

## **Did You Know?**

Did you know that in the past ten years a new pedagogical environment has emerged that upends our previous models of classroom success?

Due to modern technology students may be, quantitatively, reading more than just a few years ago but, likewise, students are also reading more superficially; most students see all arguments as merely subjective reflections of upbringing and personality and reject objectivity.

It is not that our students cannot do serious academic work. The pool in which they swim is different than that experienced by first year students just a few years before digital technology, helicopter parents and Twitter became household words. Therefore, we cannot complacently assume a common framework with first year students.

How do we shift the paradigm? First of all, the skills we expect from our students we must model, explicitly and intentionally. Given the above context in which subtlety is foreign, coarseness is taken for granted, and visual imagery dominates, we cannot assume that our students will be more reflective, thinking about their thinking, and engaged in metacognition if we do not make evident the process. As a coach of a football team works with x's and o's to make evident the various demands of a certain play, we too must make manifest, palpable and clearly obvious the various intricacies of the thinking process.

Therefore, what do best teachers know and understand? Teachers must recognize that knowledge is constructed not received. We must assist our students in creating structures that can sift information and resist the temptation to merely pour information into them. When we buy groceries we do not merely throw the ketchup and mustard on the floor, we place them in their proper place in the previously constructed shelving unit. We must first assist students in building their own intellectual shelving unit. We cannot assume it is there. And, when students construct with intellectual brick and mortar, they think at a higher level. We must ask our students to be active, not passive in how they approach the structural demands of our various disciplines and then, and only then, are they ready to learn deeply.

The awareness of our own assumptions as teachers is just as necessary as a student's recognition of their own assumptions. Students today are lazy, right? They are too obsessed with technology? They have no attention span? All of those assumptions may be true but we are then obligated not merely to shake our heads in a display of self-satisfying disgust but recognize that we have that distaste and that we need to reconfigure the template.

### **Tips:**

*-Make everything explicit and visible by illustrating abstractions.* For example, to make attendance policy clear, use engaging examples from your discipline to explain standards and to hook students on content. Is there a line from Chaucer that is useful; a story from the court of

Louis XIV; a chemical reaction? Also, metaphors, similes and analogies drawn from daily life are helpful tools. Use concrete language and build toward the abstract. Use accessible language and slowly build toward the unique language of the discipline.

*-Avoid burying students in facts; provide structure so that facts can be investigated.* Ask “big”, interdisciplinary questions that create intrinsic excitement. For example, many students find biology and ethics (to take two random subjects) challenging. Prepare a debate based on DNA found at a crime scene and the arrest of an innocent, but apparently guilty man. This will convey to students that learning is not merely fun but deeply satisfying to human development. Such an approach forces the instructor to avoid complacency. It also forces the instructor to “plan backward”: we must ask what is it that we want the student to know and create a model that builds it.

*-Build relationships based on trust and standards.* Demanding high standards and the assurance of objective qualities that can be met based on the intrinsic excitement rather than “school stuff”. By doing so, we create an environment of mutual respect and the desire in the student to meet those standards. Make sure it is not a bland “I’m OK, you’re OK”, and certainly not a pile of work for the sake of work. We can start by writing a commitment letter to students: “If you plan to take this class, I will do everything possible to help you learn and develop your abilities, but you must decide if you want to participate. If so, there are some things you must resolve to do for yourself, your fellow students and me....” When we create buy-in, students are more apt to persevere.

### **Resources:**

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