

Light on the First Day

Thomas C. Giumenta, csc

I gratefully and humbly acknowledge the assistance of Dr. Ellyn Arwood of the Education Faculty at the University of Portland for her kind and generous assistance in the composition of this article.

Feeling some stress and anxiety on this particular day is common, whether one is an incoming freshman or a seasoned professor. One anticipates the occasion perhaps for several days in advance. The day in question is the first day of class, that day in the semester when the all – important syllabus is detailed and elucidated. For some members of our University of Portland community, it might feel as dramatic as what is read in the account of the first day of creation in the Book of Genesis.

So let's use that metaphor to say "let there be light" on the first day, as professors consider dealing with the syllabus and its explanation, the dynamic contractual conversation. During these moments, the professor agrees to assign a certain grade for a particular behavior on the part of the student. Therefore, the exposition of the syllabus is pivotal. Where are the minds of our students pivoting at this time? Some understanding of what may be happening in the brain of a freshman during that first session may be helpful.

It is understood that in the learning process, sensory input is experienced, patterns are developed, concepts are formed and language is created. However it is also known that over stimulating this process could be contraindicated. In an article written for *Psychology Today*, (2011) Joanne Cantor asserts "Our working memory is limited. Even though we can store virtually limitless amounts in our long-term memory, we can only keep a small amount of information in focus at any given time. That is why we have to key in a new telephone number immediately, or save it, or write it down. Otherwise, it will be gone in a matter of seconds. We just can't juggle dozens of ideas at the same time" (p.34). We understand the working memory therefore as the immediate function that receives a sensory perception. But there is a lot of input competing for space in the working memory of the freshmen as they arrive on the first day of class. Understanding that competition may help professors frame their syllabus discussions in ways that maximize the potential for first-year students to actually retain what is said.

First year students have recently left home, family and friends. They are living in a residence hall, the experience of which is likely entirely novel. Some have never shared a bathroom before, let alone having two strangers for roommates. The food is different, the climate may be in sharp contrast to anything previously known and the freshmen have been repeatedly told that this is "not high school". A great deal of emotion-packed communication is being processed; in fact, perhaps more than ever before. Excitement runs high. How can the professor take advantage of the positive energy while not over-taxing students' working memories? The answer may lie in taking the new information and coding it to an already existing skill or experience. A professor might compare the steps one needs to take in preparing

an assignment with the careful planning that one does before beginning an extended camping trip. This method may indeed enable the student to attach previous concepts and language to a new experience. Real learning, with an accompanying positive affect, may then take place.

Neuroscientist (and UP alumnus) Michael Merzenich notes the importance of attaching a positive affective experience with learning something new: “Learning well and enjoying learning is assisted by an accompanying positive affective experience” ([How Brains Function](#)). Such cannot possibly occur if I am in fear of the consequence of failure. “ In *The Language of Respect*, Ellyn Arwood and Edmund Young clearly tell us that, “Language refers to a system of signs and symbols to communicate thoughts, feelings and ideas and that language responds to past experiences through an emotional channel” (p. 12). The sensory input that the freshmen are experiencing and the language that those students are developing on that first day of the semester will have a significant impact on how the rest of the semester will proceed. As a professor on the first day of class, how shall I orchestrate the sharing of the syllabus?

It may be important for me to frequently check the perceptions of my students as they listen to me explain the syllabus. Ask them to paraphrase what they are hearing, either verbally or in quick-writes. Speaking and writing about the experience of hearing the professor explain the syllabus may be very helpful in cementing the new material; checking those also allows the professor a chance to nip misconceptions in the bud. It may likewise be important for the professor to relate some of the new expectations to past experiences that the students have successfully accomplished. Continuing this style creates surer pathways for learning. Having the students share the expectations of the professor among themselves may also add to the layering of learning, the development of concepts and enhancement of accurate academic language. The stage is then set for the development of time management executive skills.

The all-important time management skill can be further taught by having the students map how they will accomplish the expectations by using some form of calendar alongside the syllabus. This creates a visual image and clearly connects the “what”(professor’s expectations) with the “when” (due dates). Clearer concepts are developed and correct language is enhanced.

With some brief explanation of how the expected work can be done within the period of time in the semester, this protocol not only elucidates the expectations of the professor, it also gives the student a sense of hope and confidence that she/he can fulfill those expectations in the time allotted.

And thus, by careful design and attentive planning, rather than by luck or good intentions alone, light has the opportunity to dawn.

References

- Arwood, E. & Young, E. (2000). *The Language of Respect*. Portland: Lightning Print, Inc.
Cantor, J. (2011, February). *Psychology Today*.
Merzenich, M. (n.d.). (J. L. Kuhn, Interviewer)

