

Is This Going To Be On The Test?¹

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How often have we heard our undergraduate students ask questions like "Professor Lewis, is this going to be on the test?" Or thinly disguised accusations like "I came to every lecture, took good notes, did all the reading, studied really hard, and I still got a low C on your exam." Unless you teach at a Harvard or a Stanford, these refrains may be all too familiar. And if you have been teaching for many years, as I have, you may also have the impression that their frequency has not diminished over time. What do you make of these students? Are they just not as bright as most? Are they less motivated? Do they come from academically weak high schools?

In this essay, I will offer a partial answer to these questions based on contemporary constructive-developmental theory. I will argue that rather than being less motivated or more intellectually limited or having a poorer academic background that what these students are actually expressing is a typical early adolescent cognitive-developmental level. At this level, they see knowledge as concrete and external, and they understand their job as students to be to memorize material so they can spit it back to us on a test. They are trying hard to be good students, and they don't understand why we fail to appreciate their diligence.

At this point you may be asking yourself something like "Is this essay going to turn out to be worth taking the time to read or is it something I already know?" In the act of raising these sorts of questions for yourself, be aware that you are demonstrating that how you approach learning is qualitatively different from the approach of those students I described in the first paragraph. I will attempt to illuminate that difference drawing upon the ideas of William Perry, Robert Kegan, and Patricia King and Karen Kitchener, all with a nod to the metapsychology of Jean Piaget.

What Matters Most is How Students Construct Their Relationship To Knowledge

Over 30 years ago William Perry, Director of the Counseling Center at Harvard University, noticed that some undergraduates found their initial experience of college profoundly unsettling. Despite having been academic superstars in high school, they found it impossible to understand what was being expected of them as Harvard undergraduates. Perry concluded that college professors expect their students to approach their course work using their own

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interpretive framework. Unfortunately, Perry's floundering Harvard students had no such framework, no internal mechanism for structuring a relationship to the course content. Instead, these students struggled to figure out what their professors wanted them to "know." They were baffled by the idea that they were somehow expected to discover this for themselves.

In Perry's view, these students, who were only a very small minority of Harvard freshmen, were what he termed "dualistic" thinkers (Perry, 1981). In their approach to knowledge they experienced themselves as radically separate from a vast world of "Truths" (with a capital T), truths that they expected to have to commit to memory in the process of becoming educated. From their perspective, their professors had already learned those "Truths" and would convey this knowledge, chiefly through lectures and carefully chosen reading assignments.

Although Perry focused on the duality of "Right Answers" versus "Falsehoods," the more fundamental duality was the separation between the learner and what needed to be learned. Even when successful in becoming educated, what these dualistic students believed they "knew" remained as objective, external, and unchanged as did they, the learners. One image that comes to mind for me of this type of radical separation from an external, objective world of received knowledge is a scene from the movie Jerry Maguire when 5 year old "Ray" surprises an inebriated Jerry by wandering out of the bedroom to announce "The human head weighs 8 pounds." It is a funny moment, because Ray's comment is so out of context. It doesn't strike us as so funny when we find a listing of similar unassimilated "facts" in some of our students' essay answers.

Most of Us Expect Our Students to Learn, Not Just Remember

If we are worth our salt as teachers, we expect more than memorization and regurgitation from our students. We want them to become "smarter" as a result of having taken our classes. We want our students to be able to think more like psychologists. What does this type of learning entail? According to Patricia King and Karen Kitchener, writing in their 1994 book *Developing Reflective Judgment*, we expect our students to become what they term "reflective thinkers." Whether we realize it, we expect our students to understand that being knowledgeable is not a state. Instead, it is an active process employed to deal with complexity and uncertainty in particular situations or contexts. More specifically, becoming educated in the discipline of psychology entails the developing capacity to use various conceptual frameworks for organizing and evaluating psychological data. In this process, students begin to understand that certain constructions of the data are more valid than others based on their meaningfulness, usefulness, or parsimoniousness.

Reflective Learning is a Developmental Capacity Not a Set of Concrete Skills

The genius of Jean Piaget's vision of the cognitive development of children lies in his discovery that there are progressive qualitative shifts in the complexity and breadth of our "schemas" or perspectives as we move through childhood and adolescence and into adulthood. At each successive stage we are able to reconstruct the physical world in a fashion

that grants to it more of the complexity that was there in the world all along but that we could not yet perceive using simpler schemas.

From this constructive-developmental perspective, those undergraduate students who are still dualistic thinkers have a simple and incomplete understanding of the nature of psychological knowledge. Why? Because they operate on or "construct" the physical world using a "structure of knowing," as Robert Kegan terms it, that is simpler than we expect it to be. From Kegan's (1994) constructive-developmental perspective it is a capacity to view the world from alternative points of view using "durable categories." At this stage, the world is made up of stable, concrete properties that exist apart from one's ability to perceive them. Hence, knowledge is absolute, external, and concrete. Only when this concrete, absolutistic world can be subordinated to a new and more complex capacity in order to construct the interrelationships among the durable categories does reflective thinking and abstract thought become possible.

The nature of this developmental shift is not easy to convey in a few sentences—an example may help. Categorical or dualistic thinkers are notoriously bad at making sound time management decisions. They routinely opt for exciting activities in the present and disregard their well-articulated long-term interests. Why? Not for a lack of "impulse control," as some would argue. Rather, their lack of what we might call "common sense" stems from the dualistic thinker's inability to hold together two categories at the same time. In this instance those are the category "the exciting thing I want to do right now" and the category "the important goal I am interested in achieving in the future." In contrast, the reflective thinker can and often does reflect on both the desire to be engaged in an exciting activity and the desire to achieve a desired future goal all at the same time. The result is that, for the reflective thinker, the current possibility is informed by the future desire. The exciting current activity isn't experienced as all that exciting because it is being placed in the context of its implications for future goal attainment. So, the reflective thinker is more likely to study, the dualistic thinker to party. The opposite can also happen, and often does, but the point is that the two students are experiencing the conflicting desires in qualitatively different ways. For the dualistic thinker it is a simple conflict between two alternative desires, both external. For the reflective thinker it is an internal experience that constructs the interrelationships among the two desires, each informed by the other.

Our Dualistic Thinkers Require Both Sympathy and Challenge

As Kegan (1994) suggested, it's a poor school that requires its students to know already what they most need to learn. Our first responsibility as college teachers is to recognize that our classrooms contain some students at each of three places in relationship to knowledge and knowing. Some are still dualistic thinkers. Some are reflective thinkers and some are in the process of becoming reflective thinkers. Because we are reflective thinkers ourselves, most of us enjoy those in the second and third categories. However, to be helpful to those in the first category we have to be able to "see" them. When we do, we find ourselves more in sympathy with the fact that they are struggling to survive in a world whose complexity is increasing beyond their grasp. It is that sympathy, more than anything else, that will enable these students to begin to reconstruct their relationship to the discipline of psychology. So when

they ask us, "Is this going to be on the test?," give them a simple answer to what for them is a very good question. Then you can move on to try to help them begin to see that something more is also going to be required. You might say something like the following: "Yes, you will need to know the definition of the defense mechanism called projection. But you should also give some thought to how you can tell when someone is projecting their own unacknowledged conflicts and fears on to you." Struggling with this question on their own will, hopefully, help them experience the limitations of a dualistic approach to learning and invite them into a more interactive relationship with our discipline.

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