



Speak,
that I
may see
thee.

Ben
Johnson

A New Evaluator Perspective
for
Professors of Education

J. Myron Atkin

I have learned much this afternoon--including the fact that I am a "pedagogist," drifting toward becoming a "generalist" never having had aspirations to be a "disciplinist."

My intention in what follows is to outline a type of generalist orientation toward studies in education that has attracted me; I plan to conclude by pointing to a style of scholarship that already is visible within the education professoriate, a style that I think

holds considerable promise for melding some of the perspectives we already have heard about today.

First, I will discuss briefly my perception of the disciplinary orientation in education and my notions of a scholar in and of a field of practice before indicating where current styles of inquiry and research may be leading. At the outset, however, it may be fair warning to observe that we have entered a discussion that has been in progress

at least since the start of the Twentieth Century. Perhaps the most that anyone can reasonably hope to add is somewhat different imagery to describe our predicament and our prospects.

I

Disciplinary orientations to the field of education, at their best, lead to a kind of "Rashomon" approach in describing events of interest. People coming with different kinds of training and biases illuminate complex phenomena from distinctive vantage points. By juxtaposing these astute and frequently insightful views, we occasionally achieve a sort of integration--or at a minimum, a sense of multiple truths. Those of us who saw the Rashomon film or who read the Akutagawa story arrived at a better understanding of events in the forest that day--though none of us feels confident about writing the definitive description.

A second analogue to the disciplinary orientation might be usefully noted. The field of ethology is methodologically suggestive. Instructive, too, are the conditions that brought this field into existence several decades ago. In the 1920's and '30's a few natural scientists studying the behavior of animals in the field found that the separate disciplinary perspectives were insufficient to account for the complexities of animal behavior in its natural settings. While they agreed it was important to understand the contributions of animal psychologists, anatomists, and physiologists, none of these perspectives--nor even the sum--was sufficient to explain stickle-back courtship behavior or the behavior of bees. It took a Tinbergen and a Lorenz, who began with the phenomenon of primary interest in its own terms, to develop novel approaches to analysis of animal behavior. These scientists/naturalists brought to their studies their own disciplinary background of course, but they rejected any one

discipline as the complete basis for describing the behavior that captured their attention. It seems to me also that they began to use (and still use to some degree) a kind of common sense language that they had to rediscover in order to talk across the special fields.

Viewing early ethologists in this fashion, it is possible to see parallels between their work and that of some scholars currently studying education. I've never tested whether Phil Jackson would be agreeable to characterizing his *Life in Classrooms* as an ethological study. However, his book seems to me an excellent example of the style of scholarly analysis I am describing, one that begins and ends with the object and subject of interest and brings to bear disciplinary perspectives only as they seem relevant, rather than the other way around.

At its best, then, scholarship derivative from the disciplines could be Rashomon-like, or it could be ethology-like. At our own university--the University of Illinois--and probably at yours, we are trying to encourage some of these emphases. We have evaluators who try to describe educational events from different perspectives. More about them later. We have a genuine ethologist who studies children in classrooms.

Disciplinary approaches can, of course, be reductionist and disjoint. Worst of all, they are sometimes insensitive to the work of the teacher and educational administrator. They start with narrow perspectives, most frequently out of psychology. The tendency is not even to recognize wise practice when it occurs because the blinders are so very limiting. The narrowness of these disciplinary perspectives is equalled only by their diminutive theoretical base--a point I probably need not develop for a group like this one.

II

Now what about scholarship that is more oriented to the field, in view of our assumption that the education professoriate finds itself between the disciplines and the world of practice? Well here, again, at its worst, "intellectual" discourse consists of a string of battle stories and anecdotes which may serve a useful purpose in establishing cohesive networks of people who engage in the same type of activity, but in which the intellectual effort is neither systematic nor cumulative. Make no mistake: Hand clasping is necessary in every profession. I come to a meeting like this one and listen to the conversations of fellow deans. It is consoling to learn that I face problems that are not unique. Anecdote and impression can be revealing as well as comforting.

At its best, however, a style of analysis derivative from working in the field rather than from a discipline has a kind of artistry. It frequently has a literary cast displaying sensitive use of imagery and metaphor. While such work is idiosyncratic, it can have the kind of generalizability expressed by an outstanding work of art. If this kind of production is rare in education, there are teachers and others who employ the genre effectively. To encourage this style of scholarship, it would seem plausible to examine more systematically canons of artistic and literary criticism.

III

The work of some of the "new evaluators" presents scholarly styles that seem appreciative of the wisdom of effective practice and that are at the same time analytical. I do not mean the group oriented toward objectives, but rather the group called the "goal-free evaluators"--not entirely jokingly. Outstanding practitioners among these evaluators include Ulf Lundgren and Urban Dahlóff in Sweden; Barry MacDonald

and Malcolm Parlett in Britain; of Robert Stake and Ernest House at the University of Illinois; and of Michael Scriven at Berkeley. The descriptions of educational events provided by these scholars seem especially sensitive to the variety of audiences they address. More effectively than any other group of intellectuals in the field of education, they begin with a self-conscious attempt to illuminate practice for the practitioner and the decision maker. They then try to pull together whatever information they can to help their listeners understand the phenomena in question; they consider whether they are addressing school board members, or parents, or teachers in training; they then try to assemble the kinds of data that would be most helpful to these individuals, whether the object is to foster a better understanding of the teaching of mathematics, or to promote better decision making that affects educational programs. In their own literature, they sometimes call their analyses "case studies." That may be misleading because the label might suggest what is done by some educational anthropologists and sociologists. Between the work of some social scientists and that of some of the new evaluators, there is undoubtedly overlap; there is also difference. Methodological comparability is itself a subject deserving of further study.

There is something powerfully attractive about the respectful, even humble orientation toward the world of practice demonstrated by the new evaluators. They assume that there is more to an educational situation than easily meets the eye or that can be readily assessed--as contrasted with most social and behavioral scientists, who almost invariably assume that there is less than meets the eye when they study educational events. The new evaluators are among those alerting us most insightfully about the truncated and otherwise distorted perceptions of education reflected to viewers who center their research on the most

readily describable events or most readily measurable.

IV

In closing, it might be useful to accent a point that has not yet been mentioned today. Various disciplinists are themselves beginning to doubt the power of their own perspectives to yield understanding of events in the world beneath their lenses. We seem to be coming out of the strong positivistic era that has so long characterized the social and behavioral sciences. Some writers have commented on the phenomenon of skipping a disciplinary generation, with disciplinary grandchildren now rediscovering their grandparents. We have the old "institutional" economists, for example, who used to talk about the broad world in which economic events transpire. The rising generation of economists tended to strive for perfection of abstract and highly sophisticated models while their overshadowed critics charged that these pristine constructs related poorly to actual events in the economic world. Now we

have a new generation of economists who are rediscovering the broad perspectives of their disciplinary grandfathers. When I touch on this topic during informal conversations, my colleagues suggest that a similar generation leap is evident in sociology and psychology. There are groups of younger scholars in the disciplines who are more concerned about achieving fidelity to the phenomena of greatest interest than they are intent on reducing the data immediately to the readily replicable. If it is true that the disciplines themselves are moving toward more wholistic conceptions of the problems of study, then the kind of scholarly style I am talking about in education might stand a better chance of thriving. One of my fantasies is that a college of education might lead the way on a campus in helping disciplinists to relate their work more significantly to problems that affect people in the most intimately personal aspect of their life, namely, the meanings which reveal themselves and the world to consciousness--in a word, "education."

