

The Semantics of Multiculturalism: A New Element in Curriculum

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Adequate teaching for multiculturalism must deal with both affective and cognitive aspects of awareness. Attitudes as an element of the former are notoriously difficult to change by admonition and exhortation. Teachers would therefore be wise to avoid being seen as preachers. Consequently, this article proposes an approach via a process of infiltration rather than frontal attack in the form of direct teaching about multicultural matters. Thought of like this, the cognitive could deal with ways of viewing a range of cultural and social problems. The cognitive core should be drawn from elementary and general semantics, especially as this relates to ethnocentrism and stereotyping. The article questions a facile assumption that schools promoting a multicultural outlook should institute self-contained ad hoc courses in multiculturalism itself, and elaborates a suggested alternative, namely that, with suitable additions and minor changes of approach, most subjects in the present curriculum could make their contributions to a pervasive aim acceptable to any Canadian school. That aim might be to understand ourselves and others in cultural terms.

Pour arriver à sensibiliser les jeunes au multiculturalisme, l'enseignement doit tenir compte des aspects affectif et cognitif du problème. Il est notoire que les attitudes, qui relèvent de l'aspect affectif, sont difficiles à changer au moyen d'admonestations et d'exhortations. Les enseignants seraient donc avisés d'éviter de passer pour des prédicateurs. C'est pourquoi cet article propose de substituer une approche indirecte et plus subtile à l'enseignement direct et brutal des questions relatives au multiculturalisme. Dans cette nouvelle approche, l'aspect cognitif pourrait traiter des diverses façons d'envisager toute la gamme des problèmes sociaux et culturels. En outre, le contenu devrait s'inspirer des notions générales et élémentaires de sémantique tout en soulignant certaines affinités avec l'ethnocentrisme et la stéréotypie. L'article conteste l'hypothèse spéieuse selon laquelle les écoles qui portent un intérêt actif au multiculturalisme devraient créer des cours spéciaux pour enseigner cette matière et soutient au contraire que, sous réserve de certains ajouts et d'une légère réorientation, la plupart des cours existants pourraient contribuer à atteindre un objectif global qui conviendrait à toutes les écoles du Canada et qui pourrait être le suivant se comprendre et comprendre les autres sur le plan culturel.

Schools are social institutions. The work which they do must therefore in the long run reflect changes in the values and ideals of the society that maintains and administers them. For Canadians, an important recent change of this kind has been an official commitment to the creation of a multicultural society. Speaking in the Commons on October 8, 1971, the Prime Minister said that the government of Canada "will seek to assist all Canadian cultural groups that have demonstrated a desire and effort to continue to develop a capacity to grow and contribute to Canada, . . . the small and weak groups no less than the strong and highly organized"

(Canada, 1971, p. 8546a). Many politicians, clergymen, and educators have since followed this lead, but most schools have yet to give practical effect to what it might entail for them. This apparent delinquency prompts two questions: "What, if anything, should schools do to promote the development of a multicultural Canadian society," and "How should they do it?"

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Faced with these questions, most educators would recognize that answers must come from two directions — from both affective and cognitive domains. In effect, attitude towards others is at least as important in this respect as information about them. Here, as elsewhere, affective and cognitive go hand in hand. A person's attitudes are likely to be affected by what he knows — though not always to the extent that teachers might have hoped for. Correspondingly, as his attitudes change, so does a person's willingness to accept certain items of information and to accommodate them in his mental schemata. However, for the sake of clarity, we must deal with this complicated matter here by considering affective and cognitive elements *seriatim*.

A perennial problem plaguing teachers of social studies is that of converting fact into faculty. Time and again, they ask, "How will our students translate what they have learned into action? If we teach them to write will they sign their own cheques or forge someone else's?" A parallel problem faces the moral philosopher who asks, "How does one get an 'ought' out of an 'is'?" He would probably maintain that no one should derive a categorical, evaluative conclusion from factual premises. Consider these perplexities in the context of multiculturalism. Will facts which a student learns about people of a culture different from his own tell him how he ought to act towards them? The answer must be no. How then are attitudes and values to be changed where change is called for?

Clearly, attitudes are not easily changed by exhortation or admonition. It would therefore be inadvisable to push the culture of one peoplehood upon another. The pushfulness itself might be counter-productive because it could fortify that antagonism which seemed to call for the pushing in the first place. The educational strategy which appears more likely to succeed here would be infiltration, not frontal attack. In effect, approach whatever problem exists from a number of different directions over an extended period of school life in the hope — indeed, in the expectation — that the learner would draw some appropriate conclusions and formulate some appropriate prescriptions for action. It might be better not to direct even these approaches specifically at the problem, but rather to pin it down by surrounding it or by containing it, so to speak.

Nonetheless, many schools nowadays make specific provision for periods of "value clarification" (Raths, et al., 1966) or "moral reasoning" (Simon, et al., 1966; Hodgkinson, 1979, pp. 15-22). This more obvious

frontal attack has its contribution to make to the development of appropriate attitudes in a multicultural society. There are, however, those of good standing among educators who wonder how effective this more formal approach is likely to be (Barrow, 1979). Those of this persuasion would usually prefer to rely more heavily on what is in any case an element of the informal curriculum of all schools, namely, the ambience of the school itself as a community. What is referred to here is the responsibility of the school to promote by its ethos a concern for other people and for the observance of certain rules of conduct. In other words, perhaps attitudes are caught rather than taught, and better learned in action than in discussion.

Suppose, then, that educators accept the need to approach questions of attitudes and values with circumspection; does it follow that there should be no teaching which bears directly upon this delicate matter? It would, indeed, be difficult to argue that some account of the trials and tribulations of the Hutterites or of the circumstances of Ukrainian immigration to Western Canada should not be part of any satisfactory social studies course. *Le fait français du Canada* must be obvious as a result of any adequate teaching of French to Anglophones. Again, the question, "What do we mean by race?" must surely concern the biologist — as presumably it does also teachers of social studies or of language arts. The teaching of such matter is obviously to be commended, especially where it is not seen by teacher or student to be tendentious. Brought together with other material into one course, it might appear, however taught, to be designed to effect certain desired (the word is not "desirable") changes of attitude and value.

It seems, however, that when someone in the world of education propounds a problem, someone else almost immediately offers a solution to it, usually in the form of a new ad hoc course to be provided in the schools. Unfortunately, the immediate solution or response, the course proposed, may not be the wisest. Consulted on the advisability of introducing such a course, a curriculum development officer might ask at least three questions. First, is the content valid — is it likely to do what it claims to do? Second, if the course is, indeed, needed, should it be as a self-contained unit, or could much the same result be achieved — at least in terms of content — by revamping and supplementing parts of the existing curriculum? Third, suppose that a new, self-contained course appears to be called for; what can reasonably be dropped from the present curriculum in the school to make time for it? Accept yet again that affective and cognitive are closely allied, and turn now to fuller consideration of the three questions that a curriculum development officer might ask about the solution offered.

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The immediate response to a newly propounded problem — the course

proposed — often turns out to be little more than a consolidation and extension of material already taught. As such, it may relieve a symptom while it neglects or ignores the ultimate cause (or, more likely, ultimate causes). In this sense, then, a solution to problems associated with the fostering of a multicultural society may lie not in the provision of special courses in multiculturalism at all, but rather in the ultimate reorientation of the thinking processes of students. It may, for example, lie partly in coming to accept the world as phenomenological, as a “kaleidoscopic flux and flow” (Whorf, 1956, p. 231), as a dynamic world of continua rather than as a static Aristotelian world of fixed categories. Clearly, most students will not be able to appreciate statements formulated in that way. For them, such generalities must be realized in particulars — and probably in particulars foreign to the curriculum as it now exists. We must therefore now ask, “Through particulars of what kinds might teachers hope to make such generalizations meaningful to their students?”

Particulars of the kinds proposed could, in fact, be drawn from a variety of sources, but they might perhaps most conveniently be considered as falling within the scope of elementary semantics and Koryzybskian general semantics (1958, pp. 241, 377, 406). As such, they might become elements of language arts courses, such as statistics becomes an element of mathematics courses. As elements, they might either be woven into the texture of existing courses or be offered as distinct units of study within them — the former being preferred. Here it is clearly impossible to do more than describe as examples items which could certainly be selected for inclusion in language courses. Consider two such items of special concern in the fostering of multiculturalism: “The ‘meaning’ is in me — not in the thing,” a phenomenological view of the world, and “to classify is both to simplify and to betray,” an introduction to a world of flux and flow and of continua. At this point, both are deliberately overstated for effect. The first, in particular, should be qualified so as not to read as mere solipsism.

The first of these items might be approached via the study of two pictures from a Thematic Apperception Test, two Rorschach ink-blot, and a reproduction of a picture like “Bonjour M. Gauguin” by Gauguin. Students study these one at a time without consulting one another, write brief descriptions of what they see in each case, and say how they would interpret them; that is, “What did it mean to me?” They then compare results, only to discover that though they have all looked at the same pictures and blots, what they actually saw, and how they interpreted what they saw, differed substantially from person to person. The meaning, then, of what is seen is not in the picture but in the eye of the beholder. Students might also listen to two excerpts from programmatic music — the “Polish Ox Wagon” from Mussorgsky’s *Pictures at an Exhibition*, and a minute or two of Vaughan Williams’ *Lark Ascending*. When they compare what they have heard and how they have interpreted it, they

agree that the meaning is not in the vibration of the string, but in the ear that listens. Correspondingly and aphoristically, "Words do not themselves mean — only people mean," which might be glossed as "The same words mean different things to different people."

Much will follow from this point. Classic work in the psychology of perception like that of Ittelson (1960), Cantrill (1950), and Ames (cited in Ittelson, 1968), suggests that philosophers and educators should consider individuals not as passive subjects acted upon by sensory impingements originating in an external world, but as active participants in that world — as elements of their own environments. As Gellner (1959, p. 83) once put it, man inhabits "a first person world." It is, in fact, the "I" behind the "eye" that does the seeing. What should this betoken in the present context? In *The Social Construction of Reality*, Berger and Luckmann (1967) devote a long (and for some readers, enthralling) chapter to Society as Subjective Reality. They say that human existence is *ab initio* "an ongoing externalization. As man externalizes himself, he constructs the world into which he externalizes himself. In the process of externalization, he projects his own meanings into reality" (p. 104). *Homo sapiens* is ineluctably *homo socius*, and each society facing the same great human plights — birth, death, hunger, disease, and so on — creates its own idiosyncratic realities surrounding them. All are different: None is right; None is wrong. In the same way, no one interpretation of a picture, of an ink-blot, or of a melodic line is inevitably the right one. This is the semantic core of resistance to ethnocentricity, one of the two main obstacles to the creation of a well-adjusted, multicultural society.

The second item — "to classify is both to simplify and to betray" — might again be studied first via practical demonstration. One which most immediately suits the present context would be to classify an array of nickels and dimes. As all are made of nickel-silver, the obvious criteria of classification might be size and value, but classified by either criterion, are the nickels identical? Some are likely to be worn, some in mint condition, some bear one date, some another, and so on. This, then, is a demonstration of Peirce's (1970, p. 81) "type-token" distinction. Clearly, to classify is for many purposes sensible, and the vast majority of words in any language are inevitably class words. As the same time, the demonstration shows that classifying necessarily entails the ignoring of individual differences — a matter which becomes most acutely damaging as it touches human, social affairs. So a teacher uses the proper name of each student even when they are collected by age or aptitude or achievement into the same class. Here is the semantic core of resistance to stereotypy — the second main obstacle to the creation of a well-adjusted, multicultural society.

Elementary semantics and Korzybskian general semantics (1958, pp. 241, 377, 406) comprehend many intellectual skills which might be applied with advantage to thinking on multicultural matters. A selection

of these, suitable for schools, might include: (a) the “meaning of meaning,” with special reference to meaning as depending upon a person’s experience of items in a class referred to; (b) dyslogic connotation, or emotional overtones to the referential; (c) colored language — euphemism and dysphemism; (d) conjunctive classes and hierarchies — the semantic ladder and the need for a secure footing for high level abstractions in (preferably) knowledge by acquaintance of appropriate low level particulars; (e) difficulties of translation from language to language; (f) propaganda analysis (for example, name calling, glittering generality, and slanted ideas). The selection would also include definition, leading to the analysis of concepts such as race, culture, and state. The core of general semantics is an abomination of abstractions when these are not underpinned by a sufficient array of particulars (Korzybski, 1958). Korzybski provides three principles — non-allness, non-identity, and self-reflexiveness (1958, pp. 241, 377, 406). When applied in any situation, these should push the thinker into looking again at the facts, distinguishing fact from opinion, and treating inference only with great caution. This and much more is the readily digestible substance of Hayakawa’s (1972) classic, *Language in Thought and Action*, which has much to say, whether directly or tangentially, to all who are concerned in promoting a multicultural society.

Semantic points illustrated by demonstrations described here are selected from a broad universe. That universe is, in effect, a metadiscipline of thinking. It includes, but transcends, all those modes of inquiry and ways of ascertaining truths that are supposedly taught through the ordinary school subjects. In addition, it calls for a new self-consciousness about the use of words — about the process leading to the products for which words are labels, as well as about their present acceptations. For instance, a person using a particular class word important in a discussion should know both how classes are arrived at in general and the criteria employed in determining the sense of the class word in that particular context. Like analytical philosophy, this metadiscipline has no specified content. It is rather a congeries of techniques that can be and should be applied to the substance of whatever is taught in schools as well as to the circumstances of everyday life.

Repeated appeal to techniques of this metadiscipline throughout school life should not only cause students to know them well, but also to be able to employ them appropriately in new situations. All this, though necessary, is by no means sufficient as preparation for living in a multicultural society. The infiltration of central problems of multiculturalism — notably those connected with ethnocentricity and stereotypy — comes through the willing commitment of teachers in a school to a new or additional aim, and the effects of such commitment on the contents and approaches of the subjects which they severally teach. This aim, which, with others, should pervade the work of the school, may be stated in this way: “To

know something of ourselves and others in terms of culture.” The phrase “of ourselves” is important for it makes us as much an object of scrutiny as any other people. This raises the question: “How should such a scrutiny be undertaken?” A curriculum development officer might now ask whether this would be better done through a self-contained course or through alterations to subjects of the existing curriculum.

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Men and women the world over do many of the same things though they do them in different ways. For example, all make music, all dance. All must create governments and all have some kind of religion. At this highest conceptual level, then, men everywhere have much in common. In this sense, there are cultural universals or constants — features like music and dance — to be explored in cultures whenever in time and wherever in space these are to be distinguished. These constants are realized idiosyncratically in each culture. The dancer in Bali does not perform the same movements as the dancer in Bella Bella. The pattern is, of course, more complicated than this stark contrast might suggest. Culture A may exhibit characteristics somewhat similar to those of Culture B with respect to Constant X, but A and B may differ widely with respect to Constant Y. Constants embodied in the cultures of Western Europe are recorded and codified in the subjects taught now in Canadian schools. Existing subjects are usually culture-bound — “culturally encapsulated” in Banks’ (1979) phrase — but their contents could be extended, without disrupting the present curriculum, to refer to appropriate constants as embodied in cultures other than those of the West. If this were done, the given constant as a feature both of Western and other selected cultures would be more fully explored and more sharply defined in each case by comparison and contrast.

What might be some of the effects of extending the contents of current curricula in the way described? Consider music as a case in point. First, additions or alternatives to items at present included in music courses might be systematic. The music of a people may make much of melody and of certain preferred harmonies — as the music of Western Europe tends to do. Equally, the music of a people may emphasize rhythm, as it does among the Bantu. Some East Indian rhythms are too complex to be easily appreciated by European ears, but some appealing Western melodies are monotonously repetitive to the Japanese. Again, the music of a people is artifactual; its timbres and tempi must depend partly upon the resources of the area which provides materials for the manufacture of instruments. An Australian aborigine has his bull-roarer and his didjeridu, simple instruments both, but he could scarcely be expected to provide himself with a grand piano, or if he could, to carry it with him if he went “walkabout.” Some recent curricula in music recognize it as a cultural

constant and incorporate the music of other cultures both as systematic and as artifactual (Choate et al., 1976).

Most subjects in the curriculum could be treated as music might be so as to contribute to the developing of a multicultural society. Arts and crafts, language and literature, and social studies are obvious candidates for such treatment. A teacher of home economics might consider not only foods basic to economies outside Canada, but also those connected with ritual observances as exemplified within Canada itself, such as Thanksgiving dinner, *la bûche de Noël*, *Porihi*, or even *Chanakah* cookies. The daily ritual of eating is, in fact, an important aspect of most cultures. In physical education classes, teachers could consider survival techniques in different environmental circumstances — or how Inuit and Plains Indians coped with the harshest winters, which might lead into a discussion of hypothermia. The debilitating effects of bilharziasis, beri-beri, and malaria would be well worth considering as contributing to the lack of enterprise and self-improvement in certain countries. Playing games, dramatic representation, counting systems, measuring, religious observances, and many more are cultural constants connected centrally with subjects already taught in schools. Teachers likely to work successfully with such approaches would have to break through the boundaries of their subjects as these are commonly drawn, and they would have to recognize the virtue of contributing each in his own way to “knowing something of ourselves and others” as an important aim of the entire school.

Teachers in any school might decide to deal fairly fully with cultures of immediate ethnic neighbors by infiltration. By co-ordinating their efforts, they might, that is, deal severally and at different times with a number of constants from a given culture so as to produce a kind of profile of it. In addition, or alternatively, they might do no more than select individual constants from any culture, so as to provide comparison and contrast with the manifestation of the same constant in their own, always with a view to mitigating the ethnocentric. In either case, multiculturalism in Canada could be seen as a local example of a world-wide phenomenon. In a shrinking world, teachers and students alike should come to understand something of themselves and others in terms of culture contact — and even of culture non-communication. Ideally in Canada they should — in the words of the *Report of the Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism* (1970) — come to appreciate “the contribution made by other ethnic groups to the cultural enrichment of Canada” (p. 3), presumably within a framework of substantial general agreement as to basic ideals, values, mores, folkways, and beliefs.

Here it would be wise to recognize a substantial limitation to what teachers can effect, by recognizing that a culture is much more than an aggregate of constants. It is an organic whole in the social kingdom. As Kluckhohn (1956) explains in *Mirror for Man*, cultures do not manifest themselves

solely in observable customs and artifacts. No amount of questioning of any save the most articulate in the most self-conscious cultures will bring out some of the basic attitudes common to the members of the group. This is because these basic assumptions are taken so for granted that they do not normally enter into consciousness. This part of the cultural map must be inferred by the observer on the basis of consistencies in thought and action. (p. 36)

In effect, then, members of a cultural group have a subsidiary rather than a focal awareness of these assumptions. But, meanwhile, what is the poor teacher to do about them? He does not usually know another culture in this way, and if he did, would what he knew be communicable in any genuine sense? Would it — whatever “it” is — be worth communicating in a grossly oversimplified form?

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The curriculum development officer is still faced with his third question, “What effect would provision of a self-contained course as opposed to the extension of existing content on multiculturalism have upon the curriculum as a whole?” To answer this, he might first consider that a disappointing feature of much thinking on educational matters today is that it lacks self-consistency. On the one hand, teachers would like to see their students as persons who “if given the correct intellectual tools, could grow almost indefinitely” (Eisner & Vallance, 1974, p. 6). Admittedly, the conditional “if” is an obstacle. On the other hand, however, teachers often act as if what they did not teach their students, their students would never know. To accept the latter position — one which is usually unspoken — has two undesirable effects on the curriculum. The first is that it becomes grossly overcrowded in terms of content. This, in turn, is likely to mean that relatively too much energy is devoted to teaching facts (that is, education as information) and too little to making good sense of what is learned (that is, education as induction) (Bramwell, 1978, p. 3). In effect, the student may have the facts but not the phosphorescence of learning. The second undesirable effect on the curriculum may be that it becomes even less coherent than it is now. Ad hoc courses multiply, and the curriculum becomes a medley lacking a *leitmotif*.

Assuming that there is some substance to these animadversions, what is a curriculum development officer to say to those who wish to see special courses in multiculturalism or ethnic studies? For a variety of reasons, administrative and educational, no one is likely to try to teach a student in school all that he might find it helpful to know as an adult. Nonetheless, developers will be under continual pressure to put more material into a curriculum already (as some would think) overcrowded. Before he does so, he must consider what he can take out, even against the resistance of the vested interests. In other words, he and his colleagues would have to assign values and priorities to items in question. Perhaps, then, the wisest

course is to reorient elements of the current curriculum to meet a new or additional pervasive aim referred to earlier: "To know something of ourselves and others in terms of cultures."

A well-known and much-respected curriculum theorist, Herrick (1965), has argued that a curriculum must be more than an aggregate of subjects — "more than a collection of unrelated, individualized bits of bric-a-brac; a curriculum pattern is the only way to give the specifics of curriculum a meaning and a future" (p. 18). In effect, it must be an articulated system necessitated by explicit aims. If a curriculum developer followed this prescription, he would have to see to it that any element of multicultural or ethnic studies dealt with were consistent with an overall pattern discernible in the *docendum*. Teachers in any school would, ideally, have to be going in the same general direction, even if they were going at somewhat different speeds and by somewhat different routes.

Values and attitudes are notoriously difficult to change by admonition or by argument. Teachers might therefore be wise to deal with aspects of multiculturalism by infiltration rather than by frontal attack. Infiltration suggests two possible approaches. The first is to reveal the semantic bases of ethnocentricity and stereotypy. The second is to ask teachers in any school to shape the content of what they teach so as to include items related to appropriate constants in other cultures. In doing so, they might give special attention to embodiments of chosen constants in the cultures of their ethnic neighbors. Advantages of doing this by shaping present curricula would be that ad hoc courses devoted to the cultures of ethnic neighbors would not be added to a curriculum already overburdened, and might contribute to rather than detract from its coherence.

Those who have given some thought to multicultural education will debate the relative merits of general versus specific teaching. General education for multiculturalism refers to a developed openmindedness — a willingness to accept a culture as legitimate, even if not as admirable. Specific education provides information about those cultures with which the learner is, or is about to be, in contact. Sensible arguments can be deployed on both sides and debate continues. However, teachers choosing either of these approaches or some mixture of them will still need to consider both cognitive and affective aspects of teaching for multiculturalism. In addition, they should consider the desirability of adding new items together with some semantics to the existing curriculum, always with a view to exhibiting backgrounds to ethnocentrism and stereotypy.

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