

Progressive Labels for Regressive Practices

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How Key Terms in Education Have Been Co-opted

By Alfie Kohn

“When I use a word,” Humpty Dumpty said, in rather a scornful tone, “it means just what I choose it to mean – neither more nor less.”

– Lewis Carroll, Through the Looking Glass

“Whole language” (WL), a collaborative, meaning-based approach to helping children learn to read and write, emerged a few decades ago as a grassroots movement. Until it was brought down by furious attacks from social conservatives, academic behaviorists, and others, many teachers were intrigued by this alternative to the phonics fetish and basal boom that defined the field. More than just an instructional technique, WL amounted to a declaration of independence from packaged reading programs. So how did the publishers of those programs respond? Some “absorbed the surface [features] of WL and sold them back to teachers.” Others just claimed that whatever was already in their commercial materials – bite-size chunks of literature and

prefabricated lesson plans – was whole language.[1]

Until you can beat them, pretend to join them: WL is literally a textbook illustration of that strategy. But it's hardly the only one. For example, experts talk about the importance of having kids *do* science rather than just learning about it, so many companies now sell kits for easy experimenting. It's branded as "discovery learning," except that much of the discovery has been done ahead of time.

A teacher-educator friend of mine, a leading student of constructivism, was once treated to dinner by a textbook publisher who sought his counsel about how kids can play an active role in the classroom and create meaning around scientific ideas. The publisher listened avidly, taking careful notes, which my friend found enormously gratifying until he suddenly realized that the publisher's objective was just to appropriate key phrases that could be used in the company's marketing materials and as chapter headings in its existing textbook.

Or consider cooperative learning. Having students spend much of their classroom time in pairs or small groups is a radical notion: Learning becomes a process of exchanging and reflecting on ideas with peers and planning projects together. When we learn with and from one another, schooling is about *us*, not just about me. But no sooner had the idea begun to catch on (in the 1980s) than it was diluted, reduced to a gimmick for enlivening a comfortably traditional curriculum. Teachers were told, in effect, that they didn't have to question their underlying model of learning; students would memorize facts and practice skills more efficiently if they did it in groups. Some writers even recommended using grades, certificates, and elaborate point systems to reinforce students for cooperating appropriately.[2]

In short, the practice of "co-opting" potentially transformative movements in education[3] is nothing new. Neither, however, is it just a historical artifact. A number of labels that originally signified progressive ideas continue to be (mis)appropriated, their radical potential drained away, with the result that they're now invoked by supporters of "bunch o' facts" teaching or a corporate-styled,

standards-and-testing model of school reform.[4]

A sample:

* *Engaging* doesn't denote a specific pedagogical approach; it's used as a general honorific, signifying a curriculum that the students themselves experience as worthwhile. But these days the word is often applied to tasks that may not be particularly interesting to most kids and that they had no role in choosing. In fact, the value of the tasks may simply be ignored, so we hear about student "engagement," which seems to mean nothing more than prompt or sustained compliance. Such children have internalized the adults' agenda and are (extrinsically) motivated to complete the assignment, whatever it is. If the point is to get them to stay "on task," we're spared having to think about what the task is – or who gets to decide – even as we talk earnestly about the value of having engaged students.[5]

* *Developmental* originally meant taking our cue from what children of a given age are capable of doing. But for some time now, the word has come to imply something rather different: letting children move at their own pace . . . up an adult-constructed ladder. Kids may have nothing to say about what, whether, or why – only about when. (This is similar to the idea of "mastery learning" – a phrase that hasn't really been co-opted because it was never particularly progressive to begin with. Oddly, though, it's still brandished proudly by people who seem to think it represents a forward-thinking approach to education.[6])

* *Differentiated, individualized, or personalized* learning all emerge from what would seem a perfectly reasonable premise: Kids have very different needs and interests, so we should think twice about making all of them do the same thing, let alone do it in the same way. But there's a big difference between working with each student to create projects that reflect his or her preferences and strengths, on the one hand, and merely adjusting the difficulty level of skills-based exercises based on students' test scores, on the other. The latter version has become more popular in recent years, driven in part by troubling programs such as "mass customized learning"[7] and by

technology companies that peddle “individualized digital learning” products. (I have more to say about the differences between authentic *personal* learning and what might be called Personalized Learning, Inc. in this blog post.)

* *Formative assessment* was supposed to be the good kind – gauging students’ success while they’re still learning rather than evaluating them for the purpose of rating or ranking when it’s too late to make changes. But the concept “has been taken over – hijacked – by commercial test publishers and is used instead to refer to formal testing systems,” says assessment expert Lorrie Shepard.[8] Basically, an endless succession of crappy “benchmark” standardized tests – intended to refine preparation for the high-stakes tests that follow – are euphemistically described as “formative assessment.” Too often, in other words, the goal is just to see how well students will do on another test, not to provide feedback that will help them think deeply about questions that intrigue them. (The same is true of the phrase “assessment for learning,” which sounds nice but means little until we’ve asked “Learning *what?*”) The odds of an intellectually valuable outcome are slim to begin with if we’re relying on a test rather than on authentic forms of assessment.[9]

* A reminder to *focus on the learning, not just the teaching* seems refreshing and enlightened. After all, our actions as educators don’t matter nearly as much as how kids experience those actions. The best teachers (and parents) continually try to see what they do through the eyes of those to whom it’s done. But at some point I had the queasy realization that lots of consultants and administrators who insist that learning is more important than teaching actually have adopted a behaviorist version of learning, with an emphasis on discrete skills measured by test scores.

You see the pattern here. We need to ask what kids are being given to do, and to what end, and within what broader model of learning, and as decided by whom. If we allow ourselves to be distracted from those questions, then even labels with a proud progressive history can be co-opted to the point that they no longer provide reassurance about the practice to which the label refers.

NOTES

1. These two accounts were offered by literacy specialists Pat Shannon and Harvey (Smokey) Daniels, respectively. See Paula Wolfe and Leslie Poynor, "Politics and the Pendulum," *Educational Researcher*, January-February 2001, p. 17; and Daniels, "Whole Language: What's the Fuss?," *Rethinking Schools*, Winter 1993, p. 4.
2. For more on variations of cooperative learning, see Alfie Kohn, *No Contest: The Case Against Competition*, rev. ed. (Houghton Mifflin, 1992), chap. 10.
3. In fact, the idea isn't limited to schools, nor did it start there. Co-opting is an age-old strategy to weaken movements that attempt to challenge existing power structures, thereby avoiding the need for heavy-handed responses that might end up strengthening those movements. Thus, rather than firing potentially rebellious workers, executives may promote them to managerial positions on the theory that someone will hesitate to oppose a system in which he or she now plays a privileged role. Similarly, oil and coal companies may avoid publicly attacking environmental activists, preferring to insist that they (the companies) support the same goals by strategically funding green organizations or adopting an earth-friendly vocabulary to describe their fossil-fuel initiatives.
4. The strategic use (and abuse) of words to further a political agenda – and blunt efforts to make change – also has a long history. George Orwell wrote the book on this: *1984*. For a more recent example, consider how the term *reform* has been adopted by those on the right. "For my money," advised conservative columnist David Brooks, "the best organizing principle for Republicans centers on the word 'reform,'" which can give the impression that they want to "promote change, while Democrats remain the churlish defenders of the status quo ("Running on Reform," *New York Times*, January 3, 2004). I discussed the uses to which that word has been put within the field of education in "Test Today, Privatize Tomorrow," *Phi Delta Kappan*, April 2004. So, too, for the word *choice*, which was adopted as a euphemism for school vouchers after that particular strategy for undermining public education was decisively rejected by voters in several states.
5. One caveat here: Even in its original, uncorrupted sense, *engagement* doesn't capture everything needed to create the ideal learning environment. As Susan Engel has observed, even when students are "quite engaged in a discussion or activity," it may still be a teacher-directed lesson that excludes them from "asking questions or

having a chance to pursue those questions.” (“Children’s Need to Know: Curiosity in Schools,” *Harvard Educational Review* 81 [2011]: 641-42.)

6. Mastery learning is associated with the work of Benjamin Bloom and is firmly rooted in a behaviorist paradigm: Tasks (sometimes of little intrinsic value) are broken down into small “units,” which students – not unlike lab animals – must perform in sequence, with continuous monitoring, frequent evaluation, and, often, positive reinforcement for pleasing the person with the power. This is the polar opposite of constructivist or progressive education. “Children are expected to progress from one meaningless chunk of learning to another,” as Frank Smith described the idea. Deborah Meier offered a different observation about “mastery,” pointing out that it’s an odd word because it sets the bar so high. Few of us can claim to have truly mastered what we struggle to get better at, so either the word has to be watered down or else we teach the sort of trivial skills that *can* be mastered (personal communication, January 2015).

7. See, for example, Maja Wilson, “Personalization: It’s Anything But Personal,” *Educational Leadership*, March 2014: 73-77.

8. Lorrie Shepard is quoted in W. James Popham, “Phony Formative Assessments: Buyer Beware,” *Educational Leadership*, November 2006, p. 86.

9. See my essay “Why the Best Teachers Don’t Give Tests,” October 30, 2014. And here’s another concern: A wide body of research has shown that when students are led to focus disproportionately on how well they’re doing, they tend to become less immersed in, and less thoughtful about, *what* they’re doing. As two eminent scholars put it, “An overemphasis on assessment can actually undermine the pursuit of excellence” – and that may be particularly true of the formative kind due to its salience during the learning process. (The quotation is from Martin L. Maehr and Carol Midgley, *Transforming School Cultures* [Westview, 1996], p. 7. For more on the distinction between a focus on performance [achievement] and a focus on learning, see my book *The Schools Our Children Deserve* [Houghton Mifflin, 1999], chap. 2.)

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