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Guiding Critical Thinking: Teaching Tips based on Perry's Model

In 1968, William G. Perry proposed that beliefs and assumptions about knowledge—what it is, who “has” it, and how it should be accessed and applied—affect learner attitudes and behavior in the classroom. *Forms of Intellectual and Ethical Development in the College Years: A Scheme* posits several distinct approaches to learning. The work has been widely influential not only because Perry describes scenes that are all-too-familiar, but also because it suggests a number of classroom interventions.

Perry's work was cited during a roundtable discussion at the 2010 AFS meetings in Nashville (“Lay and Expert Knowledge: The AFS Teagle Foundation Project”), and several participants asked for more information about the scheme's practical applications. In the spirit of the Teagle Foundation's mission to improve the quality of undergraduate education, I offer the following summary and tips. Research suggests that classroom instructors familiar with Perry's model find it easier to establish the trust, mutual respect, and teaching strategies that aid learning.

Perry's scheme describes four general epistemological stances: dualism, multiplicity, relativism, and commitment within relativism. Though learners often shift from one “phase” to another as they encounter new ideas and experiences, the process is not strictly linear; instead, movement among these stances may be recursive, or it may vary with regard to different subjects throughout an individual's life. In simplified form, the stances are:

1. *Dualism* (knowledge = truth received from an authoritative source). In this mode of intellectual engagement, the teacher knows the definitive answer and the student's job is to record and repeat it. Dualists are often frustrated by having to “figure it out” themselves, consider group work a waste of time (since they do not see their peers as reputable authorities), or feel dismayed by texts/authorities that disagree.
2. *Multiplicity* (knowledge = opinion, and all opinions are equally valid). Here, students recognize that there are multiple ways to approach a problem, and they may gather and use evidence (including preconceptions or prejudices) to support conclusions. But they resist critiques of sources or reasoning (“Isn't it all good?”) and are frustrated when answers to open-ended questions and cooperative work are graded.

3. *Relativism* (knowledge = contextual, not external and objective). Relativists are learning to distinguish between strong and weak evidence by considering the assumptions, stances, and methods used to create claims; they also see that not all questions can be resolved. This kind of analysis becomes a scholarly habit, but awareness of ambiguity may make relativists wary of committing to any particular idea or course of action.

4. *Commitment within relativism*. Here, individuals begin using critical skills to direct the course of their everyday lives. They make personal value commitments, evaluate the consequences of individual actions that might follow from those commitments, and take action even in the face of uncertainty or ambiguity.

First-year college students are likely to enter classrooms with a dualist or multiplist perspective, and many graduates never move into or beyond relativism. However, to help shift ourselves and our students toward ethical and reasoned action in the world, a number of scholars have suggested useful classroom strategies.

Robert J. Kloss synthesizes this work and his own experience in “A Nudge is Best: Helping Students through the Perry Scheme of Intellectual Development” (*College Teaching* 42.4 [1994]:151-58). He recommends the following:

1. Choose topics wisely. Design courses around subjects and questions that allow more than one legitimate and supportable perspective. Structure assignments so that students revisit the same idea from different viewpoints.

2. Assess early. At the beginning of the semester, find out where your students “are” by asking for short essay on “The Best Class I Ever Had,” or “How I Learn Best and How I Know That.” Sort responses according to the Perry model.

3. Foster creative silence. Set up contexts and frame (or redirect) cogent questions, then hold your tongue (aim for students talking at least 75% of the time).

- wait for three seconds after posing a question
- moderate discussion by verbally making connections, praising interesting turns, asking for supporting evidence, and observing aloud when changes of opinion appear to have occurred.

4. Be patient. Learning involves real risks and losses as the ground starts to shift under one’s feet. Students may express frustration, and early in the semester they are often anxious that a teacher isn’t taking a properly directive role. But persist in making them talk and share viewpoints.

5. Show tough love. Empathize and provide copious encouragement and feedback, but also press students to substantiate ideas with evidence.

6. Use small groups often. Groupwork helps participants experience multiplicity, see peers as viable contributors to knowledge creation, and practice offering thoughtful critique.

- Start class by asking individuals to write about a question, then discuss it in small groups for ten minutes before having open discussion. “What is the most important part of X?” requires students to compare part to whole, make a value judgment, and synthesize a response.

7. Keep track of where they’re headed. Ask, “How is the class going?” “What was the most important thing you learned in this class?” “What one question still remains for you?”

- Occasionally assess student growth through anonymous one-minute responses written on 3x5 cards. Collect and read the cards, then respond during the next class session.

8. Support the dualist. Offer a structured syllabus and assignments, “plentiful concrete examples, and multiple opportunities to practice the skills of complex thinking” (Kloss 1994). To reduce anxiety about how you’ll evaluate tests and assignments, work through sample questions that approach the same content from different levels of intellectual skill (comparison, synthesis, prediction, etc.). Discuss how the questions differ in terms of what they require from students, and compare appropriate and inappropriate sample answers.

9. Guide the multiplist. Help students practice applying non-absolute criteria for evaluation: which arguments or points, when marshaled together, are “more persuasive, stimulating, enlightening, or coherent” (Kloss 1994)?

Kloss’s article offers useful elaboration on these ideas and describes additional teaching strategies as well. For more on Perry and links to related research, see, for instance, <http://www.cse.buffalo.edu/~rapaport/perry.positions.html>.