

Metaphors in Education

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Human beings have been endowed with the capacity to articulate, produce and share knowledge. This unique capacity also places them upon the mineral, vegetal or animal realms of creation. The distinctive power of their minds enables human beings to transcend the limits of the senses and discover the realities and mysteries of the universe. Added to the power of their minds, they have also the capability of discerning goodness from evil, truth from falsehood. This added spiritual dimension provides human beings with the special capacity of purposefully undertaking enterprises oriented to their ultimate well-being.

A body of educational literature in the last two decades has associated knowledge (i.e., cognition) with the development of a broad range of spiritual capabilities such as justice, willingness to persevere, interest, confidence, patience, fairness, truthfulness, service, and so on. Search for knowledge, that is research, is a mental faculty that can be compared in nature to any of those spiritual attributes. If so, educational research and its methodologies then can become a vehicle not only to find knowledge for the sake of knowledge but also a tool to assist men and women to achieve their complete realization as higher beings of the creation. [1]

To accomplish their natural instinct for sense-making, people make use of different faculties such as predicting, observing, inferring, interpreting or measuring phenomena that occur in their surrounding environment. Once knowledge sought is formalized and systematized, it takes the form of a theory. Theories are based on assumptions and facts about the world. We have a theory on learning and teaching, a theory of relativity, a theory of numbers, a theory of the planetary system, and so on. Philosophers of science assert that theories develop either as a process of accumulation, accommodation, or restructuring. Accumulation occurs when new facts add or match harmoniously the basic underpinnings of a previously established theory. In turn, a process of accommodation occurs when existing theories meet new facts in a way that conflict with previous theoretical assumptions. As a consequence, a theory assimilates new facts on the condition that a modification of a certain aspect of the theoretical assumptions is to happen. Alternatively, two theories can co-exist having two different interpretations of the same facts. Sometimes new findings are such that the existing theory cannot stand fresh challenges and a process of complete restructuring then occurs. How many times history has witnessed that acclaimed and popular theories collapse to give way to a new set of assumptions and new ground

is broken. In brief, theories are ways of observing and describing the world and are based on mutable assumptions. Theories are not absolute but have a relative and provisional character. [2]

Probably because of its ill-defined parameters, education has gone through many fleeting, ephemeral and somehow contradictory theories of teaching and learning. Educational theories have quickly arisen, survived a certain period of time, co-existed with other theories, and finally decayed. Each one of these theories presented their own particular conception of human beings in terms of metaphors. The main theories of the 20th century include classical conditioning, behaviourism, cognitive processing, cognitive developmental, information processing and constructivism, among others. Pavlov's theory of classical conditioning compared human beings to dogs in order to explain stimuli-response processes, whereas Skinner used the metaphor of a machine to explain learning behaviours which he considered to be easy of manipulation. Piaget, probably influenced by his training as a biologist, compared human beings to a plant and its digestive system. Information-processing psychologists compared people to a computer and its parts, while cognitive psychologists explained learning as the interaction of chemical and physical neural reactions. Even constructivism, which constitutes a step forward paradigm by considering individuals as "knowing beings", still holds the belief that we are "social animals". [3]

In all these paradigms, there is a misleading assertion about our true nature because they show that we are still bound by limiting metaphors. These theories and their research methods are laden with a very restrictive view about human beings, because dogs, plants, black boxes, computers and physiological reactions evidently respond to physical laws. These metaphors actually chain our understanding of the nature of human beings rather than liberate us for more holistic and broader conceptions. The effect of these views has had a profound effect on the way educationalists have advanced their theories on education. These belief systems are now deeply incorporated in the design and provision of educational programs. Moreover, the philosophical underpinnings of these theories will keep having pernicious effects if alternative perspectives based on spiritual representations are not broadly discussed.

Recent educational theories have academically validated the role of beliefs, opinions and emotions in teaching and learning. It has been argued that these so-called affective variables have a strong effect in the way people engage in learning tasks enhancing academic performance. By recognizing the value of these non-tangible variables operating within the individual, even in the so-called hard sciences like mathematics and physics, this body of research has become closer to the Bahá'í view of education. [4] However, this literature still falls short of acknowledging the essence of the problem, which lies on the recognition of the spiritual

and therefore limitless potential of the human being. The social and spiritual principles instituted by the prophets of God such as Jesus Christ and Muhammad proved that They were not the product of their times. Furthermore, Their teachings revealed that They did not reproduce or accommodate an existing system but, contradictory to human logic and despite Their lack of formal training, They established new and triumphant civilizations based on fresh spiritual conceptions of human beings. Consequently, it can be argued that the shortness of modern educational theories in addressing the spiritual nature of the human being stand themselves as their very first limitation and pitfall.

What metaphor does the Bahá'í Faith offers to these educationalist? Bahá'u'lláh, the Founder of the Bahá'í Faith wrote in this regard:

Man is the supreme Talisman. Lack of a proper education hath, however, deprived him of that which he doth inherently possess. Through a word proceeding out of the mouth of God he was called into being; by one word more he was guided to recognize the Source of his education; by yet another word his station and destiny were safeguarded. The Great Being saith: Regard man as a mine rich in gems of inestimable value. Education can, alone, cause it to reveal its treasures, and enable mankind to benefit therefrom.... [5]

In brief, human beings have been endowed with a spiritual nature given by God. This nature enables them to articulate a relationship to their Creator and simultaneously makes them distinctive from any other being on the mineral, vegetable or animal realms. Education is also seen as a meaningful process of discovering, bringing forth, polishing, and displaying this divine nature. As a result, human beings are not borne bereft of qualities, or reproducing an alleged original sin. Instead, they are born noble and possessors of an extraordinary spiritual wealth and beauty. The assumption here is that there is much that we do not know about their capabilities, because all these precious attributes are hidden down inside. [6] Education therefore can be seen as the ultimate task of releasing those gems.

Talismans are objects that are supposed to have occult powers of their own which alter the force of nature, bring good fortune, have healing powers, avert evil and, in general, make wonders. Very often, precious gems are associated to talismans. The philosopher's stone, which many people believe would turn metal into gold, was the most sought after talisman by alchemists in ancient times. These eclectic descriptions of talismans certainly represent a nobler, fruitful and empowering conception of the human being that should necessarily be articulated into current theories of teaching and learning.

References

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