

What follows is a letter to Ruthie Nathan way back in the summer of 2009 in which I ranted some on the teaching of spelling and the education of teachers of spelling.

For the last several weeks I had been revising a hunk of “Explication, Evolution, and Orthography” from my website, thinking that reworked to address the issue of reading rather than spelling, it might be of interest to your BookHeadEd project. It was more or less boiling down to the readers (and reading specialists) benefiting from knowing something about three distinctions: language code vs. language performance, meaning vs. content, and word vs. element. Those three and the notion of the edge of chaos involved in the act of meaning-making, for both writer and reader. I let it sit for a couple of weeks while Carol made me work in the yard, and when I got back to it, it seemed so incurably boring that I gave it up.

Then last Thursday I watched the finals of the national spelling bee, and besides amazing me (again) with the youngsters’ performances, it brought on the usual fit of the grumbles, grumbles over how much the teaching of spelling has been trivialized in spite of the great range of knowledge that can be brought to bear on it.. Mid-grumble it occurred to me that there was a connection here with the psychologist Abraham Maslow. Not his hierarchy of needs, necessarily, but rather his insight that we can learn a lot about the human mind by studying mentally healthy people as well as the mentally unhealthy ones that Freud and the others concentrated on. Besides I kind of like the notion of language arts class as a Maslovian peak experience.

I suspect language arts teachers could learn a lot by studying the strategies of youngsters who are skilled in the arts of language, including spelling. And one strategy that interests me most is the way the spellers in the bee asked questions: “Can I have a definition?”, “Could you use it in a sentence?”, “What is its language of origin?”, “What is its part of speech?”, “Are there any variant pronunciations?”, “Is its base so-and-so?”. (The kid who really blew me away, when faced with the terrible word *psittacosis*, referring to some avian disease, asked “Does the base come from the Greek *psitta* meaning ‘parrot’?” – to which the somewhat astonished pronouncer said yes, and the kid had the word nailed.) . For readers rather than spellers we might also add a seventh question: “Are there any accepted variant spellings?”

Those six or seven questions and their answers all bear on Hirsch’s notion that good readers need to know the words and the world that the words are about – both the referential world around us and the grammatical-rhetorical world inside the language itself.

Basically the kids are asking what the word means, how it can be used, what its syntactic function is, where it came from, how it’s put together, how it can be pronounced. I believe that all of these, and the seventh question about variant spellings, are things that kids should be taught to help them become good readers.

Years ago when I was pronouncing words for the Seattle *Times* Scripps-Howard Spelling Bee, I noticed that there were two kinds of contestants. The first group, by far the larger of the two, prepared for the bee the way they had been taught to do spelling: by brute rote memory. Some of them were very good, almost savant-like. But when the bee progressed to the point where we were dealing with words that they had not been given to study ahead of time, the rote learners tended to fall by the wayside pretty rapidly. What was left were youngsters who had been taught, or had simply figured out for themselves, how to ask those six questions – and what to do with the information in the answers. Like the finalists last Thursday, they could think their way through the spelling of words. More than once I gave kids words that I know they had never seen or heard before (you can tell by the looks on their faces and the gasps), but they would ask their questions, and then they would come up with a spelling that if not always correct was at least always plausible. (Notice how even the idea of a plausible misspelling seems odd, because of the way our schools tend to leech out the idea of information and knowledge in the spelling of words.)

Some years before my experience with the Seattle bee, I took a year off from Central to teach at Newport High School in Bellevue. I worked a lot with a really sharp language arts coordinator by the name of Jim Sabol. He and some of the top notch teachers they had working in that district taught me a lot that year. And one thing that Jim said, pretty off-handedly, was that what teachers really wanted was lots of good stuff to teach. Which gets me back to grumbling about the trivialization of teaching spelling to youngsters and teaching future teachers how to teach spelling to youngsters, reducing it all pretty much to rote with a smattering of cutesies. Thus, as John Donne would say (in an utterly different context), “a great prince in prison lies.” I would like to see a project like BookHeadEd begin to spring that prince free.

(The article “How Do You Spell [d]?: On the Expansion of Orthographic Knowledge” in the Short Articles section of my website deals with this same issue.)

But I rant, and this is getting too long. On the other hand, you have been spared that longer and incredibly boring rewrite I worked on.

Cheers, Don

P.S. Did you and Larry ever see the musical “The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee”? Carol and I saw it in Yakima. It’s a hoot. Oddly, we were having dinner after the play at the Olive Garden, and the cast sat down at a table nearby. They were just as goofy at dinner as they were on the stage. I offered condolences to the young woman who in the play got off a couple of what I thought were good shots at George W. Bush – at which, except for my giggling, the theatre had pretty much fallen silent. Yakima is a very red town. I got the impression that she was fairly used to that silence.

D.