



GARDEN SCHOOL NEWSLETTER



Richard Marotta, Ph. D., Headmaster

Volume 92 Number: X

"Academic Excellence Since 1923"

Friday, November 21, 2014



Thoughts for the week

By Richard Marotta, Ph.D., Headmaster



In one of those many conversations that we have about education and learning, the question 'why' came up this morning about writing. Why do we write? What is the purpose of writing? Has it added to our lives in ways that have encouraged thinking and exploration?

What is interesting about this question is that a number of major thinkers, including Einstein, have expressed the belief that writing was not an advancement in human thinking but a setback. Their reasons for this view focused on what they perceived to be the loss of the personal power of the oral tradition. Communication in the oral tradition was far more personal, communal and expressive. And much to everyone's delight, there were no misspellings in the oral tradition!

This view raises many questions. Our current thinking about writing is that while it may have lessened the personal attachment, it has also increased the intensity of linear thinking. The oral tradition depended on formula to allow for memorization and to facilitate the ease of repetition. There were circular patterns in the oral recitation that enhanced the pedagogy of recitation as well as the ability of the speaker to reinforce his or her points through the power of repetition.

Modern writing has moved this process in somewhat of a different direction. Writing depends far less on the circular pattern of recitation and much more on the linear exploration of an idea. In writing a long article, the writer can move through layers of thought in depth and with the ability to hold certain ideas in suspension while pursuing the pathway of an idea. Writing allows for a more controlled sense of exploration, since it can probe deeper and deeper into an idea without depending on formula and without depending on the ability of the audience to follow the story. Of course, the reader of a written text has the advantage of 'instant replay' which the listener to an oral 'text' does not.

John Silber, former President of Boston University, once referred to teaching as 'oral publications,' believing very strongly in the power and the importance of the oral presentation in the university environment. Don McQuade in a book on writing, which he titled, *Thinking in Writing*, made the argument that the more effective way of a sustained exploration of an idea was through the process of exploring it in writing. Since there are no overt gestures, tones of voice (these exist in writing but usually without the dramatic power they have in the oral tradition) and facial expressions, writing depends more on moving through the semantic architecture of the idea. From a visual perspective, writing moves forward across the page; we see the movement, which imitates the unfolding of the idea.

In my own classes, I always stress the importance of writing not as a mechanical exercise, but as a dynamic and organic way to pursue the truth of an idea. My advice to my students is to be bold in their writing, take chances, and push an idea in ways that they didn't recognize when they started. When students push writing in such a liberating way, they re-create some of the boldness of the oral performance with the angularity of writing. As the great poet William Blake said 'write without fetters,' and you will find the truth.