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A Myth: Whose Thoughts You're Having Now

by
Mike Pope

The way we talk about thoughts correlates to the way we understand their nature—and thinkers. Our words about thoughts often reflect and influence our beliefs about them: where they are, where they come from, and what they can do. Whether the thoughts are new, simple ones that we often call information (the plane is on time) or older, more complex ones that we sometimes refer to as knowledge or understandings (existence precedes essence), our beliefs about them determine our assumptions about how to act around learners. These beliefs and assumptions can be represented, as thoughts, in our conscious and can be examined. One of the most common beliefs concerns what thoughts can do through time and space: thoughts can travel, or at least can be transported, from human to human through words or signs. Of course, the opposite belief is that thoughts do not travel, nor are they transportable, outside of the thinker's head. A third belief seems to be a combination of the above two: some thoughts, especially those called information and facts, are transportable from human to human, but some, such as understandings or knowledge, are not.

Holders of the third view may often speak or write about the communicating of information, facts, or ideas but will rarely, if ever, speak of the communicating of knowledge. They may think it unlikely that knowledge is passed down from one generation to the next, but have no difficulty saying that facts may be transmitted from those who know them to those who don't. Distinguishing thoughts that can travel from the ones that can't, they would likely say that a teacher can give students ideas but cannot give them knowledge. They may speak of one sending a message (an idea for a purpose) but would think it queer to talk about one sending an understanding to another. They can easily talk about the conveying of information, but not wisdom, and would probably use the terms *convey* and *communicate* interchangeably. To speak of ideas being communicated, conveyed, sent, transmitted, passed down, or given to another is to attribute to them a quality usually associated with physical objects, like viruses, bottles, genes, heirlooms; that is, to say that one can communicate or convey an idea is to suggest that ideas are communicable or conveyable.

Those who believe that all thoughts are communicable talk about passing knowledge down from one generation to another and find it easy to say that one can put her thoughts on paper or that another can get his ideas across. To them, *Did you get my meaning?* is an ordinary question. They find nothing odd in wondering to a colleague whether or not their students take in even their most cleverly delivered lessons. It makes sense to talk about the content of a paragraph, to presume that a paragraph contains its own meaning. They speak about the comprehending of a poem or short story,

evidently assuming that meaning is grasped, taken from them. People go to school to absorb ideas. They easily talk about a library as a repository of knowledge. Those who talk like this consciously or unconsciously believe, or have believed, that thoughts can travel or can be transmitted in words through space and time.

The opposite belief is, of course, that thoughts are not conveyable, that they are not communicated. Doubts about the power of given words are evident when we insist that our students translate notes taken in class into their own words. To us, it is important for the student to relate (the professor's) words to meaning and (the student's) meaning to words. We call this meaning of a translation an understanding. We like to talk about the active role of the listener or reader and often make assignments asking students to put two and two together. A person who talks about figuring out what another says is telling himself that others' statements can be recognized and approached as a problem to be solved. To speak of someone recognizing what another is saying implies that for the re-cognizer knowing is occurring, not for the first time but again. A very similar process is implied when we speak of someone's words reminding us of something. When we speak of remembering someone or something upon hearing or seeing a name, we hint at the importance of memory in communication. Uneasy with the notion of students taking in ideas or receiving thoughts, we prefer to speak of a learner generating thoughts or fashioning ideas, whether she is reading or writing, listening or speaking. Instead of saying that thoughts are communicated through symbols, we prefer to talk about symbols standing or substituting for thoughts. We like to think of an observer associating his own thoughts with symbols regardless of who suggests the symbols. For us, there is a thrill of recognition when Ann E. Berthoff (1984), for instance, talks about "making meaning," since we already know the pattern and symbols of that phrase and are suspicious of the phrase "take in meaning." In short, we doubt very much if any mental phenomenon—from information to wisdom—is communicable through language.

Most of us believe that chromosomes and certain micro-organisms are communicable, can be passed from generation to generation or person to person. Through genes it appears that parents transmit physical and mental characteristics to children, and there is evidence that supports this belief. By physical contact, certain organisms appear to move from human to human; symptoms and laboratory analyses provide strong evidence that humans do communicate them. Through words, it appears that people transmit thoughts one to another, but to us the evidence is overwhelming that symbols do not carry meaning anywhere.

What one person makes into a thought another can make into nonsense. UB ILLN on a "communi-plate" may prompt someone to think of Urbana, Illinois. I would have thought of nothing (I didn't think of Urbana until I started this paragraph) had I not been puzzled two weeks earlier with a small item in a message column of a high school newspaper that read, "Juniors, you be illin. (signed) Seniors." When I asked a student if there was an error in the last word (my memory served well up to the last word), her main response was laughter. I don't remember what she said. I do remember translating it to a phrase from my Mississippi years, "showing out" (for those to whom these words do not stimulate a clear meaning, the phrase "acting crazy" is a close translation). In those days a routine of mine was to hitch trace chains to a single-tree. I know something about the few people who can generate meanings for "hitching trace chains to a single-tree" if their meanings somewhat coincide with mine: They have lived on a farm before tractors were used, or they know someone who has (and they could put together a picture of a work horse or mule with two chains

running from the gear on its collar, supported by hooks on a strap across the animal's back, one on each side, back to metal hooks on each end of a wooden crosspiece, the single-tree, which keeps the chains separated enough not to rub the animal's hind legs and attaches to the plow stock). Recently a communication student asked me, "What does it mean to 'book in a deuce-and-a-quarter'?" All that my memory and syntactic ability could come up with was something like "keep records while gambling with dice." Before the class's laughter subsided I knew that, on this matter, my memory was very different from that of my students (to take off in a Buick Electra 225). I remember asking a fellow graduate student once, "I know how to calculate a standard deviation, but what is it?" Many months went by before I could answer the question, my colleague, the text, the professor notwithstanding. I remember being puzzled while reading *The Caine Mutiny* when Tom Keefer told his fellow officers that Captain Queeg was a poltroon. From my immediate memory, I figured that being a poltroon was not good. The handiest dictionary did not list *poltroon* but *poltroonery*, with the words *mean pusillanimity*. Memory served well on the first word, nothing on the second except an image of a movie scene where Patrick Henry rhetorically asks whether his colleagues are willing to let George III levy yet another tax, "Are we so pusillanimous. . .?" The connections to memory were complete when I found listed after *pusillanimity: cowardice*. Syntax did the rest: To Keefer, the captain was a mean coward. One who talks about the conveying of ideas might tell the story this way: I was taking in the author's meaning until I got to the word *poltroon*. The point was not coming across; I couldn't grasp its meaning, couldn't comprehend the author's idea. I looked for the word's meaning in the dictionary and found *pusillanimity*, another idea I couldn't comprehend, so I looked up the meaning of that word. . . .

Most unsatisfying talk, for it seems to me that it is not meaning that one is looking up but connections to one's own experience and memories, the source of meaning. Through man's biological inheritance and experience, he has the ability to create and relate notions to words like *cowardice*, *coward* and *mean* and to form words into complex structures (and meanings) like "mean coward." When presented strange words in a context, a person often connects experience to them, but when the connection doesn't occur, a dictionary can guide him to words that he does recollect.

The way we talk about creating meaning from memory also seems appropriate for language sounds. When one hears sounds, she does not save them for later use. Even though sounds are transmitted (as sound waves) from human to human, their effect on the listener is not informative in nature but simply stimulative, prodding one to formulate her own version of the sounds heard. Although acoustic phoneticians assure us that repeated sounds (even those of the same person) are never identical, fortunately, those generated by the listener are judged most of the time to be the same as those heard—but not always. A student of mine related this story: Years before she, with her father and mother, was saying goodbye to her aunt and uncle after a visit just before Christmas. Her aunt sang out "Mery Christmas!" just as she and her parents reached the steps. My student said that she turned around and rejoined "Hallelujah!" much, she later realized, to her mother's and father's surprise. On their way home she learned that she had been hearing "Happy New Year" wrong (substituting an "l" sound for the "p" and "n" sounds and, as others who speak her dialect, deleting the final "r", she had decided that "happy new year" was the same exclamation "hallelujah" that she heard in church). As with all listeners, what she heard was her own creation. Recently in a linguistics class, the students had been studying ways of classifying sounds including manner of articulation. The sibilant sounds were described as the hissing sound of friction. Later, one student

referred to the sibilant as a suction sound of kissing. Only when the speaker's sounds are "taken" differently do we notice the creative nature of listening. I heard and sang the nonsense song "Marezy doatsy dozy doatsy, little lamzy dievy—a kittlee dievy too, wouldn't you" until I was 26 years old.

In spite of experiences to the contrary, it is obvious to most of us that humans do communicate ideas one to another and usually take in what is spoken or written, but a close look at idea transportation quickly becomes absurd. For example, we may know what Lord Byron was trying to tell us and agree with some of his ideas and deny others. Imagine Byron sitting at a table, quill in hand, with the notions about not loving the world nor worshipping echoes. The ideas originate in his head and he wants to shape them and get them down on paper. After he has transformed the ideas the way he wants them, he has to move them out of his head down to the table. Slowly the ideas start down his neck, moving toward the hand holding the quill. They emerge from the skin, soak through the outer shell of the quill, dissolve in the ink, and subsequently are brushed onto the paper. His printer somehow lifts the ideas from the first copy and places them into the printing press. . . .

A magical world, where mythic powers dwell in objects, physical symbols. Humans have been reifying symbols, thinking of a symbol and its power—its significance—as one identity probably since the development of language (see Susanne Langer's discussion of Ernst Cassirer's *Myth and Language*, 1984). If the meaning of a physical symbol is not embodied by or identical with the physical symbol, the notion of communicating ideas with language is a myth. If we say that thoughts do not travel outside of humans with sounds or other physical representations of ideas, their presence must be accounted for some other way. If ideas are not communicated, if humans do not give and take facts to and from one another, what are they doing when they communicate? Why is communication often successful but sometimes unsuccessful; that is, why do speakers and listeners form similar and dissimilar notions? What are the bases of this forming?

How does one talk about communication if she dismisses the notion that it involves the conveying of ideas? We can say that the extent of one's memory correlates with the degree of one's understanding in a communication act, whether a listener or speaker, but the correlation is not perfect. If it were, all ideas resulting from a communication act would be old, extracted from memory. As Stanley Fish said (in a talk at Virginia State University), it appears that one can read only what he has already read. But the act of reading involves one's syntax—one's combining ability—and the combinations may be new to the reader and the writer. The reader does what the writer does; he uses his own memory and syntactic combinations to develop his own meaning. If the writer suggests symbols or patterns new to the reader, the reader will create her own version of them if she feels the need.

The word *communicate* has been used in English since the sixteenth century to mean, in the transitive sense, to transmit or convey abstract and tangible entities, such as knowledge and plants. It is still used to refer to similar notions, with the sense of physical transmissions mainly restricted to disease and genes. The word evidently proved helpful as notions about the nature of disease and genetics were generated. In this transitive sense, the word *communicate* is not helpful to those who attempt to account for the commonality of understandings in a community, unless they are satisfied with the myth that physical symbols have the power that they symbolize. In its intransitive sense—to share in, to cooperate, to make a community—the word *communicate* works, for humans can think together, can have similar thoughts while cooperating. They can make a community, can

develop themselves into a group of like-minded thinkers. In other words, even though humans cannot communicate ideas, they do communicate.

The notion of thinking while cooperating with others is almost identical to my notion of teaching-learning. The possibility that one can learn alone does not contradict this view; for example, a writer knows that he is a community, that he is also a reader. Indeed, a writer may be more than one reader (Strong, 1987). In a context, when a speaker-writer thinks and gestures (creating physical signs or symbols) and an observer realizes (makes real, for himself) what the other is doing, the larger community is formed, communication involving two people occurs. This communal knowing derives from man's common biological inheritance, which makes similar experience and, thus, similar memories connected with like symbols and syntax possible.

When one communicates with another, she gestures about her thoughts or thinks about another's gestures. The knowing that results is individual, and its similarity to the knowing of others of the community will vary according to their experiences, memories, and attention. The knowing is communal in the sense that it comes with the attempt to make a community, to communicate. In this light, learning and knowing do not come from the communication of ideas (by teachers or anyone else) but from communication. Knowing is a "social affair" (see Kenneth A. Bruffee's introduction to the social constructionist view, 1986). And it is at the same time an individual affair. Communication, an intransitive, reflective, creative act, succeeds with another if and to the degree that both persons' memories of experiences and symbol systems are alike. Thoughts and knowledge, instead of being taken from others, come from the self, from what one has composed from experience in communication with the self and others. Language users (the observers and the observed) engage the self, generate their own power with words, make their own sense.

When one talks about the intransitive nature of thoughts, teaching and learning cease to be a sending and receiving process. Teachers and students become composers in their attempts to communicate. Proficient teachers have communicated, have composed from experience—know. Students can learn to do the same when invited into a community and given the opportunity, example, practice, and guidance. When one stops talking about the conveying of information, the secondary social function of language seems to be the same as the primary function—making sense of one's world.

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