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UNCOMMON SENSE IN THE WRITING CENTER¹

ABSTRACT: This critique, written from the perspective of the author's book, Uncommon Sense, exposes the underlying commonsense metaphors and labels used by and about writing centers. This essay focuses on the "skills" and "remediation" metaphors and argues that their fragmentation and inadequacies have done students and teachers more harm than good, practically and conceptually. He suggests an alternative set of metaphors based on a constructivist, transactional, and holistic view of learning which would provide a sounder theoretical, pedagogical, and political basis for the work of writing centers.

In these troubled times at home and abroad, it is hard to concentrate one's energies on the day-to-day. But those of us who work in education must, by definition, be optimists with our eyes on the long term. Therefore, we must somehow find a way to believe that our efforts still count, that our students need us now more than ever, and that we can still make a difference to the future.

I am only indirectly involved with writing centers, but since my main involvement has been teaching people who teach in them or who direct them, my commitment is a deep one. While I'm going to have some critical things to say—mostly about the language we use to talk and think about what we do—I hope they will be taken as coming from one who hopes to solidify the place of writing centers in schools and colleges, not from one who seeks to further marginalize them. Indeed although I'm sure that there are

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exceptions, my sense is that writing center people sincerely try to help their student clients, and what I hope to suggest are some ways of rethinking what sort of help they need and how it might be provided.

Those of us who are concerned with the work of writing centers are always in jeopardy in the academy because the academy is a bit embarrassed by our presence. Like all other programs which are or have been labeled as “remedial” or “developmental” or concerned with “skills”—particularly “basic” skills—we are perceived to be an overt symbol of systemic failure. Higher education manages to deflect some of the criticism implied by blaming either the lower levels of schooling or the students themselves (or both), but the existence of huge numbers of students repeating the same noncredit courses year after year in the vestibule of the nation’s colleges reveals that all levels of education are complicit in the same syndrome of failure. In tough economic times, we are more vulnerable than ever, partly because we are costly, but mostly because the conservative pressures for cost-cutting frequently make even more explicit the usually tacit belief that limited educational dollars are really wasted on the less able and should be saved for the gifted.

My purpose is not to bemoan our fate, however, or to seek to develop a full sociopolitical analysis of the educational system and its failures. The former might make us feel good, but would accomplish nothing more, and the second would take us too far afield. Even though I am going to concentrate on our own situation, however, it must be remembered that the linguistic systems and educational practices that I am going to explore do take place in, and are in part shaped by, a larger economic, cultural, and ideological framework. I’m going to concentrate on our own practices because those are the ones we have the most control over, but I fully recognize that many of them are dictated implicitly or explicitly by the institutions we work in.

My title and my perspective here stems from my recent book: *Uncommon Sense: Theoretical Practice in Language Education* (1990). In it I argue, among other things, that much of the inertia that has prevented progressive innovations from taking root in the educational system stems from what I call *common sense*: the set of unrecognized, unexamined, and uncriticized beliefs and assumptions about schools and schooling, teaching and learning which define “normal” practice. I therefore try to show that while what we need is a new set of lenses: which I call *uncommon sense*, we’ll never get them without recognizing and ridding ourselves of the commonsense lenses we already have. What I hope to do is to look

at some of the common sense that lurks in the language of writing centers and to suggest some uncommonsense alternatives. For many readers of this journal, I'm sure many of these ideas will be familiar, but my sense is that they are not familiar at all in the wider beliefs and practices of the academy which is where these battles will be fought.

What's in a Name?

One of the issues we need to think about is what we are named—officially—or (if there's a difference) what people call us. To what extent does it matter if we are named (or thought of) as:

- a writing center?
- a writing skills center?
- an academic skills center?
- a writing lab?
- a remedial writing lab?
- a writing clinic?
- a learning center?

At one level, of course, it doesn't really matter at all since we all know that euphemisms rule the American roost, that we don't rest in rest rooms, and that to be in special education does not mark your prospects as favorable. But insofar as these labels do reveal some of the metaphors we live by (in Lakoff and Johnson's sense, 1980), then we must take them seriously indeed. I'd like to focus particularly on two of them: **skills** and **remediation**, partly because they are pervasive throughout the academy, and partly because, sadly, we too often believe in them ourselves either explicitly or tacitly.

Skills

The metaphor of skill is the most pervasive and pernicious of all. It is so interwoven into the linguistic (and conceptual) fabric of education, that it is extremely difficult to avoid using it even with deliberate effort. Such is the power of common sense that it is difficult to escape its linguistic clutches. You may grant its ubiquity, but wonder why it makes me so crazy.

Fundamentally my objection stems from the reification phenomena involved in the process of labeling.

Our minds have the capacity to analyze complex phenomena by constructing abstract models of them. In the case of language, for example, we routinely ignore such potentially important phenom-

ena as absolute pitch—it doesn't matter whether I talk very high or very low—in order to attend to those distinctions which do make a difference like those between long and short vowels as in *fat* and *fate*. So far we are talking about unconscious processes, and there is nothing much to worry about—partly because everybody seems to master them about equally, and partly because they go largely unrecognized. But given the nature of human minds—What inquiring minds want to know!—sooner or later somebody builds a model of such processes involving either how they work, how they are learned, or both.

And this is where the trouble starts. Once we have a model, we see that it has parts, and this is where the “Skills” are supposed to come in. (Indeed I was curious about how this happened so I looked it up. Turns out the etymology of *skill* derives from “making distinctions” in Old Norse and from “butcher” in Gothic!) And so we start the labeling process by calling various aspects of our models “skills” or “sub-skills.” Depending on the level of abstraction involved these can be really big “skills”: like reading or writing, big “skills” like reading critically or writing cohesively, medium sized “skills” like identifying main ideas or using topic sentences in paragraphs, or smaller “skills” like distinguishing: fat from fate or of spelling them correctly and so on and on and on.

But what does it mean to call such things “skills?” *It means that we are labeling parts of our model of process X and are thereby claiming that if a person wants to do X (or do X well) they will? must? be doing Y and Z?* If, for example I want to read sentences a. and b. below, I will have to distinguish between fat and fate (as well as fête, which is still another story). And, of course, I had to in order to write them.

- a. They roasted the fat pig at the fête.
- b. He met his fate with style and grace.

But what are the “skills” here? Is spelling them correctly a “skill”? Is knowing their meaning distinctions? Is recognizing the letter shapes? Is incorporating them appropriately in each sentence? (And on up the discourse ladder to whatever whole text they are embedded in.)

While it is clear that we can make such distinctions and label them, the decision to label them as “*skills*” can and often does have disastrous consequences. The problem stems from the implication that because they can be separately analyzed and separately labeled, that they can therefore be separately learned and/or that they are separately used. And this, in turn, derives from the idea that complex processes are learned as a conglomerate of these individual

“skills,” indeed that some of these “skills” are “basic” (i. e., foundational—we are, after all, dealing here with a building metaphor of learning). This, finally, leads to the all too common belief that these “basics” can and must be learned before one can **do** the larger process (or “skill”) they are supposed to be the basics for.

And, of course, since the cornerstone of commonsense education is the belief that learning depends on teaching, if these things must be learned, then they must be taught. And taught they are: as phonics rules, as spelling rules, as rules for subject-verb agreement, as maxims for paragraph organization, as paradigms for the perfect argumentative essay, and so on and on and on. And, worse still, they are taught out of the context of use. They are taught as a matter of preparation for (possible? eventual?) use. It’s a kind of prophylactic teaching designed to prevent error by equipping the learner with the appropriate series of inoculations before they venture into the jungle of real reading and writing.

Worst of all, of course, they don’t do the job. They don’t help people learn to write (or read) and they don’t prevent error either. And an unintended (?) consequence is that they make many if not most people fearful writers and reluctant readers. Even many of those who do develop some writing (and reading) ability despite the ways they were taught rarely choose to do so, and even though there may be other societal factors which account for this as well, clearly it is a sad day when our means of teaching writing and reading are part of the problem not part of the solution.

But we really shouldn’t be surprised. If “skills” are just labels of parts of our models of complex processes, then the “skills” will be only as good as the models are. We still have only a very fragmentary understanding of how the mind works as it creates and understands language. That is, we still have poor models. But what we **do** know shows even less promise for the “skills” mavens in that we are discovering that many of the processes of language use are *necessarily* unconscious—and therefore not subject to the kind of conscious control that a drill and practice “skills” model depends on—and that they are so complex and subtly interconnected that attempts to atomize them for separate teaching doesn’t correspond to the ways they are learned and used. We can, for example, sort out the tenses of English, but there is no evidence whatsoever that they provide a useful order through which to organize the teaching and learning of English as a second (or a first) language.

This point really can’t be overstressed. It may be upsetting to us to understand it, but we must come to grips with the fact that the processes of language use—of speaking, listening, reading, and writing—are simply not consciously and separately controllable.

We can control our intentions—our meanings—and monitor the extent to which what we've said or written conforms to them, but I simply have no idea—and **can't** have—how my mind is choosing the appropriate tense for this clause. I didn't write it to express a tense—I wrote it to express a meaning. On reflection—and only **after** I've produced it—can I check it. But even there my checking mechanism is not rule driven, but rather a process which allows me to use my—**unconscious**—rules as a template against which my output can be measured.

While our model building and labeling processes can make it seem like we need to **know** “skills” in order to **use** language, the facts are entirely the reverse. It is our meaningful use of language which builds the mental systems that we later label and these mental systems simply can't be built by meaningless, out-of-context “skill” drill.

The solutions here are not particularly new ones nor are they surprising to anyone who's been paying attention to the developments in reading and writing theory and language learning theory for the past 25 years. I don't want to spend a lot of time therefore arguing in favor of:

- learning language through meaningful use (not dummy runs)
- holistic (integrated) approaches to language learning
- indirect approaches to language teaching
- meaning making in a social context as the key process
- pleasure, significance, and pride as the key motivators
- beyond equality of opportunity to equality of outcomes
- excellence is possible only through this path
- high standards of achievement can be attained by all learners.

These issues are discussed in much more detail in Mayher (1990).

What I do want to point out, however, is the obvious fact that not everyone shares these uncommonsense beliefs—if they did, they wouldn't be uncommon any more!—but even more important, part of the reason that they don't is that they are trapped in the commonsense conception of “skills.” Indeed many of us are too—these ideas have been around for so long they are now osmotically acquired without reflection or critique. They've survived the nearly complete demise of the behaviorist/associationist mind models they were based on. And they've survived generations of failure as well as we've always found someone or something else to blame. (Including, by my most cynical colleagues—ourselves—either as a part of the great tracking and sorting machine or as featherbedders interested in saving our own jobs at the expense of our students.)

What is critical, therefore, is that we find ways of helping people change their metaphors about who we are and what we do as teachers—and indeed who and what our students are and do—because unless and until they change, nothing much else will take root and prosper.

Remediation

To see how this works in a bit more detail let's look at how the "skills" metaphor gets played out in the health/disease metaphor which undergirds the notion of remediation. In this set of metaphors, being able to write (read) at the appropriate level of fitness is healthy; falling behind, having abnormal processing problems, etc. is diseased. The teacher becomes a clinician who diagnoses the problem and prescribes a remedy so that the student (patient?) can be restored to healthy language use. Although the term remediation itself has fallen out of favor in recent years (too blunt?), the metaphor lives on as do the practices it justified. (And, in the early grades, in reading at least, some new euphemisms are here: the most recent is reading recovery which is premised on the metaphor that children can be diagnosed early as potentially unhealthy readers and given enough of a booster shot so they never catch the full disease.)

Indeed I expect that something like this metaphor underlies most visits to writing centers. In this case, however, the illness is not supposed to lie in the writer, but in the text. It is suffering from some disease or other and needs to be cured before it can be turned in as a healthy paper and receive the good grade it deserves. Treating the text as the problem is easier, of course, since both writer and reader can keep some distance and seem to avoid personal threat. Even more important it provides a soluble (or at least more soluble) problem than looking underneath the text to its author. And perhaps most important of all, it meets the needs of the client who is usually primarily focused on getting through the course and is eager for any help which will cure the text and get the grade.

Since most writing centers don't see themselves as editing services, however, writing center teachers are not eager to merely fix up the text for the writer and send her on her way. We are concerned with the writer—at least to some extent—and certainly our mandate from the institution is to provide the kind of more permanent cure which will prevent future texts from suffering from the same diseases. This gives rise to a certain amount of tension between the writer who has—in the main—come for a short-term

cosmetic repair, and the tutor who believes that a more long-term solution is needed which will, in turn, demand a deeper diagnosis and, usually, more sustained treatment.

While different people and different centers behave differently at this juncture, too often the “skills” metaphor returns to provide a convenient and apparently effective solution. As the tutor is editing the piece with the writer, he or she can make a quick diagnosis of one or more of the “skills” deficiencies the paper reveals. Then a drill regimen can be prescribed to cure the problem. Everyone seems happy. The writer got her paper fixed. The tutor doesn’t feel merely like an editor but like a successful clinician. And the institution can pat itself on the back for providing a useful academic support service.

But, sadly, for all the reasons discussed earlier, the prescription simply doesn’t work most of the time. That is, it doesn’t really contribute very much to the writer’s development as a writer, a reader, or as a learner, which is what I take our goals to be. (I would argue, in fact, that even when it seems to “work,” that other factors are really involved, but that’s an argument for another day.)

Learning How to Learn

If our goals really are to help all learners achieve their maximum potential as language users, then we must, I think, reconstruct our metaphors of who we are and what we do. We must recognize that there are no short cuts in language education: no gimmicks, no tricks, no medicines which will drastically speed up the learning process. If the problem wasn’t a “disease,” then the solution is not a “cure.” The good news, by contrast, however, is that every time we use language meaningfully in one mode it has the potential, at least, to contribute to development in all the others. So although we have lost the apparent speed-up of the drill regime, we have gained the synergy of integration. To do so effectively, however, we must recognize that whatever brings the learner to our center is only the tip of a complex mental system. My sense of writing centers is that we have done better in dealing with the human complexities of anxiety and failure which our clients bring with them than we have with the complexities of their language and learning systems.

Being nice, supportive, and so on is certainly an important part of our role and an increasingly vital one in large, impersonal, bureaucratic institutions. But if we want to make a critical educational difference, it is not enough.

The key metaphoric distinctions here are those of the nature of learning and language. The commonsense/behaviorist/“skills”

model of learning assumes a set of separable parts which can be independently practiced and “mastered” out of context. The uncommonsense model of learning, by contrast, is fundamentally holistic, constructivist, and transactional. While recognizing the possibility of **analyzing** the parts of complex processes, it simultaneously denies their separability in use or in learning (and teaching!). By emphasizing the centrality of meaning making in context, uncommonsense keeps its eyes firmly focused on constructing whole meanings through transactional processes involving writer intentions, textual phenomena, and reader reconstructions. In this sense even “writing” itself is a falsely separated activity implying that it can be dealt with—in writing centers—without regard for reading, thinking, learning, and so on.

A good example of the danger here has been the use of research on the composing process. While the analysis of such processes done by Janet Emig (1971) and, among others, Sondra Perl (1975) then of Hostos now of Lehman College, has taught us an enormous amount about how people write, it has, naturally, only permitted us to make inferences about the unconscious parts of the process and their effects. Further it was not designed to shed direct light on how to teach writing. When such analyses were placed in the commonsense pedagogical context, however, we immediately discovered a new set of “skills” which could be practiced—especially those like brainstorming and mapping which related to prewriting, and using sentence combining as a revision strategy. While some of these may be effective things to do in context, the commonsense practices of either requiring them or taking them out of context killed their effectiveness as surely as outlining had been rendered useless in pre-process pedagogy. (Most of us licked that one by writing the paper first and the outline later; today’s kids write the paper first and the “rough draft” later.)

Students who come to us with a question/problem/issue, therefore, should not see themselves or be treated as “skill” deficient, but rather welcomed to a “learning club” in Frank Smith’s (1988) sense. The focus should not be on their texts, but on what and how the students are trying to learn. The best entree to this may be the intentions that lie behind their texts, but to discover them we have to work to help them redefine the learning enterprise and their goals. The concept of “skills” and its fragmenting of the curriculum have certainly supported if not created the get-the-grade, punch-the-ticket, get-the-diploma structure of commonsense schooling. But by detaching such punches from either learning or competence, both student and society have been the loser. There’s a lot of unlearning to do about learning.

Indeed one of the challenges for the contemporary school or college is to find a way to create such learning club environments and to foster them wherever they exist. Where—in class or out—are students and teachers (or students and students) working together to learn? to solve a problem? to create a text? to produce a play? to debate an issue? to explore an idea? Where—in class or out—is learning fun? exciting? challenging? stimulating? Is the writing center such a place? The library? The theatre? The classrooms?

To do so we must expunge the label and the concept of “skill” from our centers and from our practice. And we must begin to educate all concerned—students and administrators—about these issues. We must recognize—and help all concerned recognize—that “surface errors” don’t respond to superficial treatment—that the only effective solutions are long-range and long-term.

We must change the processes by which students are tested, sorted, and judged in our schools and colleges. To fully make this argument would take another talk as long or longer than this one, but it is clear that we will have “skill” teaching as long as we have—overtly or covertly—“skill” testing. We are not, to be sure, the only ones who make such decisions, and we are—or we ought to be—well aware of the political motives of many involved in them—but as language education professionals it is high time we said: **Enough!** These tests don’t test anything meaningful and they are destroying our attempts to actually do the long-range job that is required. What would happen if we simply said: **NO—we won’t give them, we won’t grade them, we won’t use them, we won’t teach to them?**

Therefore, we must act on our understanding that every student who comes to us needs to work in a long-term integrated way on, at least, reading, writing, and learning. As noted, some of our clients will not be initially enthusiastic on this front. They want help today—to deal with today’s problem. And while we can provide some help—even some editing—the most important goal of each session should be to help the learner learn how to learn—to develop—to grow. And part of the process will require us to help each of them reconceptualize their own definitions of learning, and their own goals for education.

We must help our colleagues and the administrators we work with come to understand that virtually every student in their institution—even the most successful ones—have had too few experiences of independent learning to really have learned how to learn. The spoonfeeding that dominates commonsense schooling—and is, if anything, intensified in universities—has enabled the successful to learn by figuring out what needs to be regurgitated and

has left the unsuccessful almost completely at sea. Saddest of all, neither the “successes” nor the “failures” are well equipped for the real world.

If we can rid ourselves of our commonsense “skills” heritage, we can redefine ourselves as **learning centers** and claim a place at the center of the academic enterprise.

This would be not done in the spirit of territorial aggrandizement, but rather as a process of reaching out to all of our colleagues who recognize how little genuine attention learning and teaching have gotten in universities in recent years. I certainly have nothing against either research or publication—both are vital for the health of the academy—but if we can’t radically change the way learning happens in our institutions, there will be few people around to do either in the next century. The ideal situation would be for even learning centers to become unnecessary: each classroom could become one. But, sadly, we have a long way to go before we reach that nirvana.

Clearly writing/learning center people don’t have the clout to reform the academy by ourselves. What we do have, however, is the clout to begin to reform ourselves. And as we do that, it will effect our students, our colleagues, and the institution at large.

The road to uncommon sense isn’t an easy one, but I have confidence that writing center people will be in the vanguard of those who will lead us there.

Note

¹ This paper was adapted from a keynote speech delivered at the CUNY Writing Centers Conference held at Lehman College in Spring 1991.

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