HIGH SCHOOL/COLLEGE CONNECTION IN I.E.

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# THE HIGH SCHOOL/COLLEGE CONNECTION IN INDIVIDUAL EVENTS

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One of the problems for the twentieth century mind, asserts Walter J. Ong in his text, Some Proligemina for Cultural and Religious History, is that it has devalued orality and become a prisoner of the culture in which the twentieth-century mind has tried to mature. "Contemporary man," states Ong, "finds it exceedingly difficult and, in many instances, quite impossible, to sense what the spoken word actually is. He feels it is a modification of something which ought to be written" (19). Not only does contemporary man find print alien from the idiolect of homo dicens, but also he finds the substance of most print totally meretricious. Addressing this issue, Bruno Bettelheim, renowned child psychologist, observes that there are many in our culture who devalue literacy, for the skill has brought them little satisfaction. Subsequently, many ignore literary texts because the texts add nothing of importance to their lives (4). Ignoring texts, unfortunately, separates the skilled literate from literature's myth-making energies which, next to the family, are the most important conduit for transmitting cultural heritage (Bettelheim 4). Furthermore, in refusing to explore literature for its cultural value, the ill-functioning literate becomes the paradigm of Allan Bloom's closed-minded American. Bloom, who asserted in his work, The Closing of the American Mind, that a "value is only a value if it is life enhancing" (201), believes that the University has abandoned its role in transmitting values with the practical effect that all the vulgarities of the world outside the University now flourish within it (337). In sum, this exordium identifies three areas where high school and college individual events programs can collaborate: 1) stressing the primacy of orality over print; 2) identifying meaningful literature; and, 3) knowledging students in the values of their race, culture, and milieu.

## THE PRIMACY OF ORALITY

At Shepherd College in West Virginia where I teach a split appointment between the Departments of English and Speech, a reassertion of the primacy of the spoken word has begun. For decades, written composition was a prerequisite to the Speech fundamentals course, and implicit in that arrangement was the assumption that spoken communication was merely oral English. The rhetorical strategies of one were transferable in whole to the activity of the

other. Two years ago, however, the newly-formed Department of Communication persuaded its colleagues in English to allow a concurrent arrangement; students could enroll in both courses simultaneously and the vigorous and authentic relationship students have with an audience in a Speech course now carries over, as I view it, into their written work. Empirical evidence suggests that Shepherd's students' compositions are more energetic, tightly focused, and rhetorically agreeable than compositions produced by an earlier, print-oriented generation. In fact, the students in my written English sections present several of their expository pieces before the class.

Asserting the primacy of orality demands that our high schools and colleges collaborate in their efforts to devalue print. Writing in the February 1987 issue of Education Digest, Shirley Brice Heath, high-school composition instructor, declares that we need ' ... expanded opportunities to interpret texts orally and negotiate their meanings in egalitarian settings" if we are to produce better writers. Further, Heath contends that if we are to improve written skills we must challenge teachers in the immediate decades " ... to reinstill written language with the vitality of oral language" (19). Consequently, interpretation courses and extra curricular programs in individual events should be insidiously recommended to high school and college administrators as a way of improving written skills. Raymond Haggard, high-school forensic coach at Republic High School in Republic, Missouri, recently advised that storytelling exercises in high school could reinvirgorate a student's interest in language. Haggard suggested giving students " ... a chance to relate a funny situation or . . .tell in great detail about a hunting trip taken over the weekend" to help create interest in how a story is built (5). Haggard felt that reading hours, in place of the traditional staged play, might also excite a student's interest in language instead of spectacle. Billing individual events activities as a mechanism for enhancing a student's written skills, speech teachers will likely find administrator's more inclined to render support. Once the camel's nose is in the tent, however, its hind quarters are certain to follow.

## IDENTIFYING MEANINGFUL LITERATURE

Literature's themes are oftentimes ignored by students because a work's meaning is manifested too autocratically in today's high schools and universities. By what authority, a student inquires, do I decide for others the meaning of a selection? The question assumes, I believe, that a student wants to develop meaning independent from mine, or he wants to find meaning in a more personal way, and that meaning may interface with my own. Robert Scholes believes that "if wisdom or some less grandiose notion such as heightened awareness is the end of the literature teacher's endeavors, the student will have to see literature not as something transmitted ... ," but as something developed in her by the questioning of the text itself (Italics mine. 14). Textual power, for Scholes, is that strength and skill which will enable us to resist manipulation by texts of all sorts. We are shaped, Scholes believes, by the language of advertising as well as the language of politics and the other fictions of our culture. Literary education gives us the power to assert ourselves against those forces. "Textual power," as Scholes describes it, "is ultimately the power to change the world" (165). As one who has directed four national high-school summer workshops in individual events, I am confident that the arena wherein the interests of the high school and the university converge is in identifying meaningful literature and bringing our students to an understanding of it. Specifically, summer high-school workshops could be established nationwide along the boundaries of the present SCA regions. In essence, four regional summer, week-long workshops, staffed by both college and high-school faculty, would be established, and those workshops would, among other things, coerce students to select materials from a prescribed list of authors modeled along the lines of the sample I have enclosed (See attached.). Additionally, these regional summer workshops could standardize material by recognizing levels of textual complexity. Less difficult authors would be assigned to the novice; more difficult authors for varsity and advanced. If high schools and colleges shared a standardized authors list, no barrier-- excepting geography-- would forbid high-school students from competing at university-sponsored tournaments. Once done, the high school/college connection in individual events would evolve naturally to produce standardized ballots which evaluate the same things for high school performances as for college thereby providing a sense of continuity and growth from the early years through college. It is my hope that from this a national computer network, providing subscribers with current titles, frequency of use, and other relevant data would come on line because of the focused growth in our field.

## KNOWLEDGING STUDENTS IN THE VALUES OF THEIR RACE, CULTURE, AND MILIEU

Forensic teachers are essentially involved in interpreting and transmitting textual meaning to new generations of questioning minds who want to know what is worth preserving in what we call tradition. Forensic teachers are partisans of leisure, beauty and the contemplative in a setting that, for the most part, demands an acceptance of the here and now. We are charged with promoting aesthetics in a time that values utility and we preserve tradition in a democratic order where tradition is not privileged. Although students claim they want to develop their performances independently of us they have, nevertheless, come to an activity that represents some standardization of inquiry and response. Unfortunately, that standardization might be region-specific and when a student changes regions or advances from the high-school to the college circuit, different --sometimes, inimical-- standards are imposed upon them. Consequently, we are obliged on the high-school and college levels to develop a standardized ballot which evaluates the performance for its adherence

to the ethical values of the literature as those values are understood within a western, Judeo-Christian context. For this, we need certified judges trained to be sensitive to the elocutionary and illocutionary utterance; ones capable of making the poignant remark about the performer, the performance, and the value of the literature that the student has shared with her audience.

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