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AUTHOR	Ediger, Marlow
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ABSTRACT

This paper considers the role of realism, idealism, experimentalism, and existentialism in the teaching of reading. The paper first discusses realism, noting that reading specialists who are realists desire to have objectives stated in measurable terms--in state mandated tests the tests are to be aligned with the stated objectives. In idealism, according to the paper, a person cannot know the real environment as is, but he/she can obtain ideas from there--an idealist's program of reading instruction would emphasize the following: literature which stimulates the mind to grow and achieve and which stresses ideals, values, morals, and beliefs; and liberal arts courses which emphasize student thinking in depth and breadth and which guide the learner to find the self by serving humanity. The paper finds that an experimentalist's reading curriculum might well stress the following: reading to identify and solve problems identified by learners with teacher assistance; students working in small groups to identify and solve problems; and students actively participating in learning, not sedentary activities. The paper states that existentialists believe that a person first exists and then finds his/her own essence in life, his/her own goals in life. Thus, it notes, a good reading program would emphasize: individual library books for students to read which stress alienation, dread, despair, and aloneness; self appraisal in terms of doing critical and creative thinking pertaining to decisions made; and questions raised pertaining to content read to realize the subjectivity of knowledge. (NKA)

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Four Schools of Philosophical Thought and Reading.

by Marlow Ediger

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FOUR SCHOOLS OF PHILOSOPHICAL THOUGHT AND READING

Realism, Idealism, Experimentalism, and Existentialism are four classical schools of thought in philosophy. These four schools of thought may be analyzed in terms of subject matter to be emphasized in any academic discipline or skill. Each of these will be discussed with their use in the teaching of reading. Thus, by studying the four leading philosophies, one can develop a unique reading curriculum for each. Teachers and administrators need to be highly knowledgeable of philosophy and what it means for instructional purposes.

Realism and Reading

Realism stresses the importance of persons knowing the real world as it truly is. The world then can be scientifically analyzed into component parts. The parts make up a whole. The chemistry of the universe may be known and is known through formulas devised by chemists in time and space. A molecule of water, for example, has the following well known formula ... H2 O, meaning two atoms of hydrogen and one atom of oxygen, make a molecule of water. Another common formula ... C6 H12, O6, meaning six atoms of carbon, twelve atoms of hydrogen, and six atoms of oxygen, make for a molecule of sugar. Chemical formulas are very precise and accurate. The teaching of reading is not that precise. Reading specialists who are realists, however, desire to have objectives stated in measurable terms. In state mandated tests, the tests are to be aligned with the stated objectives. Furthermore, the learning opportunities are to be aligned with the state mandated objectives. In a realist's curriculum then, the state mandated objectives provide the scope of reading objectives for pupils to achieve. These are then available to teachers as objectives or benchmarks for pupils to achieve. The teacher selects the learning opportunities so that pupils may achieve the state mandated objectives in reading. At selected intervals, pupils are measured in reading to notice if the objectives have been achieved. The test is valid if the learning opportunities match up with the set of state mandated objectives in the instructional arena. The test, too, is reliable if pupils received consistent results on the test, be it test/retest, alternative forms, or split half reliability.

Each pupil should then receive a precise score such as being, for example, on the fortieth percentile. The fortieth percentile here, means that for every one hundred pupils taking

the test, forty pupils are below and sixty above the fortieth percentile (Ediger, 2002, 93- 97).

Realism, as a philosophy of education, then emphasizes

1. precision in testing to show the exact point of pupil achievement.
2. specific objectives of instruction which pupils either achieve or do not achieve, as a result of instruction.
3. alignment of learning opportunities for children with the stated objectives.
4. measurable achievement on the pupil's part, not estimates nor guesses.
5. objectivity in reporting pupil's test results and achievements.

Implications for school wide and district wide achievement are the following:

1. averages are published in the news media to indicate how one school/district compares with the others in a state.
2. pupils from failing schools may opt out of their school to attend a different one. Failure is defined by each state in the nation.
3. failing schools may be taken over by the state. Philadelphia, Pennsylvania schools is a recent example of where a state took over a "bankrupt school."
4. accommodations for the handicapped may or may not be made by the state. However, all pupils are to be tested regardless of ability levels and the gap in achievement, between racial groups, eliminated/narrowed.
5. data driven decision making works well in realism philosophy since teacher and administrator decisions are made based on objective, scientific information from state mandated tests (See Boke, June 19, 2002).

Idealism and Reading

Idealists believe that one cannot know the real environment as is, but one can obtain ideas therefrom. The human mind is central to the thinking of idealism. Mind is what brings meaning to that which transpires. The mind interprets, clarifies, and generalizes on what exists in the environment.
Many philosophers have stated that idealism should rather be called "idea-ism." The observer then obtains ideas from the environment, but does not perceive reality as it really is.
An idea centered world then pervades. Idealists do not

emphasize measurable test results from pupils to show achievement. These would be too restrictive . Rather, generalizations are desired. The human mind tends to develop conclusions, summaries, and generalizations. Cultivation and development of the intellect and mind are salient goals. An idealist needs to be a speculator and an intellectual being. Belief in God and the hereafter , as well as the here and the now, are salient goals of idealists. Losing oneself in service to others, rather than the self, makes it so that the person finds values and goals in life. The idealist needs to be a dreamer of ideas and speculate on God. Reason and imagination (creativity) are salient in developing the intellect. A quality liberal arts curriculum is at the heart of an idealist's goals. Literature and languages, mathematics, the sciences, the social sciences, as well as the fine arts are essential in developing the intellect. School experiences, by any means, can not always be interesting. The will of the pupil is necessary to master subject matter. The learner then must reach out and put forth much effort to learn. The will of the pupil is needed to overcome an easy life and to attain subject matter knowledge which cultivates the intellect and mind. Growth and achievement are necessary to realize the Absolute or God. Pulliam (1987) writing about Herman H. Horne's (1874- 1946) philosophy of idealism wrote the following:

Horne identified intelligences as a super human gift which links man with the Absolute. Dewey's philosophy is naturalistic while Horne's is theistic . Truth for Horne is an Absolute and spelled with a capital "T," while for Dewey truth is merely a term for ideas which work in a given situation. Rejecting the view that education is the reconstruction of experiences, the idealist sees education as an understanding of the individual and social life patterns, antecedent to present experience. Dewey tells us that education is growth or evolution. Horne says that education is growth toward Truth and God.

Idealists also stress the importance of the soul of the human being. The soul makes it so that there is a reality beyond that of the natural world. The spiritual world also then has a high importance. Reason is salient to obtain truth, not the senses alone by any means. Purposes and reasons for life are continually in evidence. The present life is important, but so is the hereafter. A single life is not adequate in duration for the human, but needs the hereafter also. Self cultivation or developing the intellect is of utmost importance. The finite being (person) needs to grow in the direction of the Infinite. An

idealist's program of reading instruction would emphasize the following:

1. literature which stimulates the mind to grow and achieve.
2. literature which stresses ideals, values, morals, and beliefs. Literature here might stress the great enduring truths in space and time, known as the classics.
3. liberal arts courses which emphasize pupil thinking in depth and breadth.
4. liberal arts courses should guide the learner to find the self by serving humanity.

Experimentalism and Reading

Experimentalists believe one can experience the real world only, not know it as it truly is (realism), nor receive ideas from it solely (idealism). Since one experiences the real world only, problems arise since perceptions change. With change, problematic situations arise. These need identification and solutions sought. Once a problem has been clearly identified, answers need to be sought. These answers are tentative and subject to modification. New problems might again arise and solutions sought, answers evaluated, and modifications made. Not only do perceptions change, but so does society when looking at change.

John Dewey (1859- 1953) was a leading proponent of experimentalism. Pertaining to experimentalism, Atkinson and Maleska (1965) wrote:

To a follower of Dewey, education has two sides -- psychological and social; neither may be subordinated nor neglected, The psychological nature of a child forms the basis for his education -- it is the teacher's responsibility to make full use of his natural, spontaneous activities. Describing original nature as being spontaneously impulsive rather than passive, Dewey divided impulses into four categories: the social impulse of communication or conversation; the constructive impulse to make things; the impulse to investigate things; and the impulses of artistic or creative thought.

With these impulses in mind, said Dewey, the school must be changed from a place for sedentary living to one for active doing or working. The teaching process must be planned to allow the child to learn wherever possible by his own experiences and, in that way, to acquire the habit of thinking. A proper solution to any problem demands intelligent thinking, which becomes the principal factor in the ability to cope with a new situation. Thinking, as Dewey described it, is the use of the

meanings of past experiences in the interpretation of new situations.

Dewey felt that when the psychological and social approaches are separated, there is produced either a forced or an external education in which the freedom of the individual is subordinated to a preconceived notion of what society should be, or else barren and formal development of the mental powers in which the learner has little use to be made of what is being learned. The school as primarily a social institution because its processes are social in fact, educational processes are basically no different from those going on continually in life outside the classroom.

Therefore, Dewey claimed, the manner in which pre-school learning has taken place should suggest to the teacher the logical starting point for more systematic encouragement of physical and mental growth. The school should ideally be that form of social life into which can be concentrated those factors that most effectively cause a child to share the accumulated knowledge and skills of the race. Education can be considered as proceeding most satisfactorily whenever the individual is actively participating in social relationships with others.

An experimentalist's reading curriculum might well stress the following:

1. reading, among other learning activities, to identify and solve life like problems identified by learners with teacher assistance.
2. pupils working in small groups to identify and solve problems.
3. principles of democracy being inherent in committee work.
4. problem solving which stresses life like dilemmas, such as in society.
5. using the talents of each pupil in problem solving.
6. thinking being central to each problem encountered.
7. pupils actively participating in learning, not sedentary activities.
8. pupil impulses being stressed such as conversing with others within a purposeful activity, making things in a committee setting, finding out on their own rather than being lectured to, and being creative in determining ways to do things.
9. connecting what is done in the classroom with that in the societal arena.
10. reconstructing society by changing how teaching and learning occur in the classroom (Ediger, 1995, Chapter Two).

Existentialism and Reading

Existentialists believe that a person first exists and then finds his/her own essence in life. The human being is not given an essence or purpose for living, but rather must find his/her own goals in life. There is then complete freedom in life to choose and make choices. To be human, one must make choices personally. Others should not make these choices. If they do, one ceases to be human. With personal freedom in its entirety, the human develops purposes, interests, and values in life. The individual governs the kinds and types of choices made. No other person should do this. The irrational and the absurd are inherent in life. Life can indeed be very awesome when decisions must be made which are dreaded. But choices need to be made continually. The absurd and ridiculous occur where humans are free to be involved in decision making.

Subject matter is subjective. Moral standards and values need much attention in an open curriculum. Critical thinking must be emphasized when subject matter is read and taught. Creative thinking is also salient since novel, unique decisions must be in the offing. Authentic individuals are wanted, not those who use facades. The objectives, learning opportunities, and assessment procedures are not final, nor fixed, but to an existentialist are open to choice and deliberation. Authentic pursuit of learning is a must. Pupils individually then must be given adequate choices in terms of the what and the how of learning. Self appraisal is a key factor in determining how much the self has learned. In the making of authentic choices, the pupil may face alienation due to the absurdity of these dilemma situations situations. Doubt and dread are two concepts vital in understanding existentialism. With novel, unique decisions made by an authentic person, feelings of aloneness may result.

A person is nothing more than what he/she makes of the self. The choices are endless and subjective. No guidelines are given for making choices. The feelings are of utmost importance when thinking of an existentialist philosophy. Thus, a good reading program would emphasize

1. individual library books for pupil choice to read which stress alienation, dread, aloneness, choosing from among complex alternatives, and despair.
2. self appraisal in terms of doing critical and creative thinking pertaining to decisions made.

3. questions raised pertaining to content read to realize the subjectivity of knowledge.

Pertaining to existentialism, Ozman and Craver (1990) wrote:

It is interesting that most existentialist and phenomenologist philosophers have had rigorous and lengthy education ... Most of them taught at one time or another, usually in a university setting. They have been concerned primarily with the humanities and have written extensively in the genre. Through the humanities the existentialists have tried to awaken modern individuals to the dangers of being swallowed by the megalopolis and runaway technology. This seems to have taken place because the humanities contain greater potential for introspection and the development of self - meaning than other studies.

The humanities loom large in an existentialist curriculum because they deal with the essential aspects of human existence such as the happy, the absurdities as well as meaning. In short, existentialists want to see humankind in their totality --- the perverted as well as the exalted, the mundane as well as the glorious, the despairing as well as the hopeful, and they feel the humanities and the arts do this better than the sciences. Existentialists, however, do not have any definite rules about what should comprise the curriculum. They believe the student - in- situation making a decision should be the deciding factor.

Although existentialist phenomenologists have been interested in understanding the lived experience of the learner than in the specific content of things to be learned, some of them have given attention to curriculum organization and content. The tendency, however, is to view curriculum from the standpoint of the learner rather than a collection of discrete subjects.

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