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Now is the Time

By Andrew Pudewa

A decade has passed since the *Institute for Excellence in Writing* became a full time enterprise, and over these ten years we have seen some truly remarkable results. Thousands of parents and teachers have experienced our seminars either live or by video, and tens of thousands of children have learned to use some or all of what we teach about writing with structure and style. Children and adults tell of how they have been empowered—many for the first time in their lives—to write or to teach in a way that transforms attitude and aptitude to a life-changing degree. The stack of testimonials grows ever higher.

And although the results are undeniable, a nagging question arises for many: When does the substance of students' writing gain more significance than whether or not they follow the models and complete the checklist? In other words, at what point does content become more critical than the packaging? Aren't the ideas going to be more important than the way they are formatted? Ultimately, the answer may be yes, but with a caveat; the presentation always matters. When this question was posed to the original author of *Blended Structure & Style in Composition*, Dr. James B. Webster (Professor Emeritus in History), he pointed out that even at the highest academic level, organization, word choice, and artistry in writing and speaking are critical to how an argument is perceived. In his words: "A good idea poorly presented is not as powerful as a bad idea well presented—history proves this." One need not look very far back to see vivid examples of bad ideas well presented, which duped entire generations and populations.

Classically educated and deeply religious, Marshall McLuhan understood this clearly and is remembered for his timeless statement, "The medium is the message." He realized that the way in which an idea was presented could easily eclipse the idea itself and warned, objectively but somewhat prophetically, what popular media could do to society. He, along with Neil Postman (*Amusing Ourselves to Death*) predicted the "dumbing down" of the population, which has indeed been accomplished—with the help of modern compulsory education, a tragedy so eloquently exposed by John Taylor Gatto in his books *An Underground History of American Education* and *Weapons of Mass Instruction*.

As a result of this decades-long process, we now find ourselves at a time in history when social and economic tensions are climaxing, and major change—whether we want it or not—seems inevitable. Few alive have seen such a time as this: Morality is relative and often reversed, popular culture exemplifies the public's addiction to the superficial and sensual, and "negative savings" is the euphemistic norm for most individual and government economies. When sober, thoughtful people look around objectively with a perspective from history, theology, and economics, it becomes clear that life is not likely to

continue as it has, comfortable and safe. Crisis is around the corner, and deep down most of us know it.

Yet we must keep on with our daily work of mentoring children and preparing them for what may come. For many, however, priorities are changing. No longer do we so easily fall into the mode of educating for the status quo. We are realizing that the purpose of education is no longer simply preparing our kids to be able to get a good job and be “productive” citizens, gauging success by the comfort level achieved in middle age. No, we are waking up. Almost certainly, our children will have to navigate through coming upheavals—not having a “nice” life as their parents or grandparents did, but facing real challenges: persecution, basic survival, even forming new nations from the rubble of the old. Sounds scary.

However, crisis is not necessarily a bad thing. While many fear the loss of comfort and security, it is always during times of crisis when people think about what is real, what is truly important, what is eternal. As life gets tougher, more and more people will be hungry for the truth and will have ears to hear. Who, then, will be ready—equipped not only with the words of truth, but also with the skills to speak and write them powerfully in a media-saturated world accustomed to shallow, shiny liars? Our children are the hope; our children are the most important in the world; our children can and must be ready to lead their clueless peers through the coming crises, and we must not neglect preparing them for this most critical mission.

Time is short, and children grow quickly. Although we do not know how much time we will have, we do have today, and we can make these our top priorities: character, knowledge, skills. These are the three curricular subjects to think about each morning as we begin our day; grammar, spelling, algebra, Latin, must all be subordinate to these three. Character and wisdom to know and do the right thing come what may, knowledge of the past and the present specific to one’s mission, and skills to think logically and present ideas winsomely—these three are the most, and perhaps the only really important things to consider, given the circumstances of the present. Mark Twain said, “I have never let my schooling interfere with my education.” What may have been humor then, is deep wisdom for us now; we must never let our concept of what “school” should be eclipse the education our children truly need.

Character is who we are, what we are made of—the essence of our heart, our integrity, our love for God, family, neighbor, community. While there are whole curriculums devoted to the objective study of character qualities, we also know that children absorb character through the themes and personages of classic literature, lives of heroes and saints, timeless stories of hope, triumph, tragedy, beauty, sacrifice. Stories help them develop their moral imagination, for as they read or listen, they ask themselves hard questions: Would I do that? Could I do that? What would I do if...? Why did that happen? Was that just? As we raise children to know good from bad, right from wrong, true from false, how to work and how to play, stories help weave the fabric of self, and allow them to know that there is indeed a land where the king loves his people, the selfless act of chivalry never goes unrewarded, and it is possible to live happily ever after. Such stories contain more truth than history, which is always written by the victors, poisoned by human fallibility, and in the end will vanish, as all material things ultimately do.

Knowledge is the stuff we learn—the information we put in our brain. Sadly, today’s educational approach is often inimical to the development of individual interests and talents, because a standardized curriculum assumes that it is good for all children to learn the same things at the same time in the same way. This educational system efficiently produces a society of predictable, controllable voters, factory workers, and consumers, but it is definitely not an environment where students can explode with the love of learning,

catch the vision of their mission, and pursue the knowledge and skills needed to reach their full potential as beings made in the image and likeness of their Creator. When considering the pursuit of knowledge, we must remember that if you're doing one thing, you're not doing another. If you're reading a bad book, you're not reading a good one, and very likely reading bad books is worse than not reading anything at all. Obviously, no one is going to learn everything about everything, but in many cases we feel as though we must "cover all the bases," and in doing so end up with students whose awareness of science and social studies is a mile wide and half-an-inch deep; they know very little about anything. Yes, a general cultural literacy is a good thing, but human beings naturally want to specialize, to go deep, to pursue interests with passion. Einstein said over fifty years ago, "It is in fact nothing short of a miracle that the modern methods of instruction have not yet entirely strangled the holy curiosity of inquiry." Are our kids excited about learning? If not, perhaps it is time to rethink our goals and methods for the acquisition of knowledge.

Skills, of course, are what children will need in a practical way for their life mission. Knowing how to think is critical; knowing how to communicate thoughts is equally vital if we are to impact the culture and the society. While the study of logic and mathematics helps develop internal reasoning, communication, music, and art allow for the externalization and crystallization of thought. IEW's areas of specialty are, of course, the arts of language: Listening, Speaking, Reading, and Writing. Many of us feel—even know—that our children have a mission to communicate truth during these coming uncertain times, and that developing these aptitudes at a younger age when the mind is absorbent and talents take root is essential—something which cannot be ignored.

There are many "good" things that can be included in the curriculum of a classroom or home school. However, we must always remember that "good" can be the enemy of "best." If we're doing one thing, we're not doing another, and time is our only asset. So as we consider the next week, month, or year of our teaching, let us not ask, "Is this a good thing to do?" but "Is this the best use of this child's time?" If what we want is students who will grow up to effectively communicate goodness, truth, and beauty, we must choose how we spend our resources carefully, mentor our children with love and wisdom, constantly think about character, knowledge, and skills, and be energetic and diligent in our teaching. If ever there was a point in history when our work as parents and teachers will have repercussions beyond our imagining, now is that time. May God help us.