

## EASE AND SIMPLICITY - EASINESS AND SIMPLIFICATION IN VERBAL COMMUNICATION

Geoffrey Waldon

As may seem irksome to some I am at pains continually to point out that the ideas I have been trying to work out and to communicate to others are ideas about adaptive ability and survival.

Although they seem eminently relevant to the art of encouraging learning in others, their application to deliberate education, and in particular to that area of education now referred to as 'special needs', was originally largely a matter of chance.

Until my going to work at Queen Mary's Hospital for Children in Surrey, where I first crystallised some of the seminal ideas, my study of children was entirely separate from my study and practice of medicine; however, by the time I went to work at Manchester University the growth of these ideas was already giving rise to their exploitation in very promising attempts to promote learning activity in developmentally impeded children, since when I have been engaged continually with problems of education.

It is not surprising then that my work is seen by most as summed up in what might be called my 'approach to education', nor is it odd that most of those who have found it of interest did so originally in connection with educational problems in children.

Herein may lie one of the reasons why some have found it difficult to become acquainted with the basic principles despite my strong wish to communicate the notions to others.

Whereas educational practices are important applications of the ideas it is the ideas which have given rise to an approach to education, attitudes, analyses and to methods, techniques and the design of materials. Hence, the ideas about the conditions and manner of fundamental learning and pattern of growth of general understanding must take priority even though the enquirer is impatient for a description of the approach and an outline of the curriculum.

I feel very strongly that I must communicate first the basic ideas, thereafter their role in normal functioning together with the pathology of their absence or distortion, BEFORE discussing the technology involved in remediation etc; whereas it may be an outline of the latter which the enquirer imagines he is seeking.

"If," the enquirer argues, "someone suggests that he holds a solution to what is recognised to be a fairly clear-cut problem, why should he insist on complicating its exposition with an 'obscuring cloud' of unnecessary theory?"

I feel certain that no one reading this particular magazine will still feel an urge to ask such a question; however, I also know that there are not a few who still feel that the basic principles could or should be expressed in a way that makes them 'straightforward' and 'easy to understand'.

This rather naive viewpoint is commonly held even by those who have themselves spent much effort and time in acquiring the elements of their own profession but who, in failing to see the compass of the notions they wish to know more about, greatly underestimate the work necessary to attain this knowledge.

The 'difficulty' of a topic is largely a measure of the effort and time which needs to be expended in order to acquire an adequate level of understanding, some arbitrary moment or stage being taken as the point of commencement. This might be illustrated by the analogy of growth in an onion in which the greater the number of storage leaves and the more succulent each leaf the more complex the notions which have been or are to be reached.

Whether a task is 'easy' or 'difficult' is not a property of the task but of the level and state of readiness of the understanding brought and applied to it. When meeting with a problem it is necessary to examine the state of one's current understanding in relation to it, for it may be that some preliminary groundwork is necessary to its satisfactory comprehension, and this may mean some minutes or hours of reformulation or indeed many months of preparation.

If a notion is within effortless grasp of one's prepared understanding it is likely that that idea will occur to one spontaneously. A prepared understanding implies both a level of familiarity with the concepts underlying any particular problem, and a sufficient flexibility of mind to view it from more than one perspective.

As one who has to read painstakingly, and who finds comprehension often slow of coming, I am astonished at the power of some to read quickly and to pick the kernel unerringly out of a passage with consummate skill, yet seeming ease. There is also however a commoner skill of finding main themes and extracting a digest, a journalistic skill which does not always reside with the ability to assimilate ideas, which are instead manipulated, as indigestible cyphers, 'at arm's length', more for academic sport than a desire for knowledge.

If one sets out to present an account of one's ideas, which is sufficiently comprehensive without being unnecessarily long, in clear unconvoluted English, what can one expect from one's reader?

Presumably the aim is to introduce new ideas which may have incubated and fermented for many long months or years prior to their being committed painfully to paper. Is it to be expected then that a casual or naive reader should grasp these ideas effortlessly?

Is it not more likely that a marshalling of varying degrees of concentrated effort and staying-power will be necessary for each of several readers to be in a state of preparedness sufficient to be able to understand the notions?

All being well the book will be so constructed that the earlier reading prepares the student for the later, but different sections will prove more-or-less readily negotiable by different readers and the whole must be expected to be a prolonged and effortful exercise.

The reader who wants to be spoon fed is asking to be told what he already believes. He may say, "I have no time to work at it; just give me a simple outline," when he means that he is not prepared to take the trouble to comprehend; however, to paraphrase Leibniz: there is no easy road to understanding.

The common plea for a 'simple' account rests on two misconceptions; one is that there can be understanding without effort, a belief that is contradicted by the very theory we are alluding to. The other consists in a confusion between simple and easy, and between simplification and facilitation. To facilitate is to clear the path of unnecessary obstacles, to iron out irrelevant wrinkles, and to direct the enquirer to the most appropriate entry and logical route, whilst to simplify is to reduce to the most basic principles, thus clarifying the whole and rendering the foundational structures and functions apparent by way of analysis.

Simplified then implies reduced to a state in which the component 'atoms'\* or structural and functional units are displayed in their relations to one another and to the whole, and the principles which govern these relations and the purpose and functioning of the whole problem under scrutiny are demonstrated so as to indicate the ontogenetic history of the whole.

Simplification or analysis is a process essential to the act of interpreting and is therefore a major component of thinking or active mentation. A positive relationship exists between the depth, manner and exhaustiveness of the process of simplification and the extent and quality of the resulting or concomitant understanding.

Simplification is an effortful and laborious activity whether engaged in in order to further one's own direct understanding or in the following of the arguments and ideas of another.

\* Clearly 'atom' here implies indivisible at the level of the perspective, etc, involved

In the latter event, although a preliminary analysis, prepared perhaps by the author, guides and eases the task of a secondary enquirer (such as the student of an extant theory), it is essential that the analysis or simplification, whether studied verbatim or not, is subjected to the effortful enquiry of the student.

Simplification is a simultaneous two-way activity, the analysis continually informing an understanding of the synthetic processes. That is to say, as the process explores the deeper structures and reduces the units of each level to their constituents, and as dawns a recognition of the principles by which these parts function and are related, this insight continually reflects back towards and enlightens the understanding of the whole.

The innovator who wishes to be understood must work to present his material as clearly as possible and in what he considers to be the most digestible form. Thereafter it is up to the reader to work at mastering the understanding.

"The place you desire," says Ruskin to the serious reader, "is open to labour and merit, but to nothing else." And he goes on to have the curator of the written word make the following promise to the seeker after literate knowledge: "Learn to understand it, and you shall hear it. But on other terms? No. If you will not rise to us, we cannot stoop to you." \*

Geoffrey

\* *Sesame and Lilies*, John Ruskin