

## 53 Powerful Ideas All Teachers Should Know About

### Graham Gibbs

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#### Fear and anxiety are the enemies of learning

An earlier item focussed on excessively large curricula and their consequences. One of the effects of students perceiving that there is simply too much stuff is that they drop down from a deep approach to a surface approach – settling for memorising so that there is at least some solid ground and some sense of making progress. This drop in the qualitative level of processing of information can be induced experimentally simply by threatening students with a test with unpredictable test questions.

Ambiguity has a similar effect. If students are worried because they do not really understand what they are supposed to be doing or what counts as ‘good’ or what gets the marks, then they tend to take a surface approach, even if they understand that this is unlikely to get them high marks – at least it will get them some marks. It is a safety first approach induced by anxiety.

Some students adopt a confident or anxious approach to all aspects of their studying. There seem to be students who hope for success and take risks, expect to succeed and are not too worried about the potential consequences. And there are others who are driven by fear of failure, who are conservative in their approach. They might choose obvious essay questions on subject matter that has been covered thoroughly in lectures or the text book, or where the ‘right answers’ seem

fairly straightforward. They will take comprehensive verbatim notes in case they miss anything. They prioritise coverage over depth. They choose lecture based courses rather than project based courses, or courses they are not interested in but that have a low failure rate. All decisions are intended to reduce risk.

The roots of these overall approaches may lay in their personality, their schooling, experience of past failure - or in the learning culture they find themselves in at University. A friend, many years ago, studied for Law Society exams at the College of Law. On the first day the students were told to look at the person sitting next to them and the College Principal said “One of you is going to fail!” (they imposed a 50% failure rate regardless of the level of achievement of the cohort of students). This had a very predictable impact on student learning. One of the earliest qualitative studies in British Higher Education was of student induction weeks, researchers hung out with students through the week in a number of different departments and found huge variations in the emotional climate that was established right at the start. In one department the academics had a party with the students and wine flowed. In another the students got a two hour lecture on rules, regulations and 53 different ways they could fail, and were told to knuckle down and toe

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the line. They were told to forget everything they had learnt at school, that standards were much higher at University, and that even if they had been top of the class at school they should expect to have to struggle to pass. Inducing anxiety appeared to be deliberate.

There is a special case concerning fear and anxiety where what is being learnt is in some way threatening to the individual. For example a student studying Divinity might well be threatened by a scholarly approach to the subject that was relativistic and that evaluated evidence and arguments in an even-handed way. For someone whose faith was based on belief and adherence to dogma this would be likely to challenge their lives in a very fundamental way. Many aspects of Social Science and the Humanities embody both subject matter (e.g. about sexuality, race and attitudes) or an epistemology (involving relativism and neutrality) that can be disruptive to students' sense of self or of certainty. The beliefs and ways of thinking that have sustained their life thus far are fundamentally challenged. In the early days of the Open University issues arose with working class men sometimes feeling that they either had to leave either their class or the Open University – it was not comfortable to pretend to carry on sharing the views, and thinking in the ways, of their social group, or even of their family. Women were sometimes refused their husband's permission to attend summer schools, or even to continue studying, because it was making them independent-minded and assertive. Education changes

people – it is meant to – but this can be very anxiety provoking.

Carl Rogers, in *Freedom to Learn*, addressed this issue in his humanistic '10 Principles of Learning'. Three of his principles are worth citing here:

3. *Learning which involves a change in self organization—in the perception of oneself—is threatening and tends to be resisted.*
4. *Those learnings which are threatening to the self are more easily perceived and assimilated when external threats are at a minimum.*
5. *When threat to the self is low, experience can be perceived in differentiated fashion and learning can proceed.*

He saw learning that was threatening to the self as a significant block, preventing people from perceiving and thinking openly. People would tend to protect their self, rather than choose to learn, with all its potential disruptions. Only when threat to the self was reduced was learning likely to proceed. For Rogers this involved a warm and supportive emotional environment, the neutral acceptance of people's views rather than aggressive challenges to them, and especially the removal of summative judgements in formal assessment. He emphasised the role of self-assessment as a way of reducing external threat. But the issues go much deeper than that. Some Divinity departments have introduced mentoring, peer support and other mechanisms to help first year students through the emotional challenges of relativism and open challenges to scripture. Some Social

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Science Departments offer peer support from second year mature women to first year women students. Students need to be able to feel that they are not alone in their anxieties and there is a productive way forward that people just like them have managed to take.

There seems to be much less emphasis on the emotional climate students study within than there used to be. Courses have become larger (in terms of student numbers), more impersonal and more rule-bound, with harsher penalties for breaking rules (such as concerning plagiarism) and catastrophic consequences if a student were to run up huge debts and still not get a degree. But just because teachers tend to know students personally less often and have less close contact with them does not make anxiety and emotional threats to learning go away. Indeed in many ways today's higher education is more threatening than ever, it is just that teachers are not confronted with that anxiety close up as often.

Some readers may feel that this is a bleeding heart, mollycoddling, view of the world and that a bit of pressure never did anyone any harm. In one narrow sense this is true. Graphs of the effect of stress on learning show an upward curve, up to a point, showing that some stress is helpful, or even necessary. But then the graph shows a catastrophic fall, showing that too much stress is debilitating. A complexity is that the shape of this graph is different for different people. Some (probably not many of those who go on to become university lecturers) find almost any stress

debilitating. Higher Education is not just for the emotionally robust.

As a postscript, teachers are subject to the same kinds of fears and consequences concerning their learning about teaching. I have known lecturers who were literally terrified of introducing a short 'buzz' session into a lecture in case they lost control and could not get it back again. Their belief that they had to be totally in control all the time blocked their acceptance of the idea that students needed active breaks in lectures – or at least blocked their doing anything about it. One of the reasons, I believe, that discussing teaching can be such an emotive issue for some teachers, is that they are very anxious. They sometimes see themselves as highly competent as researchers and the idea that they might be inadequate as teachers, and that competent teachers actually do different things than they do, is threatening to their sense of self, and is strongly resisted. This resistance may be totally irrational (for example ignoring clear research evidence and making arguments on the basis of single anecdotes). But in terms of Carl Rogers' principles of learning it is perfectly understandable.

#### Reference

Website: Principles of Learning: Freedom to Learn (Rogers 1969)

<http://principlesoflearning.wordpress.com/dissertation/chapter-3-literature-review-2/the-human-perspective/freedom-to-learn-rogers-1969/>

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