

Education from the Student's Perspective

An attempt at an edublog from a student in southeastern Colorado. Here goes nothing!

SUNDAY, MARCH 20, 2011

Being Pseudotaught

I'll be honest: I've had some extreme difficulty developing this post. I eventually ended up looking back through the original pseudoteaching posts, and this is what I found:

"The key idea of pseudoteaching is that it looks like good teaching. In class, students feel like they are learning, and any observer who saw a teacher in the middle of pseudoteaching would feel like he's watching a great lesson. The only problem is, very little learning is taking place." (John Burk, [Pseudoteaching: Hunting Monkeys](#))

To me, the key phrase in that quote is, "In class, students feel like they are learning...." (Perhaps that's just my bias as a student, though.) But, I know the feeling of being pseudotaught. It's that feeling of sitting in a class, typically watching, as has been mentioned many times before, a lecture or a video (complete with demos!) and truly believing that I understand what's being presented.

And then...I try to apply it. Suppose that wonderful classroom experience was a demonstration on fluid pressure. Two hours later, I'll be walking down a hallway and see some objects in an aquarium when thoughts along the lines of:

"Now, that one on the bottom is under more pressure, because...no, wait, let me think...no, that's not right...huh?"

Immediately, that familiar sinking feeling of frustration and loss comes back to me. And once again, I know--I really have no idea what's going on beneath those waves. It's not a good feeling! It only goes to reinforce the struggle that many of my fellow students have with learning.

This frustration is one that comes to many students throughout our educational careers. In fact, I mentioned to a friend that I was struggling with a post on pseudoteaching. Her response, of course, was "What's that?" I sent her through the [FAQ](#), and once she was done reading it, she turned to me and said, "There's a lot of that in La Junta." (She's right, of course. Not having attended any other schools, I don't know how we compare in terms of volume of pseudoteaching, but I would assume, from reading various other edublogs, that many other schools have this problem.)

I have spent an incredible amount of time thinking about how to write this post. I spent the entire Saturday at a track meet, and when I wasn't running, my mind kept coming back to this. And the whole time, I've been wondering if the reason pseudoteaching is so bad but looks so good isn't that the student isn't learning, it's that the student does not retain what he or she has learned.

Let's consider a theoretical student, Jack. When Jack sits through a lecture in his

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English class on the "correct" way to read a book, he really does get it. He understands the method and the techniques and the why. But when he's outside of that classroom, it's gone--because he didn't retain it. His understanding was there, but not solid. And as a result, over even a short period of time, it doesn't deepen. Instead, it leaves him.

Now, I think this is why lectures, videos, and demos tend to be so ineffective. They don't give the student time to process the information they're being given, and as a result, even though the student may understand the material in the here and now, it's not there when it's actually needed--in the future.

At least, that's how it seems to me--and that's why I'm here, isn't it?

Posted by Michael A. Rees at 6:22 PM 13 Comments 

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Michael A. Rees

First off, Riley, I can't take credit for the "figure out for themselves" idea. I saw it on the comment section of another blog. I can't remember where, though.

Now, Riley, you do have very good points. But I still must say that, when I'm stuck in a class where I absolutely have to watch a demo, I believe that I really do understand it and could apply it. Then, over a very small time period, this understanding leaves me. Perhaps this is just my experience and my mistake was in trying to extend it to the general case, but I really do believe that one of the main issues is retention.

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Bon Crowder

I learned math via pseudoteaching and loved it. History, on the other hand - bad idea for me.

Again, I say, it's about the student. Let's offer math pseudoteaching. And allow the kiddos to choose if that's their preferred method.

It would be mine.

1 year ago

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Bunki68

Another factor in the inability to retain, I think, is our divided attention. Many students skim texts instead of read for understanding and retention; many do not

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know how to take good notes, which aid retention; and all of us are multi-tasking and thinking of many things at once, so that while we understand a concept momentarily, understanding is fleeting because focus and attention are divided or are of poor quality.

1 year ago

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Chris Ludwig

Michael,

I'm not sure if you saw this, but Ed Hitchcock has an interesting response to this post over at his blog: <http://www.teachscience.net/20...>

I think that, yes, too often teachers use one activity, demo, or movie to teach an idea and that if we don't come back to it in a meaningful way, no real learning takes place. Thanks for the post and feel free to point out any pseudoteaching that you witness in my classes: the student perspective is very important, as you can tell from the responses to this post.

1 year ago

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Anonymous

"I still must say that, when I'm stuck in a class where I absolutely have to watch a demo, I believe that I really do understand it and could apply it"

This is a good statement of the problem. Students believe that they should be able to understand something having watched the demo. Then they get frustrated when it becomes apparent that they don't understand that much.

But the mistake isn't in not properly following the demo, or not retaining the information in the demo.

The mistake is in not realising that understanding of a non-trivial concept or problem happens by thinking it through independently, possibly several times.

1 year ago

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shiftingphases.com

Hi Michael, thanks for taking such care to write something unique. Your thoughts helped me think about conversations I have with students when I feel that they haven't learned an idea solidly, but they feel that they did learn it, do know it, they just can't remember it right now (or sometimes they say something like, "I know it, I just can't put it into words"). Then later, when they have a chance to apply the idea and are able to use it confidently, I ask them, "what did you learn/change about your understanding" and they say, "nothing. I already knew all of this." It's a strange conversation, and brings up the question of what do we really mean by "learning"? If I can find a good place to work it in, I'll ask my students to read this as part of a conversation about what learning is.

1 year ago

Like Reply



Riley

"the students figure out for themselves that the initial and final momentums are equal"

Yeah! This is how we learn.

1 year ago

Like Reply



ABOUT ME



Michael A. Rees

This blog began as a requirement for a Biology class; however, overnight, it blossomed into a commentary on education from the student's

perspective.

(By the way, I have a tendency to overuse parentheses.)

From the post where I announced my change to edublogging: "To be honest, I'm a little nervous about this change. So many edubloggers are so knowledgeable and experienced that I can't help but feel like an uninitiated upstart who will only end up seeming somewhat naive. I hope that you will be willing to bear with me and hope that we can all learn from this experience."

What else can I say?

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Michael A. Rees

Riley...I'm getting there. But right now, I have to go to the library.

1 year ago

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Michael A. Rees

Peter, I think that, for a demo to lead to successful understanding, it has to fully explore multiple aspects of the topic (which could lead to period-long or even longer demos). For example, suppose the demo was on conservation of momentum and involved marbles colliding. To really get understanding, I think you would have to use multiple combinations of masses of marbles, change the velocities of the marbles, and, preferably, make the students figure out for themselves that the initial and final momentums are equal. That's the kind of demo that provides lasting understanding.

As a response to your second question, thought experiments come to mind (ha ha!). If a student can design a valid lab to test an idea--isn't that a sign that they understand the concept?

1 year ago

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Riley

I don't think Jack really gets it, most of the time. I think rhetorical mastery by a good demonstrator and our tendency to agree with people automatically collude to create the illusion of getting it. I suppose there must be a fleeting understanding of what the demonstrator is talking about, and maybe that's what you mean, but I think that's pretty distinct from the learning that takes place when a student constructs meaning for himself.

That is, you can really learn something and then forget about it, but I don't think demonstrations cause anyone to really learn anything. I suspect that students who really learn "from" demonstrations are actively constructing their own ideas, and *that's* what's causing the learning. The whole problem with demonstrations is that if they're presented naively, they encourage passive watching.

1 year ago

Like Reply



Peter

I like your post as well. Question, do you think a demo going slower or with more processing time would be helpful, or do you think any demo would still leave to a lack of understanding. What do you see as an alternative to a teacher who doesn't have the resources to have all the students participate in a lab, but still wants the concept to be taught?

1 year ago

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Michael A. Rees

Thank you! I think the reason I struggled so much with writing this post (I think, all things considered, I wrote this post four times) was that I wanted to add something somewhat unique to the conversation instead of parroting what everyone else has said. It's good to know that other people have noticed what I eventually settled on.

1 year ago

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Andy Rundquist

Great post, I've think you've identified a crucial issue (retention). When I think back to my (all to prevalent) pseudoteaching episodes, I can vividly recall my students nodding their heads in agreement to some esoteric thing I'm teaching them. What I find interesting is that, later, when I'm helping them in my office, it'll be clear that they don't remember the details. However, if I do the same arm motion or use the same silly voice or whatever I may have done to be different in class, the student sometimes says "oh yeah, I remember now!"

1 year ago

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