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An Unfinished Quest in Education

Jerome Bruner championed cognitive psychology, an idea schools still struggle to adopt.



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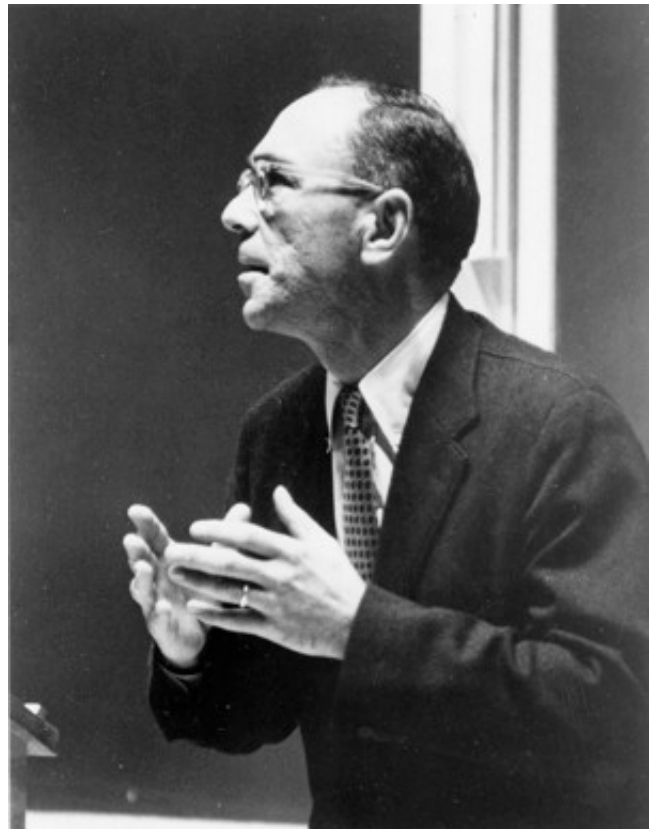
A few years ago, Jerome Bruner visited a graduate seminar I teach at New York University about educational research and politics. I told Jerry that I agreed with almost everything he wrote about education, but I feared that most Americans didn't. What if it turned out that the country didn't want what he was selling?

“Well,” Jerry grinned, “then you've got the makings of a great story.”

Bruner's own astonishing story came to an end on Monday, when he died at the age of 100. Born to Polish immigrants, he was blind until surgery restored his vision at the age of two. He spent his life studying human perception, and the ways the stories we tell about the world influence how we think and learn about it.

Along the way, he helped revolutionize American psychology. When Bruner went to graduate school at Harvard University in the 1930s, most psychological research examined the behavior that people exhibited in the face of external pressures and stimuli. But that model didn't take account of our individual minds, which filter and interpret everything we experience.

Bruner resolved to study what he called “cognitive psychology”—how people think and reason, not just how they react and respond. For education, especially, the implications were



Jerome Bruner, 1965 (AP)

enormous. Bruner found that even very young children constructed their own knowledge—that is, they made sense of new information based on prior experience and understanding. The job of the teacher was to help students build upon what they already knew.

So it didn't make sense to fill children with facts, which they would forget as soon as the test was over. The goal was to help them recognize relationships between facts. You didn't have to be a physicist or a historian to understand gravity or the Civil War. But you did need a teacher who could help you think like a physicist or a historian, ordering and analyzing information just like they did.

My fear is that American culture doesn't really accept the story that Bruner told about teaching.

A half century after Bruner laid out these ideas in his magnum opus, *The Process of Education*, they have become the accepted “best practice” in American schools. But few teachers and students actually practice them. There's an enormous gap between the story the United States tells about education and the way it actually does happen.

The first reason has to do with the preparation of America's teaching force. To instruct children in the manner that Bruner imagined, you need to have a deep knowledge of the subject that you teach. I'm a professor of education at a major research university, but I couldn't teach middle-school biology. I could make the kids memorize the parts of an atom or a cell, but that wouldn't help them

understand how biology “works”: how it asks questions, frames theories, and collects evidence.

And here’s the truly depressing fact: Many of the country’s teachers don’t have that kind of knowledge, either. Although most states now require future teachers to major in the subject they will instruct, they don’t demand that they exhibit a true mastery of it. Drawn overwhelmingly from the middle-to-low achievement range of their college cohorts, many of America’s teachers simply lack the strong disciplinary background to induct kids into a discipline.

Meanwhile, teachers who do possess such expertise are hamstrung by the beast of “accountability.” Since Congress passed the landmark No Child Left Behind law in 2001, federal and state rules have tied school funding—and, in some places, teacher salaries—to students’ performance on standardized tests. Especially in poorer communities, the result has been the antithesis of what Bruner imagined: a joyless pedagogy of rote memorization, preparing kids for the next high-stakes exam.

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Finally, it’s simply not clear that American citizens—you know, the people who elect school boards and pay taxes—want the type of instruction that Bruner did. He learned that the hard way when he developed a federally funded curriculum in the late 1960s called *Man: A Course of Study* (MACOS), which used examples from different times and places to ask basic questions about human behavior and morality.

But some of the curriculum's content—especially its description of the Netsilik Eskimos, who practiced infanticide and euthanasia—caught the eye of conservatives, who wanted their children to be taught a single moral code. Congress eventually defunded MACOS, which reminds us about the dangers of encouraging kids to think for themselves. They might end up disagreeing with their parents, and a lot of Americans—maybe, most of them—don't want that.

Later in his career, Bruner turned to the question of culture and education: how different societies influence human growth and development. My fear is that American culture doesn't really accept the story that Bruner told about teaching. But I'll always be grateful to him for telling it, over and over again, in the hope that the nation might one day learn it by heart.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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