James Britton and the Tension Between
Taxonomy and Poetry

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It's too early to assess with confidence James Britton's intellectual contribution to the way educators think about the teaching of English. I'd like to explore, however, one avenue of his influential and complex achievement. To do this requires focusing on how his carefully plotted language taxonomies both reveal and conceal the particular importance he placed on the role of literature in our lives.

Throughout Britton's career, it was the language function continua that figured most centrally in his thinking about language and learning. This conceptualization first appeared in an essay published in 1963, was more fully developed in Language and Learning (1970, 174-175), and continued to hold its place of prominence in his last educational book, Literature in Its Place (1993, 28-29). His first continuum separated the world of language into two kinds of texts, transactional opposed to poetic: the second continuum paralleled this division with two distinct roles or stances, participant opposed to spectator. His final published summary characterized the system this way:

To make short work of a long story, language in the role of participant designates any use of language to get things done, to pursue the world's affairs, while language in the role of spectator covers verbal artifacts, the use of language to make something, rather than to get something done. However, if the whole span is seen as a continuum along which a particular utterance may be plotted, we seem to require three forms of language to cover the continuum: on one hand, transactional language (at the limit of the participant role) merging into expressive—the language of ordinary, informal face-to-face talk—and that in turn merging into poetic language, the language of literature, of verbal artifacts. It seems worth noting that expressive, informal face-to-face speech may hover uncertainly between participant and spectator roles—gaining from aspects of both (1993, 28, his italics)

The taxonomy of language functions that Britton elaborated, based as it was on these pairs of opposites, led to a host of conceptual opportunities for revitalizing a progressive stance toward the role of language in education. Yet, coincidently, his schema presented certain profound difficulties, in part, I would suggest, because it reflected an already deep division in our culture between "literature" (as a means of private exploration and expression of emotion) and "exposition" (as a public discourse free of the feelings of self and subjectivity).

Ostensibly, Britton positioned his categories to celebrate the essential place of literature in human affairs and how we neglect it at our peril. As he noted,

... while everybody supports the importance of learning in its accepted sense—learning about the world, a participant role activity—there is no similar emphasis upon the kind of learning associated with reading and writing in the role of spectator... we have failed to observe that neglect of the arts in our society is closely associated with the malaise diagnosed... as alienation. ... As educators, it seems to me we need to keep two such processes in balance before the crisis point is reached: our present intense concern for what is known by those who go through our educational systems needs to be balanced by a similar concern for the degree and manner of their caring. And it is that concern that lies behind all I have said about activity in the spectator role. (1984, 329)

Yet juxtaposing the spectator role with the participant role left unresolved how the private self might be located in the arena of one's assumed public identity. In other words, the personal self (composed of various feeling states that are "exposed" within the confines of actual "concrete" poems) needs to be reconciled with the professional self (a reflective teacher committed to explicating the nature of language and learning through "abstract" expository prose).

The initial value of Britton's system proved to be crucial as a heuristic device to describe some broad distinctions among the many uses to which language is put. The emphasis on "function" meant that language as process rather than form became the key focus when considering classroom practices in English education. Among other things, this allowed researchers to sort the kinds of written texts pro-
duced in schools, as was done, for instance, in the study presented in *The Development of Writing Abilities* (11-18). It was extremely important to discover conclusively that low-level expository texts dominated the school curriculum and that most of this student writing was directed toward the "teacher as examiner." Such demographic investigations helped liberate our understanding of the role of writing in learning and fostered much of the energy behind more liberal language policies in schools including writing across the curriculum. Further, Britton wisely added another broad mediating category to his system, language in the "expressive" mode. This allowed him to account in a positive way for student texts that deviated from the "impersonal" forms dictated by accepted academic norms for writing. In this way writing that remains close to the self might be honored as providing a necessary transitional space for learners as they are struggling with unfamiliar areas of knowledge.

This was not the end of the story, however, as anyone familiar with the psychological theory created by George Kelly might predict. Indeed, Personal Construct Theory figures prominently in *Language and Learning*, giving Britton a coherent way of understanding the nature of representation and how our language labels serve to map and anticipate the boundaries of our experience in the world. By employing Kelly's understanding of opposites, we can begin to probe deeper into Britton's taxonomy and perhaps find ways of reconstruing his language function categories into new patterns and relationships.

At the heart of Kelly's system is the idea of constructive alternativism: "there are always some alternative constructions available to choose among in dealing with the world" (1963). Starting from this democratic and optimistic philosophical premise, Kelly outlined a theory of psychological action and understanding, one that entails taking an inventory of the individual's "constructs." Our constructs serve to predict and value what is happening around us. Based on opposition, a given construct is ordered by two contrasting poles--rich/poor, happy/angry, old/young. These poles define a domain of convenience to which the construct appropriately applies. Within this domain we use the construct to discriminate among discernible items. We know, for instance, that the contrast chair/table applies to the world of furniture and its use elsewhere only constitutes some metaphoric extension.

We classify the world in order to "represent" it internally to ourselves, and the world Britton was most interested in representing was the social world that initiated the intimate relations of language and learning. It is important to remember when we think about taxonomies that the central feature of human consciousness involves each individual operating on "realities" that are mental, not physical--social taxonomies, especially, consist of our interpretations of what's out there, not what's actually out there. Thus from our intentional states, generally coded in language, that mediate the mind with the world; and it's our social affiliations that mediate the world with the mind. Furthermore, the initial fabrication that propels us forward in this process of naming is the belief that we are always classifying according to presumed "natural" relationships. Then once a classification system is up and running (consider, for instance, the one based on boy/girl, man/woman), we tend to separate ourselves from its constructivist roots and let the terms speak for themselves. But we cannot disappear completely from our classifications for inevitably we leave behind clues as to the issues, the conflicts and tensions, that we've been struggling with.

Were taxonomies to remain flexible--that is as "what if" propositions along the lines Kelly suggested--our intellectual quests would be much more open. Taxonomies, however, mostly become reified through some process of erasure. A construct, which by the nature of human mental representation originates as a pair of opposites, thus often loses its manifest tension when one of the defining poles (Kelly labeled this the emergent pole) subverts the existence and claims of its opposing pole. In short, while the initial intention of the taxonomist may be to value all sides, often the problem arises of one pole becoming privileged. In Britton's case it was the transactional pole that unwittingly animated much of his work and provided the basis for his favorable reception by those most concerned with analytical writing in the schools. While in intimate settings Britton valorized the poetic, his public work often sent the message that the other side was more worthy of attention.

The signs of this reversal of Britton's intentions can be seen in his early efforts to elaborate the poles of the language function continuum transactional/poetic. Characteristically, he would begin by describing some main features that distinguish the kinds of contrasts that interested him. For instance, in "What's the use? A schematic account of language functions" (1971), we read a contrast such as "Attention to the forms of the lan-
guage is incidental to understanding, and will often be minimal" for the transacational and "Attention to the forms of the language is an essential part of a listener's (reader's) response" for the poetic (p. 213). But after this general introduction most of the remainder of the article is spent expanding detailed aspects of the transacational function under sub-categories of what Britton labels the "informative" and the "constative." Thus language uses that are instrumental—regulative and analytic—appear, however inadvertently, to be of more substance. The accumulation of classifying terms and boxes—mostly taken from the early work of James Moffett, himself a taxonomist who privileged realms of abstraction—overwhelms the poetic mode, which Britton, perhaps, believed to be more than capable of standing on its own.

Similarly, in a comprehensive summary of his thinking on language development and learning published in 1977, Britton made the case for literature, but still spent most of his time describing language as an analytic and rational tool. His comment about poetry in this regard is revealing:

*When students write in the spectator role, whether autobiographically or fictionally, whether in story or poem form, they are in search of satisfactions that are not easy to specify because they lie well below the surface; and any attempt to specify them is in danger of sounding like evangelical nonsense.* (36, my italics)

He does briefly outline four "satisfactions," which not unsurprisingly support the values of self, relationship, agency, and form, but the weight of his interest appears committed to language forms in the participant role.

In short, Britton's categories while encouraging much more language agency and autonomy among learners, have also, ironically, conspired to safely contain literature. Splitting off the spectator role serves to compartmentalize literature's deeper claim as the medium for expressing the verbal content of the emotional contours of our lives, for capturing, however fleetingly, our joys and fears of relationship. For, when we set the poetic in opposition to the transacational, unwittingly we risk segregating our feelings and the mess of uncertainty from our other intellectual endeavors. In part this constitutes yet another example of society's refusal to sanction the intrusion of the personal into educational spheres, even though the images and icons on display in the public arena are now almost exclusively and embarrassingly personal, but of an inauthentic sort, promoting solipsistic confession and exposure rather than honest conversation.

The dichotomization of Britton's system led others to link his name with "language-centered" approaches to the teaching of English. David Allen, for instance, acerbically dismissed Britton's influence claiming that "in the years since Dartmouth" it "has certainly not been to promote the reading of literature" (1980, p. 60). In a similar manner, Allen misrepresented Kelly as a deterministic cognitivist, one unwilling to entertain the importance of play or the aesthetic imagination (p. 62-67). In part these judgments grew out of a particular British quarrel over what would have primacy in the English curriculum, language or literature, but it is significant that the form that Britton's work took led many to interpret him as favoring the instrumental side of language. David Holbrook's response was even more scathing:

*Professor Britton is the influence mainly responsible for diverting English from the art-literature-imagination approach towards one which is believed to be more academically respectable, capable, in its new positivism, of hob-nobbing with Piaget, Vygotsky, Chomsky etc. while losing sight of English as 'the child's initiation into the life of man'.* (1979, 59)

Regardless of how far off the mark were these comments, such "misreadings" of Britton nevertheless speak to something that appears to be missing in his discourse on language and learning. In part this is a framing issue, for when I arranged Britton's selected essays (1982) to emphasize literature at the center of his concerns, Allen remarked that this would have in fact altered his assessment of Britton's post-Dartmouth influence. The fact remains, however, that Britton appeared hesitant to forcefully acknowledge that he privileged the poetic (and thus the intuitive and the imaginative) over the transacational.

It is also important to note, however, that Britton was equally attacked from the other side for overvaluing literature in the curriculum, which must demonstrate finally that you can't please everyone—readers will ultimately choose to interpret your words on the basis of their own agendas. These educational quarrels in Great Britain during the 1970's can in part be traced back historically to the question of who controlled the British delegation to the 1966 Dartmouth Conference—the being two factions: one, the Leavisites led by
Frank Whitehead, the other, the University of London Institute of Education led by Britton. In broad strokes, this pitted those who believed in many of the traditional values of a high moral literary culture against those beginning to see the political and social issues involved in language education. Sadly, at the end of his life, Britton witnessed a general trend in culture toward an authoritarian right that in England through the National Curriculum was successfully dismantling the kind of progressive and democratic approaches to language and learning that he had spend a life-time supporting.

In the States we find another example of how Britton's taxonomy led to his being labeled as an instrumental problem solver, rather than a poet. In his category system for sorting various competing approaches to the teaching of composition, James Berlin chose to lump Britton under the Cognitive Rhetorical label (1987, 1988). Berlin's characterization of this approach again reflected how Britton was being read prosaically: "For cognitive rhetoric, the structures of the mind correspond in perfect harmony with the structures of the material world, the minds of the audience, and the units of language" (1988, p. 480). While Berlin recognized that this view of composition focuses on process rather than the traditional products of writing, he saw Britton as supporting Moffett's scheme whereby students move "in their language development through levels of abstraction" (1987, p. 163).

This all appears to be pitting rational, analytic discourse against the language of poetry. Indeed, even the work of Jerome Bruner lent weight to this division when he claimed that there were only two fundamental modes of thought, the "paradigmatic or logico-scientific" mode and the "narrative" mode, "each providing distinctive ways of ordering experience, of constructing reality," yet "irreducible to one another" (1986, p. 11). Children may begin with stories, but they're supposed to end with reasoned analysis. Growing up is a matter of learning to appropriate theoretical functions of language ("tautologic" in Britton's taxonomy) and the expressive function is supposed to gradually wither away. Climbing the ladder of abstraction we find the intellectual with "his" reasoned ideas sitting comfortably, if a bit smugly, on the highest rung. Once the structure of the taxonomy for the transactional is in place, the development of writing abilities from simple record to complex theory takes over, and what is easily lost is the complicated layering and simultaneity of discourse functions and forms that persist throughout a person's life. Because the poetic function could not be similarly elaborated, it never appeared to command the same exalted status as the transactional function.

Britton was of course aware of this dilemma that arose out of his dividing the poetic from the transactional. In countless passages he cautioned us against the abuses of any taxonomy: "the linguists' ability to taxonomize language threatens to yield categories that must be taught as an aspect of what school writing requires" (1992, p. 304). Then in his final three books—a memoir (1988), his reflections on literature (1993), and his collected poems (1994)—he began to enact publicly the literary "satisfactions" that "lie well below the surface" and ultimately constitute our essential lives. While his celebration is inevitably guarded, it does con-
up the rules by means hardly dis-
tinguishable from the processes by
which they were first socially de-

erived—and by which they continue
to be amended. On the other hand-
—along may come the traditional
teacher and—with the best of inten-
tions, trying to be helpful—set out
to observe the behaviour, analyse
to codify the rules and teach the
outcome as a recipe. Yes, this may
sometimes be helpful, but as con-
sistent pedagogy it is manifestly
counter-productive. (1987, p. 26-
7)

This is the fundamental warning
that grows out of Britton's aware-
ness that relationship resides at the
intersections. Hinging on "in-be-
tween-ness," relationship can never
be adequately captured, let alone
categorized. In connecting and
enabling two or more perceivable
entities (the student and the teacher
in this instance), relationship for-
feits its own substantive existence.
Following the course of our nature,
into this indeterminant gap flows
language and art—which are inevi-
tably value laden and contingent.
Yet, despite the web of symbols so
constructed to maintain and cel-
brate relationship, its mystery re-
 mains elusive.

Britton points to these
breaches in our power to repre-
sent the world linguistically (or
symbolically) when he recognizes
how our sensibilities consort with
our conscious articulations: "by
reading off the dials of our own
feelings—fear, anxiety, love, hate—
without being aware that we have
done so—by these means we shall
be influenced in our behavior . . ."
And continuing, he states directly,
"there will always be a gap be-
tween our total response to what
confronts us and any formulation
we can make of what was there and
what took place" (1992, p. 318).

Our attempts to represent expe-
rience symbolically, whether in
the transactional or the poetic mode,
always fall short of our imagined
intentions. Our flirtations with tax-
onomy, with the building of cat-
egory systems, never fully capture
and explain the flux of human pro-
ducts and endeavors. "The nature of
a formulation," Britton tells us, "has
something in common with the na-
ture of the written language: a
formulation is, even in miniature, a
codification, a reduction to rules,
and its purpose is to endure, as the
written language does, so that it is
there when we need it." But even
our formulations refuse to remain
at rest; in dynamic procession we
continue to converse with them:
"in the moment when we do need [a
formulation], when we use it as a
basis of judgement in a 'confronta-
tion', a living situation, speech [in
the 'expressive' mode] may also be
involved: . . . The gap between . . .
the enduring formulation and the
spoken one is, we may suppose, of
the same nature as the gap . . .
between what can in any way be
made explicit and the behaviour
itself" (1992, p. 319).

What we readily forget, even
as we acknowledge the fundamen-
tal oppositional nature of our think-
ing processes, is that no pole in
isolation of its paired partner can
act as a whole entity. In other
words, we live, as George Kelly
observed, within the space defined
by the entire construct, not at the
end of either segregated pole. This
should force us to conclude that it is
illogical to try to understand dis-
crete categories or entities without
also entertaining the constituent re-
relationships into which they are con-
tinually dissolving. Accordingly,
Britton's functions of language tax-
onomy can prove pernicious when
it is not viewed as a working illu-
sion, itself a gap waiting to be filled
by our "expressive" speech over
and over again.

This debate about parts and
wholes, of course, can become tire-
some. Even as we speak of unity
and integration, individual catego-
ries and labels serve to seduce us
with a false sense of clarity and
order, but one only gained by some
process of exclusion. Perhaps it is
best to have Britton's younger
daughter, Alison, one of the key
performers in Language and Learn-


I think it is no longer useful to split
the pottery world into two camps,
the worthy and the decadent, the
useful and the ornamental. There
are no clear dividing lines to be
drawn and the same sort of criteria
should be applied as far as possible
to all sorts of pots, be they for daily
use as a butter dish, occasional use
as a vase, or, at the other extreme,
imaginative use as an object of
interest or enlightening beauty. It
may be useful to make a compari-
son with prose and poetry. "Prose"
objects are mainly active, con-
cerned with use, and "poetic" ob-
jects are mainly contemplative,
concerned with being looked at.
For me the best objects are recog-
nizable when I sense in looking at
them a frisson from both aspects at
once; both prose and poetry, pur-
pose and commentary. (quoted in
Dormer and Cripps, 1985, p. 26)

Breaking Out of the Boxes

December dusk—a foretaste of dy-
ing
We live in a world of our seeing.

June 1995 23
As dark moves in
From the hedge of trees to the walls
of the house
The world shrinks
To the square of a lighted room.
(October 27th 1980 [1994, p. 66])

In speaking about his experiences in teaching at an Art College in the early 1950's, Jimmy reflected, "There I found the students possessed of a creative vitality that, for a time, made English seem dull as a timetable subject and English teachers appear trapped in a sober servicing routine" (1989, p. 59). Later he contrasted this to his early teaching at the London Institute of Education English Department, where he observed that teachers

did little to foster the notion that a child might prove to be a creative writer as well as a reader, or that speech itself could, in a suitable enterprise, reach poetic intensity. In other words "literature" remained obstinately something that other people had done. Times may have changed in the intervening thirty-four years—but not dramatically." (1989, p. 59-60)

But for Jimmy, literature was something that he did too, using the language of poetry to ponder the intractable nature of his existence. At the end of his life he took as one of his crowning pleasures the publication of a sheaf of his poems, poems he had been carefully squirreling away for more than fifty years.

In his poems Jimmy positions his words to explore a wide range of private feelings that extended through his adult life—from his experiences of war to the deep loneliness he struggled with after Roberta, his wife, died:

I make sorties into our past

Living among scraps of history of the life
We shared: programmes, notes of dates
With lists of guests and scribbled menus:
Letters of many years from many places
But huddled all together—reading them
Like dipping apples that bob about
In a bowl of water.
Re-entered, they come back as life—
A life that loneliness can never know.
("February 7th 1992" [1994, p. 86])

Moments of consciousness in time.
Reflecting on relationship, contingency, destiny, and death. How we grow in and out of love, how the family and relationships evolve, how we mediate possession and jealousy, how our children inevitably leave us. How we learn to keep our wounds and hurts, our aspirations and anticipations, very much to ourselves. Displaying thoughts inappropriate for a "property" considered public presentation of self, Jimmy's poems charted the contours of his sensibility lived from inside. Yet what he chronicled are states of mind, not precise events, as though sharing a story with others risked being too intrusive.

Poems cut loose in the world are dangerous. In exposing our needs and desires, our fears and anxieties, our sense of self can be made to feel ashamed. The fragility of life—how in an instant the metal of a car can sever flesh and leave you with the horror of knowing that "what is done/can not be undone" ("For Elizabeth" May 8th, 1979, [1994, p. 60]). All the categories of our taxonomy might straightaway be reversed when we confront our illusory attempts to thwart the finality of death. But Jimmy modestly claimed no status for himself as poet. Feelings needed also to be guarded and so his language taxonomy separated poetry off into an admired "verbal object," a design that, unless one is vigilant, removes the emotional mess at precisely the point when feelings might be laid most bare. Still, wonderfully, the seepage remains:

And longing seems precious
And life seems tomorrow—
Wild music, wild music
That jangles the heart-strings.
(May 26th 1983 [1994, p. 69])

Thus we might imagine that even his taxonomy stands waiting to be disturbed, not venerated.

In discussing how he's gone about categorizing verbal forms and utterances Jimmy confesses, I have referred to narrative—spoken and written—enactment and drama, argument, poetry and novels; and using the term loosely, I have included all of these save argument under the name literature. The term is one we are used to in many contexts—from its early appearance relating to folk tales and fairy tales, through leisure reading at all stages, to examination work in high school, and through to a major role in academia, where it is often given one of a wide range of particular, and sometimes even contradictory, definitions. (1993, p. 85)

A point of departure: "literature" as the central "argument" of our lives. Fundamental reciprocity recovered: every story in concert with its expository intent—every exposition in contact with the story it reveals. Once we are clear that Jimmy's categories need not be viewed separately in isolation, but might connect and consort with their opposites, then it is possible
to regain the kind of complementarity wholeness to which Alison alludes. For instance, we might rotate one of his two continuums 90 degrees to the left forming a Cartesian coordinate system: (See Figure 1)
The resulting quadrants allow us to begin juxtaposing Jimmy's terms in creative, if heretical, ways: I—poetic language in the spectator mode, II—poetic language in the participant mode, III—transactional language in the participant mode, and IV—transactional language in that stalk Jimmy's major axes—transactional/poetic (form) and participant/spectator (role)—we discover a wealth of attitudes and positions that crave accounting: public/private, presence/absence, reveal/conceal, explicit/implicit, exclude/include, abstract/concrete, confront/retreat, repel/attract, certainty/doubt, out/in, control/liberate, horde/distribute, closed/open, tight/loose, dominance/agency, work/play, teach/learn, hierarchical/democratic, bureaucratic/expressive, duty/desire. A private and not merely a reflexive response dictated by someone else's catechism, the peculiar control and distancing power exerted by Jimmy's transactional/poetic split needs recasting. His schema need not be an excuse for rendering safe the kinds of intentions that do not fit the "correct" social script one is supposed to be following. There is room to express the grief and pain of conflicting motives and purposes—room for another "yes, but" as we acknowledge the excess we'll never capture in language; wanting what we dare not have, nor even dare imagine—a world contrary (and this scares us all) to the one that immediately envelopes us. Jimmy's commitment finally was to the mess of "personal growth," which he imagine as occurring in an equitable society, a place that continues to elude us. As we play with his taxonomy, we can learn to trust his abstractions even as they embody his rightful reluctance to make the private public. It's the legacy of this unsentimental tension in Jimmy's thinking that alerts us to the deep need in our own lives to keep duty united with desire.

References


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