

You say 'Exclusion' and I say 'Bananas!'

Why careers work must not concede command of its language

Bill Law

The trouble with our work is - as one commentator once observed - it is 'malleable'. Over the years it has certainly been moulded into different shapes, by different groups, for different purposes.

The difference between 'malleable' and flexible, is that 'flexible' knows which way is forward. It can, therefore, conceive purposes, deal with pressure, and adapt to change without losing direction. In that process, it is easy to underestimate the importance of words.

Bill illustrates how that is so.

An ancient Chinese document, *The Celestial Emporium of Benevolent Knowledge*, offers - among other helpful things - a classification of animals.

'Among animals, know the difference' it, advises, 'between' ...

... 'those that belong to The Emperor'
 ... 'embalmed ones'
 ... 'those that are trained'
 ... 'suckling pigs'
 ... 'those that tremble as though they are mad'
 ... 'those drawn with a very fine camel's hair brush'
 ... 'those that have broken a flower vase'.
 ... 'those which at a distance resemble fñies'.

Good advice? Oh yes! This is no mere academic taxonomy, it is intended to inform action. It is helpful to know the difference between trained animals and 'tremblers'. And ignorance is no defence if you're caught messing with the Emperor's animals. And so, ancient Chinese person, knowledge is power.

Not calling the whole thing off

Linguistics expert David Crystal shows how much of what we call knowledge is explained in terms of the words we use. Words signpost experience. For example Helena Drysdale argues that language is not just a neutral tool for communicating, it is our way of setting out the ways things are. That is why, when one way of talking is replaced by another, something is always lost in translation.

Signposts, both on the roads and in our heads, do get changed. Think of the attempt to eliminate *Cymraeg* in Wales. On the surface, that means no more than the inconvenience of having to learn *Saisneg* in order to be okay at school, to fill in forms, to go shopping and to make long journeys. But, at a deeper level it changes the terms in which people understand themselves and their world. It took a French philosopher, Michel Foucault, fully to

realise the ways in which 'knowledge is power'; the French understand, better than most, how their words shape reality.

The working world is a veritable grid-lock of changing signposts. What was once the firm's 'reduction' became, first 'downsizing', then 'rightsizing', recently 'house-cleaning'. Whatever, it leads - not to 'dismissal' - but being, at best, 'outplaced', at worst, 'let go'. The consequence is not to be 'unemployed' but a 'job-seeker' and - this is really imaginative - 'at liberty'! It's not hard to learn the new words, in some ways it makes life easier so to do; it polishes one's conversation to a contemporary gloss.

But this is not just cosmetics: it changes the terms in which we understand what is happening. At worst, it renders the unacceptable acceptable, invites trust for the untrustworthy, seeks compliance with what should be resisted. It is intended to change how we behave.

Words are, therefore, a battleground. You say 'downsizing', I say 'dismissal' - does that mean we're going to have to call the whole thing off? Maybe not; but this is certainly true: the weaker must struggle to protect their language from the stronger.

Business journalist Paul Kingsworth illustrates how management-speak can take over minds. He reports a WTO speaker, billed to speak at a 2001 management conference in Tampere, Finland. His USA-based group has already reported thought-experimental work on how William Wilberforce and Mahatma Gandhi might, by harnessing market forces, have more effectively resisted slavery and imperialism. The group has also outlined methods, more cost-effective than elections, for representing commercial interests in governments.

At the Tampere conference the speaker demonstrated a productivity-enhancing management tool. Called the 'employee visualisation appendage', it communicates with transmitter-receivers located on employees. The

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transmitters send a read-out on performance; the receivers give trained manager administration of calibrated electric shocks to less-efficient workers.

It was, of course, a spoof. But the 'WTO' speaker reports to Paul Kingsworth that the managers in the audience showed no sign that they suspected anything. He got a polite round of applause - no resistance, no doubts, not even a query.

The words did their work. If a speaker flavours his PowerPoints with key words - 'skills', 'trained', 'business', 'choice', 'market', 'management', 'cost', 'standards' - not only do we not ask, we don't realise that there might be a question worth asking.

Walking the walk and talking the talk

Guidance needs signposts for the contemporary world. 'Opportunity awareness', and points west, have survived surprisingly well. Indeed, with minor amendments, they have been re-erected by the QCA.

And there are new signposts. Professor Ken Roberts, long-time critical friend to guidance, is worried about the signposting of 'social exclusion'. It points, he argues, to no recognisable reality. To settle for the word, rather than attend to the reality is - Ken reminds everybody - the sociological sin of 'reification'. The perpetrators of 'social exclusion' are guilty. For, 'the excluded' are not just the people without work, they are the poor and the underclass. Some are desperate, some hopeless and some fearful. They may be a net cost to the economy; but that may mean being unready, disengaged or just bored. There is every chance that they are humiliated, loyal to those who understand them, angry with everybody else - troubled and troublesome. Few people rate all of these descriptions. Most rate some. By no means all are whom the Connexions Unit thinks it means by the 'socially excluded'. There is no single reality signposted here. It is a labyrinth.

Reification tidies unwelcome complication into manageable simple-mindedness. We should worry about that. Because in order to help we must know, and knowledge depends on words. If we mean to walk the walk, we must learn to talk the talk.

The worst effects of not doing so would be that we hurt the people we seek to help. Learners become elements in other peoples' purposes - commodities. There, in the name of 'standards', a current proposal to subject 7 year-olds to 117 learning assessments. The perpetrators of the 'employee visualisation appendage' were kidding. The perpetrators of 117 test for 7 years-olds are not.

When words point us towards the possibility of harm, or when they do not fit the reality, or just get out-of-date, then we must be free to change them. For that we need command

of our own language. Helena Drysdale regrets the way in which people have, so often, acquiesced in the loss of their own language. It was bad enough that the children of the Welsh were - in their own schools - made to wear slates commanding *Dim Cymraeg*. It is worse to hang the slate around your own neck.

Being malleable

The past is only worth visiting if it helps us to understand the present. Sometimes it does. The Schools Council Careers Education and Guidance Project, active in the '70s, was one of the most creative - and least understood - initiatives in careers work. A key element was a series of simulated newspapers, with news items, quizzes, self-help questionnaires, games, correspondence columns, pictures and features. That was probably a better idea then, than it would be now; but the point is that it raised issues for working life - how it works, who does what, and what work is like for people. The designers wanted not just to equip learners to fit in, but to understand - and to be active. A criticism at the time was that teachers could not, safely, be left to engage young minds in such dynamics.

The project became one of the first places where education, business and political interests first came into serious conversation with each other. One of the most telling remarks about that process was, at that time, made by evaluator Inge Bates; careers education is, she said, 'infinitely malleable'. If she was right about that, careers education will, since then, have proven capable of taking on whatever shape whatever strong hand cares to press upon it.

Researcher Suzy Harris' says that it has, because, she says, careers education is a 'contested concept'. Her book is a much-needed history of influences on careers education. She describes how economic change impacts policy which seeks to influence careers-education. She argues that careers education has been bounced around because it lacks a robust intellectual foundation - she makes little reference to the intellectual life of the NACGT. Suzy also misses the fact that careers education has been a happy hunting ground for the '...ologies' - all the way from neurology to sociology. But she is right to point to powerful political attention. And she is also right to suggest that - so far - careers education has not been able to find a clear forward route through the labyrinth of initiatives.

But it can be done: careers educators were among those who made the Technical and Vocational Education Initiative workable in educational terms (TVEI's demise had nothing to do with its worth). We must hope that personal advisers and their partners can do the same good job on Connexions.

It will need flexibility rather than malleability, because - in order to move on - we need to know which way is 'forward'.

Moving on

Our professional associations and institutes signpost the journey. But there is an issue here: they are what political commentator Professor Paul Hirst calls 'communities of choice' - we associate with them in order to be with people like ourselves. And, in contemporary society, communities of choice seek less-and-less contact with alternative points of view. Paul Hirst argues, that their talk has been 'hollowed out', removing conflicted accounts of what can and should happen, and speaking only of consensual and pragmatic bases for action. Hard decision making is left, he says, to managers, fewer searching questions are asked, systems become increasingly 'top-down', the point-of-delivery becomes increasingly biddable.

That ally of Michel Foucault, Louis Althusser, points to a harder route; we need, he says, to extend 'horizons of thought' if we are to deal with historical change. History is not just a branch of the entertainment industry, it is a tool. The present reflects the past. Check this out....

'The day is coming, if I do not misread the signs of the time, when teachers of our schools will have to choose between making a bolder use of their freedom and having it ruthlessly abridged.'

Edmund Holmes, Chief Inspector of Schools (1905)

And...

'Schools need to believe that they have the freedom to determine the nature and structure of the curriculum, within and beyond the statutory framework. But they have to regain the initiative and not see themselves as helpless victims in the context of instructions from above.'

David Bell - Chief Inspector of Schools (2002)

Reading the signs of the times requires that Suzy Harris's work is paralleled by David Peck's forthcoming history of the careers services. We need all the signposts we can get in working out what careers work can do, what it can do better than anything else, what can only it do - and, perhaps as much as anything - what it *cannot* do.

Paul Hirst argues that this needs new forms of open and pluralistic community. The possibilities for careers work are developed as my next 'Points of Departure'. I assume that you are not ready to have a slate hung round your neck, and you see nothing wrong in arguing with emperors.

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Note

'Bongos, Jockeys and Young Victors - why we need a think-tank for guidance' - Bill's next Points of Departure' will appear in the Spring issue.

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For fun

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