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Guest Viewpoint: Literate communication, endangered species

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Guest Viewpoint

Literate communication, endangered species

I am becoming increasingly dedicated to the things I already know, and decreasingly interested in new things I should know. The effort to maintain currency is punishing.

Each year, science publications become heavier with compounding developments and innovations. My work depends to great extent on new techniques of others, as well as my own. Journal information is vital in this respect. I can often eliminate many articles outright on the basis of their titles, but usually nothing less than sheer will power or absolute necessity can induce me to wade through the language of the others to extract their substance.

The most impressive contributions to difficult reading are usually made by officialdom which, by virtue of its inherent Prestige, seldom, if ever, requires editing. In fairness, we must also give credit to otherwise dedicated and competent researchers who are naively unaware that their talents in exposition are not entirely commensurate with their command of science. Customarily, their manuscripts are reviewed by other dedicated and competent, but equally ingenuous, investigators who accept the language as adequate to the purpose and occupy themselves with quality of technical results. Their understanding of each other's argot inspires awe!

It is beyond the realm of bad-but-understandable English when the inscrutable is explained in terms of the unintelligible:

"... the nature of the nebulous force denoted as the fictitious force,"
and the unintelligible in terms of the ambivalent:

"... when the applied force is imposed prior to the fictitious force and the fictitious force is positive, a direct solution usually results in an incorrect answer..."

I have no trouble believing that positive and negative fictitious forces are nebulous. To impose as applied force or even apply an imposed force would present a problem, especially since it must be done before or after a force that doesn't even exist. I confess also that I am defeated by a calculation that sometimes results in a correct answer.

Blindness to the importance of language is a problem of individuals who, although unskilled in the art of writing, are as satisfied with the efficacy of their English as the color-blind are with their sense of color. Every scientist is a potential author. Faithful publishing of material because of its technical value assures propagation, perpetuation, emulation and continuation of the decline in intelligent communication.

Our language consists of approximately 600,000 words, spelled, defined, compared and catalogued, and a reasonably consistent set of rules for using them. How many more trick words, definitions, re-definitions, rules and infractions of rules can we tolerate before the system collapses into chaos?

Where does responsibility for quality of presentation really lie? With language-indifferent science students? English teachers who are preoccupied with English majors? Schools that fail in their curricula to recognize the need for educated language in every discipline? Technical researchers who are insulated in and isolated by their projects? Science editors who are insensitive to language? Language editors who are detached from science? Or publishers who must produce 12 issues of a monthly journal every year. Contributory negligence exists at all levels.

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Emphasis is placed on the belief that a person's response to a given situation does not represent their moral worth, but is rather an indicator of how he/she thinks about a critical moral issue at that time. Participants in a moral discussion may arrive at the same conclusion yet have diverse reasons for their recommendations.

An individual's reasoning may be codified according to its appropriate place in Kohlberg's three level six stage paradigm. The stages are thought to represent a pattern of thinking based on a person's experience and perspectives on specific moral issues. Kohlberg argues for the invariance of the stage development, that is, each successive stage builds on the preceding one and that no stage may be skipped.

According to Kohlberg's research techniques, indirect methods are not needed to "trick" people into revealing their perceptions about moral issues. To ascertain a person's stage of moral judgment one has only to pose to them moral dilemmas that will arouse their interests and ask them what the best solution to the dilemma would be, and why.

Classroom application of moral reasoning requires that teachers actively create cognitive conflict and stimulate student's social perspective. Additionally, this appli-

cation must set in motion selected patterns of social interaction including the development of moral awareness, the art of asking questions, and the creation of a positive classroom atmosphere conducive to moral development.

Three elements are fundamental to the moral judgment paradigm: (1) the necessity of increasing the teacher's own awareness of moral issues prior to expecting students to do so, (2) the recognition that many teacher-student interactions have moral dimensions, and (3) the acceptance that selected kinds of social interaction discussions are more conducive than others to promote moral development.

Despite the initial appeal of Kohlberg's paradigm and its reliance on the theories of Dewey and Piaget several criticisms have been advanced by educators. Hersh, Paolitto, and Reimer address several of these criticisms, however, in their zeal to promote the theory of moral development they dismiss the plausibility of the stated criticisms leaving their own credibility mildly abridged. But, on the whole *Promoting Moral Growth* is a text which warrants reading by educators interested in the concept of moral development.

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Guest Viewpoint continued

Awareness, obviously, is the beginning of the solution, but this naturally breeds more questions. How is a responsive school to know that students receive all the communications training they need? How can an amateur writer be made to understand that valuable work is lost in muddled English? How does a conscientious editor discover that improvements in rhetoric obscure the meaning of research results?

If teachers or schools are represented in these publications, it is invariably through their science departments. Science journals—social, biological, and physical—do not admit to having language specialists on their executive (policy), review (selection), and editorial staffs. Technical writers in industry have progressed to the stage where they do little more than to immortalize gobbledygook in grammatically correct sentences. Without the benefits of interdisciplinary guidance and enforced literacy from the ground up, degeneration will continue to accelerate and hasten the day when each select group will inevitably work in its own sequestered language community.

Literate communication is an imperilled resource. What can you do for yourself and others to prevent its extinction?

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