

# The Power of Transparency in Your Teaching

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The Winter/Spring 2016 issue of *Peer Review* highlights the powerful impact ‘transparency’ can have on learning for all students. One aspect of transparency is making obvious the intellectual practices involved in completing and evaluating a learning task. But making these processes visible for students is more easily said than done; we are experts in our fields for the very reasons that our thinking and evaluating are automatic and subconscious. It’s hard to describe exactly what we do intellectually when we synthesize or integrate, critique, or create. Similarly, it’s difficult to articulate the differences between an assignment we score as an A and one to which we give a B. Thus, a challenge in achieving transparency is developing a deep awareness of our own processes. Only then can we explicitly teach those thinking processes.

In my own case, thinking about thinking (aka metacognition) was a new pedagogical consideration and it took time to learn this new set of skills in the context of teaching biology. So I was tickled pink one day last September when, at my new institution, I was able to problem-solve on my feet. I was teaching a new-to-me set of skills (writing outside of science) in a new-to-me format (discussion) to a population of students with whom I had no prior experience and in a class I’d never taught before.

In one of our early class meetings I asked my first-year students to identify ways that the reading homework connected to ideas from previous chapters of our text. When I was greeted with mostly weak attempts and puzzled looks, I thought fast. What is it that my brain does when I’m integrating information? My first answer was that I just “see” the connections and

parallels. How do I explain that to students? Fortunately, previous reflections served me well and a strategy came to me in the moment. I suggested we start by identifying the major ideas, topics, and characters from previous chapters. As we made the lists on the whiteboard, I felt a wave of relief as I personally started to see more connections among the material—connections I hadn't identified before arriving in class. This gave me confidence that I had stumbled in the right direction.

Another aspect of transparency is to overtly model what it is you want the students to do for themselves. So, I circled the three times that Darwin appeared in our list and as a class we identified the pages in the relevant chapters where the great man was discussed: first about his belief that humans, like other organisms, could be understood biologically; second about his influence on Rokitansky and the Vienna School of Medicine; and third about his influence on Freud. During the ensuing discussion in which we explored those connections, I silently circled the additional items on the whiteboard that had relevance (Modernism, Klimt, emotion) and noted that as I did so, a few students were using the book's index to find more textual passages. To be even more transparent about our process, when conversation started to lag, I asked the students to identify what it was we'd done to integrate ideas across chapters.

Knowing that watching isn't the same as doing I wanted to give students a chance to practice. I asked them to form small groups, identify three clearly related terms on our list, and explore the links using the same strategy of examining the relevant sections in the text. Because we'd done concept mapping in a previous class session, I asked them to track their discussion with an abbreviated version of such a map. For our class-wide debrief, each group reported on the connections they identified. These two steps, working in small groups and then reporting to the larger group, provided a direct experience of practice, as well as examples of how others had approached the task. It also provided feedback from peers (and me as I commented during reports). I created another low-stakes opportunity to practice by asking students to bring to our next class meeting a concept map linking two ideas from our list on the whiteboard with one from the next reading assignment and to provide page numbers that supported the links.

Looking back, I could have pushed the transparency a bit further by modeling how to evaluate the quality of what we were producing. If I had thought about how to help students integrate ideas ahead of time rather than coming up with it on the fly, I would have done two examples (one of lesser quality) of how content connected across chapters and then engaged us in a discussion about significance, novelty, and intellectual depth of understanding. This approach would have clarified my expectations and it would have given students practice evaluating their ideas.

Moreover, this last approach makes transparent a mindset important to becoming independent and creative thinkers: it's okay to take intellectual risks and go down a path that winds around without getting any place exciting. I could have talked about how, in fact, the risk-taking plus evaluation is part of the intentionality students need not just for my class and not just for college, but for their life and work beyond graduation. This is a learning goal that I often don't even acknowledge to myself much less make transparent for my students.

Good thing I'm teaching the class again this fall!

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