

Is changing your mind like changing your underwear?

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*Progress is impossible without change,
and those who cannot change their minds
cannot change anything.*

- George Bernard Shaw

It must be over 25 years since I last changed my underwear. No, wait; let me rephrase that: it must be over 25 years since I last changed the brand of underwear I wear. While my family may disagree, my allegiance to Marks and Spencer's undies was perhaps one of the last vestiges of my Pommie origins to leave me. After all, if it was good enough for the royal family, it was surely good enough for me. And this from a lifelong republican, no less. But I have finally succumbed to the lure of Bonds and I am the happier for it.

It is not flattering to say of someone that they change their minds as often as they change their underwear, but why do we tend to view changing one's mind as a sign of weakness or as a moral failing? If a friend says, "I've changed my mind", the temptation to respond with "Does it work any better?" is almost irresistible. Keynes probably did not say: "When the facts change, I change my mind. What do you do, sir?" But he should have. And J. K. Galbraith did say: "Faced with the choice between changing one's mind and proving that there is no need to do so, almost everyone gets busy on the proof."

To broaden my outlook, I've been reading a little bit about Foucault lately. His followers object vociferously to him being described as a Marxist but in fact he was, early on in his career. In his first book, when he was also a member of the (Stalinist) Communist Party in France, he took a Marxist line. But by the time he published a second edition, he not only took out all references to a Marxist perspective but also apparently did his best to ensure that the earlier version was well and truly buried. I find this strange. Why not simply state that you have changed your mind?

Like many a wild child of the late '60s, I too was seduced by the easy answers of radical socialism at university but had changed my mind to such an extent by the time I was in my early 30s that I stood as a parliamentary candidate for the newly formed Social Democratic Party in the 'Falklands' general election of 1983; quite a change.

This reluctance to change one's mind is particularly prevalent in education, not least because education is not an evidence-based profession. Nowhere is this more obvious than in the teaching of reading. As the eminent psychologist Keith Stanovich has noted: "that direct instruction in alphabetic coding facilitates early reading acquisition is one of the most well established conclusions in all of behavioral science". In spite of some 30 or 40 years of scientific research into how reading works and how it is best taught, however, the received wisdom promulgated in most initial teacher training institutions continues to be the whole language view (or balanced literacy as it was



subsequently, if not convincingly, re-branded). Why is this the case? What stops people, and especially education academics, from changing their mind?

As I have admitted before, I have not always been an advocate of phonics instruction. When I first came to Australia in 1990, I held what, in retrospect, may seem like a curious mix of views. While being a strong enthusiast of applied behaviour analysis in education, I was, however, not a supporter of direct, explicit phonics instruction, as my writing around this time demonstrates. Having witnessed examples of shocking phonics excesses in schools in the West Midlands, whereby children struggling to learn to read barely ever saw a book, I was deeply suspicious. Under the influence of colleagues such as Coral Kemp at Macquarie University Special Education Centre (MUSEC), however, I rapidly saw the error of my ways. The available scientific evidence in favour of my former views just did not stack up whereas the evidence in favour of phonics instruction was overwhelming. And so I very quickly changed my mind. The rest, as they say, is history. Over 25 years later, I am still the happier for it.

These days, I sometimes find myself as perplexed by the attitudes

of some phonics enthusiasts as I am by their whole language opponents. The latter seem to find no problem in ignoring the scientific evidence in favour of phonics instruction because many educationists deny the validity of empirical research in education, opting for a more ‘philosophical’ approach. Equally alarming to me, however, is the reluctance of some advocates for phonics instruction to take on board more recent research findings and to adjust their models of instruction accordingly. Some seem to hold the view that we now know all that we need to know and resist, with vigour, those within the same camp who deviate from the received wisdom.

The Dalai Lama once said that should science disprove the benefits of meditation, he would be willing to rethink thousands of years of Buddhist tradition. “If science proves facts that conflict with Buddhist understanding, Buddhism must change accordingly,” he said. “We should always adopt a view that accords with the facts.” If the Dalai Lama can be so open-minded, why do so many educationists refuse to reconsider their position in the light of the evidence?

As for those who appear to deny the reality of science *per se* in favour

of the view that even scientific research evidence is socially determined (and we’re back with Foucault and his mates here), let’s give the last word on this subject to popular author Alexander McCall Smith. In his 2005 book, *44 Scotland Street*, he comments:

“The problem was that some people preached social philosophies that paid no attention to reality. Some French philosophers had a tendency to do this, Big Lou had noted: they did not care in the slightest if their theories could have disastrous consequences – because they considered themselves above such consequences. It was perfectly possible to portray scientific knowledge as socially determined – and therefore not true in any real sense – when one was safe on the ground in Paris; but would you ask the same question in a jet aircraft at thirty-five thousand feet, when that same knowledge underpinned the very engineering that was keeping one up in the air?” (p.151)

So, have you changed your mind?
Does it work any better?

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