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Carrying meaning through language

Prakash Iyer

How do children learn concepts and ideas from experience? "What is the contribution of language to this process?" "How does our teaching make this happen?" This article paraphrases parts of Israel Scheffler's response to these questions in his seminal article "Philosophical models of teaching" in the form of a fictional conversation between two teachers.

The primacy of experience

Anubhuti: Experience is the foundation of learning, so as teachers we should create appropriate experiences that act as stimuli for children. Their response is a trigger for their learning.

Ira: Of course we need experiences not only to provide stimuli. Experience provides a context for learning, which cannot happen merely through words. But I do not think experience is sufficient. A child's mind is *tabula rasa* (blank slate). Her mind will store experiences, she will remember it, but what and how does she learn from it? Understanding or learning from even seemingly simple experiences can be very complex. Imagine a child wants to touch the flame of a burning candle and her mother asks her not to touch it. To understand why, and then decide not to touch fire she needs many concepts. Moreover, in this case depending on how she thinks and what concepts she uses, she could learn that her mother is unkind, or that she should not touch fire when mother is looking, or she might just ignore mother and touch the flame.

Anubhuti: That is true. We adults do not touch fire because we know many concepts like fire, heat, burning, pain, danger etc. even if we have not experienced them. Many concepts are involved in a simple decision like not touching fire.

But, you see *tabula rasa* is often misunderstood as the mind being entirely blank and devoid of both content and capabilities. A child's mind does not have content, but it is not completely passive. It can accumulate memories and has a rudimentary capacity for reflection which helps the child pre-process new content that enters the mind. The mind connects a new experience with earlier experiences which could be about the mother, about fire, seeing someone else being disallowed to touch it. It integrates new experiences with earlier experiences, not just store them as discrete things. We know that new experiences necessarily attach themselves to other older memories.

Ira: We should know how this capacity for reflection works. The first time a child may just treat an experience as independent event, maybe the second time too. But the third time the capacity to reflect makes it possible for the mind to form a pattern and generalize. They learn names for people and things from this capacity. So I can imagine how new concepts acquire names in the child's mind.

But learning is not only knowing labels for things and people, forming patterns and generalizing. It is a creative act in which judgments and evaluations are made. Often new concepts become necessary to form a simple judgment, during the process of reflection. We want the child to know that it is wrong to touch fire. This thinking is abstract because she has to imagine the difference between wanting to and not wanting to, fire and other things, harmful and safe. She has to hypothesize what could be wrong about touching fire and predict what might happen if she did. The ability to reflect does not provide all this. Where will new concepts come to her from? From us teachers.

The role of language

Anubhuti: Yes it is not enough to provide experiences, we need to give them new concepts too. They have to learn many things they have never experienced or even imagined. We have to give them concepts like, harm, safety, pain, right, wrong, obey and disobey. But if we say those words they will not mean anything to the child because they have not experienced it before. Those words will be mere noise to them.

Moreover language is not merely a set of words that label things. Consider this sentence: "When I touch fire the burning fire will hurt my hand." Every word in this sentence signifies a relationship with other terms. "Touch" is related to "fire", "hurt" is related to "burn". They don't even know the words, so how will they know the relationships?

If the child understands the meaning of this sentence, then she must know all the words and the relationships between them. This means, we said something she already knew. We did not teach her anything new! Does that mean my job as a teacher is of no value? That is disconcerting.

Ira: Aah, humans have known this for centuries. This is a paradox first identified by St. Augustine of Hippo in the 5th century. He said, "If the student already knows the realities to which the teacher's words refer, the teacher teaches him nothing new. Whereas, if the student does not know these realities, the teacher's words can have no meaning for him, and must be mere noises."

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His solution of this paradox was that language is not only the means to communicate labels and symbols, it also performs the function of prompting people to think. When a teacher says a word, it triggers a thought process in the child's mind. That is how she learns new things. In the aforesaid example, if the mother said "Don't be angry" as a reprimand, the child would feel bad, and think, "Maybe I am wrong. It is good not to touch fire and I should obey my mother."

But this still poses a problem. If this was true, she might learn anything from this linguistic trigger. For example, she might learn to obey elders unconditionally. Obeying her mother in this situation is alright but unconditional obedience of anyone does not amount to learning. We are left with a difficult problem. How do we trigger true learning? Both experience and language do not seem to be enough.

Anubhuti: Hmm, so what do we do then? We now have two problems. How does a child learn to use language to abstract and theorize? How can a teacher lead the child along the right path of abstraction and theorizing?

We have to think harder about language and how we use language. We learnt that language is not only labels and symbols but also a means of prompting thought. How do words prompt us to think of new things if we do not know the reality of those new things?



Ira: You know what, a few days back the Kannada teacher said that words are not the basic unit of language, meaning is. We speak in sentences, and sentences carry meaning. Even when we say one word, it is transmitted as a sentence that carries meaning. She said that is the basis for how she teaches language, through meanings.

We often express wonder about how children construct new sentences on their own. Sometimes they do not know the word for something but they either invent a new word or describe it using many other words.

Anubhuti: That is great. It changes the entire scenario. Let me say what you said differently: we communicate meanings through sentences which means, children can arrive at new ideas by constructing new sentences. Let us think using our example.

The mother says, "You should not touch fire, it is harmful."

The child says, "I shall. I want to."

Mother: "No, you are not allowed to. It is harmful, I know."

Child: "But I touched the candle yesterday and nothing happened."



**I touched it yesterday,
nothing happened to me.**

This is not a statement but an inquiry. The child expresses a real event, "I want to touch the flame." The mother responds with a "No, it is harmful. I know."

The child has synthesized parts of the question she asked and her mother's response, to create her next question, "But why did nothing happen yesterday when I touched the candle?" The child is questioning the meaning of difference, yesterday/today, and harmful/harmless indirectly by constructing a sentence in response to her mother. Language has taken over and plays the role of triggering new thoughts through a synthesis of meanings from earlier statements. This is how a child discovers new concepts that she did not know earlier, through language.

Earning the right to confidence in belief

Ira: You are right. The child does not know, but her question signifies scientific and moral inquiry. Why is fire harmful? Why is it right for the mother to stop me from touching it?

The mother could then respond with possible options that answer these queries and prompt the child to think further. This results in a conversation of the kind we try to have all the time in classes.

I thought I am just spewing words and children are memorizing those words and writing them in exams. But if we are aware of the nature of meanings that are being transmitted, the meaning children are receiving, and the new meanings they are forming, it makes the conversation richer. Now I can at least imagine how learning happens. Of course I have to pay much more attention to the meanings being exchanged by me and students. For that I need to see the mode of inquiry surfacing in their minds and lead them in an appropriate direction.

Anubhuti: Yes, and students should not accept a claim without applying appropriate rules. That is what we want students to learn: rules of thought that they are able to implement by themselves. They have to guide themselves with the rules that they give unto themselves. Learning necessarily involves discovering and owning rules that govern our ways of thinking. Of course we need to prompt them to further question these rules so that they learn new things by challenging existing rules, maybe even discover or invent new rules. Scheffler says this very eloquently. He says the learner has to "earn the right to confidence in his belief". They will earn the right to be confident only when they realize the need for rules, understand them, accept them and obey them conditionally. I say conditionally because they need to view the rules critically too.

Ira: That means three things are necessary for learning and knowledge.

- *Experience* provides a context and helps us make abstract terms real.
- *Language* triggers a thought process which is the essence of the process of learning.
- *Earning the right to confidence in belief* is necessary for the learner to be justified in what they believe.

Anubhuti: Whew! I feel much better about teaching now. Now that I think about it, my statement that experience is the most important aspect of teaching was rather naive. Of course implementing all these ideas in teaching-learning is not easy, but it will be enjoyable because now I know. Thank you for a great conversation.

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