

# Learning at a Deeper Level

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"Philosophy is not a theory but an activity." Ludwig  
Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*

I have always seen philosophy as a practical discipline that is highly relevant to daily life. My intention has been to help students become aware of, and question, their unconscious, culturally-produced assumptions about who they are, how the world is put together, and what is really of value. Over time, I have come to recognize that much of what we call education emphasizes knowledge that reaches no deeper than the verbal level--and, in fact, I believe this is true of much of what we learn, whether it is in a class, from a book, or from a conversation. If what we learn does not go beyond the merely verbal or conceptual level, then we have missed something very, very important.

## I. What is Deeper Learning?

Let's begin with an example. The first week of each philosophy class, I always devote time to the topic of learning to delay judgment. Delaying judgment simply means resisting the habitual impulse to immediately leap in and agree or disagree--to evaluate--some idea that we have just heard about. To delay judgment means to take the trouble to understand what is being said--identify the main claims being made, clarify the meaning of key concepts, and understand the reasons being offered in support of a view before deciding whether it makes sense or not. We also spend some time examining why it's important to do this: it is not possible to do an adequate job of evaluating something without first understanding it and it is also unfair to the person presenting the view to attempt to do so. In talking about this in class, students readily agree with the idea of delaying judgment and freely acknowledge that rushing to judgment is neither intelligent nor fair-minded. And, when asked to do so on an exam, they more often than not can do a very adequate job of explaining what is meant by delaying judgment.

But their ability to provide a verbal explanation of something does not mean they have deeply understood it. Very frequently the same students who did such a fine job of explaining delaying judgment on an exam will not actually delay judgment in classroom discussions or elsewhere. When this happens, I may ask students to explain what is meant by delaying judgment and find that they can do so perfectly well, but when I ask whether they have actually been doing so in our present discussion they are surprised to find themselves answering with a "no."

Clearly there is a lesson here for me as an instructor. It now seems clear to me that the students in this situation had not had what they learned filter down into their consciousnesses to the point that they could recognize non-delayed judgment in themselves or others on their own (without someone to point it out to them). Nor was delaying judgment something that they

actually knew how to do in carrying on their lives. And even if they did know how to do it and did recognize the various opportunities to do it, would they see the value in it and actually choose to do it? So far, they were still behaving exactly the same way that they always had.

I see this as symptomatic of a significant and widespread deficiency in our educational institutions. A great deal of what students learn is how to describe or define some idea in words--they learn how to talk about it--but it very often does not become anything more to them than words. When the day's class is over, they leave and it's "business as usual."

The idea of deeper learning was expressed very well 2000 years ago by Epictetus in his *Enchiridion*.

"...Do not speak much...about philosophical theories and precepts: but do that which follows from them. For example, at a banquet do not say how a person ought to eat, but eat as you ought to eat. ...For even as sheep do not vomit up their grass to show how much and how well they have eaten; but when they have digested the pasture...[their health and energy is obvious for all to see]. Do you also not show your theories to people, but show the acts which come from their digestion." (1)

Thich Nhat Hanh, in *Zen Keys*, expresses a similar view and speaks for much of Eastern philosophy in asking "What is the good of discussing a musical masterpiece? It is the performance that counts." (2)

Much of what we learn in our schools is what might be called conceptual learning--it has to do with acquiring a knowledge of concepts, factual descriptions, and theoretical constructs. While this can be valuable, there is the possibility of something deeper than this and that is the kind of learning that alters how we feel, how we see the world, and how we behave. This is what Carl Rogers has called significant learning.

"By significant learning I mean learning which is more than an accumulation of facts. It is learning which makes a difference--in the individual's behavior, in the course of action he chooses in the future, in his attitudes and in his personality. It is a pervasive learning which is not just an accretion...[of facts or theories], but which interpenetrates with every portion of his existence." (3)

How many times do we learn something in class, from a book, or from a conversation and then go on about our lives in exactly the same way that we did before we acquired this piece of learning? It seems to me that the really significant things that we learn are the things that change our way of being in the world, and we all can recall things that we've learned that forever changed our lives. I know that the world forever looked different to me after the day I learned that what we call "race" is simply a way of subdividing the human species based on arbitrarily selected physical characteristics and that it would make just as much sense to call tall people or large-eared people a race as it does to say that people with similar skin pigmentation are a race. With a little searching, most of us can come up with similar examples from our own experience.

Personally, I am not satisfied with learning that only results in people being able to talk

about certain concepts but does not have the potential to transform people's lives for their betterment and the betterment of their community. What can we, as teachers, do to promote deeper, more personally meaningful learning? I believe there are at least four approaches we can take.

## **II. Moving Toward Deeper Learning: Suggestions**

### **A. Seeing the Benefits**

An important component in producing deeper learning is that students must have some reason, motive, incentive, or perceived benefit to want to learn and want to use that learning and behave differently when they leave our classes. For conceptual learning, a grade in a class provides some incentive to learn for a test or to write a paper, but for deeper learning to occur there must be something else. Students need an explanation or demonstration of why actually having and using this learning will be of benefit to them in their lives. Often we ask students to learn something, but we don't tell them what's in it for them if they do. We need to spend some time on "Here are some of the things you can do with this once you've learned it. Here are some of the ways that people are hurt by not knowing this." Anecdotes and stories from our own personal histories can be very useful here, as well as stories from the personal histories of class members or our class readings.

The most powerful way to learn the importance of a behavior is to experience the benefits yourself. If I actually try out the new learning and directly and personally experience benefits as a result, it is extremely likely that the new learning will become part of who I am. Sections B and C below attempt to give some specific examples of how this can work.

### **B. Modeling the Learning**

"We must be the change we wish to see in the world." --Gandhi

Gandhi recognized that if we want to produce change in the world, we must start with ourselves. If, for example, I want to work for peace in the world I must start by practicing peace in my own life. I can vividly remember many peace demonstrations over the years in which angry and hostile demonstrators shouted in people's faces, and I can also remember how ineffective they usually were as far as advancing the cause of peace.

Likewise, if I want students to learn to easily acknowledge their mistaken beliefs, I must start by freely acknowledging my own mistaken beliefs and actions when they come up in class (as they surely will). Each one of these can be viewed as an opportunity to model how to respond when one has been proven to be mistaken. (Actually, whether we like it or not, everything we do is modeling something!)

The example we set is so much more important than what we tell people to do verbally. If you have children and you tell them why it is important not to eat junk food, what are the chances they will learn from your verbal instruction if you continue to eat junk food yourself?

It is crucial for the instructor to model the behavior to be learned. If students see me delaying judgment, not being personally attached to ideas and not adopting a competitive stance

in discussion, it has a much more powerful impact on them than anything I merely say to them about how to have a philosophical discussion.

Furthermore, if they can see how the learning I have (and am asking them to acquire) benefits me, they will have some reason to move toward adopting the new way of doing things as well. For example, suppose I am able to listen carefully to someone in class who is disagreeing with what I've said and then easily acknowledge that what I have said is mistaken and thank the student for bringing this to my attention. Students actually can see that this behavior benefits me by making it possible for me to easily exchange a false or misleading belief for a more accurate one, allows me to have an enjoyable and nonstressful interchange with someone with a different view, and perhaps even humanizes me and makes me more likeable in the eyes of others who are present. Students have thus been given a powerful incentive to try out nonattachment to beliefs in their own lives.

Here's an additional example: I print exams and handouts on secondhand paper (used on one side), and I tell students that I do this because it is an easy way to reduce the rate at which trees are cut down to make new paper. If they see me taking a little bit of extra trouble to act on my values it becomes slightly more likely that students will learn to take a little more trouble to act on their own values, too. They may also be willing to try out some of the less damaging environmental lifestyle choices that we have learned about in class and actually learn what it is like to live a more environmentally friendly lifestyle. I have found my own behavior to be one of the most powerful teaching tools I have at my disposal.

### **C. Reward the Learning in Class**

Rewarding the behavior in class is essential. Students are rewarded when they receive praise and acknowledgement when the new learning shows up in class discussion and in writing assignments. Students are rewarded for deeper learning when tests and writing assignments actually measure their ability to use learning rather than simply explain the meaning of concepts-assignments can require students to try out new learning in their lives and then report on what the experience was like. Typically, students' grades are determined only by their ability to accurately describe a concept and they are not rewarded with respect to grades for how well they make use of a concept in their daily lives.

Logic class is a good example in regard to the latter. It is very easy to give the students tests in which they are required to analyze writing samples that they have not seen before, grading them on their ability to identify conclusions, reasoning patterns, recognize and refute faulty arguments, and so on. They are graded on their ability to use concepts in applying them to real examples of communication. How much more appropriate this is than testing them on whether they can correctly define or explain "argument," "premise," "unstated assumption," and so on. Would you rather have for your surgeon someone who knows how to talk about surgical instruments and who can correctly define and explain what is a "scalpel," a "forceps," a "retractor," and so on, or would you rather have someone who has learned how (and when) to skillfully use these instruments to improve human health? In philosophy, it is our ability to "operate" on our beliefs, practices, unconscious assumptions, and choices that is what is truly important.

I hope anyone reading this will ask themselves: "What is truly important for the students in my classes to be able to do as a result of taking my class?" I cannot answer this for anyone else, but I have found it very useful to keep this question continually before me as I work through each class I teach.

#### **D. Create Opportunities to Use the Learning Outside of Class**

It is crucial to set up opportunities for students to use the new learning outside of class and for them to receive the benefits from the learning in their lives outside of school. Students must do something different from what they usually do that actually makes use of the new learning. If the new behavior produces better results than what they've gotten in the past, they will incorporate the new learning into their lives on a regular basis. Here are some concrete examples of some approaches I have taken in philosophy classes.

- What would it be like to try living a different way as a result of exposure to some philosophical idea? One can read and talk about the Buddhist concept of compassion in class; this is conceptual learning. An observation from Pema Chodron is useful here.

"When Naropa, seeking the meaning behind the words [of the Buddhist teachings about compassion], set out to find a teacher, he continually found himself squeezed. Intellectually, he knew all about compassion, but when he came upon a filthy, lice-infested dog, he looked away." (4)

Did Naropa understand compassion at a deeper level? Probably not. Why not both read about compassion and try it out for a day in your own life and then write a report on what happened and what was learned?

- Epictetus says that suffering is the result of a gap between what you have (your external circumstances) and what you want or expect (your internal dispositions): we suffer when we don't have what we want. Could you keep a journal of your day-to-day irritations and unhappinesses and write about how much of your suffering in each case comes from your own desires and expectations?
- After doing some reading and hearing some class presentations on environmental issues, many students have a good grasp of how personal food choices directly impact how much environmental damage each of us causes. For most, however, this tends to be knowledge at the verbal level only. Students can be given the opportunity to devise an environmentally conscious diet for themselves: one that is bioregional, plant based, organic and uses primarily or only whole foods with minimal packaging. They can then actually eat this way for a week and write a report on what they did and what they learned.
- Here is a very simple thing any instructor can do. If you've talked about sustainability and re-using (rather than the more energy-intensive recycling) in your class, you can ask students to turn in all their written work on the back side of paper that's already been used once so that they actually get some practice trying out a new behavior. You can do this in your class even if you have not talked about sustainability--not all the important learning that takes place in a class will (or needs to) fall within the boundaries of some specific topic or academic discipline. Interestingly, in the past I have actually received student papers that railed against wasting resources and against deforestation, but were written on new paper when the student had the option of using second hand paper!

- In a fashion similar to the above suggestion, you can ask students to use gender-neutral and other discrimination-avoiding language choices in their papers and even make it part of how the paper is graded. As in the previous example, I have found that some students who wrote papers that were critical of sexism chose, ironically, to use sexist constructions in their own papers!

Anything that will get students to attempt to integrate the new learning into their lives has the potential to become a very meaningful class activity. This is not how I was taught as a student, but it is how I want to work at this point in my evolution as an instructor.

"Tell me, I forget. Show me, I remember. Involve me, I understand." --Ancient Chinese philosopher

### **III. Concluding Remarks**

It continues to be a fascinating challenge for me to try to find ways to help students take things from class that will actually help them to transform their lives for the better. With some thought, and a willingness to break with tradition, it can almost always be done.

However, if the learning we are attempting to produce will truly not impact how the student feels, sees the world, or behaves, then I believe we must be willing to consider the possibility that this learning should perhaps not be a part of the course being taught. It is surprising how many things are parts of our classes simply because they have always been taught as parts of that particular subject. Tradition and sheer inertia can be powerful forces that shape what we do without us really being aware of it.

Let me cite a personal example. Venn diagrams have been taught as a standard part of logic classes for decades. So have truth tables. Though I know how to use Venn diagrams and truth tables, I never actually do, in fact, use them--and I am a professional philosopher. When I realized this some years ago, I stopped including them as part of my logic classes. How can I ask students to learn something that I don't find useful myself? It is interesting to note that I have since then asked many people who teach logic "Do you ever use Venn diagrams or truth tables either in your philosophical research, writing, study, or in your day-to-day life?" The answer I have received back is always the same: "No." So why should we ask students to learn this material?

I have heard some instructors say that lower division classes have a major portion of their value, not in producing learning that will impact a student's day to day life, but rather in laying the groundwork for more advanced classes in a particular discipline. The purpose of lower division classes, it is said, is not to give students something of value to them now, but to give them terminology, information, and methods that will serve as a foundation in their more advanced classes in the discipline.

I do not agree with this perception. Classes cannot have their primary value in laying

groundwork for more advanced classes because most students never take the advanced classes. Many of them do not go on to do upper division work at a university, and the ones who do still typically take only one or two lower division classes in any specific discipline other than the one they ultimately select as their major. Outside of their major, students typically take only enough credits in a discipline to satisfy the general education requirements. These requirements usually consist of about 12 credits in arts and letters, 15 credits in social science, and 15 credits in science or math. Furthermore, if we ask the students to spend their time memorizing terms and classification systems and theories, will this not simply insure that they never take another class in our discipline?

Working with students at a deeper level can be done, and I believe it is well worth doing, but it involves becoming aware of, and then questioning, some of our most deeply held unconscious beliefs about what we are doing as teachers.

We need to start by asking ourselves: "What are the most important things I want students to take away from this class and still have with them in six months, a year, or ten years?"

We can also ask: "How has studying/acquiring a knowledge of this subject area changed me as a person, altered my life, changed how I experience the world, how I feel, and how I see myself and my choices in life?" Because you know how these specific items of learning have been integrated into your self and your own day to day life, you will be able to create class activities and assignments that will help students to acquire this same learning and do it on a deeper level where it will transform their lives the same way that this learning from your discipline has already transformed your life.

Will any deeper learning occur as a result of reading this paper? If reading this paper only provides a half hour's entertainment and distraction, followed by a return to "business as usual" in the classroom, it has not fulfilled its purpose. It is my hope that the ideas presented here can be the beginning of a series of dialogues in which all of us can share our ongoing experiments in the classroom and find ways to make our teaching more focused on deeper learning for our students--and for ourselves.

## Citations

- (1) Epictetus, *Enchiridion*, (many editions), Section XLVI.
- (2) Thich Nhat Hanh, *Zen Keys*, (New York: Doubleday, 1974, 1995), p. 140.
- (3) Carl Rogers, *On Becoming A Person* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1961), p. 280.
- (4) Pema Chodron, *When Things Fall Apart* (Boston: Shambhala Press, 1997), p.116.