

What to Do About Bi-modal Student Evaluations?

Have you ever received a puzzling set of student evaluations where one group of students thinks you are the best teacher they ever had, and another significant group are frustrated and consider you a menace to their grade point average? Over the years I have consulted with a fair number of faculty members who have received similar evaluations from their students, usually at the end of the term when there is nothing to do for them.

The most common reason for this scenario is explained in the work of William G. Perry, Jr. His 1970 book, *Forms of Intellectual and Ethical Development in the College Years: A Scheme* (New York: Holt, Rhinehart and Winston), lays out the epistemological development of students in their early adulthood in a way that shines a light on the bimodal evaluation conundrum.

Perry's research uncovers how students generally move from a simplistic, dualistic view of knowledge (there is a right answer and the teacher's job is to tell me what it is) towards the apprehension of a more relativistic view during their undergraduate years. Later, during graduate studies, many students then move on to making a commitment to a particular world view, or interpretation of knowledge.

Perry's main line of development is laid out on pages 9-10 as follows:

Position 1 The student sees the world in polar terms of we-right-good vs. other-wrong-bad. Right Answers exist in the Absolute, known to Authority whose role is to mediate (teach) them. Knowledge and goodness are perceived as quantitative accretions of discrete rightnesses to be collected by hard work and obedience (paradigm: a spelling test).

Position 2 The student perceives diversity of opinion, and uncertainty, and accounts for them as unwarranted confusion in poorly qualified Authorities or as mere exercises set by Authority "so we can learn to find The Answer for ourselves."

Position 3 The student accepts diversity and uncertainty as legitimate but still *temporary* in areas where Authority "hasn't found The Answer yet." He supposes Authority grades him in these areas on "good expression" but remains puzzled as to standards.

Position 4 (a) The student perceives legitimate uncertainty (and therefore diversity of opinion) to be extensive and raises it to the status of an unstructured epistemological realm of its own in which "anyone has a right to his own opinion," a realm which he sets over against Authority's realm where right—wrong still prevails, or **(b)** the student discovers qualitative contextual relativistic reasoning as a special case of "what They want" within Authority's realm.

Position 5 The student perceives all knowledge and values (including authority's) as contextual and relativistic and subordinates dualistic right—wrong functions to the status of a special case, in context.

Position 6 The student apprehends the necessity of orienting himself in a relativistic world through some form of personal Commitment (as distinct from unquestioned or unconsidered commitment to simple belief in certainty).

Position 7 The student makes an initial Commitment in some area

Position 8 The student experiences the implications of Commitment, and explores the subjective and stylistic issues of responsibility.

Position 9 The student experiences the affirmation of identity among multiple responsibilities and realizes Commitment as an ongoing, unfolding activity through which he expresses his life style.

We can see the movement from a dualist view in positions 1 through 3, then a movement that begins to apprehend the relativistic nature of knowledge in position 4, moving into a fully relativistic and contextual view in position 5, and then making the first steps towards commitment in position 6.

In my observations, many students enter university with a clearly dualist point of view. Accordingly, these students perceive that the function of a teacher is to provide students with correct answers. A faculty member's insistence on critical thought and analysis is likely to face incomprehension among introductory students. In a way, this is quite natural. Even the most advanced intellectual, when faced with learning something completely new (learning to snowboard, for example) will at first desperately want to know the right answer! As we become more proficient, we can begin to see the benefits of different perspectives and styles, and might actually enjoy experimenting with them. But until we know we can make it down a hill without disaster at every turn, we'll cling for comfort to the "right answer."

Assignments that require students to analyze multiple points of view will confuse introductory students unless particular attention is paid to preparing them for this task. What does it really mean to see something through a sociologist's eyes? A biologist's? A composer's ears, an artist's eyes or a writer's? Learning to "unpack" these different epistemologies for introductory students provides teachers with the tools to bring students on board the critical enterprise of learning the "lenses" through which the disciplines see and interpret the world.

As students become more comfortable in a field, they generally progress through the stages that Perry discovered in his research and the problem of bi-modal student evaluations tends to dissipate. Just remember that your students are not like you, and that you likely cannot remember what it feels like to not understand how your discipline structures knowledge. Preparing to teach an introductory course, particularly as a new instructor, requires a leap of the imagination to see the course from your students' eyes. It also requires the skill to survey your students early and often during the course to maintain communication and make adjustments as necessary.

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