

The Present Plight

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A candid look at the predicament of the education professor seems as good a place to start as any for a column of . . . by . . . for such folk. Here, the concern is not so much the state of the *art* as the state of the *artists*. This hardly makes for the cheeriest of beginnings, but perhaps it can serve constructively as the basis for more positive things to come.

Even the most optimistic academician must concede ours is a time of sore challenge to education—not just to teacher education, but to all formal education. Not surprisingly, then, “pessimism is predominant” among faculties, as a recent headline put it, and the gloom is cross-disciplinary, with virtually no specialties exempt.

In addition to such shared woes, however, teacher education has troubles all its own. Political realities contribute substantially to our troubles. The education professor is without a constituency and a power base in an increasingly politicized context. That context is dominated within education by dwindling enrollments and teacher demand, and outside it by a general economic slow-down. It remains to be seen what will happen in individual universities if “financial exigency” seems to recommend “excessing” education faculties. Neither the politics nor the economics of such a contingency would augur well for us—even were we held in much higher esteem by our liberal arts colleagues. It seems highly improbable that a strong defense for education professors will emerge from an organization or bargaining agent representing *all* of an institution’s faculty.

If the political realities of the institution are less than reassuring, our situation within the education profession is hardly more so. One component after another has demonstrated its disregard for the education professoriate. Perhaps the clearest declaration has come from teacher organizations that have sought to move inservice education for teachers off the campus and into local centers, and to shift control from professors to the teachers themselves.

Teacher organizations are not the only professional agencies venturing in this direction. For example, the National Diffusion Network, a U.S. Office of Education project, enables teachers in validated programs to conduct training sessions for other teachers. In addition, the Network provides training in teacher education itself; teachers are trained to teach other teachers how to conduct Network programs. Yet, the Network excludes education professors; they are ineligible to participate.

Moreover, added to such political isolation is the well-known image problem. Even the most toughskinned among us has to be aware of the negative views of undergraduates in teacher education. And the hope of eventual vindication, through the graduate’s retrospective understanding and appreciation, typically goes unrealized. Teachers, as Fred L. Pigge tells us elsewhere in this *Journal*, do not perceive teacher education as the source of knowledge they most need and use. Ultimately, the problem is more fundamental. As Dan Lortie has reported, they don’t attribute their successes to the

knowledge and expertise they possess. Indeed, “good days” are chalked up to chance, the good fortune of inexplicable circumstances. Thus, ours is not only a failure to provide what teachers think they need; we fail even to convince them that good teaching is *related* to professional knowledge.

There seems little to cheer about the position of the education professor. This is one reason we think a regular column is necessary. The “we” in this case is the Society of Professors of Education, and our column is scheduled for regular publication in the *Journal of Teacher Education*. The *Journal* needs the systematic input of teacher education’s largest, most directly concerned professional constituency, the professoriate.

It is by no means clear that we can substantially alter present circumstances. But we can attempt three things: 1. extending to professors of education the solace of others in the same boat; 2. some vital consciousness-raising, i.e. awareness that unless we ‘get our act together,’ others will do it for us, or we may suddenly find our act has been replaced; and 3. offering some suggestions for enhancing that act.

In columns to come, we will tackle related topics, questions, and matters of shared concern. If you have a question to propose for treatment, or an author to recommend, please contact: Mary Anne Raywid, president, Society of Professors of Education, Hofstra University, Hempstead, NY 11550.

Power to Jargon, for Jargon is Power

One of the recurring problems with which professors of education must deal is the jibes and challenges of the "Defenders of the Language," whose typical charge is "jargon." Educationists are not the only people on the receiving end of such a charge; it is also familiar to those involved in other human services. Significantly, it is limited to those trafficking in the yield of the social sciences, however, and not the natural sciences. When practitioners of the latter employ terms that sound like either gibberish or Greek, they are often generously credited with the latter. It is just assumed that they command esoteric fare; we, on the other hand, are charged with talking nonsense—and with deliberately trying to conceal and mystify it at that!

Of all the charges—true, false, and maybe—leveled at education professors, this is among the most insidious. The reason is that it is antiintellectual—and inimical to the very sorts of high standards the critic presumably seeks. In unmasking educationist discourse as mere jargon instead of esoteric knowledge, the purist seems actually to be impeding the pursuit of such knowledge. S/he is thus contributing far more substantially to the problem (to the extent that there be one) than to its solution!

This is not to deny that educators speak a language of their own. Indeed they do; and it is very much a part of their specialized knowledge. These words become a way first to select out certain qualities, events, and phenomena for attention; and they expedite communication via shorthand references to particular combinations of these. To cite a familiar example, when an educationist talks about a *meaningful learning experience*, s/he is not just spouting jargon, but distinguishing out of all the events and phenomena of a given time and place, a particular set. Moreover, a

substantial list of things is being asserted about what is going on—e.g., the words *learning experience* suggest that it is, or it is meant to be, an episode from which learning results. The term *meaningful* is not superfluous but does a specific job: it adds that it is likely to be or was (depending on temporal perspective) a successful exercise in learning—which not all learning experiences proffered by teachers can claim. To qualify as *meaningful* in advance—in other words, well calculated to succeed—a number of conditions must be met, ordinarily including learner comprehension, interest, motivation, capacity, and likely retention.

If it sounds like an awkward list to summarize and transmit, that is exactly why a term was brought into service to do so. Voilà—*meaningful learning experience*. Thus, when educationists invoke the term, it is not merely jargon or vacuous talk, but a quick way to communicate some information of particular professional concern to them.

Coming to understand and use specialized terminology correctly is a considerable part of professional preparation and socialization. Novices would be well advised to ignore the suggestion that they reject the jargon and continue their previous speech patterns unsullied. The reason is quite fundamental: language summarizes concepts. If we do not have the language, it is difficult, at best, to summon the ideas for which they stand. (Some would even say it is impossible to *have* such ideas.) Without a term to represent a particular collection of attributes and qualities, we are condemned to consciously and tediously assemble them anew each time we want to consider or communicate them. The professional who is told to "speak in plain English" is being pushed toward inefficiency and minimal comprehension at best. Those who do not have the language are unlikely

to have the concepts either—save at the most tentative and introductory of levels.

The difference between jargon and valid terminology is an interesting one. To call something jargon, of course, is a put-down—a suggestion that it is an affected or deceptive way to talk about the commonplace and familiar. Yet new terms, of course, represent new knowledge—when they stand for distinctions previously undrawn or classes of things previously unassembled. Presumably the language purists would have welcomed the distinction between *infer* and *imply*, since it does mark a difference, and one that can assume importance. Moreover, when scientists were able to talk about a stratosphere that was distinct from an ionosphere, we assumed simply that they were reporting new information that was genuine and important.

Why, then, when educationists mark a difference between *needs* and *felt needs* is it taken to be jargon? More than one educational system has foundered on the inability to note the difference!

It is undoubtedly true that the language of the educationist, like all specialized vocabularies, blinds him or her to some other things—because that is the very nature of concepts, to focus our awareness in some directions while thus, inevitably, channeling it away from others.

As Kenneth Burke has noted, a way of seeing is always also a way of not seeing. In the case which concerns us, it would appear that the jargon-hunters have blinded themselves to the achievement and the values which specialized terminology represents. It may not be jargon but the recording and summoning of significant knowledge that they are self-righteously assaulting.

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