The Language of Labels

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Abstract

The author describes how the language of labels and her own cultural biases affect how she approaches teaching her students with disabilities. The author examines how the mythopoetic narratives of our past force us to examine the underlying assumptions of our culture that are expressed within our language and how understanding our own linguistic patterns can open our minds up to alternative viewpoints that we may not have otherwise understood.

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I no longer regard my students as "learning disabled" but as students who learn differently. Just this act of changing my language allows me to think differently about the learning process.

As a teacher of students designated as *learning disabled,* I was unaware of how much the language of the label affected how I regarded my students and the manner in which I taught them. I have begun to recognize some of my own cultural biases and the linguistic patterns that limit my ability to reach and teach my students. I now look with greater care on the labels that I use and the root metaphors that are part of my linguistic patterns.

In the process of examining these cultural biases, I have begun to realize how much the linguistic patterns of our language, and the root metaphors on which they are based, affect how I regard the world around me. We carry out our daily existence within the cultural maps that are entrenched within us. These cultural maps are "an abstract description of trends towards uniformity in the words, deeds, and artifacts of the human group" (Kluckholm, 1968, p.35). Embedded within this cultural map are the root metaphors that allow us to function on a day-to-day basis. These root metaphors "provide a conceptual and moral coherence to a culture" (Bowers, 2000, p.27). Often we are not even aware that these root metaphors exist as they are reproduced through the linguistic process. Even if we do recognize them, they are often so deeply ingrained within our thought processes that we do not always recognize their influence on our behavior. For example, in 1859, Charles Darwin put forth his theory of evolution and the idea of the survival of the fittest. Darwin's ideas became ingrained in Western thought and were used as a way to explain why some cultures succeeded over others. Eventually this idea became a way of explaining why some individuals did better than others. The idea that some people were more "fit" or "able" became a part of Western thought and was used to explain the rise of certain individuals into positions of power within society.

I found these ideas insightful and expressed eloquently in Bowers' (2000), *Let Them Eat Data: How Computers Affect Education, Cultural Diversity, and the Prospects of Ecological Sustainability*. Although his ideas at first seemed foreign to my customary way of thinking of how language is used within a culture, it forced me to look deeply within my own thought processes and to examine the root metaphors that have become a part of my linguistic patterns. For Bowers, language is never neutral. Within it, language carries assumptions and beliefs that have been incorporated into our cultural maps. To examine these root metaphors requires that we look deep within ourselves and question those beliefs on which they are based.

I believe what Bowers has to say about how deeply our language is ingrained in the mythopoetic narratives of the past is important because it forces us to examine the underlying assumptions of our culture that are expressed within our language. Examining our linguistic patterns becomes central to understanding how different cultures perceive the world around them and how we can more effectively teach students who are culturally and intellectually different. By understanding our own linguistic patterns, we can open our minds up to alternative viewpoints that we may not have otherwise understood.

When we make decisions in the educational system, they are often made on the

basis of these taken for granted truths or presuppositions. For the most part, we do not even recognize these presuppositions and even if we do, we find ourselves accepting them as though they were universal. Often as a teacher I am dismayed with what appears to be a lack of interest on the part of parents to their student's education. However, my perceived view of these parents' *lack of interest* is based on many presuppositions. First, it presumes that the parents realize that they are important to their children's education and have a great influence upon it. For some Hispanic families, education is seen as outside the realm of the family. The family's job is to take care of the child at home and the school's job is to educate the child. Parents often feel that they should not interfere with the job of the school; further, some do not feel they are adequately prepared to assist in the educational process. Secondly, it presupposes that the parents are aware of what is taking place at school. Even though the school sends a newsletter home with the students, this does not guarantee that the parents even see it. The newsletter is in both English and Spanish, but the presupposition is that the parents are able to read. I can tell you from experience that this is not always the case. Finally, this view that I have presupposes that parents have time to be interested in their children's education. The fact is that many of the parents are farm workers who work long hours and often do not get home until late at night. They have to take care of the house, the mail, pay the bills, and get children fed and into bed, so they too can get to bed to rise at the crack of dawn. When I look at the difficulties that this situation presents, it is not hard to understand why parents do not show what I consider sufficient interest in their children's education. Therefore, it is imperative that we examine the presuppositions on which we base our decisions. We need to understand the difficulties parents face and to change the way in which we include them in the discourse by changing school events to weekends and/or making phone calls later in the evening.

As a teacher of students with learning disabilities, I also operate on certain presuppositions. I have developed a view of what intelligence is and how it operates. The cultural map that I follow in my daily life recognizes that each person is an individual with different ways of approaching tasks. Yet within this cultural map is the presupposition that individuals must continually progress towards a goal despite these differences. This view of the young is based on the questionable assumption that human beings grow sequentially towards a supposed ideal or inescapable state (Kagan, 1978). The idea of individual differences and the linear progression of learning and reaching a goal is not a universally accepted fact. It is a part of the culture that I exist within. Yet I often accept this idea as universal and function within my teaching as though it were. When I look at my students, I judge them based upon this linear progression that is expected. They are tested quarterly to determine whether or not they have made satisfactory progress toward their goals; if they have not, then I go back and adjust my teaching in an effort to ensure that they make satisfactory progress. Seldom in this process has it occurred to me that all progress is not linear, or that perhaps the child is not ready to learn the material being presented at that point in time. As Montagu (1981) warns, "It is unreasonable and destructive to expect a child to do equally well in all areas of growth because [individual] rates of developing aptitudes and learning different subjects and skills vary significantly" (p.125).

This idea of individual progress in a linear fashion is embedded within the root metaphor of intelligence that has been transmitted through the culture in which I have been raised and the education that I have received. According to this root metaphor, intelligence is tangible. It operates much like a machine or a computer. Data is input into the brain, the brain processes this information, determines the connections to other information already stored within the brain, and then files the information into some filing system or storage center within the brain where it can easily be retrieved. It is obvious that this root metaphor is linked to the current educational beliefs of the American culture and to the industrialization and technological advancement within Western society. Because I view intelligence in this manner, I also view students who have difficulty in learning material as having some malfunction within this storage and retrieval process. It is as if there is some mechanism within their brain that is not functioning properly and therefore is in need of remediation.

It is obvious that such root metaphors make it easier to understand complicated processes such as brain function and present a convenient way of explaining phenomena, which occur through the use of these root metaphors. The danger, however, is when we believe that these root metaphors are the *only* way to explain these processes and dismiss alternate views and explanations. As a special education teacher, these root metaphors allow me to explain the unexplainable and provide a convenient way of thinking about how learning occurs. However, I am also constrained in the way I view other forms of intelligence. For example, the cultural patterns that exist within the educational system place a greater emphasis on print-related learning, which is a fairly recent trend within the historical context of mankind. This emphasis ignores the oral traditions of learning that have been a part of the mythopoetic narrative process of learning for thousands of years. In doing so, oral patterns of intelligence are given less emphasis, further constraining the ability of my students to learn within the educational system that they are placed.

Since root metaphors provide social and moral coherence to a culture, they often go unnoticed because they are reproduced through linguistic processes that are mostly taken for granted (Bowers, 2000). When we use language, we are also reproducing the root metaphors of the culture. Thus, embedded within the language patterns that have developed over time are “culturally specific ways of knowing” (Bowers, 2000, p. 31), and in turn culturally specific ways of thinking. Therefore we might conclude, as Vygotsky (1968) did, that “language determines the development of thought rather than thought determining language” (p. 75). If we explore this way of understanding the development of thought and intelligence, we begin to see how both are tied to language and the linguistic patterns of our culture. Therefore, as “children acquire vocabulary necessary for spoken discourse and metacognition, they are learning to think within the earlier expressions of cultural intelligence encoded in the metaphorical constructions of language” (Bowers, 2000, p.157). These metaphorical constructions, then, determine how we approach teaching and learning.

These linguistic patterns are evident in the labels that we apply to the world around us. In the case of students who have difficulty functioning in the educational environment, they are labeled according to the linguistic patterns that are embedded in the root metaphors of Western thought. We label these students as learning disabled. If we look care-

fully at this terminology, we can identify the thought patterns which influence how we view these students. The term *able* means the ability to do; if we add the prefix *dis-* meaning not, we identify these students as *not* being able to learn. By applying the label to these students we come to view them as "less than" the other students within the educational environment and thus treat them differently. Our thought patterns, which have been influenced by social Darwinism to believe in the survival of the fittest, regard these students as less fit and therefore in need of greater assistance, despite the extent of their difficulties. Students themselves, who understand the linguistic patterns of the culture, also view themselves as *unable* and fall into a self-prophetic situation. Teachers' expectations tend to decrease when dealing with these students. Even prior to meeting a student with the disability label, teachers may form attitudes based on preconceived notions. A student may be viewed on the basis of his or her disability, rather than as a person who also happens to have a disability (Hallahan & Kauffman, 2000). Less is expected and more assistance is seen as needed. General education teachers report lower expectations of students labeled as disabled, describing them as less motivated to learn, less likely to graduate from high school, and less successful in future interpersonal relations and work as adults (Carroll & Repucci, 1978). Rarely does it occur to teachers that perhaps their own cultural maps and the metaphors that are embedded within them *create* the disability, although some studies suggest that teachers' perceptions of the students' needs appeared to matter more than the label (Grosch & McKellar, 2003). As Taylor (1994) states,

> Our identity is partly shaped by recognition or its absence, often by the misrecognition of others, and so a person or group of people can suffer real damage, real distortion, if the people or society around them mirror back to them a confining or demeaning or contemptible picture of themselves. Nonrecognition or misrecognition can inflict harm; can be a form of oppression, imprisoning someone in a false, distorted, and reduced mode of being (p.25).

If we look at the cultural beliefs and view of intelligence in Western society, it is not difficult to understand why some teachers find dealing with a student with a learning disability so difficult. Teachers expect that students will progress linearly towards the educational objectives as set out in the curriculum. When students fail to meet the threshold as dictated by the state standards, the *child* is viewed as deficient, not the state standards or the cultural beliefs that underlie them. When we measure students against a culturally laden standard we must be aware of the presuppositions on which the standards were based. Standards are not, in and of themselves, predetermined; they are chosen by a group of individuals who believe that they are valuable and worth knowing. It is important to understand that these beliefs are not universal, but rather based upon the cultural understanding of the group or groups developing the standards. This group could have chosen a myriad of different standards, yet agreed only to the few that were chosen. So what of the perhaps dozens of others that they did not chose? Were these not worth knowing? And because they were dismissed do we now regard them as of *no* value? The idea that the standards themselves and the methods that we use to teach them may be responsible for creating the problem, appears to receive little consideration. This may be due to an educational system that as a whole, fails to recognize the cultural patterns and

root metaphors, which drive the system of education. It is a difficult process to remove oneself from one's beliefs and consider alternate views. It requires examining the basis of those established beliefs and their origins. Yet without examining those beliefs, we function within a narrow vision of thinking and learning which may, in fact, not be absolute, but rather based upon the linguistic patterns and root metaphors of our culture.

It is imperative that we look carefully at the language contained within the standards. If language determines thought, as Vygotsky suggests, then the language we use within these standards affects how we think of learning. Statements such as "all students shall know…" do not provide us with any leeway. If all students should know, then what of those that do not know? Do we *drill them and kill them* until they do know? Further, the language in that simple statement conveys that all students *must* know. If we look at a simple English standard that states, "all students shall be able to identify a noun, verb, adjective, and adverb", we are given the impression that it is absolutely essential that students know these things. Yet we could find a great many people in the world who have proven themselves quite successful without knowing these things. So, when a student fails to meet this standard we find ourselves in a conundrum. How do we then judge this student? If we believe the language of the standard, we may think that it is an essential part of their learning. If we *must* teach it, students *must* learn it and if they do not, there *must* be something wrong with them. Rarely, if ever, do we consider that there might be something wrong with the standard as set forth.

The Vygotskian idea of language determining thought is extremely complex and requires that we delve deeply into our own linguistic patterns and the thought processes that develop from them. Doing so allows us to free ourselves from our own cultural restraints, which act, in essence, as a set of blinders. Removing these blinders opens us to a wider range of vision, which will inevitably benefit the students that we teach. It is in this recognition that we empower ourselves to become more effective in assisting those students we had previously constrained.

As teachers, we need to understand this power and utilize it in a way that releases our students from the constraints of our own language. We need to give recognition to their differences in a manner that empowers them. We need to move beyond the culturally laden labels that constrain our thought processes and devalue our students as human beings. As teachers, we have an enormous power at our disposal that is greater than all the teaching methods that we have ever learned in our training. We have the ability to say to each and every student, "Yes, you are different, and isn't that wonderful?" This small but significant step gives legitimacy to those students who view themselves as different, thereby authenticating their identity.

Therefore, in order to effectively teach students, and more specifically those students who have difficulty in learning, we must be able to move beyond the labels that have been placed upon them. The label *learning disability* is much the same as the labels that we apply to numerous ethnic minorities, limiting our expectations of these students. I would suggest that these labels impact how we view these students and impact the ways in which we relate to and evaluate those children. As pointed out by Pai and Adler (2001), "Rigid and stereotypic labeling of the learner is likely to result in an unfair assessment of his or her educability which in turn may limit the

child's social and intellectual growth" (p. 172).

As a teacher of students who struggle within the regular education curriculum, I realize that I must view students in terms of their own progress towards their educational goals, not my own perceived notion of how they should progress along the culturally biased standards laid out in the curriculum. Further, it is important for all children to recognize their own progress and to view themselves as learners. By recognizing students as learners and identifying their improvement we strip away the barriers that blind us to their progress. Rather than comparing them to some arbitrary standard that is culturally laden, the comparisons should be made against their own advancement. Doing so allows us to move beyond our cultural biases and recognize the value of each individual learner.

By giving recognition to my students' differences, not only have I given them the opportunity to develop, but I have also given myself an opportunity to grow as a teacher. By the simple act of giving recognition, I have removed one barrier which constrained my ability to teach effectively. I now am able to recognize some of my own cultural biases and the linguistic patterns that limit my ability to reach and teach my students. By recognizing some of the root metaphors which guide my thought processes, I have enabled myself to become more effective as a teacher. I no longer regard my students as *learning disabled* but as students who learn *differently*. Just this act of changing my language allows me to think differently about the learning process. It allows me to move beyond the metaphor of intelligence as operating as a machine and to view it instead as a *developing* organ within the body which needs to be nurtured and *developed*. In so doing, I create an atmosphere that is nurturing and allow my students to progress on their own terms.

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