ENGLISH AND THE BIG HUMANISTIC QUESTION

The David L. Underwood Memorial lectures are attempts to answer how can the humanistic ideals for which David Underwood stood be advanced within the framework of the speaker's own discipline.

My discipline, English, was originally David Underwood's. As most of you know, David was a teacher of English before ascending--or descending--to Division Chair, Associate Dean and then Dean of Instruction at Florissant Valley. He joked, "Whenever I think about returning to teaching English, I remember those stacks of themes to be graded and decide I'm really a good administrator."

But, as I recall, he made the change to administration eagerly, out of a spirit of personal challenge and out of intense pride in the Junior College District, which he--as many of you here--had helped in building. In particular, he had pride in Florissant Valley and what it was beginning to represent then in the community, the metropolitan area, the state, and indeed the nation. He shared that pride with many of us. It was a widespread feeling at the time--a sense of shared building. We were building a new kind of education, an education with a broader audience than ever before, with new kinds of students.

With this sense of shared building, David became a humanistic administrator. Being a humanistic administrator is administrating the hard way--and the best way. For him, the student, community, faculty and staff needs had to be assessed in detail before deciding of priorities of support. He was too much the educator to shelve education and educators in classrooms. He was too much the humanist to apply the procrustean educational cookie cutter approaches, the reliance on pre-set systems that make neat shapes on paper but lop off the vital arteries of the living educational institution.

With his openly stated philosophy of "Everything works and nothing works," David had sufficient expertise to dare to be flexible. He had sufficient expertise also to dare to be humble. He once made the point that when he was a teacher, the students who came back to see him were often not the ones he had expected. Sometimes, he admitted, they were students that he could not even remember. He shared this experience, aware of the human limitations of teaching--and of his own limitations.

He knew that teachers live with such questions as who, among our students, ever thought about our words--and also who, sometimes, hopefully, mercifully, forgot them. As an administrator, David Underwood made many popular decisions and many unpopular decisions; but he never forgot the essential interdependence of students, community, staff and administration, the need for a sharing of mutual respect which is the center of the truly educational institution. As a humanistic administrator,
as a builder of people; David is probably best remembered among us.

But there is another way to remember him and what he stood for. He was one who was ready to ask the basic humanistic question of his original discipline of English. I remember one instance very well. As Dean of Instruction, he sat in on a number of sessions of a committee that was working on placement of developmental or remedial students. As usual, we were operating under severe financial limitations, not permitting complete pre-class testing. We decided finally, with the help of the registrar, Vincent Freeman, to shift students about from one class level to another as their skills indicated, within a semester. As might be expected, the words "remedial" and "developmental" were repeated many times. When the sessions were over, David started out the door, but turned, grinned, and said, "Wait a minute. Aren't all students remedial and developmental?" He was questioning the word labeling—not only what but how the words meant. That question is what this talk is about: English as a humanistic discipline and its big humanistic question of word use.

We usually think of the "humanities" as studies that have to do with explaining the human situation. If academic humanists are in a bitter mood, they are apt to define "humanities" as the studies that are first in academic history, first in the hearts of people, and last in government funding. More to the point here, Howard Mumford Jones in his class work American Humanism said, "Humanistic scholarship is nothing more than the professional employment for professional purposes in the humanities of technical modes for the advancement of knowledge." He was stressing the linkage and overlap in the work of all academic disciplines. We can all agree, I believe, that college studies are dedicated to such values as the pursuing of truth, whether that truth be found in the faces of a Rembrandt painting, expressed in an Emily Dickinson poem, found in a Rachel Carson report on nature, or discovered in an Einstein equation. All such studies are dedicated to the belief that truth, however unpleasant, is preferable to error; however pleasant.

As for the teaching of English as part of the humanities—well, we hear much these days about "back to basics" in English. Most people seem sure of what the basics are: spelling, a convention imposed by 18th century printers; punctuation, those marks placed in logical and sometimes seemingly illogical places; syntax or arrangement of words; parts of speech. Then too, there are certain accepted patterns of thinking and writing: cause-effect; comparison-contrast; definition; process; description; and so on. English also includes what is called "logic." As usually presented in English Composition textbooks, logic has to do with appropriate support material and forms of inductive-deductive argumentation. All these do aid clarity in communicating.

In addition, there is the belief that English study should contribute "service" to vocational and professional fields. Thus, English deals with letters, reports, and research paper forms. Perhaps because of this cut and dried service image of English study, it is only natural that; about once each year; a college English teacher encounters the business executive in a writing class, who says of his grammar problems, "Oh, my secretary takes care of all that." From such comments, and from nation-wide educational use of multiple choice tests as well as
an equally nation-wide tendency to look askance at those who speak "too"
precisely; one suspects that there is less vocational/professional
respect for those who are purveyors of "good" English than, for example,
those who are purveyors of the various sciences. After all, everyone
knows English.

Of course, literature, as one of the arts, is usually listed under
the discipline of English also. Sometimes, literature is regarded as
a sort of icing, for instructors; on otherwise unsweetened cake. Litera-
ture offers support for common folk lore, reveals human nature, and pro-
vides mutually recognizable references. There is also a less assured
belief that literature may make students wiser, and even richer—as in
helping technicians "broaden" to become company presidents. Some
scholars have protested the idea that some of the world's greatest
writers and thinkers should be cast simply as tutors to the crassly
ambitious. But one doubts if Shakespeare, Sappho, Milton and Dickenson
would mind, although Aristotle and Plato might be indignant. In any
case, we can be sure that humanists, and certainly English teachers,
have no monopoly on wisdom or virtue, any more than professionals in
any other college disciplines.

But does this accepted public view present a realistic picture of
the discipline of English? After all, Shakespeare's grammar was some-
times questionable. His spelling was so poor he spelled his own name
four different ways. At times, the logic in his plays, certainly the
accuracy of his history, is highly questionable. Still, he did a rather
good job with English, didn't he? At least his poems and plays have
had long long runs and easily meet the definition of classics—works
that are always current. And in one of his plays, the main character,
Hamlet, is questioned about what he is reading, and Shakespeare has
Hamlet respond, "Words, words, words."

Whatever the public view of English teaching, the humanistic center
of English as a discipline is sensitivity to the accuracy of words.
The various English courses, whether devoted to writing or reading
literature, are language centered, the giving and receiving of language—
not just what do the words mean but how do they mean. When an English
instructor, perhaps for the hundred thousandth time, shouts—politely—
at a student, "Be specific," the student may sense, quite rightly, that
the student, not just the paper, is being graded. Our choices of words
reveal, even to ourselves, our thinking and our lack of it, for the
style is indeed the person. Words—not fire nor the wheel—were human
beings first big feat of magic. Words make us human; and words are
what dehumanize us.

Of course, Socrates had something to say on the subject. In Athens,
5th century B. C., Socrates said to Crito, "...you must know that to
use words wrongly is not only a fault in itself; it also corrupts the soul."

And a Chinese sage of the far past—yes, reputedly Confucius—was
once asked by his disciples what he would do first if he were given power
to set right the affairs of the country. The sage answered, "I should
certainly see to it that the language was used correctly." His disciples
looked perplexed. "Surely," they said, "This is a trival matter.
Why should you consider it so important?" And the sage replied,
"If the language is not used correctly, then what is said is not what is meant; if what is said is not what is meant, then what ought to be done; remains undone; if this remains undone, morals and art will be corrupted; if morals and art are corrupted, justice will go astray; if justice goes astray, the people will stand about in helpless confusion."

And in the 1970's, Paul Beattie in The Humanist states: "The decisive thing about man has been his symbolic culture. Words are man's best symbols and language has made the human venture possible. But language can lead men astray by creating ideas that have become frozen into accepted concepts, even when these concepts no longer further the human venture. One of man's greatest problems, then, has been to keep the language honest."

How to keep the language honest, or how to fight linguistic corrosion, is the central humanist question of English study. But to fight linguistic corrosion does not mean to fight changes in meaning or reference of words, or to fight the creation of new words.

One of the most striking examples of change of reference of words that comes to my mind is the children's play song: "Ring around the rosie, pocket full of poesy, one two three, all fall down." For the original reference of these play words, we have to go back centuries to the time of the black plague in England, when an estimated one fourth of the population lost their lives. "Ring around the rosie" referred to the horrible skin sores that appeared with the onset of the disease; "pocket full of poesy" referred to pocket full of tansy, a plant that was supposed to ward off the plague but of course did not; "one two three, all fall down" was an all too graphic description of what happened to so many of the people. Today, the words refer only to children's action in play.

Not only do word references change but new words are continually created, many in response to technological changes. From the steam age came the phrase "all steamed up," and in the present day, words like "feedback" and "clone" are appearing in common use. We live in the United States in the most technologically advanced society yet known. Our technological vocabulary has increased, and has probably increased also in accuracy.

On the other hand, our humanistic vocabulary seems to have suffered a continuing deterioration. We live in a society that tolerates such humanistic word corrosion. Indeed, our institutions encourage a lack of accuracy toward words that relate to the human situation.

We are exposed to many such words daily, but only a few examples can be given here. We go to the supermarket and find cereal...or toothpaste...or eggs...in packages labeled in ascending order as "large," then "super," then "jumbo"—which means we end up using "large" to mean "small." Such uncertainties in word meaning should not bother our children. In our society, children by age 14 are exposed to an estimated quarter million television commercials. They absorb regularly the thousands of words used, not to offer reality, but to offer some kind of falsely attached appeal. Cereal, after all, does not make an Olympic athlete. A new car does not—necessarily—"make" a girl. A cigarette does not make a cowboy, even in Marlborough Country.
But let us take only a mildly distortive commercial, as those for 7-Up soda. 7-Up is the "Uncola," which says what it is not, but not what it is. Going a little farther back, 7-Up is reported as "yet and wild." We can console ourselves that the slogan is half right.... We may find it difficult to envision a "wild" soda. But we do realize that it is "how" the word means in appeal, not any reality in what it means, that makes the word worth the spending of advertising millions. Nevertheless, many a child will grow up and come to college and think a soda can be described as "wild," just as a sunset today is assumed sufficiently described by "fantastic."

There is a Grismall's Law in language, just as in economics. The economic law sets forth the principle that bad money drives good money out of circulation. The law in language is that inaccurate word usage drives accurate word usage out of circulation. The effect of the inaccuracies spreads. Words are not only used to convey information. Words are also used to block information, to influence, and to create attitudes--attitudes which make us less aware of human realities. Terms like "inner city" instead of "slums," and "poverty level child" instead of "hungry child" come to mind. But there are many other examples.

Thus, recently, quite a few of us have received notices from automobile companies. The words, as offered, often go something like this: "In the interest of more efficient operation for your convenience, we are recalling your car for inspection. Continued driving with a failed bearing could result in disengagement of the shaft and adversely affect vehicle control." Technically, probably accurate. But note that the words "continued driving" suggest that the real fault lies not with the car maker but with the car owner--who insists on driving his own car. Also, the bearing, not the automobile company, failed.

More humanistically accurate words might be: "We did not give proper inspection to your car's bearings. Without repair, you could be killed."

However, advertising and business can offer the traditional retort: "Let the buyer beware." So, let's turn to other institutional areas. The government? The military? Note that they, like business, usually require exact technological words on contracts. But, again, what about humanistic usages of words?

In government, famous but by no means unusual examples are the Nixonite's "inappropriate" to mean, more accurately, "against the law," and "inoperative now" to mean, more accurately, "a lie." No doubt some present Congressional representatives who received money from South Korea would refer to such offerings as "gifts"--certainly not the more accurate "bribes."

As for military usage, many a totally destroyed village in Viet Nam was referred to as "liberated." And for a different kind of word cover-up, there was "accidental delivery of ordnance equipment," which actually meant "bombed ourselves by mistake." When our planes were bombing civilians, as in Cambodia, the bombing was called "air support," and "structures"--never "homes"--were reported destroyed. However, such
military reports are not aimed at offering humanly realistic words. That short period of offering of "body counts," even when they were only the "enemy," was recognized as a mistake. Most Americans at the time did not want to hear the human realities in words.

Most of us often would like to hear sensitive humanistic word choices, however, from the professions. But Mark Twain's statement, "Truth is valuable. We must use it sparingly," describes professional jargon. Jargon—gobbledygook, buzz words, mumbo jumbo—often impresses us. We are told by such words who the "in" people are—in medicine, law, and other professions, including education. But before we become too impressed, perhaps we should remind ourselves that similar, and equally unnecessary, jargon makes it virtually impossible for most of us to know what our insurance policies are saying to us.

However, to turn to another national institution; many of our students are not sure they can believe or understand what their education is saying to them. Among changes on college campuses in recent years have been "Black" or "Racial Minority" studies and "Women's" studies. These studies demanded change from stereotypes and token figures, and indicated a need for education to offer social realities. Education cannot avoid such changes. To phrase the situation less politely, "If we bury our heads in the sand, we offer engaging targets."

But we are concerned here primarily with language. Words are the tools of all studies. While one painting by Monet or a dance by Nureyev or a symphony by Beethoven is worth more than a million words, it does take words to make that statement. Certainly, education pays lip service to the importance of words, especially words like patriotism, good citizenship, democracy, progress, liberty, free enterprise, opportunity, science, and yes, God. Religious education even exalts words: Thou shalt not take the name...of thy Lord God in vain. But these words, stressed further by traditional models and traditional authorities, offered as so important in educational materials, have no accurate meanings, without specific and accurate references. The words are open to challenge from students who find that these words are misused, or do not apply to them, and in application omit their models, as well as omit authorities who recognize them as people.

The language of our educational materials—in virtually all of the disciplines—has been telling many of our students that they, their heritage, their models and their interests do not count, mostly because they have not previously been counted.

Thus, supported by Martin Luther King and others, linguistic researcher Ossie Davis wrote that, as a black man, "The English language is my enemy." And those scholars who conducted several computer studies of dictionaries, as well as those who compiled a feminist dictionary of English in 1974, said, in reference to women, "The language is a tool of oppression."
But there are no current human villains in this struggle for humanistic word accuracy. This is not our college cafeteria's table game of "Force Your Opponent to Crash," or just another way of saying, "You'll never be the man your mother was." This is a far more difficult educational effort. It is a turning away from the use of a single narrow beam of attention on one segment of the American scene. It is a bringing out of the shadows and a turning on of all the lights, to see others' views of realities.

Only a few examples can be given here, out of untold numbers. In typical textbook sentences, the constructive ones in our society are almost invariably majority population males. For example, "Southern planters built their stately homes and farmed their vast cotton lands." That sentence obliterates the Black people who actually did most of that building and that farming.

Another typical sentence: "The Pilgrims carried their household goods, wives and children, to the New World." Looked at from American native people's point of view, these newcomers were simply unwelcome immigrants and this was not a "new" world. Also, in the "Pilgrims" carrying all of those packages of women, children and goods, the ship must have helped a lot. And look who have become the only "Pilgrims" in the sentence.

One is reminded of a statement by a San Francisco lady back in 1853: "The Pilgrim Fathers, forsooth! What had they to endure in comparison with Pilgrim Mothers? It's true the Pilgrim Fathers had hunger and cold and sickness and dangers--foes within and without--but think of the unfortunate Pilgrim Mothers. They had not only all these to endure... but they had the Pilgrim Fathers!"

Not only does our education tend to give a selected segment of the population all the credit. It also suggests a selected segment to blame. Thus, Hitler murdered millions of Jewish people and called it dealing with the "Jewish Problem." The real problem was of course Nazi racism and murderous seeking of a scapegoat. But this reversal continues in our educational word usage. "Black Problem?" Should not that be "White Racism Problem"? "Indian Problem?" Ditto? "Wetback Problem?" Should that be "White American Creed Problem"? The words are a matter of point of view, of course. But the inaccurate use of words also prevent solutions to the problems. Accurate reference does not blame victims for the problem.

From the point of view of some of us, it would be just fine if a book on anthropology began: "When the first ancestor of the human race descended from the trees, she had not yet developed that mighty brain that was to distinguish her so sharply from all other species..." But such usage is not accurate. The words leave out half of humankind. And as it is, we are all aware that if a boy in school is told to draw a man... and instead draws a woman... he is rushed to the school psychiatrist. One has to wonder why the same concern is not shown for girls.

Honesty in word use would be revolutionary in education. Humanistically, many students might even begin to believe that what they are learning has meaning for them. In a sense, the educators today
are in a position similar to that of the early Christian educators. As they had little educational material of their own with which to offer higher education to Christians, they had to use Greek and Roman educational materials. So they set to work to omit and revise any parts of those materials that did not agree with their Christian views of truth. One can be repelled by such censorship, but they did not want to offer past Greek and Roman Gods in their education. Educational materials today need extensive study of what and how the words mean before accuracy can be achieved, to offer a sufficient truth so that all students can recognize it.

Of course, study of truth in words will not end with awareness of the humanity and human contributions of racial minorities and women in educational materials. We will soon have to move toward accuracy in what and how the word "human" itself means...

As Robert T. Francoeur expresses the coming problem: "Faced with genetic engineering, reproductive technology, cryogenic suspension of life, behavior and personality modifying drugs, organ transplants and artificial organs, and even hybridization of human and infrahuman tissues and organizations, we must decide which indicators of humanhood we want to promote and which ones we want to reduce or eliminate, as we move into the era of the designed human."

It is of interest to note, even in the present day, that society seems to have a strong desire to humanize animals, as by improving the human word communication with apes and dolphins. But society seems to have an equally strong desire to dehumanize people, by relegating them to number status.

Since the 1940's or earlier, some scholars have believed that all college-university knowledge can be readily divided into mensurative knowledge and historical knowledge. As Mumford Jones explains these, mensurative knowledge is a seeking of objective truth to reduce the human equation to zero. Historical knowledge is that which takes time; humanity and history into account, in explaining the human situation. The basic difference between the two approaches is that the mensurative techniques, using refinements made by machines, move toward elimination of the human. On the other hand, the historical-humanistic approach strives to elevate the human. The two approaches interact, of course. But they can be viewed separately, not only in teaching but in educational administration. They represent two different viewpoints toward reality.

However, educators cannot negate the human. Education, as we all know, is not just giving information. Education is also encouraging personal discovery of the purpose and meaning of the information. Thus; those who are involved in educating must choose the more difficult; seemingly less objective side, the human side in which words have layered meanings as well as precise references in the seeking of accuracy.
The mensurative approach of relegating to number status is obviously important, and often time saving. But before we assume that the mensurative is always more effective and more objective than the historical-humanistic, we have to ask ourselves: What and how do the numbers mean? Who benefits?

In the tracings of thought that are words, educational goals and number references are too often notably contradictory and ambiguous. Thus, we see carefully recorded institutional goals, as "flexible teaching approaches should be stressed," or "individual attention should be given to students." In practice--in reality--however, these goals are strangely translated into "increase class sizes" and "avoid experimentation." And isn't it interesting how often educational statistical reports use the word "impact"--as if trying to hit somebody. "Student credit hour costs" is a well known phrase that has been bandied about increasingly here lately. Computers digest it easily. Educators, aware of the many human and community variables involved, cannot be so sure of the term's broad validity.

Let us keep in mind that it cannot be accurate for an educator to confuse the pseudo-efficient, or even the efficient, with the effective. Also, it cannot be proper for an educator to adopt the attitude of the industrialist who asserted his interest in improving the environment. The industrialist protested: "It's not my mechanized factory that pollutes the lake. It's all those dead fish."

We live in a pluralistic society, continually searching for unity, with a central focus of complete respect, if not complete agreement. Impersonal numbered approaches can achieve uniformity. Humanized approaches offer diversity, to be fit into a unified, yet ever changing and growing whole. Educational institutions cannot develop under an absentee landlord plan of managerial numbers on paper. Educational institutions are manifestly made up of people--community, students, faculty, staff, administrators. Interdependent, they cannot"control" each other. They can only influence each other, to achieve accord and growth. Relationships change, and words must be changed to portray the relationships more accurately.

According to legend, the cynical Greek philosopher Diogenes went about with a lantern, asking; "What is truth? But he stayed not for an answer. In an immediate as well as long range sense, those of us who are"staying" must offer, loudly and clearly, both answers and questions, in as accurate a language as we can achieve, to inform the people of this community, and to further the education offered at Florissant Valley campus.