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INTRODUCTION: GROWING DEEP LEARNING

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“My students just don’t get it,” a colleague complained to me recently. “I don’t understand why they can’t understand even the most elementary concepts.” While that is a common complaint among faculty, students have their own issues. “What does my professor expect of me?” I hear many of them ask. “What do I need to do to make the grade in this class?” This chorus of voices often seems like two ships passing in the night with little dialogue between them. But there is a way to understand these questions that can turn them into a conversation. For the last forty years, a considerable and growing body of research on students’ intentions has shed some important light on why professors and students don’t always connect. With that research, we can open new ways of understanding and improving learning. Without it, we will continue to talk around one another without much progress.

That research began with a single experiment at a Swedish University in 1976. In that original investigation and in a series of subsequent studies, psychologists have discovered that college students will take one of three basic approaches to their studies, and these approaches — or intentions — determine much of what they get out of college. In general, students will predominantly follow either deep, strategic, or surface approaches. Surface learners seek only to survive, to pass the course, get a degree, and get out of school. They often use what they think will be the easiest approach to learning, memorize everything, whether it is steps in a calculus problem or isolated pieces of information for a history examination. Strategic learners have only slightly higher ambitions. They want to shine, to get high grades, and achieve recognition, but such ambitions do not necessarily include any desire to understand or even to use what they learn. Many students don’t get it because that is never their intention.

Only students with a deep approach will seek meaning lying behind the page, explore its implication, applications, and possibilities. They will begin to theorize from what they learn, and that learning will have a profound influence on the way they subsequently think, act, and feel. In some powerful research, several scholars have found that only students with deep intentions will be able to use the best advice on how to study, learn, and prosper in an academic environment.¹

But where do such intentions arise? “The fault, dear Brutus, is not in our stars,” Cassius tells his friend in *Julius Caesar*, “But in ourselves.” It is not intelligence or levels of education that produce strategic or surface learners. Students come to those approaches after years of conditioning to take one approach over another, and while many factors contribute to those forces, much of it occurs in school. Sometimes it’s the advisor who says with the best of intentions, “You have some courses you need to get out of the way,” encouraging that strategic approach. Sometimes it is the professor who piles on the work, giving them little time to reflect or explore on their own. Sometimes it is the teacher who gives exams that require students simply to regurgitate information, or rely on high stakes tests that give students only one chance to prove their worth.

Yet if school often cultivates surface or strategic intentions, it can also foster deep learning. The literature on Deep Learning offers a rich warehouse of ideas on how students and faculty can work together to find more meaningful experiences. In this issue, we offer several examples of deliberate attempts to prompt what can be called in all cases “deep approaches to learning.” One important issue runs through all of them: We have considerable evidence that humans are most likely to take a deep approach to their learning when they are trying to answer questions or solve problems that they have come to regard as important, intriguing, or just beautiful. In some cases, those questions and problems take the form of open exploration and may be as general as, what is there to find and know in the world. Yet no matter what form they take, we face one central problem in formal education: the learner usually isn’t in charge of the questions (or exploration).

We might imagine a range of possible ways to address that problem. Two of our essays explore ways to allow students simply to go exploring, presumably to find their own questions and answers. Yet even within these examples, there are general themes, categories, and topics, boundaries, sometimes subtle ones, around the areas where the learner must carry out their journey. Furthermore, if we send students off on a journey, we either deny them the benefit of what we learned on our own journeys, or confine them at least ever so slightly with our assistance. How then can we give our students a sense of control over their own education — a condition that deep intentions seems to require — yet still respond to two other assumptions of formal education? How will we, first, provide them with the benefit of our own learning *and* second, help them explore the problems they face in believing what ever they may believe? In other words, why have schools at all if deep learning ultimately must involve a free-for-all exploration? What does school contribute?

Most professors see at least two contributions: They can lead students to questions that the novice learners might not find on their own, and they can put them in situations where their existing models do not work, challenging them to re-examine in new ways, even if their journey ultimately brings them back to where they started. Yet both of those efforts can seem highly confining and prescriptive in ways that contradict at least the spirit of control that the learner must have to achieve deep intentions. In a variety of circumstances, our contributors explore ways to resolve these tensions. They find answers in engaging questions they raise with students, attractive invitations they issue (including the invitation to explore), and the purposes they invoke for their enterprise. While all of the other essays explore these issues for undergraduate courses, our lead article explores deep learning in a law school program that takes students outside the classroom, appeals to their sense of justice, and involves them in doing their discipline even before they fully know it. In all, five institutions are represented: two small liberal arts colleges, a large state university, a large private research university, and a small public urban university that caters primarily to first generation college students.

Notes:

1. Bain, K. (2012). *What the Best College Teachers Do*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.