

FOREWORD

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It has been said that the 20th century was the century of physics and that the 21st century will be the century of biology. As the 21st century has barely begun, it may seem premature to be characterizing it. Nevertheless, the following excerpt from a recent editorial in the journal *Science* (Kafatos & Eisner, 2004, p. 1257) makes it clear why such a characterization is apt.

Scientific progress is based ultimately on unification rather than fragmentation of knowledge. At the threshold of what is widely regarded as the century of biology, the life sciences are undergoing a profound transformation. They have long existed as a collection of narrow, even parochial, disciplines with well-defined territories. Now they are undergoing consolidation, forming two major domains: one extending from the molecule to the organism, the other bringing together population biology, biodiversity studies, and ecology. Kept separate, these domains, no matter how fruitful, cannot hope to deliver on the full promise of modern biology. They cannot lead to an appreciation of life in its full complexity, from the molecule to the biosphere, nor to the generation of maximal benefits to medicine, industry, agriculture, or conservation biology.

Although *Common Ground, Contested Territory* is a book for teachers of English language learners, not biologists, there are themes in the book that resonate with statements in this editorial. Mark Clarke argues against seeing education in a fragmented way. He realizes that we need to take a long view—from the “molecule” of a teaching technique (which he, tellingly, conceives of as an event, p. 160) to the “biosphere” of education on a national level. If we do not do so, we do not appreciate the full complexity of schools and schooling, nor will teachers of English language learners be able to hold their own in “contested territory.” Above all, given the zeitgeist and given the extent to which global environmental challenges confront us, it is not surprising that scholars like Mark Clarke have adopted ecological metaphors to help us understand the nature of our work. Seeing teaching from an ecological perspective, we acknowledge and share Clarke’s discontent “with responses to situations that ignore the complexity” (p. 202). The ecological perspective, as he writes, forces “the awareness of the interconnectedness of individuals, institutions, and communities—systems within systems within systems” (p. 24). Indeed, the interconnectedness of classrooms within schools within communities cannot be ignored—at whatever level of scale. Any system that is conceived to be “irreducibly self-contained cannot meaningfully relate to the world ‘outside’” (Leather & van Dam, 2003, p. 6).

Indeed, there is a growing awareness among language acquisition/language socialization researchers and educational linguists (Larsen-Freeman, 1997; van Lier, 2000; Kramsch, 2002; Leather & van Dam, 2003) that the foci of their investigations cannot be studied apart from the contexts in which they operate—cannot be seen as autonomous objects of any kind. Furthermore, such scholars have come to realize that the study of complex, contextualized systems is made more difficult by the fact that such systems are often dynamic, continually being transformed over time, shaped by their environments and shaping them in a reciprocal manner (Larsen-Freeman & Cameron, forthcoming). The dynamics themselves are nonlinear, and therefore unexpected consequences sometimes emerge. The operation of such stochastic systems is not revealed by searching for simple proximate, linear causality; instead, what is of interest are “relationships and processes, not products and outcomes; our focus is on the ways that new patterns of organization and knowledge emerge in a situation of change; we are concerned with the quality of the educational environment and the learning opportunities it affords—and explicitly with the values and ideals we wish to promote in our educational work” (van Lier, 2003, p. 51).

Drawing on these ideas in systems theory and other sources for his inspiration, Mark Clarke offers an approach for dealing with seemingly intractable problems in education. As Clarke puts it, “Simple, straightforward causal expla-

nations for human phenomena are rarely useful. People are complex, and organizations even more so. Whether you are attempting to understand a particular event or situation or trying to change something, you need to abandon causal thinking—Event A causes event B—and adopt ecological thinking—Event B can be understood as the (expectable) outcome of a convergence of factors. How to influence these factors to create an environment for change becomes the focus of your efforts” (p. 198).

This is the only kind of thinking that will meet with any success in these “troubled times” in my opinion. In keeping with this orientation, Clarke encourages teachers to acknowledge the influence of their mentors, all the while becoming generators of their own knowledge, through a process of action research and reflection. He knows that the learning of teachers is well served when they cultivate “attitudes of inquiry” (Larsen-Freeman, 2000) because prescriptions and proscriptions will be of little assistance in situations where “all human interaction, including that encountered in the classroom, is unique to the moment” (p. 159).

Hanks (1996, p. 15, cited in Leather & van Dam, 2003) suggests that approaches to linguistics can be characterized conceptually in terms of two basic foci: the degree to which language is seen to exist as an autonomous system versus the extent to which language is cross-linked to the circumstances of its utterance (its “relationality”). In such terms, an ecological approach will clearly be high on relationality and low on autonomy. Adopting an ecological approach to understanding teaching, Clarke emphasizes relationships—not only in explicating the circumstances of interest—but also in the relationships that teachers establish with their students. As Mark Clarke states, “First and foremost, good teaching involves human relationships. Good teaching involves authentic engagement between people around things that matter” (p. 22). Furthermore, in order to be successful, teachers need to establish relationships outside of the classroom because “significant problems cannot be solved at the level they are encountered” (p. 181). Finally, it is clear that Clarke has undertaken very seriously a mission to establish an authentic relationship with us, his readers.

Although he says that he has worked to remove it, there is still a lot of Mark Clarke in this book. And I say, all for the better. We need more of his kind of thinking if we are going to deal effectively with the times that we live and work in. While it is true that humans cannot help learning (although I do find his definition of learning—“change over time through engagement in activity”—curiously broad), it takes a level of commitment for the learning to be purposeful and helpful. Clarke seeks to experience the ideal of coher-

ence—“that fleeting state where my philosophical commitments align with the mundane decisions I am making on a minute-by-minute basis” (p. 31). He adds “we are all seeking coherence in the world—ways of aligning our behavior with our convictions—and we want to avoid being compromised by the pressures that seem to dominate the profession these days” (p. 200). I can think of very few individuals who achieve coherence in their lives. Mark Clarke is on the short mental list that I maintain; certainly, he is among those who embody the conscience of the field.

Surprisingly, he does not use the term *awareness* often in this book; yet, to my mind, this book is centrally concerned with awareness. Having been a long-time faculty member at the School for International Training, where we organized our curriculum for language teachers around knowledge, skills, attitudes, and awareness, I find the absence of the term “awareness” striking. For instance, Clarke asks, “Do students emerge [from a particular activity] with the knowledge, skills, and attitudes that contribute to their immediate success and long-term life chances?” (p. 123). Of course, he is not alone in not mentioning awareness explicitly. Nevertheless, I am quite sure that he would agree that awareness is essential for moving “from merely seeing the world toward seeing ourselves in the world, from being embedded in the problems we are trying to solve toward gaining perspective on them” (p. 195). With awareness comes choice. One can think and act differently—with a level of intentionality that being a teacher of English language learners in troubled times requires. Mark points out, and I agree, that it is important to acknowledge one’s intellectual debts. Caleb Gattegno, the originator of the Silent Way, is one of my mentors. And Gattegno impressed upon me the fact that only awareness is truly educable. To this end, I am already conceiving of a course that with good fortune I might get to teach one day—one that uses this book as its text in order to nurture the awareness essential for teachers who work in contested territory.

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