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From Thought to Word: Learning to Trust Images

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“The mistaken idea that thinking
depends on the use of words dies hard.”

—F.R.H. Englefield

In the fall of 1980, I worked in our writing center with a student whose primary weakness in composition was one she shared with many of her freshman classmates—the proclivity to generalize. One generalization followed by another, unsupported by any concrete details, characterized Debby’s writing. One reason that the majority of our students have this same problem is that the process of learning is a process of learning to generalize. As Michael Cole and Sylvia Scribner have found in their studies, the primary difference between the unschooled intellect and the schooled is that the former solves problems individually, while the latter solves them by application of a general rule.¹ The child in school, reading generalizations and being taught by generalizations, learns to trust them and to write them. It is no wonder then that when we get students after twelve years of schooling, we get writers who have almost no conception of the concrete, and who, furthermore, distrust it.

This distrust became evident to me years ago. After I gave my classes handouts of a former student’s very general and abstract description of a place followed by a revised, more concrete and specific one, I in-

variably got the same response when I asked which was superior. Without exception, the majority of my students raised their hands in favor of the general/abstract version, and the reason they gave was that it “sounded better, it flowed.” Evidently our task is twofold: not only do we have to teach our students to use concrete, specific language, but, furthermore, we must get them to trust it. What can we do to get student writers to trust in the concrete and, moreover, to write it?

A possible solution to the problem was suggested to me when I realized that often my own thought began with concrete images. That thought occurs without language has been verified by the experiments of a number of psychologists and linguists, from Kohler and Piaget to Vygotsky. Kohler’s studies of chimps, Piaget’s and Vygotsky’s studies of the cognitive processes in children, and Furth’s studies of thinking in deaf subjects have all established the fact that thinking occurs without language.² Of particular interest are the tests conducted by Piaget with deaf and blind subjects, the results of which revealed no differences between deaf and normal children, whereas blind subjects solved their problems four years later than normal.³ It is at least worth noting that lack of language did not affect intellectual operation, while lack of sight did. One possible explanation is that the retarded intellectual operations of the blind were a result of their loss of sight, the sense that is our primary producer of images.

Besides these studies, I found support in Einstein’s description of his experience putting thought into language. Calling the process “laborious,” he explained that his thought began with “certain signs and more or less clear images,” which, in a second stage after “associative play,” he attempted to put into language.⁴ Such a description, in addition to my own experience, suggested that one way we might get students to trust in the concrete and to use it in their writing, would be to get them to notice the concrete origins of their thought.

The most important part of Einstein’s description is that putting his thought into words occurs only in a secondary stage, “when the associative play is sufficiently established” to be “reproduced at will.” It may be that some of us never get to the second stage because the images escape. In addition, putting some ideas into words may not always be a laborious process; the conventional symbols may just come. Still, this description, I think, throws some light on the reason some students fail to get their thought into words at all. For some the attempt to translate is premature; for others, the attempt to find a generalization to fit their thought is immediate, so that they do not pay attention to their images, let alone allow for “associative play.” Such a student, for

example, pictures Susan with her soft brown eyes, her chestnut hair streaked with blonde, her lithesome body, and he writes: "Susan is a beautiful girl." He does this in part because of his trust in generalization and abstraction, in part because he quit paying attention to his images long ago. As a result, not only does he lose the images he had, but he loses the possibility of having more, translating before he allows the concrete outlines of his thought to produce others by association.

Certainly I found this true in working with Debby, who ignored her images, readily substituting generalizations. On her initial visit, she brought with her a very general ten-minute freewrite on music that she'd done in her class. Her effort, sprinkled with numerous misspellings as well as generalizations, recorded such statements as these:

There are many types of music. Music can be listened to fast or slow. Music can sooth the mind...Not everyone likes all types of music. Each person has a certain type of rthm and beat that is enjoyable to their ears...Records and albums are sold almost everywhere in the world. People enjoy a certain musical groups style and by all their songs. Music can be sung in many different languages. In music many instruments are played. Everyone likes music.⁵

However, when I began questioning Debby, she told me that as she wrote, she had recalled a music class, during which her instructor had played jazz, and Debby had pictured a scene "like one in *Gone With the Wind* with Blacks on a porch, sitting around smiling and singing, clapping hands and feet." Instead of recording these associations and images, Debby had ignored them and gone on to the generalization that not all people like the same kind of music.

In order to get Debby to begin paying attention to the images she had when she thought, I made the following assignments, which she completed in approximately six weeks: first, she wrote about one feeling she'd had at the end of the day for the following two days, paying attention to any images produced as she recalled her feelings. Then, she listened to Janis Joplin's "Piece of My Heart" and wrote the images she had as she listened. Her third task was a revision of one of her papers describing her feeling "rushed," making it more concrete by putting in the images and details she'd given me verbally in conference when I'd questioned her about it. Her next assignment was to write down images provoked by the abstractions "angry," "happy," "hurt," and "frustrated." Her fifth assignment was to pay attention to images she had while reading abstractions, and the last was another ten-minute freewrite on music.

Debby's first two papers about her feeling rushed and pressured were largely abstract, although she did capture these feelings through her use of short sentences, fragments, and dashes:

Pressures, what pressures! Sometimes I feel the weight of the world upon my shoulders...Must find a job! Such a worry. I look and apply everywhere (it seems) in the past two days...Don't rush—relax, unwind it will fall into place...Rush, rush, rush. What a day—always on the go. Going here, getting there. Hurry! Hurry! You'll be late. Oh my—must catch my breath. Rest slow up—calm down....Push—push—make yourself go—it pays off in the end.

When she revised her first effort about her visit to the bus station and search for a job, the result was a much more concrete piece of writing, containing such detail as the following:

I hurried down to the bus station. What a line! It seemed everyone in Wilmington was picking up a parcel. The line was from the counter to the swinging doors. Everytime someone would enter or exit the door would swing inward with great force. The last one in line quickly learned that if they weren't attentive the door was going to knock them. I learned quickly. The black man and woman behind the counter moved lazily about. They acted as if they had all the time in the world....One man kept shifting. He would fold his arms, unfold them. He would look about, put a hand in his pocket, turn sideways, stare at who came in, tap his foot, then begin all over again. One little man with greasy brushed back hair stood in front of me. He looked as if he would squeak when he talked....Someone behind me began clearing his throat. Finally, the little man waddled out. Good, my turn. I, tight lipped and a little prudish, told the man my name, received my parcel and with a sneering thank-you, flew out the swing doors.

Between these two efforts, Debby listened to "Piece of My Heart," writing the following concrete paragraph:

A woman, lonely and desperate, sits alone. The room is slowly darkening. The faint streaks of light through the tattered curtains shows the dust particles floating about the room. Her face is twisted with emotion, over-shadowed in sadness. Tears are in her eyes. She is thinking. She wants to give her man the only valuable thing she has and that is herself. Her hands are clenched in a tight fist. She is desperate and needs to express her need for him. He has hurt her many times and the frustrated feeling envelopes her in sorrow. She wants one thing, her man. That realization may never happen.

Certainly both this and her revision of a busy day indicated Debby's increased awareness of the images she had as she thought. So, too, did

her responses to the four abstractions that I called out to her one by one, asking her to write what immediately came to mind. The images she recorded are as follows:

ANGRY:

The wave making its way slowly toward the beach. The loud crash as it disperses into rushing water and foam. The turbulent ebb and flow of the current as it flows inward—then quickly retreats.

HAPPY:

The early morning sunrise as it sets a glaze upon the horizon. The rays reaching like fingers throughout the heavens. The brightening light, slowly, announcing the beginning of a new day.

HURT:

The twisted mangled metal as it perched on the edge of the ditch. The entanglement of traffic endeavoring to bypass the tragedy. The emergency crew working with the speed of a timebomb team during the final seconds before detonation.

FRUSTRATED:

The revolving blue light in your rear view mirror. The scrabbling for license and registration. Hurrying to climb out of the car to his. The feeling in your abdomen the remainder of the day.

With this assignment, it was evident that Debby had truly begun to pay attention to the concrete outlines of her thought.

Because I wanted her to become aware that generalizations and abstractions can produce images, as well as the reverse, I asked her to record the images aroused by her reading during the next two weeks. Being unclear about how to do this, Debby returned to me and I read from Furth's *Thinking Without Language*, asking her to stop me whenever the text provoked an image. After I read a passage concerning how language and play both serve the child in thinking, she stopped me with the image of "an infant with a red rattle, waving it in his crib."

Debby's last assignment was another ten-minute freewrite on music, unannounced beforehand because I wanted to compare it to her first spontaneous effort. The difference between the two was remarkable.

Not only was the second extremely concrete, but the misspellings found in the first had disappeared. Debby even spelled “rhythm” correctly in the latter, whereas she spelled it “rythm” in her first effort. I had not looked for this particular result, but I was not surprised. Most good spellers write a great many words automatically, but for the more difficult ones, many I have talked to see an image of the word in their minds and merely copy it out. At any rate, learning to pay attention to her images improved Debby’s spelling as well as the concreteness of her writing. This last freewrite contained the following concrete images, among others:

Sounds, beats, rhythms—all this is associated with music. Beautiful sounds—those musical letters all combined to bring that flowing of sounds we all love. Sounds to listen too—rhythm to tap your foot to. Music has many different types there is jazz, rock’n roll, classical etc.—but everyone has a favorite....Music is so relaxing—just to sit in an arm chair, head back, eyes closed and mind just floating with each up beat and down beat. Its like floating on the wind. Music can give moods—some music can give the impression of happiness or the wild feeling of speeding down a deserted highway with no one but yourself—hair flying—the landscape zipping by with a smeared impression. Music can give the impression of rain and/or a thunderstorm. The loud thunderous beats and the tinkling sounds as the storm progresses through each stage. Music. Music. Music. How can anyone live without the beautiful, glorious, wonderful sounds—all a different combination of notes—so different from each other—yet when combined gives so many different reactions from the listener.

Besides more concreteness and better spelling, there were two other consequences of the experiment. At our last session, Debby told me that she been recalling numerous images from her early childhood. These memories may have been prompted by her increased awareness of the images she had when she thought. It may be that the paucity of memories we have from very early childhood, before we acquired language, is the result of our lost ability to think pre-linguistically—in images. The last consequence was recorded by Debby in an evaluation of her experience that I asked her to write. She ended her evaluation with this observation: “Through the study of images, I have become aware of what is happening around me.” As she explained when she gave me what she’d written: “I just seem to notice more.” Because images appeal to the senses, by paying attention to her images, Debby came more alive through her senses, thus allowing her to gather more data for her image-making mechanisms.

There is still, however, a great deal of mystery surrounding how we think. I based my experiment with Debby on the supposition that we do have images when we think and, further, on the notion that the process of education has taught our children to generalize, to largely ignore any images they may have in an effort to translate them into generalities. Even though not all thought may begin with images there are, besides Einstein, plenty of psycholinguists and other professionals who support the position that thinking can, and does sometimes at least, begin with images. As Vygotsky put it: "A thought may be compared to a cloud, shedding a shower of words."⁶ The problem comes, of course, when the writer fails to notice the cloud.

My approach with Debby worked well, although it needs to be tried with a variety of students, in and out of class. Nevertheless, because of my success with her, I was encouraged to share the experience with other instructors who might use my method and get the same results. I hope they will.

NOTES

¹Michael Cole and Sylvia Scribner, "Cognitive Consequences of Formal and Informal Education," *Science*, 182 (1973), 554.

²Kohler's studies are discussed in F.R.H. Englefield, *Language: Its Relation to Thought*, eds. G.A. Wells and D.R. Oppenheimer (London: Elek Books, 1977), pp. 4ff; J. Piaget, "Language and Thought," in *Language In Thinking*, ed. Parveen Adams (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1972), pp. 170-79; L.S. Vygotsky, "Thought and Word," in *Language in Thinking*, ed. Parveen Adams (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1972), pp. 180-213; H.G. Furth, *Thinking Without Language* (New York: MacMillan Co., 1966).

³H. Sinclair-de-Zwart, "Developmental Psycholinguistics," in *Language in Thinking*, pp. 266-76.

⁴In Barry F. Anderson, *Cognitive Psychology* (New York: Academic Press, 1975), pp.191-92.

⁵Debby's responses are typed as they were written, without corrections in spelling or usage.

⁶"Thought," in *Language in Thinking*, p. 209.

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