

FROM THE TRENCHES

Strengths and Weaknesses: The Impediments of Formalism

by *Edward G. Rozycki*

. . . [O]ccult causes: the very absurdity which Moliere so happily ridiculed when he made one of his pedantic physicians account for the fact that opium produces sleep by the maxim, Because it has a soporific virtue.

—John Stuart Mill, *A System of Logic*

Introduction

“Occult” causes abound in education. They are difficult to distinguish from explanations that have some scientific basis. Indeed, it is often lack of knowledge on the part of the explainer that turns a usable concept into semantic puffery. Circular reasoning is a common mark of such pseudo-explanation:

“Why can’t Johnny read this book?” “Because it’s beyond his readiness level!”

“How can you tell that?” “Because, as you say, he can’t read the book!”

Another common one is this:

“How can I get Sammy to behave?” “Reinforce his desirable behavior!”

“How will I know if I have reinforced that behavior?” “If you see him behave!”

Then, of course, there is that good ol’ fashioned distinction between “good kids” and “bad kids.” Good kids you can expect to be good, even when they aren’t, because they merely make a mistake, or misunderstand, or suffer a momentary, uncharacteristic slip. Good kids are worth the investment of a teacher’s time and trouble.

Bad kids, on the other hand, you can rely on to be bad, even when they appear otherwise, because they’re really trying to trick you and lull you into being off your guard, and who knows what mischief they’re up

to when your eyes are off them? Such kids just waste a teacher's time and don't deserve the opportunities so lavishly afforded them.

Weaknesses and Formalism

We tend to overlook the fact that we judge performances in context. That is why people who are generally competent outside the classroom can appear so inept inside it. "Can you read this text?" is not merely a demand to make some sense of it, but often, in school, to identify plot, character, author intent, or at a minimum, to be ready to recast the story in one's own words. I teach philosophical analysis at the university. Educated adults who consider themselves competent readers initially have rough going in my classes when I ask them to analyze a text in the methods of my tradition.

Any individual competence can be recast as a display of weakness if we restrict the manner in which it is performed. Formalisms are the usually social restrictions by which we judge individual achievements. Some formalisms are necessary; others are pernicious.

For example, anyone might traverse a 100-mile stretch of highway in an hour just by exercising a heavy foot on the accelerator pedal. The formalism we call "speed limit" makes this feat difficult, if not impossible. Do we nonetheless complain of a "weakness" in our driving? The recognition of the idea of plagiarism restricts many a student's ability to hand in an impressive essay. Similarly, concepts of theft might interfere with an individual's otherwise quick accumulation of wealth. Yet behavior constrained by rules and regulations is not seen as weakness.

Pernicious formalisms are ones that have been, often unconsciously, introduced as schooling customs from a particular social class or cultural group and that cannot be reasonably expected to be the same for every child. Pernicious formalisms might be the particularly idiosyncratic expectations of an individual teacher. Our schools tend to judge a child's strengths and weaknesses within a framework of expectations that the following constraints are in place and have been adapted to: "Children, even though it is only 8:00 a.m. [or even earlier], behave as though you have had a good breakfast, enough sleep, warm clothing, time to prepare your lessons, supportive parents, emotional calm, high energy despite the long bus trip to school, impeccable manners, and hyper-trained sphincters!"

Academic Formalisms

Then there are the Formalisms of the "subject matter." Whether they are necessary or pernicious is a controversial issue that must be decided on case by case. Whether they even matter is debatable: there is no end

of delight in our society recounting the many examples of successful, wealthy people who were weak in academics.

No students are weak or strong in a given subject except with respect to a task we might assign them. Johnny is never just “too weak” or “strong enough” without provoking the inquiry “For what?” Students who study a foreign language via a reading translation method usually end up weak in communication skills in that language. Phonics advocates fuss that whole-language approaches to reading produce inadequate readers, while whole-language advocates fume to the contrary. Modern approaches to math, some argue, leave students with weak computation skills. Mere computation is not really mathematics, rebut others.

There is a legitimate concern about student strengths and weaknesses. It comes from the recognition that what constitutes the curriculum determines what counts as a given student’s strength or weakness. The curriculum in turn is determined largely by the organizational needs of the school or by mere administrative convenience. It is worrisome, indeed, that administrative convenience might ultimately determine who passes and who fails in the classroom.

Computers, *et alia*

There are, also, the effects of technology on personal competence. Is being a poor speller a weakness, especially since word processors have spell-checkers? Don’t calculators make memorizing “math facts” obsolete? Few people can use a slide rule anymore. Even engineers can let their skills at solving differential equations decline.

We have generally given up the notion that everyone must be prepared to grow and hunt one’s own food. We can and have to depend upon farmers, food processors, and retailers. Must we rebaptize every dependency a weakness?

Harry can enter almost any secure building undetected. Is this ability a strength? It depends. Is he a government investigator, or a burglar?

Louise doesn’t know where the islets of Langerhans are? Is that inability a weakness? It depends. Is she a doctor, or a travel agent?

The moral: Abilities do not necessarily indicate strengths, and inabilities do not necessarily indicate weaknesses.

Pursuing Educational Equity: A Dilemma

The notion of formalism gives us a handle on something that many educators complain about in the present national atmosphere of coercive achievement testing for public schools. The strong test emphasis, the educators complain, interferes with their attempts to reach each child. Such complaints are dismissed as self-serving. But, in fact, “No

Child Left Behind,” or anything vaguely similar, may be a mechanism by which many children are ill-served in the schools.

Purportedly, in pursuit of educational equity, standardized tests are being used—indeed, overused—in public schools as an organizationally convenient means of comparing student abilities. But standardized testing imposes severe and often new levels of formalism in terms of which we evaluate students’ academically relevant behavior. Unless students have received adequate preparation, one ought to expect vast discrepancies in achievement as measured by the tests. Every educator knows, furthermore, that spending most class time preparing for testing is bad curriculum. It is boring to student and teacher alike, and it provokes rebellion and sabotage from both the “good” and the “bad” students and their parents.

Private and parochial schools are special. They are exempt from having to pretend that bubbling in pencil marks on a test grid shows erudition. Their students are not political prisoners.

Edward G. Rozycki, Ed.D., is a twenty-five-year veteran of the school district of Philadelphia. He is an associate professor of education at Widener University, Widener, Pennsylvania.