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William J. Roden

Pathways to Philosophy: Program D/Philosophy of Language
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Wittgenstein's "S" Argument Exploited in Education

In part, Wittgenstein's illustration of an individual making a notation of 'S' whenever he or she experiences pain demonstrates the notion that there is no procedure or criteria that exists to validate that the next internal experience that may trigger another 'S' is the same as the one felt previously.

Facts as internally construed, are subjective. The question of whether internal facts are, in truth, objective facts is another discussion. We think they can only be validated externally but that is impossible, but Wittgenstein states that no private language can exist by itself without some connection to external criteria. Our internal criteria may identify pain as pain, but no objective measure exists to determine if the pain the subject had before is of the same duration, level of discomfort, identical location, etc.

We are left with one option: label the subsequent sensation pain as just that, pain. Wittgenstein is right when he states, "Whatever is going to seem right to me is right." The world will not stop rotating if this is the decision I make. No one is hurt. But the bigger question is if we believe our subjective facts in a context, will there any impact upon our decisions in relating or working within other contexts? That begs the question as to whom or what provides us with the subjective facts? Internally, we do, but it does not require much thought to agree that they come from elsewhere. The more subjective, the less chance of their being "true" in the external world. This is a conundrum in the very place where we look for guidance or knowledge: Education.

Below is a discussion of overused jargon found in the minds of and espoused by educators. They substitute for what we think we know about the "facts" of educational theories, serve as totems, and educators assume they have a concrete meaning, positive value, and contribute to our library of teaching and learning knowledge. Interestingly, educators do not concern themselves with insuring that a new practice is put forward in a particular context will have the same result in another. After all, it is a "best practice."

Education theorists and practitioners abound, and all believe they have a clear understanding of “best practices” in that field. This could include pedagogy, fund-raising, student accountability, curriculum development. As in that expression, “trying to nail Jell-O to the wall,” specifying any objective criteria merely leads to a Wittgensteinian, endless maelstrom or vortex of subjectives.

A new “flavor of the month” technique, software program, mode of instructional delivery, teacher effectiveness or student assessment plan, are always present. Despite nebulous “rubrics” to concretize how students are assessed and the like, no one teacher or professor will apply her criteria the same. I knew of a professor who gave every all his students an A if they met the curricular milestones, while another would see that performance to rate a C for just meeting thresholds.

This phenomenon of defining best practices, what is effective, student-centered, and the like can be compared to Wittgenstein’s pain example. Both attempt to identify and measure subjective events. Unlike the pain scenario, however, there is the potential for harm to others. No academic preparation can provide the tools to identify a best practice in every educational setting or contexts. The experts will always say their new mousetrap will make a difference, it will succeed in the classroom, regardless of the audience. The more technically sophisticated the next Excel tool is developed, obviously, the students will benefit. Just ask the vendor.

Measuring students’ success will again be memorialized on yet another spreadsheet. This false sense of objectivity reminds one of Wittgenstein’s criticism of scientism overlaid on the study of philosophy.

Partly because Education is considered a social “science,” it can create “evidence” out of whole cloth. Like Wittgenstein’s internal S example, educationists will continue to point to subjective criteria to justify what will be effective in the teaching and learning process. We are told we need to develop “critical thinking skills,” “transparency,” to make “data driven decisions” regarding the best way to teach, and because educators are talking to themselves (alone or at a conference with others), again Wittgenstein’s statement, “whatever is going to seem right to me [or us] is right.” As he opined, “...we can’t talk about ‘right.’ The latter truism is the safety net for “consultants” and education leaders.

Of course, these solutions are accented by colorful kits, wine after the workshops, attractive presenters (especially in the software or IT industry.) They convince their audiences that this new computer software will give us the “data,” we need to “move forward.” If we work hard we will have a “world class institution.”

Because we cannot seem to talk about right, or ever realize the causes, the preparatory challenges that hold students back, we clutch ‘totems’ along the way and subscribe to their worth. These totems can be found in Business (i.e., the former Total Quality Management movement). As with their Native American forbearers, they were attractive, colorful, even seductive. No matter what “sensation” (problem, pedagogical tool, etc.) is found, it is somehow tied back to the totems created by the consultants as sacred. Fortunately for the current experts, as with the next S sensation, educators forget what worked before.

With no real external criteria, educators are easy prey. The pseudo-scientific models presented sound real. Taking these “takeaways” home, one soon finds the basket empty. Years of such conferences merely result in participants getting older, passing around phone shots of the grandkids and planning for lunch.