

## Letter to "The Australian" newspaper

25 March 2009

You have been publishing some pretty lopsided claims recently about the best way to teach English, for example: 'The Rudd Government must hold fast to education reform' 28/2, 'Curriculum values' 17/3, 'Time to spell it out' and 'Teachers in 'subliminal' bid to bar phonics' 19/3; and 'Hidden ideologues control our teaching' 21/3.

I do understand you're trying to sell newspapers and get online revenue but much of this content seems a bit reactionary and quite unbalanced, feeding the polarised mindsets that have caused much of the 'literacy wars' controversy. Without wanting to sound unduly Confucian, both camps have a point. There is no question about the value of sounding out letters as part of a language learning program. But neither should there be any dispute about the fact that when trying to read, much of the sense we make is cued by the context of particular words and phrases. It is an established fact of cognitive psychology that we constantly (and often unconsciously) guesstimate what parts of a text mean from its surrounds as well as, for example, its style of expression, intended purpose and audience, possible author biases and sources of credibility.

When actually learning to spell words, of course it can be helpful to sound out letters. But try using only that method when trying to help kids spell draught or draft, for example, much less diarrhoea. To try to say it's one or the other 'ideology' is simply a G.W. Bushism, a 'you're either with us or agin us' unhelpful polarised rigid mindset that attempts to reduce complex psychological and social processes into emotive right/wrong tribalism. There seems to be evidence that teachers would do best by select from a range of strategies according to the particular needs of a student and situation (which is what effective teachers have always done).

I've been 'involved' in schools and universities for over 40 years. More than half of this has been as a practising teacher, teacher trainer, researcher and curriculum designer/developer (state and national level projects) mostly focusing on language, literacy, communication and culture. I don't particularly warm to the post-modern extreme view that everything must be viewed through a lens that sees everywhere the perpetuation of power inequalities.

But does this mean that social critical theory per se is 'out'? How can we deny that social, economic and political power does in fact often influence what gets written, published, broadcast and transmitted? Surely we need to help our children understand

how to avoid being manipulated, to develop independent thinking skills that ferret out?

I have two short illustrations that may help understand my points. In the 1990's I worked in a small team at the (Victorian) Board of Studies to develop, amongst other things, the original English Curriculum and Standards Framework (CSF). A colleague was working with the Victorian Racing Club to design a school kit that educated students about the racing industry and gambling in particular. I helped him identify some links with the English CSF and activities that promoted critical literacy by examining the (false) assumptions behind some gambling advertisements, to deconstruct, if you like, some of the persuasive language and strategies used by the profiteers to hook unwary consumers.

Somehow the media got hold of a draft version of the kit and decided to beat up a sensational story. One morning my ears pricked up when I heard Jon Faine on ABC Radio Melbourne 3LO interrogating the then Education Minister (Don Hayward) about why his Department was 'promoting' gambling to the vulnerable school student population. The Minister rebutted that the gambling kit had nothing to do with his Department which had its own authoritative curriculum designers such as the Board of Studies, etc. etc... Faine interrupted: 'But this kit has got the Board of Studies name on it!'

I wasn't sure whether to be grateful he didn't mention my name which was listed in the acknowledgements or not. The Minister denied any knowledge of this association and muttered words to the effect that it must be some junior project officer with no official standing. I soon found myself explaining my involvement to the Director of the Department Geoff Spring who had been brought in to do the Kennett Government's drastic culling of teachers and staff. It wasn't a pro-gambling kit, I protested, more an anti-gambling toolkit to help students protect themselves against the devious subliminal ploys of the gaming industry etc., etc.. The Director disagreed and the kit never saw the light of day. Thus the Victorian school community was left prone to the continued assaults of the gaming industry without a shred of critical literacy with which to defend and fight back.

The second story is related in time and space. Around that time I organised for myself and a number of colleagues to do a professional development program: 'Frameworks: Assessment and Evaluation Program Facilitator Training'. This program had been developed and was run by the target of several of your recent attacks on whole

language- Brian Cambourne. I had already undertaken, as well as delivered, other Cambourne-designed courses that aimed to help teachers promote literacy acquisition in everyday their classroom teaching. There was little if any ideology that I can recall in any of courses, just practical and useful strategies that generally helped average teachers to improve their awareness, knowledge and skills in literacy rich teaching methods.

For some time I had been holding one burning question to ask Cambourne. During the previous year or two, I had been trying to help teachers of Aboriginal students in East Gippsland develop teaching strategies that would provide better access to and for these kids. After doing a little background research as part of a Masters program, I noticed a striking similarity between some of the principles that were claimed to work for Aboriginal students with those of the whole language approach. For example, one principle was to create psychologically safe conditions that allow learners to 'take risks' by having a go at saying or doing something without fear of feeling stupid or like a failure.

Simple, obvious, you might say, yet when I worked with a range of generally competent teachers in their classrooms, it was clear that they, usually unintentionally, were either excluding or embarrassing some students by putting them on the spot in ways that made them feel they were being showcased and judged before they were ready to perform. For example, giving them the opportunity to practise until they felt ready, such as in supportive peer groups, to learn by using a mix of socially mediated communication modes (e.g. peer interaction) rather than just listening to the teacher or reading a text. One senior teacher of 30 years experience told me that this was the first time he had been shown and used strategies that actually engaged his Aboriginal students.

I asked Cambourne if he knew of any research or literature that had also made the connection between whole language ideas and aboriginal learning styles. I found it particularly exciting because instead of stigmatising Aboriginal learners, this touch point actually suggested that they were used to more natural and meaningful ways of acquiring expertise. In contrast, we westerners had inherited anachronistic 19<sup>th</sup> century Western models that were originally designed to prepare foddors for the satanic mills, methods that emphasised sitting still for long periods, trying to absorb decontextualised written or spoken diatribes from an 'expert' source of knowledge (i.e. teacher, blackboard or book).

Rather than address the question directly, Cambourne told me he had recently been invited to speak with a group of local Aboriginal people in NSW about the whole language theory. He explained some key ideas down by a river, around a campfire while the audience listened and nodded respectfully. After he'd finished, they clapped and started to disperse. Before he left, an elderly lady pulled Cambourne aside and said to him words to the effect: 'You white fellas only just worked this out have yer? We've been doing this stuff for years.'

Cambourne makes no bones about the fact that he has a social justice orientation and believes that a critical approach to literacy development is a crucial tool towards that end. Whether this makes him an ideologue is open to question. The very concept of ideology hints at a mental rigidity and intransigence to modification, possibly with a biased subjective bent thrown in. I've had no contact with Cambourne for about 15 years- he is very well equipped to represent himself and that is not my intent here. However, saying he 'casts a long shadow' seems unfair (maybe subliminally so) to both him and the 'generations of teachers' he is supposed to have 'socially engineered' (also maybe subliminally).

Cambourne has been so widely accepted because most teachers find his research and insights actually help them to teach better. Therefore you could say his work has highly 'consequential validity'. Instead I simply conclude that the weight of research evidence suggests a judicious blend of approaches is likely to do the best for our children. There should be no more bogey people associated with the explicit teaching of grammar, phonics and spelling (though hopefully not in the mindless drill and rote ways of bygone eras). Neither should we deny the value of proven whole language approaches that patently reflect much of our natural learning inclinations. Both will help to develop the durable, lifelong and transferable core attributes needed now more than ever for future generatons.

Best regards from  
Nick

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