

“Giving You Something to Make You Wise.” A Peircian Joke About Teaching?

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There are a number of points on which I believe Torill Strand and I agree. For instance, she warns us of an impending “[E]ra of informationalism, transnational knowledge economies, and by implication an epistemification of everyday life.” If I understand all this correctly, I share her worry about our age of information overflow and misinformation that might wash away the ancient dikes of criticism that have been essential educational tasks as philosophers (of education). I share her worry about “knowledge economies” and the encroaching “epistemification” of the everyday if that means the whimsical child’s play of picking up some relativistic perspective, “perception,” or other epistemic Barbie doll, and idly coddling it until it loses its novelty and is then discarded for another whimsical “perception.” I also agree with her elaboration of C. S. Peirce’s comment on surprise as a learning experience that bridges the familiar with the novel and unexpected and that forms a double consciousness.

It is also the way of philosophy to disagree with the author. I commend Strand for attempting to throw new light on ideas in the work of Peirce who, as pragmatist philosopher, has been in the shadow of John Dewey as a contributor to educational theory. However, I want to state right up front that my colleague has not succeeded in convincing me that it is a worthwhile effort. Let me highlight a few points of disagreement. First, I cannot join in her conclusion that from Peirce’s “flows of signs mediating actual lived experience” follows “Signs are thus the only means of learning we have” and second, that, therefore, Peirce’s semiotic “can be regarded both as a theory on educational process and a method of studying them.” First, it is not clear to me how the process of semiosis translates cleanly into an educational process since Peirce meant this to be a contribution to the logic of science.¹ Second, it is also unclear as to how this insight of education as process is “not traditional” or more than a truism. I suppose it is superficially true that education is a process, just as it is superficially true that, say, principles of simple arithmetic govern the dollars in my checking account. But the latter idle fact, plus all the pure arithmetic in the world, does not tell me if I can afford, drawing upon funds in that checking account, a new car or a trip to Rome. In the same way, to insist that education is a process — that is, a series of occurrences extended within an all-embracing fourth dimension of physical time — obscures the much more complex point that, like pieces of music or games of soccer, education has its *own* proprietary time. For example, in educational time, there are school days — either taken singly or as a period of a whole life — and they are decidedly not the same as days counted by either the astronomer or the stockbroker. Furthermore, it is a truth of educational time, known long before the advent of developmental psychology, that there may be child prodigies in mathematics or violin playing, but not in philosophy, public administration, or

international diplomacy. As Aristotle knew, *phronesis* requires its own sweet, educational time. Where is it recorded, but in educational time, that you cannot teach third graders quantum mechanics!

Second, what I find paradoxical in Strand's essay is this: just those experiences of which she so wishes to tell us — formative experiences that present us with jolts and surprises — defeat the argument she puts forward on behalf of Peirce. I have therefore to disagree with her interpretation of the maternal rhyme, "Open your mouth and close your eyes, and I will give you something to make you wise." American children may have heard this when Mother was not planning to pop into their mouths a candy or sweet — a pleasant surprise — but when Mother was hiding a spoonful of bitter medicine behind her back. "What makes us wise" in this experience is hence not positive reinforcement à la B. F. Skinner but some kind of bitter medicine — not the pleasure but the sudden, sharp pain or horrible taste. Thus, I do not think that Peirce was thinking of the practical joke as pleasure, given that he mentions that such experience "tortures us." And these — the pains, the embarrassments, the shames — are the very experiences that need no interpretations, no mentations, no extra added thought to inform us of their symbolic values. The child, in his first major school play and facing a large audience, who suddenly cannot remember a single word or line, does not need intellection, does not need Peircean interpretants final, dynamic nor immediate, to discover his occurrent experience as deeply embarrassing. Such experience flies right to the knowing heart like an arrow. No mediation is necessary here.

Third, Strand's principal argument is intended to weld a joint between education and semiotics. Sad to say, that argument is a non sequitur. Here is that argument: "[W]hile experiences teach, any experience is represented by signs. Signs are thus the only means of learning we have." It is unfortunate that this inference has the very same form as the following: "While experiences teach, any experience is represented in the Serbo-Croatian language. Serbo-Croatian is thus the only means of learning we have." Even Peirce knew that argument validity is a matter of form. The latter argument — in support of Serbo-Croatian hermeneutic universalism — is hopelessly invalid and so is the former. "Serbo-Croatian is the universal language of learning" or "Signs are thus the only means of learning that we have" — is a false generalization and no cogent argument.

Fourth, for more than sixty years now, philosophers have known that Peirce's pragmatic maxim does not hold. Willard Van Ormen Quine, with help from Pierre Duhem, was right about one thing: there is no testing for, nor conceiving of, an application or applications of a statement or idea alone and in isolation.² When we test, as when we apply, we take on whole, even potentially infinite, ranges of statements. Except for degenerate cases, you just cannot check one statement by itself. To illustrate this with a statement of a light bulb shedding light, I have to bring to bear a myriad of attendant statements or assumptions about plugs, switches, lamps, sockets, cords, — perhaps even times of day. To apply the bulb, even in conception, I apply all of these together. Hence, testability (as in logical positivism) or applicability in conception (as in Peirce) are not sufficient to afford a notion of

meaning that works for individual statements or ideas as Peirce would have had it, one statement or idea at a time. One cannot distill the meaning of a single statement out of testability or applicability, even in principle.

Finally and in sum, we have here been given no reason to think, and perhaps a good deal of reason not to think, that Peirce's refuted semiotics, like that of the logical positivists to which it is first cousin, is any mentor and guide when it comes to illuminating the dark channels of education nor of educational research as the author promises in her title. Why appeal to these tired mentalistic theories of a Peirce and why call them not traditional? John Dewey or George Herbert Mead have had more illuminating things to say about education and research and this in a theoretical and practical language much more conducive and illuminating to educational application. Considering educational process, learning, inquiry, Dewey would want us to come down from the loftiness of abstract theory to the everyday and immediate of experience. In the following I am not quoting Dewey but rather I am repeating Strand's quote of Peirce. It sums up my response to Strand's presentation of Peirce:

For ordinary purposes, however, nothing is gained by carrying the analysis so far; because these ordinary commonsense concepts of everyday life, having guided the conduct of men ever since the race was developed, are by far more trustworthy than the exacter concepts of science; so that when great exactitude is not required they are the best terms of definition.³

I do not wish to discourage Strand but I have never been convinced of the fruitfulness of interpreting Peirce for educational insights nor was I persuaded by the complex avenues she has been pursuing in her efforts to throw light on the concepts of education, learning, and inquiry. These central ideas would clearly benefit from Strand's obvious willingness to tackle difficult and abstract problems in the philosophy of education. I just do not think Peirce will make us wise in this regard.

1. Charles S. Peirce, *The Essential Peirce. Selected Philosophical Writings*, vol. 2, eds., Nathan Houser et al. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998), 326. See the long Peirce quote in Strand's essay.

2. See Donald Gillies, "The Duhem Thesis and the Quine Thesis," in *Philosophy of Science: The Central Issues*, eds. Martin Curd and J.A. Cover (New York: Norton, 1998), 302–319. See also Karl-Otto Apel, *Der Denkweg von Charles S. Peirce* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1970) 159–185.

3. Peirce, *The Essential Peirce*, 433.