

Jerome Bruner (1996) Dressed in a Cartesian Cloak of Sorts

Unquestionably Jerome Bruner arrives at understanding through a post-rationalist's perspective and one that is broader in scope than Descartes' 1637 blue print for inquiry. Bruner's place in history accesses him to more tools—cognitive and behavioral early in his career, while ethnographic and literary later on. Nevertheless there is a *neo-rationalist* that Descartes would celebrate written between the lines of Bruner's 1996 text. Bruner's intensity—much like Descartes 350 years earlier—is driven by a profound need to nail down ideas, an unconscionable quest for certainty that manifestly questions the surrounding culture. Bruner is deeply skeptical of the cultural consequences of the canonical ways of school. He wonders if we should be assimilating the young into our own national culture, change itself, or the skills to cope with change. Yet he parts ways with Descartes' skepticism by taking a stand with the psycho-social perspective on knowing even to the extent of criticizing his opus magnum *The Process of Education* as too “intrapyschic”. Descartes' starting point was mind. So, too, was a young Bruner's. There is no sense in reading Bruner, however, as a dualist. Descartes, on the other hand, was a dualist who set mind on one side, as a separate and distinct substance, and body on the other, as separate and distinct.

Bruner's (1996) Journey Towards Knowledge

Bruner's empiricism is no longer focused on the inner workings of the mind wrestling with contrived problems in some neo-Piagetian universe. Bruner still has a “test frame” (and so to that extent he is a traditional scientist, at least in his choice of lexicon) but it is educational practice as it exhibits “cultural psychology”. The traits of this seem to be 1. self in interaction with others; 2. self under construction via both acting in the world and being acted upon; 3. the situated/contextualized overt and covert agendas of culture; 4. the acquisition of symbols.

We come to know something when we can link it to prior knowledge, to some schemata that we have already developed through early encounters with the world, with others and with the self. Bruner is careful to note that the sense of flux is very real when you look at knowing from this perspective. Knowledge is, hence, a way to burn away all of the peripherals and connect dots at a more superordinate level—particulars fall away, disappear and we are left with more general concepts. In fact, this may be a key factor in acquisition of conceptual understanding. True in some sense to his earlier mentalistic world view, Bruner still argues that the deepest way of knowing is through the proactive move on the part of a single self, the move to action, to engagement, to task—but this is empty ritual if the self is not able to act from powerful magnetic attraction between what it already knows with what it is acquiring through the task.

What Does it Mean That the Culture of Education is the Influence of Culture on How We Come to Know?

It means that the hegemony of culture that dominates the political and social stage beyond the school house influences the curriculum in both overt and covert ways. Take for instance the reform movement in education. Most date it to the document *A Nation at Risk* (1983). As a movement it has never had grassroots ground swells. It has been reform initiated by legislative and administrative interventions. Teacher and students are monitored and tested. Moves beyond regulations and mandates often to enfranchise key stakeholders—including teachers—are often viewed with distrust by practitioners who have been demoralized in the process. It is often the powerful feigning parity with the weak. Like our schools, which inculcate passivity, obedience, and conformity to rules in our students, this same cultural agenda works itself out on teachers.

Bruner (1996), WWOK (1986) and Sherris (2004)

For Bruner (1996) culture is a toolbox that can be understood through multi-disciplinary ways of knowing—primatology, anthropology, linguistics, sociology, and historiography. Bruner sees the narrative mode of thought and medium of transmission of that thought as a way to enhance our knowledge of self, other and world. This is because it is so close to the nuances and the anomalies of our very human way of expressing thought. It is also the stimulant that engages us with knowing. The subjective and the objective have a place in this picture—one that is much richer than only working with the descriptive and analytical statistics as litmus for knowing.

For WWOK (1986) narrative is clearly a tool, but there is a sense that the evolved levels of knowing arrive through the tensions of oppression and the rise up and out of it into an enlightened constructivism. This requires deconstructing the embedded dominant culture, critiquing the process, and constructing a social network of like minded, cooperatively organized relations among small groups.

For Sherris (2004) who has lived most of his life in a neo-Marxist collective in a tiny country struggling for its identity, boundaries, and existence, the story is not a new one. Story, or narrative, have always been the medium for defining self in relation to other selves as a shared state, not just my mental state or yours as separate entities. Science has never been a sacred cow (C.P. Snow). The hegemony of one culture over another happens even between two people. It takes a playful critique to stay untangled in the web we weave and the ways we trap each other. The important think is to steer clear of pain while seeing deeply into the oppressions that we cause others and that others cause us. Humor helps me a great deal. So does this incredible belief in the rhythms of mind and body in some delicate union. And all this from one who just purchased the swimsuit issue of *Sports Illustrated*—many contradictions—and therefore, I could never really be a rationalist without denying much of who I am (thought is the wedding of sexuality and mind—Norman O. Brown circa 1960s, no?).