

Educational Theory as a Form of Symbolic Action

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A signal is comprehended if it serves to make us notice the object or situation it bespeaks.
A symbol is understood when we conceive the idea it presents.

– Susanne K. Langer, *Feeling and Form*

While educational experts write about a range of topics from a variety of theoretical perspectives, many share an avid belief in causation. This faith in cause-and-effect relationships gives rise, as Susanne Langer observed, to a “practical vision” that is dominated by a “literal minded conception of reality” and a matter-of-fact kind of attitude. In saying this, her hope was to shed light on what literal-mindedness casts in its long shadow, and her philosophical efforts are the source of my inspiration.

Facts, as Langer so eloquently put it, cannot stand alone: “*between the facts* run the threads of unrecorded reality...the bright, twisted threads of symbolic envisagement, imagination, thought...the whole creative process of ideation, metaphor, and abstraction that makes human life an adventure in understanding.”¹ Following her lead, I hope to make educational theory an adventure in understanding; accepting that educational theory is, I will ask questions about how it does what it does. In doing so I will take Langer’s observation one step further by suggesting that it is the symbolic action packed around ideas — and not the ideas alone — that motivates educational theory into practice. Theorists, in other words, study historical facts to offer ideas for educational improvement, but their ideas will not be translated into action unless the attitudes and outlooks that make theory’s needs *felt* have also been supplied. Those dispositions, in turn, are delivered by symbolic gestures that enact, on the page, the kind of conduct considered appropriate to the world that a theory describes. Educational theory, in short, is composed of ideas that have cognitive appeal, but it is the verbal action between ideas that provides the emotional incentive required to transform conceptions into actualities.

Making educational theory an adventure in understanding is an exceedingly difficult task, and it is especially tricky when one’s audience finds comfort in knowing what theory is. The study of theory as a form of symbolic action, moreover, deserves to be approached from multiple angles, and this essay is necessarily limited to one approach. My assertions rest on insights gleaned from Langer but also from Kenneth Burke. As Burke said, “the work of every writer contains a set of implicit equations. He uses ‘associational clusters.’ And you may, by examining his work, find ‘what goes with what’ in these clusters — what kind of acts and images and personalities and situations go with his notions of heroism, villainy, consolation, despair, etc.”² One way to analyze the symbolic action of a text, therefore, is to study the images that go with an author’s understanding of the world. My approach focuses on the symbolism of what theory seeks to change by considering the construction of an educational problem. As I will suggest, descriptions of educational problems are

frequently established by making reference to widely shared symbols that are prepackaged with social, cultural, and moral significance and that require, therefore, little elaboration to inspire acceptance of the need for change. It is not within the parameters of this essay, however, to amass factual evidence in support of this claim; my goal, instead, is to offer one example that I hope will invite a different way of reading educational theory. What this way of reading suggests, in the end, is that educational theory — as it is practiced on page as opposed to the content of its assertions — already rejects the mind/body dualisms that some philosophers like to accuse other philosophers of relying upon.

EDUCATIONAL THEORY AS SYMBOLIC ACTION

We know what educational theory is, but how does it do what it does? This is a large question and my answer offers but a small beginning. I start with the assumption that educational thought embodies attitudes toward the situations, events, or people under its description. My thesis, simply put, is this: a writer's attitudes are conveyed, in part, by the symbolic action recommended by the imagery packed around descriptions of educational problems. It is the way an author imagines the various dimensions of a problem, in other words, that establishes the emotional urgency needed to put theory into practice. I view problem construction, in short, as a linguistic process because social problems cannot be understood independently of our describing activities. Indeed, the kinds of events or situations that warrant intervention cannot be recognized as troublesome until a group of people with sufficient social and cultural resources formally organizes them into problems and persuades others that they are worthy of social intervention. On this view, therefore, it is vital to ask how educational problems are constructed, because representations of what is deemed problematic are not neutral and also because what is deemed problematic must be taken on faith since the entire spectrum of events that constitutes a social problem cannot literally be viewed by any one person or from any one social location.

While my way of reading educational theory relies on additional assumptions, I will let them unfold as my analysis proceeds and hope that, if my example is plausible, coherent, and interesting enough, it will invite others to consider *how* educational theory does what it does as opposed to simply thinking about its point of view. The text I use introduces a theory that, at one level, is driven by a very practical vision of education — a vision aimed at improving school-home relations — and the introductory observations that best exemplify the problem addressed in this text are these:

Once upon a time, not much more than a hundred years ago, the United States was predominantly a rural culture. A book purporting to be a "guide[...]" to working with families would have been an anachronism.... Today the world, the family and the community are topsy-turvy different. The changes that have occurred in a century are profound. The family has been turned inside-out: single parent homes; step-children of second and even third marriages often blended together; women working outside the home; children bearing children; isolated urban nuclear families; urban life with its noise, crowded housing developments, traffic.³

Sue Spayth Riley wrote this prelude and the author of the book, Carol Gestwicki, seems to find her attitudes agreeable. As Gestwicki indicated, she sees a world

defined by “family stress” and tells us that “Efforts are being made in both public and private sectors to offer some external support to alleviate family stress, as the understanding dawns that family breakdown is responsible for many of the ills plaguing the community at large.”⁴

Since these passages are taken from the opening of this book, they represent the author’s efforts to create a context that establishes the need for school-home theory. When educational experts open with images of the problem they hope to ameliorate, in other words, they are establishing the utility of their theory in terms of the problem it addresses (and many academics open their texts in a similar way). What this practice affirms, in turn, is that academics write from the perspective of an institution that values a cause-and-effect approach to solving social problems. However, these passages also reveal something about the particular attitudes of school-home theory. As these images assert, the authors see a world defined by changing family forms and values that are responsible for societal ills. More precisely, what this image of the world proclaims is that the relationship between parents and schools can be divided into two periods: there is a long tranquil past characterized by wholesome family forms and a present moment of unprecedented change characterized by broken families.⁵ The present, in other words, is imagined as the world turned upside down, and the symbolism of this passage teaches us that the authority of the expert is derived from her ability to stand above this dysfunctional scene where she can see, with unflinching clarity, who is responsible for “many of the ills plaguing” society. The perch of her expertise — theory that is literally aimed at promoting healthy school-home relationships — is ironically dependent upon images of pathological families. Indeed, without the uncertainty that this troubling, if not frightening, image of the American family declares, the need for her school-home theory might be eviscerated.⁶

What I want to examine more closely are the associational clusters used in these passages, and my goal is to uncover their symbolic action by considering what kinds of images go with the world a theorist wants and the world he or she rejects. The symbols used are important because they enable school practitioners to simplify and interpret the world that exists at the edge of their classrooms. What these symbols enable, in particular, are shorthand ways to deal with social differences as opposed to well-studied ways. Though the word “woman” is used only once in the preceding passages, for example, her image is everywhere. Indeed, it is her profligacy that figures as the main source of trouble. “Single parent homes” is code for women who live without men, as is the image of the “crowded housing development.” Only girls and women give birth, and when they do so and work outside the home, or when they blend their progeny with those of other women, they are responsible for problems affecting society as a whole. Through the symbolic action of these passages, students of theory learn that a division between types of women — between the kinds of women represented in these images and professional women — is appropriate to understanding the relationship between school and home. Moreover, since the image of the single mother or the crowded housing development frequently invokes an image of poor women of African or Hispanic descent, students are provided a

shorthand method for drawing this line between women as villains and women as heroes. What we have in these passages, in sum, is an image of “bad mothers” loaded with racial and social class significance, and we know these types of women are undesirable because they are found in associational clusters that directly link them with societal breakdown.⁷

Since students aspire to emulate the expertise that defines their profession — since identifying with theory is what professional training is all about — it is crucial to ask questions about the kinds of attitudes and dispositions that accompany educational thought because these aspects of expertise must be embodied to motivate theory into practice. Clearly, the kinds of images analyzed previously participate in and sustain traditional gender, race, and social-class stereotypes, but it is the *way* they collaborate that teaches dispositions and ethical habits. What bad-mother images promote — through the reader’s identification with the symbolic action of educational theory — is the acceptance of the higher merit of school practitioners vis-à-vis socially disenfranchised groups. These images provide, in other words, an ethical rubric that builds the identity of school practitioners against a set of clearly defined social opposites — against, that is, parents whose child-rearing activities are responsible for societal ills. Moreover, in associational clusters that portray social life in melodramatic terms, school practitioners figure unquestionably as exemplars of all that is good and their relationship to parents is symbolically reciprocal: Those who act and think as school practitioners do will be awarded the recognition of being a good parent, while those who find the orientation of school practitioners foreign or disagreeable can be dismissed as bad parents. Finally, it should be clear that this divide — or some kind of divide — is central to the construction of a professional identity, and it is authorized by the superiority that all forms of theory ask readers to embody (including my own). The questions that remain, and I will return to these in my conclusion, are, Must educational thought rely on such oversimplified and stark portrayals of the social world to establish its authority? Are melodramatic images of social differences essential to the production of educational thought? Or, can we be more provisional and generous toward the differences of perspective that educational theory depends upon?

EDUCATIONAL THEORY AS AN ETHICAL RUBRIC

Clifford Geertz thinks that “Since Dewey, it has been much more difficult to regard thinking as an abstention from action, theorizing as an alternative to commitment, and the intellectual life as a kind of secular monasticism excused from accountability by its sensitivity to the Good.”⁸ My hope is to make it even more difficult to conceive of educational theory as something that stands outside of social practice and as something that, at the level of its writerly practice, is capable of embracing mind/body dualisms. As a social practice, the production of educational expertise derives its distinction from the institutional norms, values, and commitments that gives it its historical and contingent shape. As a writerly practice, in turn, educational theory depends on the manipulation of cultural forms to motivate theory into practice, and it should be held accountable for the kinds of manipulations it pursues. To further our understanding of educational theory as a writerly practice, I will focus on how educational theorists call forth and persuade an audience.

Theorists extend an invitation to an audience, in part, by proclaiming the utility of their solutions for the problems they describe. Where human relations are concerned, however, the utility of a solution is rarely judged on the basis of fact alone; reference to factual claims is, at best, a secondary means of persuasion. As Joseph Gusfield suggests, facts are useful for organizing the cognitive side of a given problem — they are useful, that is, for establishing that a problem exists and for asserting that it can be changed. The primary way educational theorists encourage acceptance of their solutions, and thereby motivate theory into action, is by laying out an ethical rubric that asks readers to make distinctions between good and bad or better and worse. As Gusfield puts it, “The moral side is that which enables the situation to be viewed as painful, ignoble, immoral. It is what makes the alteration or eradication desirable or continuation valuable.”⁹ It is the moral meaning symbolically woven around theoretical ideas that asserts the need, from the perspective of a situated morality, for expertise and expert intervention; it is this felt need, in turn, that must be embodied for theory to shape practice.

In the view offered here, educational texts do not simply report on “educational realities” and thereby compel assent; they actively construct a particular version of reality with the goal of inducing belief as the central aim. The images used to induce belief, as Murray Edelman suggests, have “a major influence on social change and almost always act as a conservative force.”¹⁰ The impact of images is conservative because, as the bad-mother device explored previously testifies, images are frequently derived from social stereotypes that maintain power relations. The symbolic action of a text, however, is not straightforwardly conservative or simple. Bad-mother images, for example, could provide incentive to simply withdraw from public school practice. The appeal of this rhetorical device, therefore, must be much more complex. Perhaps its appeal comes in the way it symbolically inverts the social hierarchy that privileges the familial status of parents over the extrafamilial authority that schools have over children. By displacing the mother’s authority, in other words, this device is dialectically appealing because the bad-mother image functions as the source of alienation that, if transcended, ultimately becomes the source of identification for school practitioners, that is, “the good mother.”

The modes of persuasion in educational thought are easy to overlook not only because academics in colleges of education have been trained to privilege literal content over figurative content, but also because the symbolic action of educational thought actively seeks to deflect critical analysis and ethical reflection. This happens, in part, because, as Michael Apple observes, experts work with scientific categories that “are academically and socially respectable and are supported by the prestige of a process that ‘shows every sign of being valid scholarship, complete with tables of numbers, copious footnotes, and scientific terminology.’”¹¹ The use of professional code words and scientifically derived categories, in other words, can pull attention away from academic writing as a form of moral conduct. It is not simply an expert’s reliance on scientific categories and abstractions per se that arrests critical analysis and ethical reflection, however; it is the *way* an author invites their auditors to collaborate in their assertions that helps establish the habit of

unreflective judgment. The rhetorical device of the bad mother, for example, is built upon a set of symbolic oppositions which assert that “we do this, they do that” or “we feel this way about children, they feel that way about children.” Collaboration in this device is achieved by laying out an ethical rubric that promotes identification with the expert who is the antithesis of the bad mother. As a consequence, either you believe, as the expert does, that family breakdown is responsible for many of the ills plaguing society, or you are, by association, part of the problem. In short, it is not the use of scientifically derived understandings about family and society that sets this mode of collaboration in motion; it is the ethical action packed around these categories that awakens attitudes of collaborative expectancy whereby the reader is symbolically aligned with the author. Identification is promoted, in turn, by exalting the reader through a subtle form of flattery. The author assumes, in other words, that the reader’s values are *naturally* aligned with his or her own, and those values are therefore not open to question. What educator, after all, would stand up in defense of the pathological family who is responsible for many of society’s ills?

As I have noted elsewhere, when academics persuade their auditors by laying out an ethical rubric that polarizes the moral universe — by providing antithetical images that the reader cannot refuse — they are making use of a romantic plot structure.¹² The moral universe in romance, according to Northrop Frye, is neatly divided into images of the world we want and images of the world we do not want. His comment on this polarized image of the world applies to our consideration of moral conduct in educational thought:

Romance avoids the ambiguities of ordinary life, where everything is a mixture of good and bad, and where it is difficult to take sides or believe that people are consistent patterns of virtue or vice. The popularity of romance, it is obvious, has much to do with its simplifying of moral facts. It relieves us from the strain of trying to be fair-minded, as we see particularly in melodrama, where we not only have outright heroism and villainy but are expected to take sides, applauding one and hissing the other.¹³

Educational texts that are shaped by the melodramatic conventions of romance relieve their readers from the strain of being fair-minded by magnifying the differences between good and bad, thereby leaving the reader with only one viable choice. In addition, they deflect critical analysis of that choice by promoting identification with the expert through a form of temporizing flattery.

This strategy of polarizing the moral universe is common in educational thought because it is difficult to talk about the world we want without invoking negative images of the world we reject. Using pathological images that promote attitudes of repugnance and fear, on the other hand, is not the only way to promote our audience’s moral allegiance. Consider, by way of contrast, another widely used rhetorical device that seeks to reveal the factional interests concealed by the claim of equal educational opportunity. This Marxist-like strategy pits the haves against the have-nots, and it has been widely used by authors who like to write about the glaring disparities that inequitable educational policies give rise to. This kind of rhetorical device, however, has also been put to use in more conservative political agendas — for instance, in government documents that constructed and attempted to ameliorate a problem called “the digital divide,” where those who have access to computer

networks are pitted against those who do not.¹⁴ Sentimental images of youthful innocence neglected — images also associated with the bad-mother device — are used in these kinds of rhetorical strategies, suggesting that these kinds of images are part of the linguistic rituals that help compel acceptance of educational problems regardless of the topic being discussed or of the author's political orientation.

When the origin of an educational problem is rooted in structural poverty and poorly conceived educational policies, rather than in bad mothers, there is a shift in the kind of moral conduct recommended. When the haves are juxtaposed against the have-nots, the attitude is usually one of tears, not fear. Instead of magnifying images of bad people to promote identification with expertise through fear, in other words, this rhetorical device magnifies bad situations to promote identification with expertise through compassion. The effect of this Marxist-like device, however, is frequently achieved through flattery and therefore arrests critical analysis in the same way that bad-mother images do. What educator, after all, would stand up and advocate for glaring inequalities in public schooling? Moreover, the minute these inequities are associated with a specific group of people — with administrators or legislators or with the educational Right or Left, for example — the cathartic effect of having a clearly identified scapegoat comes into play, enabling the sense of moral superiority that all romantic plot structures invoke.

EDUCATIONAL THEORY AS A FORM OF EXPERTISE

I would like to conclude by noting that while romantic forms of expression are widespread in educational thought — because experts frequently talk about the world they want in terms of the world they do not want — melodramatic attitudes need not be. Educational expertise does not require pathogenic villains to be persuasive, but it does require some degree of superiority, leaving us with the question, how much superiority is necessary? To answer this question, I will take my lead from Burke. He claimed that “The progress of humane enlightenment can go no further than in picturing people not as *vicious*, but as *mistaken*.” The difference between picturing people as vicious or mistaken in educational theory amounts to a difference in the degree of moral superiority required to make educational experts who they are — it amounts to a difference, that is, in the degree of moral superiority required to set experts apart from the objects of their expertise. As Burke goes on to say in his comic way, “When you add that people are *necessarily* mistaken, that *all* people are exposed to situations in which they must act as fools, that *every* insight contains its own special kind of blindness, you complete the comic circle, returning again to the lesson of humility that underlies great tragedy.”¹⁵

What gives educational theory its special kind of blindness is the fact that it is historical and situated and is, as a consequence, partial. This partiality arises from the limits that any organizing interpretive framework imposes, but it also arises from the limits that our vision literally imposes. Whenever educational theorists write about a general pattern of existence, for example, they are substituting probable vision for actual vision, because educational patterns do not and cannot exist independently of our describing activities: we cannot actually see patterns, we can only theorize their existence. Given that our reliance on creative imagination is

unavoidable — that our efforts to represent the world as continuous and stable can only lead to probable accounts of the way things are — my goal is to heighten my auditor's sensitivity to how educational thought is composed. As I have argued, educational theory contains a practical content aimed at shaping the way people think, but the way that content is put together matters because the symbolic action of a text conveys ethical attitudes toward the people, situations, and events being described, and those dispositions, if embodied, will accompany theory into practice.

Whatever images an author relies upon to motivate theory into action — whatever kind of symbolic action their words model on the page — those images will be teaching students of theory at least two kinds of dispositions: they will teach students the attitudes considered appropriate to the specific practices that theory desires, and they will teach students how to think about the ethical implications of educational expertise more generally. With regard to this latter lesson — the lesson that professional training *must* teach — no degree of sensitivity toward our representations of the world can completely avoid the air of superiority that the practice of theory is already premised on. In this essay my authority derives from reading one example, and the terms of critique I offered could also be applied to my own work — that is, it can be said that I have constructed a theoretical problem out of a melodramatic example. I feel obliged to conclude, therefore, by noting that melodramatic examples have a place in theory. They offer excellent heuristic devices for uncovering novel insights and for inviting more in-depth and nuanced explorations that might otherwise go uncharted. In short, it is not oversimplification that matters, it is *what* theorists oversimplify in their effort to draw in their audience that makes a difference. In using Langer and Burke to note how great a role symbolic action plays in educational theory, I have underestimated the content and goodwill of school-home theory in hopes of attracting an audience to the possibility that theory, in doing what it does, already rejects mind/body dualisms. This is to suggest that philosophers of education could, if they were so moved, give up old-fashioned divides between mind and body or theory and practice.

1. Susanne K. Langer, *Philosophy in a New Key: A Study in the Symbolism of Reason, Rite, and Art*, 3d ed. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press), 279, 281.

2. Kenneth Burke, *The Philosophy of Literary Form: Studies in Symbolic Action*, 3d ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973), 20.

3. Carol Gestwicki, *Home, School and Community Relations* (Albany, N.Y.: Delmar Thomson Learning, 2000), ix.

4. *Ibid.*, xi.

5. See, for example, Stephanie Coontz, *The Way We Never Were: American Families and the Nostalgia Trap* (New York: Basic Books, 1992); and William C. Cutler, *Parents and Schools: The 150-Year Struggle for Control in American Education* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000).

6. See, for example, Adam Phillips, *Terrors and Experts* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1996).

7. See, for example, Haithe Anderson, "The Educational Imagination of School-Home Experts," *Philosophical Studies in Education* 28 (1996): 17–29.

8. Clifford Geertz, *Available Light: Anthropological Reflections on Philosophical Topics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 20.
9. Joseph Gusfield, *The Culture of Public Problems: Drinking-Driving and the Symbolic Order* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 9.
10. Murray Edelman, *The Politics of Misinformation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 11.
11. Michael Apple, *Ideology and Curriculum*, 2d ed. (New York: Routledge, 1990), 125.
12. Haithe Anderson, "Educational Theory as a Writerly Practice," *Studies in Philosophy and Education* 21, no. 3 (2002): 219–228.
13. Northrop Frye, *The Secular Scripture: A Study of the Structure of Romance* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1976), 50.
14. U.S. Department of Education, *Getting Students Ready for the 21st Century: Meeting the Technology Literacy Challenge: A Report to the Nation on Technology and Education* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1998).
15. Kenneth Burke, *Attitudes Toward History*, 2d ed. (Los Altos, Calif.: Hermes, 1959), 41.