

**The Educational Theory of Jerome Bruner:
a multi-dimensional analysis**

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Based on writings by and about Jerome Bruner, answers have been constructed to the following questions in eight general areas:

I. Theory of Value: What knowledge and skills are worthwhile learning? What are the goals of education?

II. Theory of Knowledge: What is knowledge? How is it different from belief? What is a mistake? A lie?

III. Theory of Human Nature: What is a human being? How does it differ from other species? What are the limits of human potential?

IV. Theory of Learning: What is learning? How are skills and knowledge acquired?

V. Theory of Transmission: Who is to teach? By what methods? What will the curriculum be?

VI. Theory of Society: What is society? What institutions are involved in the educational process?

VII. Theory of Opportunity: Who is to be educated? Who is to be schooled?

VIII. Theory of Consensus: Why do people disagree? How is consensus achieved? Whose opinion takes precedence?

Extensive endnotes and references are provided.

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Jerome Bruner's Educational Theory

Introduction

Jerome Seymour Bruner, born October 1, 1915 to Polish immigrants, was raised in New York City. He was born blind but his sight was restored after two cataract operations while he was still an infant. Bruner has become one of the leading education psychologists of his time, developing an influential theory of active learning that contrasts strongly with the behaviorism that was prevalent in educational psychology through most of the twentieth century.

Bruner did his undergraduate work at Duke University. He received his Ph.D. from Harvard University in 1941 where he stayed on as a professor in psychology from 1952-1972. He cofounded and directed Harvard's Center for Cognitive Studies.^[1] Bruner also holds honorary Doctorates from Yale, Columbia, Sorbonne, Berlin, and Rome. Bruner has taught at Oxford University, and is currently on the faculty of NYU's School of Law. He explains his current interests as: "the various institutional forms by which culture is passed on -- most particularly in school practices and in legal codes and legal praxis. In both examples, my concern is with how canonical forms create dialectic with the "possible worlds" of imaginative art forms. My preferred method of work in both instances is the anthropological-interpretive."^[2]

Bruner, along with Leo Postman, developed the so - called "New Look" in psychology focussing mainly on perception as an active process, based on experience and cultural conditions.^[3] In addition to studying perception, Bruner began to look at the role of strategies in the development of human cognition. ^[4] During the 1950's and 1960's, Bruner developed a profound interest in the cognitive development of children and in the forms of education appropriate to them. Ultimately, Bruner became one of the most influential figures in the "cognitive revolution" in education.^[5]

Piaget, Vygotsky, and Luria influenced Bruner's studies. Their work helped Bruner develop his theory of the stages of cognition that he subsequently applied to the classroom, in his much-translated book *The Process of Education* (1960)^[6], a book that was influential in the curriculum-reform movement of that period. In that book, Bruner famously argued that any subject, if it is presented in the proper manner, could be taught to any child at any stage of development.

After studying perception in children, Bruner proposed that their individual values significantly affect their discernment.^[7] More recently, he has contributed critically to the field of cultural psychology. This sub-discipline takes particular account of the historical and social contexts in which educational processes take place. Bruner's interest in this context was reflected in his later work on education, especially in his 1996 book *The Culture of Education*. ^[8]

I. Theory of Value: What knowledge and skills are worthwhile learning? What are the goals of education?

What is of value is determined importantly by the individual learner. Education is a process of personal discovery. [9] According to Bruner, the learner must instigate experiences, seek out the information necessary to solve problems, and reorganize what they already know to achieve new knowledge. In order to comprehend the material the learner must actively manipulate the information either concretely or abstractly, and use inductive reasoning to draw inferences and make generalizations. The students must then confirm or disprove these generalizations by themselves through “discovery learning” or with the assistance of a teacher through “guided discovery.” This allows students to identify an organizational structure and create a “coding system” to mentally connect concepts together.

A major theme observed through Jerome Bruner’s studies is that, as cognitive growth occurs, students move through three stages of learning: enactive, iconic, and symbolic. In the enactive stage, students begin to develop understanding through active manipulation. Therefore, students at the enactive stage should be given the opportunity to “play” with the materials in order to fully understand how it works. In the second stage, iconic, students are capable of making mental images of the material and no longer need to manipulate them directly. Here students are able to visualize concrete information. The symbolic is the final stage in which students can use abstract ideas to represent the world. For example, students are able to evaluate, judge, and think critically. [10] Students must go through all of these stages successively in order to connect new ideas and concepts if they are to generate their own understanding.

Effective teachers, Bruner maintains, must provide assistance and guidance through these three stages via a process he calls “scaffolding”. This is how students build understanding. Ultimately, scaffolding allows students to become independent learners.

The overall goal of education is that a teacher should guide their students so that they build their own base of knowledge instead of being taught through rote memorization. [11] New information provided to the students would then be understood and classified based on the knowledge they already have. Bruner says, “The interconnection of the new experience with the prior knowledge results in the reorganization of the cognitive structure, which creates meaning and allows the individual to “go beyond the information given.” [12]

Bruner says, “*We teach a subject not to produce little libraries on that subject, but rather to get a student to think ... for himself, to consider matters as a historian does, to take part in the process of knowledge-getting. Knowing is a process, not a product.*” [13] Learning will therefore become more consequential, practical, and memorable. At a conference at Columbia University, Bruner urged teachers to, “*Transmit conventional ideas but encourage students to make the leap to the imaginable.*” He insisted that, “We must not teach present fact, but to open up questions,” if we don’t, Bruner warned, we would be doing an injustice to the teaching of the different subject curriculums [14].

II. Theory of Knowledge: What is knowledge? How is it different from belief? What is a mistake? A lie?

Knowing is a process, not a product. Bruner emphasizes that learning is an active process in which students construct new ideas or concepts based upon their current/past knowledge. The learner selects and transforms information, constructs hypotheses, and makes decisions, relying on a cognitive structure (connecting thoughts and organizing information) to do so.[15]

Education is a knowledge-getting process and children need to participate in the process of acquiring knowledge. [16] One of the three major considerations in the *Process of Education* deals with the structure of knowledge. Bruner maintains that the important things to learn involve how an idea or discipline is put together.[17] But he also reminds us that, “*Knowledge is not a storehouse. You already "know" most of what you "learn" in science and mathematics. "Learning" is, most often, figuring out how to use what you already know in order to go beyond what you currently think.*” [18]

In the *Culture of Education*, Bruner makes a connection between knowledge and beliefs. He states “that more is required to justify beliefs than merely sharing them with others. That “more” is the machinery of justification for one’s beliefs, the canons of scientific and philosophical reasoning. Knowledge, after all, is *justified belief.*”[19]

Bruner would conclude that making mistakes is necessary in order to gain knowledge. Through the active process of trial and error the student can uncover the interrelationships between concepts and ideas, which allows them to gain knowledge about “new truths.” This process of making “mistakes” is a necessary process in order to discover the facts about the concept. It also allows the learner to have a better comprehension of the information learned because through making a mistake the student learns the accuracy of the information.[20] Bruner views mistakes as a necessary part of the learning process, children should be encouraged to try new things, even if mistakes happen. Learning and knowledge evolve through active experiences with one’s environment through trial and error experimentation. In *The Process of Education*, Bruner writes: “*It takes a sensitive teacher to distinguish an intuitive mistake – an interestingly wrong leap – from a stupid or ignorant mistake, and it requires a teacher who can give approval and correction simultaneously to the intuitive student.*” [21]

A lie, or a deception, according to Bruner’s theory could be classified, we might surmise, as a deliberate misrepresentation of the information learned. Through discovery learning, these lies can be worked around and true knowledge acquired.

III. Theory of Human Nature: What is a human being? How does it differ from other species? What are the limits of human potential?

Scientists would classify man as a bipedal primate in the Hominidae family that is capable of viewing the world abstractly; has the ability to think about topics that took place in the past, present, and even the future clearly separates humans from every other animal on this planet. Bruner states that, “the divide in human evolution was crossed when culture became the major factor in giving form to the minds of those living under its sway.” [22]

Bruner holds that being human involves being part of a culture that empowers one to “look outside the human skin for the sources of human competence – to the culturally

provided prosthetic devices that make it possible for the human mind to vault beyond itself[23].” Other species appear not to have this capacity. Bruner was particularly interested in language and other representations of human thought.[24] He emphasizes that humans are beings that interact with others verbally. They are able to make connections while constructing materials, to express understanding of a new concept and to demonstrate knowledge of the subject through models of reasoning. Once a human has discovered a new idea they can examine the perceptions to expand their understanding.[25]

Bruner also states that, “*Although the world of culture has achieved an autonomy of its own, it is constrained by biological limits and biologically determined predispositions.*” [26] These factors impact the ways in which humans construct meaning. Bruner cautions, “*We need to realize human potential, but we need to maintain a culture's integrity and stability. We need to recognize differing native talent, but we need to equip all with the tools of the culture. We need to respect the uniqueness of local identities and experience, but we cannot stay together if the cost of local identity is a cultural Tower of Babel.*” [27]

This conflict identified by Bruner shows us that, human beings, with environmental, cultural and biological predispositions strive for the imagined limitlessness of the collective human potential, but at the same time recognize the powerful role that such variables play in the difference between what we *can do* and what we *believe we can do* based on our distinctly human interpretations of the world around us.

Having the potential for limitless cognitive growth, Bruner describes the brain’s “opportunistic” nature. “*The humanoid mind/brain complex does not simply ‘grow up’ biologically according to a genetically predestined timetable but, rather, is opportunistic to nurturing in a human-like environment.*”[28] That humans have the ability to “understand what something ‘means’ requires some awareness of the alternative meanings that can be attached to it.[29]

IV. Theory of Learning: What is learning? How are skills and knowledge acquired?

In *In Search of Mind*, Jerome Bruner explains his idea of learning: “*‘Learning’ is, most often, figuring out how to use what you already know in order to go beyond what you currently think. There are many ways of doing that. Some are more intuitive; others are formally derivational. But they all depend on knowing something “structural” about what you are contemplating-how to put it together. Knowing how something is put together is worth a thousand facts about it. It permits you to go beyond it.*”[30]

Learning is an active social process in which students construct new ideas or concepts based on current knowledge. The student selects information, originates hypotheses, and makes decisions in the process of integrating experiences into their existing mental constructs.[31] By organizing the cognitive structure, using schema and mental models, the learner can provide meaning and organization to experiences and go beyond the information given.[32]

Bruner describes learning as what happens when one applies previous learning and life experience (biological or cultural) to the completion of a new task or the understanding of

an unfamiliar concept. He also maintains that if given the proper organization and facilitation of the new information, a person at any age can learn, even if it is only the most basic understanding of the material being taught. This type of 'scaffolding' allows learners to use all of their biological as well as cultural tools in order to 'build' their understanding of a task or topic.

Bruner maintains that learning follows a similar sequence no matter the age of the learner. There are three ways in which human beings interpret the world around them. In learning, we move through each stage to develop a more comprehensive understanding of what we are experiencing, but these stages are very integrated, occurring together in some cases, and only loosely sequential as one translates into the other.[33] In these three stages which are enactive (action-based), iconic (image-based), and symbolic (language-based), learners faced with new information move through each stage of representation as they grasp the concept of what is being learned.

Both Jean Piaget, Bruner's mentor, and Bruner himself conceptualized thought processes as being subdivided into distinct modes of reasoning. While Piaget related each mode to a specific period of childhood development, Bruner saw each mode as dominant during each development phase, but present and accessible throughout. Bruner, unlike Piaget, did not contend that these stages were necessarily age-dependent.[34]

Bruner suggests that the approach taken with regards to structure in learning should be a practical one. *"The teaching and learning of structure, rather than simply the mastery of facts and techniques, is at the center of the classic problem of transfer... . If earlier learning is to render later learning easier, it must do so by providing a general picture in terms of which the relations between things encountered earlier and later are made as clear as possible."*[35] Interest in the material to be learned is the best stimulus for learning, rather than external goals such as grades or competitive advantage.

Students build knowledge based on previously learned information in a spiraling fashion, which enables learners to connect prior schematic concepts. Bruner described this process as a *Spiral Curriculum*. Here is how he describes it: "the idea that in teaching a subject you begin with an "intuitive" account that is well within the reach of a student, and then circle back later with as many more recyclings as are necessary, to a more formal or highly structured account, until the learner has mastered the subject in its "full generative power." [36]

Bruner maintains that knowing is a process, therefore, his work focuses on

- (a.) the importance of understanding the structure of the subject being studied; and,
- (b.) the need for active learning as the basis for understanding.

Bruner argues that when learners are presented with perplexing situations they will want to figure out the solution. This was the basis for his discovery learning theory. Discovery learning is inquiry-based: learning takes place in problem solving situations where the learner draws on his or her own past experience and existing knowledge to discover facts and relationships to be learned. Students interact with the world by exploring and manipulating objects, wrestling with questions and controversies, or performing experiments.[37]

The structure of learning is more important than simply memorizing facts. Learners should be able to make connections between concepts. Schools often do a disservice to students, says Bruner, by limiting teaching to only important information. Learners need time to think analytically about information and not simply use their intuition to solve a problem. There needs to be an analytical process to investigate the information presented. In order to be invested in learning, learners must be interested in the material.[38]

V. Theory of Transmission: Who is to teach? By what methods? What will the curriculum be?

In *The Culture of Education*, Bruner states, “Passing on knowledge and skill, like any human exchange, involves a sub-community in interaction. At the minimum, it involves a ‘teacher’ and a ‘learner’ – or if not a teacher in flesh and blood, then a vicarious one like a book, or film, or display, or a ‘responsive’ computer. It is principally through interacting with others that children find out what culture is about and how it conceives of the world. Unlike any other species, human beings deliberately teach each other in settings outside the ones in which the knowledge being taught will be used.” [39]

Bruner disagrees with “our Western pedagogical tradition” where teaching, “is fitted into a mold in which a single, presumably omniscient teacher explicitly tells or shows presumably unknowing learners something the presumably know nothing about.”[40] He proposes instead that, “...learners help each other learn, each according to her abilities. And this, of course, need not exclude the presence of somebody serving in the role of teacher. It simply implies that the teacher does not play that role as a monopoly, that learners ‘scaffold’ for each other as well. The antithesis is the ‘transmission’ model ...”[41]

Bruner’s theory of cognitive development focuses on the idea of active transmission, conducted via discovery learning. Discovery learning is an “inquiry-based learning theory that takes place in problem solving situations where the learner draws on his or her own past experience and existing knowledge to discover facts and relationships and new truths to be learned”. [42] It is through this style of learning that a student interacts with his or her own world; exploring objects; questioning (creating hypothesis); and developing problem-based learning skills. Bruner found that, as a result of this learning development, students are “more likely to remember concepts and knowledge discovered on their own”. [43]

More than just actively learning, Bruner associated his cognitive development theory with the idea of promoting life-long learners. Bruner maintained, “Cognitive structure (i.e., schema, mental models) provides meaning and organization to experiences and allows the individual to go beyond the information given”. [44] The skills that promote transmission, in the opinion of Bruner, it allows the student to create connections to the material at hand, thus making deeper assimilations to information, and developing a stronger urge to see where the information will lead them next.

The instructor’s role on providing an environment in which this transmission of information can occur is key. The role of the instructor is to not only provide the key materials necessary for learning, but to also maintain an open dialogue with students, thus facilitating any possible connections that the student may not create independently.

To instruct someone... is not a matter of getting him to commit results to mind. Rather, it is to teach him to participate in the process that makes possible the establishment of knowledge. We teach a subject not to produce little living libraries on that subject, but rather to get a student to think mathematically for himself, to consider matters as an historian does, to take part in the process of knowledge-getting. Knowing is a process not a product. (1966: 72)[45]

Bruner marries his three modes of representation and Vygotsky's zone of proximal development in what he calls the "spiral curriculum". He describes this method in his book, *The Culture of Education*, "...in teaching a subject you begin with an 'intuitive' account that is well within the reach of the student, and then circle back later to a more formal or highly structured account, until, with however many recyclings are necessary, the learner has mastered the topic or subject in its full generative power." [46]

Bruner's theory of transmission is not meant to be restricted to a classroom setting. Instead, this theory focuses on one's ability to develop skills that will aid them in learning outside of the classroom, as well. Bruner's concept of instruction is meant to be "*the means of transmitting the tools and skills of a culture, the acquired characteristics that express and amplify man's powers--especially the crucial symbolic tools of language, number, and logic.*" [47] This reiterates the importance of learning voiced early on in our history by Thomas Jefferson: "Whenever the people are well-informed, they can be trusted with their own government." [48]

The goal of teaching is to facilitate learning experiences and stimulate critical thinking skills; not simply to transmit knowledge. Bruner states, "In theorizing about the practice of education in the classroom (or any other setting, for that matter), you had better take into account the folk theories that those engaged in teaching and learning already have. For any innovations that you, as a "proper" pedagogical theorist, may wish to introduce will have to compete with, replace, or otherwise modify the folk theories that already guide both teachers and pupils" [49]. Therefore, anyone can teach in any setting, however, Bruner implies that the "educator," should be knowledgeable about the theories that are accepted and employed by more seasoned practitioners.

According to Bruner, children learn through a process of inquiry in which they discover relationships between concepts. As the learner is faced with problems he or she uses their prior knowledge, experiences, and self-motivation to uncover new truths. The student develops responsibility as he or she encounters new information. By physically interacting with concepts through questioning, experimenting, and researching students become part of the findings and are more inclined to comprehend the relationships among hypotheses. [50]

Consequently, in the curriculum there must be a process of discovery where people examine and develop ideas through active engagement. Discovery learning encourages students to actively use their instinct to discover interrelationships between different concepts. This should be done through inductive reasoning where students can observe, analyze, infer, and confirm concepts. [51] In Discovery learning, it is the teacher's

responsibility to present examples for the students, however the student must use the evidence to prove or disprove their assumptions with support from the teacher.[52]

Given Bruner's theory of discovery learning, the environment is designed to encourage learners to continually question and explore concepts through hands on experiences. Curiosities are destined to arise therefore the curriculum is not specifically planned out. Bruner says, "We have become so preoccupied with the more formal criteria of "performance" and with the bureaucratic demands of education as an institution that we have neglected this personal side of education[53]." Thus, Bruner implies that although we focus on mastery of curriculum objectives in our culture of education, we should also cultivate critical thinking skills and collaboration within our learners. Bruner emphasizes that, "In most matters of achieving mastery, we also want learners to gain good judgment, to become self-reliant, to work well with each other. And such competencies do not flourish under a one-way "transmission" regimen[54]."

The curriculum, according to Bruner, should involve sequencing within a course. In order for students to build on knowledge that is more complex they must first acquire a skill set that allows them to move into more complex topics. The foundation allows the students to spiral higher while studying new skills and reinforcing previously learned information.[55] Bruner described the spiral curriculum in the following way,

" ...I was struck by the fact that successful efforts to teach highly structured bodies of knowledge like mathematics, physical sciences, and even the field of history often took the form of metaphoric spiral in which at some simple level a set of ideas or operations were introduced in a rather intuitive way and, once mastered in that spirit, were then revisited and reconstrued in a more formal or operational way, then connected with other knowledge. The mastery at this stage then being carried one step higher to a new level of formal or operational rigor and to a broader level of abstraction and comprehensiveness. The end stage of this process was eventual mastery of the connexity and structure of a large body of knowledge..."[56]

Bruner may be suggesting a modernized, more sophisticated form of *Socratic learning*, first developed by the Greek philosopher, Socrates who used questioning, to "stimulate rational thinking and illuminate ideas[57]." Similarly, Bruner proposes that instructors should arouse curiosities and draw hypothesis from their learners by using the Socratic questioning method to actively engage them in dialogue[58].

VI. Theory of Society: What is society? What institutions are involved in the educational process?

The *American Heritage Dictionary* defines a society as "... a group of humans broadly distinguished from other groups by mutual interests, participation in characteristic relationships, shared institutions, and a common culture." [59] The key word here, as it relates to Bruner, is "culture." In *The Culture of Education*, Bruner says "Culture shapes the mind, it provides us with the toolkit by which we construct not only our worlds but our very conception of ourselves and our powers".[60]

Bruner suggests that a need for societal membership is built into the species. He writes, *“Children show an astonishingly strong "predisposition to culture"; they are sensitive to and eager to adopt the folkways they see around them. They show a striking interest in the activity of their parents and peers and with no prompting at all try to imitate what they observe.”* [61]

For Bruner, however, this imitation, indeed the entire process of socialization, is complicated by the fact that society is an ever-adapting, ever-changing mechanism. This requires us to continually redefine how we educate the young. Bruner writes, *“We are living through bewildering times where the conduct of education is concerned. There are deep problems that stem from many origins - principally from a changing society whose future shape we cannot foresee and for which it is difficult to prepare a new generation.”* [62]

Importantly, Bruner also maintains that education must transcend mere enculturation. He reasons that, *“Finding a place in the world ... is ultimately an act of imagination.”* [63] *“The home, workplace, and social (friendship) circles have different values and beliefs, which complicates the individual’s ability to subsist within one culture. Therefore, people should be encouraged to identify and understand their perceptions of culture and go “beyond the cultural ways to innovate ... to create.”* Bruner adds, *“Each must be his own artist, his own scientist, his own historian, his own navigator.”* [64]

As to the institutions involved in the educational process, in *The Culture of Education*, Bruner stresses that all cultural institutions are involved — some in tension with others. He stresses that, *“...there is a reciprocal relation between education and the other major institutional activities of a culture: communication, economics, politics, family life, and so on... education is not a free-standing institution, not an island, but part of the continent.”* [65]

Of course Bruner recognizes schools as major institutions in the educational process; but he does so with criticism of the formalistic evaluation and bureaucracy that they involve.

"If school is an entry into the culture and not just a preparation for it, then we must constantly reassess what school does to the young student's conception of his own powers (his sense of agency) and his sensed chances of being able to cope with the world both in school and after (his self-esteem). In many democratic cultures, I think, we have become so preoccupied with the more formal criteria of 'performance' and with the bureaucratic demands of education as an institution that we have neglected this personal side of education". [66]

Bruner appears to see schools as servants of society, rather than a means for social reform. For instance, he explains the relationship between school and society thusly, *"What we resolve to do in school only makes sense when considered in the broader context of what the society intends to accomplish through its educational investment in the young. How one conceives of education, we have finally come to recognize, is a function of how one conceives of culture and its aims, professed and otherwise.”* [67]

At one point Bruner’s growing appreciation of the profound impact society has on the process of schooling prompted him to wish that he had had a greater interest in society when he was doing his research. He writes, *“If I had it all to do over again, and if I knew*

how, I would put my energies into reexamining how the schools express the agenda of the society and how that agenda is formulated and how that is translated by the schools. That, it seems to me, would be the properly subversive way to proceed.” [68]

Bruner’s use of the word “subversive” here suggests that he is no mere apologist for the status quo; and he does see a tension between reproducing culture on the one hand and empowering individuals on the other. In the final analysis, empowerment seems to win out, for Bruner maintains that the ultimate function of education is to “... *enable people, individual human beings, to operate at their fullest potential, to equip them with the tools and the sense of opportunity to use their wits, skills, and passions to the fullest*”.

He also stresses the importance of schools nurturing students’ self-esteem and the personal side of education. He says, “*Any system of education, any theory of pedagogy, any ‘grand national policy’ that diminishes the school’s role in nurturing a pupils’ self-esteem fails at one of its primary functions*”. [69] But he cautiously notes, “*The antinomic counterpart to this is that the function of education is to reproduce the culture that supports it – not only reproduce it, but further its economic, political, and cultural ends*”. [70]

VII. Theory of Opportunity: Who is to be educated? Who is to be schooled?

Bruner does not single out a particular socioeconomic class, culture, gender, age group, or ethnicity as more deserving of the opportunity to receive an education. Bruner believes in the potential of all human beings to learn, within as well as outside of, a specific cultural context. In *The Culture of Education*, Bruner enthusiastically declares the desired function and education to *all* humans when he said,

“It is unquestionably the function of education to enable people, individual human beings, to operate at their fullest potential, to equip them with the tools and the sense of opportunity to use their wits, skills, and passions to the fullest. “School provides a powerful opportunity for exploring the implication of precepts for practice”.” [71]

Jerome Bruner supports the idea that all people in a culture need to be educated as a means to induct the young into a culture’s canonical ways and to enhance their individual powers. Education provides cultural tools and perspective for mental activity to occur. Bruner would maintain that it is inevitable that everyone is educated in one way or another. For example, he states, “Education does not only occur in classrooms, but around the dinner table when family members try to make joint sense of what happened that day, or when kids try to help each other make sense of the adult world, or when a master and apprentice interact on the job.” [72] Bruner says that receiving an "education could provide richer opportunities than it does for creating the metacognitive sensitivity needed for coping with the world of narrative reality.” [73]

Bruner maintains that all people should have the opportunity to be schooled because he conceives of school in this way,

“Ideally, school is supposed to provide a setting where our performance has fewer esteem-threatening consequences

than in the 'real world' presumably in the interest of encouraging the learner to "try things out."[\[74\]](#)

Schooling, like education, allows learners to gain knowledge and experience within their culture. "Mental life is lived with others, is shaped to be communicated, and unfolds with the aids of cultural codes, traditions, and the like."[\[75\]](#) These "cultural codes" are generally taught in schools as language, mathematical symbols and the like.

VIII. Theory of Consensus: Why do people disagree? How is consensus achieved?

Whose opinion takes precedence?

According to Bruner, disagreement between people may be due to cultural differences. Bruner states that, "learning and thinking are always situated in a cultural setting[\[76\]](#)." Bruner describes culture as "an interplay between the versions of the world that people form under its institutional sway and the versions of it that are products of their individual histories[\[77\]](#)." Individuals, therefore, construct knowledge on the basis of their culture and from their own experiences. Consequently, varying cultural beliefs and different life experiences may cause disagreement between people.

Bruner maintains that, "what is sacred is that any well-wrought, well-argued, scrupulously documented, perceptively honest construal of the past, the present, or the possible deserves respect. We all appreciate that, nevertheless, we must decide between competing accounts, competing narratives. That is political and social reality[\[78\]](#)." Consensus, would therefore, be achieved by the majority of people who accept a particular account or narrative. Although many documented narratives maybe honest, thoughtful, and well defended, it is the majority rule that creates consensus. Yet, Bruner writes that, "... every narrator has a point of view and we have an alienable right to question it[\[79\]](#)." It is the act of questioning popular narratives and beliefs that triggers disagreement.

"Some narratives about "what happened" are simply righter, not just because they are better rooted in factuality, but also because they are better contextualized, rhetorically more "fair-minded," and so on[\[80\]](#)." Bruner implies that some narratives or stories are more correct because they are embraced by the status quo or majority. As Bruner noted, "We accept a certain essential contestability of stories[\[81\]](#)."

In *Acts of Meaning*, Jerome Bruner writes about disagreements,

"When there is a breakdown in a culture (or even a micro culture like the family) it can usually be traced to one of several things. The first is a deep disagreement about what constitutes the ordinary and canonical in life and what the exceptional and divergent...A second threat inheres in the rhetorical overspecialization of narrative, when stories become so self-servingly motivated that distrust displaces interpretation, and "what happened" is discounted as fabrication...And finally, there is a breakdown that results from sheer impoverishment of the narrative resources-in the permanent underclass of the urban ghetto...It is not that

there is a total loss in putting story form to experience, but that the “worst scenario” story comes so to dominate daily life that variation seems no longer to be possible.”[82]

Bruner writes that although a cultural community shares many views and ideals, “...human beings forever suffer conflicts of interests, with attendant grudges, factions, coalitions, and shifting alliances.”[83] But he insists, “There must obviously be some consensus to ensure the achievement of civility.”[84] To achieve consensus cultures have “interpretative procedures for adjudicating the different construals of reality that are inevitable in any diverse society.”[85] In addition to these adjudicating procedures, cultures employ peacekeeping strategies. Bruner writes,

“In human beings, with their astonishing narrative gift, one of the principal forms of peacekeeping is the human gift for presentating, dramatizing, and explicating the mitigating circumstances surrounding conflict-threatening breaches in the ordinariness of life. The object of the narrative is not to reconcile, not to legitimize, not to even excuse, but to rather explicate...To be in a viable culture is to be bound in a set of connecting stories, connecting even though the stories may not represent a consensus.”[86]

Whose opinion prevails when consensus is not achieved? Bruner would likely maintain that it depends on the situation. If a law has been broken, an culturally recognized interpretive authority’s (courts of law) opinion would prevail. In a family situation, perhaps the disagreement would go unresolved as a difference of opinion and narrativized to be due to “a generation gap”. If the disagreement is large, as in a difference in opinion on religion, one could seek out a different subculture within the larger culture with members who share a more similar opinion; he states, “Every narrator has a point of view and we have an inalienable right to question it”.[87] Discussion, involving disagreement and questioning a point of view, is the best means of unifying agreement.

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