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Business community, society must demand literacy skills for all

By Diether Haenicke
May 13, 2009

A few years ago, I attended a conference at which business leaders told college administrators what skills and qualities they expected to find in our graduates and their future employees. High among the executives' concerns, as I remember, was that many of their junior managers no longer wrote or spoke effectively. I was not surprised.

Just one example: Before 1968, students at the University of California were automatically exempted from remedial English, known as "Bonehead English," if they scored higher than 600 on the English achievement test. Fewer than 35 percent of all students attended the Bonehead sections. In 1968, the score was reduced to 550. However, in spite of this significant easing of the score, the number of Bonehead freshmen increased to more than 50 percent in the 1970s. In 1976, the University of California abolished remedial English and merged it with freshman English. Once the majority of freshmen require remedial instruction, it is no longer labeled remedial. It becomes the accepted norm.

What has happened? Clearly, our students are every bit as talented as those of earlier generations. But they bring with them different skills. If I have a computer problem, I only need to open my office door and wait for the next undergraduate student to walk by. Chances are 2:1 that the youngster can fix my dilemma within minutes. Chances are also 3:1 that the student won't be able to express himself in precise and coherent sentences. Bright though he is, he will speak what I call the "I'm-kinda-like-you-know-what-I-mean" version of the current vernacular.

Over the last few decades we have de-emphasized the study of the humanities and the arts which, to a large extent, deal with and depend on verbal and written expression. There has been a bold shift toward technically oriented academic disciplines which are perceived as providing better chances for employment and, in a general sense, hold more of a future.

As science and technology are getting ever more complex, four years are barely enough to provide a good undergraduate education in applied professional fields. Adding humanities curriculum is hard to do, even though accrediting agencies in business and engineering increasingly demand it, and although industry CEOs give moving speeches on the necessity of a broad liberal education for the young people that enter their companies.

We in education would like to believe these words, but the personnel recruiters don't seem to hear the speeches their CEOs make. As long as industry recruiters systematically select people with very focused engineering, accounting or computer skills, our students will not make any special efforts to enrich their education with courses that strengthen their writing and speaking. If industry needs and wants language skills, it must hire accordingly and cannot just pay cheap lip service to humanities education. If we want to preserve effective levels in communication, business and industry must help education. As the future employers of our graduates, they must demand these skills. Our students often listen to their future employers more carefully than to their professors.

Just a century ago, many people, educated and uneducated, wrote letters, extensive diaries, or painted. Thus they recorded and conveyed their thoughts, their elations and miseries, partly to provide themselves psychological relief through self-expression, but also to transmit to succeeding generations the essence of their spiritual existence.

Our generation has succumbed to a technology that largely eliminates the contemplation that was necessary for the letter or the entry into the diary. We replaced the letter with the long-distance call and the diary with the photo album. Some publishers ask us to rewrite our college textbooks for the 10th-grade reading level. They ask us to go for the easy, but wrong, solution. We should not further dumb down each text, nor should we agree to have our constitution, or the works of Walt Whitman, rewritten and simplified so that they remain intelligible for increasingly functionally illiterate people. We should be equally sophisticated in handling both our language and our technology.

The business and education communities must speak with one voice when it comes to raising our language skills. I consider this to be in our joint best interest.

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