

# **What Will We Remember? Cognition, Communication, and Emotion as Foundations of Lifelong Learning**

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## **FADED FACTS OR FIRM FOUNDATIONS?**

When I think about teaching, I ask myself: “What will students take away from my class that they will remember and use a year from now, five years from now, 20 years from now?” To answer this question and help my students develop intellectually, professionally, and personally for the long term, I design courses that help students think—not memorize, communicate cogently—not list information, and become emotionally connected—not passively receive. Because, after all, education is not just passing test after test, only to find that one’s knowledge is gone a few short months after the last exam. Nevertheless when, as an experiment, I gave some of my students the same final exam that all had passed eight months before, 80 percent of them failed the second time. Many facts had disappeared from their heads, and the relationships among course elements sadly faded in their essays. This confirmed what many intuitively know about the transient nature of some of what we transmit in the classroom, and inspired me to convey something more substantial and lasting.

While teaching, I also constantly remind myself to appreciate the wonderful opportunity I’ve been given as a professor—the rare privilege and joy of changing someone’s life path by making a direct, deep, and long lasting difference in the way someone thinks and how he or she sees the world. As I answer my question, I also realize that without sincere concern for the students’ welfare, an ability to see things from their perspective, and the patience to listen and hear beneath the surface of their words and actions, that all the intellectual knowledge in the world will not help me be a truly effective teacher or mentor.

## **COGNITION AS FOUNDATION**

One course I teach, International Management, is a wonderful opportunity, but not simply because our world is becoming increasingly global. Teaching international management is first about raising students’ awareness that others don’t always see the world the way we do, and then about helping them see the world from others’ perspectives. Of course, this is sometimes bewildering on all three levels, cognitively, communication-wise, and emotionally. But students come to see that understanding another’s perspective is ultimately what any relationship is about, whether in business

or outside. And so the cross-cultural skills they gain don't just apply to understanding people of other countries, but to interacting effectively with people of different ages, genders, religions, and other differences that must be bridged for peace in the modern world. Given the importance of this mission, the opportunity to help students build such skills is pure pleasure.

Again, education is not memorization, so I don't give exams; textbooks are optional, and required readings limited. Rather, we discuss short articles from the popular press in every class. This alternative cognitive approach sidesteps students' time and language limitations, while showing them that the course material is not dry theory, but rather something that surfaces every day in the fabric of international business life. Without required readings, some students become anxious over the ambiguity of not being told exactly what to do, and the need to take responsibility for themselves. However, these are exactly the feelings one must cope with on international assignments, and the skills that students must develop not only for international assignments, but to succeed at any challenging position. Thus, the course structure nurtures personal growth and self-confidence, while reinforcing the course's intellectual messages about ambiguity in international business. To solve this "ambiguity problem", students can choose from suggested readings, should they need additional information or if they wish to clarify what was presented in class. This helps students develop critical information search and selection skills for the real world, where no one tells you what to read, when to read it, or how much of it to read. By requiring students to make personal and professional judgments, they learn to assess the world themselves, and to make responsible and realistic decisions. These skills regarding ambiguity and information assessment will last a lifetime, and can apply to any job.

To further emphasize thinking abilities that will endure and transfer, the three assignments that I've constructed for the UG class target three basic cognitive skills: reasoning—developing and supporting arguments from complex situational data; analysis and application—being able to see business behaviors in terms of course concepts; and generalization and abstraction—being able to see patterns, categorize, find regularities, and abstract from concrete instances. Although students may not explicitly recognize these assignments' deeper purposes, they leave the course with solid training in three key cognitive skills that they can and will use throughout their careers.

One key cognitive problem with reasoning, especially for MBAs, is that students often see organizational elements such as strategy, organizational behavior, or human resources (HR) management in isolation. This tendency is natural given people's cognitive limitations and our propensity to isolate academic disciplines and not stress cross-disciplinary links (probably to limit complexity). To counter this natural cognitive tendency, I continually urge students to see an organization's big picture by recognizing that one area of an organization affects and is affected by other elements. In other words, my goal becomes breaking down ingrained reductionist habits. For example, when students evaluate a job performance evaluation program, I ask whether that program supports or hinders the company's corporate strategy. This

initially surprises them because HR and Strategy are two different courses, they tell me. Ultimately, however, this training builds a larger causal awareness of how the various pieces of organizations function as a whole, again inculcating a general cognitive and practical skill that will benefit students throughout their organizational careers. Whether with MBAs or UGs, teaching is not just providing knowledge, but changing students' thinking patterns.

## **COMMUNICATION FOR CLARITY AND VOICE**

Communication skills are also central to my classes, particularly writing, because they too transcend both discipline and time. No matter what you do or when you do it, you need to communicate effectively or your genius will not shine through. Although people talk of separating ideas from their expression, this is sometimes difficult, if not impossible. Therefore, to succeed you not only need to have good ideas and think clearly, but you must express those ideas well. To that end, I have developed and integrated two writing techniques into my undergraduate course. The Paramedic Method helps students quickly and easily improve their sentences, while simultaneously giving them self-confidence, crystallizing their personal and business identities, and providing lessons on impression management in organizations. The Reasoning Diagrams I've developed are cognitive aids that help students avoid the frequent error of reaching conclusions with little support from their previous analysis, or amassing considerable analyses that are somehow largely ignored when drawing conclusions. In short, these diagrams, which I require students to do before writing their papers, help students see the big picture in both the business situation they are studying, and in their written analysis. Again, these techniques are portable and lifelong.

Another thing I try to do, especially with MBAs, is help students become aware of their overall writing patterns. I noticed that students' paper grades often correlate quite highly over a semester, and began wondering why. Some students are unthinkingly resigned to their lack of improvement, telling themselves and me that "I am a B- or C+ student" simply because they've always received those grades. But how often do they receive those grades not because of their intelligence, but because they get graded papers back class after class without the feedback or guidance that would help them write better in the future? To break this cycle of resignation, I sit down with students and show them what they are doing wrong, not so much in terms of course content, but rather in terms of their thinking, organization, writing styles and habits. That usually means dissecting their papers and making them aware (often for the first time) of their paper's reasoning, argumentation, structure, logic and support. Happily, once students begin to see these patterns, their papers improve, not only in my course, but over all their courses and at work.

## **EMOTION AS LEARNING FOR HEARTS AND MINDS**

Complementing cognition and communication are emotions. You might have the best intellectual knowledge of your topic, but without an emotional connection between you and your students, you're not really teaching or mentoring. In some ways connecting is simple: love what you're doing and your joy and enthusiasm will be contagiously obvious. More concretely, little things that show your involvement and concern go a long way in helping students trust me not only as a source of knowledge, but also as a friend and peer. Once you shift their perspective of your role, their intimidation melts, helping them relax and open up, both personally and intellectually.

So what little things help a lot? Having students read my book about my cross-cultural stumbles in learning Japanese culture helps them see me as a person who makes mistakes too. Before long they're more willing to try new things that may not always succeed. What else? Grading all students' papers to get to know them, allowing students to call me Dr. Gary, learning their names, speaking Cantonese to help them feel at home, having weekly meetings with a student feedback committee, and having an end-of-year dinner so that we can talk as friends. Really listening to students and being flexible towards workload and due dates clearly conveys that my concern is not just lip service, but sincere. Taken together, these things go a long way towards breaking down traditional, formal, and isolating professor–student roles, building the bridges and trust needed for effective learning to take place.

Beyond just relationships, emotions build a fire for students' intellectual involvement. By sprinkling elements that elicit feelings—opinion papers for short articles, experiential exercises, and humor—into the classroom mix, students are actually more likely to understand and retain ideas that could be taught purely intellectually. Recognizing students' feelings also goes a long way in helping them overcome their reticence to speak out in class, quite important for my highly interactive classrooms. During class discussions there are no wrong answers, just opinions and supported arguments; I try to transform any student's "wrong" answer to something with a grain of truth so that the student saves face and that others know that I would do the same for them if they decide to speak up. Whatever their manifestations, students' emotional connection starts with their commitment to the class and instructor, is supported by a teacher's sincere concern, and eventually carries through to their emotional engagement with course material and its application in the real world.

In the end, effective teaching seems complex to implement. It's easy to get caught in the myriad, but necessary day-to-day details of teaching. Choosing good readings, showing students the connections between pieces of the course, giving lots of written feedback with assignments; these smaller things all count. But ultimately it comes down to making sure that these small things hang together cohesively so that students walk away with larger, more general skills they will remember and use over a lifetime. Cognition, Communication, and Emotional Commitment: These three big-picture elements, coordinated and clear, are the cornerstones of my courses, and my solutions to effective, long-term intellectual, professional, and personal growth for my students.