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Slow Learning—Sounds Like a Problem, but Just May Be a Very, Very Good Thing

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Slow Learning—Sounds Like a Problem, but Just May Be a Very, Very Good Thing

I subscribe to the Faculty Focus newsletter, written by Maryellen Weimer, who is associated with *The Teaching Professor*. She had a column a few weeks ago about “slow learning.” I quote her first two paragraphs:

Slow learning—not to be confused with slow learners—is learning that happens gradually, where understanding deepens slowly and skills advance but without immediate noticeable change. Some learning occurs all at once; suddenly, there’s a performance breakthrough. Typically, fast learning feels easy, even if it was preceded by a frustrating period of confusion. What is finally understood is so clear, so obvious—what is finally mastered no longer seems hard.

But mastery of the intellectual skills we aspire to teach—critical thinking, problem solving, writing, the ability to work productively with others—happens slowly. Progress is hard to see, especially if it’s looked for every day,

or even once a week. It’s a bit like losing weight (or putting it on). You don’t see it coming off (or going on), but then you put on a pair of jeans and they button without a struggle (or with much difficulty).

Her concept of “slow learning” really struck a chord with me, especially when she mentioned critical thinking. All colleges claim that critical thinking is central to what they expect of their students, but at Winthrop, over a decade ago, we made sure that critical thinking was central to our students’ experience when we required a course in critical thinking, CRTW 201.

I have taught that course for a dozen years, and I have seen the results in our students, results within that class, but also results in other classes as students develop, sharpen, and hone their critical thinking skills. Critical thinking is central to our general education core, starting with WRIT 101, continued in HMPX

102, and then culminating in CRTW 201—but spreading out into the courses students take afterwards, especially as they progress in their majors.

And teaching critical thinking has sharpened my own thinking, as well as changed the way I teach my literature courses.

Still, I have seen the problems that Maryellen Weimer talks about: students get frustrated at their slow learning, at a pace so slow that they cannot recognize their progress.

Our students are not the only people who demand instant gratification: our culture demands it, always has, and now with the ubiquity of fast and amazing electronic devices, that demand has grown even stronger.

In the old days, if I wanted to check on the spelling of a word, I had to get up and find a dictionary and look it up. Now, I toggle

“Her concept of ‘slow learning’ has set me thinking for the past few weeks; I have examined my American novels class for signs of slow learning. I am convinced that, despite its frustrations, slow learning may actually be the deepest learning, and thus very important for us to pursue with our students.”



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out of this document and find it instantly.

Think about the way we retrieve facts now, compared with the way we used to. I am still astonished at how quickly I can find out almost anything. Our amazingly fast and smart devices have even changed the way we argue. A few years ago, a friend was telling me about a concert he had recently seen at Red Rocks, Colorado. I mentioned something I had read: that the Beatles played at Red Rocks. Joe went nearly ballistic with disagreement. No way!

Then he whipped out his first generation, iPhone, a brand new toy at that time, and punched a couple of buttons. I saw Joe’s expression change immediately to one of astonishment. “Damn, you’re right!” he exclaimed.

(I just googled it again. August 26, 1964. There are even some YouTube videos. They played six songs, and it did not sell out. Amazing.)

If we demand instant progress, instant learning, think how frustrated our students are when confronted with slow learning. More from Maryellen Weimer:

Even though progress may be slow, it is often visible across a course, but students still struggle to see their own progress. More than once I’ve sat with a student looking at the first and last pieces of writing done in a course. “Do you see how your writing has improved?” I ask. “Well, not really, but I’m getting better grades,” the student replies. Even when pressed, most of my students cannot point to anything specific in their writing that has improved.

Her concept of “slow learning” has set me thinking for the past few weeks; I have examined my American novels class for signs of slow learning. I am convinced that, despite its frustrations, slow learning may actually be the deepest learning, and thus very important for us to pursue with our students. I conclude with advice from Dr. Weimer about the need to explicitly highlight the concept in our teaching:

What are the signs of progress when you’re learning how to think critically or solve problems? Do we point them out to students? Do we help students discover that they’re making progress, even if they can’t see it happening? It

would behoove us to talk about slow learning with students, about how progress probably won’t be fast, how persistence pays off, and how essential it is to believe—not that the learning will be easy but that students have got the intellectual muscle they need to succeed. If they keep at it, someday they’ll be surprised by their new intellectual strength.

We had fast food, but now we have the slow food movement. We have fast learning, but perhaps we need slow learning too. Intellectual food for thought.

Here is a link to her complete column, as well as information on how to subscribe to the Faculty Focus newsletter: <http://tinyurl.com/zazoo2r>

Thanks to Maryellen Weimer, Faculty Focus. And thank you to The Beatles. Love is all you need!



Thanks For Helping Make the Teaching and Learning Center Work!

Winthrop's Teaching and Learning Center offers a wide variety of sessions each year for faculty and staff, on teaching, technology, professional development, and personal development. From leading class discussion to mastering the Smart podium to tenure and promotion to cooking soufflés, the TLC tries to make sure that all faculty and staff receive

the kinds of professional and personal development that will make them better teachers, administrators, and employees.

To offer this programming, the TLC depends on the talent, expertise, and generosity of our faculty and staff. We do not have a big budget to bring in outside speakers and experts. Even so, we are able to offer engaging,

timely, and valuable sessions every year on a variety of topics. We thank those who have offered their time and talent in past years.

If you have a request for a session you would like to see, please email me and I will try to arrange it. And if you have a session you would like to present, please email me. We will set something up as soon as we can!

A Service From the TLC: Teaching Consultation

The TLC for several years has been offering a service: teaching consultation. At the instructor's request, I (or another agreed-upon person) will visit your class to observe and consult with you afterwards about your successes and challenges. This consultation has nothing to do with the tenure and

promotion process, and no reports will be made to department chairs or deans (unless you so request). The invitation to the consultant can only come from the instructor, not from a dean or chair or any other person. All conversations will be private and confidential. If you don't want me to visit your class and observe your teaching, we could

just meet and talk about your teaching. If I am not available to visit your class because of my schedule, I will find a qualified person to do the consulting. So please let me know if you would like to invite me into your class or for a consultation. Call or email me (803) 323-3679 or birdj@winthrop.edu.

Go2Knowledge—Learning On Demand!

Go2Knowledge is a website that offers a variety of video presentations on faculty and staff professional development. You will find presentations by nationally-known experts in seven categories: At-Risk Populations, Campus Safety, Organizational Development, Student Success, Teaching and Learning, Technology,

and Open Educational Resources. Within each category, you will find a number of excellent and informative videos. The Office of Academic Affairs has provided us a subscription to this service.

People often tell the TLC that they would like to go to sessions, but they don't have the time or they can't

at the times sessions are offered. With Go2Knowledge, you can attend sessions on demand, anywhere, 24/7. The TLC will also have frequent Go2Knowledge Groups, where we meet to discuss a presentation. Log in here: <http://www.go2knowledge.org/winthrop> See you there!

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The 4th Annual Winthrop Conference on Teaching and Learning 3/24/17

The 4th Annual Winthrop Conference on Teaching and Learning will be held Friday, March 24, 2016. The call for papers and proposals will be coming soon!

Thought For the Week

"Learning softeneth the heart and breedeth gentleness and charity."
--Mark Twain, *The Prince and the Pauper*