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Why They Don't Get It: Learning from Our Students and Their Writing

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This article sets out to unpack the "lost in translation" quandary of teaching critical skills to students who just don't seem to get it and offers some suggestions about small-scale interventions that course directors and teaching assistants can make to facilitate the learning process. In addition, the CST is offering a workshop series during the fall term (see insert) for faculty to explore these observations in further depth, review their course outlines and assignment descriptions and look at the different ways that they can help students work to improve their thinking and writing skills.

As instructors we spend enormous amounts of time and energy in designing course outlines and assignments to reveal the wonders of our particular disciplines to our students. We want them to be stimulated and engaged by the history, trends, concepts and key theoretical issues of our subjects. We even want them to have fun. But what we often find in those stark feedback moments of essay and exam marking are glaring mismatches between what we said and what they write. We gasp at the worrisome examples of vague, garbled or poorly organized essays, and are annoyed by their rigid thinking or their dreaded attempts to "psych out" the prof.

As a result we may find ourselves indulging in blaming the students for not "getting it," and even wax nostalgic about that golden era when students could spell, knew grammar, did the readings, and could think and write.

Let's suppose, however, that there really was no golden age and that when we were undergrads we didn't get it at first either. We, too, entered the land of academia as strangers but were successfully enculturated in ways that we no longer remember. We now speak the language and know the customs as if they were innate and thus do not know that we actually have to explain to our students much more than we realize.

As an anthropologist with a scholarly interest in university teaching, I have been intrigued by this question of mismatch, language and unexpressed assumptions which lead to miscommunications between learners and teachers.

Fortunately, my opportunity to study this question came in the 2004-05 academic year when, after teaching primarily large lower level Social Science courses (including many years of second year Foundations courses), I took up a post at the Arts Centre for Academic Writing (CAW) working one on one with students on their writing.

In this setting I worked with students from diverse cultural, linguistic, and preparatory backgrounds, who were, I assume, fairly representative of the diversity of York students in general. Like other York students many of these students were the first in their families to go to university.

By the end of the year, I felt I had learned a lot from my informants and a lot about the mission of the CAW. A couple of years earlier, when I first tutored briefly at the centre I was initiated into its culture. I learned then not to think of it as a remediation site, but to see the full depth of its scholarly role in critical skills development for students with a variety of needs and concerns. I was able to translate this knowledge into my intake discussions and destigmatize their sense that they had landed in some sort of "special ed" setting. Our approach was to see the work of critical thinking, reading and writing as a collaborative project, which would facilitate the emergence of students' own voices.

Hidden Codes: Course Outlines, Assignments and Critical Skills

they expect to be "filled up" with information and spill it back out at ritual moments of essay-writing and test-taking. All of us have heard or suspected versions of this thinking lurking amongst the student body. Here's how one student phrased it:

> *It's very easy for me to memorize facts. The advantage is that it is kind of cut and dried. The information is there–all you have to do is soak it into your brain* (Baxter Magolda, 2002, 93).

I am particularly drawn to the image of "soaking" knowledge into the brain, because I have imagined just such an hydraulic metaphor in relation to many of my students over the years. I could sense their annoyance as I refused to "fill'er up" and instead persisted in lecturing on problematization, context and contending discourses which destabilized notions of easy to memorize, test-friendly definitions. In the hydraulic model, there really was no place for critical skills. These types of learners are quite baffled and frustrated by our critical skills goals and do not understand our analytical demands.

As an anthropologist, I think of these learners as unacculturated immigrants to academia. Psychologists looking at the same issue see a developmental process, and note important age-related changes in thinking styles through the university career and beyond. (See for example, Baxter Magolda, 2002.)

However we characterize this process of transition, I think it is useful for instructors to jettison any tendencies towards blaming students and try to see the world from their perspective.

What I have learned is that conscientious but naive learners read our course outlines but don't see the connection between the course outlines and assignments and tests. These students do not understand why they are doing poorly, since they are desperately trying to "learn" (in the form of memorization) as much as they can. This rather absolutist concept of mastery is very frustrating for critical skills teachers who receive poorly organized, unanalytic regurgitation expressed in word choices like the use of "prove," when students are asked to "discuss" an issue or key concept.

Deconstructing the course outline is a way of breaking out of this box. I asked the students I was working with at the CAW to read their course outlines aloud (Why They Don't Get It from page 3) before discussing their assignments or writing problems. What I wanted them to grasp was not only what the course was about, but also how the instructors had described what the course was about. The key here was to pay attention to the verbs which actually signify the analytical style we want our students use. In academic culture, we use terms like "explore," "trace," "explain," "discuss," "compare," "highlight," "pay attention to" (and many more.) But naive learners tend to see "prove." (Indeed, I once sat with a student and in five minutes we generated a list of about twenty verbs and could have gone on.)

Thus, I concluded that although we model for them flexible analytical language, we do not actually tell them that that is what we are doing and that is what we want them to do.

I found that students made real breakthroughs when I explained this modelling process to them. They began to see that the course outline was a text that they could decode and they were able to see the relationship between the course outline and their assignments. As they learned the language of the course outline they shifted to more flexible and more analytical word choices and more meaningful organizational strategies as they abandoned the forced-march search for the "right answer" and felt comfortable considering a variety of points of views.

Scary Words: Critique and Argument

Another significant indicator of language as an obstacle to learning is revealed in the use of analytical terms like "critique" and "argument." We see these words as neutral (for the most part) but our students seem to find them to be inherently negative and often feel anxious or uncomfortable when we use them or when we ask them to do so.

Therefore, we have to actually explain to them what we mean by analysis. They hear the word "argument" as being a fight, when we are talking about lines of reasoning. "Critique" is understood as being even more negative. One student told me that she didn't have the heart to do a critique of a certain writer's works considering "how hard her life had been." She was quite relieved when I explained to her that "critique" did not mean critical in the conventional vernacular sense, but was an analytical way of looking at the themes and trends or other significant features of that author's writings. All we had to do was look at the key issues raised in the course outline and apply them. Thus, "critique" was demystified as not being an invitation to bad-mouth someone.

course outlines. As course directors we tend to feature these terms prominently in our outlines, assignments and lectures, but rarely explain them. I don't think I ever did as a lecturer. I learned about the scary, negative and moralistic constructions with which they were infused by listening to how hard it was for CAW students to handle these terms.

Certainly, I also learned never to take for granted what students know. And I also learned that transparency in pedagogy is essential. Like "critique" and "argument," the term "analysis" is not self-evident. I would expect that engaging students in a discussion of what we mean by these terms early on in the course (and probably repeating such discussions) may help produce better arguments, more careful critiques and richer analyses by our students.

"Near (Miss) Analysis ": Untangling Garbled Prose

In the workshops this Fall, I plan on discussing a problem in student writing that I call "near analysis" or "near miss analysis." It is something that I used to consider just a garbled mess. One recurrent example is the very odd practice of attributing agency to the theory itself. The result is sentences that assert that the theory itself is causing some action. Feminist theory is perhaps creating an increase in day care spots or Marxist theory is causing class struggle. The reader/marker usually can't understand what is going on in such statements and just appends a frustrated pile-up of question marks in the margin. I now am learning that such writing can actually represent novice attempts to think analytically. I believe that such constructions represent a baby step towards understanding analysis and are markers of a real effort rather than a sign of poor listening skills. But these are efforts adrift in a sea of not knowing what analysis or theory actually means.

In the workshop, I am looking forward to discussing a case study of an even more complex version of "near analysis" and looking at the collaborative steps that a student and I worked through to identify, decode and rework this kind of error into an analytically clear presentation. I hope that participants will bring examples with them for the group to discuss.

Self-Imposed Limitations: "Can I Use 'I'?"

How can we help students identify and break out of restrictive patterns that they seem to have imposed on themselves when they are asked to discuss an issue or apply course concepts? Again, some simple interventions can have significant results. For example, the students I worked with at the CAW found it very liberating when I gave them permission to use "I" when writing their thesis statement or conclusion. Every student I met with recalled a high school teacher telling them never to use "I."

Whatever the cause, the result of this heavily internalized commandment against "I-usage" maximizes the potential for murky writing. Imagine trying to phrase a thesis statement or a conclusion without being able to say "in this essay **I** will evaluate or argue, or highlight or trace..." Thus even students comfortable using academic analytical language were tripped up by the self-imposed demands of using unwieldy passive voice constructions. Perhaps your students' writing will improve if you give them permission to use "I." I found that an unanticipated bonus of freeing student prose by encouraging the active voice was that I was able to discourage the tedious practice of "psyching out" the professor ("what does s/he want?") and getting students to accept responsibility for what they were writing ("what do I want the reader to know?"). I am not sure how these processes are connected and plan to do further investigations this year.

Making Sure Students Know Who Said What and Why It's Important

Given the often categorical way that popular culture presents information, it is understandable that students frequently write as if ideas just fall out of thin air and land on the page. Students seem to delete the key phrase "according to..." when they hear us lecture, or read and so their notes do not reflect how an issue emerges, is problematized or contested. Here again, some simple interventions from the instructor or TA can make big differences.

In the lecture setting, one such intervention is to give students cues for effective note-taking so that the material gathered by students can be related to the analytical issues of the course. In addition, teachers can discuss what we want students to know about what constitutes credible, compelling data or theories in our disciplines. Joint projects with librarians are very helpful in this regard.

It is important for teachers to discuss academic dishonesty, citation and attribution and not assume that

attribution is important. The CAW venue has allowed me to work with students on their notetaking, the kinds of texts we rarely see as professors.

Naïve learners often skip full citations, confuse authorship in contentious debates, can't distinguish what the lecturer has said from their own impressions and have no strategies for "interrogating" texts. Their notes reflect an absence of "why" questions, contextual backgrounds or other important signifiers of complexity. These multiple problems can end in poor writing, academic dishonesty or a grey area between the two.

I have worked with students with poor note-taking skills to develop strategies for careful attribution and explained to them from the point of view of critical skills development as well as professional ethics why it is important to know who said what. My sense, as a former prosecutor of academic dishonesty cases, is that there are some students who fall into error for non-malicious reasons. They simply have poor skills.

Sometimes students simply can't figure out who said what or why something is important. I have worked with them to develop ways of articulating what they don't know and finding answers to their questions. I often ask them to actually go to their TA's or professor's office hours or a librarian with their problem. In turn they have reported the pleasurable experience of learning through such conversations.

What's Next?

I hope that this reciprocal experience between learners and teachers, CAW and CST will continue and expand in the coming year as I work on the issues described here and the ones I anticipate arising from upcoming workshops. I look forward to hearing from faculty about what their students don't get and learning from students what they find mysterious.

These and other ideas related to helping students "get it" are the topic of a series of three workshops I will be offering during the fall term. I am also available for consultations with individual faculty who wish to look at their own course outlines in view of these observations and develop links and dialogues between instructors, the Foundations program and the various writing centres across the campus.

References

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