JEROME BRUNER, MEANING MAKING AND EDUCATION FOR CONFLICT RESOLUTION

This page intentionally left blank

JEROME BRUNER, MEANING MAKING AND EDUCATION FOR CONFLICT RESOLUTION

Why How We Think Matters

BY

SALLY MYERS

The Woolf Institute, Cambridge, UK

United Kingdom – North America – Japan – India
Malaysia – China

Emerald Publishing Limited
Howard House, Wagon Lane, Bingley BD16 1WA, UK

First edition 2021

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978-1-80071-075-7 (Print)
ISBN: 978-1-80071-074-0 (Online)
ISBN: 978-1-80071-076-4 (Epub)

ISOQAR certified Management System, awarded to Emerald for adherence to Environmental standard ISO 14001:2004.

Certificate Number 1985
ISO 14001

INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

To Joshua

This page intentionally left blank

CONTENTS

This page intentionally left blank

LIST OF TABLES

This page intentionally left blank

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.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

With grateful thanks to my supervisors Leon Turner and Sara Savage, and to Fraser Watts and the rest of the then Psychology and Religion Research Group, Centre for Advanced Research in Theology, Faculty of Divinity, University of Cambridge.

This page intentionally left blank

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.