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Understanding the College First-year Experience¹

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Each fall, thousands of high school graduates launch into the next phase of their academic careers: college. They arrive on campuses across the United States full of hope and optimism, trepidation and anxiety. All intensely feel both the eagerness to excel and the fear of failure. Parents, family, and (quite often) friends left behind, they venture into the uncharted territory of college determined to chart their own courses, to shape their own destinies. Some enter college well-prepared for the academic and social challenges that await them; others arrive ill-suited to meet the expectations of post-secondary education. Most will survive their first-year at college and go on to graduate, but all too many will drop out before the freshman year is over. Some will ultimately return later in life to complete their college education, but all too few.

For ten years now, I have been one of those who met these students at the door of academe each fall. First, as a graduate teaching assistant at the Ohio State University, then as an instructor at the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire, and now as the assistant director of the Center for Integrative Studies in the Arts and Humanities at Michigan State University, I have taught hundreds of freshman students in first-year composition courses, as well as in introductory literature and film courses. The pattern of their development during the first year is all too familiar to me.

For the first week or two, they are simply overwhelmed by the college experience: locating classrooms

and buying books, learning to live with roommates and meeting other students in the dorm, making sense of multiple syllabi and completing assignments on time, and more. Eventually, the turbulence of doubt, uncertainty, and confusion settles and all seems well. "I can do this," each one invariably thinks, "this isn't all that different from high school, after all." But then a paper is due in one course, followed by an exam in another, even while the student has to complete a major reading or laboratory assignment over the same period of time. Just as that crisis has been bravely bested, the student faces yet another exam in a different course and receives back the earlier paper and exam, both of which have a lower grade than the student had anticipated. If that is not difficult enough to handle, even for the best of students, yet another and more difficult paper is assigned in one class that is due at roughly the same time as a major midterm in a different class. Suddenly, the student's world seems to fall apart as the academic workload verges on the insanely unmanageable. And it is small consolation when a professor, teaching assistant, or adviser responds to the student's lamentations with the disconcerting observation that "this isn't high school, you know."

Whether the student realizes it or not, he has just entered the purgatorial zone of the first-year college experience. If the student survives this academic hazing, he or she will have learned two important lessons that will prove invaluable over the tenure of the college experience: (1) College is not high school; one cannot just

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"coast" through; and (2) The successful college student takes responsibility for his or her education. No longer the passive recipient of the knowledge bequeathed by the teacher, the student has now become an active participant in constructing knowledge.

For the vast majority of students I have taught, the problem they face in the purgatory of the first-year is the product of neither lack of intelligence nor of aptitude (as I try to reassure my students repeatedly throughout the first semester). Instead, the difficulty they encounter arises from the workload that each course expects of them—*what* students learn—as well as a transformation in the students' styles of learning—*how* they learn. On the one hand, rarely have they had to read so many pages or worked so many problems in such a short amount of time, only to complete the assignments and realize that yet more is due the next week in addition to a paper or exam on the material covered in the previous weeks. And the pace never seems to let up but, rather, intensifies during the last weeks of the semester, leading up to the dreaded Finals Week. But, somewhere along the way, the students learn to hone their academic skills—time management, note taking, test preparation, essay writing, and so on—and to adapt to the expectation of the college course workload. And, in this, their high-school experience often serves them well.

On the other hand, the purgatory of the first year results from the challenge posed by adopting new styles of learning that are less a matter of skills and more a matter of the student's relation with him- or herself as a learner, with instructors serving not so much as authorities but rather as facilitators, colearners with the students. And, in this, the high-school experience seems to be more a part of the problem than the solution. "Among the many changes students undergo during the college years," Bette LaSere Erickson and Diane Weltner Strommer observe in *Teaching College Freshman*, "one of the most significant is the change in their perceptions of learning" (1991, 47). Erickson and Strommer suggest that the scheme of intellectual and ethical development first proposed by William G. Perry (1970, 1981) and later supplemented by Mary F. Belenky et al. (1986) and others² provides a productive model for understanding the rather purgatorial transformation of student learning styles that commences during the first semester of the freshman year. In brief, the transformation in learning styles occurs in four phases, often characterized as dualism, multiplicity, relativism, and commitment in relativism.

The vast majority of first-year students enter college as dualists. For them, knowledge is a matter of truth, answers are right or wrong, and positions are good and bad. Professors know the truth, which they impart in their courses and test for in examinations and essays. Learning is simply a matter of absorbing as much of

the professor's knowledge as possible and producing the correct answers in exams and essays. At this phase, the student regards him- or herself as an entirely passive recipient of the professor's knowledge; like empty vessels, students attend classes to be filled with the elixir of knowledge, which they store within themselves until it is time to return that knowledge in an exam or essay.

By the end of the first year, these same students will, quite often, emerge as multiplists or, ideally, will be transitioning toward relativism and commitment in relativism.³ At the stage of multiplicity, knowledge is no longer truth but only opinion, answers are no longer right or wrong but better or worse, and positions are simply a matter of theory, tantamount to mere beliefs. Professors simply hold privileged opinions and learning becomes a game in which students tell their professors what they think their professors want them to say. But the student is now no longer passive; instead, he or she strives to learn the rules of the academic game to win the best grade possible. Although, by the end of the freshman year, students may seem jaded and cynical on the surface, a more profound transformation is beginning to happen within as they realize that, since opinions must be backed with reasons and evidence and contrary opinions must be fairly analyzed and evaluated, they must be prepared to support their opinions as well as to be open to alternatives. At this point, the student has shifted from passivity to activity; college is no longer an environment in which professors have the sole responsibility to teach but, rather, one in which the student has an equal responsibility to learn. They are now well on the way to becoming critical thinkers who are, in the words of Richard Paul and Linda Elder, "self-directed, self-disciplined, self-monitored, and self-corrective" (in Reimers and Roberson 2004).

What happens during the nine months between when the students first arrive on campus in the fall as dualists and when they return home in the spring as multiplists? During their freshman year, students are exposed to a variety of concepts and theories, none of which are inherently right or wrong. A student in an introductory psychology course, for example, learns that there is no one agreed-on theory of personality but, rather, a series of competing models, all of which seem to be well-supported and equally viable. In a literature class, a student is informed about a number of possible readings of William Faulkner's "A Rose for Emily," none of which is presented as the definitive, authoritative interpretation of the story. Or a student is assigned to write an essay analyzing and evaluating a text, a concept, a theory, without the professor stating in advance what answer is the right one or whether there even is a "right" answer. And then the essay, which the student feels is the best he or she could possibly have written, is returned not only

with errors in grammar or punctuation marked but also with observations that the essay lacks a unified focus or that certain paragraphs need to be developed more fully and coherently. In other words, first-year students are repeatedly confronted with learning situations in which there is no right or wrong answer and in which seemingly every question they ask is answered with yet another question: "What do you think?" or "Why do you think that?"

And that is what makes the first year in college so aggravating, so purgatorial, for the typical student: thinking. Students seem to be consistently amazed when they discover that they are not expected simply to recite the correct answer but to think, and to think for themselves. Merely providing the right answer is no longer sufficient; instead, students must think why an answer may or may not be right, what makes one answer better than another, and they must also be prepared to explain what they think and why.

High school teachers and college professors can help their students through this transition but not by offering the easy way out by a return to the naïve comfort of dualist thinking. To the contrary, teachers and professors should work to gain a better understanding of the process of transformation induced by the freshman-year experience. As William Perry has remarked, we need to hear "where students are speaking from" as much as what they are saying (in Erickson and Strommer 1991, 54). We, too, need to change, to stop regarding ourselves as the authority-who-knows and to become facilitators of student-directed learning, realizing that we, like our students, are learners as well.

NOTES

1. I am indebted for some of the insights in this article to the Lilly Seminar "Teaching Critical Thinking: Are You Doing It and How Can You and Your Students Know It?" held at Michigan State University on October 29, 2004, and facilitated by Dr. Tine Reimers and Dr. Bill Roberson, both of the University of Texas–El Paso.

2. See Kurfiss (1988) for a fuller discussion.

3. In my experience, very few freshman students move much beyond multiplicity, and so I limit my discussion in this article to dualism and multiplicity. Briefly, however, relativism builds on multiplicity as the students come to understand that knowledge is contextual and learning is a process, inflected by the student's background of assumptions, values, and expectations, whereby knowledge is constructed on the basis of sound reasons and evidence. The professor is now a facilitator for the student's active construction of knowledge. At the phase of commitment in relativism, the student has made an affirmation or choice based on the self-constructed knowledge developed during the phase of relativism. Learning is now wholly active as the student takes responsibility not only for his or her knowledge, values, or beliefs but also for the choices and actions that proceed from that knowledge, values, and beliefs.

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