10-1-1976

Philosophical and Cultural Perspectives on Reading

Nathan Kroman
Wichita State University

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/reading_horizons

Part of the Education Commons

WESTERN MICHIGAN UNIVERSITY
Dorothy J. McGinnis
Reading Center and Clinic

PHILOSOPHICAL AND CULTURAL PERSPECTIVES ON READING *

Nathan Kroman
WICHITA STATE UNIVERSITY

Introduction

Candor requires that I disclaim any real expertise in the educational speciality of reading instruction. This probably accounts for my writing about it with such sublime confidence. I do, however, believe that I know how to read. Moreover I have related to large numbers of people who are representative of many and diverse occupational and regional sub-cultures across the United States and Canada all of whom believe that they know how to read. These people typically exhibit a rather particular pattern of thinking styles. Since thinking is related to language and language is related to reading and since they all learned to read through processes and procedures that seem quite similar, it seems reasonable to wonder whether the way in which we learn to read partially influences the way in which we think.

Because part of this paper is a polemic against certain uses of definitions, I feel obligated to try to avoid them myself. I believe that through a series of true stories and anecdotes I can identify fallacies in thought which are supported by the way our language is culturally patterned and taught. Although I am personally convinced that the educational system generally serves these maladaptive latent functions, I encourage the reader to decide whether reading instruction *per se* plays a role in these processes.

Phenomena and Meaning

Before we get to the anecdotes, I shall attempt to make a distinction between *phenomena* and *meaning*. That thing, which in our language is commonly called the sun, is whatever it is regardless of the language or symbol by which we refer to it. It is whatever it is and has certain effects on people regardless of the meanings they attach to it. On the other hand, there are other effects that it has as a function of the many and widely varied meanings which are assigned to it by the various cultures of mankind. People create these meanings out of, or, if you prefer, in their experience and the meanings they assign to those experiences. The word *mean* or *meaning* can, in a real sense, be related to "understanding of" or "make sense of." Making sense of phenomena does not necessarily require language but communicating understanding does require language as does the achievement of higher and deeper meanings. There is, I believe, a tendency to confuse phenomena with the meanings we attach to it.

The word *mean* as in the question, often asked in school, "What does it

mean?" is hard to define. I can, however, illustrate some of the senses in which the word is used. First, we say "X means Y." In this usage we are saying that X and Y are the same. We can, and often do, simply say that X means Y without assigning any value or meaning to Y. Second, we can say that X means a *collection of words* which forms a phenomenal description of X if we are sure that the words we use have a common meaning. Thirdly, we can point to something which X represents. I tend to group these together because in spite of their variation they are all the same in that the word *mean* is used as an equal sign in mathematics. On the other hand we can answer the question, "What does it mean?" by interpreting *mean* in its implicative sense. That is, X means Y translates to X implies Y. "It is raining and that *means* that I will not take that long walk." Lastly, *mean* can be taken in its consequential sense. "It is raining and that means that the grass will get wet." Failure to distinguish between these three meanings assigned to *mean* is an example of the maladaptive function of our language style.

Some Stories From Life

On the first day of one of my courses I tell my students that I would like a male and a female to volunteer for a demonstration. Without warning I strike a firm but not severe blow on the upper arm or the male. I then put my arm gently but firmly around the shoulders of the female and hug her. When the volunteers are seated, I turn to the class and say, "Please tell me what you just saw." Generally, only about five percent of the class will do what I asked them to do. In one particular class of over thirty students none told me what they saw. Typically the replies consisted of such statements as "You don't like him," "Hostility," "Dirty Old Man" and on and on with a rather amazing variety of languaging all of which reflected the meanings which they ascribed to the actions. We often confuse events with the meanings we attach to them.

This distinction is further highlighted by the fact that many of us are emotionally affected by film sexuality or film violence. When this happens it is the faked and simulated behavior that affects us and certainly not the genuine feelings of the two dimensional patterns of light, shadow, and color that we see as people.

We also tend to confuse language and words with understanding or meanings. Much of education is concerned with the application and recognition of words whose assigned meanings are equated with other words in the sense of the *equal* sign discussed earlier. One fine summer day in Canada I was on a picnic with a friend, his wife, and his young son. The boy asked his father to tell him why the apples fell from the tree. My friend replied in a way that most of us would. "They fall because of gravity" or "gravity is what makes them fall." The young fellow's eyes lit up with the look of real insight and with a nod of sagacity responded with "Oh!!!" The boy accepted a word which he confused with understanding. We promulgate the use of words as a substitute for understanding. Often we feel that only *our* words can express not only our own understandings but common understandings.

Consider, for example, the following: I once caught three philosopher friends in conversation. I asked them for a definition of philosophy that I could pass on to my students. When I came back about an hour and a half later they were still arguing about what philosophy *really* was! They had no previous difficulty in agreeing about which human activities they would call philosophy and which they would not call philosophy. The argument arose only in relation to a definition. In spite of their common philosophical background, they couldn't shake loose of the culturally patterned and deeply embedded notion that there was a set of words which had a necessary connection to the thing which they understood to be philosophy and, further, each was sure that *his* words were *the* words. The predictable argument was not about philosophy at all but rather about the words which should refer to it.

The same assumption about a necessary relationship between a thing and the word for it was humorously pointed out on a Canadian television talk show. The guest said "You know, I really don't understand these people at all. The French call it *argent,* the Spanish call it *dinero,* the Germans call it *gelt.* Why the blazes don't they call it *money* for that is what it truly is!"

Another illustration of how the rigidity about words confuses thought is provided by another exercise I use in my classes. I ask students if, in their opinion, unicorns are real. Typically the reply is a resounding "no." The question as to the reality of love produces an equally resounding "yes." The students are then asked to write their own conception or definition of unicorns and of love. When confronted with the hard fact that they are completely agreed on the conception or definition of that which they affirm to be unreal and have almost total disagreement about that which they affirm to be real, they react with confusion, consternation, and, most interestingly, with the feeling that they have been tricked or duped. Their frustration increases when I point out that it was *their* answers, *their* meanings, *their* definitions and *their* failure to question my question that created the problem.

Our patterned language style also promotes polarized thinking. In school we are almost always asking either-or questions. My class is asked whether human faces are alike or different. Only a very, very small minority of the students either question the legitimacy of the question or answer with the single word "both." Typically they will all either emphatically assert that human faces are alike or that human faces are different. Their education and the way words have been used have blinded them to the obvious fact that, in some respects, human faces are alike and that in other equally significant respects, no two are alike.

Discussion

These anecdotes, although somewhat different, seem to illustrate an underlying tendency in our thinking which I believe is related to the way we typically use language in our culture and, more importantly, the way in which we unintentionally teach people to use language and to read. Critical thinking is defined differently by different people. I will not offer a definition for obvious reasons. However, whatever it is that people mean by

the concept, it is part of the processes of both the creation of knowledge as well as its application. It probably also is not merely the substitution of one set of words for another. For me it involves the process of seeing phenomena in novel ways. This involves a certain flexibility as well as precision in perception as well as in the use of language. We ought, I believe, to avoid language which suggests essences and absolutes and the notion that "we call the sun the sun because it *really is* the sun."

The chronic disease called "Hardening of the Categories" is prevalent in the halls of academia. We organize knowledge into neat little administrative units called academic departments and we give them such labels as Philosophy, Biology, Political Science, Psychology and on and on. Although these are perspectives which are used to study aspects of human experience, we treat them as discrete things. It is quite easy to goad academicians into an argument as to whether a particular segment of human experience is really a psychological, economic or political event.

The intricacies involved in the generation of new knowledge and understandings necessitate the categorization and compartmentalization of methodologies and concepts of academia. What is maladaptive is to confuse them with things. I believe that the current disenchantment with education is partially due to our failure to make knowledge whole and thereby perceivable as part of life. I believe that what is taught is potentially relevant to life but we have so refined knowledge in our thinking and its organization that it is no longer seen as relevant. We confuse labels, meanings, definitions, and abstractions with experience and understanding.

Conclusion

I believe that the following rather common practices in education share responsibility for the kinds of maladaptive thinking I have been discussing.

1. Although large numbers of words in our language are given many meanings, we often teach and use them as though they had only one meaning.
2. We indicate a written or spoken word and "What does it mean?" instead of asking, "What does it refer to in this sentence?"
3. We ask questions and relate only to a right or wrong answer. Typically, we do not encourage the student to restructure or question the question.
4. We tend to separate the study of language and other communication skills from other areas of study.
5. We point to a thing or a picture of a thing and ask, "What is that?" We are then pleased when the student supplies its label.
6. When a student uses a word we ask, "What does it mean?" and accept another word for an answer.
7. We typically ask, "Is it this or is it that?"
8. We still, like my friend's son, think we know what makes apples fall because we can use the word *gravity*.