

Incorporating *Gestion Mentale* in our Teaching Practices.

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The field of *Gestion Mentale* was developed by the philosopher and educator Antoine de la Garanderie (1920-2010). He lived in France where, for some 60 years, he studied learning from the standpoint of what is taking place in the mind. He wrote in French and, as of now, his many books and articles have not been translated into English.

Introduction

How baffling it can be to observe a student who is having difficulty remembering or grasping some information. There are times when she or he seems to blank out on tasks that to us seem simple and straightforward. Working with a student, you may ask, "Why does he not make the connections? Why does she not recall afterwards what was presented to her?" You may find yourself thinking, "If only I could peer into his mind and see his thought process, I could then watch what he is doing and not doing in his mind and, perhaps, be of more assistance to him."

This, of course, is pointless wishful thinking. And yet, why not have the student look into her own mind and communicate her observations? Why not record what individuals report on what is happening in their minds at the very moment they accomplish a learning task? Then, drawing from this store of empirical knowledge, you could suggest certain options to the student in difficulty. You could help that particular student experiment and put in place those personal mind processes through which the task on hand can be successfully accomplished.

This, indeed, becomes feasible when *Gestion Mentale* is incorporated into our teaching practice.

This field has evolved out of the intention of a teacher, Antoine de la Garanderie, to enable all the students in a class to be successful learners. The research is based on observations made of individuals faced with specific learning tasks. The students reported on the mental images they employed while accomplishing these tasks, and many thousands of such reports led to the discovery of certain principles of learning. The accumulated records of such observations and the conclusions drawn from them, together with ongoing research contribute to the field presently known as *Gestion Mentale*.

This is an introductory article focusing on a single, central aspect of this emerging field, namely, on the distinction between two types of mental activity: In one, our physical sense organs function in the role of intermediary to the observed world and in the other one, this function is absent. It will be shown how understanding this distinction can enhance a teacher's ability to guide the learning process, whether in the framework of support teaching or of general class teaching.

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“In the World” vs. “In the Mind”

At the core of *Gestion Mentale*, is the distinction between “mind” and “world”:

“**World**” has to do with what is perceived as the world outside our minds. It is the world we get to know through our sense organs of our body. In the school context and from the point of view of the student, it concerns all that the teacher does to catch her interest and present the subject matter to her.

“**Mind**” has to do with the formulation of meaning purely within our mind where it is not observable to another person. From the point of view of the student, it concerns what he does inside his mind with what is presented to him.

The teacher presents the subject matter of lesson in ways that are pleasurable, efficient and promote student activity related to the subject. For the students, all of this takes place in the world they perceive outside their mind. The counterpart is what the student does with these perceptions in her own mind, how she transforms them into personal “mind content” by evoking within herself certain images, sounds, words and sensations.

Producing Images in the Mind

On the whole, we pay little attention to the flux of sounds and images that flit through our minds. Instead, our attention is drawn to the meanings – the thoughts - that emerge from this “mind content.”

For example, take the moment when you recall meeting a friend. In doing so, you may think of what the person said, or what you said, or of how the person was, or of an earlier experience you had with that friend and many such things. What we do not notice, in all likelihood, is how our mind is producing these meanings. What content is present in your mind while these meanings arise? For instance, do you have a picture in your mind of the person? Do you hear the voice of the person in your mind? Does some of the conversation come up “translated” into pictures? Is your own voice describing or commenting on what was? Once you discover that many things are happening in your mind, you can begin to note in what pattern and in what sequence they arise.

When we reflect on a cognitive act just accomplished, the “mind content” that gave rise to that thought can be retrieved. This means we are capable of changing our focus, of letting go of the associations which carry our thoughts forward, and instead observing the structural elements (images, sounds, etc.) which form our thoughts.

Observing “mind content” is the cornerstone of *Gestion Mentale*. It opens the possibility of entering directly into the nature of learning and into the most essential elements of pedagogy. It allows for empirical answers to questions which beforehand would have been difficult even to ask, questions like: what “mind content” and what “mind procedures” allow for the successful accomplishment of specific learning tasks by a particular individual? In *Gestion Mentale*, achievement in learning is correlated with what is taking place in the learner’s mind.

“Attention” as a Mind Activity

The word “attention” can serve as an example of how learning activities are defined and understood in terms of what is happening in the mind.

“Attention,” in *Gestion Mentale*, is described as a specific act that is carried out *in the mind*. It is the act of making an object become present in the mind – as a mental image, picture or sound, or as a sensation.

Here are two examples:

1. *When looking at a bird:* The bird becomes a picture in the mind which one sees without using one’s eyes. Or, the bird becomes a chirping sound retained in the mind, something audible yet not through the ears. It could also become a conversation about some aspect of the bird or perhaps a description of it, all in the mind without employing the body senses directly. It could also become the feeling of flying or of imitating the bird’s movements. Of course, in each of these cases, especially in the last one, greater precision about the object of attention would need to engage other senses.
2. *While reading a text:* When a person is creating mental images (sounds, sights, words, sensations) which have to do with the content of that text then, inevitably, that person is attentive to what they are reading.

Forming “mind content,” whatever way it is done, assures that one is attentive to that object. The contrary is also true: If the object is not present in the mind in some form, one is forcibly *inattentive* to that object. Seeing the bird with one’s eyes, or reading the words of a text and even hearing them pronounced out loud do not in themselves constitute paying attention. Attention is determined by what is taking place in the mind.

This act of paying attention, of producing “mind content,” is accomplished through embodying a specific *intent* or “*projet*” as it is called in French. This is a separate topic within *Gestion Mentale* and is not included in this presentation. What has been said so far, however, serves well enough to illustrate how acts of learning are described from the point of view of what is happening in the mind. Thus, “paying attention” is what comes about when images, sounds, words and sensations are being formed in the mind.

In the Mind

In *Gestion Mentale*, “mind content” is divided into three primary modes:

- a) Mental images in the form of pictures
- b) Mental images in the form of sounds
- c) Sensations: movement, taste, smell, touch, warmth, balance, etc. (Sensations engage the physical body. The presence of a sensation is brought to mind and consciousness through the body.)

These three modes come to expression in myriad different ways. An exciting part of teaching with *Gestion Mentale* is observing the very surprising variety of means by which individuals connect with what makes sense.

Yet, in this plethora of individual approaches, there is a certain order. According to Antoine de la Garanderie, each of us is partial to one of the three primary modes. Although all three modes may be part of one's repertoire, one out of these three plays an essential role and empowers a person with the ability to make sense of any given situation.

There are people who need to make images in their minds in order for a given object to take on meaning; they have taken the visual mode as their mainstay. There are others who need to hear sounds or speech in their minds; they have taken on the auditory mode. There are those who need to imagine a sensation in order for information to enter their mind; for them, proprioceptive sensations have become the path to meaning. By naming these structures "*habitudes mentales*" (a person's habitual path to meaning), Antoine de la Garanderie suggests that even though such preferences can be observed in early childhood they are essentially acquired through practice. The leading mode of an individual is referred to as that person's "pedagogical mother tongue" (*langue maternelle pédagogique*).

The terms *visual*, *auditory*, and *sensory* are very specifically defined in *Gestion Mentale*. They refer to the way a person structures meaning *in their mind*. A preference for pictures or for descriptions or for movement *in the outside world* does not determine whether the person's dominant mode is visual, auditory, or sensory. In some cases, following the lead of external behaviours can be misleading. The determination of dominant procedural modes – of the pedagogical mother tongue - is made on the basis of what a person does *in their mind* when they elicit and codify information. Understanding this distinction brings a degree of clarity to the whole subject of determining auditory, visual and sensory modes.

Making Sense

Learning has everything to do with creating "mind content." Only when information enters the mind in some form does it begin to make sense. When an impression is made upon the mind in the form of pictures, sounds or sensations, the information becomes accessible to the individual. Then it becomes possible for that individual to do something with that information. In *Gestion Mentale*, attention is seen as the initial act of learning and the essential first step into the remaining acts which are: memorizing, understanding, reflecting and using creative imagination to invent or discover new possibilities.

When information is presented in a form that is foreign and does not match the way the person normally enters things into their mind, that information is indigestible, one could say. It does not satisfy the personal requirements for producing "mind content." Until either the teacher or the student makes the required changes it cannot enter the mind. The student of course perceives what is being shown or told or done, but the information remains something in the world "outside" without becoming part of her mental world. Unable to become the subject of the student's attention, it cannot be put to any further use. It is not memorizable, not comprehensible, not subject matter that can be reflected on, and so forth.

For example, if a student requires the presence of sensation such as movement, and no movement is suggested in her teacher's presentation, the information given remains inaccessible as "mind content" until sensation is introduced. Although the sensation needed may be nothing

more than an imagined gesture, it still is the key to opening the mind to that information. Parallel situations arise when the required forms are auditory or visual.

It is common for schoolchildren to be confronted with “not understanding” when a communication is relayed in a form that is not their own. It is crucial that students, and certainly early-school pupils, recognize that this is due to the form in which a message is presented and is not due to their inability to understand. Students should be given opportunities to explore their personal mind processes and see that when information takes the form they personally require, intelligibility arises. The mistaken belief that understanding engages some innate ability that one either possesses or lacks could surely handicap the development of a person’s learning for a lifetime.

What then is the role of the teacher in bringing clarity to students and making information intelligible? Emerging from this approach is the fact that wherever incomprehension arises, information needs to be reconstituted in order to become digestible. This can be done by the alerted teacher or it can be accomplished by the students themselves. During the early years of schooling, many pupils have not yet discovered how to reconstitute information in the form that meets their personal needs and it is predominantly the teacher’s task to do so. At the same time, the teacher’s responsibility is to see that all pupils gradually learn to do this for themselves.

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Leaning Words

Creating “mind content” in the form of images, sounds and sensations is an activity that begins long before learning to speak. The world we observe becomes intelligible when we register it as “mind content.” Each person has specific ways of making this happen, of holding in the mind what is experienced through the senses.

Language learning introduces an added refinement. In this case what has to enter the mind is not the form, sound or sensation of, say, a tree or a dog or a cushion, but the sound of the word which represents the object. In learning to speak, a child gains mastery of the semiotic function of specific sounds by associating the sound of the word with its attributed meaning. Both of these need to be codified into some mind form and, too, it is in the mind that they need to be coupled with one another.

The following is an example of how a child, unable as yet to read and write, learns the new word “*cushion*.” The process is more subtle than one might at first imagine.

At the outset,

For the person with visual orientation:

A meaningful image needs to be present in the mind.
For example: a picture of a cushion.

For the person with auditory orientation:

A meaningful sound needs to be present in the mind.
For example: the muffled sound of patting a cushion.

For the person with sensory orientation:

A meaningful sensation needs to be present.
For example: the feeling of pressing against it or throwing it.

In this manner, specific content is personally codified in the mind and the child can evoke the object.

From this codification of meaning, to learning the new word “cushion,” there is a further step to make. The coded meaning (which evokes the object cushion, for that person) needs to be associated with the vocalization “cushion.” One needs to remember that it is not what the child hears and sees *in the world* that allows for the connection to be made but what happens *within the mind*. The sound of the word “cushion” needs to be formed in the mind and associated with the mind’s codification for the object cushion.

For this to be encouraged, certain procedures are effective. One, for example, has to do with the presence in the mind of familiar information that has already been encoded. This is critical, for it is the prerequisite for assimilating new content. When the child calls the familiar content to mind (and evokes the object cushion) he is open and ready to assimilate the new content, (the sound of the word “cushion”). The progression from the presence of the known, to the dual presence in the mind of what is known together with what is new, opens the path to success in learning.

The sound of the word “cushion” is not inserted into the mind like a letter into a letterbox. In accordance with the individual’s orientation, specific preliminary steps are required so as to engage the learner’s personal process or itinerary for creating mind content.

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Learning the Alphabet

Writing requires a new set of skills, that of entering into the mind graphic signs and symbols which in themselves are quite meaningless and function merely as a code. These signs are conventions agreed upon within one particular culture.

A vital role of the primary school teacher is to assist the child in making the transition to coded written language. This means the teacher helps the child over the threshold from making a *true-to-life mind content* to making *coded mind content* in the form of letters, numbers and written words.

This transition is fraught with difficulty. The school child frequently stumbles when confronted with coded representations and does not realize right away what to do to transform them into personal “mind content.” For example, a student who can readily think of the word “swing” or “happy” has a picture, sound or sensation that carries the word’s signification. But when it comes to thinking the sign “+” or the letter form “b” the necessary context is often not available and no mind imprint can be made. The student perceives the sound and perceives the graphic form which is presented to them (i.e. she/he can hear it and see it and recognize its presence as an object in the world) yet is unable to transform it into “mind content”.

If at this stage the teacher recognizes the hurdle confronting the pupils, specific aid can be offered and impending repeated failure averted. The fact is, we adults probably have no recollection that this transition from concrete to abstract was a critical step in our own development. We easily make the mistake of taking for granted the schoolchild’s transition to symbolic language and are not attuned to the delicate passage it entails.

It is necessary to take time, in a non-judgemental context, and accompany the students carefully over this Rubicon. There are specific ways in which we can allow young students to move back and forth between the real world and the coded sign until bridges and passages appropriate to

their individual mind processes are formed. We can assist them in *their* discovery of how to give presence in the mind to the abstractions we know as letters and numbers.

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Matching Sight and Sound

At times, a child in pre-school or elementary school is unable to name colours correctly. Very commonly, the problem is pedagogical rather than physiological or psychological. An alerted teacher can bring a solution before it becomes an issue of concern.

The most likely hypothesis, in fact, is that the child is already half the way to success. The child *has* learned the colours' names but does not know which colour to associate with each name (i.e. does not know what it looks like). In the complimentary case, the child *does* know what each colour looks like but not the associated names. (*To understand this paragraph the reader needs to recall that "know" is not what the child perceives but what the child has entered into her mind as a mental image or sound.*)

The first is the case of a child with an auditory orientation who has grasped the auditory content and has not succeeded in giving mind presence to what is being perceived visually. The second is the case of a child with a visual orientation who has no difficulty in recognizing the various colours but has not succeeded in giving mind presence to the spoken names of those colours. The pedagogical task is to complete the child's learning process by enabling them to integrate the unregistered part of the information.

In order to accomplish this with ease, it is helpful to employ two principles elucidated in *Gestion Mentale*, about the way the mind functions:

- a) Information must be present in the mind in a person's primary mode before any supplementary information can be accepted in a secondary mode. (See Learning Words above.)
- b) In order for information to be registered in the mind in a secondary mode, the primary mode must be disengaged.

For example, in order for a child of visual orientation to encode the name of a coloured object, that object must be absent from her/his field of view. Only when the child has disengaged her/himself from the external activity of looking at the coloured object, can the process of learning begin. Then, she/he can call up "empty" mind space in which to hold the visual image present, while extending the mind's reach into the auditory content. This auditory compliment (name of the colour) needs to be heard or spoken in the mind.

In contrast, for a child of auditory orientation, moments of silence are all-important. In order to encode the image of the coloured object, this child needs to be free of auditory input, such as the teacher speaking, so that he/she is not engaged by any external sounds. This allows the child to have "empty" time in which the name, now heard or spoken in the mind, is held present while the associated visual mental image is formed.

(With time, a person becomes more proficient at breaking sensory contact with an object internally, without having to move the eyes or the object away or to be in silence.)



Complying with the mind's natural processes of assimilating information is of utmost importance when pedagogical difficulties arise. It is not uncommon to find that difficulties simply disappear when the child's own mind processes are respected.

Matching sound and sight in the case of colours is not unlike matching written letters and their sounds. There too, where reading and writing are being taught, the alerted teacher can make students' learning paths smoother and more effective.

Skills in Gestion Mentale

A complete survey of *Gestion Mentale* would offer a wider understanding of how to approach specific learning tasks. What is offered here may serve to arouse the sensitivities and interest of teachers, but it is far from a full exposé. It offers merely the bare notes of the melody, without the ornamentation that gives life to the tune.

To understand *Gestion Mentale*, one needs to experience using it with students. In addition to recognizing the principles of mental activity and the innumerable ways an individual can avail of these, there are specific skills that need to be practiced. One concrete example is the *dialogue pédagogique*, a Rogerian approach to dialogue. Students are placed in a situation where they have a specific leaning task to perform. The purpose is to uncover the mental structures they employ when successful at a task. Open questions and non-invasive listening allows the teacher to observe what the student exposes rather than drawing foregone conclusions. The emphasis is on the student's growing awareness of herself, and not on what the assisting teacher can tell about the student. The goal of a *pedagogical dialogue* is to enable a student to resolve a specific learning difficulty with which she or he is faced.

The study of *Gestion Mentale* is also the study of oneself as a learner. It is when teachers have made inroads into understanding their own personal structures of learning that they can be most helpful and open-minded in the approaches they use with the students.



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