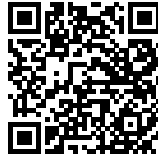




THE HUMANITIES AND LANGUAGE

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It is often assumed that the discipline of the Humanities involves anything and everything that cannot be properly be classified as a proper science. It is also commonly assumed that language is simply a method of communication – so that flapping one's arms is the same as speaking; or, one may draw a picture, since a picture is worth a thousand words, as the adage tells us.

Before proceeding further, perhaps it's best to define our terms so that we do not get bogged down with assumptions.

Turning to language, we need to understand it as thinking more than communication. The founder of linguistic philosophy (Wilhelm von Humboldt) tells us that language is the expression of thinking peculiar to a people, even the most primitive of people, those closest to nature, as he puts it. Communication is only the simplest, basic level of linguistic use.

The most intensive use is the generation of ideas. The philologist Max Mueller continues Humboldt's description when he describes language as "the outward form and manifestation of thought."

And Humboldt further defines language as the medium through which humanity encounters reality – "Man lives with his objects chiefly as language presents them to him."

The philosopher, Ernst Cassirer, succinctly described language as first the symbolic rendering of expressions and second the engendering of discursive thought; or, in other words, reason.

Thus language is the principle which serves to link together complexity in order to produce meaning, or what may be called abstract thought. In brief, for Cassirer, language is the entelechy of knowledge.

This obviously means that language has more than a denotative function – it is more than simply communication.

To quote the Danish linguist Louis Hjelmslev: "A language is that into which all other languages, and even all other conceivable language structures may be translated. In language, indeed only in such, can the inexpressible be dealt with until such time as it is expressed." Language, first and foremost is ideas.

Given the intimate association of language with thinking and knowledge – why do we hear the teachers of language referring to it as a "form of communication?" What purpose does this extreme simplification fulfill?

Having briefly defined language, we may do the same for the humanities. Again, we encounter confusion. The tendency nowadays is to view the Humanities as anything that is not science; and this confusion continues into areas which veer into science (like anthropology, psychology and sociology).

So, what are the Humanities? In a very straightforward way the Humanities have always meant the study of Greek and Latin – that is, the discipline of the Humanities has always been tied with the learning of language – because it was (and one hopes still is) believed that by learning a language, in a disciplined and structured fashion, a person became educated and refined.

Thus the Humanities are based upon the understanding that education is only possible through language. Therefore, the Humanities are not anything not science – but very specifically education in language – and those disciplines that promote language – namely literature, philosophy, biography and history. And it is here also that we have the very history of education.

But we now speak of skill, rather than education, and language is simply another tool to further the demands of the labor marker, rather than the promotion of being a good human being – the traditional goal of education. Skill is not about education – it is about labor and production.

Education is about building the good human being – or about the esthetic, moral and intellectual nature of humanity. Skill is about the material environment and its conquest. Skill is about bondage (the demands of labor). Education is about understanding the exercise of freedom.

And then there are countless falsehoods that permeate teaching institutions. The worst among them is the notion of “learning styles,” and the absurd notion of “right-brain” and “left-brain” learners. Study after study has amply demonstrated that there is no such thing as “visual learning” or “auditory learning,” or kinesthetic.

Nor does the brain function in left and right compartments. And yet, these false notions are so popular in educational institutions – and worst of all, entire pedagogies are built around these falsehoods. Why? As researchers recently observed in an extensive in the Journal of Psychological Science, “The contrast between the enormous popularity of the learning-styles approach within education and the lack of credible evidence for its utility is, in our opinion, striking and disturbing.”

Disturbing because students are being taught based upon false assumptions. Is an educational institution a place where pop-psychology should be followed?

And yet the popularity of these views in pedagogy is enormous. And the literature is enormous. But it is literature produced by the non-specialist – by the amateur. Why do teachers follow these falsehoods?

And recent studies also tell us that the only way possible for the brain to learn anything is through language. Thus, the physical brain is Humanistic. It is built primarily for language, for thought, for ideas. And the world that we live, the labor that do, is a function of thought, of ideas. The world that we inhabit is the product of Humanism.

Thus to neglect confuse Humanism with anything other than language is to deny the importance of thought.

The photo shows, "Le quai aux fleurs," by Marie-François Firmin-Girard, painted in 1875.

