

Fostering Descriptive Power

Perception is fascinating and is inextricably bound up with all levels and kinds of thinking. Perceptual knowledge, descriptive data, serves as raw material for any and all processing operations. Certainly all kinds of constructing and processing operations await, e.g., imagining, describing, generalizing, comparing, day-dreaming, thousands of kinds. The mind is constantly at work with its symbols, such as images and language, formulating and focusing percepts out of sensory stimuli and then making thought and feeling constructs.

Knowledge forms available in the mind as words and language powerfully serve to organize and synthesize the sensory field. Use words to help the child see. Language the surroundings, that which is being observed. Language not only coheres and registers the environment, it also makes operational the process skills that become the skills of inquiry for the learner.

The basic inquiry for the young child is that of observing and describing. The interaction between observing and describing produces and is the stuff of experience. Experience is an individual construct, an individual artifact. By means of his senses the learner encounters the immediate environment and begins to develop and to learn the concepts that become his code for making meaning. The code could be thought of as the environmental code since it is the basis by which the individual gathers and processes all sensory information.

More specifically the code enables one to carry out such operations as describing, classifying, inferring, generalizing. It happens that the code vocabulary associated with observing and describing also is used to carry out other process skills. For example, as the learner develops such concepts as *color*, *shape*, *function*, he has a basis not only for observing and describing things and happenings, but also for classifying them and generalizing about them. The code vocabulary that supports the describing skill becomes the basis for other process skills. As the code is extended and elaborated, it becomes possible to gather and to process sensory information more effectively, to do a better job of reading or deriving meaning from the environment.

Specific and systematic consideration should be given to deriving teaching strategies that serve to foster the descriptive power of the learner. The following questions can serve as guides.

What are the attributes of description, the terms of description? We can describe in terms of physical characteristics such as *color*, *size*, *form*, *pH*. There are thousands of concepts that have been invented and that stand ready to designate physical characteristics and attributes. If we have learned the concept, then we can perceive and observe the characteristic designated by the concept. Other terms of description include those that designate *function*, *feelings about*, *sequence*, and others. The point for the teacher is that the child needs to practice and utilize

descriptions through a variety of terms and attributes.

What is the object of description, that which is being described? What are the attributes dealing with, formulating or modifying? One can, for example, describe material objects, feelings, beliefs, happenings. A person might be skillful with describing or embodying material objects but be poor with describing moods or feelings or happenings. Notice that a concept can function either as an attribute of description or as an object of description. I can describe with *red* and I can describe *red*. It is a red ball. It is a dark red.

What is the mode of description, the form or vehicle of description? What form of representation is to be used? Description can be formulated or represented in a variety of ways. We can describe or formulate with language, with graphics, by demonstrating in action, with mathematics, with dance, with music. Here, again, variety is the keynote. What is the best mode for formulating the particular meaning? There is much meaning that cannot be formulated in language. There is a wide repertory of forms that symbolize or carry meaning. The learner needs to develop facility with a variety of forms in order to receive, construct, and express meaning efficiently and to realize the spectrum of his potential for productive and creative thought.

The teacher or parent can help the child construct and utilize descriptive information by giving him the opportunity to develop and use a variety of attributes to description, of objects of description (that which is being described), and modes of representing description. Too, help him to see purpose in description. Do I want to analyze something, tell something to others, record something for future use, enjoy something? What is it that description can do for me, for anyone? Keep in mind that descriptive information serves as the raw material for all other process skills. I must first embody something before I can compare it or speculate about it, reason with it or from it.

Other thinking skills can be analyzed in order to get a vocabulary that will cue or make operational the particular skill. *To sequence* might use such terms as before-after, here-there, first-second-third. . . Teaching can be benefited by systematically utilizing not only a content vocabulary but also a process vocabulary. The topic of *erosion* carries such subsidiary and associated concepts as solvent, dissolving, wearing, weathering, force, surface, flow, weather. To get and use facts about erosion, to make ideas about and to understand *erosion* carries associated concepts of processing, e.g., observing/describing, comparing/classifying, inferring/generalizing. To know erosion, I must know how to find out about erosion.

Utilizing his knowledge and skills, the child is a learner. He wants to learn. During elementary school age, he tends to be curious about the objects and events in his immediate surroundings. He is all eyes and ears and movement. He is prime for collecting facts with his senses. Help him to use them. Whatever idea or concept you want the child to learn, try to make sure that it is rooted or can be rooted in direct experience. We realize that the pre-operational stage of mental development and the stage of concrete operations rely primarily on sensory information for the production of ideas

and learning. The elementary school context, then, becomes an information processing center where the facts necessary for achieving concept goals are available from and based on observation and manipulation of actual objects and events. Secondary sources of facts, e.g., books, films, are used primarily to support and add to sensory information. Books give meaning to experience. Experience gives meaning to books.

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