SELF-REFLEXIVENESS IN TEACHING-LEARNING PROCESSES

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DEBBIE, an earnest twelve-year-old, stands frustrated at the chalkboard after misspelling several words in spite of the teacher's exhortations to listen to the sounds. Louder, more meticulous enunciations neither lower the tension nor lessen the frustration. Self-reflexive awareness can break through this impasse. Say to Debbie, "Listen to your listening." Don't explain in detail. If there is a question, suggest that she do it as best she can in whatever way she understands "Listen to your listening."

When pupils have "listened to their listening," not only have they frequently spelled correctly even words that were wholly new to them, but they have responded favorably in arithmetic or in other subjects when attention itself was a concern. Incidentally, in spelling, the either-or of right and wrong is replaced with a recognition that often a miss by one letter, or even two, may be a step towards achieving accuracy.

In order to enlarge upon self-reflexive processes in the classroom, we must consider varieties of self-reflexiveness.

Korzybski emphasized that map-territory relationships practically constitute our knowledge and that there are no perfect maps. Consequently, perfection is another illusory "allness." Predictability and degrees of probability displace certainty as the basis for our decisions and expectancies. A map that hypothetically would be exactly like the territory would require the map-maker in map₁ to be making another "perfect" map₂ in which the map-maker would be making map₃, ad infinitum. Less grandiose maps still show the brush strokes or smudges of the map-maker; for any functional maps, the criteria for selection of data and for emphasis of selected features reflect the biases or special interests of the map-maker, thereby slanting the map.

In language, self-reflexiveness manifests itself in talking about talking, writing about writing, reporting about reporting, news about news, etc. Since these expressions manifest multiordinality of terms,
then varying levels of abstraction shape interpretations differently and meaning becomes partly a function of context.

Because meaning influences behavior, Korzybski felt that second-level self-reflexions, which he called second-order mechanisms, offered a practical approach to personality problems and insights into some of their etiology. For example: Beneficially, hate of hate may reverse the hate in a hater; harmfully, whereas a first-order fear may be normal, fear of fear becomes destructive.

Essentially, self-reflexiveness means that maps have their own properties. Although such properties are not characteristics of territories, they influence our evaluations of territories and our performances in consequence. We find maps that are similar in structure to the territory useful and effective, so we may non-consciously tend to assume that territories behave like maps. Such assumptions may lead us to expect a static world instead of a process world, because maps are static. Resultant semantic distortions and subtly masked allnesses may lead us to break our "semantic necks," chasing after such semantic rainbows as ultimates and absolutes of Happiness, Popularity, Truth, and Success, or trying to escape negative answers and negative knowledge by branding them as Failure with a capital "F."

In order to prevent and counteract semantic blockages to learning, Korzybski urged that teachers forewarn students about the self-reflexive nature of language. Before such explanation can make meaningful impact, however, students must have self-reflexive experiences and be aware of them.

This can be accomplished, as well as new insights into teaching gained, if we implement Korzybski's formulation, which maintains that self-reflexive language is an outgrowth—not a cause—of the self-reflexive nature of our neurological processes. This viewpoint may well merit becoming a pivotal consideration in education. If the development of self-reflexive neurological processes precedes the development of self-reflexive linguistic behavior, then human activities other than language also may manifest self-reflexiveness.

Let us view teaching-learning as a map-territory relationship and seek self-reflexive instruction that can correspond more adequately to the territories, that is, the students' self-reflexive nervous systems.

In several intermediate-grade public school classes, children who had difficulties with listening were asked to listen to their listening. A number readily achieved successes with specific learning tasks that previously had thwarted them.
Similarly, there were many more success experiences for students and for the teacher when we used "Think about your thinking" as one of our approaches to problem-solving. This was particularly so in arithmetic. Errors came to be viewed not as little disasters but rather as mirrors in which to reexamine one's thinking and work habits. At times students crystallized assumptions and came up with self-insights which seemed far beyond seventh-graders. Panaceas were neither expected nor discovered, but progress was so apparent to the pupils themselves that they grew increasingly responsive both to review and to new work.

As students grasped the significance of self-responsibility and experienced the excitement of self-discovery, they became actively interested in learning how to learn. With some guidance from the teacher, they began to say, "I haven't been able to do this so far," instead of "I can't do it." We engaged in activities that I call "relaxed learning." The underlying assumption is self-reflexive: we may be making learning hard just because we are working too hard to learn—a self-fulfilling prophecy.

The first class to apply "relaxed learning" used spelling as the subject medium. Out of thirty-five students, thirty-one maintained a ninety-five percent average or higher, in spelling for the remaining fourteen weeks of school; previously only ten had been able to do so. Of the other four pupils, two markedly improved their averages to about eighty-eight percent, and two continued to need remedial work using word lists developed by Dr. Dolch; however, both these pupils did improved work with their remedial spelling lists.

Handwriting lessons also had a self-reflexive basis; they were called "three-step writing." For step one, the student made a slow, careful copy of the expert's handwriting as presented in his handwriting booklet. In step two, the same lesson was copied rapidly but with an eye to the prescribed form. For the final step, each student decided which of the first two steps looked better to him. He then closed his handwriting book and made a fast copy of the selected step. After all, he was writing from his own writing and could proceed with new security. Usually the improvement was evident in step three of each lesson, and was strikingly so when compared with earlier papers written at the first of the school year.

Experiences with self-reflexiveness were carried over into peer relationships. Conflicts sometimes were settled by discussing "judgments about judgments." A manifested interest in differences of opinion helped motivate a study of descriptive and inferential language. The teacher developed a unit for teaching description-inference to
which the class responded with interest sometimes bordering on excitement. Subsequently, state achievement tests happened to show that most of these boys and girls were doing notably better academic work than they had done prior to the description-inference unit. Furthermore, the verbal aptitude scores for this class increased an average of 21.3 points over their best scores in any preceding tests.

Certainly the teacher was not exempt from benefits of self-reflexive awareness. Because he was learning how to “wonder at wonder,” self-discoveries by children were less often blunted by superimposed routines. He grew to realize that students often reflect the teacher’s communication patterns, and sometimes was able even to recognize when such patterning occurred. An old truism from graduate school days, “Teachers tend to teach as they are taught,” took on renewed significance; but its implications gave rise to new concerns, as well. If a teacher uses a single way of instruction, is there an implicit predisposition towards authoritarianism for the student? Are experiences with a variety of teaching methods essential for children to develop multi-faceted viewpoints that lend themselves to democratically pluralistic attitudes?

In a sense, because it permeates our lives, self-reflexiveness can link intermediate and secondary classrooms to the world outside, including upper academia.

The nondirective therapy of Carl Rogers has a self-reflexive basis. So does McLuhan’s “The medium is the message.” Self-fulfilling prophecies are essentially self-reflexive prophecies. The Hegelian ideal, “The idea which knows itself,” is an example of philosophic self-reflexiveness. And the prefix “meta” as used in metatheory and metalinguistics is self-reflexive.

In order to forestall polarization of attitudes such as has occurred in university economics classes, a case can be made to show that determinism, at operational levels, self-reflexively transforms itself and devolves into indeterminism, and, in counterpart, indeterminism modifies itself towards determinism. Corollary to this, the postulated ideal conditions of classical laissez-faire economics have not existed, because they undergo self-reflexive changes that tend to concentrate economic power, therefore limiting free competition.

At the home level, a family changes itself. Each new child changes the structure of the family, so no two children are from the same family. Unless parents and teachers are aware of this, their expectancies of siblings may become distorted and their exercise of authority may be distorting to the child’s self-image. That commonplace, the