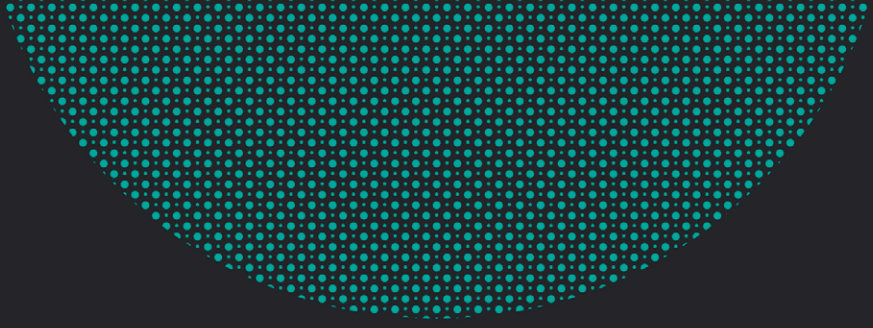
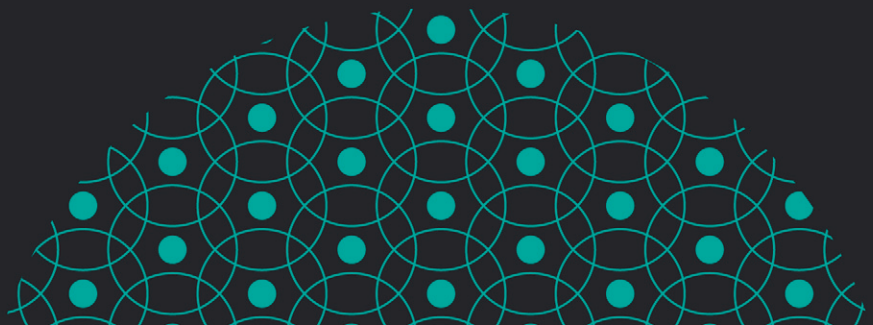


EMERALD POINTS

JEROME BRUNER, MEANING-MAKING AND EDUCATION FOR CONFLICT RESOLUTION

Why How We Think Matters

SALLY MYERS



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JEROME BRUNER, MEANING MAKING AND EDUCATION FOR CONFLICT RESOLUTION

Why How We Think Matters

BY

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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

To Joshua

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SIMPLE SUMMARY

This is intended to be simple. The rest of the book is a bit more technical, but I hope still accessible.

(1) Most human beings don't enjoy chaos or uncertainty. We like things to be ordered and predictable and to make sense to us. So, we come up with ways of thinking about how things around us work, which explain and justify the order and predictability we like.

(2) This is natural and normal and sensible as we need to make sense of the world around us in order to survive and flourish. What is more, it helps us to survive and flourish if we band together with other human beings. For this to work well we must agree on a lot, especially what order should be like.

(3) We check out how we make sense of the world with other people by using words that we all already know and by putting those words together in sentences using grammar we all agree on (mostly). This means that we almost always use ways of thinking about things that already exist.

(4) Mostly we don't question our ways of thinking about the world. This is true even when it becomes obvious that although we are using the same words as other people we probably mean different things when we say them. This is because it is difficult and uncomfortable for us to disagree, and if we disagree too much we will lose the protection pretending to agree provides.

(5) We also use words to tell stories to ourselves and others about our personal relationship with the order and predictability we live in. These stories are fitted around the way we think the world works, and what we think about the way the world works is fitted around our stories.

(6) We agree on our collective stories in the same way we agree on how the world works and what order should be like. (We sometimes call this history, science and politics.)

(7) All this thinking helps us to understand the world and our place in it, but mostly we forget about it and carry on with life. We only change our thinking if something big and different comes along that cannot be ignored.
(8) When this happens we have different reactions depending on our personalities, the amount of power we stand to lose or gain, and just how uncomfortable the 'new thing' makes us and the people around us feel.
(9) How we react usually boils down to one of three ways: (1) We find the new thing too threatening to how we make sense of the world and how we understand ourselves and so we reject it completely, make it change, pretend it doesn't exist, or if that doesn't work, try to stop it existing; (2) We see that in many ways the new thing can fit into how we already see things if we adjust them, just a little bit; (3) We decide that in the light of our new knowledge or experience we really do need to rethink how we make sense of the world and the stories we tell about ourselves.
(10) Only brave people ever try number three unless they absolutely have to. Only very brave people try number three when the people around them are saying 'No!'
(11) This is because it is scary to change how we think about ourselves and our world, and especially scary to admit that there are some things we just don't have the answers for any more.
(12) However, when we do change our thinking, we soon get used to it.

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INTRODUCTION

The basic assertion of this book is that the way we think about things matters just as much as what we think about things. That is not to suggest that the content of belief is unimportant. Nor is it to ignore the obvious fact that beliefs themselves shape how we perceive, understand and indeed live in the world. It is to claim, however, that the way in which beliefs are constructed and represented by individuals and organisations crucially affects their stance towards themselves and the world in general, and that discernment of this is vitally important when it comes to learning to live with difference.

Of course what people represent to others may not be what they actually think. However, accepting this limitation, the aim of this book is to offer a threefold toolkit: a framework for analysing representation of a given subject and self-understanding in relation to that subject, a scheme for determining stance towards challenge, and a method for exploring potential adaptation in response to new information and 'other'.

There are many perspectives on each of these already. What is attempted uniquely here is the development of a particular set of tools based upon the thinking of educational philosopher and psychologist Jerome Bruner. I shall argue that Bruner not only offers a practical and comprehensive way of examining how an individual constructs their knowledge of the world and understands themselves within that world, but that the discrete parts of his thinking might be brought together to facilitate exploration of this in dialogue between people who disagree, in pursuit of empathy and possible ways forward.

Bruner's thinking is incredibly wide-ranging and any attempt to draw it together means, paradoxically, excluding a lot of his work. In this book I focus on his ideas concerning the paradigmatic and narrative modes of knowing, the narrative construction of reality, and the antinomies he identifies between an individual and their social environment. I then turn my attention to examine how an individual's paradigmatic and narrative representations might change over time. I examine Bruner's thinking concerning the psychological processes involved in the transformation of intellectual propositions in the paradigmatic

mode, and transformation in narrative self-understanding in response to new information. I then move beyond Bruner's own thinking and argue that stance towards challenge and openness to change in the two modes are related, and that the relationship between them is key to exploring how change in self-understanding might lead to change in intellectual representation. I argue that when life experience demands that individuals make adjustments to their narrative mode of knowing, and in particular to their narrative construction of reality, that this can lead in turn to a corresponding change in their paradigmatic propositions. I then use a particular feature of Bruner's idea of narrative construction of reality, canonicity and breach to develop a method for finding common ground and potential adaptation in both modes of knowing.

Chapter 1 introduces Jerome Bruner. It begins with a brief sketch of his life and then provides an overview of his contribution. It examines the psychological and philosophical basis for his thinking, offers a summary of criticisms and establishes the as yet largely unrealised potential his expansive approach has to offer.

Chapter 2 moves on to a more detailed analysis of his theories concerning what he terms the paradigmatic and narrative modes of knowing. It then explores three dynamic tensions in meaning making that he identifies between an individual and their social environment before considering what he describes as 'knowing with the left hand'. The chapter concludes by establishing that although Bruner's thinking is compelling in its individual parts, no one so far has tried to draw these different components together into an integrated theory or model.

Chapter 3 explores how Bruner's thinking might be brought together. It establishes that similar attitudes towards difference may be determined in both the paradigmatic and narrative modes of knowing, and that certain psychological mechanisms of change can be identified in how adaptation in representation in the two modes is prompted and resolved within a dynamic social context.

Chapter 4 looks at the crucial role of narrative in how individuals adapt on a day-to-day basis to their changing environment, challenge and life events. It explores how these natural narrative mechanisms of change might be engaged to provide a way of exploring new possibilities for empathy and ways of constructing representations and understandings of the world.

Chapter 5 brings together the work of the first four chapters to offer a Brunerian Toolkit for use in exploring, assessing and promoting adaptation of world views. It offers frameworks for mapping paradigmatic and narrative representations alongside social influences on these, a scheme for examining a stance towards challenge and openness to new information, and a method for

employing narrative mechanisms of change to enable evaluation and potential transformation of representations.

The final chapter brings Bruner's ideas into dialogue with three related but distinct disciplines; education and research, conflict resolution and religious belief. The conclusion offers a reflexive critique of the book and suggests further areas for research and application.

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JEROME BRUNER: AN OVERVIEW OF KEY IDEAS

Jerome Bruner (1915–2016) was a philosopher and psychologist whose work spanned seven decades and many different disciplines including developmental, cognitive and cultural psychology, linguistics, law, literary theory, computer science, anthropology and, of course most famously, education. He was born blind and not able to see until after operations to remove cataracts when he was two years old. Perhaps this was the root of his lifelong quest to understand how we engage with, comprehend and mentally represent the world within the limited way in which we are able to perceive it. Speaking in an interview in 2008, he said:

> *We will never know how the world really is; we always have to construct what we think the world is. We do it by describing the human situation by telling stories; we do it in science; we do it in interesting kinds of ways of thinking of new images and so forth. So my passion has basically got to do with how human minds make this sort of reality.*
>
> *(http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r2H_swMUlOg)*

Bruner was convinced that human beings create rather than discover truth and meaning, and he spent his whole life exploring how we construct these

worldviews. The following sketch of Bruner's life is drawn from his autobiography, *In Search of Mind* (Bruner, 1983).

Bruner gained his doctorate entitled 'A Psychological Analysis of International Radio Broadcasts of Belligerent Nations' from Harvard University, before serving in the Psychological Warfare Division of Supreme Headquarters Allied Expeditionary Force Europe during WW2 under General Eisenhower. After the war, he returned to Harvard. He was at the forefront of the cognitive revolution in psychology; the reaction to and movement away from behaviourism, which began in the 1950s. He became one of the founders of the Centre for Cognitive Studies at Harvard. At the time, computational models of the mind were central to the cognitive revolution. However, it is indicative of how Bruner allowed his own thinking to continue to develop over time that he himself subsequently challenged those models. Bruner then turned to focus most of his attention on educational studies and quickly found himself in the middle of political debates around education in America. Prominent in the background to these, was technological competition with the former Soviet Union. In 1959, he was asked to head up a curriculum reform group for the National Academy of Science. This was to prove the turning point of his career. His conclusions were widely read and deemed very controversial by many conservative pressure groups. They have nevertheless been highly influential in education studies and often the starting point for other thinkers ever since (Weltman, 1999, p. 161). In 1972, the Centre for Cognitive Studies closed and Bruner moved first to Oxford, then back to Harvard, and finally to New York University. In his later work, Bruner shifted his attention from education to law, and in particular to applying his thinking regarding psychology, anthropology, linguistics and literary theory, to legal practice. He died on 5 June 2016, aged 100, and the tributes from his many friends and disciples gave testimony to both his genius and humanity (Association for Psychological Science, 2016, https://www.psychologicalscience.org/observer/remembering-jerome-bruner accessed 22nd October 2020). Colleagues summarise Bruner's approach and lifelong enquiry into cognition and education as being, 'engagingly humanistic… at the same time, ebullient, fun and profoundly moral' (Bakhurst & Shanker, 2001, p. 17).

Bruner's work is wide-ranging, and he explores and draws from many disciplines. However, one unifying aspect throughout his writing is the fact that Bruner takes a particular constructivist view of the world, which aims to occupy the middle ground between nature and nurture. Crucial to any account of Bruner's work is recognition of how he understands the dynamic relationship between an individual and their social environment in meaning-making. He asserts that individuals construct meaning using both the innate

cognitive **and** the cultural tools available to them. His thinking is heavily influenced by both the biological determinism of Piaget and the social constructivism of Vygotsky. He accommodates both, but does not synthesise them. It is Bruner's embrace of both perspectives that makes him such a difficult but also potent thinker to work with. It is important, therefore, to understand the foundation upon which he builds.

Bruner asserts frequently that that there is no (using his term) '*aboriginal truth*'. He does not believe that it is possible or indeed even desirable to reproduce a mirror of some supposed 'real' world in the mind. Instead, he claims that individuals are active participants in constructing their 'reality', with and within the social environment in which they find themselves. He sometimes calls this joint process 'sense-making' but more usually, after Nelson Goodman, 'world making' (Goodman, 1984).

Bruner argues that just as visual perception is filtered by various biological mechanisms in order to prevent an individual from becoming overwhelmed, we also limit what we think and, therefore, consciously 'know' at any one time (Bruner, 2006a, p. 24). As with sight, this restrictive filtering prevents individuals from becoming overwhelmed. It also facilitates a way of focussing on and thinking about a particular idea. Bruner proposes that it is through this faculty that humans have the ability to transcend and achieve a new understanding of their existing knowledge. Bruner calls this 'going beyond crude knowing', his term for the very basic type of knowing, which he argues is simply the automatic action that comes to be associated with a particular stimuli. In circumstances where there is no meta-cognition involved, Bruner is fond of saying: 'The fish will be the last to discover water!' (Bruner, 2006a, p. 19). He proposes that although they do not always choose to do so, humans are able, when pushed or minded, not only to stand outside their existing 'knowing' and examine it critically but also to envisage alternatives, compare and contrast them, and come to conclusions about the validity of former suppositions based upon these new perspectives.

To achieve this requires a certain level of basic consistency in knowledge about self and world, which Bruner calls a 'guardian of permanence' (Bruner, 1990, p. 26). However, Bruner does not mean to imply that this is in any way unchangeable. On the contrary, Bruner argues that knowledge and self-understanding in light of that knowledge is constantly changing. He believes that when we apprehend the world, we sift and sort what we find in order to make sense of it. At its most basic level, this process might be prompted when we recognise information that we have seen before. He quotes William James who described this kind of recognition as: 'Hello Thingumbob again!' (Bruner, 2006a, p. 8). Bruner argues we develop mental structures and schema within

which to store and relate information we recognise (Bruner, 2006a, p. 9). Eventually, in Bruner's terms, we are able to move beyond the information given, i.e. the information as it is presented and explore new ways of structuring it. This becomes especially necessary when we come across new information that does not fit with existing ideas and demands we pursue alternative means of understanding. Bruner describes this learning process as beginning with imitation, and he, therefore, argues that categories and methods of processing information are, at least nominally, socially derived. However, Bruner goes on to suggest that learning can progress via didactic exposure, to self-management of knowledge, and finally to facilitate what he calls 'actually thinking' (Bruner, 2006b, p. 166).

Bruner argues that just as it is widely established that discovering the structure of any body of existing shared knowledge is fundamental to the ability to efficiently conserve memory, the same 'grasping' of structure is also fundamental to the effective and competent understanding and communication of any body of communally held knowledge (Bruner, 2006a, p. 64). He argues that this is how an individual builds a mental picture of the structure of their world, thereby enabling a level of permanence, necessary to conduct life. Bruner argues that this is then mentally represented in two distinct forms. Bruner terms these modes of representation, paradigmatic, and narrative modes of knowing. He argues that we use both modes of knowing in our world sense-making.

Briefly, Bruner identifies paradigmatic knowing as that way of structuring the world that is commonly called 'scientific'. It is pragmatic, concerned with regulation and order. It is directed towards identifying causation and explaining phenomena in order to establish laws about behaviour. In this mode of thinking, the mind acts much like a computational system and is occupied with how information is structured and stored. It is employed to determine 'truth'. Narrative knowing in contrast, Bruner argues, is more commonly associated with the 'poetic'. It is heuristic, concerned with imagination, new perspectives, and is (usually within rules of non-contradiction) without limit. It is directed towards interpretation after the fact and allows information to be represented in different forms. Its mode of thinking is likened to hermeneutics, and it is occupied with understanding the information it discovers. It is employed to find what is believable and to recognise verisimilitude ('truth'-likeness).

In his earlier work, Bruner proposed that these two modes of apprehending the world were related to such an extent that they were in essence, mutual and translatable. In his later writing, however, he changed his mind about this deciding that they are, in fact, separate and independent. Obviously,

explanation requires interpretation and understanding requires ordering, but even so the two modes of thinking are, he claims, clearly distinguishable. Regarding this conclusion, Bruner says:

> *Surely we can live with the two, the austere but well-defined world of the paradigmatic and the darkly challenging world of the narrative. Indeed, it is when we lose sight of the two in league that our lives narrow.*
>
> *(Bruner, 2002, p. 101)*

According to Bruner, paradigmatic and narrative forms of knowing sometimes overlap, inform each other or information in one mode gets re-coded to the other, but they are not reducible one to the other in either direction. He argues, therefore, that they are both necessary as an individual represents their 'world' to themselves and others.

Taking these two modes of ordering cognition as his starting point, Bruner explores the various ways in which an individual's representation of reality changes day by day, as it adapts to meet new perspectives and information. He describes, and here, he follows Piaget, how we assimilate (i.e. conform new information to existing mental categories) and accommodate (i.e. adapt those existing categories or patterns to fit new external circumstances). This process, he argues, is usually unconscious. However, he believes it is by no means predetermined and automatic. Bruner identifies a number of variables that influence the development and direction of both paradigmatic and narrative modes of knowing. This is particularly the focus of his work on the culture of education, where he argues that what is officially taught is only a fraction of how children come to understand a particular phenomenon. They are, he argues, much more influenced by social expectations than actual facts (Bruner, 1996). He also identifies other influences on paradigmatic and narrative modes of knowing, including personality, habitual expectation and prejudice. Furthermore, Bruner argues, we are not limited to using existing internal or external frameworks, but rather, that humans have the ability to envisage alternatives. He proposes that they do this using what he terms 'knowing with the left hand' (Bruner, 1979).

Bruner argues that in order to 'break out' of habitual thinking patterns, humans employ imagination; that is, they 'picture' other options. Examples of imagination offered by him include the world of play and role-play. He describes how a child experiments with different imaginary roles as part of establishing and understanding their place in the world (Bruner, 2006a, p. 162). This playful reimagining is voluntary, but Bruner suggests that a

reconfiguring of mental representation might also be prompted by a challenging alternative external manifestation of an existing mental schema. To illustrate his point, he describes how an artist, he uses Cezanne as an example, recreates the subject of their painting in a different medium (Bruner, 2006b, p. 25). Similarly, he explains how a writer, this time his example is Ricoeur, not only describes reality but also then enlarges upon it (Bruner, 2006b, p. 30).

When an individual is confronted with new information or ways of 'picturing' the world that challenges their existing paradigmatic patterns, Bruner believes that they turn to narrative to help them reconcile cognitive dissonance by adapting old or forming new schemata. The way that story is used to adapt to the unexpected is crucial to Bruner's understanding of how individuals continually recreate the world around them. It begins, he argues, at a very early age and has some elements of being instinctive. Bruner examines how the childhood game '"Peekaboo"… domesticates error and surprise' (Bruner, 2002, p. 32). This foreshadows how deviation from the expected is highlighted and also how it is resolved back into 'normality'. Bruner argues that this resolution involves both intrapersonal and interpersonal activity. Internally, 'self' is represented in narrative form, and individuals reconstruct their internal autobiography as they meet new situations. This not only involves negotiating past memories but also hopes for the future. Bruner identifies the tension of being caught between the familiar and the possible within this creative process (Bruner, 2002, p. 13). However, when creating and recreating these personal narratives, individuals also draw heavily upon external, i.e. culturally available sources and use established roles and ways of being in order to tell others, and themselves, what, and even how, they are thinking. Bruner argues that change in both the paradigmatic and narrative modes of knowing occurs as a result of this ongoing dialogue between an individual's 'inner world' and their immediate, and then wider culture.

Bruner argues that narrative is the key mechanism by which individuals, situations and events are envisaged in different ways. He explores how literature imagines, and in imagining creates, hypothetical worlds and alternative models of the internal and external world (Bruner, 2006b, p. 106). Bruner argues that the flexibility of narrative makes it the ideal medium through which 'new' information is not only understood, but also how it is incorporated into an individual's worldview. Unsurprisingly, Bruner draws heavily on narrative theory when he considers how individuals present and re-present themselves to self and others in response to change. He argues that narrative mental representations of the world are constructed in the same way as stories. However, this does not mean that there are no regulations or templates

involved. Although stories are constructed in a way that is in part idiosyncratic, socially constructed patterns and rules are also followed.

Bruner argues that paradigmatic and narrative modes of knowing are employed not only by individuals but also collectively, and that these modes of knowing are present not only in individual minds but also within shared social self-understanding. He argues that this is by way of common processes, but also shared content, in the form of a mixture of history, folk pedagogy, legally enshrined behaviour and largely sub-conscious knowledge of the 'way things are'. This social knowledge inevitably heavily influences how an individual constructs the representation of his or her own perceived reality. Bruner agrees with the commonly accepted view that culture is a dominant factor in this meaning-making process. However, he argues that an individual has the freedom to construct their own understandings within their environment, using both modes of knowing.

Bruner suggests that an individual's knowledge of the world is gained first by direct enactive (physical) engagement with the world and then through iconic (pictured) memory and finally through symbolic (representative) systems. As learning becomes progressively more complex, people become increasingly reliant on agreed symbolic systems, especially language. Yet, paradoxically, as they become more fluent in the different socially available methods of interpreting their world, they also develop the ability to become more self-reflective. In all cases, learning about self and world is an organic process, with tension in meaning-making between the individual and the culture in which they find and identify themselves. Tension, because this culture both facilitates and frustrates their growth.

Bruner identifies three specific antinomies that exist between the individual and their social environment: (1) the opposition between the drive to achieve individual potential and the pressure to reproduce and further the culture within which the individual is developing. Bruner also refers to this as idiosyncratic v. conventional development; (2) the opposition between intrapsychic and socially situated learning; i.e. learning 'in one's own head' and vicariously enabled learning. Bruner also refers to this as 'inside out' v. 'outside in' learning; and (3) the opposition between the search for objective universal truth and what is locally established and subjectively accepted knowledge (Bruner, 2006b, pp. 175–177). There is no shortage of psychologists occupying all points of the biological determinist/social constructivist continuum. However, no single point along this line is complete in itself as it necessarily excludes other views. Bruner's use of antinomies, therefore, potentially provides a far richer theoretical basis for exploring the dynamic relationship between an individual and their social environment.

Although Bruner's contribution to psychology is extensive, he appears remarkably neglected. His name appears frequently in works by cognitive and developmental psychologists, especially those concerned with children's education, but although discrete strands of his thinking are mentioned, it is only in passing. For example, Schaffer who only briefly touches upon Bruner's ideas about language and the grammar of social interaction in his chapter about linguistic and communicative development (Schaffer, 2006, p. 205), Crossley who refers fleetingly to his thinking on human experience and narrative structure (Crossley, 2000, p. 48), and Holstein and Gubrium who simply name him as someone who has commented on the storied nature of self-identity (Gubrium & Holstein, 2001, p. 103).

There seems to have been no previous attempt to bring his ideas concerning the paradigmatic and narrative modes of knowing together and no thorough application of his theories to a particular area of knowledge outside children's educational studies. Although Bruner's distinction between the paradigmatic and narrative modes of knowing is routinely referenced, it is only as the starting point for a psychologist to launch in one or other direction. For example, McAdams uses it as a way to begin his exploration of narrative self-identity (McAdams, 1993, p. 29). The distilling of Bruner's contribution to psychology into the division between paradigmatic and narrative modes of knowing is an oversimplification of his thinking that ignores the deep insights he offers into both modes of knowing. His approach to mental representation is complex and multifaceted, involving emotion, intuition and the subtle interplay between intrapersonal and interpersonal influences, and much of this insight is currently lost.

At least one of the reasons for this neglect is perhaps the enormous amount of intellectual ground he covers. The sheer scope of his thinking means Bruner is in many ways an uncomfortably unwieldy writer to work with. He thinks as he writes, changes his mind, and goes off on interesting but distracting tangents. He can be a little 'free-range' and often drifts into other disciplines mid-paragraph, drawing the perspectives they provide back into his developing argument. The vast landscape his work covers means that he used broad brushstrokes, which does bring inherent problems. He has been criticised for a lack of precision in how he uses terms that he borrows from various disciplines (Barzun, 1963). Others have noted that he does not often appreciate the nuances of these borrowed concepts, or take account of criticisms of them; nor does he address the other ways people have looked at them (Olson, 1992). He has been further criticised for not engaging thoroughly enough with the empirical research involved in the various disciplines he draws upon (Nettler, 1945).