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Thinking, Education and Human Potential

Introduction

In this chapter I want to share some of the findings and insights that have come from my twenty-five years' experience in educational practice and research. In that time I have researched and worked in education from family day care and preschool, through primary, secondary and tertiary, to work with senior citizens. I have also lived and worked in a range of countries and cultures. Early in my career I was a metallurgist and my most recent research has focussed on professional thinking in business and industry. The research represented here has the common threads of exploring and developing human potential. This has led me into seven major themes: questioning dominant classroom practices through exploring the nature of teaching; student in-class thinking; the cognitive demand of textbooks; the role of ignorance in education; current testing practices; the direct teaching of thinking; and the creative management of change.

Many of the educational issues discussed here have been easily transferred to industry in my most recent work. What I see and what I hear, as I work in both schools and business settings, is often about frustration and feeling powerless, and about potential unrecognised and underdeveloped. It is also about an apparent unwillingness to openly explore the status quo and to apply commonsense and real lived experience to the generation of new action.

Let me begin by focussing directly on the reality of the life of a teacher. This is something that I did myself as a teacher fifteen years ago. I wondered why teaching was so hard for me. I loved children, I liked sharing what I know, I liked helping people develop their potential, but the job was killing me. It was so much harder than working as a metallurgist. I decided to do an analysis of my life as a secondary school teacher. I still remember the afternoon when I did the calculation. I was in Canberra, a cold drizzly afternoon. That calculation changed my life as a teacher, and I want to share it with you.

What it revolved around was how much time I was prepared to spend on my teaching as opposed to the other things in my life. During the school day I had no spare time. I was either teaching, taking classes for someone else or doing the masses of administrivia that are required of teachers. So what determined to a large extent how creative I could be, how competent I would be, was the

amount of time I was prepared to give outside school hours. I figured twelve hours a week was all I could give to the job and still maintain a rounded life. If you are teaching my children I want you to live a real life. I want you to hug your spouse, play with your children, strum your guitar, go to symphony concerts, rock concerts, look at your stamp collection, do your tapestry, play squash, read for pleasure, drink beer watching State of Origin football matches, or any of the other things which make you human. In other words, do the things that make you a dynamic developing human being. And if you're going to do that, you can only spend a limited amount of time at home working for teaching. I think twelve hours a week is it. That's, say, three hours three nights a week and a rainy Sunday afternoon. Those twelve hours a week become forty-eight hours a month. When I divided this equally, I had twenty-four hours for lesson preparation and twenty-four hours for my students each month.

As a secondary school teacher that gave me ten minutes to prepare every lesson I taught. Ten minutes to prepare every forty-five minute lesson. That was the reality. If I spent an hour preparing a lesson, it took five unprepared ones to make up. Two hours, it was ten unprepared ones; three hours, fifteen unprepared ones. And since I taught 160 students, the twenty-four hours a month to spend on my students equated to nine minutes per child per month. Not nine minutes per child per day, or per week; but nine minutes per child per month. This was a potentially crippling reality! I do not present these figures to encourage sloth or a lack of professionalism in teachers. All I ask is that all concerned look openly and honestly at the job. This can then promote a more informed debate about the massive compromises all teachers are currently forced to make with respect to their dreams and their ideals. Life is even more complex for principals and deputies – I leave it to you to try those calculations.

My calculation led me to give up taking home piles of books to mark, which immeasurably improved my quality of life without harming my students. I recommend this decision to all teachers. Marking as currently practised is a traditional form of self-flagellation which is of questionable value unless the student is sitting with you. And yet this practice is probably the single greatest destroyer of school teachers.

Obviously there are wider implications. Firstly, if teachers only have ten minutes to prepare each lesson, they need top quality curriculum materials to help them. I think each nation should produce curriculum materials to support their teachers, which incorporate the best of pedagogy and, as much as

From Action to Thought: The Fulfilment of Human Potential

Introduction

Why do people do what they do? How do people develop and change? How do people go about assisting themselves and others to grow? The particular answers that any person gives to these questions lie within the model of human action that is adopted. This model is so important because it has such profound implications for the way we manage the development of our own lives, the responses we give to the actions of others and the efforts we make to assist the development of ourselves and others.

Any model should have the potential to develop excellence in ourselves and others. The model in this paper has been used successfully to manage change in industrial and educational settings, at both the personal and group levels (Butler 1990, 1992). At its centre is the two-way relationship between action and thought with specific focus on the pathway from action to thought, and the role of one's own experiential knowledge and beliefs. Currently, too little emphasis is placed on the much travelled but still largely unexplored pathway from action to thought, and too great an emphasis on the logical and slippery pathway from thought to action.

The tremendous concern and energy expended to logically justify actions reflects an imbalance and a lack of trust in the knowledge gained by lived experience. Experience is the more powerful way of becoming an effective practitioner in a social and moral context. Experiential knowledge is a form of rationality that offers an alternative pathway to the comprehension of the social world, and to the design of effective social action. Such knowledge is constructivist and dynamic. It assumes that human action will never be embraced definitively and forever by theories and laws, and that there is truth for the present and immediate context only.

The focus of this paper is personal being and becoming

The focus of this paper is personal being and becoming, with an emphasis on individual human agency in the realm of practical actions that have the following characteristics: they have competing and opposing goals; their character changes with time; and they are usually urgent, moral and interpersonal. Dreyfus and Dreyfus (1986, p. 20) describe this area of human action as "unstructured", which they define in the following terms:

Such areas contain a potentially unlimited number of possibly relevant facts and features, and the way those elements interrelate and determine other events is unclear. Management, nursing, economic forecasting, teaching and all social interactions fall into that very large class.

Dalmau, Dick and Boas (1989) have written extensively on organisational being or organisational culture in the context of such practical actions. The influence of the context on the individual person is admitted (knowledge and beliefs are partly socially located and distributed) but the relationship between person and context is essentially dialectical and the person can act to change the context. This dialectic will not be treated in detail here. Rather, at the centre of the argument is the position that: persons in large part create themselves and the patterns of their actions by the understandings they have developed and beliefs to which they subscribe (Harre 1983). Understanding in this context means knowledge that has personal meaning. Individual persons and whole organisations understand their experiences within explicit or implicit assumptions and models that they hold.

The structure of this paper derives from the nexus between thought and action. The first model emphasises the pathway from thought to action; and regards thought as a process that operates logically on public, external knowledge to derive action. The second model, the human-action model that this paper proposes, is placed within an emphasis on the pathway from action to thought; but also includes and stresses the pathway from experiential knowledge to action.

Traditional Model: From Thought to Action

This model of human action states that the way to develop and change either ourselves or others is to read or be told what to become, then to go out and do it. Underpinning this model is a host of assumptions, apparently inoffensive and non aggressive. Specifically, it assumes that peoples' actions can be externally determined and specified by new knowledge, new directives, new procedures. People, in the extreme form of this model, are assumed to be human robots, with erasable memories that can be reprogrammed numerous times as the situation changes. It assumes that information is a body of validated generalisable conclusions which can be applied in specific situations with unique individuals.

This model appears plausible because our vast and expanding store of knowledge is so expensive, impressive