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An Attempt at Teaching Learning

Deep learning is by nature next to impossible to teach in school because it relies so heavily on students' self-motivation. A deep learner can always be recognized by the way he articulates his scholastic experiences. Instead of recounting which books he was assigned for class, he recalls specific discussions or readings that struck him on a more personal note. In his book, *What the Best College Teachers Do*, Ken Bain mentions that deep learners will speak about "developing an understanding, making something their own, 'getting into it', and making sense of it all" (9). This is not easy for every schoolchild to do, however. There are many variables, one being a simple lack of interest for a subject, that can make deep learning impractical for the pupil at any age, however one of the biggest obstacles to deep learning at the college level are the inimical study habits that have been perpetuated over prior years of schooling.

To understand the fundamental impediment of primary education on deep learning, you must first consider the means through which we acquire knowledge during these years. In the course of the early educational process students are expected to read books and listen to their teachers in order to correctly answer on a test that, for example, Christopher Columbus discovered America in 1492. Students are taught through classroom experience that the more "facts" they learn, the better they will score on tests. With good test scores come good grades and the

accumulation of credits, which in turn lead to diplomas and degrees and so forth. Now although these awards and honors may be important in the rat race, the students miss out on any understanding of the relationship that these so-called facts have with actual knowledge.

Success in the typical elementary, middle, or high school class requires that students become what Bain calls "bulimic learners". Students must memorize a "feast" of information from one chapter, regurgitate it on the test, and then purge their brain of what they just crammed to make room for the next chapter of material (41). This of course leads to short-term thinking and restrains knowledge to the specific point of view of the textbook or the teacher. Tests written straight from the history book inherently assume that a fact is a fact and is either true or false, without further investigation. Deep learning requires us to call into question the origin of information rather than accept single pieces of data. As William Perry asks in his essay *Examsmanship and the Liberal Arts*:

> By whose calendar is it proper to say that Columbus discovered America in 1492? How, when and by whom was the year 1 established? What of other calendars? In view of the evidence for Leif Ericson's previous visit (and the American Indians), what historical ethnocentrism is suggested by the use of the word 'discover' in this sentence? (245)

"These questions and their answers," Perry states, "are not 'more' knowledge. They are devastation" (245). This line of questioning undermines the superficial method used to teach students and evaluate their proficiency in the classroom.

Perry makes the point that "we have something to learn about 'what we think knowledge is' by having a good look at 'what we do when we go about measuring it'" (235). Exams taken during the pre-collegiate stages of education mislead us to believe that there is always one correct answer. The goal of higher education is to challenge this theory. Perry writes about examsmanship at the college level, and extensively analyzes the concepts of "cow" and "bull" writing. In their purest form, cow is data without relevancies, and bull is relevancies unsupported by data (241). The majority of bulimic learners write cow because they are trained to remember as much of the material as possible and recite it on their exam. Students are accustomed to being rewarded for this style of writing because it proves that they worked hard and spent time studying the material, however to a college professor these papers do not demonstrate any true understanding.

Because teaching students "how to think", instead of "what to think", should be the goal of a liberal education, professors are less concerned about the schooling of the pupil who,

> Has come to understand the nature of man's knowledge, even though
> he has not yet committed himself to hard work, than [they are] about
> the education of the student who… is working desperately hard and
> still believes that collected 'facts' constitute knowledge. (Perry 244)

This leads us to the conclusion that, in the eyes of the liberal arts professor, good bull (writing which demonstrates an understanding of the context within which the data was collected) is, in practice "of more value than 'facts,' which, without a frame of reference, are not even 'true' at all" (243). Students who receive a high grade for this writing may feel undeserving because of the notion that bull is less "moral" than cow; however, it is no surprise that professors prefer to grade papers offering new insights and relationships that were not spoon-fed from a book. Perry notes that after wearingly grading pages and pages of factual regurgitation, "the sudden meeting with a student who at least understands the problems of one's field provides a lift like a draught of refreshing wine, and a strong disposition toward trust" (243). This trust that the professor feels towards the pupil who writes good bull is much different, and considerably more intimate, than the confidence he has in even the most diligent cow writer (244).

So in order to demonstrate that you know "how to think", the first necessary step is dropping the concept of "true-or-false" thinking altogether. Absolute answers, as convenient as they may be, cannot exist in an intellectual environment because they are merely observations from one frame of reference. To truly benefit from a liberal education, you must be aware of the contexts from which you acquire information, and of the assumptions and biases (such as ethnocentrism in the case of Columbus) that they entail. Additionally, you must examine data from different perspectives and associate your learning with personal experiences. Comprehending the relationship between man and his knowledge assures faster and more meaningful learning, as well as the ability to retain it (244).

Liberal art professors have the tricky task of helping students learn "how to think" about knowledge. However, as stated previously, deep learning requires, more than anything else, strong will power on the students' part. Walker Percy, author of "The Loss of Creature", can attest to the struggle involved in "getting students into it." The difficulty, Percy believes, stems from the "educational packaging" in which students receive schoolwork. This idea of educational packaging is part of a larger concept, "the symbolic complex," which relates to tourism, laboratory science, and Shakespearean literature.

In the example of visiting the Grand Canyon, the sightseer has a preconceived notion of what his visit "should" be like based on a combination of picture postcards, geography books, tourist folders, and the mere name: *The Grand Canyon* (482). This symbolic complex makes it impossible to truly *see* the canyon at all; furthermore, sightseers become incapable of having any sort of sovereign experience like Garcia López de Cárdenas. In the classroom setting, Percy suggests that,

> A student who has the desire to get at a dogfish or a Shakespeare sonnet may have the greatest difficulty in salvaging the creature itself from the educational package in which it is presented. The great difficulty is that he is not aware that there is a difficulty; surely, he thinks, in such a fine classroom, with such a fine textbook, the sonnet must come across! (489)

And herein lies the difficulty of encouraging deep learning in the classroom. Many students may try very hard to "get at" the material without understanding that it needs to be "unpackaged".

This problem persists from the textbook to the science lab, and even into the art museum. Any student can look at an ancient Roman sculpture and see that it is a beautiful work of art; the question is whether he can pull it out of its symbolic complex. In an exhibit filled with marble artifacts, what does one sculpture mean to a humanities student that the one next to it does not? Although it may have a description box explaining its origin or the social significance of its time, it is impossible to grasp the individuality of each piece. The art is no longer unique, but merely a specimen of all marble works. The kind of undeveloped thinking that results from this manner of schooling must be avoided not only because it hinders deep learning, but also because it leads to hasty generalizations.

Looking at a dogfish or a sonnet or a marble sculpture in attempts to understand all dogfish, sonnets, or sculptures "is the mistaking of an idea, a principle, an abstraction, for the real. As a consequence of the shift, the 'specimen' is seen as less real than the theory of the specimen;" (490) so it follows that individuals will cease to exist, and will be replaced simply by specimens of a race. This type of superficial understanding causes discrimination and prejudice that directly oppose deep learning. So how do we truly learn anything with so much symbolic packaging in and outside of the classroom?

This question can be answered by uncovering the root of the symbolic packaging. Part of the symbolic packaging is due to students' trust in literature. In Ralph Waldo Emerson's lecture, "The American Scholar", he reminds us that "meek young men grow up in libraries, believing it their duty to accept the views, which Cicero, which Locke, which Bacon, have given, forgetful that Cicero, Locke, and Bacon were only young men in libraries, when they wrote these books" (57). His point is that we cannot constitute the writing of these "experts" as our own knowledge. When Emerson says, "it came to him, life; it went out from him, truth," (56) he is suggesting that the literature we learn from is merely the writer's sovereign experience transmuted onto paper. This relates to his notion of the active soul, which is the power every man needs in order to create. "The soul active sees absolute truth" (57). This is the root of human progression. He continues to say that each generation must create their own books from their own experiences, because many people misinterpret the use of books. Books are to be used for nothing but to inspire. Books can be a great influence on writers and scholars in general, but Emerson's concept of self-trust is of greater importance in regards to deep learning.

Percy has a similar viewpoint on self-trust and its importance. A large part of the symbolic packaging is due to our "eager surrender of sovereignty by the layman" (Percy 487). Thinking back on our time in the sandbox as a child we remember playing with other kids without a care in the world as to their name, their background, or whether they are "good people". As we grew older we begin making judgments on people right from the start, and we often times look at others more as

consumer items than as individuals. "Too often we submit ourselves to the role of consumer and waive our sovereign rights as a person" (Percy 493), and the problem is that nobody is safe from this change; everybody loses their ability to see things with virgin eyes. But this does not mean that at a certain age we lose our ability to create sovereign experience. The key is knowing that there is a struggle to recover the dogfish, the sonnet, the sculpture, and even our relationships with others from the symbolic complex. We need to have faith in our own power to discover and expand our wealth of knowledge.

Percy and Emerson would both agree that books and schooling are very important in the education of any scholar; however, they also know that sovereign experiences and the active soul are what lead society forward. The overall thesis of Perry's essay on examsmanship is that "cow and bull are not poles of a single dimension", and the goal of good writing is not "to 'find the right mean' between 'amounts' of detail and 'amounts' of generalities" (241). The best paper is rather the one that is able to blend the two until they become indiscernible from each other. This same abstraction can be used to relate to deep learning. Knowledge is not an "infertile hermaphrodite" between the written thoughts of the past and the active soul of the present, just as it is not a certain amount of sovereign experience mixed with expert testimony. There is a middle ground that is not measured by the total quantities of either, but rather by the overall outcome. Deep learning is about developing an understanding and making sense of it all (Bain 9), and the goal of education is not to become a consumer of facts and experiences, but rather to express your own individuality and sovereignty (Percy 493).

In the end, deep learning can be achieved by realizing and overcoming the temptation of accepting thoughts the way they are presented to you, and by struggling to grasp their true meaning. Exploration is a vital tool in "getting into it". Genuine learning is reliant upon the student's ability to take the dogfish, the sonnet, and the sculpture out of the lab, the classroom, or the museum, and to understand its original context. "Life is our dictionary" (Emerson 61), and although you may never find definition for all of its words, you must personalize the words you do find.

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