

Jerome Bruner's Theory of Education: From Early Bruner to Later Bruner

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ABSTRACT: Though a psychologist by training, Jerome Bruner has always been, and still is, one of the leading figures in education. His theory of education in the 1960s and the 1970s directly influenced the programs of education formulated during those decades. The influence of his theory after the 1980s seems to be less direct, and some who read his 1996 book, *The Culture of Education*, may have an impression that his educational theory has changed. In this paper, I will review the historical significance of the changes in Jerome Bruner's work over his career and their implications for curriculum theory. I will argue that there are, in fact, significant changes in Bruner's views.

KEYWORDS: Jerome Bruner, curriculum theory, culture, culture as context, culture of education, structure of discipline, understanding, spiral curriculum, discovery learning, narrative.

Introduction

In this paper, I will review the historical significance of the changes in Jerome Bruner's work over his career and their implications for curriculum theory. Though a psychologist by training, Jerome Bruner has always been, and still is, one of the leading figures in education. His theory of education in the 1960s and 1970s (characteristically seen in *The Process of Education*, 1960/1977), directly influenced the programs of education formulated during those decades.¹ The influence of his theory after the 1980s seems to be less direct, and some who read his 1996 book, *The Culture of Education*, may have an impression that his educational theory has changed.

I will argue that there are, in fact, significant changes in Bruner's views. The key to understanding the changes in Bruner's theory is his concept of culture. In short, his earlier view implied a logic of cultural transmission. Culture represented educational *content* to be transmitted to the student, and the primary issues for curriculum theory were to locate the most valuable part of culture that would enhance individuals' cognitive capacity and to work out an effective way of communicating

the content to students. On the other hand, his recent view emphasizes the importance of understanding culture as *context* in which values and meanings of students' experience may be interpreted. So, his primary concerns are to help students experience various modes of meaning-making and communicating and to create a community in which multiple ways of learning take place as opposed to the largely cultureless mode of learning which dominates schools.

The kind of psychology that conceives of learning as essentially an individual process in which the individual's mind acquires neutral and objective knowledge is the major cause of cultureless learning. He has always tried to overcome this classical epistemological position since the earliest stages of his career, but it did not have strong practical implications when he was enormously popular among those who were concerned about the state of the curriculum. His earlier view attracted attention from both lay and academic persons and was used as a principle of curriculum reform from the 1950s to the 1970s. His recent view does not seem to provide educators as straightforward a guideline for curriculum development as his earlier view did; rather, it provides us with perspectives to understand and assess the characteristics of the education we have today.

The Concept of Culture

From the early stages of his career, Bruner has been interested in the notion of culture; how culture shapes the mind. In fact, his dissatisfaction with existing psychological theories' inadequacy to deal with the way culture shapes the human mind motivated him for the research on the human mind that involves not only psychology but also philosophy, anthropology, linguistics, and so on. He wrote, "though it is obvious to say that the child is born into a culture and formed by it, it is not plain how a psychological theory of cognitive development deals with this fact" (1966, p. 6).

Bruner describes that "culture" – being aware that culture is not a simple entity but a phenomenon that consists of various layers of cultures and subcultures – denotes an environment in which we live, and it embodies "a set of values, skills, and ways of life." He also says that "culture" is the "toolkit" for sense-making and communicating (1996, p. 3); as such, it enhances our (presumably) natural endowment in action, perception, sense-making, and thought (1966, p. 126; cf. also, 1971, p. 53). An example of the toolkit is the language that is commonly used in a particular cultural tradition; it includes not only grammar and

vocabulary but also such things as knowledge, beliefs, and values shared by the people of the culture (e.g., interpretive procedures in sense-making and communicating; cf. 1996, pp. 86, 95).

Culture is the context in which individual members make sense of and appraise incidents and phenomena. As such, it is a constraint on endeavors of the individual mind; just like our native language imposes a certain limit on the way we think and communicate. On the other hand, culture does not lack resources for the individual to transcend to some extent the limits imposed either by the presumable human native endowment or by the culture itself; for example, people who are good at using various modes of linguistic expression seem to be much less constrained by the syntactical structure of the language (Bruner, 1996, p. 18).

To Bruner's eyes, the dominant scheme of education looks as if it assumes that learning could escape culture-embeddedness. Bruner therefore criticizes:

- 1) What he calls the "computational" view of the human mind. The view that underlies the theories of mind from classical empiricism to behaviorism; it regards the human mind as *tabula rasa* and the process of learning as a matter of how unambiguous facts can be sorted, stored, and retrieved by the human mind;
- 2) The view that conceives of facts, values, and meanings as fixed and indifferent to cultural context and human perspectives; transparency of language and neutrality of knowledge;
- 3) The view that regards the process of learning as one-directional, and hence, overlooks our talent for "intersubjectivity." The Western tradition of education tends to regard learning as a process in which "a single, presumably omnipresent teacher explicitly tells or shows presumably unknowing learners something they presumably know nothing about" (p. 20). The Western tradition tends to overrate the explicitness of communication; communication is seen as analogous to the passing on of things from one hand to another, and the communicability of explicit linguistic expression tends to be privileged (1996, Ch. 1).

Bruner tries to supercede the principles and practices of education that are premised on these views. So he proposes a *cultural* view (as opposed to the computational view). He says that nothing is "culture free" but also that individuals are not mere mirrors of their culture (1996, p. 14). While individuals' construal of meaning or judgments are subject to

canons and standards of a particular culture, cultural values are not univocal (p. 14).

Individuals are not mere receptacles of facts, nor is culture a mere collection of unambiguous and immutable facts; individuals construct meanings and culture is always in the process of change. Education is a process of negotiation between the individual and culture. Education as an institution presents useful knowledge, visions of worthwhile life, and so forth, in a somewhat consolidated form, but it does not mean that it necessarily sets a definite limit upon the meanings and values which individuals construct; culture is also a resource for individuals to conduct a well-adapted life in the culture and, if necessary, for transcending it, at least to some extent.

He seems to have been consistent since the earlier times about the cultural nature of the human mind and activities. The question for those who are interested in the historical significance of his theory is whether his earlier views might have failed to put forth these views, especially when they were translated into practical application; or whether he might have provided, though perhaps unintentionally, some ideas that would support the views he tried to challenge.

From Early Bruner to Later Bruner

In this section, I will show in some detail that the logic of Bruner's earlier view (roughly up to the 1970s) was that of cultural transmission. It is true that Bruner critiqued, since the earliest stage of his career, some theories (psychological or otherwise) that seemed to him to imply cultural transmission as a crucial mission of schools. For example, he criticized John Dewey for promising cultural transcendence but failing to provide appropriate means for it. However, when we consider the context in which his particular ideas should be placed, it becomes clear that his earlier view provides language that would support rather conventional views of curriculum and teaching which are shared, for example, by Franklin Bobbitt and Ralph Tyler.

Bruner, Dewey, and Progressive Education

Those decades in which Bruner was involved in educational reform were marked by the fact that America was in urgent need of improving its schools and curriculum, most notably caused by the Sputnik shock of 1957.² As a result of this incident, America was made to realize that it was lagging behind the Soviet Union in preparing scientists, and also citizens who were well educated in such areas as science and math, from

whom future intellectual leaders would emerge. The blame was largely placed on the inadequate educational principles and practice based on progressive experiential education whose theoretical origin was John Dewey's philosophy of education.

Although Bruner shares Dewey's criticism against a mechanistic view of the human mind, he criticizes the so-called experience-based education which was too often associated with the name of Dewey. Bruner thought:

- (1) Human beings become what they are only by internalizing culture,³ but this acquisition of culture happens by learning the essences (or the toolkit) of culture which are encapsulated in each subject or academic discipline taught in school (though Bruner was not satisfied with the existing curriculum);⁴
- (2) The principles and logic of the so-called experience-based education were inadequate. Particularly problematic were the assumptions (a) that the educational program could motivate children for learning if the activities and subjects in school were connected to or based on the daily experience which children have outside school, and (b) that experience-based education could expand children's perspectives beyond their familiar ones.

In the 1980s, his commentary on Dewey almost disappears from his books, but it seems that he had Dewey in mind when he was vigorously writing about the importance of educational reform in the 1960s and 1970s. This is apparent in his small essay, "After John Dewey, What?" (in *On Knowing: Essays for the Left Hand*, Bruner, 1962/1979). This essay was written as a criticism of Dewey's view of education based on Dewey's "My Pedagogic Creed" (Dewey, 1897/1975). Since it was not based on *Democracy and Education* (1916/1985) or a few other works which show a maturer view of Dewey and are more typically referred to as his major works of education, it might not be entirely fair to Dewey, but these two papers show good contrast between the two.

Bruner seems to be in agreement with Dewey's point, "all education proceeds by the participation of the individual in the social consciousness of the race" (Dewey, 1897/1975, "My Pedagogic Creed," Article I, p. 116), but he also says that this view, if developed as in Dewey's theory, has a possible defect or a limit in scope. Bruner wrote right after the quote above:

But education must also seek to develop the process of intelligence so that the individual is capable of going beyond the cultural ways

of his social world, able to innovate in however modest a way so that he can create an interior culture of his own. (p. 116)

A key feature of Dewey's way of interpreting and constructing education that "proceeds by the participation of the individual in the social consciousness of the race" was to connect experiences outside and inside school, and Bruner thought that it may very well hinder the full development of the individual, particularly the development of the capacity to "go beyond the cultural ways of his social world." Bruner thought that this would undermine Dewey's point about education as continual growth. Bruner wrote:

But education, by giving shape and expression to our experience, can also be the principal instrument for setting limits on the enterprise of mind. The guarantee against limits is the sense of alternatives. Education must, then, be not only a process that transmits culture, but also one that provides alternative views of the world and strengthens the will to explore them. (1962/1979, p. 117)⁵

Conceived in this way, the view about knowledge and knowledge acquisition in Dewey's philosophy (and also in progressivism) is inadequate. Bruner describes the consequence of such Deweyan progressive view in the following way:

A generation ago, the progressive movement urged that knowledge be related to the child's own experience and brought out of the realm of empty abstractions. A good idea was translated into banalities about the home, then the friendly postman and trashman, then the community. It is a poor way to compete with the child's own dramas and mysteries. (1966, p. 63)

In contrast to this, Bruner thinks that:

The unity of knowledge is to be found within knowledge itself, if the knowledge is worth mastering. To attempt a justification of subject matter, as Dewey did, in terms of its relation to the child's social activities is to misunderstand what knowledge is and how it may be mastered. (1962/1979, pp. 120-121)

So, the goal of education, in Bruner's terms, becomes "disciplined understanding" (p. 122).⁶ By emphasizing *understanding*, rather than *performance*, he means that it is not sufficient to have information (in the sense that it is simply displayed in multiple-choice or short-answer questions); information or knowledge must be structured so that the individual can (a) expand and deepen his or her knowledge more efficiently, and (b) go beyond what is simply given. As a method to achieve this goal, Bruner proposes his famous *spiral curriculum* and *discovery learning*.⁷

The "Structure of Discipline" and "Discovery Learning"

Bruner seemed to think that the academic disciplines or topics have a tendency to arouse curiosity in human beings in general, including children. When he said, "interest can be created and stimulated," (1962/1979, p. 117), he means that academic subjects have intrinsic attraction, and that they do not always have to be related to children's daily experience in order for children to be interested in learning.⁸ So he says that "intellectual activity anywhere is the same, whether at the frontier of knowledge or in a third-grade classroom" (1960/1977, p. 14). Thus, educators need not make subjects or topics more accessible or palatable by presenting them in real-life settings of children's daily experience.

Instead, subjects and topics must be presented according to the *structures* of the academic disciplines which are the essence and reflection of accumulated human curiosity.⁹ A child, for example in learning history, in this scheme, must be treated as a historian inquiring into the issues and problems of history. Referring to his famous proposition, "any subject can be taught to anybody at any stage in some form that is honest" (1962/1979, p. 108) may help us understand his belief.¹⁰

As I wrote at the beginning of this paper, Bruner thought that individuals become what they are only by learning the essence of the culture in which they live, and this essence of culture has a potency to intrinsically motivate children. He thought that the structure of a discipline would facilitate the learning process; and that discovery learning and spiral curriculum would allow students to be active participants of their own learning, and hence, would make lessons meaningful. Bruner thought highly of participatory methods or models of learning, rather than the mere receiving of information, knowledge, or skill. So he emphasizes that a child learns, for example history, as a historian does. He wrote, "there is no difference in kind between the man at the frontier and the young student at his own frontier, each attempting to understand. Let the educational process be life itself as fully as we can make it" (1962/1979, p. 126). And the virtues of this sort of learning are twofold:

The virtues of encouraging discovery are of two kinds. In the first place, the child will make what he learns his own, will fit his discovery into the interior world of culture that he creates for himself. Equally important, discovery and the sense of confidence it provides is the proper reward for learning. It is a reward that,

moreover, strengthens the very process that is at the heart of education – disciplined inquiry. (pp. 123-124)

Bruner wrote, “no person is master of the whole culture” (1962/1979, p. 116). I would draw from this that the issue about the structure of knowledge was mainly about the cognitive capacity (or its limit) of the individual. He explains about the structure as follows: “Grasping the structure of a subject is understanding it in a way that permits many other things to be related to it meaningfully. To learn structure, in short, is to learn how things are related” (1960/1977, p. 7). Grasping the structure of a discipline would (a) simplify information, (b) generate new propositions, and (c) increase the manipulability of a body of knowledge (1966, p. 41). There is a point made about generating the new propositions, which may lead an individual to new discovery or creativity or going beyond something given, but the most important point about the structure seems to be the efficiency in learning and coping with a vast amount of information in contemporary society.¹¹ (Probably this emphasis comes from the context of American education in the 1960s.) So, Bruner, in those books in which he often mentioned the concept of structure (from *Process* in 1960 to *Relevance* in 1971), suggested that the urgent task for education was to prepare “a well-educated citizenry” (1960/1977, p. 1). He also uses such words as *excellence* and *disciplined understanding*; what he had in mind at that time was: “One thing seems clear: if all students are helped to the full utilization of their intellectual powers, we will have a better chance of surviving as a democracy in an age of enormous technological and social complexity” (p. 10).

A point that deserves our attention is his idea of *intuitive thinking* or *intuition* (see Bruner’s books from *Process*, 1960/1977, to *Relevance*, 1971). While intuition has a rather complicated history in the history of ideas, it means, in the context of Bruner’s ideas, a leap of thought unbound by step-by-step, careful and informed thinking; it means, in short, guessing (1960/1977, p. 64) or hunch (1971, p. 85) and Bruner encouraged students to use it. This was a very unconventional thing to say, at least in the mid 20th century, to describe a valued procedure in education. He observed that in school, a totally different and unnatural mode of thinking is imposed upon children, that is, the kind of thinking that needs to be clear, distinct, informed, and explicit from the beginning, and it turns children off from engaging in thought. So he wants to encourage children to engage in serious thought by saying that it needs not be accurate or correct from the beginning.

He says that intuition “is less rigorous with respect to proof, more visual or iconic, more oriented to the whole problem than to particular parts, less verbalized with respect to justification, and based upon a confidence in one’s ability to operate with insufficient data” (1971, p. 82). By intuitive thinking, one grasps “the meaning or significance of structure of a problem without explicit reliance upon the analytic apparatus of one’s craft” (1962/1979, p. 102). Just like Dewey’s “suggestion” and “verification” in his idea of “reflective thought” (1933/1986), Bruner proposes that intuitive thinking should be coupled with “analytic thinking.” What we can draw from these points is that the purposes of using intuition are, first, ultimately to grasp the structure, and second, to nurture confidence in children.

However, the problem is that when the encouragement of thought is placed in the general context of assisting children to understand the structure of disciplines, his ideas would look rather conventional and conservative, because the ultimate purpose is the acquisition of the structure of discipline and the process toward it can be arranged entirely on an individual basis. While his acknowledgment of the intuitive aspect of thought is rather new, the overall learning theory does not really deviate from the dominant view that conceives of learning as a process in which the individual mind acquires an indifferent flow of information.

Epistemology

We notice in the remarks above (1962/1979, pp. 123-124) Bruner’s assumption about learning is basically an individual business (“make what he learns his own,” “interior culture of his own”). Nevertheless, we cannot but notice, particularly in his interest in Vygotsky’s work (1934/1992), his orientation toward the construction of the human mind via interaction with other human beings and culture. For example, in the 1962/1979 preface to *On Knowing*, he wrote that “interior intellectual work is almost always a continuation of a dialogue.”

Bruner’s conception of understanding also includes what may be called a meta-cognition: a capacity to understand not only particular content but also the psychological or intellectual processes and strategies one uses in acquiring the content. He asks, “What do we mean by an educated man [person]?” and answers that, though an educated person does not necessarily need the most sophisticated, latest knowledge in all areas, she or he should know (a) the level of his [or her] own knowledge, and (b) how to acquire knowledge (1962/1979, p. 109).¹²

He has always appreciated the significance of “meta”-cognition, that is, being conscious of how one’s own mind works in knowing, thinking, and learning. Or, put slightly differently, being able to look at oneself (one’s knowledge, thought, and cultural values) from another’s point of view. For example, he explains discovery learning in the following way: “Discovery teaching generally involves not so much the process of leading students to discover what is ‘out there,’ but rather, their discovering what is in their own heads” (Bruner, 1971, p. 72).

From the 1950s to the 1970s, Bruner favored such concepts as *structure*, *discovery*, and *intuitive thinking* – after the 1980s, he used such concepts as *culture*, *meaning-making*, *narrative*, and *inter-subjectivity* much more often. The change in his favored concepts seems to come from his epistemological changes; he now seems to dispense with the clear-cut separation between individuals and culture which we find in his earlier writings. Consequently, he seems to be less concerned with the idea of education as an individualized process, and that of learning as an exclusively individual achievement.

In *The Culture of Education* (1996), Bruner reflects on the way he thought three decades ago. “It now seems to me in retrospect, some three decades later, that I was then much too preoccupied with solo, intrapsychic processes of knowing and how these might be assisted by appropriate pedagogies” (Preface, p. xi). Also he said, looking back on the Head Start Program, that the conception of “deprivation” was based on the notion of the mind as *tabula rasa* (p. 80).

So, how do these changes affect his educational theory? I think that an example can be seen in the following remark in *Culture*; “Now, school is a culture itself, not just a ‘preparation’ for it, a warming up” (1996, p. 98).

Along with his point about the departure from “solo” psychology, a departure from “preparation” seems significant. We have to examine two points about his earlier view.

Bruner was, from the early stages of his career, influenced most notably by Vygotsky, and was interested in the way culture shapes the human mind. This has been consistent from the time he emphasized such concepts as structure though he was, at that time, more concerned with (a) what individuals acquired, or what they become able to do, as a result of education; and (b) the objective nature of the structure of knowledge. His shift of focus from individual to communal (or, his departure from “solo”), and from objective/subjective to “intersubjective” can be seen in some of his works even in the 1970s. For example, he

wrote, "man's intellect then is not *simply* his *own*, but is *communal* in the sense that its unlocking or empowering depends upon the success of the culture in developing means to that end" [italics added] (1971, p. 7).

He said that though essentialism or realism, in which the self is thought of as something like substance or essence, was dominant in psychology, alternative views of the self had already existed in other areas such as cultural anthropology and philosophy.¹³ According to one such alternative viewpoint, a "proper person is better conceived ... not as the pure and enduring nucleus but [as] the sum and swarm of participations" (1990, p. 107). Bruner, in psychology and education, introduced this conception of relation (or mutual dependency) between the human mind (or the self) and the culture. His departure from his earlier "solo" orientation became apparent in the 1980s and 1990s. He wrote, "it is man's participation *in* culture and the realization of his mental powers *through* culture that make it impossible to construct a human psychology on the basis of the individual alone" (p. 12). He also said, "to treat the world as an indifferent flow of information to be processed by individuals each on his or her own terms is to lose sight of how individuals are formed and how they function" (p. 12).

Bruner's critical view of solo-epistemology was not sophisticated or forceful enough in the early years, and the temperament surrounding education (whether in terms of theory or of public concern) was not ready for it. In any case it did not catch educators' attention in those decades; whatever Bruner's intention might have been, his emphasis on such things as "the structure of the discipline" and "discovery" did not force people to give up the epistemological position that would treat the world as an indifferent flow of information. His ideas, on the one hand, allowed people to feel that they did not have to give up the legacy of progressivism which treasures spontaneity, excitement, and joy of childhood in the process of education (because of Bruner's emphasis on active participation in learning), while, on the other hand, assured them that academic excellence by the acquisition of solid content is sustainable and that America did not have to lag behind the Soviet Union (because of Bruner's emphasis on the structure of discipline).

Now, Bruner's concern seems to have changed from implementation of his ideas to the elaboration of his psychological and epistemological research. He sets aside his concern with the educational implication of his research or view, and examines more carefully the nature of the emergence and development of the human mind.

The educational practice we see around us today does not seem to reflect this epistemological change yet, Bruner is not the only one who thinks this shift important. The success and failure of schooling is still measured primarily by the acquisition of prescribed content. We are yet to see a definitive form of implementing the view that emphasizes “intersubjectivity” and “narratives.” However, we may notice in the field of curriculum theory the kind of shift which Bruner is talking about. An example may be the concept of curriculum itself; it is no longer preoccupied with the importance or possibility of setting the goal (objective), and deducing from it appropriate contents and processes to achieve it (the Tylerian notion of curriculum). Now, some people conceive that curriculum denotes how each person experiences the educational process; this is typically seen in such an idea as *currenre*, which is “a method and theory of curriculum which escapes the epistemological traps of mainstream social science and educational research. *Currenre* focuses on the educational experience of the individual as reported by the individual” (Pinar, Reynolds, Slattery, & Taubman, 2000, p. 414). This new notion, in turn, encourages us to re-examine the relation between psychology and education; a critical viewpoint which Bruner was among the first to take.

The Scientific Rigor of Education

Bruner’s increasing emphasis on narrative, culture, and intersubjectivity reflects a change in a larger philosophical and theoretical context.

One of the consequences of his changes is the relation between psychology and education; or to put it a bit differently, we may say that the idea of science as the foundation of educational theory and practice is called into question. In short, his message to the educators who look to psychologists or scientists for practical guidance of curriculum and teaching is this; the 19th century conception of rigor in education is over and they are no longer authorities to be counted on for practical principles of curriculum development or teaching methods. This does not mean that educational studies are less rigorous than natural sciences, but means that their rigor should be of different nature.

Psychology used to be expected to supply effective means to the ends that were identified by such disciplines as ethics (Herbert) and sociology (Durkheim), and Bruner’s earlier theory fits in this scheme (cf. 1966, p. 23). The assumption was that psychology, by virtue of its capacity to identify the law of development of the mind, could tell educators what

content was suitable for children of certain developmental stages and what the arrangement of presentation of the content should be in order to maximize learning. Thus, from Herbert and Durkheim in the 19th century to Piaget and early Bruner in the 20th century, psychology was prescriptive. However, Bruner now seemed to believe that there were problems in that understanding of what psychology can and should do.

Bruner now says that the process of teaching and learning is a matter of communication that is not quite accommodating to the traditional universalistic or scientific view. In the traditional framework, learning was understood as the relation between the student's mind and the object of knowledge (1996, p. 178). On the other hand, in the recent view of Bruner, it is crucial to understand the process of learning as a process of communication.

Therefore, learning is no longer seen as merely a matter of the *mastery of the content*; it is a set of phenomena that occurs around the mastery of the content. Learning should be understood as an inherently communicative process, and educational theories which are intended for practical application must take this into account. Bruner has consistently argued that culture shapes the mind, but early Bruner's emphasis was on the problem of what content or toolkit shapes the mind in the most functional way, and this problem setting induced the attempt for efficient ways of communicating a given content to the student. On the other hand, he is now more interested in describing and analyzing what is taking place in the minds of those who are involved in the learning process when the attempt for teaching and learning is made. One of the points he makes is that learners are constructing their psychological theories, so to speak, as well as constructing world-views when they engage in educational activities.

For example, following Bruner, I may distinguish three levels of learning. When children are involved in a typical classroom interaction that includes the learner, the teacher, and the content, at least three levels or layers of learning experience is taking place in the mind of the learner (cf. 1996, pp. 57-58).

The first level is obviously the mastery of what passes as valuable knowledge and skills in the learner's own culture or society.

The second level is to understand how to comprehend other people's beliefs, intentions, and desires. At a very superficial level, all teachers know that students look in teachers' remarks for useful tips for good scores and grades, or they *read* in teachers' tone, expression, gesture,

and so forth, lots of messages by which they learn how people and society operate and what they are expected to do or not do.

The third level is that students come to understand, through communication with teachers and other students, the characteristics of their own learning, remembering, thinking, and guessing.

Educators used to conceptualize learning only at the first level, but Bruner includes the second and the third level, which he calls the “meta” cognition (cf. 1996, pp. 18-19, for his belief in the importance of meta-cognition). This perspective requires us to examine the way we understand what takes place in the classroom.

Consequences of Bruner’s View

The principles that dominate our schooling are highly de-personalized and cultureless. For example, the language of accountability holds a view of education as a matter of how faithfully individual students acquire or copy prescribed contents; the other side of this coin is a pair of assumptions that valuable content is prescribable apart from the context in which individual teachers and students live, and that it is desirable so to prescribe content. I do not think that many teachers hold this as an ideal picture, or even an accurate picture, of what is going on in the classroom. However, the problem is that teachers are considered doing well when they, almost as mere technicians, pass the prescribed content on to students. This is why such things as multi-media presentations of the content which more efficiently ensure that students memorize it are deemed comparable with, or potentially can replace, human teachers. Bruner’s early view had very little that would challenge this notion of learning.

For another example, I wonder what significance students get when they pass through segments of learning, grades, and stages of schooling. Bruner refers to Ignace Meyerson’s idea of “works” (*oeuvres*), which means the externalized product of cultural activity, experience, and processes. The “works” could mean in a grand scale the arts and sciences of a culture, but in the context of learning, it could also mean the product of the learning process that gives “pride, identity, and a sense of continuity to those who participate” (1996, p. 22). Accepting Bruner’s ideas, one would have to conclude that our schools are cultureless and de-personalized because they lack this sense of significance of, and attachment to, what one has experienced through the process of learning.

Bruner points out the importance of creating a sense of self, in all human experience and in school particularly. He then says that in order to have a sense of self, two aspects are crucial. First is to have a sense of “agency,” that is, to have “a sense that one can initiate and carry out activities on one’s own.” Second, but more importantly, he says:

What characterizes human selfhood is the construction of a conceptual system that organizes, as it were, a “record” of agentive encounters with the world, a record that is related to the past (that is, “autobiographical memory,” so-called) but that is also extrapolated into the future-self with history and with possibility. It is a “possible self” that regulates aspiration, confidence, optimism, and their opposites. (1996, p. 36)

My observation is that these conditions for having selfhood are missing in schools in many cases. Students do learn things when they find significance in these things (lessons and activities) to their lives. In such a case they even engage in drills and memorization just like a boy who wants to be tomorrow’s Michael Jordan would shoot a ball to the basket thousands of times. The problem of our schools, on the other hand, is that drills and memorizations are imposed on students in such a way that students cannot understand the context or significance of these activities.

The point of view which Bruner has reached is shared by others as well. Nowhere else than in curriculum studies is this tendency clearer; for example, in the work of the so-called reconceptualists such as William Piner and Madeleine Grumet who speak of the idea of *currere*. This is not a coherent or systematic movement, but it is a reaction against the Tylerian notion of curriculum and conceives of it from such an alternative, phenomenological perspective.

Neither Bruner nor the reconceptualists seem clear as to what comes next (1996, p. 22); they are certain that educational and curriculum studies should de-emphasize traditional notions of what counts as learning, but we are not quite clear what their new curricular principles may look like in an operationally meaningful sense. However, Bruner does make a few suggestions.

First, in *The Culture of Education* Bruner writes that education tends to work well when learning is, first, participatory, provocative, communal, and collaborative; and second, when learning is a process of constructing meaning rather than receiving (1996, p. 84). This is not to recommend that we should discard the memorization of facts, but to recommend that we should examine to what effect facts are acquired, for example. In another place he suggests that the ultimate end of pursuing

knowledge is to develop curiosity (Bruner, 1983, pp. 62-63), and ironically, he sounds like Dewey, whom he criticized earlier. Since learning involves much more than the mere passing on of the content from one person to another, it makes less sense to suppose that involvement of first-rate scholars would solve the problem. The process of developing a curriculum, for example, needs to become an engaging conversation that involves teachers as well as academics. Thus, the ideas of enforcing a curriculum on a large scale and of holding teachers accountable to inculcating the prescribed content make less sense. Individual teachers or teams of teachers should create their own local curricula by using such things as a state or district-wide curriculum as a reference.

Second, he suggests that the role of the teacher, rather than the system, will become more important (Bruner, 1996, p. 85). Thus, the system, for example a formal curriculum, becomes less important compared to the role of the teacher, and the actual activities and interactions which take place in the classroom. He wrote:

The means for aiding and abetting a learner is sometimes called a “curriculum,” and what we have learned is that there is no such thing as the curriculum. For in effect, a curriculum is like an animated conversation on a topic that can never be fully defined, although one can set limits upon it. (1996, pp. 115-116)

Curriculum used to be, and still is, thought of as a course to run (from its etymological origin), in which the goal is set, and all that individual runners (learners) are supposed to do is to reach the goal by following the fixed route.

Bruner’s current notion of the curriculum as “an animated conversation” does not seem to fit well with the old notion of education and curriculum.

It does not seem plausible to me that we can create an entirely different yet effective or meaningful curriculum based on Bruner’s theory today. Even if we try to make one, I wonder how different it could be from the one based on his earlier theory. (We should note that Bruner writes that his basic belief about education has not changed over the years; see *Culture*, 1996, p. 39). The point at issue is which of the changes Bruner went through addresses the way we should see the curriculum or how we may make use of it, not the content or structure of the curriculum itself. Now the problem (or emphasis) is not whether “the scholars at the forefront” or “first-rank scholars” are involved in making the best curriculum, but (our reflection upon) how the curriculum can be used to bring about an “animated conversation” in

the classroom (1996, p. 115), and what kind of communicative experience is likely to follow from the way a curriculum or lesson plan is organized.

NOTES

1. For example, Head Start, “discovery learning,” and the “structure of the discipline movement.” Bruner’s influences are seen also in England (e.g., Plowden Report, 1967) and in Japan (the structure of the curriculum movement in the 1960s and 1970s).
2. Cf. “a long-range crisis in national security, a crisis whose resolution will depend upon a well-educated citizenry” (1960/1977, p. 1).
3. This is very Vygotskian. We should remember that he was among the first scholars who introduced and appreciated the value of the works of Lev Vygotsky (and A. Luria). He wrote the introduction to Vygotsky’s *Thought and Language* in 1962 (1934/1992). Bruner writes that he encountered Vygotsky’s works in the late 1940s (1983, p. 139), and that Jean Piaget and Vygotsky were the two figures who made him realize the fascination in studying the development of the human mind (p. 136). As to the difference between Piaget and Vygotsky, and the attractiveness of Vygotsky over Piaget, Bruner describes in *Culture* (1996) as follows: “I recall particularly visits with Alexander Luria, that enthusiastic exponent of Lev Vygotsky’s “cultural historical” theories of development. His ebullient espousal of the role of language and culture in the functioning of mind soon undermined my confidence in the more self-contained, formalistic theories of the towering Jean Piaget, theories that had very little room for the enabling role of culture in mental development” (Preface, p. xiii).
4. See for example, his “Man, A Course of Study” (1966), in *Toward a Theory of Instruction*.
5. Cf. also, *Relevance*, 1971, p. 102.
6. Also “Excellence” (*Process*, 1960/1977, pp. 9, 70; *On Knowing*, 1962/1979, p. 119), that is, “optimum intellectual development” (1960/1977, p. 9).
7. For Bruner, knowledge is not a mere collection of information. He writes, “knowledge is a model we construct to give meaning and structure to regularities in experience. The organizing ideas of any body of knowledge are inventions for rendering experience economical and connected” (*On Knowing*, 1962/1979, p. 120).
8. Bruner believed that “cognitive or intellectual mastering is rewarding” (1966, p. 30).
9. “In a word, the best introduction to a subject is the subject itself” (1966, p. 155; 1971, p. 60).
10. This proposition has several variations, but the one that I quoted seems closest to what Bruner wants to say. In *Process*, 1960/1977, Bruner wrote, “the foundations of any subject may be taught to anybody at any age in some form” (p. 12), and “any subject can be taught effectively in some

intellectually honest form to any child at any stage of development” (p. 33); in *Relevance*, 1971, “any subject can be taught to anybody at any stage in some form that is both interesting and honest” (p. 18). Words such as “effective,” “honest,” and “interesting” have been added and eliminated, but his major point seems to be in the word “honest” which means intellectual honesty. Cf. *On Knowing*, 1962/1979, p. 124 where he explains what he means by “honest.”

11. Cf. in *Process*, 1960/1977, he writes, “the main objective of this work has been to *present subject matter effectively* – that is, with due regard not only for coverage but also for structure” [italics added] (p. 2). It is interesting to note that Theodore Brameld (1971) categorized Bruner’s theory as basically “essentialism” which takes “education as cultural transmission,” rather than, for example, “progressivism.” We should also note that this evaluation was done in 1971. Brameld’s categorization is based on Bruner’s emphasis on the “structure” of knowledge, “excellence” and “disciplined understanding,” which imply the importance of the acquisition of a pre-determined knowledge. He writes, “however insightfully he [Bruner] at times supplements progressivist concepts such as reflective thinking, one may wonder, in fact, whether he does not actually invite regression rather than progression in his interpretation of knowledge and knowing” (p. 234).

I agree with this interpretation. Whatever his intention was, Bruner’s argument in the 1960s and 1970s seemed to imply that the process of learning was a process of acquiring knowledge that existed in culture independent of the individual’s use or interpretation of it.

12. “I think that, at the very least, an educated man should have a sense of what knowledge is like in some field of inquiry, to know it in its connectedness and with a feeling for how the knowledge is gained. An educated man must not be dazzled by the myth that advanced knowledge is the result of wizardry. The way to battle this myth is in the direct experience of the learner – to give him the experience of going from a primitive and weak grasp of some subject to a stage in which he has a more refined and powerful grasp of it. I do not mean that each man should be carried to the frontiers of knowledge, but I do mean that it is possible to take him far enough so that he himself can see how far he has come and by what means” (Bruner, 1962/1979, p. 109).

13. See *Relevance*, 1971, p. 21, where he mentions F. Boas (1938), M. Mead (1946), and B.L. Whorf (1956).

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