

GREAT TEACHING

Expanding Students' Limited Perspectives of Learning

Given that one of the primary aims of a transformative education is to expand students' perspectives of their relationship to self, others, community, and environment, perhaps a foundational student perspective we should strive to expand is students' understanding of their own processes for learning.

Abraham Maslow is credited with originating the saying that to someone whose only tool is a hammer, everything looks like a nail. Similarly, if a student's only means of studying is to "memorize stuff," then she is severely limited in achieving the kind of learning that's so often required in college.

David Kember's research (2001) involving interviews of 53 college students to discover their conceptions of learning and teaching examined the epistemology-based reasons for how and why students struggle to learn in college. What he discovered, that "[n]ovice students holding didactic/reproductive beliefs found it difficult to adjust to higher education if the teaching was not expository" (p. 205), correlates nicely with faculty's experiences trying to help entering students who are practiced only in surface-learning study strategies.

If the only tool these students have is the hammer of memorization, all forms of learning look like the multiple-choice nail.

[View entire Great Teaching article](#)

To cause a developmental shift in beliefs, it does appear necessary to confront students with the incompatibility of their current beliefs. They cannot come to appreciate a facilitative/transformative model of the teaching and learning process unless exposed to teaching based upon these premises. (Kember, 2001, p. 218)

In this statement, Kember hits the transformative learning nail squarely on the head: what he describes is the necessity for the "disorienting dilemma" as described by Mezirow (1991) as the launchpad for students to then try to resolve the difference between current reality (not being able to use their only mechanism for studying) and desired state (succeeding as college learners). Further, he provides a process faculty can use to help students reach that desired state — the use of instructional strategies that require students to, among other things, develop a reflective capacity.

Kember characterizes a lower-order study/learn strategy that relies on memorization of disseminated facts as an epistemology in which students hold didactic/reproductive beliefs. In other words, students believe that learning is the accumulation of facts presented by faculty or in books and other resources.

In a college philosophy class, for example, in which students are challenged to wrestle with fundamental understandings of themselves and their place in the world, a learning strategy relying solely on didactic/reproductive study techniques will generally doom a student to failure.

In fact, because a college education is *supposed* to help students learn how to deal with ambiguity and derive meaning from human affairs (theirs and others') that are almost never clearly black or white, we *must* present opportunities for students to wrestle with their own epistemological selves.

Fortunately, there is hope. Kember shares (2001) examples of the growth learners can sustain as they begin to change beliefs about the very definition of learning. For example, early on in a class in which the faculty member employed a teaching strategy that included student reflection as a way to make meaning, one student wrote:

In the past I was quite inflexible in my method of study. I only revised what the teachers said was important. Now I have to read books and find (relevant) material for myself. Of course they are different . . . very different, so I am not able to cope with this (learning approach) . . . I could not decide what was right or wrong, the feeling was so insecure. Through journal writing and sharing in the learning process, I found that writing papers is very difficult. (p. 219)

However, by the end of the course, most of the students had come to value the process of reflection as a means to help them learn:

When we discussed it further, some of them even agreed with me, so there was an integration of our thoughts . . . Small group discussion helped me a lot. The other students are from different hospitals, different clinical units. Sometimes, they talked about their experiences which I have never heard before. (p. 219)

While the above demonstrates the meta-cognitive arc among students in a single class, Kember's research also includes an evaluation of the success of introducing active learning strategies and other non-didactic/reproductive instructional approaches to students in college as part of a study examining 90 such instances (2000). Characterizing the findings from that research, he says that "(p)ositive student feedback on almost all the initiatives indicated that students came to see the value of such forms of teaching and eventually came to prefer them" (2001, p. 219).

The takeaway here is that perseverance as we help students adjust to the kinds of deep learning strategies necessary in college does ultimately pay off, and an excellent means of prompting such growth in student learning is to use high-impact teaching practices such as group work, reflection, active learning, and so on.

References

Kember, D. (2000). *Action research and action learning research: Improving the quality of teaching and learning*. London: Kogan Page.

Kember, D. (2001). Beliefs about knowledge and the process of teaching and learning as a factor in adjusting to study in higher education. *Studies in Higher Education*, 26(2), 205-221.

Mezirow, J. (1991). *Transformative dimensions of adult learning*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.