

## “From Sole Learning to Soul Learning”

Gayle R. Baldwin  
University of North Dakota

### APPENDIX A - STUDENT AND PEER GROUP GUIDELINES FOR SUCCESS

#### OUT WITH THE OLD; IN WITH THE NEW!

##### Old Myth #1:

“The instructor’s job is to give me an education. I bought it, now I want the product.”

Problem: No one can give you an education. Becoming wise and well educated is a process. You must involve yourself in this process. Knowing facts and being educated are two different things. The instructor’s job is to be a midwife, to help you give birth to your own teacher.

##### Old Myth #2:

“My job as a student is to find out what the instructor wants or likes and please her. This assures me of an ‘A’ for the course.”

Problem: If this has worked for you in the past, you have had lousy instructors. You will never be more than mediocre regardless of your lifetime work.

##### Old Myth #3:

“If I just buckle down and study hard, I will be successful.”

Problem: This is a half-truth. The image of an individual working in isolation to absorb facts in order to regurgitate them reinforces the idea that individual success is what education is about. I know you have been trained to think this way, but the world is too small for this to lead to any creative solutions. You must begin to re-image yourself as an individual in community. What you do alone affects all those around you. As you work alone, do so in order make the material your own. Then you can contribute to your peer group.

##### Old Myth #4:

“If I find this course too hard, I just drop the course and move on. My GPA is the most important thing.”

Problem: 1. You miss an opportunity. If the material is challenging, you should rejoice! Education might happen if you persevere. Force yourself out of your comfort zone.

2. If you disappear or drop out when things get difficult, you set up a pattern that will continue into your work, your relationships, your lifetime.

3. You let down your peer group. Remember, you are part of a small community in this class. They are counting on you.

##### Old Myth #5:

“Music, TV and late night caffeine help me study better.”

Problem: None of this works. Some people can memorize under these conditions, but real dialogue with the material depends on silence. You must listen to your inner self in conversation with what is being read.

##### Old Myth # 6:

“I’m not sure I understand this, so I’ll keep my mouth shut in class so I won’t look dumb.”

Problem: It’s really easy to sit passively in a classroom like you are in a movie theater. But you will never become an educated person. Until you risk questions or even challenge the material in front of other learners, you will not know what you know or don’t know. Hint: everybody else may be thinking the same thing. Be assertive. Failure is not bad; not trying is deadly. Ask any Olympic athlete.

### Old Myth #7:

“If I am to be successful in this class, I should be nice and not rock the boat.”

Problem: The classroom is not the place to be “nice.” You need to ask difficult questions of yourself, your peers and the instructor. Together we will learn how to ask the hard things, or challenge a position without attacking. Begin by being sure you understand the other position thoroughly. Before you ask something hard, say, “I think I understand what you are saying. Let me say it back to you and you tell me if I have it right.” Then express your discomfort with this position if you need to do so in order to understand.

### Becoming a Real Learner

1. Be part of the team. Imagine that your peers in class are counting on you to wrestle with the assigned material. You are part of a team. You cannot be responsible for others’ commitment, but you can be sure you are prepared.
  2. Involve yourself in the material. Read for understanding, not memorization. Listen to the writer. Ask yourself: Can I repeat this idea back in my own words? Can I give examples that make the idea more concrete? Do I understand the author’s ideas?
  3. Listen. Try to do this before you begin to make value judgments on the material. Your first task is to listen. This means putting yourself into the author’s mind as much as possible and seeing things as the writer does.
  4. Question. Once you can do this, ask questions of the material. Note what you don’t quite understand. See if you can say this in your own words. If not, be prepared to suggest to the instructor how she can help you get it.
  5. Own the material. Have all this work done before the class. You will see what a joy it is to “own” the material. Watch then how the instructor and your other peers can take your preparation and go that one step further in pushing the idea to its limit.
  6. No excuses. Never make excuses for not being prepared. If you fail to complete an assignment, just admit it: “I goofed. I hope to finish this later, because I need to catch up. Sorry I let us all down.”
- Note: Common excuses that “just don’t cut it”: “My car wouldn’t start. The computer crashed. My grandmother died. The alarm clock didn’t go off. My roommate didn’t wake me up.” Now some of these might be legitimate reasons for a problem, but most of them simply show a failure to take responsibility for your own education (except the fact that people do die, in which case you should inform the instructor immediately and contract an agreement on make-up work).
7. Ask for help. When you have tried to understand the material, but still don’t, make an appointment with the instructor. You might even arrange to have the whole peer group meet with her. This would also be a great way to iron out any relationship problems within the group.
  8. Take care of your body. I know, this really sounds like Mom, but your ability to succeed depends on what you eat and drink, as well as getting regular sleep and exercise. Your body and your mind are intimately connected. Ask any Olympic athlete.
  9. Examine your life. Ask yourself if your personal relationships are empowering you or diminishing you.
  10. Develop awareness. Listen to the messages you give yourself that are negative and those that are positive. If you pray, let this kind of honesty become a part of your meditation. What do you discover about yourself?

## Peer group guidelines:

1. Make a solid commitment to this group from the first week.
2. Make sure each member has the name of each member, an email address and/or phone number. Find out if it's OK to call and when it is most convenient.
3. As you study alone, remember you are doing it for yourself and for the other members. If you want, find a study partner or two with whom you can practice taking responsibility for the assigned material.
4. If there are problems in the group (for example, two people are doing all the work all the time for the rest of the group), make an appointment with the instructor and clear it up quickly.
5. When another peer is speaking, regardless of whether or not you agree or disagree with his or her position, always ask to repeat what the other is saying for understanding. Say: "Is this what you are saying? Help me, I don't understand." If you cannot agree with the position, say, "My experiences have been different from yours. This is what I have come to believe."
6. How can you help a peer member? Help them clarify their thoughts and ideas without judging them. Be a mirror. You could say to them, "You say you are happy with this position, but you don't seem to be. I notice that you seem tense, nervous or even angry about something." Pause and see if they want to respond to that. If not, move on. You have done your part.

## Final Words:

In all religion classes, remember that although you may maintain a very intense faith conviction, your job is never to assert it as "the only way" to believe. You might think that your way is the "real truth," but the classroom is never the place to bully others into silence. As Augustine remarked (I paraphrase here): "If my actions do reflect my beliefs, then my words are meaningless."