

THE OBSTACLES TO LEARNING: INFORMATION - 1987

By David Boulton

Long before children acquire language, they seem to make discernments. Sometimes these non-verbal “judgments” are observable in the preferring of a particular toy or activity, at other times much more subtly so, they appear in the more dynamic experiences of learning to crawl or walk or drink through a straw. Somehow the child’s proto-emotions and actions are responding to some “awareness”, though not necessarily self- or consciously so.

The process involved in such discernments seems to imply a non-verbal awareness, though again, not necessarily a self- or non-self, or conscious or sub-conscious, one. Notwithstanding a particular identifiable orientation it does however seem that the process includes being aware of “differences” and being capable of more than automated pre-disposition with respect to them. In other words capable of learning.

This is important in that if verbal discerning uses verbal concepts and elements for a comparative basis, what is the basis of non-verbal discerning?

Relatively speaking, non-verbal discerning seems to occur in relation to dynamic differences and qualities of the “feeling” or “energy” the environment evokes within the child.

The reason for examining this is to provide a background from which to explore some potentially different views about learning. It is therefore important to move from here seeing that a significant difference between verbal and non-verbal awareness is the basis involved in discernment. Having established that there is a difference, we can begin to entertain the notion that the dynamic co-implications of these different perceptual processes are near the root of learning.

As children we learn most rapidly and profoundly through a primarily non-verbal process.

As adults our capacity for learning is limited by how well the non-verbal and verbal learning processes generally co-operate and specifically co-implicate.

The child’s transition from non-verbal orientation to verbal orientation is crucial to the subsequent capacity for learning.

Verbal awareness is not just the awareness of words, but the organization of awareness by images, symbols and words. Non-verbal awareness is not just the non-awareness of words but the non-word-symbol-image nature of awareness. One is, relatively, (cognitive) content oriented, the other (affect) process oriented - but both are meaning oriented. Meaning being the result of discernment of differentiation.

To further ground the importance of such thinking consider the relationship each different basis of discernment yields with respect to meaning.

What is non-verbal meaning? It can be described in words but can it be experienced in words? As children we non-verbally experience meaning in relation to learning to walk but while we can describe that meaning, we as consummate walkers no longer experience it. In contrast, what do we mean by verbal meaning? The meaning associated with words? As the semanticists are fond of pointing out, words do not have meanings. They are vague and ambiguous and are given meaning by the context of the perceiver.

The common denominator of this circular problem about meaning, is that meaning is an interplay between the object, subject or event and the verbal and non-verbal context of its perception.

This is difficult to grasp because the process of non-verbal awareness is no longer entirely within the direct experience of the adult-self. We do have non-verbal experiences, but we no longer have a non-verbal orientation with the world. In the adult the experience of awareness is dominated by the verbal and by the self, both of which being relative abstractions of the more direct relationship with “energy” or “attention” which is

non-verbal. The point here is that the verbal minded orientation is a different reference basis or contextual ground than is the non-verbal. Consequently the nature of non-verbal awareness, is an entirely different “self-world view”. The discernment processes differ in verbal content and the relationship of that content to the meaning attributed them by disparate contextual views.

Having now seen that the verbal and non-verbal bring different “contexts” to the perception of “contents”, how can we reconcile the fact that the verbal grows out of, or at least is in some way rooted in, the non-verbal? In other words if the verbal is initially the result of non-verbal learning how can they imply such different perspectives?

To begin to see how this relates to the relationship a child has with information, consider the relationship between the non-verbal and verbal in the child who is acquiring language.

The first field of activity is the association of an object or, an event relating objects, to a sound. Both the sound and the non-sound perception are associated together both in what is the beginning of verbal memory and also in relation to the non-verbal dynamics of discernment. There are a multitude of co-implications. Essentially, non-verbal inner responses, recognitions, feelings and discernments are given verbal labels.

Because of the process of co-implicating experience in both non-verbal and verbal terms, learning is rapid and profoundly deep.

The first step then, in acquiring a language, is one of attention focusing on the association between the sound and its referent. Dog is dog. Tv is Tv. Mom is Mom. Ball is Ball etc.. This first step is arbitrary with respect to non-verbal awareness. The child accepts that a shoe is a shoe without demanding to know why.

But, the child does encounter difficulty when the words being accumulated do not represent labels for non-verbal discernments. When, before his non-verbal perception can distinguish a difference, he is forced to acquire one verbally: Water, Milk, Apple Juice, Orange Juice, Grape juice, etc...instead of “juice”. If he hasn’t made a non-verbal distinction between them, where do the labels go? The acquisition of such words prior to the ability to differentiate their meanings non-verbally can keep them from co-implicating themselves in a common concept.

The next typical step is learning to associate sounds heard with visual symbols - the alphabet. Here again other than the inability to differentiate auditorily the “B” from “D” or “P”, which comes along quickly with heightened sensitivity to difference, the child co-implicates the symbols with their sounds in both verbal and non-verbal ways.

The next step is the visual recognition of words. Here begins the more subtle problem. The pronunciation rules of language can not be conceptually understood, there are insufficient verbal support elements and concepts. As such, when the sound of a word pronounced is in non-resolvable conflict with respect to the prior co-implications regarding the sounds of the letters that comprise it, what happens? The process which has guided and energized the child is “wrong”, without having a way of understanding (non-verbally) “why”. The emphasis is placed on relying on arbitrary associations rather than co-implications.

Such accumulations, while learned, operate like a barrier to real learning in two important ways:

1 - They help to develop and fortify a schism which takes place between the non-verbal and verbal. The child learns to rely upon the authority of the verbal without necessarily understanding “why” because he is made to feel his previous non-verbal process of understanding is wrong. How do you explain to a three year old why “eye” is not spelled “i”? Everything he has learned says otherwise and if his previous notion and the new association can’t be reconciled and yet the new is correct by the reckoning of a superior authority he separates within himself. The child learns to distrust the very process which has guided him through the marvelous learning feats which have made him what he is.

2 - Memory that is related to external association without being co-implicated with the non-verbal, when re-

called in its original context, prohibits the conjunction of non-verbal and verbal “meaning” processes. Except for the possibility of a later insight which could co-implicate the memory, it will remain as an insulator to understanding. Because verbal associations are sustained by the dissipation of energy of non-verbal processes their ability to later co-implicate with related understandings requires more mental energy than otherwise required. Such accumulations are not available for faster, lower energy “free-associations”, therefore they are more limited from participating in learning and creating.

Jumping now beyond the small child, we all have these characteristics. When the meaning in learning, elementally and conceptually, is not co-implicating verbal and non-verbal awareness, the energy of attention dissipates. To have learning so co-implicate, the orientation of the learner must be towards meaning. As meaning is not in the words, events and objects but in the learner, the learning environment must communicate at the learner’s level of meaning, stretching it but not disengaging it. The learning environment must be meaning oriented.

To summarize; the child’s early learning is guided by the inner response to qualities and differences in energy - not verbal content. Miraculous learning occurs under these conditions. As the verbal accumulates to the threshold of participating in perception, its accumulating inconsistencies (not reconciled non-verbally) aggregate and de-sensitize the learner to what has up to this point guided the learning process. As this condition proliferates it imposes increasing limitations to the child’s capacity to learn. The growing tacit acceptance or resignation of this situation results in rigid ness of self and a mechanical mentality reflective of the associations maintained at higher levels of arbitrary abstraction.

All of this said, the relationship a child has with information is not alone in it’s subtlety or encrusting side-effects. Once children acquire a verbal orientation their relationship with the entire world is riddled with arbitrary associations which override their otherwise natural tendency for co-implicating the verbal and non-verbal. But our relationship with information can be, relative to the other factors, easily changed.

If we can become sensitive to the potentially profound damage to our capacity for learning our relationship with information implies; we can use that awareness in interpersonal relationships and through technology to make available to the learner, of all ages, many different opportunities to perceive the meanings which will co-implicate what is being learned. This is the significance of the information age.