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Fred Barton

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Evolution and Constancy: One Teacher's Journey

Fred Barton

The first thing I really learned about teaching was that what happened in my classroom was not what had been promised by my education professors. So, to save my sanity and keep my thirty healthy high school sophomores from tearing the bricks out of the walls, I set about finding ways of teaching that seemed to do some good for the students and wouldn't send me into an early retirement. Over many (sometimes painful) years I developed an unarticulated theory from practice about teaching composition.

Part of my theory grew out of the books I discovered after graduation. As I read, I began to wonder why research findings accumulated, in some cases from the beginning of the century, had not found their way into the classroom. In the 1963 and 1986 versions of *Research On Written Composition*, for example, it is reported that teaching formal grammar is not helpful to student writers and sometimes is even harmful to their development. Yet my training appeared to perpetuate the myth that teaching parts of speech or sentence diagramming was what made writers, and I continued to use *Warriners* and *English 3200* as central textbooks for my classes even as experience told me that they did nothing more than cause some kids to memorize the parts of speech, or incorporate aspects of mechanical drawing into English.

English gurus, and other high-powered professorial types gave me many explanations over the years for my lack of impact on my students' ability to write well. James Moffett wrote, "Now education means of course that something or somebody gets changed, but taxpayers want their children to stay the way they made them" (5). The

implication of what he said is that I was not supposed to change my kids, just maintain the status quo.

Ann Berthoff saw the problem residing in the limitations of science when she wrote, "What writers do is thus confused with what psycholinguists want to study" (14). Now I was forced to teach only what "scientists" could measure, regardless of how meaningful it was.

John Mayher put the whole issue in a metaphorical perspective when he wrote that "...[T]he commonsense belief[is] that the function of schooling is to transmit knowledge and skill from expert practitioners to the young" (19). Finally I became a conduit through which information flowed, a sort of educational storm sewer.

When I returned to school as a graduate student, I found that there were theoretical underpinnings for what I had discovered in class and, as with the ineffectiveness of teaching grammar, educators had apparently known about them at least since the writings of Dewey in the early part of this century. So why hadn't anyone told me, I wondered. Had I been sleeping in class the day they talked about this? I didn't think so. As I began to look more deeply into the work of these people, two reasons for their general lack of visibility began to appear: history and bad luck.

Looking Back At Today

There is a science fiction story about a man who went back in time to the age of the dinosaurs where he accidentally stepped on a butterfly and thus altered the natural flow of history. When he returned to the present, he found that act had

completely changed his world from a free democratic society to a totalitarian fascist one. Perhaps we are also living in a changed world as a result of the clash between the Platonists and the Sophists in ancient Greece. To put it simply, the Platonists won and an externalization of the search for truth and meaning began to take hold. Plato created a rift between experience and formal reason. Since reality could not be perceived directly, all experience was suspect. So I was taught to focus on the forms of writing and not the experiences instigating them. Meaning began to be viewed as objectively existing outside of any individual, waiting to be discovered and named. Suddenly, the shadows on Plato's cave wall began to look menacing. They meant that teaching writing could only be done over my shoulder, through grammar drills and worksheets which were supposed to be absorbed by my students and somehow improve them, like a coat of paint had improved the walls of my old apartment.

"I could not understand why they resisted my attempts, made a shambles of intricately prepared lessons, and generally relegated me to a level of importance somewhere just down from old shoelaces."

I knew, of course, that one of the goals of school was to prepare students to become members of the society in which they lived and, as far as composition was concerned, that meant teaching my students "proper" forms of expression. Yet, several years of fighting a guerrilla war with students had taught me that there was more to life—and school—than propriety. Something was missing, and that something was relevance. As a graduate student, I had wrestled with a writer named Michel Foucault. He won, but one of the lessons I took away from him was that at some point in the development of institutions (such as school) the continuation of the institution itself becomes a primary goal. So much a goal that the original causes for the institution itself (such as learning) are shunted aside. As I went to teacher-parent nights attended only by the parents I didn't need to see, and endured the student chant of "Will this be on the test," I began to believe Foucault was right. Since the childrens' experiences weren't of the kind valued by the adult world, they were left out of the education loop to be replaced by what adults (often in the form of

behavioral scientists—who were proud of teaching pigeons to bowl) thought was necessary.

That was the philosophy under which I was trained, however, and I of course I believed that if I could get my kids to see the construction of language that lived in the textbooks, handouts and exercises I was giving them, they would go on to lives of joy and fulfillment. I could not understand why they resisted my attempts, made a shambles of intricately prepared lessons, and generally relegated me to a level of importance somewhere just down from old shoelaces. Later, I was to rediscover Dewey and something he wrote that helped me begin to work out of my problem: "Since education is a social process, and there are many kinds of societies, a criterion for educational criticism and construction implies a particular social ideal" (115). It was obvious to me that I wasn't part of my students' society, but of what kind of society was I a part? I went looking again.

"Big Science" Comes To Town

I discovered that one event before and one shortly after I was born, coupled with the still prevalent Platonic idea of meaning as externally discoverable, combined to create a situation in which I was actually expected to be ineffective in my classroom. These events were the Second World War, which evolved into the Cold War, culminating with the unfortunate launch of Sputnik in 1957.

Institutions provide the outer armor with which societies protect themselves. In times of threat, the value of institutional knowledge and meaning becomes paramount. The real danger of fascism, followed closely by the implied danger of communism, coupled to make voices arguing for a change in the organization of any institution—particularly school—weak and ineffectual. Just as the Japanese had threatened to destroy our way of life when they bombed Pearl Harbor, so the Communists threatened to destroy our societal belief in the predominance of capitalistically organized, open societies when they launched their satellite.

Technology had been our saving grace in the Second World War. Our factories turned out more planes and tanks than ever before. Our ships were faster, and our bombs eventually bigger than anything the enemy could put against them. It should come as no surprise then, that we turned once again to technology to counter Sputnik. This renewed emphasis on "Science" had an immediate and telling effect on schools. As John Mayher wrote, "...[B]lame for poor educational

performance was attributed to the pernicious influence of institutions for teacher education and their supposed continuing devotion to the progressive educational concerns of educating the whole child instead of teaching academic subject matter" (26). Science, the scientific method, now returned to the schools with a vengeance and swept this unsuspecting student teacher up in a tidal wave of prepackaged learning materials, programmed texts and "teacher proof" curricula. Not only were my students' experiences valueless in the classroom, five years of training to be a teacher had apparently been a waste of my time as well.

Language became a "code" the unlocking of which revolved around the accumulated weight of a series of discrete translating skills. Hence my *Warriners* and *English 3200* texts. This idea effectively separated the meaning process from individuals and brought it under the scrutiny of those who purported to have developed ways of controlling it, most notably B.F. Skinner. His ideas fit nicely with the emergent desire to use science to pluck our society from the jaws of defeat at the hands of the godless communists. Skinner's effect on the institution of school was to further the idea that learning was the acquisition of a step by step sequence of skills, usually going from the simple to the complex and perhaps culminating in Bloom's Taxonomy and programmed learning. Skinner and Bloom were the loudest voices of my training. Without my knowledge, they had shaped my behavior in the classroom as effectively as we had taught our gerbil Ophelia to scoot through the maze in psychology class. Ophelia went back to the labs to await the next set of hapless undergrads when we were done with her. I was to be let loose on students, a situation of much more ominous portent.

Writing about his experiences at that time, John Mayher recalls,

One of the responses to the demands for better writing instruction in the post Sputnik era in which I was involved was the creation of a new composition curriculum which consisted entirely of recommended assignments for students to complete...Although we tried to make the topics interesting, it didn't really matter in our scheme of things whether or not school writing was itself meaningful for the writer; what counted was acquiring the skills necessary to be able to write later, in college or in the working world. The prevailing perspective held that if such skills could be developed without writing at all; by doing grammar exercises, memorizing spelling lists,

learning punctuation rules, so much the better, since that would be the most efficient possible method (30-1).

The analytical scalpel of the scientific method (a gift from Aristotle) had been applied to the acquisition of language, and a perfectly straight forward, logical procedure had been developed for teaching that acquisition. In fact, it was so straight forward and logical it didn't even require teachers—it required monitors to check and record students' progress through programmed texts and worksheets. The society wanted cold war soldiers out there on the new front lines of factory and laboratory, and my role was as a drill sergeant, running groups efficiently and quickly through boot camp. The problem was nobody told me. I still expected to be a teacher.

America did make it to the moon first, reestablishing her technological dominance, and the Viet Nam War ushered in a period of questioning that, as the communist threat began to diminish, set the stage for the rediscovery of those, like Dewey, who saw teaching as active and learning as an individually determined process. Those voices were strengthened by the experience of American educators at the Dartmouth Conference in 1966. Out of that gathering grew the personal growth model of teaching which, in a return to Dewey, stated that meaning is made through language, and the learner's role in that meaning making enterprise is central. Even though the historical environment was ripe for this view of language in England, New Zealand, and Australia, the effect of the personal growth movement was marginal in the U.S. because the diminishing political threat of communism was replaced by the growing economic threat of Japan, hence a continued reliance on "Science" to restore us to economic dominance.

Even so, Moffett saw this as a time to take back the power surrendered to institutions during the Cold War. He writes:

It's time for teachers to quit playing dumb and passive, even if that was part of their teacher training. Again and again I have found that English teachers don't believe much in what they are doing, agree with a student centered approach, and are really quite eager to make a change. But they feel powerless and don't trust their perceptions. These are the effects of the educational-industrial complex we are embedded in (9) .

I never thought of myself as passive, or dumb. I did think of myself as distant. I was expected to

be an observer in my own classroom, watching as my students ran through the maze of composition and emerged as competent clear and fluent writers. I knew it wasn't working, but it was what everyone said I should be doing. It is only through my exposure to people like those who attended Dartmouth, and those who inspired them, that I got to see that there was another choice, another option, one that, if I can co-opt the term, would be more "user friendly."

Attacking the Either Or Scenario

Moffett saw the issue as one of political power. His solution was to organize the teachers to take back their classrooms, but he overlooked the network of relationships among the various groups within society. I wish Moffett had been with me at the parent-teacher conference when a father took me to task for not teaching Shakespeare in my tenth grade class because he had "suffered" through Shakespeare as a tenth grader and saw no reason why his son shouldn't do the same. Schools reflect the values of the communities they inhabit, and a strategy that changes only one aspect of that society (teachers) is doomed from the beginning to remain essentially an underground movement. As my old wrestling coach Foucault pointed out, "The eighteenth century invented, so to speak, a synaptic regime of power, a regime of its exercise within the social body rather than from above it" (39). That means that no one group will be able to impose a change on the other members of a society because there is no single "King" to knock off. No single leader means no obvious rallying point for revolutionaries. Moffett's solution thus falls victim to the very learning approach he rails against, meaning imposed on parents and students rather than negotiated with them.

Ann Berthoff wrote that, "The appeal of factorizing skills into subskills is so powerful that it can befog the vision of teachers who know better" (77). Why? Because "it's real purpose was to protect teachers from parental attack" (77). I remember a dean who was appalled that I would even attempt to teach composition without a grammar handbook and, in fact, threatened to write me up if I told my students they wouldn't need to buy a book for my class. What kind of class would that be, she wondered. What would I test over?

Like all institutions, and most people, I don't like change. Yet, I know I have changed, sometimes consciously, sometimes not. I have come to think of change, not as leaving something, but as acquiring something. I think part of the reluctance

to change is centered around the view that it is a take it or leave it proposition. I don't think this is true. I changed in the classroom because I didn't feel good about what I was doing, but I still do some of those things that used to set my teeth on edge. Grammar is a part of the writer's universe and students do need help in that area. It's the how and the when of that help that has changed for me. Grammar is no longer the sun at the center of my classroom universe, but a star in a galaxy of stars, all of which I try to visit with my students. We are explorers and I am a member of the crew. I don't think of this so much as a change, but an updating, an evolution.

It seems to me that the first step towards inclusion of student-centered learning strategies is a step away from the either or scenario. Curriculum needs to be viewed as having social and individual elements instead of one or the other. And the combination of those aspects has to find its way down into the individual classroom and even the individual lesson, becoming a shifting priority of emphases rather than discrete and separate totalities. My students still want to know how what they do in my class will help them get a job, and that is an important and relevant question. Working is not the only thing they will do in their lives though, and part of my responsibility to them includes aspects of life that go beyond the economic. To paraphrase W.E.B. Dubois, if I only teach them to make a living, I've not done my job. I must also help them to make a life.

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