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For Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion



The Power of Entry Points

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How do you help students get the point you're trying to teach? More often than not most of us try the direct approach: "Just tell them!" But a paradox in learning is that often students do not learn what they are told as well as when they discover it for themselves (there are two contrasting schools of pedagogy here: direct instruction vs. discovery learning).

The issue at heart is that to by-pass the process of how one acquires learning is to inhibit learning. As I am fond of saying, "Teaching-by-telling doesn't work because it does other people's thinking for them."

One way to help students acquire a concept is to use **Entry Points** to help them approach the concept indirectly and through multi-faceted dimensions of learning.

Here are the characteristics of Entry Points:

- Entry points are used to develop learning experiences aimed directly at developing understanding of key concepts (theses are usually identified in the learning objectives).
- Entry points "validate" instantiations of the target entry point. (E.g., an aesthetic entry point activity must tap into and apply the aesthetic dimension and align with an aesthetic learning outcome; an analytical entry point must help "advance rehearse" an analytical learning outcome, etc.)
- Entry point-based learning experiences require students to engage actively, and think with, and about, concepts in novel ways.

Rich learning experiences employ a range of entry points to the content (i.e., introductory or “messing about” experiences that invite students with varying backgrounds, experiences, and expertise to work thoughtfully with the content).

Joseph Piro provides a great example of the use of entry points in his article, "Teaching Rembrandt," *Humanities* (November/December 2007) Volume 28 Number 6).

First, he provides a rationale for the function of the teaching in using this particular entry point:

"Being an “agent of civilization” is one of the many roles ascribed to teachers. If we are to have any expectations of producing a well-educated, well-prepared generation of deep-thinking, resourceful leaders, then it is essential to give students an opportunity to review, respond to, and ultimately revere the power of the human imagination—past and present. There may be no better way to promote this than to study, understand, and exult in masterpieces."

In the examples given in the article we can see a variety of concepts addressed through this entry point:

- A springboard into the Protestant Reformation, Counter-Reformation, the Thirty Years' War, and other events in seventeenth-century Europe.
- The importance and significance of Biblical themes.
- The philosophical concept of aesthetic: beauty.

Entry points can be used at any point in the lesson, not just the beginning. Remember that the function of the entry point is to lead into concepts-attainment. I have used the following with students as entry points for segments for concepts attainment in the learning process:

- ● A video clip of ballet dancers to understand the concept of triangles and homeostasis
- ● Playing with clay to understand Aristotle's form-matter hypothesis
- ● Playing the game Cranium to understand the concept of multiple intelligences
- ● A slide show of paintings and sculptures to understand different philosophies of aesthetic interpretation
- ● A short movie to understand “postmodern” concepts followed by a film critic's critique
- ● Creating a board game to understand group dynamics and the “rules about rules.”

As you prepare for your next teaching experience, take time to consider how you want your students to “enter the learning experience” by creating an entry point that leads to the learning outcome.

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