Increased Meaning of Texts

MIKE SESSIONS

Department Chair of Design and Construction Management

Sousa (2011) and Wolfe (2010) observed that learned content does not move into long-term memory unless that content means something. Dewey (1991) wrote that learning is about the meaning of things and not the things themselves. Jarvis (1987, p. 170) described human beings as "meaning seeking animals". Mezirow's (2000) learning model associated adult transformative learning with changes to meaning. Bain (2004, 2011) tied his deep learning model to the learner's grasp of the meaning of what had been learned. And, Kegan (1982) proposed that developmental stage shifts are the result of changes to meaning. If meaning is at the heart of deep learning and connected to developmental growth, it would be useful for us as educators to understand what meaning is and how we can help students to make meaning of the content of our courses.

Meaning requires a personal experience, which experience can be imagined, and the impact of the experience on the person. The impact of an experience may be in the mind, such as a thought, but will always be somatic such as something felt, an emotion, a sensation

of touch, or reflexive such as the quick pull back from the heat of a flame. For example, consider Sally, a young girl who was asked by her teacher to prepare a Mother's Day card. Sally did not know what a Mother's Day card was, but she complied with the instructions of her teacher. For Sally, the card she had created by the end of class was a piece of paper she had colored on and folded in half. Sally took the card home and presented it to her mother. The card had an impact on her mother and her mother reacted with a warm smile, kind and thoughtful words, hugging Sally, and putting the card on the refrigerator. The reaction of Sally's mother to the card had an impact on Sally. Sally saw her mother's smile, heard the tone of her voice, felt the embrace of her arms, and experienced warmth in her chest. After this experience, Mother's Day card meant something to Sally. Sally consciously or unconsciously connected the impact she experienced to the card she gave to her mother. Through this connection, Mother's Day card not only means something to Sally, it also makes sense – she understands what a Mother's Day card is.

You, like me, have had experiences that are meaningful and at the same time make no sense. For example, a person may have experienced a tragic event that caused deep feelings. The event was meaningful, but the person may not be able to make sense of the tragedy. When a meaningful experience makes sense, or is understood, the meaning becomes part of cognitive content and, therefore, becomes more easily recalled and used in a person's mental models. In this and the previous example, an experience that makes sense and is meaningful is both somatic and in the mind. To think of meaning in this way is consistent with heaven's pedagogy for deep learning. God said, "I will tell you in your mind and in your heart, by the Holy Ghost, which shall come upon you and which shall dwell in your heart" (D&C 8:2). As educators, we strive to engage students with more than content that makes sense, because content that makes sense can also seem like content that is irrelevant busy work. We also strive to engage students with content that is relevant and has a personal impact on the student so that it is meaningful and more deeply learned. The best way I have found to accomplish turning content into meaning has been to follow Nephi's example of likening or applying content to ourselves (See 1 Nephi 19:23). Helping students liken the content of what I am teaching to their self provides

As educators, we strive to engage students with more than content that makes sense, because content that makes sense can also seem like content that is irrelevant busy work.

an opportunity for the content to have an impact on the student, for it to become relevant, and with this impact the student is more likely to make meaning of the content.

For content delivered to a student, in the form of text or delivered in a lecture, to have meaning and stimulate a response, that content must become personal – it must be relevant to the person. To become personal, a student must experience use of the content or must envision use of the content, either in the past, the present, or the future. Envisioning the use of content stimulates the personal impact of that content. While envisioning or imagining use of content will not produce a perfectly accurate picture of its application or the impact of that application, it will make the content more meaningful and ready to be tested in the crucible of actual experience. Likening text to the self requires a student to stop and reflect, and the best way I have found to make this self-reflection occur when a student is reading a text is through the use of a "social document annotation platform" (SDAP). (Mazure, 2015)

BlueBeam software is the SDAP I use, but other platforms to accomplish a similar result are available through the University. Using BlueBeam, an entire class of students asynchronously read and annotate a document or chapter as a group within the SDAP. All annotations are visible to each student, and annotations can be responded to by anyone in the class. I require six annotations for about fifteen pages of text, and the annotations must be spread throughout the assigned reading. Most importantly, annotations must apply the material to the student's life, either past, present, or future. The student must find a piece of material they can apply to their self, stop reading, and start self-reflective writing about application of the material. This makes the snippet of content take on greater meaning and pulls into context the larger text so that the

entire text becomes more relevant and interesting. Reading and annotating the text before class is one step in the process of making content more meaningful, but there are additional steps I take to facilitate greater meaning and deeper learning.

Students will have read the assigned text and made annotations the night before class. I read the annotations before class and make a few notes about concepts that were confusing to students or concepts that invited interesting student insight. Class begins with five to ten minutes of discussion taken from my notes about students' annotations. Sometimes these discussions are clarifications I provide. At other times, I call on a student who shared an interesting experience and ask the student to help us understand how his or her experience relates to the concepts in the reading. I follow this segment of the class with a summary of the overall concepts. The remainder of class is a hands-on Ponder and Prove experience with the content, generally a project or case study, so that the meaning of the content is further coalesced. I begin the Ponder and Prove assignment with an explanation of why the assignment applies to them and how they will use the concepts or tools in their career. This explanation of why and how is another way to liken the content to their self.

Likening what we learn to our self is a method we are encouraged to use as evidenced by its inclusion in the Book of Mormon. Likening to the self makes the concepts personal and promotes a mind-body or mind and heart impact. With mind and heart engaged, concepts will take on meaning and students are more likely to experience deeper learning. There are many new tools and approaches we can use to help students reflect on new concepts and liken those concepts to their self. Each tool provides educators with different methods, resources,

and approaches. To make the ideas I have presented in this article more meaningful, I encourage you to imagine applying a Social Document Annotation Platform in your classroom. Consider the impact on students who are required to do self-reflective writing as they apply the reading material to their life or career. Ponder how you might use their annotations to help foster discussion that promotes a personal impact on the student. I am confident you will find this exercise to be meaningful. ❧

References

Bain, Ken. 2004. What the Best College Teachers Do. Massachusetts: Harvard University Press.

Bain, Ken. 2011, April 18. Fostering Deep Learning. Faculty Workshop conducted for Brigham Young University–Idaho, Rexburg.

Dewey, John. 1991. How We Think. New York: Prometheus Books.

Jarvis, Peter. 1987. Meaningful And Meaningless Experience: Towards An Analysis Of Learning From Life. Adult Education Quarterly, 37(3), 164–172.

Kegan, Robert. 1982. The Evolving Self: Problem And Process In Human Development. Massachusetts: Harvard University Press.

Mazur, E. (2015, May 15). Confessions of a Converted Lecturer. Faculty Workshop conducted for Brigham Young University-Idaho, Rexburg.

Mezirow, Jack. 2000. Learning To Think Like An Adult; Core Concepts of Transformation Theory. Learning As Transformation; Critical Perspectives On A Theory In Progress. California: Jossey-Bass.

Sousa, David. 2011. How The Brain Learns (4th ed.). California: Corwin.

Wolfe, Patricia. 2010. Brain Matters; Translating Research Into Classroom Practice (2nd ed.). Virginia: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.