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Unlearning How I Have Been Taught

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The readership of the Journal of Industrial Teacher Education includes instructors and professors who prepare professionals in the fields of industrial and technical teacher education and industrial and military training. My hunch is that more than a few times these career and technical teacher educators have said to their students, “OK, let’s break into small discussion groups.” Although it may not have been apparent to the naked eye, several of these students may have internally cringed at the idea of working in another small group. The purpose of this brief essay is to help career and technical teacher educators think about these group learning experiences from the eyes of their students. Perhaps my story as a learner can lend insight into helping these students learn how to learn in any setting – including group activities.

I am a graduate student in a program that emphasizes science and technology. For as long as I can remember, I have always disliked group activities. I rarely learned much from such activities let alone retained anything that I may have learned. On the first day of a recent class, my spirits dropped when the professor announced that the class would be doing several group activities throughout the semester. Not again, I thought to myself. As class proceeded, I listened to the professor explain how students need to analyze their reactions

to their least preferred ways of learning. According to Pavlovich, Collins, and Jones (2009) incorporating the emotional experience into a reflective process may help students better examine how they think and feel about situations. It took me a while to break down my biases about group activities. As seriously and objectively as I could, I slowly began to understand my feelings of dislike for group activities.

My academic background has always revolved around science courses that prepared me to learn in a certain way and in a specific type of environment. As a child, I attended a private school. The students were competitive because they all wanted to make the honor roll. Thus, many of these students evolved into highly motivated self-directed learners. If the students did not understand the material taught in class, they were expected to either stay after school for extra help or review the material at home. Group activities rarely occurred. The classes were very structured and the majority of the learning was dependent on the teacher. Once students reached fifth grade, twice a year, they picked science projects to conduct. The science projects were entirely self-directed learning projects with deadlines to turn in writing assignments or data to the teacher.

In college, I majored in a science area. I had to individually read and learn things on my own under the guidance of the professor(s). I conducted laboratory exercises testing particular theories. Group projects or activities were rarely needed for these classes. My learning environments were always quiet areas with few distractions. Nearly everything that I learned in my undergraduate studies occurred in a theory and laboratory format. My current learning style is that of learning about ideas in a logical manner that allows me to play with the ideas in my own way.

I have come to realize that my professors' teaching methods have greatly influenced my learning preference and style. Looking back at my educational settings and formats, I have always been taught in classes that were structured, quiet, and individualistic. I know that I need to be in a quiet environment without distractions so that I can clearly hear my thoughts about things. I need to be left alone to my thoughts or readings in order for me to learn and understand concepts and ideas. Also, I had always perceived group work to be the complete opposite of my learning style because it is not in a structured format and does not give me the opportunity to process my thoughts or ideas at my own pace.

I began to challenge my biases towards group activities. Slowly, I deconstructed my group bias and discovered that maybe it has been a misconception that I constructed over time. I reaffirmed to myself throughout the years that learning in conditions other than my training and my preferences was not effective and a waste of my valuable time. After taking a long hard look at myself, I think the truth of the issue is a resistance to change. I became accustomed to my routine of learning and was unwilling to accept the chaos of group activity. I had not recognized the importance of learning in ways or conditions that were different from my preferences.

Palmer alluded to this penchant for building a comfort zone and hunkering down in it, "we often clutter our learning space with obstacles and distractions to evade the emotions that education evokes" (p. 83).

I recently completed a graduate course on learning how to learn. This experiential learning course was a huge stretch for me. As a result, the self-imposed boundaries to my thinking were pushed out and I came to realize that my beliefs about learning need to change. There are many things that I do not know, especially about myself. The experience has helped me to envision a future for myself in which I am a lifelong

learner. I want to be able to effectively use the knowledge I gain from collaborative learning activities. I want to evolve into a better learner -- a person who can learn from any type of activity or situation and apply that knowledge to my life. Furthermore, I realize I must unlearn how I have been taught.

Perhaps my journey as a learner can provide insights to you – the readers of JITE. Students arrive in your classrooms with predispositions regarding various types of learning activities and conditions. They have preferred approaches to learning, and they also may try to avoid some learning situations like the plague (Roth, 1997). Help these students come to know themselves as learners. The odds are they have never critically analyzed themselves as learners even though they have many years of formal education. Within your class sessions integrate discussions and activities, allow them to focus on themselves as learners. They need to understand how they have evolved as learners, and how they can become more effective and efficient as learners regardless of the context (Smith, 1982). Give these students a gift that will last a lifetime-- help them develop skills in learning how to learn.

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