

COMMENTARY

UNDER THE NAME OF EDSPEAK:  
SANDERS REVISITED<sup>1</sup>

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**ABSTRACT.** James T. Sanders recently published an article in this journal (Vol. 29 No. 1) in which he identified what he believed to be a “particularly empty form of educational discourse” – cleverly dubbed “Edspeak.” This essay points out that in his description of the formula for that form of discourse, Sanders has become a victim of his own criticism, thus vitiating the criticism itself.

**RÉSUMÉ.** James T. Sanders a récemment publié ici (vol. 29, n° 1) un article où il disait avoir identifié ce qu’il croyait être “une sorte de discours particulièrement vide” – qu’il a astucieusement appelé “Edspeak”. Le présent article montre que, dans sa description de la formule que revêt cette forme de discours, Sanders tombe dans le travers qu’il dénonce et que sa critique perd ainsi tout son sens

.I would never join an organization that would be foolish enough to accept me as a member.

Groucho Marx

There is a small town in which the barber shaves all those and only those men who do not shave themselves. Who then shaves the barber? If he does not shave himself, then he must be shaved by the barber (himself).<sup>2</sup>

Bertrand Russell

**J**ames T. Sanders, in the Winter, 1994 issue of the *McGill Journal of Education*, has written an intriguing article, “Edspeak and the Double Adjectival Vacuity.” His intention is to point out a pernicious form of educational meaninglessness. What he claims to have located is yet one more form of educational *Educanto* – a word coined over three decades ago by James Koerner in *The Miseducation of American Teachers* (1963). Sanders reminds us of the following quote by Koerner:

Educanto is a deadly serious phenomenon: it masks a lack of thought, supports a specious scientism, thrives on slogans and incantations, and repels any educated mind that happens upon it. Until education can carry out its business in decent English, most other reforms are handicapped, for they cannot even be discussed intelligently. (p.75)

Aside from the ever so slight ethnocentric assumption that **English** is the only language within which decency may be manifested, Koerner is of course correct. That is not to imply that education is the only field within which language serves some function other than the conveying of meaning. I believe it was Kierkegaard who, when told that man (sic) uses language to cover up his thoughts, responded, "Man uses language to cover up the fact that he has no thought."

Nevertheless, I surely would acknowledge that the problem is severe in the field of education. Exposing forms of non-meaningfulness has the potential to be valuable, especially if it appears that the perpetrators of that genre do intend to be conveying meaning in their

... task-force reports, educational mission statements, school board directives, tendered research proposals, curriculum guides, and the like. (p. 74)

There is an interesting category that Sanders does not mention as susceptible to forms of Educanto in his article, that is, **scholarly essays themselves purporting to expose new forms of *Educanto***. In fact, not only does Sanders commit the egregious act of *Educanto* in his essay, but what is more damaging is that he commits the act in the very effort to describe his own form of *Educanto* – the "double adjectival vacuity."

If future teachers are to foster meaningful performance-based outcomes, they will need to adopt flexible teaching- and learning-strategies that promote both essential individualized competencies and positive collaborative experiences. (p. 74)

I have italicized precisely those expressions in the above sentence that Sanders himself uses as examples of the disease he then diagnoses. As some indication that there is something awry with the above sentence, he points out that "it is easy enough to recycle the same sentence frame by simply substituting four new double adjectival vacuities in place of the old ones, to wit" (p. 75):

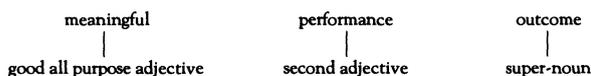
If future teachers are to foster [life-long cognitive skills], they will need to adopt [effective school-based initiatives] that promote both [practical resource-based programs] and [supportive community-based partnerships]. (p. 75)

While the substitution of four new phrases for the original four does not automatically reveal a vacuity in either sentence, it does suggest that something peculiar may be happening. The case for having captured a form of vacuity becomes particularly strong when Sanders comes up with twenty nouns (Column C), twenty adjectives of one sort to precede the nouns (Column B), and twenty adjectives of another (Column A) that precede the first adjective. It turns out that any adjectives selected from columns A and B can be used to precede any noun from Column C and (and without thinking at all about what one is doing), they all result in phrases that appear to be as meaningful (actually meaningless) as each of the expressions in the above supposedly meaningful quotes. Furthermore, there is nothing to preclude our extending this list from twenty elements to any number in each of the categories.

Of course the entries for columns A, B, and C are not selected randomly. They are generated by a formula of Sanders as follows:

First, choose a highly abstract (preferably trendy) noun whose double referents are virtually limitless. Then modify this super-noun with a “good,” all-purpose adjective to give it a positive spin. Finally, insert a second adjective between them that will ground the vacuity in some broad educational locale. (p. 77)

So, if we select *meaningful performance outcomes* as a typical vacuous expression, each of the three terms is an exemplar of the formula as sketched below:



On my first reading, this description seemed so innocent but just as I was on the verge of trashing an entire class of beloved and well entrenched vacuities in my own writing, I reread his formula. Take a look at how it describes the second adjective above. It is an adjective that “grounds” the vacuity in some *broad educational locale*.

Look at that expression again: *broad educational locale*.

Of what does that expression for the selection of the second adjective (sandwiched term) consist? Those words themselves illustrate the selection of (1) a “highly abstract noun whose possible referents are virtually limitless (*locale*), (2) “a ‘good’ all purpose adjective to give it a positive

spin" (*broad*), and (3) "a second adjective between them that will ground the vacuity in some broad educational locale" (*educational*).

Thus, in establishing his formula for a supposedly vacuous expression, the author resorts to using the very thing he is criticizing as an element in his formula. If what he is trying to describe is truly vacuous, then how can he use the very vacuity he is condemning in his own formula?

The author may very well have located something significant here, but unless he can remove the recursive quality from his formula, I shall have to persist in maintaining a *quality professional problem-solving* (sic, sic, sic of course) style of writing.

#### NOTES

1. My title requires a bit of permutation in order to convey fully its playfulness. One needs to recall an illustration from *Winnie the Pooh*. We are told in one of the Pooh stories that Winnie went "under the name of 'Sanders'". There is then a charming illustration in the book which fully conveys what that means. That is, we see Winnie sitting under a tree with a sign overhead in which the word "Sanders" is emblazoned. Interchanging the words "Edspeak" and "Sanders" should clarify what I am driving at.

2. This popularized anecdote reveals a conundrum attributed to the work of Bertrand Russell on set theory, which upset the foundations of mathematics for generations. The more abstract version of this puzzle is the following: Some sets are members of themselves (e.g., the set of ideas); some sets are not members of themselves (e.g., the set of shoes, being an idea, does not itself consist of shoes *per se*). Now consider the set of all sets that are not members of themselves. Is it or is it not a member of itself? A little reflection leads us to conclude that if it is a member of itself, then it is not a member of itself; if it is not a member of itself, then it is a member of itself.

#### REFERENCES

Koerner, J. (1963). *The miseducation of American teachers*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin. (Cited from p. 21 by Sanders).

Sanders, J. (1994). Edspeak and the double adjectival vacuity. *McGill Journal of Education*, 29 (1), 73-78.

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