past this training; it views the humanistic arts of imitation and variation as insufficiently analytical. Unfortunately, the Council on Foreign Relations' clarion call merely recapitulates the anti-humanism that has gripped American secondary and post-secondary education since the 1960s.

The profession of Composition and Rhetoric has a long and distinguished history. Educators in the trenches of college composition and high school English perform noble service. We should honor and reward their work. However, we should think twice before recommitting to failing technological and pedagogical strategies. If the failure of K-12 education in the U.S. really amounts to such a dire threat, then follow through on the analogy. Go into the field and judge the situation from the ground. Test your weapons before buying more, if you are concerned about national security.

NOTES

1 Abraham Flemming, A *Panoplie of Epistles, or a Looking Glasse for the Unlearned* (London: Ralph Newberie, 1576), sig. v verso. The passage comes from the introductory epistle, "To the Learned and Unlearned Reader."

2 The Report does acknowledge inequalities in U.S. education based on region (see p. 17), but also states that the entire system lags behind the international competition.

3 *A Panoplie of Epistles*, "To the Learned and Unlearned Reader," sig. v verso. Abraham Flemming (also, Fleming, c.1552-1607) was an Elizabethan translator, "learned corrector" (editor), and humanist, who eventually became rector of the parish of St. Pancras Somers Town. He entered Peterhouse College, Cambridge as a sizar, or poor scholar, and became a prolific translator of a great diversity of works, including the first English translation of Virgil's *Bucolics* (1575) and Synesius's *A Paradoxe, Proving by reason and example, that Baldnesse is much better than bushie haire* (1579). In *A Panoplie of Epistles* Flemming "combines features of humanist educational theory with those of self-education manuals for the literate merchant classes, which had surged in popularity with the rise of printing." See the article by Patricia Brace in the *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, Volume 236: British Rhetoricians and Logicians, 1500-1660, First Series. A Bruccoli Clark Layman Book, ed. Edward A. Malone (Missouri Western State College: Gale Group, 2001), 126-39.

4 Richard Braddock, Richard Lloyd-Jones, Lowell Schoer, *Research in Written Composition* (Urbana, IL: NCTE, 1963). "For many years now," writes David Tomlinson, "opponents of grammar in the classroom have been able to shut down debate by saying that scientifically rigorous studies have repeatedly shown grammar teaching to have absolutely no effect on developing writing skills. They are mistaken." "Errors in the Research into the Effectiveness of Grammar Teaching," *English in Education* 28 (1994), 20. Commenting on the Braddock Report, John Mellon states that "it maligns a method of teaching that has worked . . . throughout the history of education." "A Taxonomy of Compositional Competencies," in Richard Beach and P. David Pearson, eds. *Perspectives on Literacy: Proceedings of the 1977 Perspectives on Literacy Conference* (Minnesota: University of Minnesota, 1978), 247-72. Martha Kolln adds, "That famous statement [Braddock's claim that grammar is 'useless if not harmful'] has probably had a more harmful effect on our students . . . than all the time spent memorizing rules and diagramming sentences." "Closing the Book on Alchemy," *College Composition and Communication* 32 (1981), 147.

5 See Bill Russell and Taylor Branch, *Second Wind: The Memoirs of an Opinionated Man* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1979) 66-67; Twyla Tharp, *The Creative Habit: Learn it and Use it for Life* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2003), 162-63; Robert Louis Stevenson, "A College Magazine," in *Memories and Portraits* (New York: Scribner's Sons, 1887). I develop this argument more fully in "A Rescue Plan for College Composition and High School English," *The Chronicle of Higher Education* July 27, 2009: http://chronicle.com/article/A-Rescue-Plan-for-College/47452.