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Changes and Challenges in Teaching the Word and the World for the Benefit of All of Humanity

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Changes and Challenges in Teaching the Word and the World for the Benefit of All of Humanity

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In this paper, I will address critical changes and challenges which all educators around the world will have to address if we are to develop a global village in which all humans are respected, allowed to live with dignity and without persecution. Teachers and teacher educators will need to consider the vital importance of helping learners in their moral development as they become competent communicators. Prepackaged, superimposed curricula which do not allow room for teachers and learners to negotiate their words and their worlds simultaneously will eventually come to be seen as counterproductive to the best interests of the societies of the twenty first century. In fact, the basic skills we most need to be teaching, those which help students to develop ontologically while preserving their epistemological curiosity about the world, are conspicuously absent from commercial materials, standardized tests, and courses of teacher preparation. Rather than teachers as technicists who cover a fragmented, decontextualized curriculum, skill by skill, teachers must intellectualize their efforts to design thought provoking activities which require negotiation for meaning and higher order thinking. They will have to learn to read their students' evolving, developmental proficiencies, as teachers pose critical questions which promote student engagement with issues of language, literacy, culture, ecology, democracy, and humanity.

> "I can't respect the teacher who doesn't dream of a certain kind of society that he would like to live in, and would like the new generation to live in; a dream of a society less ugly than those we have today; a society that is more open and less marred by prejudice." Paulo Freire, 1996 (1)

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

In the 1950's, Noam Chomsky offered new insights into the field of linguistics which were so different from the status quo that he found it impossible to publish his ideas in the United States. What Chomsky suggested was that -- contrary to the notion that behaviorists were asserting about language being a habituated behavior which is conditioned into speakers -- natural language acquisition involves active, cognitive processing on the part of learners of their native languages or any subsequent language they wish to learn. Whereas pre-Chomskian definitions of language proficiency focused almost entirely on prescriptive grammars, Chomsky understood the importance of generative grammars; approximations based on meaning which are learner-generated and evolve from deep to surface structures over time. What I choose to refer to as the "me want cookie" stages of communication.

> Communion, communication, community - in simple Anglo-Saxon meaning: to eat together, to talk together, and to live together, respectively.

In the early 1960's, Del Hymes and William Labov added the science of anthropology to the equation and a total revolution in language theory exploded onto the scene. Hymes suggested a new definition of language proficiency which included linguistic competence, but

also much more: Communicative Competence. To be communicatively competent people must be able to get done what they intended to get done using whatever language they have available. The less language a learner has available, the more strategic competence is important. Native speaker accuracy is neither a reasonable or desirable expectation in early stages of language learning, because learners must go through developmental stages of communicative competence as they acquire an intuitive grammar in the target language. Therefore, language teaching should be concentrated on creating communicative pedagogical spaces where learners can negotiate for meaning with other learners. The process of negotiating for meaning, --which we all do in our second language, and often in our first language, in authentic language settings, for example when we are lost in a foreign country and ask for directions-- helps learners to develop strategies to communicate more effectively as they acquire the target language. These skills transfer from language classrooms to real world communicative settings and are much more helpful to language learners than memorization of dialogues, verb conjugations, and other artificial, prepackaged "language" activities based upon behaviorist notions of language learning anchored in grammatical syllabi.

In addition to strategic competence, Labov's work added an entire dimension which has led to the consideration of sociolinguistic competencies as part of the definition of language proficiency. It is a well-documented fact that those who do well on examinations of linguistic competence are not necessarily able to communicate effectively with speakers of that language. It has also been demonstrated that learners who acquire language naturally can communicate effectively and perform with reasonable success on grammar tests despite the lack of emphasis on grammar in their learning. It is clear that new approaches to language teaching (TPR, natural approach, silent way, cooperative learning, etc.) are gradually making their way into classrooms, but these approaches are often less successful than theory predicts because of our failure to abandon pre-Chomskian notions about language learning which persist alongside more communicative approaches. I wish to address some of the reasons below, and I wish to add one further dimension, a sociopolitical and cultural one, for our professional consideration as we embark upon the next century.

While this revolution continues, it is interesting to note how few professionals associated with language teaching, how few professors who prepare these professionals, how few testing "experts," and how few publishing companies seem to have noticed. The majority of these "professionals" continue to base their pedagogies upon pre-Chomskian, behavioristic theories which exclusively prescribe surface structure grammatical accuracy, even when the prescriptive grammar is not the way native speakers actually speak. A simple example should suffice here: one of the most over taught verbs in the English language is "will," a modal verb in the present tense which indicates the future. While I am not suggesting that we never teach this verb, it amazes me how we neglect to teach the American verb "gonna" which represents the spoken language English as a Second Language learners are "gonna" hear when they watch Hollywood movies, listen to popular culture music, or speak with Americans of almost every social class, ethnic group, and geographical region of the United States and elsewhere in the English speaking world as well. This is but one of an infinite number of examples where language in use stands in stark contrast to language as taught. Let us reflect for a moment on what we know about our mother tongue and the world in which we grew up. I would like to offer just a few examples of things we know that no one made an effort to teach us, we made no effort to learn, and no one has ever attempted to measure whether we know them or not. Despite all this, we know these things and we all know them.

For instance, when I burn my hand on a hot pot, I say OUCH! I don't say "Hot" or "I burned my hand" or "Wow!" I say Ouch. My mother says ouch. My father said ouch, my sisters say ouch. My neighbors and friends who grew up in the United States say ouch. People I don't know in California say ouch too. Why? Was it an item, skill number 252, in a

standardized curriculum which is nationwide? No. We all learned it because it is a natural expression of the language and culture in which we grew up. If I had grown up in Mexico I would not say ouch because in Spanish, in the same situation everyone says ¡Ay! These are things we all learn, yet no one tries to teach them to us or test us.

How do you say OUCH in Chinese? Does anyone disagree?

Why do we abandon successful ways of knowing when we teach? How can we say teaching is based on science when we ignore such basic information about successful learning environments? Perhaps no one has ever asked these questions. I think there are many great scholars who have been asking these questions for a long time, but apparently few have been listening. So, I think it is time to ask them once more.

What else did we all learn without someone intentionally trying to teach it to us? We learned how close we should stand to a person we are talking with. We learned when to hug rather than shaking hands and vice versa. We learned the music of the language we speak, the melodics. We learned how to behave on elevators. Understand that most of this learning is invisible to us, yet there are clear cultural rules. The next time you get on an elevator, try facing the back of the elevator, singing opera, or hugging everyone. You will discover the rules quickly, and so will everyone else.

Mothers help children to develop linguistically, socially, physically and emotionally and are really the first teachers of children. Mothers are highly successfully, yet they accomplish tremendous amounts of learning on the part of their children without lesson plans, tests, quizzes, scope and sequence charts, and without behavioral objectives -- "Today I will teach my child to speak in the past tense." or "Today I will teach my child how to walk." -- and yet they are successful in learning how to speak in the past tense and learning how to walk! What is it that we can learn from this success? How might these reflections lead to insights which will change our views of teaching and learning in significant ways? In 1973, Herb Kohl stated:

> There is no reading problem. There are problem teachers and problem schools. Most people who fail to learn how to read in our society are victims of a fiercely competitive system of training that requires failure. If talking and walking were taught in most schools we might end up with as many mutes and cripples as we now have non-readers (1973:xi).

What prompted Kohl to make such a statement? Why is this statement still so true in many schools today? This leads me to a concept I'd like to introduce to all of you which I call "The Language Paradox" and I state it this way: "The best way to ensure that people will not learn a language is to intentionally try to teach it to them" (Bahruth 1997). Mothers do not deliberately try to teach language to their children and yet their children learn the language and so much more. This is because language acquisition is socially motivated, and not the result of the memorization of an arbitrary collection of rules about how a language works. When will we admit to the embarrassing connections between not learning and not teaching? Only then can we begin to create conditions in our classrooms which foster natural language acquisition and healthy human development. I now wish to turn to an even more critical concern for professional educators: humanization.

A VISION

The sociopolitical and cultural dimension of communicative competence that I wish to offer here is vital if we are to be successful in communing, communicating and building communities which foster world-wide, peaceful co-existence. Teachers of language, and all teachers really, who ignore this dimension do a great disservice to the world and the learners they presume to teach. Let us suppose that we have a mean, greedy, dishonest person and it is our job to teach him or her a second language. To help a student to become communicatively competent in a second language without addressing ontological issues (for example, honesty, integrity, the importance of respecting others and our environment, sharing, passion and compassion), then what we end up with is a mean, greedy, dishonest person who can speak two languages. And now that person is even more dangerous!

One critical look at the traditional materials, tests, and activities used in most schools would reveal the moral bankruptcy of the curriculum. As teachers, we can begin to select materials which foster healthy humanization of our classrooms as we help our students to learn new languages and cultures. A tremendous amount of wonderful children's books have become available which lend themselves to discussions of critical human issues. While many would say this would be a political act, I would insist that failing to do so is also quite political. Who is benefiting from our failure to address the critical issues facing humanity? Who would have the most to lose if somehow greed were no longer fashionable? What do we have to gain from addressing these issues? What do we have to lose if we do not? We need to begin to see the connections between greed and poverty, and how our failure to address these issues reproduces increasingly cruel and antihumane societies.

It seems that teachers are being asked to teach a curriculum which is more and more focused on building the basic skills of language, science and math; a curriculum prepackaged by publishing companies which are in many ways at great distances from the classrooms of learners who are to learn from them. Prepackaged, superimposed curricula which do not allow room for teachers and learners to negotiate their words and their worlds simultaneously will eventually come to be seen as counterproductive to the best interests of the societies of the twenty first century. Research has clearly demonstrated that basic skills are not learned and then utilized for higher order, learner-centered, interesting activities. It is now clear that basic communication skills are learned in the context of exploring such activities in contexts which reflect a democratization of the classroom and the nurturing of interactive communities of learners who are actively engaged in problem solving activities and conversations. In fact, the basic skills we most need to be teaching, those which help students to develop ontologically while invigorating their epistemological curiosity about the world, are conspicuously absent from commercial materials, standardized tests, and courses of teacher preparation.

Not only must we ensure the linguistic and literacy development of students who are to be our future decision making citizens, but we must also ensure their development as wholesome human beings who will choose humanity and ecology over greed. Current trends in globalization reflect antihumane tendencies whereby the bottom line of maximizing profit precludes any careful consideration of humans exploited or ecology trampled in the process.

Paulo Freire (1991) once said that "critical pedagogy is much more a pedagogy of question than a pedagogy of answer." I wish to leave you with a few critical questions to explore and discuss with your colleagues, with your students, with your families and friends. Understand that I believe in correct usage of language, but I am unaware of any booming success in language teaching which turns on a grammatical syllabus, habit formation, or the defensive learning posture which is caused by testing, and creates a rift between teachers and students. "The "normal" curve represents statistically the impossibility of linear and chronological approaches to learning which pretend to educate all learners in cookie cutter fashion.

Where children fall on the "normal" curve seems to have more to do with goodness of fit in a one-size-fits-all educational system, than it has to do with the innate ability of a student to learn. By the same token, "ready to learn" linguistically accommodates an inflexible school system and might be more accurately stated as ready to fit" (Bahruth, 2000). How can we say that we have been well prepared, if we perceive the bell curve to be normal at all, rather than seeing it as a statistical documentation of the failure of traditional education.

The faulty logic of traditional rationalizations for failure would appear ridiculous in any other context. A simple story serves to illustrate my point. Two gardeners were given identical seeds and one spent long hours preparing the soil, carefully planting the seed, watering it and caring for it daily in developmentally appropriate ways. Her seed developed into a beautiful, healthy plant. The other tossed his seed on the ground and did nothing for it. When his lack of effort and care resulted in failure, his dismissed any critical reflection and simply said, "Bad seed." Which kind of gardener do you wish to be?

I wish to confess, here and now, that I too used to be a factory worker in the assembly line called school. The red pen once felt comfortable in my hand. The failing student had personal problems unrelated to my professionalism. After all, I went to a school of education and learned to be a technicist. It has been through continuous scholarship that I have transformed my pedagogy, and I have discovered that my students are starving for more meaningful educational experiences. I have rediscovered the joy of teaching and learning. I recognize the potential of all seeds and the failure of irresponsible gardeners.

Teachers should be human beings first, and the more humane we are with our students, the more effective we will be in helping them to come to know what we feel is important. This, of course, includes grammatical accuracy, but it should not be at the expense of the continuous ontological development of learners and their teachers. We must teach to the heart as well as to the head.

What questions are we willing to put to our pedagogy so that we might become more effective in teaching language in ways which will benefit all of humanity? Are we willing to ask what the vital components of education should be? Are we willing to discuss basic skills in terms of character development rather than distracting ourselves with less significant "basic skills" of punctuation, grammar, and spelling? What makes punctuation, grammar, and spelling so important that they take up so much of our energy and attention that we become less attentive to the moral development of our students? Why do we continue to value skill building materials based upon structuralism and behavioristic approaches to learning, while never critically examining the ontological emptiness of the content? Are teachers simply responsible for making students more articulate, or should we also concern our pedagogy with the ideas they articulate? Should we be promoting language learning only for the purpose of material gain and high paying jobs, or should we promote language learning to seek deeper understandings of the human condition? When will we rise to the challenges of our professionalism by asking ourselves the difficult questions which will transform teaching from the technicism of social reproduction to the intellectualism of cultural transformation? Will we continue to stand by and grade papers with our red pens, or will we recognize the futility and meaninglessness of these mechanical practices and begin to join our students in meaningful conversations whereby language is genuinely acquired through its designed purpose which is to make meaning of the world we live in as we explore the ways in which the words we choose can help to shape the future in more human ways?

I am calling for a paradigm shift away from a grammatical syllabus towards classrooms which promote communicative competence through meaningful social and academic interaction. This implies a shift from teacher-centered, meaning-getting direct instruction towards a learner-centered, meaning-making, collaborative learning environment. Rather than teachers as technicists who cover a fragmented, decontextualized curriculum, skill by

skill, teachers are encouraged to intellectualize their efforts to design thought-provoking activities which require negotiation for meaning and higher order thinking. Teachers will have to learn to read their students' evolving, developmental proficiencies, their generative grammars, as they pose critical questions which promote student engagement with issues of language, literacy, culture, ecology, democracy, and humanity. As David Purpel has stated:

> To put matters bluntly, the vocation of educators is not about improving instruction, or developing an integrated curriculum, or even providing for a smooth and orderly school organization, but rather it is to participate in the struggle for a just and loving community. Educators are moral leaders who work in educational institutions, not pedagogues who occasionally have to deal with ethical problems. The major question that we need to ask educators is not "What is your philosophy of education?" but "What is your philosophy of life and what are its ramifications for education? (1999:77).

Teaching as a profession needs to become more intellectually charged, not in the study of the structure of languages alone, but also in a growing awareness of the political nature of education which is blatantly "ontologically lite"[1] (Bahruth, 1996). We must discover that, as children grow up, not only do they learn the language of their speech community, but simultaneously, they often become fluent in a language of impossibility. Teachers are often well-versed in a language of deficit which blames learners when learning does not take place. Unfortunately, they learn this language while in school and the tragedy is that colleges of education often fail to challenge this language -- I might be so bold to say teachers become more fluent in this language during their "teacher preparation" programs. This prompted Kinneman (1995) to say "The greatest impediment to school renewal is probably the fact that we all went to school." Teachers need to become fluent in the "language of possibility" if we are to truly teach in ways which shape the future to produce as Paulo Freire stated: "a society that is more open and less marred by prejudice."

In the holy scriptures of India the human body is used as a metaphor for society. The legs represent the laboring class, the humble people who work hard from sunrise to sunset each day with their entire physical beings. The arms represent the merchant class, folks who make their living by buying the peasants' goods at minimal cost and selling them to the rest of society, often making much more profit than the laborers. Finally, the head represents the teaching class. That means us. To make meaning from this metaphor we can extend it a bit. If the body loses a leg, it can still hobble around with a crutch. If the body loses an arm, it still has an arm to compensate for the loss to some extent. However, if the head is chopped off, the body dies. When education represents the interests of globalization and greed, rather than the wellbeing of the planet and humanity, it is a frightening sign that society has lost its head.

Loren Eiseley once wrote: "The teacher is genuinely the creator of humanity, the molder of its most precious possession, the mind. There should be no greater honor given by society than permission to teach, just as there can be no greater disaster than to fail at the task" (1959).

The changes which represent our greatest challenges as teachers will require us to face the moral dilemma of the societies in which we live. Will we accept the challenges and

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[1] "Ontologically lite" is a combination of a philosophical term related to the meaning or purpose of human existence and the term "lite" which is a reflection of American popular culture used in advertising for numerous products from beer which is "less filling" so you can drink more, to dairy products which are less fattening. What I intend here is to denounce the moral bankruptcy of the traditional curriculum. David Purpel (1999:122) uses the term "Ontological sterility" to express a similar notion. (See reference below).

become living agents of history, or will we allow ourselves to be swept away by globalization which turns on greed and exploitation of the planet and the humblest of its inhabitants?

I want to end with a poem from one of the sages of our time. Shel Silverstein's poetry for children confronts the language of impossibility and offers children the language of possibility through his life's work. It is a language of hope.

Listen to the Mustn'ts
by Shel Silverstein

Listen to the MUSTN'TS, child,
Listen to the DON'TS,
Listen to the SHOULDN'TS
The IMPOSSIBLES, the WON'TS
Listen to the NEVER HAVES
Then listen close to me-
Anything can happen, child,
ANYTHING can be.

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