DIMENSIONS OF INSTRUCTIONAL PSYCHOLOGY

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ABSTRACT

This paper highlights eight topics cogent to psychologically enlightened instructional theory. Discussed issues include: (1) a multivariate model of man, (2) American school's cultural heritage, (3) the limitations of scientific reductionism, (4) developmentalism in school learning, (5) individual differences, (6) decision-oriented instructional research, (7) teacher education, and (8) the separation of learning theory from instructional theory. Implications for future instructional theorizing are offered.

Instructional practice means school learning and involves at least affective and cognitive behavior. Instruction involves curricular planning and execution mostly by teachers and learning mostly by children. In such a grandiose endeavor, instruction could be supported by grand theory, but it rarely is. Instruction offers little global or elegant theorizing beyond prolonged testimonials. Change is imminent, I hope.

Physicists and chemists — classical scientists — expect much of their theories. American human psychologists placate themselves readily with resigned optimism — human psychology is so difficult to understand — and thereby expect much less of theories. Ideal scientific theories are conceptual guides to understanding novel problems, data yet uncollected, or challenging rationale.

Theory is a two-part conceptual vehicle linking substantive questions on one shore, to data-based revolutions on the distant shore. According to Cornfield and Tukey's (1956) simile, the expanse between shores is transversed by crossing two bridges which join on a "movable" island about midway. The first bridge is the statistical span; the second one is termed the subject-matter span.

By modifying the observation program and the corresponding analysis of the data, the island may be moved nearer to or farther from the distant bank, and the statistical span may be made stronger or weaker. In doing this it is easy to forget the second
span, which usually can only be strengthened by improving the science or art on which it depends. Yet a balanced understanding of, and choice among, the statistical possibilities requires constant attention to the second span. It may be worthwhile to move the island nearer to the distant bank, at the cost of weakening the statistical span—particularly when the subject-matter span is weak. (p. 913.)

Current instructional psychology may be represented as two sides of a giant coin. On the one side are methods and procedures which solve some puzzles but not all. On the other side is substance—the discipline’s most valued questions. Taken together is an incessant tension between old questions one may ask and solve versus the more important unraveled puzzles one would like to pose.

Grand theory is a wispy dream for too much of psycho-instructional literature is commercial. Between elegant theory and daily grind, many educational psychologists seek narrow refuges among textbooks. Thousands of introductory psychology and educational psychology courses are taught annually, and scores of commercial publishers capture handsome profits selling survey texts and readers. With the regularity of seasonal flux, one is assured each school year of a fresh harvest of introductory literature.

Each publication promises the “new” look, the secret approach, or the unlocking of surprise treasures from teeming storehouses of research data. A little of this but not too much of that. Whatever strikes the student-consumer’s fancy sells most and dominates the market, and naturally, whatever the published authors select as pivotal research is popular and dominates thinking.

A dangerous myth is afoot among this welter of texts. Too many naively believe that the most essential instructional research is completed. Textbook discussions are overly finalized, too polished and pleasing. More is always needed, of course, but a passive reader is implicitly assured that enough is already done for decisions about the planning and execution of schooling. Progress if measured quantitatively by printed production is illusory.

What will best sustain instructional theory is not empty, prolific production but detailed attention to essential schooling tasks. Robert Owen’s second utopian community at New Harmony, Indiana, in 1825 illustrates the unfortunate results of ignoring essentials. Owen surrounded himself with educational free-thinkers and social experimenters who were, almost without exception, men of words and not of action. While printed verbiage poured forth, community-sustaining essentials like tending crops and livestock were ignored. The experimental community crumbled as quickly as the pigs invaded the vegetable garden. Educational research may not sustain itself long on words and appearances alone, vitality requires substance and, especially, a penchant for practical instructional decisions. As with Owen’s living utopia, unless essential tasks keep the community operating, the enterprise