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Learning from Michael

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This is my thank you to Michael Armstrong for his gift of respect for the thought of each individual child. I needed that gift, sorely.

I was once a teacher of young children. Later, my graduate education research experience was a hunt for patterns in young children's language development. We tracked three children in spontaneous conversation with their mothers from the time they began putting two words together (at about two years) until they were speaking in full sentences. Our analyses found similar patterns across the two girls and one boy. For example, all three children consistently added *-ing* to express ongoing action before other verb tenses, and when describing nouns, they consistently added *-s* to express plurality before possession. Even more strikingly, they made the same errors of overgeneralization – like *mines* (perhaps by analogy with *his, hers, theirs*). There were individual differences, but in our analyses these were ignored. This analytical training in searching for categorical similarities carried over into my subsequent independent research.

Michael, through his very different interpretations of children's writing, forced me to confront the individuality I had learned to ignore. After some summers together at the Bread Loaf School of English in Vermont, we started a wonderful email colleagueship. Ever generous, Michael would attach his essays, often an interpretation of a single child's text from the village school near Oxford where he was the teaching principal, or from the public school in Lawrence, MA – with many children from immigrant Dominican and Puerto Rican families – where he regularly spent a month in a Bread Loaf teacher's classroom after his British retirement.

Once, he wrote about a child's text he had found in a preparatory document for the English National Curriculum. 'When I was Naughty' (WIWN) told the story of two sisters who stole some crisps from the kitchen cupboard, started upstairs with their loot, were caught by their father, lied unsuccessfully, and were sent to bed without supper. The author had divided her narrative into five segments, with text and illustration for each.

I was as intrigued as Michael had been with WIWN, and decided to use it (with full credit to Michael's 1990 article in *FORUM*, 33(1), 12-16) as the basis for a forthcoming talk. I sent photocopies of the child's illustrated text to a small group of language research colleagues, asking what caught their attention. True to their training, they analysed it in terms of their familiar categories. For example, in the sentence 'My dad cort [caught] me and Claire', the author had written *My* as the final word in segment two and the rest of the sentence at the beginning of segment three. One researcher suggested that the anomalous placement of *My* could be the writing analogue of a 'speech error', a well-known psycholinguistic category that can be the result of dual attention to one idea while planning another. Michael, by contrast, had originally asked (*FORUM*, 33(1)), 'Is the author trying to highlight the interruption of the action in full flow?' I sent my talk with my colleagues' responses to WIWN to Michael. His comments were gentle but firmly critical.

Perhaps because, like Michael, I had been a primary school teacher, a role that demands attention to individual differences, the contrast between my analysis of categorical patterns and Michael's interpretation of individual uniqueness stayed restlessly in my mind. So, some years later, on the verge of academic retirement, I tried again in an invited journal article, still using the same child's text, to suggest not contrast, but complementarity.

This time, I compared the overall structure of WIWN as shown in the author's segmentation of text and illustrations to sociolinguistic analyses of narrative form – for example, William Labov's five-part canonical sequence: orientation, initiating action, complicating action, resolution, and coda. The fit is surprisingly good. I concluded with a quote from an authority in a distant field to suggest that the difference between analyses and interpretations, at issue in our correspondence about a child's written composition, has wider relevance. George Kubler has critiqued archaeology's tendency to ignore the contribution of individual makers to the artifacts it analyses: 'Works of art are produced by individual persons whose unique sensibilities transform the stream of tradition'. Again, I sent this article to Michael, and again he responded:

> I have often wondered how my work relates to the work of theorists such as Labov or indeed to your own work, and your essay clarified the relationship in lots of ways. I was especially interested in your reference to George Kubler's *The Art and Architecture of Ancient America*, which I bought two or three years ago when I was working in Lawrence but have not done more than glance at until now. I looked up your reference and was struck most of all by the introductory section on The Place of the Artist: 'Works of art are produced by individual persons whose unique sensibilities transform the stream of tradition.' I see children as just such persons – which I dare say goes way beyond Kubler's intention – and the educational task as that of promoting the simultaneous absorption and transformation of tradition. The two aims I see as complementary. (Michael Armstrong, email message, November 16, 2013)

This memorial message is my public appreciation to Michael for what I have learned from him: initially, respect for the thought of each individual child; now his profound definition of 'the educational task'.

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