

Chapter Four

RETHINKING ED PSYCH 101

Instrumental Rationality and Post-Formalism

The structural arguments of Tyler, Schwab, and Bloom et al. . . . take ideological positions while denying ideology [and] offer advice about correcting practice that reinforces practice in place. . . . Why are they privileged? If these arguments fail to do what they claim, what ends do they serve? They serve to reproduce educational practices in the name of change and progress.

Cleo H. Cherryholmes

QUESTIONING UNQUESTIONED PREMISES

The pervasive, positivist orientation to education discussed in the last chapter has generated a massive educational infrastructure that is rarely acknowledged or questioned. Positivist assumptions underpin countless educational activities routinely accepted as part of “the way things are.” If pressed for a more detailed rationale explaining why lesson plans list behavioral objectives, or why vocabulary words are routinely introduced before reading selections in textbooks, or why standardized tests are considered so reliable, an educator might well produce an explanation taken from educational psychology: “Well, Tyler’s research on planning indicated . . .” or “According to Bloom’s Taxonomy, . . .” or “In an ed psych course, I learned that . . .”

But in response to such answers, the ever-skeptical critical theorist asks “So what assumptions did *their* work embody? Why are *their* answers accepted as authoritative? What are the alternatives?” An exploration of those critical questions indicates that the most commonly cited authorities of educational psychology based their research and theories on premises that are positivist at their core—including even Piaget, who believed that humans construct their own understandings of the world. To enable substantive educational reform, not just some cosmetic surgery, it’s

necessary to understand how these unchallenged positivist assumptions have influenced educational psychology and subsequently shaped what is now routine practice in classrooms and districts nationwide.

PHILOSOPHICAL DIFFERENCES IN THE KITCHEN

When my son received the results from a standardized reading test he had taken, I posted the elaborate document analyzing his performance on top of countless other school papers on my refrigerator door. My husband and I looked it over together with high expectations, knowing from experience that our son was a fluent and highly skilled reader. However, our reactions to the test results were strikingly different—so different, in fact, that I can use them here to succinctly demonstrate the contrasting views of a traditional (i.e., positivist) parent and of a critical educator.

I looked the document over, trying to glean some big picture from its numerous bar graphs and technical labels, its charts of skills and subskills (and possibly subsubskills—who remembers?). There were numbers for everything, scores galore, and an obvious concern for comparing the performance of this *subject* (never this *child*) to others in comparable age levels and grades. For every score, the results offered a comparison to some national norm in a chart demonstrating graphically whether the subject was “ahead” or “behind” his peers. It was obvious pretty quickly that he’d outperformed the national average by far in every “subskill” save one. Looking more closely to see what my son had “excelled” at, I found *reading comprehension* and *vocabulary* among other things. Then, I looked to see which category he was “deficient” in and found *word recognition*. I laughed and laughed.

My husband’s eye was also drawn to the “problem” in word recognition, but his response was a far cry from my laughter. After all, he is not in the business of critically analyzing prevailing educational practice. As I was laughing, he turned to me in chagrin and barked “Good grief! LOOK how far behind he is in that. Let’s get him a tutor—*soon*.” I imagine that my husband’s reaction would be nearly universal among concerned parents: “The test shows he can do *x* but not *y*; we better get him help with *y*.”

But I too am a concerned parent, and like my husband, I love my son and worry about his welfare. How, then, could I laugh at a deficiency in something as serious as *word recognition*? The answer lies in the connections between positivism, pedagogy, and educational psychology.

BUT THE WHOLE IS GREATER THAN ITS PARTS

Positivism assumes, remember, that knowledge is an objective, quantifiable thing. As such, the whole can be broken down into parts, and the parts can be grouped and sequenced logically. Thus, if we want to teach *reading*, we figure out what reading consists of—what its parts are. Then we group those things (phonics, comprehension, vocabulary, word recognition, and so on), and we sequence lessons in every area. Of course, we must test every area, too, so that we know if a student lacks any subskill she needs to move forward. Here is the rationale for “failing” a student: if subskill *x* hasn’t been learned, then the child won’t be able to take on subskill *y*. Grade 3 curriculum must be mastered before grade 4 curriculum, or the lessons of grade 4 won’t be possible.

And here is the reason my husband was so upset about my son’s problem with the subskill of *word recognition*: how will our son be able to read next year’s material if he’s having trouble recognizing words this year?

Only being immersed in positivist assumptions for so long could make someone blind to the obvious fact that the test’s diagnosis of my son’s reading ability was patently ridiculous. No one—not the test analyzers, not my husband, not me, not my son or his teachers—had any question that my son was a skilled reader who had little or no trouble comprehending a wide variety of reading materials. In what bizarre sense could he possibly be deficient in *word recognition*? What exactly might that mean? What are we to think of test results that indicate a child can readily understand what he reads, but cannot recognize words? What kind of a “problem” is that? How do we fix a reader who isn’t broken while he is actually reading?

We had every indication—including ones far beyond the test results—that my son could make sense of words shaped into sentences, of words appearing in some sensible context. Isn’t that exactly what readers

are able to do, and isn't that what matters? No, not in the positivist paradigm; not when there is an assumption that the appropriate approach to teaching is to break wholes into parts to be mastered in sequence. Unfortunately, most parts are meaningless out of context. Thus, children are taught the alphabet in senseless ways ("circle every A on this page") and given information about parts of speech outside of a useful context ("circle the verb in every sentence"). When a child asks why such tasks are necessary, or resists meaningless work, the adult pulls rank and says either "Because I said so" or "Because you'll need to know this later."

The first "later" that matters is test time. And since tests focus on the same senseless bits we teach, they become equally meaningless. In order to test some subskill, like word recognition, it must be separated out from other subskills and tested in isolation. Thus, the reading test tried to measure how well my son could recognize words standing alone, completely devoid of meaningful context. Never mind that the only place a reader needs this subskill is on a positivist reading test (or worksheet).

Think about it. Where in a reader's experience do single words appear completely decontextualized? *Entrance* appears on doors; *Men*, too, appears on door signs, often next to a graphic figure representing a man—and often next to another door with the word *Women* and a graphic symbol for a woman. *McDonald's* appears next to buildings with a clearly recognizable shape and decor; *peas* appears on cans with pictures of that vegetable. In fact, I learned to recognize the Italian words *uscita* (exit) and *gabinetto* (toilet) after I read them repeatedly on doors that I needed to find in Rome. We learn to recognize words from reading them; recognizing a word out of context is simply *not* a prerequisite for reading it *in* context. Nor, except on artificial tests, are we ever called on to do so.

Similar inanities occur in tests of "writing." Again and again, tests claim to measure a variety of subskills: vocabulary, usage, punctuation, grammar, organization, and so on. Often, based on things like forced choices between "he and I" or "him and me," or between "who" and "whom," students are diagnosed as being deficient in this or that skill and assigned "remediation." But when in the real process of writing is a writer forced to make such choices? Never, actually, because a writer who didn't want to make a mistake and wasn't sure of the difference would likely

recast the sentence entirely or check relevant rules in a reference book. And since when has knowing the difference between nominative and objective case ensured that a student would be a “good” writer? Anyone who’s ever read any quantity of student writing knows full well it’s possible for writing to be grammatically precise and organizationally impeccable—and still dull as dishwater or incomprehensible as a political speech.

The whole of reading and of writing and of historical understanding and of mathematical and scientific understanding—the whole of any sophisticated skill or understanding—is *always* greater than the sum of its parts. This is not to say that subskills might not be involved; certainly after a student understands the big picture of reading and writing, he might find some information on phonics or punctuation useful. But the parts ought not to be mistaken for necessary antecedents to the whole. How could a golfer learn to keep her head down when swinging a club, for example, if she practiced looking down outside the context of a swing? It doesn’t matter if she can keep her head down when she’s standing in the locker room without a golf club; it matters if she can do it as she’s swinging. Similarly, it doesn’t matter to me if my son can recognize words out of context on some standardized tests; it matters if he can do it when he’s reading. It also matters to me that he knows how and when to look up unfamiliar words in a dictionary—but that’s “cheating” on the test. How odd. Maybe we should pass some sort of law against readers looking up words they don’t know to stop such behavior?

Of course, in a hierarchy of experts, the credibility of those on top trumps that of those below, and an experience-based, commonsense argument isn’t granted much validity. As a result, in recent years there has been a steadily increasing body of research, books, and articles seeking to discredit the positivist part-to-whole approach. There’s far too much material to adequately summarize here—but then, that means that anyone wanting more detail won’t need to look far. For example, Frank Smith’s *Insult to Intelligence* (1986), a highly readable book that critiques a positivist approach to reading instruction in great detail, is one accessible place to begin. Smith is not a critical theorist, but his book supports critical arguments by persuasively demonstrating that commonsense and common

experience discredit a part-to-whole approach. Another good starting point is John Mayher's award-winning book about language education (1990), which explores and challenges the traditional paradigm; its title, *Uncommon Sense*, pointedly notes that sense is something that has become very uncommon in education indeed.

Just how did so many senseless ideas and practices ever become such sacred elements of "the way things just *are*" in education? And what does all this have to do with Ed Psych 101 anyway?

ED PSYCH, INSTRUMENTAL RATIONALITY, AND ABSURDITY

In a positivist world, the quest is always toward certainty, and everything is hierarchical. The more one knows, the more expert one becomes, and the more power one has to lay out blueprints for others to follow. Always, the most expert is the researcher who knows everything in his specialized field and contributes new knowledge via research. So it has happened that the work of teachers has long been designed by experts from outside the classroom: historians, mathematicians, scientists—and, of course, educational psychologists and researchers.

What teachers do in classrooms is based on educational psychologists' ideas about how students learn and how best to make learning happen. Of course, once we start talking about "learning," we're back to the question central to the last chapter: "What exactly does it mean *to learn*?" And here's where the backdrop of positivism becomes increasingly noticeable.

For years, psychological researchers have considered the goals of school to be self-evident and clear—and thoroughly positivist: learning means acquiring and remembering information. How could they assume otherwise, since they were immersed in a cultural world framed by a positivist paradigm? Of course, information could be divided into its component parts; in fact, there was so much of it, it had to be. The questions of educational psychology centered for decades not on *what* to learn, but on *how* to ensure "learning," how to know when it occurred and what practices made it happen. This is why critical theorists describe traditional educational psychology as being focused on instrumental

rationality. Researchers working from this perspective ask: "To reach the (unquestioned) goal of 'acquiring' knowledge, what procedures, or what instruments, are best?" Assuming that science can answer any question, they never doubt the validity of their stance: "If the question is rationally, objectively, logically researched, surely we can 'discover' universal procedures for teachers to follow." From this perspective, what is "good" is what "works"; what "works" is what best promotes retention of information. The "one best way" to attain high scores on post-tests became the field's Holy Grail. Evolution of the field has led to the idea that there might be a menu of best ways instead of a single best way—but the belief that specific teaching strategies can be researched and prescribed remains firmly in place.

Given the hierarchy generated by the positivist paradigm, it isn't hard to understand how this happened. Because education wanted very much to gain respectability in the university as a "real" science, it adopted the objective methods of natural science, even though anyone not blinded by unquestioned assumptions could plainly see that individual children behave with a great deal more variability than two chunks of carbon. Traditional educational psychology assumes not only a nonproblematic goal (helping children remember things), but also a homogeneity among children that is nothing less than absurd. While we manufacture a wide range of clothing sizes for their very different bodies, we maintain a "one-size-fits-all" attitude toward children's intellectual development. The unique experiences and information that children bring to classrooms are routinely treated as irrelevant in research on *how* teachers "should" teach (though anyone would laugh themselves silly at the thought that children with different body sizes ought to be made to wear the same size clothes, which some expert had decreed appropriate for their age). The child interested in writing is to be taught the same way as the child who fears it; the child who has a full library of books at home is to be taught the same way as the child whose home contains no books or magazines at all.

As natural scientists sought to define genus and species of plants and animals, educational psychologists worked to organize the stuff of the classroom, independent of the attributes that make children human rather than flora or fauna. They focused on determining which divisions of information, which sequencing of subskills, which practices and activities

in the classroom would lead surely and directly to optimal “learning.” What was “normal”? What was not? Since goals seemed obvious, assessment seemed obvious. “How will we know if they’ve learned? Why, we’ll give them tests to measure recall and to monitor acquisition of subskills. We’ll ensure mathematical reliability and validity of our results, and then we’ll *know* who has learned how much of what. We’ll be able to tell who needs instruction or remediation in what.”

Just as one might count legs on a critter to classify it biologically, educators began counting the circles children made on standardized materials and tests in order to classify them educationally. Numbers came to outweigh sense and experience; if a test said a child had difficulty recognizing words, then the child had difficulty recognizing words, and his reading ability be damned. (Of course, this happened most often to poor children—but that’s an observation I’ll take up in the next chapter.) If an “expert” phonics text said children must learn *f* before *d*, then there could be no skipping ahead to *d*—and children had to be able to recognize *f* and *d* in isolation, even if they had no trouble reading the word “food” in a sentence.

All of this becomes a house of cards when we begin questioning base assumptions about what constitutes learning, what the goal of schooling ought to be, and whether it’s possible (let alone desirable) to design effective practice without taking variability among children into consideration. If we agree with the alternative views that facts are inert until human consciousness imposes some sense on them, that learning is sense-making rather than retention, that it’s silly at best to work from part-to-whole in the classroom, then what relevance can so much traditional educational psychology have?

It’s as if expert technicians have designed for us the most fantastic airplane imaginable—but, since our goal is to get to the local supermarket, all their design expertise and the resulting product do us not one bit of good. To recycle a metaphor from the last chapter: a computer analysis can tell us all about mileage from Pennsylvania to New York, which roads offer the shortest route to Manhattan, and how long we can expect each leg of the trip to take—but all that information will be totally useless if our goal is not New York, but California, and if we’re planning to fly rather than drive there.

THE PROBLEM WITH PIAGET

Because the work of Piaget is the foundation on which much current thinking in educational psychology is based, it's necessary to understand how Piagetian ideas have contributed to an educational world which is as insensitive to the uniqueness of individual human beings as was any Skinnerian experiment with rats.

When Piaget did his groundbreaking work on how humans process new information, he hypothesized that all learning involves either *assimilation*, finding a way to make new information fit into preexisting ideas about the subject or world, or *accommodation*, the ability to modify preexisting ideas so that new ones fit into the framework. As he explored how this process might work, however, he focused on identifying predictable stages of growth and concurrently assumed that the stages would follow each other linearly. That is, the framework of his research assumed that there are universal stages of intellectual growth, that each stage would be a prerequisite for the next, and that each new phase constituted a "step-up" toward some maximum achievement. The processes of accommodation and assimilation were triggered by a person's need for *equilibration*, a stable mental state where all contraries or inconsistencies seem resolved.

In the modest context of a single chapter on educational psychology, this is a necessary oversimplification of Piaget's work. Still, even this superficial sketch outlines areas that have led to rigid and limiting practices that run counter to the critical theorists' vision of a world of multiple perspectives, realities, and possibilities.

First, in pursuing a model of intellectual stages, Piaget assumes the positivist tenet that "teaching" is a matter of shepherding students through some predictable, universal sequence. In earlier, behaviorist manifestations, the sequence involved primarily bits of information; in Piagetian ones, the sequence involves different sorts of intellectual ability. But in either case, the uniqueness of every human student becomes irrelevant, and pedagogy is based on a one-description-fits-all model. Of course, there might be some slight variation in the age individual children reach different intellectual stages, but the *range* of ages and the sequence of growth is identifiable. Skinnerian theory might lead to one sort of classroom activity and Piagetian to quite another, but in either case there

is no consideration of children as unique individuals with unique interests and talents. A teacher needs only to measure class members against Piaget's template, conduct instruction on the levels they're on, and try to move each child on to the next level.

The entire idea of moving forward, moving up, also reinforces the kind of hierarchy typical of positivist education. The focus is always on the next step, on more and more and more; more information in one case, more rungs on the developmental ladder in the other. Education becomes a game of more and more, faster and faster, getting from here to there as quickly as possible, being "ahead of" or "behind" others, "ahead of" or "behind" where one "should" be. And, at the end of the line is abstract thinking, the highest of all educational goods, the most advanced of all intellectual skills. The more a person can disconnect from the real world, the farther away one's thinking is from daily life's objects and experiences, the "smarter" one is in Piaget's terms.

Critical theory offers several challenges to such thinking. First, since every human being is inescapably shaped by such factors as where and when he was born, what values his parents held, how lucky he was or wasn't in opportunities to explore the world, what language he speaks—by a kaleidoscope of variable factors shifting differently for every human being—the critical theorist argues it is absurd to postulate some "pure" human developmental process. The idea that all humans experience the same sequential developmental process belongs in the realm of positivism, where it's assumed single "right" or "true" answers are possible. Instead, for the critical theorist, every answer is only one possible answer among many; every model, however useful, is only one possible model among many. And since each of us has a unique perspective on the world that is shaped by our surroundings, there is no way to factor a human's interaction with her environment out of any developmental process. Ignoring environmental influence ensures theoretical inadequacy.

Moreover, assigning abstract thinking a higher order seems a cultural decision rather than an "objective" one. Where is the stone handed down from on high proclaiming that people who can think outside of life experience are "smarter" than people who can weave strikingly beautiful blankets from raw materials? Who says abstract thinking should be prized

and privileged? Such judgments come not from some god of education, but from the upper echelons of the highly educated. Interestingly, these are the same people who were nurtured in the culture that most uses and prizes abstract thinking; these are the same people who are themselves unusually talented in thinking abstractly; and these are the same people who design the models that tell others who is "smarter" than whom.

Why exactly should abstract thinking be more valued, more rewarded, more honored than other, real world talents? What of the artistic and musical ability of a Cassat and a Beethoven, for example? What of the ability to understand and inspire other people, of a Dr. Martin Luther King? What of the ability to visualize what modifications might make a set of house plans better suited to the needs of a specific family, as my uncle, a master carpenter, was easily and brilliantly able to do for me? What about the ability to make any child stop crying, which my father-in-law exhibited to a degree I've never seen in another human being? What kind of intelligence do these abilities depend on, and why are they of less value than the ability to think outside the world of people and things? Conversely, on a matter much closer to home: should I be required to give my doctorate back because last summer at the beach, after I bought a cheap puzzle book at the local newsstand, I spent two full days working out a logic puzzle only to formulate a wrong answer—twice?

Contemporary researchers are beginning to ask such questions and are beginning to formulate the kinds of varied answers that the critical theorist insists are possible (and that might allow me to keep my degree in good conscience). From Howard Gardner, for example, we hear about eight largely unrelated kinds of intelligence, including musical, spatial, bodily kinesthetic, and interpersonal. From Robert Sternberg, we hear about contextual intelligence. From Daniel Coleman, we hear about emotional intelligence.

When educational psychology manages to meander away from unquestioned assumptions about the value of abstract thinking and from traditional assumptions about what people need to learn and how they should learn it, a world of new opportunities opens up for the classroom practitioner—and a much more inclusive and inquisitive classroom climate develops. For example, I recently experienced a demonstration art

appreciation class conducted by a professor who believes that the body can be useful in coming to "know" a work of art. Through a variety of exercises in which participants used their bodies to recreate the feeling or mood of paintings and sculptures, I personally came to understand a great deal more about art in one hour than I ever understood through several traditional college courses. And, my learning came about through a shift from logical thinking to metaphorical thinking, and through a shift from reason to emotion in my responses.

Like many of our cultural assumptions, the assumptions that have shaped educational psychology have led to an educational world limited by several fixed horizons. Given the influence of educational psychology over educational practice, in order to conceptualize and pursue a new kind of classroom, we will first have to challenge sacred ideas from Ed Psych 101 that steer practice into the same kinds of ruts, over and over and over again.

WHAT MIGHT A POST-FORMAL EDUCATIONAL PSYCHOLOGY LOOK LIKE?

If you're looking for *an* answer to the question above, you've not yet quite caught on to critical theory's emphasis on multiple possibilities. The only certainty is uncertainty and change. Still, having said that, there are certain characteristics we can anticipate in any manifestation of a psychology claiming a critical perspective.

A critical psychology will be based on a perspective that insists on the questioning of all assumptions and on the validity of multiple realities. Therefore, it will also be characteristically antithetical to traditional formalist psychologies and their fixed procedures, questions, and answers. While formalist psychologies assume that emotion and reason are incompatible, a critical psychology would assume instead that emotion and reason are simply alternative ways of knowing the world. Readers familiar with the old *Dragnet* television series may recognize the formalist perspective in Sergeant Friday's relentless insistence on "Just the facts,

ma'am"—no feelings or speculation about the crime allowed. A Friday steeped in critical theory, on the other hand, might find the witness's emotional impression that the villain looked exactly like the devil as useful as knowing the criminal's exact height.

Viewing reason as only one tool we can use to know the world, a critical psychology will avoid the formalist's search for single, reliable understandings and instead seek multiple possibilities. Reason might tell Friday that *only* the wife had motive and opportunity to kill the husband, but intuition might repeatedly indict the butler, even if he had a strong alibi and even if only the wife's fingerprints appeared on the gun. How often has experience shown each of us the power of intuition to accomplish what reason could not? Surely we've all seen enough movies and read enough books to know that often the *only* person who seems reasonably and certainly innocent of the crime is the one who actually committed it. Why should we accept the word of "experts" that only reason is acceptable in our mental toolbox? And how do we evaluate such expert claims when we know that various government agencies sometimes employ psychics?

Readers who are "catching on" to the critical perspective may already see how a critical psychology will consciously shun formalist insistence on certainty and singularity. Unlike formalists, critical theorists deny that there is only one credible version of reality. Instead, they insist that to deepen our understanding of the world, we must learn to perceive from as many perspectives as possible. The deeper our understanding of the world, the better we'll be able to act consciously in it. Whereas formalist theories impose blinders on our view, postformalist theories lobby for broadening our horizons.

Believing that all wholes are greater than their parts, critical theorists argue that we need many other tools—music, art, emotion—to construct an informed vision. While too much emotion may distort our vision, so does the lack of any emotion at all. Humans are both rational and emotional, and reason should not be separated out from the human psyche as the most valuable part, as if it were nutmeat to be extracted from a worthless shell. A critical psychology will inform us about how we might implement the full range of tools at our disposal to explore the world in all its richness and diversity. The sterility of an exclusively rational approach

will be replaced by a multifaceted vision more inclusive of humans in their totality.

In short, a postformal educational psychology would explore and value a wide range of mental tools for knowing the world, and it would pursue multiple versions of "reality." And here the traditionalist shudders: without prescribed methods of transmitting fixed information, without prescribed and standardized materials, what could a *school* possibly do and be? How could school *not* become an abyss where students would learn *nothing* because there was no agreed upon *something* for them all to learn? How could we be sure that anything they *might* learn would have any value? How in the world does a theory of multiple realities translate to specific classroom goals? And what kinds of things would teachers actually be *doing* in classrooms in this sort of educational world?

As radical and unrealistic as a critical approach may seem to many readers, the reality is that many of the ideas it embraces are hardly new. John Dewey argued long ago that education constitutes *miseducation* when it consists of memorizing and regurgitating meaningless bits of information:

How many students, for example, were rendered callous to ideas, and how many lost the impetus to learn because of the way in which learning was experienced by them? How many acquired special skills by means of automatic drill so that their power of judgment and capacity to act intelligently in new situations was limited? How many came to associate the learning process with ennui and boredom? How many found what they did learn so foreign to the situations of life outside the school as to give them no power of control over the latter? (1938, 26-7)

Arguing against traditional, positivist education, Dewey anticipated that any alternative model of education might be challenged as empty—and his answer to such a challenge was simple:

Just because traditional education [is] a matter of routine in which the plans and programs were handed down from the past, it does not follow that progressive education is a matter of planless improvisation. (28)

Dewey, of course, had all kinds of thoughts on what kinds of plans and

goals were in order for schools, which he detailed in several volumes of work.

But the essential point here is that his plans shared critical theory's emphasis on the need for all citizens of a democracy to be equipped to think and act effectively within it. From this perspective, a school's primary goal must be to educate autonomous, empowered citizens who know they have choices and can analyze the choices they make. In pursuit of this goal, Dewey argued that "the conditions found in present experience should be used as sources of problems" in schools (79), and that, therefore, "a single course of studies . . . is out of the question" (78). Dewey's emphasis on participatory democracy and on multiple classroom procedures, basic as well to post-formalist thought, indicate that critical theory has roots reaching into the early nineteenth century, into the work of one of education's greatest theoreticians.

More contemporaneously, a current approach to the teaching of literature—commonly referred to as a *reader-response* approach—also embodies significant characteristics of critical goals and psychology. Here, too, we can identify the roots of current thinking in work done decades ago. Even the early writing of Louise Rosenblatt, which outlines a theoretical base for reader-response pedagogy, is replete with passages that might have been written by one of today's critical theorists. And interestingly, Rosenblatt herself had no trouble translating her theory of education into productive classroom practice—nor have the many writers and teachers who have followed her lead.

READER-RESPONSE THEORY AS CRITICAL PIONEERING

Like Dewey before her and the critical theorists who come after, Rosenblatt (1938) argued that when traditional, positivist methodology banishes the nonrational from the classroom, it actually diminishes students' intellectual ability:

Perhaps adolescent students are often impervious to the appeal of literature because for them words do not represent keen sensuous, emotional, and intellectual perceptions. This indicates that throughout the entire course of their education, the element of personal insight and experience has been neglected for verbal abstractions.

Few teachers of English today would deny that the individual's ability to read and enjoy literature is the primary aim of literary study. In practice, however, this tends to be overshadowed by preoccupation with whatever can be systematically taught and tested. Or the English program becomes what can be easily justified to parents and administrators, whose own past English training has produced skepticism about the value of the study of literature. (50, 64)

Everything about traditional methodology de-emphasizes the personal and the experiential; Rosenblatt objected strenuously to such methodology largely because of its focus on texts (the "subject matter" of the course) and its parallel disregard of students' humanity. In opposition, she argued that if students were to learn anything of use in the literature classroom, their own experience and background had to be central concerns in any effective pedagogy:

The individual reader brings the pressure of his personality and needs to bear on the inextricably interwoven "human" and "formal" elements of the work. If his own experience of life has been limited, if his moral code is rigid and narrow or slack and indiscriminating, the quality of his response to literature will necessarily suffer. Conversely, any sensitivity to literature, any warm and enjoyable participation in the literary work, will necessarily involve the sensuous and emotional responsiveness, the human sympathies, of the reader. We shall not further the growth of literary discrimination by a training that concentrates on the so-called purely literary aspect. (51)

In short, if schools are to educate literate and perceptive readers, then the students—and not the material—must matter most. In traditional methodology, however, the nature of students has been completely ignored, often producing classroom conditions nothing short of bizarre:

During a reorganization of education on the Indian reservations some years ago, it was discovered that in some classes the Indian boys and girls were being required to read Restoration comedies. It seemed ridiculous that these children, whose past experience had been only the conditions of the reservation village and the vestiges of their native culture, should be plunged into reading the sophisticated products of a highly complex foreign country remote in space and time. Can it be doubted that the children could "make nothing of it"? Any show of "understanding" a Restoration play would undoubtedly be only a parroting of empty words and phrases to satisfy a teacher's demand.

The plight of these Indian children probably differs only in degree from the average American child's relation to much of the literature he reads in his classroom. (57)

By ignoring the fact that classrooms contain people as well as information, educators working within the formalist paradigms have created alien spaces for children who too often cannot survive, let alone thrive, in them.

Rosenblatt is particularly critical of such classrooms because she perceives the goal of literature study to be the nurturing of a critical and empowered citizenry. While she doesn't use the critical term empowerment (detailed in chapter eight), her concern for that goal is clear:

Our schools and universities must be transformed, as C. S. Peirce said many years ago, from "institutions for teaching" into "institutions for learning." The student should go to school and college, not for the purpose of being taught ready-made formulas and fixed attitudes, but in order that he may develop the will to learn. . . . he must develop the flexibility of mind and temperament necessary for the translation of that sense of truth into actual behavior. Instead of judgments accepted in whole cloth, he must acquire a curiosity about the causes of human actions and social conditions; he must be ready to revise accepted hypotheses in the light of new information; he must learn where to turn for this information. He needs, in short, to develop a dynamic sense of life, a feeling that an understanding of causes makes for greater control of conditions. Instead of drifting with the stream of circumstance, he will be able to set up more rational personal and social goals and to understand better the conditions under which they can be achieved. (132)

The aim, surely, is to enable the student to make intelligent judgments. . . . The question [of what we should teach] is this: Will this objective knowledge affect his actions, inside and outside the school today, and will it influence his actions in later adult life as a member of a family and as a member of a national and world community? . . . Democracy requires a body of citizens capable of making their own personal and social choices. The corollary of this is that they should be emotionally and intellectually aware of the possible alternatives from which to choose. (176, 193)

The purpose of any teaching, then (but especially the teaching of literature), must be to help students develop the intellectual and practical skills they need to become active, effective, fully literate citizens. Any educational methodology that forces students to uncritically absorb someone else's idea of what's important is antithetical to this democratic goal.

Rosenblatt also understood the need to combat hegemony in classrooms, though again the term was not in use at the time. She argued strenuously

that students' emotional responses to literature could serve as an essential tool for helping them uncover their own unconscious, cultural assumptions.

An undistorted vision of the work of art requires a consciousness of one's own preconceptions and prejudices concerning the situations presented in the work, in contrast to the basic attitudes toward life assumed in the text. . . . The reader's own reactions, like the work of art, are the organic expression not only of a particular individual but also of a particular cultural setting. . . .

The attempt to work out the author's system of values and assumptions about man and society should enable the student to discover the unspoken assumptions behind his own judgment. His conclusions about this particular work imply the unarticulated theories of human conduct and ideas of the good that shape his thinking. . . . By bringing their own generalizations into the open, students may be led to feel the need of putting their mental houses in order. They will see how often they have been dominated by ideas only because they have heard them repeated again and again. They will develop a more critical, questioning attitude and will see the need of a more reasoned foundation for their thoughts and judgments, a more consistent system of values. (115, 118, 120)

By openly discussing their assumptions, by scrutinizing their sense of what is "good," students can learn to avoid a pitfall all too common in any society, the tendency:

to accept the familiar or the traditional as possessing a fundamental rightness and, conversely, to consider the strange and the unfamiliar as necessarily inferior or reprehensible. Since the individual unconsciously absorbs the particular modes of behavior, views of human nature, and ideas about socio-economic arrangements, of the culture into which he is born, he takes them for granted and often cannot even imagine any possible alternatives or variations. Hence, when he does encounter another cultural pattern, as when the white man comes into contact with the African or the Samoan, he tends to look upon it as inferior. (157)

And after students learn to challenge their own unexamined assumptions? What then? Will they be left to wander, as opponents of critical theory charge, in a relativistic void, bereft of moral signposts? Not at all.

Any system of values can be scrutinized in terms of its consequences for human life. Any form of conduct, any social mechanism, any custom or institution, should be measured in terms of its actual effect on the individual personalities that make up the society. To use the culturally sanctioned terminology, every human being is entitled to "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." This means that the human being is

recognized as having value in himself and that anything which reduces him to the status of a thing, instrument, or automaton is condemned. . . . The corollary of this is that if a conflict of interest should arise, no individual or group would be justified in gaining their own satisfactions through exploitation of any other individuals or groups. (165, 166)

Implied here is the critical theorists' constant questioning of whose interests any prevailing value system serves, and what its costs are to others.

On multiple counts, then, Rosenblatt's work is an early version of current critical theory and critical psychology. It argues persuasively that schools ought to empower students for participatory democracy, that their emotions have a place in the classroom, that who they are as people must be a prime consideration in pedagogy, that multiple readings of a real world object are not only possible but essential, and that it is a prime concern of education to help students free themselves from paralyzing, hegemonic ideas.

What all this means in terms of classroom practice is outlined in *Literature as Exploration*, from which the above quotes came. Further explorations of classroom practice have also been fleshed out in countless works by other practitioners and theoreticians in the years since Rosenblatt's seminal work appeared. Today, countless secondary and university teachers use a reader-response pedagogy daily in classrooms nationwide. Scholarly, as well as pedagogical, work in the field has shown Rosenblatt's ideas to be educationally valuable and unquestionably practical, demonstrating that the vision of contemporary critical theorists is anything *but* radical, pie-in-the-sky educational thinking.

Still, few traditionalists will be eager to abandon the lessons of a positivist Ed Psych 101 and to embrace this new perspective, despite its venerable ancestry. Once we shift from one view to another, we won't be able to avoid confronting many other implied changes in day to day practice. Chief among these is an implied shift of power and privilege, both inside and outside the classroom. Why such a shift is both necessary and inevitable is the topic of the next chapter.