

Language as Illumination

Or, Turning on the Lights
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An Activity

With my own students, I performed an exercise.

I turned off the lights and asked them to close their screens.

Together, in the dark, we talked about language.

"Can you see the objects in the room?" They shook their heads, "No".

Could you navigate the room without crashing? Again, "No".

The nature of language

"Language," I told them, "is like light".

Here I flip the lights.

"It allows us to see the world more accurately and navigate it more effectively.

This applies both to the inner world of self and the outer world of others."

The current situation

- This kind of illumination through language, however, requires two interconnected modes of perceiving the world, as three-dimensional sight requires two eyes.
- A current apprehension in Western higher education is the isolated emphasis with which the Western paradigm approaches these two modes.

Two proposals and one consideration

- The nature of language is like the nature of sight, requiring simultaneous vision through both eyes.
- The current state of our Western culture promotes that students learn to watch the world through only one eye.
- How can we teach ourselves and our students to relate to the world meaningfully through language?

Three Couplets

1. A discussion of the two ways of perceiving
2. An attempt to understand the Western approach to these two modes
3. Within the space of the composition classroom, a combination of these discussions to illuminate a vision for the kind of perception which language can provide.

*I will use the space of the classroom to illustrate throughout the essay, as I draw on my experience as an instructor of first year composition courses at my own university.

First couplet: two ways of knowing

- Factual knowledge and relational
- “Thinkers over the millenium have detected two styles or modes of knowing, although they have used different words to categorize these modes... knowing **by reason** and knowing **by faith or revelation**... knowing by **empirical observation** and knowing by **empathic immersion**” (Goldin).
- The two modes of perception are “shared by everybody, thus bridging the gap between real or suspected difference” (Bao et al. 636).

First couplet: *Saber y Conocer*

- Two Spanish verbs are helpful here
 1. *Saber*: knowledge of facts about something.
 2. *Conocer*: given the synonym, “acknowledgement”.

First couplet: oral and literate cultures

- The written word is like the human hand: a tool to grasp, dominate, and utilize (McGilcrist 14).
- “For an oral culture, learning or knowing means achieving close, empathetic, communal identification with the known” (qtd from Havelock in Ong 45).

First Couplet: Left and Right Brain

- The division between ways of knowing begins at the long-recognized separation between the left and right parts of the brain.
- “The left hemisphere specializes in a sort of **piecemeal attention** that helps us to **make use of the world**, but in doing so it alters our relationship with it. Equally, the right hemisphere subserves a **broad, open attention** that **enables us to see ourselves connected** to – and, in the human case, **to empathise** with whatever is other than ourselves” (McGilchrist 15).

Second Couplet: The Western Approach

McGilcrist adds, "Each needs the other but the left hemisphere... believes that it can 'go it alone'. I believe the battle between the hemispheres (which is only a battle from the left hemisphere's point of view) explains the shape of the history of ideas in the West and explains the predicament we find ourselves in today."

Second Couplet: Concerned Voices

- “Paradoxical roots [of] human knowing... **Mind** and heart, **hard data** and soft intuition, **individual insight** and communal sifting and winnowing” (Palmer et al. 22).
- “Others... seemed to find a way to dull **the sensation of loss** and reconcile themselves to what life had brought. Those who refused to compromise traveled to India, or marched on Washington and Selma, or they overdosed” (Palmer et al. 55).
- “It is no secret: culture in the West has become progressively more **practical, materially oriented, and skeptical**” (Edmudson 13).

Second Couplet: An Imbalanced Vision

- Edmudson's states of "Self" and "Soul".
- The basic vocabulary inherent to a discussion of the two states of knowing is “in danger of dropping off the map of human inquiry,” and “in its place, there opens up an expanse of mere existence based on desire, without hope, fullness, or ultimate meaning”

Second Couplet: The Western Self

- "My view is that language and the hand have a certain common agenda – that is, they enable us to grasp things: to pin them down and **make them useful**. And we cannot deny that they have done that in spades. They have helped us to use the world and, by doing so, to develop many of the things of which we are most justly proud, the fruits of civilisation. But there is a **price** for this kind of approach to the world" (McGilcrist).
- "Love is the extremely difficult realization that something **other** than oneself is **real**" (Iris Murdoch).

Second Couplet: Implications

Scholars link these to a decreased "capacity for empathy":

- Violence
- Hate crimes
- Sexism and Racism
- Bullying
- Depression and Anxiety
- Nihilism

Third Couplet: Our Role and Our Tools

- A crucial **responsibility** and an exhilarating **opportunity**.
- Empathy is defined as “the human urge to know how lives feel,” and the author posits that such an urge can be developed through the medium of “the finely conceptualizing, specifying, ordering, relating, and expressive powers of language” (Eileen).
- Language as intellectual light, causing us to see the world.
- Murdoch: language as **metaphor** for the world.
- A warning: can language only be used as a **tool to grasp** the world, or as a **mode to inhabit** it? Is it possible to combine **both kinds of knowing** through language?

Third Couplet: Murdoch's Metaphor

- "Metaphor is not a **peripheral excrescence** upon the linguistic structure, it is **its living centre**. And the metaphors which we encounter, and which **illuminate** us, in conversation and in poetry, are offered and are found **illuminating** because language... is **experienced** in an imaging semi-sensible mode, particular example of which we are not unable to discuss with other people".
- Explicit instruction of this "imaging, semi-sensible mode" has become almost wholly relegated to the creative writing and poetry classrooms.
- Murdoch exposes, "An **account of meaning** which rests on a search for **hard verificatory data** breaks down in certain regions".

Third Couplet: The Composition Classroom

How, at 9:20am, on a Friday morning, are we to turn on the lights?

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An aerial, grayscale photograph of the Liberty University campus. The image shows a large, multi-story building with a prominent circular section in the foreground. To the right, a tall, slender clock tower rises above the other buildings. The campus is surrounded by trees and a road with a truck is visible in the lower right corner. The overall scene is hazy, suggesting a misty or overcast day.

First Attempts:

- Guided discussions between pairs in peer review instead of the silent scratching of red pens across rough drafts.
- Creative title workshops.
- Activities where students line up at the white board to each draw a feature of a landscape, showing students the place they take within a community when they write.
- Explicit discussions of the two ways of knowing and sitting on the outside steps of the lecture hall writing: “birds, mountains, highway noise, classmates writing” to learn about knowing as watching and comprehending.

I also got lines like these:

“the weather comforts me oddly”

“The world is *alive*”

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An aerial, grayscale photograph of the Liberty University campus. The image shows a large, multi-story building complex with a prominent tall clock tower on the right side. In the foreground, there is a large circular structure, possibly a stadium or arena. The campus is surrounded by trees and a road with a truck is visible in the lower right. The background shows rolling hills under a cloudy sky.

An Activity: Freewriting

- The writing of the essay before us is our students' future capacity to create a meaningful world through language.
- I end with several of these preliminary questions, some practical and others inspirational, but meant to create a thought flow which is both open-ended and concrete.

Questions of What:

What could it look like to teach our students, both implicitly in our modeling and explicitly in our instruction, to understand not only the form and uses of language, but also its nature as a medium of truthful perception of the inner and outer world?

What does it look like to teach our students to take risks for the sake of authenticity? What does it look like to define success as growth rather than perfection?

Third Couplet: Murdoch's Metaphor

- How would an intentional awareness of both kinds of knowledge change our teaching?
- How could it give us license for creativity integration in the classroom?
- How can we combine both unassessed inspiration activities and thoughtful assessments of growth in the classroom?
- How can we turn the attention of students to the developmental process, rather than immediately attempting to fulfill the product?
- How could scaffolded discussion occur as a way for students to understand language orally, in context of dialogue?