Abstract:

Whereas all animals learn, and whereas many animals might be said to teach, only humans have evolved the capacity to teach (and learn) through language. In fact, recent evidence from a range of different scientific disciplines--including evolutionary biology, primatology, archeology, and cultural anthropology--has begun to make it clear that our species-unique capacity for teaching and learning through language is a fundamental component of the human adaptive suite. This capacity apparently coevolved with other critical traits (including bipedalism, pair bonding, supersized brains, an extended juvenile period, an expanded foraging range, and reliance on high-quality, difficult-to-extract food sources) over a period of some six million years. Given this evolutionary history, it's increasingly clear that a "learner model" capable of describing mechanisms of human learning (not just learning in general) needs to acknowledge the central role of language, and how human teachers and learners have been using language, as a biocultural activity, to pass along, and acquire, life-sustaining knowledge and skill for millions of years.

Biosketch:

As a lifelong educator and educational researcher, Donald "Chip" Morrison has spent more than forty years in and around schools. His career includes stints teaching English as a Second Language (in Hong Kong), as an educational software developer, museum exhibit developer, K-12 school reform agent, school program evaluator, and, most recently, Research Assistant Professor at the Institute for Intelligent Systems, University of Memphis. His research interests include the use, and misuse, of computers in education; the relationship between school reform and instructional quality; the nature of classroom talk, particularly in science and mathematics; and, more recently, the granular analysis of the language used in human tutoring sessions. A graduate of Dartmouth College (Drama), Morrison holds an M.A. in Language Studies from the University of Hong Kong, and an Ed.D. in Human Development from the Harvard Graduate School of Education. His recent book, On the Coevolution of Language, Teaching, and Civil Discourse, reflects a lifetime of thinking and learning about language, and how we use language to teach, learn, and think cooperatively with other humans.