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Gluckman, Honey

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Johannesburg College of Education
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H. Gluckman

CRAP SPOUTING AND CRAP DETECTING

In 1969 Postman and Weingartner wrote a book called Teaching as a Subversive Activity. Chapter I of the book was entitled "Crap Detecting". In it the authors wrote, "We believe that the schools must serve as the principal medium for developing in youth the attitudes and skills of social, political and cultural criticism." (p16) For Postman and Weingartner education was, paraphrasing Hemingway's words, "to cultivate just such people - experts at 'crap detecting'" (p 16).

One might be surprised that such an aim would find favour with our own conservative education authorities, yet here follow two aims of History teaching as set out in the T.E.D. syllabus for Std. V.

3.2.8. "The ability to analyse, elaborate, classify, compare, criticize, evaluate and synthesize..."

3.2.10 "The ability to recognize motives, attitudes, bias, propaganda, exaggeration, falsification. trivialities, untruths in documents, books, films, television and reference works."

The official sanction is there, yet to what extent are these skills being actively taught in educational institutions? To what extent are teachers or even lecturers aware of the necessity for giving students these skills as opposed to continuing "to ram and cram information into students for the passing of exams of dubious value." (Dr. J. Burns: quoted in The Star 7/3/85). In the position that South Africa finds itself in today it is imperative for the ordinary inhabitant, of whatever age or colour, bombarded as he is by propaganda from the Left, the Right

and the Centre, to acquire skills which will enable him to differentiate between opposing claims of truth, between fact and comment, between proved and unproved assertions and also between provable and unprovable assertions.

For those who have not yet acquired these skills, here follows a do-it-yourself course in being a Crap detector (to be referred to hereafter as c.d.)

Firstly, become aware of and accept that vast amounts of crap surround you, particularly in the political field. No one is exempt from being a crap spouter (c.s.). This ability and inclination belongs as much to the respected academic as to the unschooled lout: to the man in high political office as to the looniest of the political lunatic fringe: to the cleric as well as the commie: to the editor of the newspaper which follows your chosen ideology as well as the hack from the gutter press which advocates the ideology you despise and criticize. In other words you can not be a c.d. if you automatically believe that something must be true because:

a) So and so said it and he must know
b) Cabinet ministers, opposition party members, govt. officials, etc. never lie
c) It's in the newspaper/I read it in a book/It was announced on S.A.B.C. T.V.
d) My mother/father/uncle/friend told me so
e) My teacher/lecturer/principal/rector said it was so.

Please note that I have <u>not</u> asserted that any of the above often or necessarily tell lies. My point is that the c.d. will not believe anything important,

particularly in the political field, without first checking for himself on the reliability and validity of the evidence offered for a so-called fact or the reason offered for a suggested point of view.

In a country as sharply divided as South Africa is, it is particularly difficult to discover what the truth is. This is because it will be in the interests of the different opposing parties, factions, interest groups, movements, etc., to present the 'fact' in such a way as to gain the most benefit. This is done by selecting some facts and ignoring others, or more subtly, by stressing some facts and down-playing others. For example, some news media will choose and then stress those facts which point at the violence of rioters while others will ignore or minimise these facets, but select and stress those which show up the brutality of the police. This can be done not only through selective reporting and careful positioning of news items but through selective shooting of scenes for T.V. It is important to realise that the camera, the tape-recorder and the video-recorder <u>can</u> lie as can interviews which give a distorted and one-sided picture of an event.

The only way, then, that the ordinary inhabitant of South Africa can hope to come close to the truth is to be prepared to consult as many sources as possible and then, bearing in mind the bias and subjectivity of all these sources, as well as his own bias and subjectivity, to come to some conclusion for himself as to the truth of a particular event.

Having done this, the c.d. will then come forcibly to realise that there is very rarely only <u>one</u> truth or <u>one</u> side to an argument or question. It is possible for there to be several conflicting truths, eg., the truth as experienced by police in rioting townships; the truth as experienced by rioters themselves;

the truth as experienced by a chance victim of a riot and the truth as experienced by those whose job it is to report the news. To select only one of these as the truth and to ignore all the others is to be guilty of being a c.s. rather than a c.d.

The temptation to do this is made stronger by a characteristic of the English language, viz., the use of one generalized word to represent a group of people. In using this one convenient word, the many components of that group are depersonalized and cast into a single image. Thus, for example, the police are no longer seen as consisting of a variety of individuals some of whom may indeed be power-mad bullies or ignorant racists. Some, however, may well be loyal officials grimly doing their duty as they see it. Some may be exhausted people at the end of their tether and the rest may be nervous, if not terrified young men poorly trained for coping with such frightening situations. By using the one word, *police* all will be seen, depending upon one's point of view, as either bullies or heroes.

In the same way township rioters will no longer be seen as a variety of individuals, some of whom are indeed idealists fighting bravely for justice and equality. Equally some may be children enjoying a glorious game where they can make up the rules as they go along. Some are gullible youngsters indoctrinated or intimidated into being the puppets of others while the rest may be common criminals making hay while the sun shines. Again by using the one phrase, township rioters, all will be seen, depending on one's point of view, as either brave freedom fighters or communist-inspired agitators.

The c.d. will be strongly aware of these dangers of generalisation and he will know that just one instance to the contrary can prove a generalisation false. As comforting and as comfortable as it

is to believe that all rioters in South Africa are communist-inspired agitators or conversely, all Government officials are authoritarian bullies, the c.d. will ignore such claims, for in his mind warning bells will ring not only because of the generalisations used, but also because of the emotive language in which these assertions are cast. Throughout this article I have deliberately used such emotive language. Did warning bells ring for you when you read 'respected academic', 'lout', 'lunatic fringe', ignorant racists', 'gutter press', 'puppets', 'agitators', 'bullies', etc? The purpose of such language is rarely to add to the factual content of a sentence, but rather to play on the emotions of the readers and by arousing feelings of either approval or disapproval, to manipulate the reader or listener into feelng what the writer or speaker wants him to feel.

To avoid being manipulated in this way, the c.d. should always demand that such terms be defined. In fact, he should demand that all words whose meanings can be open to doubt should be defined. It is a sorry characteristic of language that it can be used not only to clarify meaning, but also to camouflage it; not only to communicate ideas, but also to conceal them. Andrew Savage, in an article for the Sunday Star (8.12.85) entitled 'The Time for Slim Politiek is over,' stated, "Communication has been reduced to a science so that information can be adequate, timely, correct, understood and imparted in a convenient and effective form. In our country this science is prostituted in order to misinform". He goes on to request that terms used by government officials be clearly defined so that they cannot be misconstrued. For example, writes Savage, 'discrimination in the South African context,' means making a distinction on grounds of race or colour. How then, he asks, can government claim to be against discrimination and yet

still keep such legislation on the statute books? 'Black leaders' mean the leaders as chosen by the Blacks themselves. The government, Savage claims, have distorted the phrase to mean the leaders of the government's choice.

Savage then goes on to discuss how words like 'citizen', 'reform,' 'negotiation,' 'violence,' 'patriotism,' have all been similarly prostituted. Bearing this in mind, the c.d. will withhold judgment, agreement and action until a term has been defined to the satisfaction of all those concerned. Thus "Socialism is better than Capitalism and should be implemented in South Africa" cannot be either accepted or rejected until the concepts 'Socialism' and 'Capitalism' have been clearly defined. This should not be too difficult to do. What will be more difficult will be to define 'better than'. Finally, the c.d. will then demand compelling reasons why what has been prescribed should therefore be accepted, since the conclusion of this assertion (should be implemented in South Africa) does not logically follow on from the premise (Socialism is better than Capitalism).

In other words, our c.d. will also have to learn the basics of logic. This is a vast subject on its own and cannot be encompassed within the bounds of this article. Nevertheless, if our c.d. is aware of the difference between a <u>true</u> and a <u>valid</u> conclusion he will be less likely to be manipulated by a c.s. A conclusion can only be regarded as true if all the premises leading to the conclusion can be proved to be true. This will obviously exclude premises which contain unproved generalisations, which contain emotive terms and/or undefined terms which would prevent one from accepting the premise, or which contain ideas which can never be proved, eg. "Man was put on this earth to suffer" or "It is good to suffer".

A valid conclusion has to obey the rules of logic. It must work. It is therefore possible to have a valid conclusion which may not necessarily be true or may actually be false. eg.

> All violence is wrong and all who use it should be punished.
> Freedom fighters use violence.
> Therefore freedom fighters are wrong and should be punished.

The conclusion here is indeed valid (as your common sense will tell you), but is it true? The first premise needs careful examination. It is obviously a generalisation. Is there one instance to the contrary that would make this a false generalisation? eg. In the case of war against a murderous tyrant such as Hitler, is violence still wrong? Moreover, how is 'violence' to be defined? How is 'wrong' to be defined? etc., etc. The c.d. looks very carefully at all arguments presented to him.

To sum up then, the c.d. has an open mind, but he is <u>not</u> gullible. He is not prepared to believe anyone no matter how high in authority <u>nor how attractive or appealing the message is to him personally</u>, until he has evaluated the reasons or evidence given for the message. He is not fooled by generalisations, again no matter how attractive they are to him, and alarm bells ring in his mind when he hears or reads emotive terms. He refuses to accept any statements or assertions which contain ambiguous or undefined terms or are not amenable to being proved. Finally, when presented with any argument he carefully examines the premises to check whether he will accept them. He also looks at the conclusion and checks both its validity and its truth.

If our c.d. has mastered these skills, he will also

have achieved the aims of the T.E.D. history syllabus as set out at the beginning of this article. i.e he will be able to "recognise motives, attitudes, bias, propaganda, exaggeration, falsification, trivialities, untruth in documents, books, films, television and reference works".

References

Postman, N. and Weingartner, C. 1969 Teaching as a Subversive Activity. Penguin Books Ltd.