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Misbehavioral Subjectives

Background

The following essay originated as part of a drama that says as much as the essay itself. By 1969, enough federal funding had been channeled into schools to raise issues of strict evaluation, supposedly to guarantee cost-effectiveness. Faculty representatives from Purdue, Illinois, and Indiana Universities had received a two-year grant from the U.S. Office of Education to produce "A Catalog of Representative Behavioral Objectives in English, Grades 9-12" with built-in suggestions for evaluative procedures. This was called the Tri-University Project in Behavioral Objectives. During its first year, a couple dozen "consultants," including me, were to convene twice for a total of five days to write objectives for this catalog. Consultants comprised some leaders in English education and administrators representing schools where the objectives were to be field-tested during the second year in a "controlled" comparison between schools not using the objectives and those blessed with them. The latter, the ones represented at the meetings, were called "ES 70 Schools"—"Experimental Schools for the '70s." With this federal notion of "experimental" it's no wonder the '70s got off to a bad start.

The Tri-University directors were to revise and edit our objectives and, after field-testing and garnering reactions from outside readers, publish the Catalog for the profession. One of the directors was also the in-house behavioral psychologist and was charged with visiting all school sites. Directors worked closely with "major consultants" David Krathwohl, co-author of a continuation into the "affective domain" of Benjamin Bloom's *Taxonomy of Educational Objectives, Cognitive Domain,* and Robert Mager, author of the project bible, *Preparing Objectives for Programmed Instruction.* The very telling title of the latter had a more innocent air then than it could possibly get by with today. The same for some statements in the abstract of the Project's USOE proposal distributed to participants for study before we met:

> Behavioral scientists may provide some assistance [in defining the subject of English]. They focus upon the learner—the learner as a doer, as a reactor, as a person whose behavior can be influenced in measurable and desirable ways by the classroom and by his reading, viewing, listening, speaking, reading, and reasoning.

To equate *doer* and *reactor* is symptomatic of this approach, whose advocates had not yet learned to mask the technocratic manipulation of students so well as later, after they came under fire. Admitting that English is not typing, the Proposal rationale continued:

> Nevertheless, despite the impossibility of eliciting for English many statements as exact as "type fifty words a minute," the search for behaviorally phrased statements has value because of the constant focus upon the child and upon the outcomes of instruction as reflected in what the child does.

Posing as child-centered while actually generating a very destructive "constant focus upon the child" struck me as exactly parallel to the fraudulent doublespeak claims of programmed instruction to be "individualized." No one has ever tried to measure the incalculable negative effects of keeping children perpetually under this kind of spotlight and of regarding them as score-sources while they are trying to grow up. This is not education but child molestation.

Similar efforts to manipulate the consultants themselves bothered me more and more after we arrived for three days, in October 1969, at the Speedway Motel in Indianapolis (no cheap symbolism, please). I might have been flattered to find that the handout called "Categories for Behavioral Objectives," which was used to group us into working parties, employed concepts and even specific terms from my two books published the year before, but when I tried to open some discussion during plenary sessions on the ideas and principles underlying the project, the "major consultants" became hostile and the directors (mostly English education professors) embarrassed. Clearly, we were to get out into those motel rooms in our small groups and write our objectives as directed, not question assumptions and intentions and ramifications. Some of the other consultants privately expressed misgivings or disgust, or satirized the project, but the mood seemed to be, "What can you do in the face of the feds? Better we're in on it."

For two days I was a good boy and went along; then at a cocktail party the evening before the third day I told the directors I couldn't stomach it any longer. They understood, they said, and we agreed that I would spend the last day writing a paper on my position. We did not discuss what I might do when we all reconvened for the final two days in St. Louis the following March. So in about four hours the next morning—having so much to get out in one sustained deadline session was rather like doing once again a long college bluebook exam—I wrote longhand the following statement, dictated it to the Project secretary, took one last look at the historic racing cars reposing in the Final Parking Lot of the lobby, and boarded a plane for the return to San Francisco.

I spent the flight trying to assimilate an experience I had never had before. At breakfast, one of the directors had offered me the presidency

of the National Council of Teachers of English for the next available term, knowing full well that as soon as I finished my scrambled eggs I was going off to my room to write a dissenting view that, according to agreement, would be distributed to participants and included in the Project papers. Why hadn't he made this offer during the three nights and two days we had already spent together? And why was the offer never repeated for another year, as agreed when I declined? I know that the directors wanted badly to pull off the Project so that English could get federal support and to this end tried hard to accommodate consultants like me who were idealistic enough to be potential troublemakers. They no doubt felt justified because they were trying to protect our profession from our government. My purpose in relating this is not to embarrass these well-intentioned people but to point out what we very much need to face in the future—that it's better to do without funding than to become enslaved to its source. Schooling in the United States is supposed to be a function of municipal or county government, not of state or federal government, but we have sold it out to those centralized bureaucracies. More tax money should be retained locally so that the community can control its own schooling.

Under the title "Misbehaviorist English: A Position Paper," Anthony Tovatt and John Maxwell included this essay in their collection *On Writing Behavioral Objectives for English,* which the Commission on the English Curriculum of the National Council of Teachers of English published in 1970, prefaced by a resolution cautioning that "real danger to English instruction may result from definitions of English in the behavioral mode." This book includes articles by directors of the Tri-University Project, one of which replies directly to my article. While their collection was being compiled, the NCTE Director of Publications telephoned me to ask if I would be willing to delete the final sentence, to which some people involved in the book objected. Later, after he had left the Council, he told me that he had been hoping I would refuse, as I did.

Of course, the real drama at the Speedway Motel was an invasion of Tony Tovatt's room by a squad of field mice that forced him to bunk with me for a couple of nights. How could this be the same motel where, in the movie *Winning,* Paul Newman found his wife in bed with a faster racer?

As an exercise in clear thinking, it might be a helpful thing for English teachers to write behavioral objectives—and then throw them away. We probably tend to be more fuzzy-headed about what we are doing than math or science teachers. At any rate, we often operate intuitively. As a result, a lot of research in English education has probably wasted

government money. To concede all of this, however, is not to yield penitentially to cost accountants' preference for evaluation models. English is difficult and different, because a native language is enmeshed in the vast and intricate fabric of interpersonal and intrapersonal life. For this reason, to waste money on research in English may be necessary for a while before results are satisfactory. (More money is being wasted on more dubious enterprises.)

What I see as negative in the formulation of behavioral objectives for English concerns three areas: the inadequacy of such formulation to do justice to the goals of English, the unintended mischief that will almost surely result from publishing behavioral goals, and the bad precedent set for future relations between government and education.

Some goals in English imply overt behaviors and some do not. In insisting that desirable behaviors be *observable,* the behavioral approach rules out a great deal of learning—too much to merely mention in a cautionary note prefacing the goals. Consider, for example, what may be happening in a more taciturn member of a discussion group. The effects of certain reading, acting, and writing on a student's social, emotional, and cognitive growth tend of course to be long-range and inextricable. Although it helps to acknowledge that many of these effects will occur years later and often out of school, in practice these effects will either not be observed by evaluators or be falsely attributed to more recent school treatment—or, most likely, be ignored because they cannot be causally traced. The greater the time-space span, the less likely it is that effects can be ascribed to their proper causes. A behavioral approach will tend to favor short-span, well-segmented teaching fragments, because observed "responses" can then be more easily related to the applied "stimuli."

Even at short range, observed behavior can be badly misinterpreted by a psychology that in the name of objectivity refuses to infer what is going on in the black box of our head but does not refuse to infer the meaning of observed behaviors because the latter are supposedly self-evident and entail no inferences. But any observation entails inference. The claim to be an objective observer is really unscientific. The mere fact of being overt does not make a behavior objective. Einstein said that the observer is the essence of the situation. (In this regard, incidentally, the claim that the behavioral approach is centered on the learner is not very honest. A premium is placed on the favored viewpoint of the observer.)

In order to reduce the observer's inference to an "objective" level, it is necessary to control the stimulus-response situation to an extreme degree. In education this means to simulate laboratory conditions within a classroom—to systematically vary one factor at a time. For this reason, the protest that trivia need not result rings hollow; it is built into the "objective-observer" emphasis, which requires oversystematized fragmenting of learning. Without a respect for inner processes, such as ge-

netic development, an observer can misinterpret certain confusions in the thought and speech of students as task failures when actually these confusions indicate arrival at a more complex stage of growth where more errors *can* be made. A student who describes dialectical differences very well after a session of hearing recordings of different dialects may be drawing on previous personal experience unknown to the observer.

So mainly, what is unscientific is limiting observation to the external view and repudiating all introspective statements. Since truth surely cannot inhere in one point of view alone, it must follow that an inside-outside view is more truthful. Overreacting to the mystical elements in earlier vitalist and mentalist psychologies, S–R psychology adopted another extreme in denying truth to the individual's own description of his inner life and consequently in denying his self-assessment of his learning. The only hope for truth through observation is to synthesize the totality of observations—from different times and vantage points—into a full picture. This certainly must include the student's statements about what he has or has not learned, how and when. The interior and external views correct and corroborate each other. Discrepancies stimulate new insights.

Also, because objectives determine evaluation, it is absolutely essential that the learner have a hand in formulating objectives. Otherwise, some kinds of learning behavior of value to him will never be written into the curriculum because they are not destined to be assessed. It is of course just this exclusion of students from decision-making that has helped to fire campus rebellions. One need not be sentimental about students or blind to their excesses to recognize nonetheless how wise and practical it is to include their view—in fact, to do more than that, to permit their groping for self-determination and power to become itself a driving force in their education. But S–R psychology is not inclined to champion this "vitalist" view that action originates in the individual as well as in the environment.

The kind of curriculum that I have been trying to evolve in collaboration with others could not be successfully evaluated by measures derived from behavioral goals. Not only could it not be assessed, it would never get off the ground because the amount and kind of activities that would have to be run off in the classroom in order to evaluate behavioristically would drive out and distort hopelessly the learning activities themselves. What I have proposed is to settle on a handful of general verbal processes that, if only from a purely logical standpoint, can't fail to develop the growth of thought and language because they are basic sending-and-receiving activities that can be varied in infinite ways, and to back these activities to the hilt without asking either teachers or students to engage in other activities merely or principally for the sake of evaluation. Assessment would occur in two main ways, one informal and the other formal: teachers would constantly match their observations against

the statements of students about what they are learning and what they need to learn. Outside raters, experts in discursive learning, would assess samples of student discourse—tapes of discussion, finished compositions along with early drafts, tapes of rehearsed poetry readings, videotapes of acting and improvising—all taken in slice-of-life fashion from the normal learning activities. Rater evaluation acknowledges the subjectivity of any observer, but the subjectivity can be somewhat offset by quantifying and correlating rater judgments. This sort of observer can combine cues and get a total "reading" about which aspects of reading or composition or conversing a certain group is weak or strong on. This assesses the curriculum, but it does not necessarily tell which student has mastered which sentence structure or been sensitized to which dialectical differences. But to make sure that every student has mastered every specific should not be a goal anyway. Such uniformity at such a level of particularity is not desirable in itself, and, more important, can be bought only at a ruinous price that I, for one, would never be willing to pay.

To appreciate fully the price entailed in behavioral specification of English teaching, we have to envision realistically what will probably be done with such a list of objectives when promulgated by a prestigious leadership corps to the rest of the profession. First of all, I have noticed again and again that when second-level objectives are further specified as third-level objectives,[1] they not only become transformed into activities, which is necessary since this third level is the one that is actually behavioral or observable, but that at least half of these activities are ones I would consider undesirable, such as filling in cloze passages or listing the items of evidence in a speech or essay. The latter might very likely occur, and occur many times, in discussion, but I would be willing to trust that years of small-group discussion would, if teachers knew how to run the process well, naturally cause students to itemize evidence either individually or collectively. I would never be willing, however, to program a curriculum so minutely as to ensure that every student gave observable proof at every developmental stage that he could list someone else's evidence, because to ensure that, along with the myriad other mini-objectives, would pervert the curriculum into one vast testing system that would not leave enough room for something like small-group discussion even to become effective. In fact, most major drawbacks in the present curriculum stem from just this self-defeating effort at systematization. Instead of reading, talking, acting, and writing for real, students are taking comprehension tests, doing book reports, writing "critical" papers about literature, parsing sentences, filling in blanks, etc., to make their learning visible to the teacher. Thus the main impact of behavioral formulation in English will be to perfect the error of our present ways.

[1]According to guidelines issued at the conference, it is at the third of five levels of increasing specificity that objectives first become "behaviorally phrased."

It is reasonable to assume that a representative list of behavioral goals would be rather eagerly seized upon by (a) administrators at funding sources who are accountable to taxpayers (officials in state and federal education departments and school superintendents), (b) curriculum directors in school systems and all English teachers looking for guidance about how to teach the subject, (c) the testing industry, and (d) teachers of teachers, who wish to bring teacher education in line with the current notions of curriculum and methods. Despite all protestations to the contrary, the scenario will probably play like this. The third- and fourth-level objectives will almost automatically become measures of evaluation because they are, by virtue of being behavioral, almost in testing form already. Since tests are used to measure the performance of curriculum, teachers, and students, everyone concerned has an investment in doing only what can be tested. The testing industry certainly has little motive to pass on to schools the reservations and qualifications about behavioral objectives that the writers of them might feel. Cautionary notes and prefaces are virtually certain to be stripped away. In the familiar circular fashion of all state and national exams so far, these tests will act backward to determine the curriculum, and teachers will teach to them. This shrinking of the curriculum to fit the measuring standards is precisely what the Dartmouth Seminar denounced. Furthermore, only those projects whose objectives are stated in behavioral terms will stand much chance of receiving local, state, and federal money. Since this budgeting bias will bias research and experimentation, the S–R trend will be self-reinforcing, as indeed it has been for some time. After all, the essential motive behind the writing of behavioral objectives is to take the guesswork out of accountability.

Clearly, all areas of education have been advised to conform or lose out. To permit this kind of relationship between government and education is to encourage an already pernicious national trend. A marriage of convenience has taken place between the cost-accounting procedures developed in the Defense Department and the operant-conditioning principles of some behavioral scientists. What they have in common is a manipulative one-sided approach to human affairs and a rejection of two-way transactional models of action. Both gain. Cost-accounting administrators have mated with the psychology that suits their needs and problems best. It is the same psychology that the advertising industry has picked, and for the same reasons—manipulation of others toward one's own ends. The education industry has invested heavily in it by marketing teaching machines and other small-step programmed materials. To the extent that teachers and parents misunderstand what education is about, they too sometimes "buy" the operant-conditioning model of education—to remove choice from the "subjects" and make them do what teachers and parents want them to. On the other side, what the S–R

school of behavioral science itself gains is a support that it has increasingly failed to get among the great leaders within its own discipline. This is an unholy wedding indeed.

English educators should have been asked to write goals according to their best lights but also in the light of an honest presentation of the government's accounting problems. We should never have been asked to fit English to a model chosen for these reasons and with this history. Losing this battle means losing a lot more in the future.

In short, we are being MacNamara-ed, and we should fight it. But, I am told, if we don't write these behavioral objectives, "they" will. If this is true, then let's recognize this for just what it is—extortion. Lend your name and support to this project or else you-know-who will write these objectives instead of you. I simply cannot accept these conditions. I respect the directors of BOE, appreciate their good intentions, and sympathize with their own conflicts about possibly contradictory commitments, but with the submission of this position paper I must withdraw from the project.