

CHECK YOURSELF

The following passage is adapted from an article's discussion section and contains a number of errors. Find and correct them.

When a conversant requires that "meaning what one says" be part of their discourse, the result is what Habermas (1979) describes as the "ideal speech situation"--a conversation in which candid communication flourishes and in which a teacher uses reason, scholarship and professional expertise to help their students improve whatever craft is being learned. In Habermas's ideal speech situation there are 4 validity claims, or criteria, for a speech act. Like for Cavell, 1979, the first validity claim is truth, in the sense that what is spoken should be factual, as best the speaker knows it to be so. Those in charge of pupils have the clear and obvious responsibility to be well-informed. The second claim, comprehensibility, requires that what is communicated be understood and accessible to the listener. To this end, a teacher has the responsibility of ascertaining what their students are capable of understanding. The third claim requires that speakers be sincere in their utterances. As a consequence, the listener learns to trust the intentions of their speakers. But trust must be reciprocal--to be sincere, a speaker must also trust their listeners. Lastly, it must be right for a speaker to perform the speech acts, in the sense that their claim to the communication is justifiable. For a teacher, it is required that they understand the nature of their discourse--what is generally and usually referred to as subject-matter expertise--and that they have met the first 3 criteria. It is largely this last claim that make communicative acts significant. When the validity claims are not realized, speech acts can and should and must be rejected.

But no student in our sample would have responded to the writers' questions about his poem in the reciprocal conversational mode of Cavell or the ideal speech situation of Habermas (1979). Instead, their instructional strategies were guided by formalist beliefs about what they believed to be sound pedagogy. Using such formalist schemes, the psychological aims of these future teachers led them to treat what the student actually said in their poem to be of little account. In effect, honest criticism and instruction was generally and typically avoided--it was to the child feeling good about their work and themselves independent of the works' merits to which the instructional priority was attached to. The instruction suggested, and the perceived subjectivity and relativism of poetic expertise doomed the content of the poem to irrelevance. For these reasons, the suggested instruction was perceived by the researchers as not very instructive.

Feeling the responsibility to mean what we say, it concerns us that the responses we observed failed to meet, in almost every sense, Cavell and Habermas's criteria for ideal speech, and that they were so truly and deeply decontextualized. For reasons embedded in their understanding of psychology, they were not predisposed to say what they meant. As a consequence, they did not mean what they said. It is also troubling that, in citing their responses, it was psychological license to avoid truth and sincerity which the students gave themselves. In general, a student would justify their solutions by citing what they perceived to be psychological principles which operate across contexts; that criticism is the enemy of creativity or that feedback should be positive. They attached priority to psychological well-being over skill development. The results were that they had lower expectations of what a 13-year-old may fairly be expected to handle and to achieve--certainly academically, as a writer, and possibly interpersonally. While they meant well, we suggest that their responses are ultimately patronizing, estranging and manipulative in their effect.

Preservice teachers whom we would have been positive across the board tended to do so in the name of writing, however, it was psychological considerations such as enhanced self-esteem which were seen as setting the stage for authentic self-expression (which was most frequently marked as poetry's primary function). But their conception of authenticity even psychologized writing by equating "being truthful" with a procedural sincerity. In effect, the poet's task was reduced by them to a version of self-expression equivalent to merely transcribing whatever we happen to think about some matter to paper. It is strongly suggested by us that authenticity is something that readers have the sensibility to discern, and that authentic reading serves authentic writing.

These conceptions of authenticity are perceived by us to be deeply problematic because they devalue meaning what we say as both an educational aim and as a means for achieving that aim. It is acknowledged that the ideal speech situation engenders its own sense of responsibility. Having a child's best interest at heart, it is clear that good manners and the everyday psychological savvy which the researchers discussed earlier dictate that honest criticism should be couched in terms that they are capable of understanding, and be delivered in ways which do not cause the opposite effect we intend. Knowing that kindness is also essential, brutal honesty is seldom desirable, and this is not what either Cavell (or us) means by sincerity. Also, the truth must sometimes be withheld, if the speaker should judge that the listener is not, in some way, genuinely ready or able to engage in the speech act. There is nothing in these commonsense safeguards, of course, to license subterfuge, the duplicitous honesty that we observed or, most especially, the distortion of truth in the teaching conversation.