

Some Reasonably Predictable Patterns of Students' Cognitive Development

First year:

- Knowledge is externally-located, problems are solvable.
- Authorities (instructors) are reliable sources of knowledge. When authorities disagree, the "winner" is the person whose credentials (or volume, or age) are more impressive.
- The key to academic success is retrieving that knowledge and returning it to instructors with proof that it has been appropriated. It does not occur to students that you might not have the answer, even less that there might not be one.
- Grades should reflect *how hard they have worked* to master *what they think* is the material.
- Things that cause stress?
 - Anything that challenges the above
 - An instructor admitting uncertainty
 - Different opinions from respected sources
 - Any ambiguity in an assignment
 - Leading a discussion
 - Critiquing others' work
 - Interdisciplinarity

The Dualist

A dichotomous, authority-directed approach to learning. "An embeddedness so complete that it offered no place from which to observe it" (Perry).

Common statements:

"Can you tell me which of these interpretations is the right one?"

"Is this going to be on the test?"

"I don't like group work because we don't agree on answers."

"My pastor says that my religion professor is wrong."

"I'm interested in facts, not the reasons behind them."

"Everyone here is so anti-war, and they just try and make you believe what they believe."

Late first year/Second year:

- The location of knowledge shifts to a more internal place.
- Students are developing their ability to hold competing opinions in their heads simultaneously.
- Peers become somewhat credible sources of knowledge, but sometimes at the expense of the instructor.
- They are still not good at differentiating between reasoned opinions and those based on less (e.g., “gut,” cultural norms).
- Since everyone has “a right to their own opinion,” and since some problems might be unsolvable, it doesn’t matter what solution you choose. Therefore, grades that seem to indicate you prefer one opinion over another are unfair.
- Things that cause stress?
 - Being asked to make an intellectual commitment
 - Ambiguity in assignments, but they are more accepting of it.
 - Being judged by peers (as well as instructors)

The Multiplist

Finds “pronouncements” irritating, questions or rejects authority. There may still be “right” answers, but they may not always come from the “experts” (Perry).

Common Statements:

“I don’t know how you can judge art.”

“I don’t like group work because we can’t agree on answers.”

“How can you grade me on my interpretation? It’s MY interpretation?”

“People get good grades by playing the game, but it’s all bullsh**.”

“I don’t go to church anymore because I just don’t think there’s any way to know what religion is right.”

Third and fourth year:

- Ideally, students begin to recognize that knowledge is a negotiated place between the external and the internal world, that evidence, while sometimes flawed, can be useful in determining the merits of an opinion.
- Peers (as well as themselves) become increasingly credible sources of knowledge, but in partnership with instructors.
- What causes stress?
 - Younger students, or less intellectually mature students who are not where they are.
 - Instructors who belittle them, handhold, or do not recognize them as full partners in the learning process
 - Lack of interdisciplinarity

The Relativist

Begins to articulate discernment of evidence for opinion. Stops “trying on” ideas, beliefs, identities and makes some internal connection with what works. Intuition and personal inclination become forces for pursuing “truth.”

Common statements:

“I’m going to major in game design, even though my parents think I should major in business.”
“I really like my Professor X because she respects my ideas, but she also pushes me to back up my arguments.”
“This reminds me of something I learned in another class.”

When students are in over their heads? Three common reactions:

- Temporizing: When pushed from thinking dualistically, they may waffle, might drop a class, might drop out of school. It’s a “timeout,” and hopefully temporary.
- Escape: Overwhelmed by possibilities, they fully embrace early multiplicity. Since no one has the “right” answer, they are free to believe and do whatever they want, and they show no movement toward commitment.
- Retreat: Overwhelmed by the complexities of the world, they prefer to stay firmly planted in an unexamined life, faith and academic experience. They take the Blue Pill.

Source: Perry (W.G.) 1968. Forms of intellectual and ethical development in the college years: A scheme. New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston.

Selected Reading

Baxter Magolda (M.) 2009. Promoting self-authorship to promote liberal education. *Journal of College and Character*, February, 2009.

Perry (W. G.) 1968. Forms of intellectual and ethical development in the college years: A scheme. New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston.

Williams, L.B. (2004). Leadership, feminism, and classroom politics – Or, how I gave up the fight and learned to love resistance. *About Campus*, January-February, 2004.

www.umich.edu/~refjudg/index.html: Online instructional resources developed by Patricia M. King (University of Michigan).