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DIVISION AND SYNTHESIS: IMPLICATIONS OF THE ASPEN COALITION CONFERENCE

Richard Lloyd-Jones

I'm not sure when I first learned about division and synthesis. I doubt that it was when I was in school or college. Probably when I began teaching in a college of engineering, I had to translate my college courses in abstract logic into the practical rhetorical terms useful in explaining organizations to technically oriented students.

Of course, I knew how to divide and synthesize long before I took logic. In a rudimentary way we learn that even before we acquire our native language. We learn that "Daddy" is not "Mommy," but both are "family." In many ways all language learning is dividing the impressions we receive through eyes and ears and fingers to go with words and then putting the words together to make some kind of sense. We do it; we just don't name it. Naming our basic intellectual processes is a school amusement. Perhaps even in school the names are late additions.

I remember in 10th grade that I learned "Gallia est omnis divisa in partes tres." Florence Flynn had us memorize that opening to Caesar's commentary on the Gallic War along with a batch of Latin tags. Obviously, Caesar divided, and Miss Flynn observed that it helped him organize his description of Gaul. We were learning about the five star

theme even though she didn't use such words. The next year we read Cicero's orations, which are full of rhetorical figures, so we acquired a store of tricks, generally unnamed. My favorite was accusation by denial, that is, "Cataline is not a murderer, but he is conveniently served by murderers." I liked Cicero's long lists, too, and the elaborate balance and inevitable periodicity of his Latin.

I took Latin as a class, but I debated under the guidance of Guy Croesen, a government teacher who often excused his best debaters from attending class so that they could work on debate. It was in fact very effective instruction in research even though we thought we were getting away with something. Mr. Croesen was big on division and outlines made with explicit transitions between sections. He favored an outlining system with lots of super-script numbers to emphasize parallels and levels of importance. I don't recall ever hearing the terms "category" or "hierarchy" but we certainly learned them. We had rhetorical rules of thumb that allowed us to rearrange our opponents' arguments in our categories, to re-divide the presentations in order to synthesize the material to fit our views of the issue. It was mostly pure Aristotle, although I'm not sure Mr. Croesen knew that. He never used that name in my presence even though he rather liked flattering us with the sense that we were big time.

You may guess that I'm using a bit of autobiographical sleight-of-hand to sneak up on a general point concerning all of us in English these days. We have been dividing and synthesizing all of our lives, and perhaps the greatest power in our culture has depended on dividing. The

carriers of Western Civilization are noted for their powers of analysis, the alternative name for "division." In our descriptions of civilizations Asiatics are labelled as the synthesizers, advocates of holistic approaches— and perhaps passive in accepting the world as it is. I hesitate in making such a gross division of human temperaments, but after all I am a Westerner and part of the power elite. I divide and sometimes conquer.

The oddity for us English teachers is that although most of our talk in teaching organization is devoted to division, we are perhaps the school people most devoted to synthesis. We talk about encouraging the creative vision, about helping our students make sense, a useful point, in building papers and in responding to the full power of literary language. For us analysis is but a means to greater unity. To be sure, the close reading techniques we inherited from the '50s as well as the present form of the basal readers seem to stop with divisions and isolation, but neither is the dominant system of our academic heritage, and both are under attack by our professional leaders. We are expected to be sensitive to the complexity of human experience and the rich interweavings of language.

For me this tension between synthesis and division is emblemized by the 1987 conference sponsored by the Coalition of English Associations at the Aspen Institute in Maryland. For shorthand some called the meeting Dartmouth II, after the 1966 meeting of Anglo-American scholars, who attempted to define directions for the field at that time. You may recall that the British members of that meeting had a profound effect on American schools. John Dixon's *Growth Through*

English is still basic reading for many of us. Given the current rash of reports on education as viewed by administrators and politically prominent pundits, we seemed to need to bring abstractions down to the classroom constraints of one field. The Coalition was formed to renew our vision of what English should become to serve the students of the next century.

Synthesis is a point of departure. There are eight associations in the Coalition, and several of them are overwhelmed with sub-divisions and affiliates. We English teachers are too numerous to be served effectively by only one organization, so we have to divide, but in division we are in danger of overlooking our common needs. From the first planning stages the Coalition wanted to synthesize, even though it took four years of piggybacking in our separate conventions, a trial run for a few people at Urbana, and committee meetings at various places. We struggled to represent all of our parts without elevating any minor part to major status.

We tried to identify issues for our agency and a mode of operation that would be open but productive. We did not attract every group that might have had an interest. Some, such as those concerned with speech, or media, or linguistics we represented by choosing from our own members those with such concerns and often membership in still other academic groups, but even so, the eight organizations are broadly representative. Perhaps the most significant requirement, urged by those from MLA and other collegiate groups, was that classroom teachers from elementary and secondary schools be included in such

numbers that they would be truly heard even though it meant that NCTE had a disproportionately large share in selecting participants.

A meeting of 60 people is not really a meeting of organizations, either, even though representatives of the organizations may have set the tentative agenda. The 60 were chosen for their own sake by the elected leaders of the organizations. Each group tried to make sure we included people engaging the intellectual and social divisions of our field. As synthesizers we accepted a broad definition of "English," so we reached far, but with only 60 people, even allowing that each person had multiple interests, we probably didn't hint at every possibility, but the diversity was impressive. All are prominent in some sector of English language arts, and almost all are currently practicing teachers, but they have different training, different vocabularies, different assumptions, different foci, different kinds of students, different social background. They represented the divisions in the field, but not organizations as such.

The Coalition planners risked intellectual chaos by inviting representatives of a divided field to spend three weeks together in constant discussion. Rockefeller, and Mellon, and Exxon, and NEH, and Aspen were persuaded such a collection of English teachers could define operationally within a particular area of study (albeit a huge one) some of the strictures about American education made in general reports on education. They put up money. We were expected to synthesize a moderately concrete vision of what we really are in all of our complexity.

One major division we decided to address directly in the structures of the conference. Like Gaul, we are best understood as divided into three parts— elementary, secondary, and college.

We are defined by our students, and the definition is reinforced by the architecture of school buildings and the roles of administrators to whom we report. We earn our credentials from different people, often in acquiring quite different knowledge and skills. The division is so deeply embedded in our educational system that it seems to represent some ultimate reality rather than administrative convenience.

It is not ultimate, to be sure, but it is a fact of our lives as teachers and a crucial barrier to common efforts, so we have to deal with it. About 40% of the Conference meeting time was spent in three sub-groups representing the maturity of our students. The sub-groups had plenty of internal division, but they were unified by the conditions of their daily work. Another 40% of the time was spent in groups shuffled to mix levels of instruction. Those groups were reshuffled three times to alter the human chemistry and combinations of other interests. The remaining 20% of the time in assembly was spent in large group sessions, often reacting to views developed differently in the sub-groups. We had other groupings at unhurried meals or on long morning walks or even on the 15-minute ride from one conference site to the other. The collective talk led to individual writing, for we kept the word processors humming at two and three in the morning, and we managed to burn out three Xerox machines telling each other what to think.

I will not pretend that there was no friction or heat. After all, people were putting on the line strongly held views of successful professional lives. These were task oriented people, highly verbal, competitive, energetic, widely read, and professionally informed. But they also were open-minded synthesizers, negotiators, used to hearing secondary meanings, supportive. Much of the first week was spent in discovering a common vocabulary—or at least in translating from one vocabulary to another. Cries of "jargon" would remind speakers we did not all share the shorthand of their professional language. Simple astonishment—both pleased and horrified—greeted pictures of ordinary events at other levels of schooling. Little by little strangers, mere representatives of positions, turned into people, strangers into friends, and presentations relaxed into conversations and enactments. We became a community of scholars, a goodly fellowship of prophets ready to speak to the world. We synthesized, we joined together lions and lambs, in a human and professional sense those who came convinced of their separate interests melted into a common view.

What is the vision? How will the world know of the miracle? You may guess that lovers of language, reveling in both text and context, are fond of subordinate clauses, appositives, and free modifiers. Various resolutions approved in principle run to 80 or 90 pages. Three weeks of talking and writing cannot quite be put into slogans—although the group tried. The best we managed was "Democracy through Language." I don't support that such a phrase will sell many cases of soft drinks, but it does suggest the governing values of the meetings.

We feel responsible for the whole range of the uses of our language as well as for the study of the language itself. We cannot imagine that our country will thrive unless the citizens are aware of how they are shaped by their language and how they can influence events with their language. Language precedes government. Not the power of legislation but the forces of life make a language central to the lives of citizens, and we are the ones appointed to help people understand how those forces are manifested. That kind of sentiment doesn't fit neatly into resolutions, certainly not into carefully qualified remarks of academics.

An editorial committee will eventually eliminate repetition from the official resolutions, and will add materials to provide contexts for some of the assertions, but I'll risk a few simplifications to suggest how the statements about our common interests progress. I think they tell much about collaboration between colleges and schools. Later you'll have books by Wayne Booth of Chicago and Peter Elbow of Massachusetts, who will give their personal reactions to the meeting. You can't beat the power of the single mind for synthesizing.

The key idea I've named. We accept the definition of our field pretty much as offered by the elementary language arts people. In the elementary classroom we expect the teacher to deal with speaking and listening, writing and reading, media, the language itself, and the language as the means of access to other kinds of study. The gamut of culture is represented in English. The elementary school teacher is the

ultimate synthesizer. The rest of us are justified by our divisions, our specialty interests.

Our second assumption is that none of us begins at the beginning. That is, our pupils always come to us as sophisticated language users so we have to build on existing foundations. Language is so inclusive of human activity that any class of students comes with diverse language backgrounds, and given the mobility of the country and the variety of its ancestry, the differences are often huge. Sometimes they are so great that we are tempted to think that one or another extreme user is incompetent even though more properly they are merely not in the mainstream. The American nation is a wonder of diversity, always in tension between divided individualism and collective strength. As teachers we then face the problem of how to synthesize, how to make use of the differences in order to increase the knowledge of all.

Since language is inherently social, we need an interactive classroom with lots of talk (and listening) and eventually lots of writing and reading, a third issue. The reading should include not only official works of literature and expository information, but works written in the class. Students need to experience how their different skills in the use of language can be used in sharing their ideas with their fellow citizens of the class. The facts of student difference make the tyranny of standard fill-the-blank class exercises nearly irrelevant; even at best, teaching to the normal curve wastes the time of most students. But time spent in adapting one's language to address the needs of one's classmates is never wasted.

Using the language cooperatively means different things at different stages of schooling, of course, and I don't mean to suggest that teachers should never go solo. Mini-lectures or explanations or exhortations will always have their place. The image of children in straight rows with hands folded or collegians madly scribbling notes in front of a lecture machine feeding on yellow notes should be scrubbed, though. Language learning is interactive. Although for a time one writes or reads alone, eventually comes the comparing of views and interpretations, the sharing of background knowledge, the asking of questions. The teacher is doubtless the leader, but all need to learn how to ask a question or phrase a doubt, all need to learn to believe in the value of their own knowledge. That requires performance.

As you can guess, the conference emphasized language used for the real purposes of students, a fourth point. Games are real, of course, and language games are part of our intellectual tradition. We should play them together. Even the role playing implied in exercises requiring nine-year-olds to write letters to a landlord asking permission to keep a pet (one of the National Assessment exercises) has its place. But so much information must be acquired and assimilated that English should be part of all instruction as a means to learning.

A specification of that point implies a fifth one. Our serious purposes require reading real literature, not made up reading exercises. We have no problem defining literature to include popular stories or films, and we encourage taking public speeches or advertising or street conversations as serious tests for study. Still, given the remarkable

range of fine trade books for children, we don't want to spend efforts on de-coding exercises. Similarly, at more advanced levels we want to sample the whole range of superior writing in English, not just those that for one reason or another have become habits. Some habits are helpful, some merely represent the unexamined choices of people too tired or timid to react to what they read.

Young people should engage thoroughly some works written centuries before their births, but such requirements for new knowledge are too heavy, frustration will lead many to short circuit the reading process and gain almost nothing but a little learned decoration for cocktail parties, perhaps enough to pass a test on cultural literacy without being seriously challenged to understand the allusion they can identify.

But students also need to read words based in sub-cultures of America markedly different from their own and also in national cultures different from ours. In short, they need to sample through literature the diversity, the differences, of human experience so that they can later synthesize a richer view of human nature. All such reading requires help with background knowledge. The idea that literature consists of works for which there are Cliff notes should distress us all though, because the real knowledge exhibited in a work of literature almost surely is not included in what is summarized. That kind of abstracting and categorizing is simply reductive, and our role as synthesizers should work against such reduction. We try to see the world whole, and we guide others through space and time to have a richer sense of what it means to be human.

In practical ways we observed that the lives of the people we guide are often markedly different from our own and from the lives of commentators in high places. To be sure, the popular press has pointed out changes in the family, the community, the economy, the cultural mix, the media, and whatever can be given a name. Whether it's the latch-key kid, the Big Mac seller, a child struggling with the separation of parents, an average adult, a happy or an alienated member of an ethnic community, a political or social rebel, a deaf genius, the mixture is real and difficult. The strategies for working with groups of such students have to work out on a local basis, probably on a student-by-student basis. That in turn raises real questions about the nasty effects of mass testing as well as desperate need to recruit and encourage and utilize efficiently a corps of superior teachers. We didn't endorse any current plans for the reform of teacher education, but we did indicate approval of Carnegie's inclination to seek out complex measuring systems, for reconsideration of collegiate programs, and for encouraging teacher participation in professional organizations as a kind of in-service training. People who are expected to act professionally should be treated as professionals.

So too we spoke to the conditions of teaching: the need for classroom libraries as well as school libraries, for professional libraries and journals as well as materials for students, places to be alone both as students and teachers, places for discussion and conferences, times of sustained quiet without announcements, times of good but disruptive activities, specialists for consultation both by teachers about students and by students to get information, time to get to know students and

contexts to permit the acquaintanceship to be sustained over more than one term or year, chances to work with colleagues in such ways as to have a sense of the whole program of English studies. You can imagine the sort of list we'd compile. Some schools and some levels of schooling have the support of the school structure that others need, but lack others. We all need enough common activities that we can understand and explain the needs of our colleagues at other levels.

Although many—perhaps most—of the participants came to the conference with fear and foreboding, with visions of useless carping at each other at a rural retreat which offered no escape, the feelings at the end were upbeat, collegial, eager to spread the word. Several groups even proposed similar meetings for other people to be scattered around the country, and most participants went away with plans for speeches and papers to remind us all of our common purposes.

I imagine that our advance exhortations to ourselves that a joint meeting would be profitable were whistling in the dark. The open agenda was frightening, we were especially worried about whether we'd have anything to show the funders. And I suspect that some of the funders were a bit nervous about a meeting that didn't have its conclusions established in advance, and they may not be too keen on what emerged. There were risks enough for everyone.

But I recommend it to you. It was a thoroughly enlightening experience. You may think you'd prefer a more nearly task-oriented affair to serve some practical purpose, for that gives focus, especially to short meetings. Short meetings also encourage plays for local political

advantage or showing off. The risks of a longer meeting are paid for in the possibility of a real exchange of uncertainties. You might as a tentative agenda simply decide to re-argue the issues presented in the books I've predicted for appearance in the spring. Even if you arrived at the same conclusions, the support would be useful, but you'd probably want to give the ideas a local twist. Certainly you'd open lines in your own region for long range support of English studies.

What we are challenged to teach, to represent in our culture and in our nation, is too massive for us to go it alone. Yes, I can shut my classroom door, publish my specialized scholarship, and work only with the students who come to me. But that, I think denies the essence of our field, our reason for being. We help people join together in seeing the world. As starters we need to join ourselves together in supporting programs in English.

Richard Lloyd-Jones is a Professor of English at the University of Iowa, a former chair of CCCC, and a past president of NCTE. This article originally appeared in *Focus: Teaching English Language Arts*, the publication of the Southeast Ohio Council of Teachers of English, and is taken from an address to their members.