

What Do You *Mean* by That?

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“Oh, what tangled webs we weave when first we practice to believe.”

~ Laurence J. Peter

O.K. So people have different beliefs about abstract or other complex contexts. But surely we can find some consistency in the language itself. After all, you won't find much disagreement if you say that *the purpose of school is to educate children*.

The appearance of agreement may be comforting, but it is nebulous at best. (See *The Meaning of Education*). The same is true of our assumption that people hold the same meanings for words such as *understand*, *teach*, *learn*, and *knowledge*.

Apart from the dictionary definitions—which are often of little value in their vagueness—the *meanings* people attach to words are complex beliefs based on their values and experiences. Educators, particularly those who write standards, often don't even bother to define words such as *know* or *understand*. They merely list behaviors through which students may demonstrate *knowledge* or *understanding*. For example, here are several content standards from various state and national documents.

- ▼ Students *know* and *understand* the symbols, icons, and traditions of the United States that provide continuity and a sense of community across time.
- ▼ Students *understand* the cycling of matter and flow of energy through the living environment.
- ▼ Students *understand* how species depend on one another and on the environment for survival.

According to these documents, *understanding* is to be *demonstrated* by specific behaviors, such as “recognizes the flag of the U.S.”, “describes the nitrogen cycle”, or “identifies predators and prey in an ecosystem.” It's not difficult to see that these behaviors involve significantly different cognitive levels. Further, they are much more specific than the standards themselves might indicate.

If one defines *understanding* in terms of one's ability to fill in the correct bubbles on a multiple choice test, then those behaviors may seem sufficient. But would you agree that the ability to pick out the flag of the U.S. from among several examples signals an *understanding* of its significance to the people of the country? *What this means at the level of the individual teacher's classroom is significant.*

Depending on your personal definition of *understanding*, the questions you choose to ask on tests might range from the lower levels of the taxonomy (*state*, *express*, *recognize*) to much higher cognitive levels (*apply*, *synthesize*, *evaluate*.) Keep in mind that it is the *meaning* that you assign to the word *understand* that drives these choices. It is your *belief* about what it means to

understand. If you don't know what that belief is, then you are making your choices habitually—mindlessly.

Meaning and Context

It's confusing enough when different individuals hold conflicting beliefs and values about the same context, but one would at least expect the same individual to have consistent beliefs. Wrong! Because values and beliefs arise from and reside in so many different contexts within our lives, people are often unaware that, as they shift from context to context, they contradict themselves.

The same person who condemns abortion or murder ("Thou shalt not kill") may support the death penalty for capital crimes or, without much soul-searching, take the life of someone who threatens a child. The same person who says "Absence makes the heart grow fonder" to one friend may say, "Out of sight, out of mind" to another, in a different context. Truth—meaning—is a highly contextualized experience! Just when you think you have a person "figured out," he or she behaves in a completely unexpected way.

I once had a professor in a graduate education class who frequently presented us with "value-laden" problems such as the following: Imagine you have a child who is dying from a rare disease for which no cure is readily available. A man has developed a cure but refuses to sell it or make it available for use. When you visit him to beg for the medication, you see a vial of the medicine on the man's desk. When the man again refuses to make the medication available, would you, if you had the opportunity, take the medication to save your child?

In previous similar problems, one woman in the class had been adamant about any issue that she could interpret using the Ten Commandments. As expected, her answer to this problem was, "Absolutely not!" Her rationale: "Thou shalt not steal!"

Then, the professor changed the problem slightly. This time, when you visit the man, what you see on the desk is a paper with the formula for the medicine. The question becomes, "Would you memorize the formula and give it to the doctors to reproduce?"

My assumption was that, if you wouldn't do the first, you wouldn't do the second. My definition—the *meaning* I assign to stealing—is taking something that belongs to another person without their permission. Much to my amazement, the Ten Commandments lady said, "Oh, of course, I'd do that." She explained that you couldn't steal with your eyes—only with your hands! For her, stealing *means* taking something that belongs to another person without their permission *with your hands!* This woman, who consistently defended the highest moral ground, was completely at home with the idea of taking the formula "with her eyes."

I later discovered there's a common perception that when one "takes" something without removing the physical object from a person's possession, it's not stealing. Isn't that what we do when we copy something from a book or make a photocopy of an article from a magazine? Is that stealing, or does one have to use the item for one's personal gain—be it health, an increased reputation, or monetary gain?

If it's not stealing to photocopy a few pages for one's own reference, is it stealing to copy the entire book instead of buying one's own copy? What if the book is no longer in print or copies are no longer being sold?

Truth isn't always easy to define. Each individual determines the truth—the meaning—of a situation based on personal beliefs, values, and experiences. People assume that when they use the same words, they've reached agreement. Yet, judging by the previous example, even words such as *steal* do not hold the same meaning for everyone.

Begin by Defining Your Terms

Educators constantly toss around words such as *successful*, *effective*, *appropriate*, *respect*, *learn*, *understand*, and *teach*. What, *specifically*, does each of those words *mean* to you? What is your measure of *success*? Is it the same as that of a student? The student's parents? The experts writing educational standards? The people urging more individualized learning environments? When teachers try to motivate students to succeed, whose definition are they using?

Some years ago, a workshop leader began by having everyone in the room write his or her definition of "thinking skills." Of the 112 people in the room, *no two definitions were the same*. And the differences were rarely cosmetic. They were fundamental differences in meaning that would significantly influence the way a person "taught" thinking skills.

As educators define the problems of the institution, they often make broad statements such as "We need to have more *accountability*." Rarely does anyone say, "How do you define *accountability*?" Everyone simply nods and sets about trying to solve the problem. But each person involved in the process may be perceiving *accountability* in a different way. Being *accountable* may range from producing students with high test scores to producing students who demonstrate exceptional creativity, citizenship, or responsibility. Depending on their meaning, the "problem" of "having more accountability" changes drastically. Is it any wonder that people find it difficult to agree on an "answer" when they are working on different problems without being aware of it?

Theorist Michael Reddy suggests that we spend too much time in problem solving and not enough in problem setting—defining the terms used in our statement of purpose.⁽¹⁾ Let's stop assuming agreement on the everyday terms used in education. Develop the habit of saying "How do you define that word?"—not in a confrontational way, but in an effort to arrive at a common starting point. Let's begin by taking a step back to the very language of education.

References

1 Reddy, Michael J. (1993). The Conduit Metaphor. In A. Ortony (Ed.) *Metaphors of Thought*, 2nd ed. (p 188). New York: Cambridge University Press

[A much more extensive discussion of meaning and the role it plays in education may be found in Chapters 3 and 10 of *Teaching In Mind: How Teacher Thinking Shapes Education*.]