UND

12-1986

Education: A Universe of Discourse

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by
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*"We deliver excellence for less"--motto on
the side of a U.S. Post Office delivery van.*

*"The current
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In education, as in other professional fields, the
development of special language has noticeably speeded
up since World War II. New words and new phrases turn
up in public discourse and, as we get used to them and
as they inevitably begin to shape our view of the field,
we forget they haven't always been there; they become
the terms in which we think about education.

The relatively rapid change in language over the
last forty years can be seen in part as a result of
advances in the technology of mass communications but
in part, too, the result of equally dramatic advances
in a relatively modern art form--or craft: that of
influencing mass response to ideas and events through
manipulation of language itself, through both the inven-
tion of new words and the reapplication of old ones.
This article attempts to describe the ways in which the
language of education has changed and to examine some
of the reasons why.

To begin with, the current rhetoric in education
bears the unmistakable signs of lessons learned from
public relations and advertising (industries which have
been on the cutting edge of the development and exploi-
tation of language manipulation techniques): more
influenced by strategies and purposes than by knowledge
and experience. Words like "excellence," and "rigor,"
and phrases like "basic skills," "minimum competencies,"
"cognitive goals," and "academically gifted" have the
ring of salesmanship. They freight the subjects in
particular ways which betray an altered relationship
between language, at least public language, and experi-
ence. In subtle ways, as professional language has been

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influenced increasingly by purpose rather than experience, it has become redirected from the past to the future much as the American heroic ideal has shifted from the Lone Ranger to Luke Skywalker--the one "a champion of justice...in the thrilling days of yesteryear," and the other operating in a setting not yet invented.

The history of language, its changes and development, is intertwined with human history. Words accrue meanings, or lose them, in response to how individuals and society perceive what is going on around and among them; words in turn influence how these events are actually seen and understood. In this way, language remains in touch with the times, up to date in usage although lagging a bit in dictionary definition; dictionaries as the conservers of language are, quite reasonably, slow to admit neologisms.

The 1984 edition of the ERIC Thesaurus describes the slightly conflicted functions of printed repositories of language: "This 10th edition is the result of ERIC's continued efforts to maintain quality in its controlled vocabulary and to respond to the changing nature of education."[1] Lexical (or dictionary) meaning acts as a kind of brake on what might otherwise be over-rapid change; over-rapid because quickly developing special vocabulary--slang, professional usage, in-group language--works against generally shared understanding which, at best, takes a while to catch up.

"The new professional words and phrases tend to be shiny although banal. They've gathered no moss."

Because of their programmatic introduction into the profession, the fact that they are in front or ahead of the thinking which they are meant to influence, up there with Luke Skywalker, the new professional words and phrases tend to be shiny although banal. They've gathered no moss. For over a century children in public schools have been learning to read, write and do arithmetic. The relatively recent renaming of these achievements "basic skills" influences how we regard them; an imperative is built in. At the same time, the new terms are less specific, less clearly understood than the old ones. People are not sure what is or what should be included as a "basic skill." Language has run ahead of meaning.

A related variety of language manipulation is the forced transfer of words from one context, in which they have grown, to another. Real estate provides a case in point: the importation of the word "home" to mean "house." "Home" brings with it associations of character, warmth, coziness, stability, refuge, safety and so on; a house is presumably more easily sold when advertised as a "home" even though the implied qualities are

unearned and what's up for sale is in fact simply a
house. Such words and phrases, however, once they've
been transplanted into foreign soil, soon lose flavor.
"Home" eventually becomes a banal word conveying actu-
ally less than "house" in spite of the intended carry-
over of feeling and meaning.

Much invented and artificially naturalized language
tends to be thin, to imply, invoke, cast an aura rather
than say something as well as possible. I've suggested
two closely related reasons for this impoverishment:
first, that meaning itself has not accrued, over time,
in the usual way; secondly, that when context is as yet
unrealized, language is influenced by programmatic
assertion rather than by experienced reality. Words
and phrases are used to project images, feelings--an
illusion of meaning ("We Deliver Excellence for Less").

Language, according to Owen Barfield,

> *has two primary functions, one of which is*
> *expression and the other communication. They*
> *are not the only functions language performs,*
> *but they are both indispensable to its exis-*
> *tence. The goal to which expression aspires,*
> *or the criterion by which it must be mea-*
> *sured, is something like fullness or sin-*
> *cerity. The goal toward which communication*
> *aspires is accuracy. Both functions must be*
> *performed in some degree--and at the same*
> *time--otherwise there is no language at all.*[2]

Going by Barfield's criteria, one could say that, in
public discourse about education, there is virtually
"no language at all."

It seems useful, at this point, to look at some of
the language currently in evidence in the field of edu-
cation. It's actually not the more concrete words like
house/home--or in this case, desk, textbook, chalk--
which interest me but rather those that Raymond Williams
refers to in Key Words as "words of a different kind and
especially...those which involve ideas and values..."[3]

In order to point up the romantic, "essentially
feudal" nature of rhetoric used during the First World
War, Paul Fussell created a "table of equivalents":
ordinary language in one column, the "raised" language
of the 1914-1918 period in an opposite one. A "friend,"
for example, becomes a "comrade," a horse a "steed" and
the enemy becomes the "foe." Comparison of the two
columns reveals the pattern of intention behind the new
vocabulary: to whip up energy and enthusiasm for the
battle, for going off to fight on the continent even

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though the likelihood of also dying there was stunning-
ly high.[4]

My own "table of equivalents," a small selection
from a long list of possibilities, has in the first
column some "raised" words and phrases common to the
current discourse on education, and in the column oppo-
site, the roughly equivalent terms used before the new
ones came in. An analysis of the words in the lefthand
column and a comparison of the two columns will reveal
some suggestive patterns, something about what lies
behind the kind of education being promoted.

TABLE OF EQUIVALENTS

Basics	3 R's
Minimum Competencies	Passing scores in required subjects
Excellence (in education)	Quality education
Academically gifted	Successful students
Cognitive goals	Book learning
Dyslexia	Word blindness
Time on task	Time spent on paperwork

The first three terms in the lefthand column all have
to do with keeping up expectations: on the one hand,
putting a floor under acceptable achievement levels and,
on the other, holding out a shining, albeit largely
substanceless, vision of possibility.

"Basics" is shorthand for basic skills which are
defined in the ERIC Thesaurus as "Fundamental skills
that are the basis of later learning and achievement."
The term has been around for a relatively long time, at
least as long as the Thesaurus itself which was first
published in 1966. The concept of basic skills gained
popularity, however, in the early seventies, probably
because of the widespread influence of the Iowa Test of
Basic Skills.[5] It's a truism that in the last seven
years, anyone applying for a grant in education has
failed to make some mention of basic skills at his/her
peril.

"Back to Basics," the related action-oriented slo-
gan and conservative rallying cry, came in, according
to the Thesaurus, in the early 70s, in the service of
"an educational movement stressing basic skills,
achievement and accountability begun...as a protest
against school permissiveness and declining student
performance."

The sense of moral pressure the term "basic skills"
brings with it is palpable. The pressure seems to steam
up from an underground reservoir of mainly unarticulated,

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although readily recognizable, values--the traditional
and literally conservative values of home, family and
country. "Back to Basics" indicates a desire for
stronger discipline, fewer choices. Its advocates have
little interest in or patience with individual differ-
ences, eccentricities of the imagination, non-utilitar-
ian learning. Students are expected to "shape up," the
curriculum, to eliminate "frills." A puritan ethic can
be sensed here, favoring an education which is often
dry and dismal though worthy and certainly economical.

In spite of the implication that we all know what
is meant by "basics," confusion and disagreement exist.
Computer literacy, for instance, although clearly never
a part of the traditional curriculum, is often, these
days, included as a basic skill, even in the elementary
grades. Education in the arts, considered by many,
including this writer, to be absolutely basic to effec-
tive schooling, is usually the first thing to go in
budget cutbacks.

Although the Thesaurus warns that basic skills are
not to be "confused with minimum competencies," the two
are closely related. Minimum competencies are defined
as "Skills that are deemed essential for a given age,
grade or performance level." In practice, they are
basic skills codified and invoked for purposes of
enforcement, basic skills further divided, quantified
and made testable. "Minimum competency" is a recently
arrived, although very influential, term in the dis-
course on public education. Even more confusion
surrounds it than surrounds "basic skills" and all the
difficulties which might have been anticipated have
already arisen over the relationship between competen-
cies, educational background and local culture--whether
competencies can, in fact, be abstracted, made uniform
across the board and reliably tested regardless of
individual differences in belief, language, interests,
preferences, experience and schooling.

"Excellence" is a prototypical PR word in that it
suggests meaning but in fact conveys only attitude.
Nobody can be against "excellence" in part because
nobody knows what it is and in part because it suggests
something strenuous, upbeat, worthy of our best efforts
--in short, something we have to be in favor of. Once
we looked to the schools to provide "a good sound edu-
cation" or "quality education." We now demand only the
best, that all the boys and girls, like those in Lake
Wobegone, be "above average." Although, by Barfield's
criteria, this particular example of the new language
is neither accurate nor sincere, as a rallying cry, the
call for "excellence" has evoked widespread and, to me,
surprisingly serious response from educational adminis-
trators and the research establishment.

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Cognitive goals also have to do with our ambitions for school children although, in this case, more with process (I think) than subject matter. The Thesaurus, sounding hard put, defines them as "behavioral objectives that emphasize remembering or reproducing something which has presumably been learned or that involves the solving of some intellectual task."

Benjamin Bloom first systematized cognitive goals in a widely influential handbook, A Taxonomy of Educational Objectives; the Classification of Educational Goals[6]. Volume I of the Taxonomy identifies and elaborates on goals in the "cognitive domain," Volume II in the "affective domain." In Volume I the goals are grouped into six hierarchically arranged classes--from the bottom up: knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis and evaluation. The educational rationale for the hierarchy is that, "As we have defined them, the objectives in one class are likely to make use of and be built on the behaviors found in the preceding classes on this list."[7] The Taxonomy was intended to help "curriculum builders...specify objectives so that it becomes easier to plan learning experiences and prepare evaluation devices."

Both the concept of a taxonomy and the word itself are derived from the natural sciences, specifically Linnaeus' monumental mid-eighteenth century work on classification of flora. Bloom (a striking name in this connection) introduces his book with an acknowledgement of the derivation: "Most readers will have heard of the biological taxonomies which permit classification into such categories as phyllum, class, order..." etc.[8] Taxonomies sort out, order, and make areas of experience generally comprehensible in the interest of intellectual control.

The term "gifted" used to be reserved for artists, writers and musicians. Recently the adjective has been applied more broadly to include "persons who by virtue of outstanding abilities are capable of high performance."[9] The U.S. Office of Education, after grappling for several years with a definition of giftedness, came up in 1972 with six different areas in which a person can be gifted: (1) general intellectual, (2) specific academic, (3) creative or productive thinking, (4) leadership, (5) visual and performing art, and (6) psychomotor ability. A note of caution, however, is sounded by the authors of the Encyclopedia article quoted above: "A definition of giftedness must begin by clearly distinguishing between proficiency in lesson learning and test taking on the one hand and innovative behavior and creative productive accomplishments on the other."[10] In practice, academic giftedness is in fact largely determined by scores on standardized tests.

The use of the term "gifted" is clearly an example of a term being trans-
ferred from one context--the mysterious world of creative genius--to another, an
academic context in which, despite the attention paid to definitions, its meaning
has become confused and subject to political manipulation: the "academically
gifted" can usually be redefined for the occasion according to local political
needs and purposes.

Dyslexia is one of those words which, because of its Greek derivation,
sounds medical and diagnostic; it is in fact merely a designation, not an expla-
nation. The Thesaurus defines dyslexia with admirable economy and lack of
pretension as "impairment in the ability to read despite adequate intelligence
and proper instruction." The authors of Key Words in Education give a slightly
peevish and more skeptical definition: "A disability supposedly resulting from
lesions in some part of the brain which interfere with the ability to read."[11]

The term "dyslexia" is often used to explain children's difficulties in
learning to read: "He has dyslexia" or "She's dyslexic." Parents and other
non-professionals tend to be impressed by the sound of the word, believing it
describes a pathology which has been both identified and at least partially
understood by professionals, like pneumonia or anemia. Parents even frequently
believe dyslexia to be contagious or treatable with drugs. Unexplained inability
to read was once called "word-blindness," a term as adequate as "dyslexia" and
perhaps less misleading.

"Time on task" is a central concept in Mastery Learning, a pedagogical
method which gained influence in the early 1970s. Benjamin Bloom, John B.
Carroll and others popularized the idea that anyone can learn but some take a
longer time. Thus the element of time--the minutes and hours actually spent "on
task"--along with natural aptitude become the significant factors in academic
success. "Assuming that aptitude determines the rate of learning, most students
can achieve mastery if they are allowed and do spend the necessary amount of
time on a learning task."[12] The idea has the appeal of simplicity even though
it doesn't always work out in practice. It's difficult to know when a child is
"on task;" he or she can appear to be working on long division problems while
his or her mind is off on the baseball diamond, home with mother or out in space
with Luke Skywalker.

These are where the words and phrases come from. What, then, inspired their
introduction into education?

I could expand the list to include such words as "remediation" (extra help),
"study skills" (concentration), or "at risk" (likely to have problems at school).
Even with my limited list, however, the pattern becomes clear. First, the over-
all tone of the new language implies the possibility of control over a social-
izing process, education, which to the public seems much of the time out of
control. The introduced language is more technical, more special than the old;
we find fewer words we are likely to use comfortably in other connections or
encounter in other areas of experience, like "learning," "blindness," "scores."
Instead, we have "cognitive goals," "dyslexia" and "minimum competencies." It's
as though "they," the language makers, are assuring "us," the public, that the
situation is under control, that "they" now know what "they" are doing; that, as
in science, special standards and techniques exist, understood by experts which,
if properly applied, will make education an orderly, predictable and manageable
process.

Such words and phrases have come to education with overtones of business ("goals"), medicine ("dyslexia") and the military ("time on task")--all pragmatic, down-to-earth, no-nonsense areas of human activity. Significantly, we find no language or metaphors from the arts, religion or philosophy, areas in which the illusion of certainty and control is more difficult to put across. One could say we have traded the values of insight and understanding for claims of systematization and control.

To summarize, education, along with the other social sciences, has fallen victim to positivism and, in the process, has become a pseudo-science rather than the art it once was.[13] Language is being used to support the illusion of education as technology with its roots in science. Rather than describing prevailing beliefs, the current language is intended to create them. Only the substance is still lacking.

For the sake of symmetry and with no intention to scapegoat the U.S. Post Office, I will end this essay with an anecdote which sums up my thinking about the language of educational discourse: a friend received, in his mail delivery, a worn piece of brown wrapping paper with a bit of twine stapled to one corner. Next to his name and address handwritten on the paper was an official U.S. Post Office message stamped boldly in red ink: "PACKAGE DELIVERED WITHOUT CONTENTS."

FOOTNOTES

[1]Thesaurus of ERIC Descriptors, 10th edition. Phoenix, AZ: Oryx Press, 1984, Preface p. vii. All subsequent references to the Thesaurus in this article will be found in this edition.

[2]Barfield, Owen, Speaker's Meaning. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1967, p. 35.

[3]This essay is heavily indebted to three books: Speaker's Meaning by Owen Barfield (footnote #2), Keywords by Raymond Williams, New York: Oxford University Press, 1976, and The Great War and Modern Memory by Paul Fussell, New York: Oxford University Press, 1975.

[4]Fussell, op.cit., p. 21.

[5]See Hawes, G. R. and L. S. Hawes, The Concise Dictionary of Education; New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1982, p. 25.

[6]A Taxonomy of Educational Objectives, Benjamin Bloom, Ed. New York: Longmans, Green & Co., 1956.

[7]Ibid, p. 18.

[8]Ibid, p. 1.

[9]Encyclopedia of Educational Research, Vol. 2; American Educational Research Association, Harold E. Mitzel, Ed. New York: The Free Press, 1982.

[10]Ibid, p. 724.

[11]Collins, K. T., L. W. Downes, S. R. Griffiths, K. E. Shaw, Key Words in Education; London: Longmans Group Ltd., 1973, p. 217.

[12]Bloom, Benjamin, "Mastery Learning," p. 54; Mastery Learning Theory and Practice, James H. Block, Ed. New York: Holt Rinehart and Winston, 1971.

[13]Suzanne Langer, in Mind, an Essay on Human Feeling (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1967, Volume I), lists five "idols of the laboratory" characteristic of the social sciences in their efforts to be validated as sciences: physicalism, jargon, methodology, objectivity, mathematization. All of these are evidenced in the new discourse on education.