

TRANSFORMATIVE LEARNING

“Frequently in error, but rarely in doubt”

Harvard psychology researcher Dr. Ellen Langer poses an interesting thesis about a major cause of mindlessness: we proceed mindlessly when we believe we know something.

If we think we *don't* know something, however, we are much more alert, more engaged, and pay much closer attention.

Alert. Engaged. Attending. Do those sound like positive attributes for students in your classrooms? If so, helping students develop a strategy for paying attention by looking for disconfirming information, by looking for differences, by asking, “What if this *isn't* true?” will be powerfully transformative for how they engage with course content, with college, with life.

“Mindfulness in the essence of engagement,” says Langer (2014).

The absence of such an approach, Langer contends, makes it easy for students or anyone to be frequently in error (because we really don't know all the facts) but rarely in doubt (because we accept something as fact and from that point forward decide it's not really worth a whole lot of attention).

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One point Dr. Langer makes about the pervasive mindlessness in our society and in our schools is that facts are delivered as absolute and therefore there's nothing interesting about them anymore. Consequently, we no longer pay attention to those facts. Among typical college-aged students today — a group some researchers describe as a “distracted generation” due to shortened attention spans borne of frequent task-switching among multiple electronic divertissements — holding attention is challenging.

(NOTE: “task-switching” is the accurate description, *not* “multi-tasking.” See Mark Bauerlein's *The Dumbest Generation*, 2009, for one viewpoint decrying the inability of college students to pay attention.)

But, “Facts are facts,” you say — that's what makes them true and therefore worthy of building disciplines upon and cataloging as the foundation from which to launch future discoveries. That is all true (a “fact”), but consider the viewpoint of the famous physicist and teacher Richard Feynman: “. . . nearly everything is really interesting if you go into it deeply enough” (from his July 21, 1986, letter to V. A. Van Der Hyde, collected within *Perfectly Reasonable Deviations from the Beaten Track: The Letters of Richard P. Feynman*, 2005, p. 415).

The facts are there for Feynman, whether for himself (when he was alive) or for his students as he considered how to convey those facts in interesting ways.

According to Langer, once you accept the fact that you don't know something, you're naturally inclined to pay attention. This plays out in many important ways in our daily lives, and for this reason if for no other, it becomes one of the most transformative understandings to which we can lead our students. For instance, as a citizen, once you accept the "fact" that politicians of a certain party are evil, you stop paying attention to any information that might argue otherwise.

We simply don't pay attention to that which we believe we already know.

This is one reason for the rapid rate of forgetting among students once they've taken the final exam. If they get an *A* on the exam, they've proven to themselves they already know the material, and they — literally — forget about it. The subsequent course often proves erroneous their assumption they know those "facts," however.

Contrast the above scenario with a student who, even though she received an *A* on the final exam, remains intensely interested in the subject. Why is she interested? Inevitably it's because she believes there's more to know about the subject.

In other words, she *doesn't* believe she knows all the facts, and therefore she pays more attention to the subject. The side benefit is that she's more motivated to study the subject precisely because she's sure she *doesn't* know everything about it. (This assumes, of course, it's not a subject she's convinced herself is worthless to know in the first place and/or has no personal relevance to her life.)

Langer claims that a key benefit from assuming we *don't* know is that we become much more engaged humans, humans who experience all that is around us more deeply, more fully.

Certainly there's not a more transformative outcome we can help our students develop.

References

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