

Surrealistic Tendencies in Educational Thought Sources and implications

The trouble with having an open-ended licence to be an intellectual - such as a career in academic life would seem to grant - is that licencees tend to believe that the confidence and speed with which they juggle with ideas matters more than the validity of those ideas. Now a juggler must have things to juggle with that won't misbehave; it is not likely that he will prefer, for his act, live birds to apples and oranges. To render such ideas as birds tractable, so that they won't jib at being juxtaposed dramatically and unusually with other ideas like snakes or fire, it is necessary to freeze them first at some instant of their reality, like taking a photograph; and then you juggle with the photographs (those faithful renditions of reality), placing them if you wish in any number of incongruous relationships and thus provoking all sorts of unprecedented interest. This, as Susan Sontag said, is surrealism. Olson thinks that a good deal of talk about education is surreal and getting more so, and he lays out several ways in which that development is not at all useful.

The field of curriculum, indeed of education itself, is given to the use of images to describe desirable states for human beings. Education is an improving sort of activity, and those who think of the improvements it might bring are prone to metaphor. So we have ideas like education as "growth", or curriculum as a "racetrack" - a course to be followed. We have plays on the archaic meanings of the word education itself, a "drawing out".

These images are used both to describe what should be done and to rally people to that task and give them comfort as they pursue the difficult business of improving people. These images act as generative ideas giving colour and force, we hope, to the direction we think we ought to go. I don't want to say

that we do not need these images; only that we can become prisoners of them when the images take on a life of their own.

It is my view that current thinking about school change is driven by images of schools that are surreal; and I want to show how this might be so and why it isn't a good thing. To help me do this I plan to draw on a critique of surrealism by Susan Sontag (1973) given in her book *On Photography*. In that book she shows why photography is the most surreal of the arts and what some of the consequences of this are. I also draw on John Wilson's (1979) analysis of the tendency to fantasy in educational thinking.

Surrealist images: they drift away

Before I do this let me sort out how I plan to use one of the terms here. Surrealism itself was a project of certain artists at a certain period of time; the term is normally used in connection with that artistic project. What these artists tried to do was labelled "surrealism", but apart from that label there isn't an independent meaning of the term - at least as far as I can tell from ordinary use. Similarly, there were cubists and impressionists and their associated "isms". Part of what went on in the surrealists' project involved giving rein to imagination; to extravagant and unrestrained imagination and to exploring fantasy life and hallucinations.

One way of looking at the surrealist program is to consider it an effort to represent and interpret the phenomena of dreams. Thus surrealism was a project undertaken by painters and writers and photographers to arrive at imagery by automatic unconscious processes; to tap psychic forces; to liberate reason from the control of received values; to explore the subconscious. One of the results of this process was the production of strange images with odd juxtapositions. These were meant to say something universal about what went on in the unconscious. So such images are often labelled "surrealistic".

Susan Sontag picks out two elements of the surrealists' project which she thinks characteristic of photography and about which she is critical. The images **distance** the viewer from the context in which they were obtained, and they tend to **drift** away into mere charm as time passes. The images allow one to give them meanings unrelated to the contexts in which they were first made. The images, she says, are clouds of fantasy and pellets of information. They have this quality because, with photographs, their original uses are easily modified and often supplanted by subsequent uses. As Sontag says, a photograph is only a fragment, and with the passage of time its moorings come unstuck. It drifts away in a soft pastness, open to any kind of reading (or matching) to other photographs.

It is this capacity, for the endless juxtaposition and drift of meaning that these images can give rise to, that brings us

close to the particular angle on the surreal that I want to pursue further. As Sontag notes, a set of photographs freezes movement in the life of a society and so contradicts the life's form, which is a process or flow in time. Life is not about significant details illuminated by flash and fixed forever. Photographs are.

What is dangerous about these images, as Sontag sees them, is that although they are meant to speak volumes about the human condition, they subsequently are used to produce juxtapositions which are open to any kind of interpretation, any kind of meaning uncontrolled by the context of the life from which they came. The images have come unstuck from the very processes they were meant to illuminate. In a sense they cannot illuminate those processes; they can only be manipulated to serve the ends of others.

Educational images that are surreal too.

Paralleling Sontag's concern about fantastic images is the tendency to fantasy John Wilson (1979) sees in education; that is, fantasy as a "story or picture generated not by concern or with a fact or any sort of appropriateness to the world, but by the emotional need of the person in question". (p.14) This also appears to lie at the heart of Sontag's critique of photographic images.

Wilson argues that the tendency to fantasy in education is due to its invitation to "fantasies of perfection; or at best of changing the (human) world in some dramatic way". (p.3) There is a tendency to underestimate the difficulties about doing this, difficulties that reside in human nature. The second reason, he notes, is that in the theory and practice of education "the real world does not hit us hard enough ... to jerk us out of our fantasies". (p.4) Wilson goes on to suggest ways of dealing with fantasies that have much to do with trying to clear up the conceptual confusions they represent.

One can see some interesting parallels between the surrealistic program and an educational one. Both strive for improvement, both are prone to work through fantasy; both lead to conceptual muddle when thinking is dominated by fantasy. Wilson and Sontag end up by saying the same thing: the pursuit of understanding is not illuminated by fantasy, but confused by it.

Wilson makes the point that a fantasy is more than, say, just an isolated prejudice - it is more like a "story or picture with connected elements". (p.13) Both Sontag and Wilson consider fantasy is dangerous because it is immune from processes of rational criticism.

I believe that some educational images are adrift in such a way. Such images have taken on a life, their own, adrift from their original context, and in danger of confusing us by allowing us to entertain fantasies about the nature and purposes of

schooling. I want to look at a number of examples from education which disturb me for this very reason. The intent here is modest. I don't want to offer reasons why the images hold sway; that is, I don't want to try to deal with the origins of these images. My interest is in their surrealistic qualities and the implications of that for educational theory.

The image of a coupled system

Take first educational policy-making; specifically, planned school change. Arthur Wise in 1977 advanced the notion of hyper-rationalization to explain why efforts to engineer school change fail. By hyper-rational he means an excessive attention paid to the procedures of the school system: that is, too tightly coupling its inputs and outputs. The school is thought of as a factory with control systems and lines of authority and feedback mechanisms.

Behind the input-output idea of the school as bureaucracy that Wise complains of is the idea of a school as part of a coupled system. Karl Weick (1976) uses this image as a basis for understanding what schools do and what life in schools is like. He sees the school as an organism whose parts are capable of sensing, adapting, surviving, maintaining identity, achieving semi-autonomy. Coupling is what goes on between the elements of the organisms as these elements work together to achieve system goals. Highly coupled systems ensure that plans made at the centre are carried out on the "line". What concerns him are loosely-coupled systems where central plans have only a modest effect on what happens in the system. Schools he would say are like this.

One of the defining characteristics of a loosely coupled world like the school is that there is a relative lack of coordination, several means to the same end, causal independence, delegation of discretion, a lack of alignment between structure and function.

Weick claims that loosely coupled worlds do not provide an individual with many resources for sense-making, and with such little assistance in this task a predominant activity of people in such systems is trying to construct social realities. Here Weick is saying that people on the "line" depend on the people above them to define their tasks; to tell them what the organization as a whole is trying to accomplish and what their part in the process is. Thus it is not the purposes of autonomous individuals that matters, but the collective purpose. Without collective purpose and the instruments to communicate and shape the achievement of that purpose, Weick supposes that individuals will not be able to make sense of their work. The assumption behind Weick's hypothesis about life in a school, say, (a loosely coupled world) is that teachers depend on external definitions of purpose to make sense of what they are doing. Without such orders teachers are not likely to know what to do.

They lack purpose if they are not given purpose from above, and without the organization meaning is not possible. The couple image leads to a view of people as part of a system of control.

It seems to me that the image of people at work in schools captured by the loose couple idea has taken on a life of its own remote from school life. Weick himself admits that the image is capable of taking on endless meanings. He calls for "developing research tools capable of preserving loosely coupled systems", and he goes on to develop an agenda for research based on this slippery idea. He says thorough descriptions of coupling should show checks and balances, localized controls, stabilizing mechanisms, and subtle feedback loops that keep the organization stabilized and that would promote its decay if they were tampered with.

An "exoskeletal" explanation

John Meyer (1980), picks up Weick's imagery in his thinking about school change. He talks about the "exoskeleton" of the school as the system of legitimation for what the school is doing, coming from the outside and bolstering the efforts of the school to convince its students that what is happening to the school is worth taking seriously. The exoskeleton is the support given to what schools do by the system of accreditation that exists outside the school. Thus "the real technology of the system lies in its instructional exoskeleton, not in organizational machinery." Meyer is in fact answering Weick's question: What holds the school system together? Answer: the exoskeleton. Not any program of curriculum intention, but how well the school is able to activate for its purposes the purposes of those outside the school. He says, "Perhaps effective teaching requires less creating of a distinctive local world in the classroom than the activation of the larger institutional one ... It seems possible that a teacher who blandly plays the conventional role and is considered deadwood by younger innovators has found the most effective strategy."

What he means is that it doesn't matter what the teacher does as long as schools deliver the credentials required by the larger society. Meyer explains the functions of loose coupling. School rhetoric is decoupled from what actually goes on there so that students can be convinced that what happens in school is relevant to their chances after school. This is done by **studied organizational inattention** to actual work and learning. This he calls loose coupling. The key thing is to be seen to conform to the required categories. The school program is most binding - that is, engenders the greatest support - if it is justified without reservation in terms of categories that have broad and solid support (like being able to get a job using high school credentials). As he says, "The advantage of loose

coupling is that educational categories and instructional reality are invariably inconsistent. Teacher preferences and capacities, parent tastes, student interests operate to create gaps between what is going on and what people expect. It may be more rational to retain institutional supports by programmatic conformity to general rules combined with concealed adaptation to local realities."

What supports what's going on in schools, as he sees it, is exoskeletal to the classroom or the school; it lies in the effective activation by the school of the larger social realities outside the school (the exoskeleton) that give school work educational meaning. The object of the school, he says, is to activate in the students their own membership in the educational system and with this to mobilize their commitment, and this is done by getting students to think that their school work does link up with their pursuit of desirable careers, even if it doesn't actually accomplish this. Thus statements of purpose support what goes on in school even if what actually goes on doesn't really promote those purposes. Within the exoskeleton of espoused purposes which capture support, teachers are free to do what they like.

Thus loose coupling is a way of conning people into doing their school work with the promise that this work will get them somewhere in the society. Whether or not it does do this, or ought to do this, isn't the issue. This is what to do if you want the system to be able to maximize inputs and outputs.

Consequences of the way people talk: puppetry

Now one might say that this is all talk from organizational theory. But this is also the way many people talk about curriculum change. I believe the kind of mechanical image at work in the idea of exoskeletal support of the school and the loose coupling of promise and practice which protects the exoskeleton underlies much talk of school change. Before returning to these mechanical images to voice my complaint about them, let us look at an example taken from the literature of school change.

Take the work done at University of Texas under an NIE contract. In a paper entitled "A Developmental Model for Determining Whether the Treatment is Actually Implemented", Hall and Loucks (1977) talk about school change efforts as "treatment", and about subsequent discussion with people involved in school change with reference to where teachers lie on a measure of their use of an innovation. Such data are then used to determine how well the "treatment has been implemented"; that is, to what extent the innovation has been translated into the teacher behaviour defined by the design of the innovation.

The point of gathering these data is to be able to measure implementation in a "cost-feasible manner". The instrument used yields a scale against which people's **response** to treatment

can be measured. As the authors say, "The focus is not on how they feel (think) but on what they do in relation to the innovation", that is, on the extent to which they actually behave in conformity with the desired behaviour. These efforts to measure teacher response are in aid of greater coupling between school system plans and teacher response.

From Meyer's perspective the Texas program would seem futile. (Don't change teachers; just make sure that the courses have the right labels.) In either case the teacher is reduced to a mere puppet. The language of the paper I find disconcerting, when I stop to think that this is being written about education. These examples I have cited are not isolated pieces remote from mainstream talk about school change. Much writing on school change reduces the teacher to a puppet, in the way the analyses we have been considering do.

I find these images seductive; they give a sense of power over the systems I am considering; they make me feel as if I could pull a string and something would happen. Seductive or not, I think they are dangerous images. In them people are puppets inside the machine, pushed and pulled by forces outside of them, plastic men and women. Take Weick's case. People are given purpose by the input and outputs of the system in which they work - the orders coming down the line giving them purpose for what they do. They are hand-held puppets waiting to be told what to do. In Meyer's case, people are string puppets whose actions are driven by the requirement of the society for the products of the schools. In the Texas case people are both hand-held and controlled by strings.

Images within a life of their own

Why do I find these images surreal? These images seem to provide a duplicate world to the one they are supposed to represent. The buildings are there; the curriculum is there; teachers are there, but the meaning of their work no longer has anything to do with them. Like photographic images these mechanical images of the school and school life have taken on a life of their own. We have no idea what those things in the image might mean to those whom we see in the image, just as we cannot know what it meant to be a sharecropper from looking at Walker Evans' photos, nor what was going on in many of the old pictures that one inherits from one's grandparents. You can read what you will into those photos, and you can juxtapose them with others as you will.

Perhaps it is the strange juxtaposition that sets me on edge. I find it hard to think of a new curriculum as a "treatment"; what an odd juxtaposition of language. I wonder what the "feedback loops" of the loosely coupled system are. I wonder what it might feel like to be loosely coupled. Is it the case that because schools are loosely coupled I spend much of my time trying to make sense of what I am supposed to do?

What sort of a puppet does that make me? The image renders me helpless with no moral purpose. Indeed if I am to be rational, I should avoid too much coupling; that is, it isn't wise for me to let people know what I am really doing in case they discover that it isn't any use at all; that is, it won't get you a job with Exxon.

How does one get trapped in such a charade? The exoskeleton that supports what I do depends for its strength on my duplicity. Otherwise dangerous moulting might begin. Here we have a moulting exoskeleton. The imagery has run away with one. But this is exactly my point. These images do have a life of their own. I mean what is to stop one from trying to shake loose from one's couples?

While saying that the images are surreal may give me some relief from my frustration with these images, it gives me few clues as to why I experience that frustration. What is wrong with these images? Why do they set me on edge?

Disqualifications of the surreal image

First, it is seductive in its reduction. It gives one a sense that one is saying something powerful; that one is in control of a system that is responsive; that one understands well. This is a mistake in educational studies. The business is too complex to think we can, by dint of a few clever images, understand what is going on. The trick is too simple. Much more is going on in school than providing grist for the employment mill. Much more is going on than information flow, through a system of tasks and subroutines and other technical matters. A curriculum reform is not a treatment.

Second, the images are without a moral basis; education is an improving kind of business. It is after better people. The mechanical images we have been looking at raise no issues outside of the machinery they purport to describe. To what ends are the machines directed beyond their own survival? Their own homeostasis; their own digestion and excretion? The images are blatantly mechanical and amoral. It is this kind of concern that Reid (1979) raises in his discussion of the moral dimensions of theory building in education. The sort of talk that would enliven their programs and give an educational feel to the talk is absent. In the end these images are not about schools or educational institutions at all - although they may be about schools as bureaucracies or as parts of the manpower system.

Third, the images are borrowed and used in educational talk without a by-your-leave. Where is the talk that says that these images have something to say to educational problems? They may advance problems of bureaucrats or politicians or organizational theories or adoption of school-system-modification packages or what have you, but what do they have to say to education?

Fourth, these are images of control. As I said, the teacher is a puppet in a system whose rationality is predicated on conformity to bureaucratic dictates within the actual instructional planning process, and to conformity to the demands of the employment system behind which instruction goes on. Or is the instruction the facade, and are the employment prospects the reality?

Having said this, I still think that it is the surreal quality of the images that most strikes me about these ways of looking at schools and school life, and my hope is that the notion of the surreal, as applied to images we use in talking about schools, is helpful in coming to grips with them, in assessing our feelings about them, and in coming to some judgment about them.

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