Perry Framework: Possible Reading

From: A Nudge is Best: Helping Students through the Perry Scheme of Intellectual Development

Perry posits that students move, in their learning, through a series of fairly well-defined phases that can be delineated by detailing the ways in which they view themselves in relationship to what they believe knowledge to be: **dualism, multiplicity, relativism,** and **commitment in relativism**.

In **dualism**, students view knowledge as received truth. It is facts, correct theories, and right answers. In this naive epistemology, professors already know these things, and education consists of their revealing them to the students. Learning thus is simply taking notes, memorizing the revelations, and recapitulating them on demand, by way of tests or papers. Students are made uneasy by omission of portions of the text? another "infallible" authority? and by being asked to think independently, offer their own opinions, and draw their own conclusions. They believe that teachers, who have all the right answers, should simply disclose them instead of making the students perform what to them seem senseless tasks.

For this same reason, peers as a source of knowledge are rejected out of hand. Dualistic students spend a great deal of time trying to figure out and are confused by "what it is that the instructor really wants." Their most nerve-wracking confusion results when authorities disagree. Subsequently, as multiple interpretations and diverse opinions manifest themselves more and more in their classrooms, faith in authorities and right answers is worn away, and they conclude that, at least in some areas, no one knows the answers. They have now entered multiplicity.

In **multiplicity**, knowledge is simply a matter of opinion. Professors, then, are not authorities with the right answers; they're just people with opinions. And, in this still-naive stage, be cause "everyone is entitled to his or her own opinion," the students' are as good as the instructor's or anyone else's. All opinions, they adamantly declare from their vantage point, are equal. Consequently, they are baffled at instructors' criticisms of their work, believing that prejudice, whim, and personal feelings are the criteria for judgment.

As more and more instructors demand evidence, support, substantiation for the students' conclusions, however, students begin to temper their views and see that instructors are trying to help them learn a way of do ing things, but their criticism now shifts to the instructors' not making their evaluation criteria clear. They have clearly not yet learned to shoulder responsibility for their work. When they begin to learn how to argue, counterargue, consider alternatives, and offer several possible conclusions, they are entering relativism.

In **relativism**, they learn to weigh evidence and distinguish between weak and strong support. What has previously been just ritualistically pleasing the instructor by following abstract academic rules for argument now be comes a way of thinking, and students achieve new insights about what it means to know and to learn. They now understand? those few who reach this stage during a college career? that knowledge is contextual: What one "knows" about anything or concludes about something is colored by one's perspective, assumptions, and methods of inquiry. Most questions and problems thus become more complex. Faculty members now become resources to help students learn disciplinary methods of analysis; learning itself becomes use of the methods to understand complexities.

Finally, when students recognize that they must eventually make choices and commitments, they transfer these understandings of complexities and di verse perspectives from academic pursuits to the creation of a personal worldview. They have now reached Perry's final phase, **commitment in relativism**. This requires them to integrate the relatively objective, removed, and rational procedures of academia with their more empathies and experiential approaches to all other aspects of their lives.

~~The foregoing condensations do not capture the complexity or richness of the Perry Scheme, nor do they speak to the supports and challenges that must be provided to students during each phase. Once the epistemological stage of the students in the classroom be comes known, these supports and challenges do need to be provided, as I shall shortly show. But first teachers must become aware of the existence of developmental stages in growth such as Perry delineates.~~

~~Jerry Gaff (1991), in his study of reform in general education, recalls evaluating the progress of a new interdisciplinary program at one college and asking the faculty how the students were responding. Faculty members re plied that the students were passive and needed to be told what to do, they tended not to participate in the discussion of key texts, and they avoided drawing their own conclusions. Recognizing the behavior as characteristic of students at a particular level, Gaff inquired of the faculty if they had ever heard of the Perry Scheme. None had. After explaining it briefly, he found that faculty attitudes toward the student behavior had changed for the better (184-85). (I remember quite clearly my own initial exposure to the Perry Scheme and how stunned I was by its explanatory power. Much if not most of the bewildering student behavior I had been at a loss to understand fell in to place on the scheme, and I then both understood them and judged them less harshly as a result.)~~

~~Gaff justifiably draws at least two implications for teaching from this experience with teachers unfamiliar with Perry's work. First, college instructors should understand? perhaps even take it for granted? that the typical fresh man student cannot perform sophisticated mental functioning. He or she is unable, for instance, to cope with two conflicting interpretations, both of which may have some explanatory power. Second, teachers should attend to students' needs for challenges, to stretch their cognitive powers, and for supports, to reduce the threat of failure and help them cope with the insecurity of not knowing something with certainty (185-86).~~

~~From my experience, I would like to detail the most useful challenges to undergraduates (mostly freshmen) in my literature, writing, and linguistics classes, those challenges that help them move from dualism at least to multiplicity and perhaps to incipient relativism. It is questionable that any further movement through the phases is either possible or desirable within the limits of one semester. As it is, students under the constraints of complex ways of thinking sometimes, in Perry's words, "retreat, temporize, or escape" as alternatives to growth (1968, 177 ff.)~~