

Negotiating a Technological Society

The following is an extract from a speech made by the Head of School to returning faculty and staff at this year's Rentrée.

This is going to be another truly remarkable school year. We will open at 942 students from 56 countries next week, a most comforting number given the forebodings of the financial challenges which have impacted many of our families. Of a \$20 million operating budget, we are awarding \$4.2 million this year in various kinds of financial aid, \$600,000 more than originally budgeted, as it is truly important to us to maintain the socio-economic diversity of our community and keep our students in class. While we may have fewer cash reserves to fall back on this year, and must watch our dollars more carefully than ever, we can still bask in the sunlight of the full CIS, CAIS and WASC accreditation received in the spring, which, along with the Homologation from the French Ministry of Education, makes us one of the most highly credentialed schools in the world. We continue to do exciting and important work, as attested by strong academic results: 100% pass rate at the Baccalaureat Francais, 100% at the Brevet, plusieurs mentions, 80% success at the IB diploma, and a long list of very highly regarded university and college acceptances both in the US and abroad. Our important mission of academic rigor, bilingualism, cross-cultural communication and diversity will remain alive due to you, our dedicated faculty and staff, and I am looking forward to working with you to realize all these core values again this year.

I predict that over the next decade, thoughtful, reflective, student-centered educators like you, the driving force of innovation and dynamic change, will be rebuilding all our concepts of what it means to be educated in order to negotiate a technological society that has never before existed but as you have just seen does actually exist now. Our President arguably got elected because of his superior knowledge and application of technology, continually promoting his anthem of change via texting, social networking and bulk email. As we rebuild, as we adapt our version of a liberal education to deal with our fully technologized society, we may need also to keep in mind what it is to be human, and to emphasize the skills we, the digital immigrants, still need to bring to our digitally native students.

While they can teach us how our computer applications work, we grown-ups still have something to offer, I think: skills in creative risk-taking, critical-thinking, cross-cultural communication, high quality research, the separation of fact from fiction, truth from propaganda, the qualities of rigorous deconstruction, of high-level analysis, and the negotiation of a mainstream media that promotes politics as entertainment, as carnival, rather than the serious negotiation of serious matters. These are the skills that our students are still relying on us to provide, today more than ever.

As the school year begins, we can all prepare to hear pundits complaining once again about how kids today can't write and that technology is to blame. There are many debates out there in cyberland about whether the comic-book generation, the post-literate society, the social networking sites that encourage narcissistic and illiterate bloggish blathering, the powerpoint presentations have killed carefully-crafted essays, and whether emailing, texting and Instant Messaging have degenerated language, any language, into nothing more than sloppy penmanship and bleak, bald, bad, sad shorthand.

Let's look at some academic studies. Andrea Lunsford, a Professor of Writing and Rhetoric at Stanford University, organized a mammoth project she called "The Stanford Study of Writing" to scrutinize students' prose. From 2001 to 2006, she collected more than 14,600 elementary, secondary and college-level student writing samples...everything from in-class assignments, formal essays and journal entries to emails, blog posts and chat sessions. Her conclusions are stirring.

"I think we're in the middle of a literacy revolution the likes of which we haven't seen since the Greek civilization", she says. For Professor Lunsford, technology isn't killing our ability to write. It's reviving it, and pushing our literacy in bold new directions. The first thing she found is that young people today write far more than any generation before them. That's because so much socializing takes place on line, and it almost always involves text. Of all the writing Professor Lunsford's students did, a stunning 38% of it took place outside of the classroom – life writing, as Lunsford calls it, writing in which those twitter updates, and the list of 25 things about oneself, add up.

It's almost impossible to grasp how big a paradigm shift this is. Before the internet came along, many students never wrote anything, ever, that wasn't a school assignment. Furthermore, the study found that the students were also remarkably adept at what the Greeks called "kairos", assessing their audience and getting their point across. If you think about it, online writing, particularly in chat and discussion threads, is conversational and public, making it much closer to the Greek tradition of argument than formal letter and essay writing, the tradition we academics still tend to adhere to today. Kairos personified, many of you will remember, was also the ancient Greeks' god of the fleeting moment, the god of a favorable opportunity opposing the fate of man. What better symbol for the internet, than him?

The fact that students today almost always write for an audience (which is something virtually no-one did in my generation) gives them, I think, a different sense of what constitutes good writing. In interviews, Professor Lunsford's students defined good prose as something that had an effect on the world. For them, writing was about persuading and organizing and debating, even if it's about something as quotidian as what movie to go and see. The students were overwhelmingly less enthusiastic about their in-class writing because it mostly had no audience but the professor. It didn't serve them any purpose but to get them a grade. What to do about that, I ask you?

For some of you, all this may seem like too much emphasis on technology, and too much denial of traditional academia, but it's not going away, and this year you're all going to

be required to use lots more of it, not only in your classroom instruction, but also in your communications with families. Embedded technology will become a pedagogical requirement for everyone that teaches here. Everyone will have a minimum baseline of web-based communications expertise. We will do our best to ensure that all the equipment works, we will have plenty of help from the technology team. But we will all do it, because, just like the light-bulb, it is not going away anytime soon.

Another 21st century challenge is rearing its head this year, one that is not going away either: H1N1, a.k.a. swine flu. Our global society has many advantages, but unfortunately also offers airborne germs a frequent flier upgrade, even as indiscriminate applications of antibiotics and other drugs have put bad bugs on a strength and conditioning program. It seems that more than 20 new pathogens have emerged since the late 70's, and now we are trying to dodge the bullet of a global flu pandemic. The fact is, germs now hitchhike on international trade. Raspberries picked in Guatemala can be on our grocery shelves the next day, along with an interesting array of parasites. War, natural disaster, political unrest... these erode public health and send masses of new carriers across borders. TB caused 30 million deaths worldwide from 1990 to 2000, and now, drug-resistant TB is rampant in Russia, Peru and other countries. All to say, we must not panic about swine flu. We will bring flu vaccines to faculty and staff who elect to take them, and will implement the policies of the Center for Disease Control and Prevention. The best we can do is wash our hands frequently, use hand sanitizers, sneeze into our elbows, cut down on the bisous bisous, and follow common sense in staying home if we have symptoms. Above all, we will not over-react, and yes, we do plan to keep our programs of international exchanges and community service intact.

The other focal point for the year, as essential to our mission as that of academic rigor and bilingualism, is that of diversity. This summer, I picked up among other books, Barack Obama's *Dreams from My Father*, subtitled "A Story of Race and Inheritance". I was hoping for insights not just into the realization of an American dream, but into the mind of a man who is both African and American in heritage. What touched me most in it, however, were Obama's poignant reflections on his relationship with his absentee father...reflections that transcended time and skin color and the notion of race and served only to underscore how alike our human emotional needs are underneath the surface, rather than how different.

This year, we are putting special efforts not only on enhancing our previous important work with the school-wide green task force, but also on collaborating with the grass-roots Community Alliance, a growing partnership organization of parents, teachers, students and administrators, formed not just to bring like-minded people together in social settings, but also to evaluate how well we are achieving true diversity in all its forms, how well we are supporting minority community members, and how well we are encouraging under-represented students to grow and flourish. True, we without doubt have succeeded in our outreach to international families, as evidenced by our more than 50 nationalities. Also true, we have reached out to recruit and retain French families, with many successes and a few disappointments, even opening this year a new PreK program for three-year-olds that will consist of 19 students, 9 of whom are francophone already.

What some of us perhaps have not yet succeeded in doing as well, what we are still grappling with, is understanding the notion of identity as experienced by many of our American-born students, particularly those of color. And plenty of other questions abound too, and I for one do not have the answers.

For example:

- Do our LGBTQ students and staff members feel safe here?
- Do our adopted students feel understood here? Do students with same-sex parents?
- Do parents who have adopted, whether straight or gay, single or married, feel pleased with our welcome?
- Do we provide an adequate or even a safe forum for community members with minority political viewpoints?
- Do our text books and course materials incorporate enough diverse and differing perspectives?

The fact is, as grown-ups, we are all victims of our generational ignorance and our subtle embedded biases, whether we admit to them or not.

Perhaps it's just me, but how do we really know even what conversations to begin to have? What words to use? How do we avoid appearing stupidly behind what our young people are really thinking about and what they're actually doing? How do we have the conversations in a sensitive and meaningful way? It's somewhat of a conundrum. After all, we're the school that disdains the word tolerance, the school that instead invokes the notion of celebration, when talking about human difference. Just one diversity coordinator working in a corner? I may be wrong, but that might be as bad, in my view, as internationalism celebrated just once a year by a day of F words: food, flags, festivals. Above all we have to LIVE the diversity of our school, authentically. However this plays out this year, I'm genuinely looking forward to the conversations. And we're going to start having them right away.

On September 8, if all the inspections go well, we shall be opening our state-of-the-art, eco-friendly, LEED certifiable Arts Pavilion on 66 Page Street in which we will all continue to enjoy, I imagine, even more provocative and cutting-edge student productions of music, film, art and theatre. I think it's looking quite splendid, an urban mix of concrete and glass, with a soupcon, a hint, of left-over Harley Davidson. Our permit inspections are gearing up for September 3, and so we urge you to stay away from the many men working overtime over there until we have the green light, at which point we will organize tours to take you all through at leisure. This summer we also worked on creating a recreation room for the Middle School, which Mireille is going furnish with advice from the student body, and we also made significant changes to a PreK room to adapt it well for our three-year-olds. On the strategic horizon? Board level discussions to create a multi-year campus master plan with perhaps a second gymnasium and wellness center, and eventually to include separate purpose-built spaces for early childhood/maternelle and another for High School. Having said this, it's important that you know that no monies for the Arts Pavilion were raised from tuitions. We built this

through specific donations given just with this project in mind... past parents mostly, patrons of the arts who simply loved what the school has done for their children. I want to close with some reflections on the necessity for all of us, students and faculty alike, to put time aside for ourselves for genuine creativity, reflection, and above all, risk-taking. It's what makes dreams come true. It's what will lead us to India this year as part of the Bangalore-San Francisco sister city agreement, it's what will get us a satellite Campus in the hills of Tamil Nadu, it's what will help us forge partnerships in China, it's what will lead us to examine new programs and collaborations between all three school sections and the Chinese American International School, and it's what will help our school survive and thrive even during these tough economic times.

So, in conclusion, I challenge you to imagine who wrote the following:

“It started before I was born. My biological mother was a young, unwed college graduate, and she decided to put me up for adoption. She felt strongly that I should be raised by college graduates, so everything had been set for me to be adopted by a lawyer and his wife. But, at the last minute, when I was born, they decided they really wanted a girl, and so I ended up with two non college-grad parents who got the call in the middle of the night and groggily agreed to take a boy.

My adoptive parents had to promise my birth mother that at least I would go to college, but when the time came, I naively chose one that cost a great deal of money.

I had chosen Reed, and my working class parents' savings were all being spent on tuition. After 6 months, I couldn't see the value in it. I had no idea what I wanted to do in life and no idea how college was going to help me figure it out. And here I was spending all of the money my parents had saved their entire lives. So I dropped out. It was scary at first but turned out to be one of the best decisions I ever made. The minute I dropped out, I could start dropping in on classes that looked more interesting.

Reed College at the time offered perhaps the best calligraphy instruction in the country. Throughout the campus, every poster, every label on every drawer, was beautifully hand calligraphed. Because I had dropped out and didn't have to take the normal classes, I decided to take calligraphy. I learned about serif and san serif typefaces, about varying the space between letter combinations, about what makes great typography great. It was beautiful, historical, artistically subtle, and I found it fascinating.

None of this at the time had even a hope of any practical application in my life. But ten years later, when we were designing the first Macintosh computer, it all came back to me. And we designed it all into the Mac. It was the first computer with beautiful typography. If I had never dropped in on that course, the Mac would never had had multiple typefaces or proportionally spaced fonts”.

Of course, this was part of the life experience of Steve Jobs, CEO of Apple and Pixar. And so, we end with Think Different. I look forward to working with each of you this year. Thank you for your support.