

# The Anarchy of WORDS

"We use words as the tools of our trade. It behooves all of us to fully understand the nature of the symbols we toss around so freely." This article represents a semantic approach to curriculum planning.

*A very great part of the mischiefs that vex the world arise from words.*  
—BURKE.

IT HAS BEEN SAID that theory is usually fifty years ahead of practice. With respect to the public school curriculum, this is very probably an understatement. Perhaps this frightening lag is mainly attributable to the words we use.

Why should it be difficult for an honest, sincere, devoted assemblage of curriculum-planners to reach common areas of understanding? Why is it that once curriculum is set up in a given school system, the classroom teachers and administrators who helped implement the document often deviate from its substance and spirit so markedly?

Language, whether spoken or written, is primarily responsible for our present high level of civilization. Yet, our words are laden with snares which trap the unwary. Language not only contains severely limited characteristics, it is also highly deceptive in structure. All this leads to confusion in meaning.

Administrators, supervisors, classroom teachers and others who serve in the capacity of curriculum-planners are sorely in need of effective tools

with which to deal with the myriad problems presented by the misuse of words. The discipline of semantics, which deals with the systematic study of meaning, may well provide us with weapons to destroy the verbal blocks which inhibit clear thinking in this critical area of education.

There are at least four outstanding linguistic pitfalls which claim victims given to a trusting faith in the efficacy of words: contextual meanings, limited meanings, intensional meanings, and two-valued judgments.

• *Words have meaning only in context.*

Words are artificial tools or symbols which man uses in order to communicate with his fellow creatures. The primary limitation of these symbols is that they have meaning only in a particular context. If the context changes, the words take on a different meaning. "The child must be made aware of his responsibilities toward recognized authority," means one thing in democratic America and quite another in communist Russia.

The semanticists tell us that inside each of us lies a picture of the world. This picture stands for the whole realm of objects, happenings and relationships outside us. The pictures in

our heads are distinctly different from each other. Because of the limitations of our language, however, we often use the *same* words to express *dis-similar* contexts.

Every curriculum is unique. Its concepts are peculiar only to a given school situation. The curriculum-planner can no more successfully extract words from a borrowed curriculum than he can copy his fellow teacher's classroom manner. "The curriculum must meet the needs of the child," means many different things to many different people. Each of us has his own mental image of the "needs of the child."

If this highly important contextual limitation of language is taken into consideration by curriculum workers, they will attempt to choose words which pertain exclusively to a specific instructional program.

- **Words do not tell "all."**

No word or group of words can possibly tell "all" about a given object or event. Characteristics will be left out. This is a semantic fact which is usually ignored, probably because it is so obvious. Any sentence which begins, "The curriculum is . . ." will not tell all about what a curriculum is or is not.

The semantic quarterly is entitled, *ETC.*, thereby reminding the reader that the words within its covers have strictly limited meanings. William James once put it this way: "The word 'and' trails along after every sentence."

If we attempted to describe the characteristics of a particular child in a certain grade level, we would probably begin by determining such factors

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as age (chronological and mental), I. Q., health, personality, interests, etc. No matter how carefully or how long we tried, we could not tell all the traits of the child. The "etc." is an integral part of the description.

To say that "John is lazy," or that "John is bright," (inferences, not facts) leaves out a great deal we need to know in order to properly evaluate John. Employing our warning signal, however, by adding "etc." to the statements, aids us in delaying a snap judgment and a know-it-all attitude.

Curriculum planners, cognizant of the fact that all words leave out characteristics, will not believe in their omnipotence. Consequently, they will be in a better position to weigh the meaning of their symbols which, at best, give merely an indication of their thoughts.

- **Intensional and extensional meanings.**

In the real world there are no material counterparts to such well-worn educational terms as "progressive," "activity," "democratic organization," "creative," "constructive," etc. The concept of "democracy," for example, may have useful meaning in a given context (a New England town meeting), but it has no rigid and absolute meaning.

Curriculum builders constantly use words which are *intensionally* oriented, that is, which derive their meaning from the suggestions they connote inside our heads. An *exten-*

sional meaning of an utterance, on the other hand, is that which it points to or denotes in the real world. The meaning is self-evident on the basis of empirical evidence. Thus, the non-verbal act of gesturing to a person to be seated gives extensional meaning; defining a word by using other words is an example of intensional meaning.

The statement, "The curriculum must be based upon the principles of child growth and development," has intensional meaning only. Such statements succeed in keeping us going in verbal circles. Moreover, communication becomes bogged down in a wasteland of semantic confusion.

If we apply the remedy of defining our words, we are soon compelled to define the defining words and discover ourselves in a hopeless snarl. The curriculum maker can avoid this snarl by keeping definitions down to a minimum. He must consciously point to extensional levels of meaning wherever and whenever this is possible. In building curricula, this implies giving specific examples of what we are talking about.

• *Beware the two-valued judgment.*

Our language structure often compels us to make an "either-or" decision. A thing is either black or white. A school is either progressive or traditional, child-centered or subject-centered, democratic or autocratic.

A more realistic and sensible approach to curriculum-making is one which recognizes the relativity of

events. Black and white are, after all, extreme ends of a continuum between which are deepening shades of gray. If the two-valued judgment were applied to the physical sciences, the thermometer would read either "hot" or "cold."

Thus, "progressive" and "traditional" methodology may peacefully co-exist in a school building, or in a classroom. The words "always," "only," "same," "never," have no place in a curriculum plan. We must guard ourselves against absolutes for they tend to reinforce two-valued judgments.

It is seen, then, that the two-valued logic of absolute choice between "either" and "or" leads to the tyranny of using "good" and "bad" labels when evaluating a situation. A grounding in the semantic discipline will foster an attitude which will recognize the fact that in a given situation there are normally many choices from which to choose. Elements taken from a combination of these choices may often provide the needed solution to a problem.

The interest of educators in the study of semantics should be far from academic. We use words as the tools of our trade. It behooves all of us to fully understand the nature of the symbols we toss around so freely.

Semantics can aid us to think straighter and communicate more meaningfully. Its application in curriculum planning will be ignored at our peril.



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