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# *Student Success*

## **Teaching for Transformation: From Learning Theory to Teaching Strategies**

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No matter what you teach, you face the challenge of bringing students from point A – what they currently know – to point B – the learning goals of a course. In many courses, the distance between points A and B is huge, and the path is not obvious. Students must not only acquire new skills and information, but also radically transform their approach to thinking and learning. This newsletter explores theories and teaching strategies that address this universal teaching challenge.

### **The Challenge**

Even though students may have no experience in your class or your field, they enter your classroom with a long history of academic training and life experience. For this reason, presenting new information is not enough to guarantee optimal learning. Students must recognize the limitations of their current knowledge and perspectives. This means that you cannot simply unload your knowledge on students. What is required is a true transformation of students' existing knowledge.

Instructors from all fields face this challenge. In the sciences and mathematics, it is common for students to have learned an oversimplified definition or approach in high school. Students making the shift from classical to modern physics, for example, cannot simply layer new information onto old understanding.

In the humanities, students may, for the first time, be asked to develop original interpretations of texts or to consider conflicting interpretations of texts instead of seeking the one, instructor-approved, "correct" interpretation. This new approach must replace the approach that students have learned, practiced, and been rewarded for. In the social sciences, instructors often have the difficult job of helping students unlearn common sense beliefs that may be common but unjustified. In all these cases, students' previous knowledge must be completely revised, not merely augmented.

### **Transformative Learning Theory**

Transformative learning theory (see Mezirow, 1997) addresses this common teaching challenge. The theory describes the conditions and processes necessary for students to make the most significant kind of knowledge transformation: paradigm shift, also known as perspective transformation. Mezirow (1991, p. 167) describes perspective transformation as:

*...the process of becoming critically aware of how and why our assumptions have come to constrain the way we perceive, understand, and feel about our world; changing these structures of habitual expectation to make possible a more inclusive, discriminating, and integrating perspective; and finally, making choices or otherwise acting upon these new understandings.*

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Spotlight



## WORKING PAPER ON TRANSFORMATIONAL LEARNING

Steve Graham, Associate Professor, Speech  
~ San Joaquin Delta College

A student of mine named Susan (not really her name) missed her persuasive speech and comes to the class the next day saying that it was the worse day in her life. Her computer froze up, her sister got into a fight with her, and her mom (who she doesn't have a relationship with) stopped by her house just to piss her off. She knows that I don't allow make-up speeches. Now she wants to know what I can do to help her pass the class because she is transferring in the fall and has to take math in the summer. What do I do?

The next day I'm approached by no less than 10 students wanting to know what their current grade is and what I can do to help them improve it. Wow, what is going on? Could it be that are students just are not prepared for college level work...ok, that was too easy. If these stories sound familiar you will probably agree that we face some serious challenges. The California Community College Chancellor's Office (CCCCO) reported that approximately 70% to 80% of new community college students require a basic-skills course in either mathematics or English (Illowsky, 2008).

Now I start to think about adult development and student success. Am I a part of the problem or can I be a part of the solution? I tell myself I would rather be a part of the solution, but I need help. That's why I am writing this

article; I would like to open a dialog with my colleagues and see what you think. I will illuminate just a few of the major challenges we face and then introduce a potential solution for future dialog.

### Problem

#### *Underprepared Students*

The problem is something we are all familiar with. Community colleges have experienced a large increase in the matriculation of underprepared students and these students are enrolled in classes throughout the college. Evidence shows that the majority of students who are enrolled in remedial classes do not successfully acquire college-level skills required to complete coursework and earn a certificate or degree. The CCCCCO (2005) found that approximately 30% of the 650,000 students who enrolled in a basic-skills course during the 2001–2002 school year had persisted and successfully completed the next course in the discipline within 2 years (Kozeracki & Brooks, 2006). Students who do not demonstrate remediation of basic skills cannot graduate or transfer to 4-year universities.

SJDC has experienced an increase in students who do not demonstrate proficiency at the basic-skills level. Wetstein & Nguyen (2008) reported the college is above the statewide norm of 70 to 80%, with 84.2% of students not demonstrating

proficiency at 9th grade or below in reading, 84.3% in writing, and 64.8% in mathematics. Wetstein & Nguyen also talk about how students were faring in the mathematics and English classes after completion of the remedial classes at SJDC. The results indicated that approximately 63% of all students who attempted a basic-skills class completed it successfully, but only 40% of those students completed the follow-up course successfully within a 3-year span. This figure represents two students out of the original 8.5 students who enrolled in remedial classes. For students in the English as a Second Language (ESL) program, the success rate for follow-up courses drops to a dismal 20%. This statistic represents 1 student out of 8.5 ESL students who enrolled in the program (Wetstein & Nguyen, 2008).

[Click Here](#) for complete article

### San Joaquin Delta College

#### STUDENT SUCCESS PROGRAM

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*If you wish to submit a Staff Member (faculty, management, classified, etc.) to be spotlighted for a Student Success innovative contribution, please contact, Janice Takahashi at: (209) 954-5205 or email at: jtakahashi@deltacollege.edu*