

The Technology of Language

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Since the first grade, students are asked to master two core subjects: math and language, which, in the case of U.S. schools, means “English.” No other subjects get this priority. Why? Sure, college majors in math and English (having taken the other courses required for entering medical school) consistently score the highest on the MCAT, but the point of this dual “core” is not to make physicians (or lawyers or poets or engineers). The point is to make valuable citizens. Whatever its private rewards, requiring math and English reflects an unapologetically public goal, not that of making you more gloriously “you,” but that of making you more useful to others.

Such utility makes sense, of course, only if, by mastering these two subjects, you wield a power that society needs. What “power” is this? Good, well-disciplined folks will tell you that math and English are required past elementary school because students need to “balance a checkbook” and “communicate effectively”—as if students hadn’t already learned enough arithmetic and basic reading and writing by the fifth grade or, at the unspeakable minimum, by the 12th grade. No, the real question behind the curricular requirement is why algebra, trigonometry, calculus? why syntax, fiction, poetics? why “higher” education? Is there really a secret, powerful utility in these higher forms of math and English?

Here’s a big, fuzzy answer: math and English constitute the two primary discursive systems—numerical and lexical—by which we produce, exchange, and revise most of our

knowledge. We can talk to each other through pictures and non-verbal sound, but numbers and words do most of the heavy lifting. When we ask what something “is” or “why” it happens and what it “means,” we hope that numbers or words, if applied dexterously and creatively enough, will answer the question. The power to plot human experience inside one or both of these symbolic orders is therefore considerable, because the people controlling the system determine its products; experiences get shaped—or created or destroyed—inside the system of numbers and words.

So, when this existential power is reduced to “balance a checkbook” or is hazed over with “communicate effectively,” the justification for “higher” math and English looks ridiculously small. Math, however, has one clear advantage over English in the way it is taught that sometimes transcends this crude thinking and justifies it as a public good. Math is much harder to fake. It looks real, feels closer to the truth. Plato thought so; we think so. Words, on the other hand, are the domain of the fakers. Every English instructor in high school and college knows that students have been faking their English skills ever since elementary school, and the teachers themselves have been aiding and abetting the crime, winking at incompetence. Math, by contrast, has weeded out the pretenders quickly and definitively. That’s why math majors are recognized as extraordinary: their power over the system of numbers is real, even mysterious. And this mystery to math goes further. It launches students into the mysteries and powers of all the technologies that use math. Math is understood publicly as the core mental technology behind most of our physical technology. If you can play in the sandbox of mathematics, then you can play in any of the castles built there. Math becomes an archetypal knowledge that makes other things happen. It underwrites computer science, engineering, chemistry, economics, even healthy

chunks of biology, psychology, and political science. Math is king. Jobs open up at NASA and Apple and anywhere else employers know what a math major actually means. That's utility, and that's money.

A major in English has neither advantage. First, because English routinely indulges pretenders rather than exposing them, its weakest students—the fakers, anyway—reign over nothing; their skills max out while on managerial duty at Burger King. Second, in the broader public view, the study of English is associated with either the dandy's imagination or the ordinary exchanges of modern life (think “email”). “English” is either irrelevant or pedestrian. Language study is not associated with the sorts of marketable mysteries lurking in “technology.” Math is. Even if most people think the arithmetic skills of elementary school are sufficient (and most people think exactly this), the culture of technology, of public utility, tells those same people that the math wizards—who underwrite all the mysterious, beautiful, powerful technology we consume—are valuable, and this logic does not translate to English because, as far as people know, there is no technological payoff for higher language skills. Where is the public good?

MCAT scores notwithstanding, then, before anyone can pitch the marketability of an English major, we have to admit the hard truth that most English departments have low standards for literacy, and then we have to admit that society itself has low standards for literacy. Who cares if you can't read Shakespeare or Hurston or Chomsky? Public feedback negates the very perception of mastery. What does “strong” mean? Quoting Aristotle? Dropping a five-dollar word at the diner? Weak English majors might not even know that they lack mastery of their own subject. The remarkable result is this: English departments are glutted with students

possessing the very same language skills that everyone not majoring in English also has. Does anyone care if a chemistry major can't do chemistry better than a seventh-grader can? You bet. Does anyone care if an English major can't do English better? Nope. The only people who could care are those who can define what “strong” skills mean in the first place. All the others believe (1) that remedial language skills are already enough (think “email”) and (2) that “higher” language skills (whatever “higher” means) would get you nothing of public value.

Why? Because there is no visible culture of technology to certify the value of learning, say, “advanced” writing, let alone literary analysis. What’s the payoff? Unlike math, English—language study—is not seen as an archetypal knowledge that makes other disciplines work, one that, by itself or through them, makes important things happen. Viewed from the outside, higher (college-level) English, most embarrassingly the composition course required of all students, is a vestigial, half-hearted remediation that our society maintains in the curriculum while STEM majors do the essential work, serve the public good. What value to others does the study of English produce in the citizen? The public can't see it, especially when English majors themselves can demonstrate no extraordinary power over language in the first place, except the self-indulgent fatuities jellied up in them by their equally profligate or incompetent professors.

Because the English major is, by this logic, the haven for pretenders and loafers, for faux-specialists who might, on a good day, “communicate effectively,” whatever that means (and salary.com lists the actual “Communication” major as the worst Return On Investment), then where's the marketability in ersatz intelligence, especially if everyone else can muster the same level of communication skill (think “email”)? In sum, without establishing and maintaining the public value of extraordinary language and literary skills—not ordinary, low-level skills acquired

in K-12—English departments today make themselves irrelevant (churning out self-referential dandies) or redundant (churning out fifth-grade-level readers and writers who then join the other fifth-graders who majored in something “useful”). We’re not contributing to civic good; we’re the bug in the program. The only way to establish the public value of an English major (or minor) is to demonstrate the advantages of actual mastery in it.

To that end, the shift in the English major's public value should begin outside the major proper, in the general-literature and general-writing courses everyone takes, because demonstrating the value of mastery requires the presence of public mastery in the first place. The standard of competence for all students must be maintained across the board, just as it would be in a general-education math course. Incompetent non-majors don't get a pass any more than do incompetent majors. Professors of composition or literature classes must be able to define and declare incompetency in all their students (and perhaps in themselves or their colleagues). No fudging. Advanced math that excuses incompetency is no longer “advanced”; it’s remedial. The same goes for chemistry, music, psychology, and every other field. Do it well, or get out. The same goes for the professors. It's college. No pretenders, no loafers. The whole point is to be extra-ordinary. That's why students major in a field. Learn your arithmetic and algebra before you get here. It’s time for calculus. Any subject that trades away its public value by lowering its standards, as English departments so often do, trades away all the opportunities for its students in the marketplace.

Next, courses for advanced students in English—that is, for the majors—must really offer advanced skills, the kind that non-majors don’t have. And then the public value of those extraordinary skills must be visible. Right now, too many English majors can't distinguish

themselves from any other student who, at the lowest level, can't tell "conscience" from "conscious" or "affect" from "effect," who have no sense of subject-verb (i.e., clause) structure and therefore can't understand how punctuation is used—subtly or frankly—to interrupt, resume, qualify, or extend that structure: to create a different voice for a different task, simple or complex. The fakers can't distinguish themselves from any non-majors who also can't develop a single claim coherently (i.e., through a set of related sentences: a paragraph) or who won't or can't test the aptness of an example or the precision of an explanation or who will use a thousand words foolishly to say what might have been said wisely in a hundred. These are English majors who can't distinguish themselves from every other student who postures but can't persuade. Why would an employer choose that kind of English major over students in other majors when all of them have the same language skills? At least the major in physics or business or criminal justice has other skills. Anyone can memorize "To be, or not to be," but can just anyone map out the major aesthetic, social, psychological, historical, and epistemological variables in Shakespeare's play? Can just anyone then move that extraordinary, if also obscure, knowledge into the public good, into visible utility—without reducing it to slogans and cheap shots? A real English major can. The faker can't.

Like the real math major, then, who can do math (and can't get away with fudging), the real English majors can do language and literature. What does that mean? These students can do more than its arithmetic and algebra; they can do its calculus. They can write a solid email or report, sure—how many millions of consumers struggle even here?—but they can also muster a cogent argument or marshal a complex plan. They can build layers of image and sound into language, and they can decode them. They can think more nimbly and more comprehensively

with language than can the “ordinary” competitor. They can make language do more work. They can tackle bigger projects in language, anticipate deeper concerns, organize more diverse materials, discern the most relevant evidence for a claim or discover its weaknesses sooner and chart a response better. They can recognize larger patterns of elaboration or evasion or bias or privilege in language, and they can do it better. In the vast laboratory of words, they can test the most fantastic and the most critical hypotheses. They can rethink and revise better—from a choice in connotation or tone or rhythm to a strategic shift in emotional pace or rhetorical organization or logical structure. They can read twice as well as any non-major can. They can write ten times better. This kind of power in language makes interesting things happen. It changes minds or confirms intuitions. It charts paths or closes them down. It reports perfectly when reporting is called for; it argues persuasively when argument is called for. It sees clearly and interprets cleverly—one hopes even wisely. And it measures the costs and benefits of its own use. It knows its limits. It is not math or biology or any other field but its own. That's why being better at it matters. What it alone can do, once visible, matters.

Being “better” is the difference between “winner” and “loser” in most job markets. Language is a technology. It always has been. Fake English majors look no more accomplished at using it than do majors in other fields. They are amateur musicians fumbling with the instruments of language but unable to compose any better music than can the other amateurs. They can't win audiences on objective grounds. They can't play. Employers want the significantly better candidate. That's the winner. Fake English majors can't get good jobs because they don't have extraordinary objective skills, just excuses, padded GPAs, and wads of self-congratulation masking their confusion and resentment. Real English majors, by contrast, can do

every significant task we might imagine, plan, execute, analyze, and reinvent in language—and they can do it much better, to the point that people on the outside marvel at their calculus. Real English majors have mastered a complex technology that, once it's recognizable, employers and the public value because it makes extraordinary things happen. As J. L. Austin, following Wittgenstein, famously observed, words do things; they don't just describe states of being. In small and large combinations, from the spicule of feeling to the spectacle of social action, language shapes our lives. We text and email all the time, yes, but most people do it the way children play video games: as consumers. English majors, whether by reading or writing or by plotting all the verbal links between, work the system behind the consumption. They are producers—and good ones. They can pilot the craft, not just ride inside it. They can think through the problems in language, big and small, that would crash ordinary consumers. They can compete for real audiences because they can do the hard math underwriting those verbal problems. Fake English majors can't. They are masters of nothing; they can't produce anything of public value. Real English majors have mastered a significant public technology, a craft, a pliable form of public experience that reaches from our courtrooms and stock markets and factories and hospitals to all the frantic or fanciful e-mails shot between—from the lawyers to the lovers. Go without language for one day, if you can, and witness how much of your life depends on this technology. Then witness how little of it most people really control, despite all their blathering online and off. They shout or demur or squirrel away, but everything they do is small, fragmented, ineffectual. The public sphere is teeming, swarming, buzzing with subtleties and complexities that only specialists can manipulate. Those people are out there, from speech writers to advertisers to poets; they are doing extraordinary things with words. The trick is to

make that culture of technology visible again. Who turns language on and off? Who re-wires it or re-calibrates it or re-distributes it? Who lays down the verbal connections that define a new social grid, a new market capacity, a new political resistance, a new pleasure or pain in the language we consume?

If the inner life of the English major means little to anyone on the outside—and I would hope that our inner lives are never dismissed merely for their lack of utility—the technology of language, in the hands of a master, can still mean so much. Sometimes it can mean everything, drawing and re-drawing our world in palpable ways that ordinary people value precisely because they can't do it. That's advanced technology, and that's a public good.