Teaching vs. Learning Environments

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The shift from the "teaching" environment to the "learning" environment is more than just a change in language, a change in systems operation, more than an adoption of the latest educational fad. It is a systemic change based on contemporary learning research. Modern teaching methods, essentially unchanged in over one hundred years, are based on imitation/repetition modeling, where the "apprentice" or student imitates behavior of the teacher or master. That model, existent since medieval times, assumes that "learning" solely exists in proximity to the "teacher." If the teacher does not teach, the learner does not learn. Without the classroom setting, no learning takes place.

Certainly, most of us in the field of education will admit that learning is not limited to the classroom, and it is possible for learners to "learn" something different than what was intended in the classroom. Very often, instructors have to spend inordinate amounts of time trying to design curriculum and presentation techniques to frustrate those students who wish to only learn the path of least resistance through a course. This learned behavior by students, though, is at least partially a result of a curriculum design that focuses on memorization and recall (imitation/repetition) as the dominant method of assessment. It is an environment where students are judged on their ability to imitate. Indeed, a theoretical "perfect score" on a written exam for some instructors is no more than a perfectly-reflected echo of the instructor's own understanding and knowledge of the content. In such an environment, it is no wonder that plagiarism is a problem, that students constantly and consistently ask, "But what do you want on this assignment?" Imitation becomes the Holy Grail. If the imitation can be found, salvation is at hand.

This is the trap of a Teaching Environment. It is a focus on content and its delivery to learners. The model is based on the concept of modernism, a belief that knowledge resides in a specific location and is shared or transferred from the one who "knows" to the one who does not. The professor "professes" the knowledge; the learner absorbs it and is ultimately transformed through epiphany. Truth is the constant, and though truth may change with time, it is a logical, organic change based on those previous "truths" from whence it came. In its extreme form, the modernist concept can be evidenced by the teaching schema: it is the correct interpretation, the correct solution method, the correct reasoning process. The text (embodied in the professor) is the Truth.

In order to encourage learners to leave this imitation-as-goal perspective, the Learning Environment was given form, partly because of learning research relating to the computational mind theory, partly as a response to postmodernist theories. The focus of a learning environment is on the development of concepts, patterns, and relationships. It is based on the theory

that knowledge is not shared, but rather constructed within each individual through either inductive or deductive reasoning.

For this construction to take place, though, a framework must exist in the mind that by which new quanta of information can be evaluated and related to existing information, forming a pattern or "chunk" of knowledge. Without this framework, without the nodes or scaffolding on which to hang new information, these quanta cannot be incorporated into long-term memory, into the belief system of the learner. In addition, the more complex the patterning in a learner, the more information can be incorporated. The more a learner learns, the easier it becomes to learn.

In a Learning Environment, the presentation of content is not as important as the discovery of the underlying patterns and concepts that constructed the content. The rules of grammar, say, are less important than how communication can be hindered by ineffective comma choices. A learning strategy such as this allows the individual to construct the framework on which knowledge can grow. Other learning strategies, such as simulations, role playing, and learning scenarios provide the entire framework and "pre-chunked" knowledge patterns.

For example, imagine how learning takes place through reading a novel. Most novels have an underlying educational or informational thread that creates interest (such as Grisham's "law" thread). Aristotle identified this as the Thought component of poetry. When an individual reads the novel, a knowledge quantum (for example, the "admissible evidence" knowledge quantum - - what constitutes admissible evidence) is presented to the reader within the context of the novel's fictive reality. Because the reader sees it in relation to the novel's inductive reality, a prescribed pattern, the knowledge of law is communicated. This is learning through simulation.

Instructional design strategies based on the learning questions, "What do we want our students to know? to think? to be able to do?" can lead to active and engaging assignments that help learners construct knowledge and show them that imitation is not the goal.