
LEARNING THROUGH UNDERSTANDING

A LABOR-INTENSIVE PROPOSITION



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A colleague once commented about his newly discovered need for glasses: "I'll wait a while longer. I can still see more than I can understand!" Although they may be free from physical impairments of vision, many of our students fall into a similar category of intellectual myopia. Being products of previously ingrained poor learning habits, these students approach each academic endeavor as a challenge to their ability to master factual details of an academic discipline, while giving very little thought to the unifying conceptual themes that link these facts together in a logical way. Essentially, they fail to realize that understanding the logical "framework" of a knowledge base greatly simplifies the retention of its factual content. Without this realization, it is easy to understand why students have become disenchanted with the education process, which they often perceive as an exercise in tedium.

Certainly we are not responsible for the attitudes our students bring to the college experience, but we do have an obligation to instill healthier attitudes toward learning while they are under our influence. If or when we succeed, we are rewarded not only with an informed person, but with an enlightened and inspired student who realizes that logical thought, not memorization alone, is the true basis for learning.

We must concede that our students enter college with a cultural knowledge base that, if not diminished, is in many respects different from ours.

Moreover, their intellectual curiosity is suppressed by anti-intellectual attitudes, i.e. the "Nerd" syndrome, which inhibit their active participation in class. And, for reasons unknown to me, fear of failure is less a motivating factor than it was with our generation. Our mission, should we accept it, is to find where these students are academically and bring them to where we want them to be, without sacrificing ourselves on the lectern with low student evaluations—not an impossible mission, but definitely a labor-intensive one. Where to begin?

Based upon individual personalities, every professor develops a characteristic style of teaching so that strategies that work for one person are not necessarily appropriate for all. With that idea in mind, I will briefly describe some of the tactics and methods that I have found most helpful.

Given that a relaxed atmosphere is more conducive to learning, I try early to "informalize" the classroom environment. You may choose to do so by whatever tactic seems most appropriate in your situation. A sense of humor goes a long way here. Allow your authoritative knowledge of the subject to preserve the desired professorial distance. In this environment, students are less ashamed of their ignorance, less afraid of saying something wrong, and more willing to participate actively. Without some sort of instantaneous student feedback, we are left only with tests to assess their academic backgrounds and their learning progress. By then, it's too late.

Years ago, I critically re-examined the content of my courses, challenging the justification for including every fact by asking, "Why do they need to know this?" If information was not essential

to illustrate a conceptual theme or as a prerequisite for some future concept, it was eliminated. This practice shifted the entire character of a course more toward a conceptual organization with the factual content serving as examples of unifying themes. Analogies are also valuable here. However, the analogy must come from the students' knowledge base, not ours, if it is to be effective. Thus, we have to access their memory banks to see what resides there. Simple questions, often rhetorical in nature, suffice if they are directed to the entire class and not to individuals. The more courageous students volunteer answers at first. The meek, who first answer quietly to themselves, will venture forth in time. Selecting questions, the answers to which lead logically to the next point, allows students to experience the logical organization and flow of the material while subtly encouraging similar thought processes in their own minds.

Additionally, arriving early for class and engaging students in casual conversation also helps to bridge the cultural gap. In time, conversations will shift to problems encountered with course content. Thus, both professor and students benefit from these one-on-one or small group interactions. When this works and students begin to consider their professor approachable, numerous opportunities arise for informal exchanges.

In reality, this "informal" educational environment is my ultimate goal. I believe that this is where both the attitudes toward learning and the approaches to knowledge acquisition are modeled and reinforced. ●