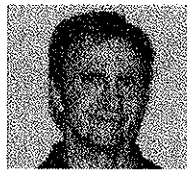


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Higher-Level Tweaking

by Calvin G. Roso

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Where do state standards lead us - to higher levels of thinking or to a dumbing down of the curriculum? In part, this depends on the standard; but even more importantly, it depends on what teachers and students do with the standard.

Dumbing Down

"I don't get it!"

"I don't understand!"

"This is too hard!"

When we hear our students say these things, the temptation is often to make it easier by either leading them to or giving them the answers, or by changing the assignment to fit their current academic level. This is something standards-driven education is accused of doing: teaching to the lowest level. As teachers, we need to be confident enough in our professional abilities to assert what students can and need to learn. If what we're teaching seems too difficult for our students, that often confirms that what we're about to study is the right thing for them to learn.

One of my favorite books about teaching is an old classic by the late Mortimer Adler, *How to Read a Book* (1972). What Adler says about good books also applies to higher levels of learning:

Good books are over your head; they would not be good for you if they were not. Any books that are over your head weary you unless you can reach up to them and pull yourself up to their level. It is not the stretching that tires you, but the frustration of stretching unsuccessfully because you lack the skill to stretch effectively (p. 48).

Adler suggests that students need to be stretched to new levels; in fact, it's that very process of stretching that produces learning. One job of the teacher is to stretch the students without allowing them to become frustrated by the process. So, instead of diluting the curriculum when students find it difficult, we try new

approaches to help our students better understand something they've never experienced before. We should always aspire to make learning interesting; but we need to also remind ourselves that the ultimate goal of teaching isn't to provide a good experience - it's to enable students to think and learn.

Dragging the Student In

My first few years of teaching were often driven by the desire to be liked by my students. My sanguine personality wanted to make everything fun for them. However, I soon discovered that fun doesn't necessarily equate to learning.

Over time, I began to agree with Mara Wolynski's philosophy that "the real job of school is to entice the student into the web of knowledge and then, if he's not enticed, to drag him in" (1976). I wanted students to gain knowledge and understanding - I wanted them to learn to think - but I wasn't sure how to help them to do so. Then I heard the educational catch-phrase of the 90s: critical thinking. For me, the idea of critical thinking was initially just a vague instructional methodology, rather than something specific that students needed to be taught how to do. I'm sure that, at times, critical thinking was actually taking place in my classroom, but it was more likely stumbled upon by my students, rather than intentionally designed as part of a curriculum and instructional process.

Curriculum Alignment or Critical Tweaking?

When it comes to curriculum alignment, we tend to think of aligning our curriculum to set standards. Allan Glatthorn (1994) defines alignment as "a process of aligning the written curriculum, the tested curriculum, and the supported curriculum to make the taught curriculum more effective" (p. 49). But I believe that part of making the "taught curriculum more effective" includes teaching our students to think critically.

Critical thinking includes having the ability to analyze ideas and solve problems so that one can ultimately think independently. Critical thinking includes the ability to take what has already been learned and to synthesize and apply that learning to other topics and real-life situations; in other words, to move beyond basic knowledge and regurgitation of facts to higher-level thinking.

So, how can we not only align our curriculum to professional standards, but also tweak it to develop students' critical thinking skills?

To make sure that my course or unit included critical thinking, I needed to take a close look at the actual assessments I had chosen, as well as the objectives/standards I was using to help guide students toward assessment. For example, I initially said I wanted students to "take an essay test" or "give a speech" or "write a book review." These assessments were vague. I then changed my assessments to become more specific by aligning what I wanted students to know and do to higher-level thinking skills:

- "Take an essay test" became "Compose an essay differentiating between the issues studied."
- "Give a speech" became "Analyze issues surrounding the topic of capital punishment, and perform a persuasive speech based on your findings."
- "Write a book review" became "Critique a book, discussing the author's theme"

of. . . .”

In time, my textbook assignments, state standards, and learning objectives were aligned to higher-level thinking skills in the same way. I now often tweak state standards by changing the action verbs given in the standard. Bloom’s Taxonomy is a great place to get verbiage that will lead students toward higher level/critical thinking skills. For example:

- “Recognize and explain the impact of ethnic diversity” becomes “Evaluate the impact of ethnic diversity and illustrate a proposal for. . . .”
- “Identify and describe the relationship between . . .” becomes “Interpret the meaning behind each of the. . . .”

Another method of tweaking is aligning standards to multiple intelligences. This not only offers students opportunities to learn in modes that they are strong in; it also enables students to develop all of their intelligences to a greater level of competency. To do this, I simply keep a list of learning styles and related activities and revise state standards accordingly:

- “Recognize and explain the impact of ethnic diversity” becomes “Discuss the impact of ethnic diversity and present a logical proposal for. . . .” or “Dramatize the impact of ethnic diversity and illustrate a proposal for. . . .”
- “Identify and describe the relationship between . . .” becomes “Interpret the meaning behind each of the. . . . and journal how this relates to your current situation”

If I could redo my first two years of teaching, I would definitely approach things differently. I would start by not only knowing where I was headed, but I’d make sure I was headed in the right direction. I would then communicate the purpose of that direction to the students; students shouldn’t have to guess why they are doing something.

As we practice aligning what we want students to learn to goals that include critical thinking, we’ll no longer be simply teaching to the test or even teaching to the standard; we’ll be teaching beyond the standard. For the sake of all of the Sams and Julies and Roxannes in our classrooms, let’s prioritize higher-level curriculum tweaking, enabling them to develop critical thinking skills that they can utilize for the rest of their lives.

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About Calvin G. Roso

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