

Which History?

“Yesterday we introduced ourselves and took care of the getting-class-started stuff. Unless someone has leftover questions, we’ll begin today by jumping right in to the study of history.”

“Here’s what I want you to do first: The second hand on the clock is approaching twelve. For ten seconds, while it’s moving between the twelve and the two, I want you to think about this room and what’s in it. Nothing else. Ready? “Start. . .”

* * *

“Okay, time’s up. Now, tell me something that was true in this classroom during those ten seconds. Melanie?”

“I don’t think I know what you mean.”

“Well, I don’t mean anything complicated. Just tell me something--anything--that was true here during that time.”

“Uh, well, somebody’s stomach growled. And they giggled.”

“Good. That’s two things that were true . . .two ‘facts.’ I’ll put two tally marks on the board to represent them. Okay, who else has a fact? Yes. Tony.”

“You mean just ordinary stuff, right?”

“Yes.”

“Well, I was sitting at this desk. Playing with my pencil. Trying to figure out why we’re doing this. Breathing. Staring at the clock.”

“Good. That’s five more tally marks. Jenny?”

“I don’t know whether I have the right idea or not, but if I do, I can give you dozens and dozens of facts like that . . .hundreds . . .maybe thousands.”

“Just for this little 30-by-30 foot space and ten seconds?”

“Sure. Put down 25 marks for everyone’s hair color, and 25 for their eyes. Fifty more for our heights and weights. Those were all facts. You could say dozens of things that were true just about the carpet, hundreds or thousands of things about the clothes we were wearing--textures, fits, styles, materials and so on. Then there’s all the furniture in the room--what it was, where it was, what it was made of, how it was made. In fact, just describing the clock or the pencil sharpener--how they’re put together and how they work. . . I have no idea how many facts there’d be in those descriptions, but I know it would be a lot.”

“I agree. So, how many factual statements might it be possible to make about that little slice of space and time?”

“You could fill every blackboard in the school with tally marks.”

“Well, if that’s true, how many facts might there be if we expanded the space and time to include what’s usually studied in American history--all of the North American continent for 500 years? Or what if we took in all of human history, from this moment back?”

“It boggles the mind.”

It *should* boggle the mind. If it does not, it is surely only because we have not thought about the question. Past reality presents us with an infinite number of facts. From those facts we select an infinitesimally small number and build stories about America, about western civilization, about the world, stories now so familiar we have difficulty imagining alternatives. Yet that same reality contains the raw material for countless other stories, stories little or not at all like the ones we teach but just as true and perhaps even more important.

Does that seem improbable? Hundreds of different American histories already exist in the memories of Indian tribes, ethnic minorities and other groups and nations with whom we have had dealings. In many instances, the stories are not mere variations on our textbooks; they differ in fundamental ways. Black Elk, an Oglala Sioux who as a young boy witnessed the Battle of Little Big Horn, told his life story in *Black Elk Speaks*. In his recollections of the past, his memories of visions play a role which has no counterpart in textbook versions of American history.

We recall and record what we think is important.

Our assumptions, beliefs and values shape our histories. Most of the names and events highlighted in our textbooks reflect our interest in power and wealth and our belief that pursuit of them explains significant past action. If we believed that what mattered most was not power and wealth but a sense of community, our accounts of the past would be different. If we agreed that what was most important about human existence was movement toward a particular moral code, not a page in our history books would read as it does now. If we thought that the highest good to which humans could aspire was creativity in the arts, that all else was incidental and of little consequence, yet another history would take shape. Given each of these assumptions, our whole conception of past and present reality would be different.

“Okay. We’ve established that there’s no end to the amount of raw factual material we could draw from to write history. So how do we decide which facts to use and how to organize them?”

(Silence)

Well, let’s cut the problem down to a more reasonable size. Think back to this room and those ten seconds. How would you decide which of the available facts to use to write a history of just that?”

(Long silence.)

Few students are prepared to deal with the question of how historical accounts are shaped. Few history teachers are any better prepared to deal with it. Preoccupied with the near ritual of repeating (with minor variations) the standard stories of the past, little thought is given to why a particular story emerged, or whether there might be other, more revealing or more useful stories.

Well, how *should* we go about writing a history of those ten seconds?

When we give thought to the human condition, what we really want to know is, “What’s going on here, and what does it mean?” Our expectations for history are very much the same. We want it to tell us what happened and what we should make of it.

Is that not what is in our history textbooks? To some degree, yes. But we ordinarily approach the task of describing human affairs in such a superficial way, tying the story together with little more than proximity in time or space, or supposed “cause-effect” relationships, that much of what is vital to real understanding never makes it into our students’ heads. Having no conscious model to guide the task of fact selection, we teach a great deal that does little to expand our understanding of human experience, and we omit much that is absolutely essential.

How can we decide which facts are important? How can facts be ranked in order of significance and arranged in the most useful way? How can we tell when information of critical importance is missing? Philosophically final answers to these kinds of questions are not accessible, but we can do a far better job of answering them than our present general education curriculum suggests.

“Tell me: What do maps, miniature cars and airplanes, recipes, dress patterns, mathematical equations, chemical formulae and photographs have in common?”

“Well, they’re sort of copies of the real thing.”

“Right. They’re models. A model is a simplified representation of a more complex reality. Models tend to leave out details and emphasize the important parts of whatever they represent. Are there models of human activity—‘made up’ versions of life?”

“How about soap operas?”

“Good! What do you need to produce a soap opera--not to televise or broadcast it--just to put it on?” “Well, you have to have some actors. And a stage or studio. And some kind of plot or idea.”

“Is that all?”

“Oh! The actors have to actually do something. Move around. Act.”

“Right. Stage. Actors. Plot. Action. And of course, the whole thing takes place in time, which is a fifth element. Those are the basic requirements. It might be helpful to have a producer, a director, stagehands, an audience and so on, but they’re not absolutely essential. If we’re trying to model human activity, we organize it with those five elements. And. . . pay close attention. . . we decide which facts about actors, stage, plot, action and time are important by deciding which facts, if different, would cause other important facts to be different. The assumption that something is important because of its systemic relationship to something else is as automatic and natural as is our use of the five categories.

“Think about the idea of systemic relationship for awhile, and talk about it with your team members.”

From the perspective of Western culture, all comprehensive accounts and models of human activity contain five basic elements: (1) the time of an event or an occurrence, (2) its participants, (3) the location or environment in which the activity took place, (4) a description of the action, and (5) the meaning attached to the event, action or occurrence. Even in accounts of aspects of reality which appear not to include actors--for example, descriptions of natural phenomena, scientific experiments and the workings of machines--human presence is implicit in the role of observer, experimenter or commentator.

Note the ubiquitousness of the five categories: The newspaper account of a bit of reality tells us where an incident took place, when, who was involved and what happened. Why it happened--whether from human intent or due to the operation of chemical or physical law--is usually implicit in the description or is taken for granted by the reader. Drama (a direct model of human experience) requires a stage, actors, a plot and action, and is set in time. A police report of a crime will include a description of the scene, the probable day and hour, the name of the perpetrator or suspect, a possible motive, and a description of what appears to have happened. The novelist provides us with a setting, characters, a plot, a description of action, and sets the story in time.

Including these elements in our descriptions of past and present reality is all but automatic. If one or more of them is left out, questions will be asked to complete the picture. In the simplest of statements--*"Molly and I like to go downtown to shop on Saturdays," "Soon after midnight the angry crowd moved toward the prison,"*--our "natural" model of reality is displayed.

In this familiar territory lies the key to an educational revolution. We need a discipline for the ordinary, the commonplace, the whole of human experience. Devising formal subcategory systems for the five components of our model of reality will give us that discipline, a general education discipline of unlimited breadth and depth. And recognizing that the categories are systemically related will give us the long-sought goal of an integrated curriculum, a curriculum in which everything can be logically related. Once in place, the discipline will open for us a presently undreamed of level of insight into human affairs.

"How many of you took biology last year? Let's see hands.

"Hmmm. A bunch. Well, between us we ought to be able to remember something about biological classification systems. What is it biologists study?"

"Life."

"And the major divisions of living things are . . .?" "Plants and animals." "Okay. For the benefit of those who haven't had biology yet, or have poor memories, I'll put the word 'life' on the board, with a branch leading to plants and another leading to animals. Like . . .so. Now, where do we go from animals?"

"Vertebrates and invertebrates."

"All right, two branches from animals, one to vertebrates and another to invertebrates. Now, if we follow the vertebrate branching . . .?"

"Uh, I think that takes us to fish, amphibians, reptiles, birds and mammals."

"Sounds right to me. Okay, five lines extending on from vertebrates. This kind of diagram is sometimes called a conceptual tree. You can see why."

"Maybe, then, you should have drawn it from the bottom up instead of sideways."

"Yeah, probably. But you've got the idea. All this, of course, is just a tiny part of the classification system biologists invented for thinking and talking about the part of reality they're interested in."

In our attempt to understand human experience, we have created elaborate conceptual structures for the description and analysis of certain parts of reality--trees, personality, DNA,

aircraft, classical architecture, for example. What we have not done is distance ourselves sufficiently from experience to create a conceptual structure organizing and integrating the whole of it. Without such a structure, our perceptions of parts of reality lack context, and our perceptions of the whole lack comprehensiveness.

Preoccupied by our narrow specializations, we pay little attention to ordinary experience. Familiar environments, daily routines, the premises underlying those routines--all lie largely unexamined. We should not be surprised by the widely shared student view that general education has little value. It is of little value. Only tangentially does it deal with life as it is lived. It does not deal with the whole of it at all.

Academia's neglect of the ordinary is indefensible. Ask students to describe any familiar activity in sufficient detail to allow someone unfamiliar with that activity to visualize it, and they cannot. And because they cannot, because they have not been taught to think about the commonplace, the implications and consequences of familiar experience are rarely understood and appreciated.

Without question, the most powerful of all instructional resources is immediate experience. The here and now is available, moment by moment, in every school in the nation. It costs nothing to use, and is inherently interesting and challenging. Yet nowhere in traditional education is provision made for its study. Every school day our children sit in three-dimensional reality, in a rich and diverse microcosmic culture, and are not led to look at that culture. Immediate experience bombards them with messages about their worth, about their place in the scheme of things, about power and status, about human relationships, about the nature of the past and the possibilities in the future, about the larger culture within which they must function. And in the midst of all that, we give them textbooks to read and worksheets to complete.

Our five-element model of reality, adequately elaborated, makes accessible that which familiarity does not presently allow us to see.

“Okay, you know what a conceptual tree is, and you know the major elements in our perceptions of reality. So put the two together to organize your thinking about that ten second slice of reality. Create a conceptual tree with reality as the trunk, and stage, actors, plot and action as the main branches, then think of sub-categories for each of the four categories.”

“I'm still not clear. Give us a start.”

“Well, for actors, how about ‘number of’ as the first branch? Certainly the size of the class is useful information. And climate as a subcategory of stage or environment is surely appropriate. If the temperature in the room during that ten seconds had been below freezing, other facts would almost certainly have been different.” “Yeah, I'd have been outta here.”

“There! Hear that? That's an example of systemic relationship. Change the temperature in the room and the number of actors probably changes. Or, stated more generally: There is a relationship between the environment and demographics. That's a useful idea in human affairs.

“Okay, get on with the project. You have ‘number of’ as a branch for actors, and ‘climate’ as a branch for stage or environment. Keep analyzing the ten seconds, and add as many similar branches to the four main categories as you can.”

The pedagogical power of a model of reality is most apparent out at the tips of the branches of the conceptual tree. There, abstractions become concrete, propositions are often

quantifiable, hypotheses can be tested. Students know, for example, that technological innovations have brought changes to the world of work. What they do not know is how to explore the many implications and ramifications of those changes. But when the general proposition is translated into specifics suggested by the categories of our model of reality, the nature and impact of the changes begin to be apparent. Students comparing familiar patterns for work with those of an earlier era will be struck by differences in the amount of time parents and children ordinarily spend together, in childrens' familiarity with adult occupations, roles and responsibilities, in the workday accessibility of husbands to wives and wives to husbands, in the quality and quantity of interactions between friends, workmates, neighbors and strangers, in the amount of exposure to those of different social class and race, and those holding different values. The changed patterns, in turn, affect attitudes toward self, family, coworkers, the larger society, authority, power, status, work itself, and much else.

Patterns for work affect in fundamental ways the quality of life. We are, however, generally oblivious to the subtleties of those affects. Lacking conceptual tools for tracing the evolution of our work patterns and for contrasting them with those in other societies, we are captives of the status quo. A model of reality that directs attention to patterns for work allows us to imagine potentially liberating alternatives. It does the same for every other pattern of action and every idea.

And it does something else. It tells us that the concept of "commonplace," as it applies to human experience, is a label attached only to unexamined aspects of that experience.

"All right, what you've done for that ten seconds and this room, do now for a slightly larger space and longer time. Choose some historical event or contemporary situation and, using the model, take it apart. The model will direct your attention to certain aspects of the event or situation, and the event or situation will help you refine your model by suggesting additional subcategories for actors, stage, plot and action."

The traditional curriculum is, generally speaking, a distillation of expert opinion in various fields of knowledge. The student is expected to read textbooks and listen to lectures presenting that expert opinion, absorb it, and eventually demonstrate that some measure of what has been read and heard can be remembered.

This view of educating casts the student in a passive role, neglects all mental processes excepting recall, and assures that instruction will lag behind developments in the disciplines. Perhaps the most serious flaw in present practice however is the curriculum's essentially static nature. Emphasis is on the transfer of existing knowledge rather than on the development of the ability to create new knowledge. That will not do. Given the rate of social change, even the best of today's solutions are unlikely to fit tomorrow's problems.

It is easy to demonstrate the role played by a formal model of reality in creating new knowledge. Because insight comes primarily from the discovery of relationships between various aspects of reality, what is needed is a model which makes those aspects clear. They can then be "mixed and matched" in countless ways, and promising relationships can be investigated.

Consider, for example, possibilities for the expansion of knowledge when various perceptions of reality (plot) are juxtaposed with other aspects of reality: What is the relationship between differing views of the nature of time and intersocietal misunderstanding? Between assumptions about the meaning of life and the functioning of economies? Between beliefs about

human nature and methods for controlling deviance? Between explanations of cause and the thrusts of science? Between assumptions about the supernatural and amenability to change? Between beliefs about the structure of the self and approaches to health care? Between a sense of community and population distribution? Between time segmentation and attitudes toward work?

Or consider the challenge of questions generated by juxtaposing environment (stage) with other aspects of reality: What is the relationship between neighborhood design and interfamily dynamics? Between long-term climatic change and local economies? Between supermarket design and consumer spending patterns? Between resource abundance and political stability? Between resource scarcity and attitudes toward otherworldliness? Between household appliances and perceptions of family roles? Between the content of visual arts and amenability to social change? Between weapons size, cost and complexity and personal autonomy?

About demographics (actors): What is the relationship between population size and individual self-concept? Between population size and institutional flexibility? Between age distribution and incidence of crime? Between age distribution and marketing strategies? Between sex ratios and perceptions of aggressive behavior? Between sex ratios and perceptions of work roles? Between physiological characteristics and rate of resource use? Between physiological characteristics and disease susceptibility?

And about patterns of action: What is the relationship between patterns for work and intrafamily relationships? Between patterns for distributing wealth and societal productivity? Between patterns for decision making and institutional flexibility? Between rites of passage (or the lack of them) and self-concept? Between patterns for ownership and the distribution of political power? Between patterns for expressing emotion and physical health? Between wealth dispersal and investment capital availability? Between mass communication and personal autonomy?

Perhaps useful exploration of relationships like the foregoing seems beyond the abilities of adolescents. It is not. Making explicit our implicit model of reality will push education to an entirely new level of sophistication.

For general education purposes, we must formally and deliberately sort our conceptions of reality into our five natural categories, and systematize and elaborate them as we have systematized and elaborated the traditional academic disciplines. If we will do that, we will find that we have a comprehensive, integrated model not only for the study of history, but for all of reality--a supradiscipline. By any measure, it will be superior to any discipline, combination of disciplines, or the totality of disciplines now taught.

Why, given its absolute centrality in our thinking, is our culture's five-part model of reality not discussed and argued about within the academic community? Why is it not summarized in the fronts of our history and other textbooks, providing, as it does, a rationale for all that is taught and ignored? Why is our model of reality not the subject of constant scholarly dialogue? Why are teachers not talking about the relative merits of various ways of teaching students about that which structures their every act and thought--the distinctive model of reality imposed on them by the culture of which they are a part?

There are many reasons. One is simply our assumption of the adequacy of what has always been taught. If we know something, and the "well-educated" people around us know the same thing, we tend to assume that is what should be taught to the young. We take comfort in

lists of what the “culturally literate” know, and are proud of our familiarity with the items on the list. We shake our heads in despair at students who graduate and do not know the name of the longest river or the tallest mountain. Self-satisfaction comes easily, for what we do not know does not disturb us. We cannot miss what we do not know that there is to know.

A second reason the educational establishment has paid so little attention to our culture’s model of reality stems from our failure to study the entities which generate such models. In the analysis of ordinary, large-scale human affairs, we are concerned most with the actions of nations--the United States, France, China, the former USSR. But as almost every day’s news reaffirms, it is societies, not nations, that are the basic units of human organization. The mere drawing of a political boundary around a group of humans does not make of those within it a coherent entity, does not impose upon them a shared set of assumptions about the nature and meaning of experience. Societies, not nations, create models of reality, and no two of those models are exactly alike. Yet nowhere in the traditional curriculum is there provision for the systematic study of societies or of the images of reality societies generate.

A third reason why we have not recognized the centrality of our “natural” model for representing human experience is our preoccupation with the particular fact, the particular incident, the particular event. Caught up in the motions and memories of governing, exchanging, warring and other matters, we are unable to see the patterns and regularities that reflect and disclose our culture’s model of reality. As our textbooks and examinations show, the mental storing of discrete bits of factual knowledge is treated as an end in itself rather than as a means to amass sufficient data to allow the identification of patterns, structures, and relationships.

A fourth reason why we do not recognize the role our model of reality plays in organizing our thinking stems from our assumption of the legitimacy of the traditional academic disciplines. We accept without question the contention that economics, physics, government, chemistry, geography and other studies are appropriate ways to segment reality. For purposes of general education, however, the disciplines do us an enormous disservice. Such specializations, and their interdisciplinary hybrids, fragment reality and thereby obscure its systemic nature. To make matters far worse, the very structure and organization of our secondary schools and universities reinforce fragmented views of reality. Within administrative divisions and departments, the various disciplines have become so solidly institutionalized they have taken on lives of their own. Now, instruction often appears to students to be more concerned with the disciplines than with the phenomena the disciplines were created to illuminate. Reality is all of a piece, but there is little activity within the educational establishment that suggests an interest in creating a general education reflecting that fact.

A fifth (and probably the most important) reason why we have not made explicit our model for selecting and organizing information about reality stems from the inherent difficulty of seeing the too-familiar. The old saying, “A fish would be the last to discover water,” suggests the problem. The assumptions and premises which underlie our accounts of the past and our actions in the present are not apparent to us. Reared within the cognitive confines of a single society, we lack the awareness of alternatives that puts our shared assumptions and premises in relief. Insofar as human experience is explainable, our whole way of life is built on a dozen or so assumptions about the nature of reality. Nothing that we can know about ourselves is more important than an awareness of those assumptions. But how many Americans--student or adult--can explain with clarity their society’s basic time orientation? Its assumptions about causation? Its beliefs about the nature of nature? The differences between their own and another society’s assumptions about

the structure of the self? Nothing is more fundamental to an understanding of the human condition than clear conceptions of the basic premises upon which ways of life are built, but the traditional curriculum all but ignores them.

To summarize: General education should help us make sense of human experience. Human experience can be understood only in the context of the society within which it occurs. Societies must therefore be understood. Understanding societies requires that we think about them. The success of that effort hinges on the merit of the conceptual model used to select and organize information. For those within the dominant society in America, that conceptual model has five parts. General education in America should, at a minimum, clarify and elaborate the five and their relationships.

A supradisciplinary curriculum that makes explicit our implicit model of reality will eliminate almost every identified difficulty with the traditional curriculum. Model awareness will tell us why we choose what we choose to teach, allow us to establish instructional priorities, enormously increase our understanding of ourselves, give us a sophisticated tool for the description and analysis of every culture, society and sub-society on earth, open the way to insightful analysis of the dynamics of social change, guarantee curricular relevance, provide a conceptual structure that meshes with what is known about how the mind organizes information, end major arguments over the literary canon, move us away from our emphasis on the mere mental storing of information toward knowledge-generating activity, and show us vast, important areas of knowledge neglected by the traditional curriculum.

And, finally, building general education upon our culture's accepted model of reality will erase the artificial boundaries between disciplines, courses and subjects, and logically relate and make mutually supportive everything taught. Not only will such a curriculum more accurately reflect the nature of our perceptions of reality, it will allow us to build a much more compact general studies curriculum, thereby freeing instructional time for students to pursue specializations reflecting their interests and aptitudes.

Sweeping claims? Yes. All this for an action as simple as making explicit our implicit model for the study of human experience? Absolutely. Skeptics might consider the probable reaction of Sir Isaac Newton's neighbors if he had called them out of their houses to hear that he had "discovered" gravity. Would they not have said, "We already know about that"? And would they not have been right? Nevertheless, Newton did an extraordinary thing: He moved his neighbors from mere knowing, to knowing what they knew. Reality had not changed, but perceptions of it had, and the consequences revolutionized physical science.

Our situation is much the same. We "know" that our basic categories for thinking about reality are humans, environment, meanings and values, and patterned action growing out of those meanings and values, with the whole set in time. We "know" that, within these categories, what is considered significant is that which, if it were different, would cause significant changes within other categories. These ideas are as simple, as obvious, and as natural to us as the idea of gravity. But until we know what it is that we know--until we make what we know explicit in the form of a formal, conscious model of reality, systematically organize and elaborate that model, and then tie all that is taught to it, we will fail to give our young the conceptual equipment they need to make the most sense, and the most, of human experience.

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