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ESTABLISHING THE POLICY OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE ACROSS THE CURRICULUM: ASPECTS OF TEACHERS' DISTRUST OF THEORY

DR. SULAIMAN O. EGUARE

Abstract

The paper examined the theories of Kohn, Novak, Barnes, Allen, Britton, and Pring on the learning process. Kuhn's model of ever-expanding paradigms is seen as not appropriate to the advancement of knowledge in the field of education because of the unverifiable nature of his theory. Novak, Barnes, Allen, Britton and Pring insist that student talk is central to the learning process; that teachers should not be transmitters of knowledge. The paper demonstrated that this is basically wrong as this theory has made teachers to be encouraging uncritical pupil talk. All authority of the teacher is rejected. Pring's theory further compounded the theoretical map of the teacher by suggesting that our conceptual goggle is as valid as the students. The paper concludes on a positive note that we should not play down theory in language and learning by concentrating on the problem but we should provide teachers with conceptual goggle in order to comprehend theories.

Introduction.

The first article in this series mentioned the origin of the notion of English Language across the curriculum. The introductory article articulated the difficulty in designing a language policy across the curriculum coupled with the problems of dissemination of the notion to teachers in Britain, which, it is hoped, we shall be concerned with when finally we establish this policy in Nigeria. Finally, the paper mentioned teachers' distrust and disillusionment with teaching/learning theories. This second article on the establishment of language across the curriculum policy will examine thoroughly why teachers distrust theories and, of course, proffer solutions.

Why Teaching Theories Are Elements Of Disillusionment.

Kohn has described how knowledge is advanced by the development of paradigms, which Novak (1997) characterizes as conceptual goggles "through which we observe phenomena and which enable us to relate phenomena one to another." As a paradigm becomes increasingly less able to explain apparent inconsistencies, the conditions are created for it to be supplanted by a newer,

more embracing one. Thus Newton's theory of gravitation has been discovered to be a less adequate description of celestial mechanics than Einstein's theory of relativity. More recently, the theory of Plate tectonics has brought a new coherence to the study of the Earth's geographical and geological features. It can be seen, therefore, that whereas the introduction of a new paradigm can open the floodgates of knowledge, not only by explaining the inconsistencies that have occurred, but also by presenting conceptual possibilities to be exploited in future research, or want of a new paradigm the advance of knowledge in a particular field will be arrested. Similarly, if for reasons of prejudice, for example, an old paradigm is clung to and a new, more appropriate one is resisted, knowledge will inevitably be distorted.

Now it will immediately be recognized that Kohn's model is not appropriate to the advancement of knowledge in the field of education, where we have failed to develop broad, all-embracing theories (Novak, 1997). Certainly there have been influential ideas rooted, for example, in philosophy, in sociology and in psychology. However, in the absence of a broad conceptual framework against which to assess their worth, and given the difficulties in verifying them empirically, mutually incompatible ideas have held the field for protracted periods of time. Their very contentiousness has made them attractive to researchers and thus they have been prodigal of resources. However, the greater tragedy resides in the fact that had many of these disputes been resolved one way or the other, the implications for the classroom would have been minimal. Even if it could be shown, for example, that intelligence is genetically transmitted; we would be no clearer about how to enhance the cognitive and affective development of children. Furthermore, the simplistic behaviourist approach to educational research has failed "to recognize the complexity of the interactions among... variables and the changes these interactions produce in the variables and in the concepts that govern their interpretations" (Novak, 1997). Thus not only have teachers generally been most exposed to theory at a time when they have had little experience to bring to bear upon it, but this theory has often been either irrelevant to the practice of education or downright suspect. It is not surprising therefore; that theorizing has been discredited in many teachers' eyes.

This does present a real problem then, but the answer to it is not to try to proceed by playing theory down. Teachers will not advance their understanding of language and learning unless they are provided with appropriate conceptual goggles". Furthermore, we think that there is good reason to believe that teachers' antipathy to theory can be overcome. As Novak (1997) points out, if we are to develop a suitably broad, all-embracing theory of education, at its heart must be an understanding of how we learn. It is this that would enable us to evaluate

previous educational research and that would introduce a sense of order and pattern and direction to future research. Teachers will respond to such theory because it will not be remote from their practice; rather if it is soundly based it will inevitably impinge directly upon it. If we believe, therefore, that we have made significant advances toward an understanding of how language shapes learning, then we must be prepared to explain these advances clearly and trust to the teachers to adapt their practices accordingly.

The Root Of The Problem

And, of course, this brings us to the root of the problem. Despite weaknesses in the dissemination of ideas about language across the curriculum, it nevertheless has to be recognized that in many schools that have tried to establish language policies in Britain there have been key members of staff who have been well versed in language and learning "theory" and who have, in a number of cases, elected to exert a theoretical influence on their colleagues. It is because even in these schools language across the curriculum has failed to become a meaningful notion that we have contended that some of the theory to which teachers have been exposed in Nigeria has, in any case, been of doubtful validity, or that in some cases it has been applied inappropriately. It is to these points that we now turn our attention

In his survey of trends in the teaching of English since 1965, Dave Allen suggests that James Britton has seemed to reject all authority of the teacher in learning in the school (1980). Now what Allen is referring to is the emphasis placed by Britton, following the American psychologist, George Kelly, upon the personal construction of knowledge. "Your representation of the world differs from mine", asserts Britton, "and this is not only in so far as the world has used us differently, that is to say we have had differing experiences of it. It is also because your WAY OF REPRESENTING is not the same as mine" (1970). And in order to represent the world to ourselves and hence, to develop our personal construction of knowledge, we must embody what we are experiencing in our own language. Thus talking and personal expressive writing are elevated to a level of greater importance than reading and listening. Now although Britton accepts to a certain extent that in any society the people will build a common world picture, "the novel idea of a personal unique construction, particularly alongside a child-centred pedagogy, was too dynamic for the sense of balance" (Allen, 1980). Thus the view that there is no point in trying to transmit knowledge to pupils, that they can only acquire it through their own active, creative shaping of experience, achieved considerable currency. Further doubts about the teacher's contribution are embodied in Britton's assertion that "there is in the long run no

means of exploring learning. We have come to recognize that the most precious means to a child's progress in learning is his own acknowledged responsibility for it; and, complementary to that, that we have no diviner's rights or powers by which we could so predict the society he will live in that we dare take on that responsibility ourselves (in Allen, 1980).

Now, Britton's view influenced the various attempts to establish school language policies: firstly, because his writings and particularly "language and learning", were invariably recommended reading on language and learning course during the seventies, and even currently in Nigeria and other Anglophone countries; secondly, because the English teachers who were influenced by him were often prominent in the attempts to establish language policies in their schools; and thirdly, because of his influence on other writers – notably Douglas Barnes – who were also widely read during the same period. Certainly, it is difficult to think of anyone who exerted a greater influence than Britton throughout the seventies. Thus teachers across the curriculum of physics, of geography, of history, for example – who generally adopt the style of what Barnes termed the "transmission" teacher, supposedly not seeing "speech or writing as changing the way in which knowledge is held" (1976), regarding himself as a subject expert and giving his attention "to the goals of knowledge (rather) than to the processes by which people attain them", have been subjected to vigorous attempts to alter their styles of teaching in order to enable children to make knowledge their own, firstly, by exploring their experiences freely in their own talk, and, secondly, by writing expressively about them rather than in some teacher-imposed style that is irrelevant to their own needs and understanding. That is, they have been encouraged to become "interpretation" teachers, recognizing that "the pupil's ability to reinterpret knowledge for himself is crucial to learning" (Barnes 1976).

Now, we wish to make it clear at this point that there is some merit in the view of knowledge that Briton and Barnes have promoted. However, as we hope to demonstrate shortly, it has not been fully thought through by them. Furthermore, it has encouraged a rather uncritical approach to pupil talk in some of their supporters. Consider, for example, the transcript below taken from a chapter entitled "Language Across the Curriculum" in a book designed to meet the needs of teachers in the JSS years. What we are witnessing, asserts the author, is the pupils "groping for meaning" in a teacher-initiated, teacher-led discussion on what time of day a photograph they have all examined was taken. She is "exploring their power to generalize, to deduce, to hypothesize, to resolve opinions, to put into some order ideas of time and light. In order to do so, she taps their own experience and language, gives it breathing space and allows them to

formulate in their own way the ideas" (Messenger, 1974). Let us now imagine members of the audience for whom this document was intended – for example a teacher responsible for promoting science in a Junior Secondary School, or a teacher of Physics to Senior Secondary Pupils. What can he deduce about the quality of learning that is evidenced here? How many pupils emerged with an understanding of the central evidence of significant learning about either time or candles like the extract on page 8 of this essay, it is no more than a blind assertion of faith in the power of pupil talk.

Julie:	*Sir... Mr. H. You wouldn't be able to make a reliable candle clock.*
Teacher:	*Why?*
Julie:	*'Cos both our candles burnt down different times. It depends on the candle.*
Girl:	*Unless you buy the same candle.*
Julie:	*Because her candle burnt slower than our candle.*
Teacher:	*There's all sorts of things (indecipherable).*
Julie:	*And the wind, ...*
Teacher:	*And the wind, yeh.*
Girl:	*Like the candles you put in candelabra last longer than these ones.*
Teacher:	*well, they're different thicknesses, aren't they?*
Boy:	*No they're not, they're posher.*
Teacher:	*What, they're made out of something else?*
Girl:	*And then twisted...*
	That's what I mean...
Voices:	*Yeh, those twisted ones...*
	Burning slower...
Girl:	*Yeh, because when we had a power cut two weeks ago we had a candle like that and one of them fancy ones in a candelabra. And the candelabra lasted longer than that one.*
Julie:	*So it depends on the candle.*
Boy:	*Those twisted ones do burn slower*
Teacher:	*I can't see why.*
Boy:	*'Cos it has to go round the bend.*
	(laughter)
Girl:	*It's a different wax, I suppose.*

(Schools Council, 1977, pp. 43 – 44).

However, it is not just that the above examples of pupil talk apparently failed to result in learning, but that they failed in situations where the common experience of teachers would suggest that teacher presentation of knowledge would have succeeded to a considerable extent. It is certainly true that many teachers of English, with its emphasis on aesthetic response, affective growth, personal expression and the development of language skills will be predisposed to regard the theory of the personal principle upon which the teacher had considered it worthwhile to focus his attention? We suggest that the only one we can be certain has understood is John, who understood in the first place for in view of the less orderly discussion after the point where she "takes up the terms and sequence of John and expands them to make the description clearer". It is not clear that anyone else has grasped the point. Furthermore (to avoid any suggestion that his own way of making meanings is not valued; perhaps?) she does not focus either John's or anyone else's attention on the important substitution of the word "overhead" for the term "in the middle". Now of course, anyone familiar with Barnes's "from communication to curriculum" (1976) and "Communication and learning in small groups" (1977)will realize that he, too, would have been unimpressed by this transcript. The teacher is too intent on her own meaning for Barnes's liking and he would have noted her neglect of Alan and the fact that she brought John into the discussion – an established source of "right" answers no doubt. However, our main point still stands: the Barnes – Britton view of the personal formulation of knowledge is interpreted by many teachers to mean that "telling" is undesirable (if not in the strictest sense, impossible.) and that any talk by pupils must have some value. Lest it be thought that we are construing too much here, let us draw attention to the following dialogue, which was considered by Naney Mostin to be an impressive enough example of pupil talk to be included also in Marland's "Language across the Curriculum" (1977). "The objective here is connected with the idea of time," said the physics teacher in charge of the lesson, "and yet I'm sure they learned far more about candles...." (Schools Council, 1977, p. 44). He did not consider this to be a matter of regret and thought it valuable that: "They're out on a limb – they haven't been told what to do" (p. 44). On the basis of the evidence of this transcript, however, we would suggest that there is no formulation of knowledge as a testimony to the impossibility of transmitting knowledge, but their brethren in other academic subjects are not to be convinced. And we would suggest that they are right; knowledge is personal and has to some extent to be formulated personally, but because we encode our experience in a common language we are able "to join in a larger common understanding (Sapir, in Britton, 1970, p. 202). That is to say, we all make meanings idiosyncratically, but meaning itself is not arbitrary. Thus we are able to

transmit knowledge from one to another "within a play of tolerance" (Branowski, 1977). It is our contention that it is because the majority of teachers did not lose sight of this important fact that they were not susceptible to the leadership in language policy matters of those who, under the Barnes – Britton influence, seemed to have rejected it. Furthermore, we suspect that Barnes's characterization of the "transmission" teacher, unflattering as it was, did some harm. Moreover, we doubt its genuine validity. Recognizing that knowledge can only be exchanged "within a play of tolerance," and drawing upon one's experience of the children one is teaching, all the other children one has taught, the nature of the learning material, one's previous experience of having taught it, and then drawing upon one's knowledge of language in order to find forms of words which will reduce the "tolerance" to a minimum is hardly to show a slavish regard for subject at the expense of the learners. And yet this is what, in our experience, even the most traditional teachers attempt to do, albeit sometimes unsuccessfully.

Now, it is true that in "from Communication to Curriculum" (1976) Barnes disclaimed that he was postulating exploratory talk and small-group discussion as the only road to knowledge, or that he was suggesting that teacher presentation of knowledge was never desirable, but to the best of our knowledge neither he nor Britton ever developed this point of view (indeed, Communication and Learning in Small Groups" (1977) seems to be a testimony to a belief that the failure of small-group discussion is more likely to be explained by limitations in the group than by its inappropriateness to the task. And yet surely if one accepts that transmission of knowledge is ever possible one must immediately recognize its peculiar advantage - efficiency. In view of the very small selection from available knowledge that even the most able pupil can acquire in school, we would suggest that efficiency is a quality we cannot afford to ignore. Thus any satisfactory account of learning must try to indicate the conditions under which teacher presentation is likely to be productive. Had Barnes and Britton done this they may well have won a wider audience for some of their other ideas, but theirs was the blindness of reaction.

Before adumbrating our own suggested approach to "language across the curriculum" we wish to draw attention to one other unfortunate aspect of the doctrine of the personal formulation of knowledge. It has encouraged, we would suggest, a rather patronizing attitude to some children that is likely to inhibit their educational progress. Thus, having quite rightly pointed out:

> *"even the young child, is lumping together all towered buildings as churches.... Has a way of*

> *conceiving the world, although it is not that of grown-ups."*

Professor Pring goes on to assert:

> *"The adolescent may have a range of concepts whereby events and objects we linked together differently from those of the teacher, this conceptual map is different but one cannot say it is wrong" (in Bantock, 2000, p. 70).*

Would Professor Pring have us believe, then, that it is impossible to be wrong; that the "conceptual maps" of the rather difficult group of adolescents who prompted this observation were as valid as his own? Presumably, if pressed upon this point he would deny it, yet it is one short step from the belief that "your way of representing the world is not the same as mine" to "your knowledge is just as valid as mine". And although we doubt that many teachers have wholeheartedly embraced this latter view, we suspect – witness the weak examples of pupil discussion we considered earlier – that many more have had their confidence to some extent undermined by it, and that it has, therefore, been detrimental to pupil growth and development. Notwithstanding the obvious truism that teachers can learn both from and with their pupils, the view of knowledge that we are postulating – that by idiosyncratic routes we all aspire to some extent toward a common understanding – necessitates both teacher and pupil often recognizing the authority of the former's knowledge, so that the latter can achieve what Polanyi characterized as a "fusion of the personal and the objective" (Allen, 1980). Now granted there is a danger here that we will present a fixed view of knowledge, rather than a conceptual approach to understanding that recognizes the tentative and evolutionary character of the concepts derived from the interpretive models we devise (Novak, 1997). However, as we shall soon demonstrate, we are not advocating a simple transmission-reception model of teaching and learning. Furthermore, we do consider it vital for teachers to draw their pupils' attention to the controversial nature of knowledge. Given, however, that what is currently controversial is inevitably at the frontiers of knowledge and, therefore, generally beyond the conceptual grasp of pupils, it seems best to act upon Dearder's (1981) advice and examine in all subjects sources of past controversy: what gave rise to them, how they were resolved, what is our present attitude to the issues they raised, etc. In teaching science, for example, we must

ensure that our pupils come to understand that its history is "littered with the wreckage of successfully contested theories." Thus, we will promote "an adequate grasp of the nature of human enquiry, of its dependence on imaginative ideas, of the place of criticism in it, of its advancement sometimes by fruitful wrong ideas rather than by pedestrian right ones and of its tools and standards" (1981).

Now if our view – i.e. that a particular view of knowledge held at least implicitly by teachers prominent in the language across the curriculum movement led to its eventual demise – is correct, then it follows that if we are to establish the policy of language across the curriculum in Nigeria we must, at the outset, be explicit about the view of knowledge upon which we intend to base it. The one we have adumbrated above is, we believe, viable.

Conclusion

We have seen why teachers tend to reject or are disillusioned by theories. The "conceptual goggles" do not fit. We are expected to examine how theories in learning would assist in mapping out teachers' conceptual understanding of both teaching and learning theories in the next publication in the series.

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