
Rick's Place

Notes, Thoughts, and Random Musings on the Online Experience

by Rick Hein, AMIS webmaster

The Navajo culture...had taught him the power of words and thought. Western metaphysicians might argue that language and imagination are products of reality...the Navajos brought with them a much older philosophy. Thoughts, and words that sprang from them, bend the individual's reality. To speak of death is to invite it. To think of sorrow is to produce it.

The Fallen Man
Tony Hillerman

"Say it ain't so...Tell me you love me...In the beginning was the word..." There they are; words reinforcing and producing our view of reality. Do our words reflect reality or do they create reality? What is reality? Many better minds than mine have discussed this concept, and looking at language and thought as a creator of reality instead of a describer of reality is a task that we undertake on a daily basis.

You don't believe me? Think about the last time you used visualisation to produce a better tone. "Make it feel like there is an orange inside your mouth...Lift the tone from the bars..." You can probably take it from here and add a few thousand examples. When we use images to inspire our students efforts, aren't we using the power of words and thoughts to create or bend reality?

Let's take a small step further down this line. Words that spring from thought could form one of the definitions of language. We have looked at computer languages and we certainly know that our computer reality is defined by the languages that they speak. HTTP, Windows, Mac, UNIX, E-mail, fax, HTML, binary, assembler, machine code: each of these languages limits and constrains the processor to a set of actions and reactions. A reality is created by these languages. The languages are unique, have dialects, and miscommunication can and does occur between devices that do not speak a common tongue.

We have seen, produced, and performed in 'realities' that are created through the languages of words, music, light, colour, costume, and sound. Think of your favourite scene from a musical, opera, or play. The audience are fooled into thinking the actors are really living the experience on stage, and their emotions are engaged by the interplay of the mechanics of the scene. A little more light; a different tune; an awkward, 'unreal' turn of phrase and the 'reality' on stage is seen to be the illusion it is. We suspend 'reality' when we go to the theatre, but the tears and laughter of the audience are real, aren't they?

Our knowledge of optics tells us that the lenses in the eye produce an image on the retina that is upside down. Yet we 'see' feet 'down' on the ground. Our brain filters the 'reality' of the image's location on the retina.. We perceive a pattern of vibrations in the air and infer and evaluate relationships between the frequencies simultaneously and in sequence. Major, minor, diminished; *legato*, *sostenuto*, *detaché*; sad, uplifting, consoling; they are just vibrations that we have lived with, absorbed, identified, and attached to our 'reality'. Think of your experiences with the music of other cultures. Does the noble court music sound noble to your ears? Is the proud song of the shepherds proud or slightly silly? How can anyone dance to that rhythm?

We sometimes joke about teaching music as a foreign language, but it very often is an apt description of what we do. When we are teaching music through performance, we have to remember that for many of our students, the emotional vocabulary we are building may not be present in their experience. They probably have grown up in a different culture or have not been made aware of the existence of this particular dialect of cultural language.

The last sentences of the quote at the top of the page bear a great deal of thought. "Don't talk yourself down," we tell our students. Even on our worst days we can have one positive experience - the chord is in tune, the tone is focused, the ensemble works as a unit - and that makes the tiredness, frustration, and anger go away. We try to teach students that acknowledging the existence of a problem is the first step in eradicating it. We can go one step further and take a positive view of life and minimise the power the negative influences have on us. There is growing proof in the realities of psychology, medicine, and education that what Dr. Norman Vincent Peale called "The Power of Positive Thinking" exists and has a greater power in our day to day 'realities' than we realise.

Crowd your life and the lives of those you love and care for with positive experiences and leave no room for the negative. Your music, their music, and the music of the world around you will be that little bit better for your efforts.

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