

Challenging Dichotomies – Inspired by Paul Kirschner’s Inaugural Address at Utrecht University

Thanks, Paul, for your interesting inaugural address and your provocative discussion of the various dichotomies (objectivism/subjectivism, passive/active learning, student-centered/teacher-centered, supply-driven/demand-driven, cognitivism/constructivism, independent/dependent learning) that have dominated and animated educational research and scholarship in the last century. I take the overall suggestion to be that these dichotomies are not really genuine in the sense of describing exclusive but all inclusive categories of things and situations in the world, reminiscent of Peter Goodyear’s (2000) description of false dichotomies in “Environments for Lifelong Learning: Ergonomics, Architecture and Educational Design.” You lament the lack of scientific rigor in educational science and suggest that continuums rather than Either-Or categories might be more appropriate in many of these cases. As you probably know, these ideas resonate with many of my own, including my comments on *atomistic..holistic* perspectives on learning and instruction.

Let’s suppose that continuums in these allegedly dichotomous areas would in fact be more consistent with observed phenomena. I then wonder why such dichotomous thinking has been so pervasive in educational science. Is this a consequence of the 1960s bumper-sticker mentality (*If you are not for it, you are against it*)? Are educational scientists just bad scientists? To abuse Shakespeare, are we just poor players who strut and fret our hours upon the stage and then are heard no more ... full of sound and fury but signifying nothing? Exit stage right.

Enter the rock (courtesy of T. S. Eliot’s *Choruses from the Rock*):

“The endless cycle of idea and action,
Endless invention, endless experiment,
Brings knowledge of motion, but not of stillness;
Knowledge of speech, but not of silence;
...
Where is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge?
Where is the knowledge we have lost in information?”

Such hard questions. I wish they would go away and leave me alone. Really. Your inaugural address brought such questions to mind again. A thousands curses on your head ... may you grow like an onion ... with your head in the dirt ... not really. But such questions do haunt me from time to time ... like a traveler in Shelley’s antique land (see *Ozymandias*).

My struggles with these hard questions dates back to graduate student days in philosophy with Oets Kolk Bouwsma. He would say things like “surely your life must show what you think of yourself” and “what will come from what you are now doing and may do

tomorrow?” Whoa ... that last question is like a slap in the face ... or perhaps more like tripping over a butterfly. What will come from what I am doing? I wonder.

Being trained as a skeptical philosopher, I have a convenient answer – I do not know. And I think that is the correct answer to such a question. I have also noted that these questions tend to arise in moments of idleness. When I am fully engaged, for example in writing notes like this one, such questions do not arise ... okay, so I lied. Language is entitled to take a holiday every now and again. A certain resident of 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue seems to have given meaningful language a permanent leave of absence. I do not know the future and can only guess. In fact, I do not know much of anything, so I sometimes make more or less well informed guesses about many things, such as the effects of learning that is more active than passive, or the likely progress of learners who are more often independent in comparison with those who are more inclined to be dependent, or ... yikes ... is there really empirical evidence to support those kinds of conclusions? Seems like it, but the evidence is not all that clear or convincing ... another discussion, perhaps.

This keyboard is almost out of words. Two more thoughts – one about language taking a holiday and one about learning as interaction. First the last ... or the last, first. Whatever. With regard to the claim that learning is interaction. I thought learning involved processes and activities that resulted in relatively stable and persistent changes in abilities, attitudes, beliefs, knowledge, skills, and such. I suppose it is reasonable to argue that processes and activities that involve highly interdependent interactions are likely to result in learning, especially of a kind that might sustain life-long inquiry. I suppose. But then learning and interaction are not exactly the same things – they would be related things. So the little word that is on holiday in this thought is the word ‘is’. I do not want to be Clintonian in my interpretation of this word, but it does strike me as an unusual claim – ‘language is interaction’. I wonder whether such language will perpetuate more dichotomies or whether it might inspire empirical research with regard to a meaningful educational continuum. This remark about ‘is’ is one thought I wanted to share.

The other thought was about language taking a holiday. It is ironic, I think, that it is language that makes meaningful discourse possible, but it is also language that so often facilitates misunderstanding and confusion. For examples of the latter, I again appeal to the current resident of 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue. For examples of the former, I appeal to O. K. Bouwsma – who often told me to do something useful (I am convinced he was secretly communicating with my mother) – and to Bob Gagné who said that our business was to help people learn. What a great enterprise in which to be engaged – helping people learn better. I hereby pledge to dedicate the remainder of my life to helping all and only those who do not help themselves (see Bertrand Russell’s “Barber of Seville” in the event this statement was not as clear as it should have been).