



Dualism and the Post-Modern Student

When is an answer right?

by David Bruning

“Well, that’s just your opinion,” a student comments during a discussion about how observed redshifts of galaxies imply the Universe had a beginning some 13 billion years ago.

Is the student’s response one resulting from deeply-held philosophy or from limited educational growth? In the first case, the student may not be responding from a religious standpoint but from a more general post-modern philosophy that seems to grip Western society. In the latter case, the student may be in the early stages of Perry’s model of intellectual growth.

Modernism, which started in the early 1900s, arose as physicists and astronomers enjoyed great success in detailing the behavior of the atom, stars, and the Universe. Science could describe everything according to modernists. The backlash to this technoviewpoint was post-modernism, which says (simplistically) there is no absolute truth and that everyone’s opinion is equally valid.

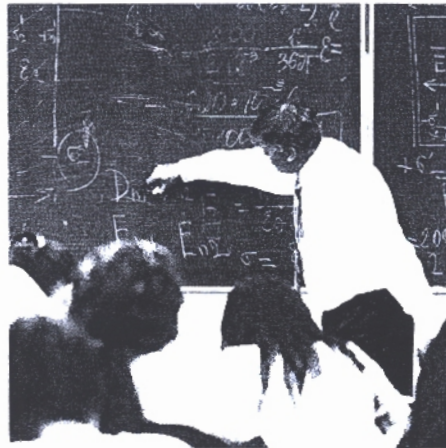
William Perry, in his studies of Harvard students, described the intellectual development of 18- to 22-year olds and claimed that great shifts can occur as students are exposed to diverse viewpoints. Perry developed a nine-point scale that categorized students’ development from “right-wrong” (dualistic) thinkers to relativistic ones.

Category one members are those who think there is only one right answer and they often state: “You said X in class but the book says Y,” followed by “Why did you say something wrong in class?” Not only do they believe in authority as the source of knowledge, but they also have a great sense of righteousness. These students often proclaim, “Don’t tell me about different theories, just tell me which one is right.”

Persons in the second category recognize that different viewpoints may exist but feel the other viewpoints are wrong and confused. These students take pains to learn the

instructor’s viewpoint and will repeat it willingly, although not necessarily identifying with it. These students see learning as a game to figure out what the instructor wants.

Rejecting authority figures occurs for category-three thinkers. They may still believe that there is absolute truth, but the instructor doesn’t know it. Often these students think they are graded arbitrarily on



papers because they haven’t learned yet how to form solid, evidence-based arguments.

Students who embrace multiplicity as a spectrum of personal opinions form category four. Everyone has a right to his or her viewpoint but every perspective is just a personal opinion. This group understands that they must reason relativistically, but they have not yet learned that it is because physical truth is relative and not just a requirement formed by the instructor.

Category five is the swing group. Persons in this stage believe that truth is relative to a particular situation. They sometimes apply this non-uniformly, believing that sociology may be relativistic but that science is not.

Students in category six through nine understand that truth is relative, and they apply this idea consistently. However, the commitment to these perspectives varies from six to nine. Early stages have an “anything goes” attitude, while later stages

develop commitments to certain beliefs while accepting other perspectives.

So do we encounter post-modernism or relativism in the classroom? Both, because post-modernism, in my opinion, is a societal equivalent to Perry’s relativism. Anecdotally, most of my students seem to fall in categories two through five.

While thoughtful academic engagement is important for groups five through nine to continue development, these students will largely succeed in spite of us. Category one and two thinkers need to confront questions such as “Is the Sun an average star? Why did astronomers so quickly accept Copernican theory even though it was more cumbersome and not as accurate as Ptolemaic theory? Did Einstein prove Newton’s theory of gravitation wrong?”

Category three and four thinkers require the most patience and attention from us. They can be confrontational, not because of their personality but owing to the cognitive imbalance they experience. The worst thing we can try to do is provide them with answers, forcing what Dave Pushkin calls cognitive capitulation. Rather, we need to lead them to seeing how two things can be true at the same time by leading them gently with questions so they form their own sense of truth. One way to build relativistic thinking uses group exercises, which start from an imaginary dialog between two students discussing a concept such as who is at the center of the Universe. Students must not only ponder the dialog but their own beliefs as they discuss which student’s view is correct.

The next time a student confronts you with “which answer is right?” or “that’s just your opinion,” take a moment to assess where he or she falls in Perry’s scheme. Instead of being dissidence, this is really a teaching moment. ■

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