

How to Study and Learn (Part Two)

In part one of this article, we introduced some of the intellectual skills, abilities, and dispositions essential to the development of the educated person as articulated in our Miniature Guide for Students on How to Study and Learn. We provided eighteen ideas students need for becoming master students. In this article, we continue to highlight important ideas from the *Thinker's Guide for Students on How to Study and Learn*. Specifically, we focus on three key ideas: the importance of ideas, or concepts in thinking, how to think within the ideas of a subject or discipline, and how to learn important ideas from textbooks. Each section in this article is written directly to students, with important implications for learning.

How to Understand Ideas

Ideas are to us like the air we breathe. We project them everywhere. Yet we rarely notice this. We use ideas to create our way of seeing things. What we experience we experience through ideas, often funneled into the categories of “good” and “evil.” We assume ourselves to be good. We assume our enemies to be evil. We select positive terms to cover up the “indefensible” things we do. We select negative terms to condemn even the good things our enemies do. We conceptualize things personally by means of experience unique to ourselves (often distorting the world to our advantage). We conceptualize things socially as a result of indoctrination or social conditioning (our allegiances presented, of course, in positive terms).

Ideas, then, are our paths to both reality and self-delusion. We don't typically recognize ourselves as engaged in idea construction of any kind whether illuminating or distorting. In our everyday life we don't experience ourselves shaping what we see and constructing the world to our advantage.

To the uncritical mind, it is as if people in the world came to us with our labels for them inherent in who they are. THEY are “terrorists.” WE are “freedom fighters.” All of us fall victims at times to an inevitable illusion of objectivity. Thus, we see others not as like us in a common human nature, but as “friends” and “enemies,” and accordingly “good” or “bad.” Ideology, self-deception, and myth play a large part in our identity and how we think and judge. We apply ideas, however, as if we were simply neutral observers of reality. We often become self-righteous when challenged.

If you want to develop as a learner, you must come to recognize the ideas through which you see and experience the world. You must take explicit command of your thinking. You must become the master of your own ideas. You must learn how to think with alternative ideas, alternative “world views.” As general semanticists often say: “The word is not the thing! The word is not the thing!” If you are trapped in one set of

concepts (ideas, words) then your thinking is trapped. Word and thing become one and the same in your minds. You are unable then to act as a truly free person.

Essential Idea: To understand our experience and the world itself, we must be able to think within alternative world-views. We must question our ideas. We must not confuse our words or ideas with things.

How to Control (& Not Be Controlled By) Ideas

The ideas we have formed in personal experience are often egocentric in nature. The ideas we inherit from social indoctrination are typically ethnocentric in nature. Both can limit our insight significantly. This is where mastery of academic subjects and of our native language comes into play. This is where education is supposed to empower us.

The ideas we learn from academic subjects and from the study of distinctions inherent in language use represent sources of ideas that can take us beyond our personal egocentrism and the social ideology in which we are otherwise typically entrapped. When we learn to think historically, sociologically, anthropologically, scientifically, and philosophically, we can come to see ignorance, prejudice, stereotypes, illusions, and biases in our personal thinking and in the thinking common in our society. Many, without such command, confuse very different things: for example, needing and wanting, having judgment and being judgmental, having information and gaining knowledge, being humble and being servile, being stubborn and having the courage of one's convictions.

Command of distinctions such as these and those inherent in multiple disciplines can have a significant influence upon the way we shape our experience. If, for example, we see confuse ethics with arbitrary social conventions or religion or national law, we have no basis for understanding the true basis of universality in ethics: what does harm or good to humans and other sentient creatures.

When we develop our thinking, we go beneath the surface of ideas. Our personal experience is no longer "sacred." We recognize our fallibility. We strive for ideas to broaden us and empower us as free individuals.

Essential Idea: There are at least four different sources for ideas: our personal experience, socialization, the academic subjects we study, and our native language (English, Spanish, etc.). To become truly educated, we must learn to monitor and evaluate our use of ideas from these domains. Only then can we learn how to control (and not be controlled) by ideas.

How to Think Within the Ideas of a Subject

Learning to think within the ideas of a subject is like learning to perform well in basketball, ballet, or on the piano. Thinking within the ideas of a subject at an advanced

level without disciplined practice is as unnatural to the human mind as sitting down at a piano and spontaneously playing Chopin's Polonaise.

Unfortunately, many classes do not highlight how to think within the ideas of the subject. Merely receiving lectures on the content of a subject will not teach you how to think within its ideas. You must therefore set out to discover how to think within biology, how to think within chemistry, how to think within economics, etc. You will not discover this thinking by cramming large masses of partially digested contents of a textbook or sets of lectures into your head. Here is what we recommend.

Recognize that you are seeking a new way to look at learning. Recognize that it will take time to become comfortable in this new perspective. Consider your task as a student to learn new ways to think. Stretching the mind to accommodate new ideas is crucial.

For example, if you are in a history course, your job is to learn how to think historically. Or, if you are in a writing class, your job is to learn to think like a skilled writer. Or, if you are in a Sociology, Psychology, Geography, Biology, Philosophy, or Chemistry class, you should be striving to think sociologically, psychologically, geographically, biologically, philosophically, or chemically. If you are in a Nursing, Engineering, or Architecture class, you should be attempting to think like a professional nurse, like an engineer, or like an architect. Your mind must stretch to be successful.

Recognize that there are key ideas behind the subject that give a unified meaning to it. Look up a variety of formulations of the essence of the subject (use dictionaries, textbooks, encyclopedias). Remember that you are looking for the ideas that give a unified meaning to the subject. What makes art, art? What makes science, science? What makes biology, biology? Try to find the common denominator of the various accounts. Ask your instructor for help.

Now relate every new idea (in the textbook or lectures) to the fundamental idea with which you have begun. The big idea with which you began should be in the background of all new ideas. Seek intuitive connections, connections that make complete sense to you.

Essential Idea: There are basic ideas that act as guide-posts to those thinking within a subject. Look for these basic ideas and stretch your mind to learn them. Weave everything else into them.

How to Learn Ideas from Textbooks

- All textbooks are organized by systems of ideas within them. Diagram the systems to help you begin to learn them. Notice yourself naming, identifying, connecting, distinguishing, and explaining things using ideas.

- Where we have knowledge, we have an organized technical vocabulary. Create a glossary of the most important ideas you learn in each subject you study.
- Your knowledge can be no stronger than the knowledge you have of ideas in a subject. Test yourself by trying to explain key ideas in non-technical language.
- All ideas must be understood in relation to contrasting ideas. Try naming and explaining the ideas opposite to key ideas you learn.
- All idea clusters must be understood as part of further such clusters. Take any important idea you learn; name the ideas that cluster around it.
- There are many domains of ideas: ethical, religious, cultural social, political, scientific, mathematical, etc. Name and explain a key idea in each domain.
- At the beginning of any class, try making a list of at least 25 ideas of the subject you want to learn. To do this you might read an introductory chapter from the textbook or an article on the subject from an encyclopedia. Then explain the list of ideas to a friend (State, Elaborate, Exemplify, and Illustrate each).
- As the course proceeds, add new ideas to the list and underline those ideas you are confident you can explain. Regularly translate chapter and section titles from the textbook into ideas. In addition, look for key ideas in every lecture you hear. Relate basic ideas to the basic theory the subject uses to solve problems. Master fundamental ideas and theories well. Do not move on until you do.

Essential Idea: One important way to think about what you are learning is by highlighting, diagramming, and explaining the ideas at the heart of each subject you study.

Conclusion

Understanding the power of ideas in human thought is critical to cultivating intellectual development. We cannot give academic content deep and significant meaning, nor effectively use it in our lives, if we are unable to actively bring the concepts embedded in that content into our thinking. We cannot command the quality of our own lives if we cannot recognize the role of ideas in our lives. We cannot be ethical persons if we cannot recognize how and when we manipulate others---or they manipulate us---through misleading or false ideas. In short, the development of the educated mind presupposes insightful understanding of the crucial role of concepts and ideas in human life.

{Information in this article is taken from Paul, R. & Elder, L. 2001, *The Thinker's Guide to How to Study and Learn*, Dillon Beach, CA: Foundation for Critical Thinking.}