Diss “like” - By Ted Gup

Depending on how you do the math, there are between a quarter-million and a million words in the English language. The 20-volume second edition of The Oxford English Dictionary boasts north of 291,500 entries. A Texas-based outfit, the Global Language Monitor, puts the number of words at 1,010,649—that’s as of May 24, 2011—and growing at the rate of one new word every 98 minutes. Whatever the count, there are plenty of words to go around.

Of all these hundreds of thousands of words, only one do I hold in contempt. That word is "like"—not the tepid expression of mild appreciation but the parasitic form that now bleeds the mother tongue, marks the user as a dunce, and, were it truly understood, scandalizes our schools.

No word has less meaning or says as much about what has become of education.

It is easy—and fashionable—to dismiss it as a personal pet peeve (a pedagogical hypersensitivity,) a verbal tic (like Tourette's, a disability that, though embarrassing, calls for accommodation, not correction), or a sophomoric affliction akin to acne—soon to be outgrown and impolite to point out. It amuses others as an endearing aspect of the ingénue who texts through class and surfaces now and again, with hand raised, bursting with earnestness to volunteer that "like, when I, like, think about this, I, like. ... " ("Thank you, Heather," says the instructor, grateful for any relief from his or her own monotonous monologue.) Then there are those who are merely disdainful, content to ridicule the afflicted, and take it on as part of the sackcloth and ashes that goes with being a teacher. The collective response of the academy: feigned deafness.

But having spent the last 30 years in the company of the possessed, I have come to view "like" as something more pernicious, a kind of carrier, like the flea that brings with it the plague. It is the byproduct of a culture that is loath to set standards, pathologically averse to confrontation, and prostrate in the face of precipitously declining verbal and writing skills. The endless cascade of "likes" is nothing more than the sound of our own collective dereliction, a verbal cue that we care less about our students and more about teaching to the test, conducting perfunctory self-assessments, winning student-evaluation pageants, and maintaining the illusion that all is well—the oral equivalent of grade inflation.
If we have succeeded in leaving no child behind, it is perhaps because we have condemned children to a common cluster of mediocrity, like, you know, unable to speak, and worse yet, unaware of the severity of their impediment. It is a form of cruelty, a velvet noose they will forever wear around their necks as they venture out into the world, presenting themselves in job interviews, addressing clients, patients, judges, customers, and peers, reminding one and all with whom they come into contact that, notwithstanding a diploma and high GPA, they have failed and, worse yet, we have failed them.

To those who imagine that "like" is merely empty calories, think again. It is used as the connective tissue, for many the basic webbing upon which all sentences are formed. These are sentences whose destination is a mystery even to the speaker. It is a way to buy time, a stalling device that keeps the sentence aloft even when the air is no longer under its wings. It creates the illusion of forward movement but imparts no progress toward an idea or a position. Such a sentence hovers, hoping that some direction will clarify itself before exhaustion—the speaker's, the listener's, or both—takes hold and the sentence collapses from sheer vacuity.

"Like" is merely an adhesive that, ironically, holds together unlike elements. It represents the antithesis of forethought, is inimical to critical thinking, a counterfeit expression, a poseur emboldened by years of self-indulgence and pedagogical neglect. It is a kind of get-out-of-jail-free card, relieving the speaker of accountability. It tells students that the world is so intrigued by what they have to say that it is willing to clean up after them, to sift through the verbal refuse for the nuggets concealed within.

Where "like" is the norm, silence is abhorred and the oxygen requisite to contemplation denied. Reflection, in a time of instant messaging, seems as quaint as the quill pen and the flickering of candles.

We extol critical thinking but wince to make room for a quiet period to allow it entrance. We attach a premium to spontaneity, even if it produces blather. Better to have the mouth moving than the wheels of the brain quietly turning.

There is (or, at least, was) a difference between classroom participation and contribution. Half the time when students speak, it is like listening to the Delphic oracle—the meaning is so elliptical and vague as to be indecipherable.
Saddest of all are those students who do indeed have something to say but whose sentences are so mired in "likes" and "you knows" that nothing escapes the muck of their expression.

Those who remain silent on the matter of "likes" are complicit. They are the Vichy of vocabulary. By their acquiescence they are implicitly teaching that clarity is not a virtue, that self-editing is passé, and that intellectual rigor is no longer valued. The tacit acceptance of "like" inadvertently promotes all that teachers of writing and thought loathe—inexactitude, flaccidity, and waste.

College professors often blame the high schools and take comfort that they are above such rudimentary matters. Why, in the midst of considering the Great Ideas, should they stoop to such trivialities? Besides, some will argue, it is rude to intrude on personal matters of expression. It might strain the student-faculty relationship. (What is the value of so fragile a relationship?) Nowhere on the course syllabus does the word "like" appear, not among the learning objectives, not among the diversity goals. (In earlier days, such concerns would not have required specific authorization but would have been considered the sine qua non of an education.)

Today it is symptomatic of an anomic academy that increasingly invests in its own bureaucratic status and disinvests in students. When the subliminal priority of the academy is self-affirmation and validation, acknowledging basic problems in articulation and thought are unwelcome. Student failure is equated with institutional failure and threatens critical presumptions.

Today, "like" is among the outliers of pedagogical concern, a peripheral to all courses, a personal matter, like hygiene. Most teachers would no more call a student's attention to an enslavement to "like" than they would point out that a student has bad breath or poor posture. Better to let the student go about his life unawares, as if his verbal fly were open.

In an age of social media, how we speak and write seems so yesterday, and the corruption of the written word in texting and tweeting has given birth to forms of language alien to many of a certain age. "Like" is born of a mind-set that believes in shooting first and aiming later, that is all about hitting the send button, and views speed as the consummate virtue. "Like" is a license to leap off the high dive and then look to see if the pool is filled.
In dealing with "like," its cousin, "you know," and a host of other issues from grade inflation to academic honesty, the chosen path of too many institutions is that of least resistance.

But we in the academy have a role to play beyond merely moving students along a conveyor belt toward graduation. We have a responsibility to ourselves and to our students to help them develop "critical thinking," a term oft-repeated but seldom given much real thought. Teaching a student to take pride in self-expression is not a pedagogical intrusion but an obligation. Words matter because they are not merely an expression of thought but the way to thought itself. The reliance on "like" does not merely handicap the thought process, it subverts it.

"Like" is not an incurable condition. For years I suffered silently listening to students, many of them bright and otherwise able, self-destruct in class as their sentences devolved into a morass of "likes." It was all I could do to take them seriously. But all this was less about them than about me and about how I saw my place in the academy.

Very gingerly, I began to broach the subject with individual students. Many welcomed the fact that I cared enough to say something. A few resented what they saw as meddling. They had gotten this far just fine, which is sadly true and an indictment of the system that moved them along.

So pervasive is the problem that virtually every student in one of my classes was incapable of uttering a sentence without resorting to "like." And so I wrote the word down on the back of a legal pad in six-inch-high capital letters: "LIKE." I told the students that each time they used the word, I would hold up the sign. For a class or two it dramatically slowed things down. Some students found they could not speak in class without using "like" and for a time preferred to say nothing. Others tried to laugh it off. Initially I found myself constantly reminding students. Many were tongue-tied, self-conscious to the point of paralysis.

But within a few classes, the word had all but disappeared. Even more striking was the fact that students spoke more slowly and far more deliberately. The quality of content improved markedly.

Was it a great academic victory? Probably not. But as part of a broader strategy to elevate students' aspirations for themselves, and as a way to show that I do in fact care about them as individuals, it made a difference. It was part of a comprehensive attempt to get students to think before they speak, to eschew
the banal and self-evident, and to put a premium on clarity. It was a start. It was a way for me to begin to
take back something that I feared had been lost. It may be that years from now, they will remember me
for nothing more than curing them of their addiction to "like." That may be a small thing, but it is a
beachhead in advancing the cause of clarity, critical thinking, and personal accountability—theirs and
mine.