

Mediated Learning

A Newsletter by and for the Instructors of The University of Montana



Are We So Intrigued with our Favorite Tree that We are Missing the Forest?



Professor Mark Cracolice

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Earning a PhD requires an ever-increasing degree of research specialization as the American university system progresses forward through time. Reflecting this trend, research publications are also becoming more specialized. For example, the title of a 1916 paper published in the *Journal of the American Chemical Society*, arguably the most prestigious journal in chemistry, was “The Atom and the Molecule.” Even nonchemists will recognize the relative simplicity of the title of this paper. When I scan the contents of the current issue of the same journal, article titles such as “Direct Determination of the Number of Electrons Needed To Reduce Coenzyme F430 Pentamethyl Ester to the Ni(I) Species Exhibiting the Electron Paramagnetic Resonance and Ultraviolet-Visible Spectra Characteristic for the MCR red1 State of Methyl-coenzyme M Reductase” appear. University faculty have to be extremely research specialized to be effective in today’s academic world.

A logical consequence of this increasing degree of specialization is the development of courses that are very focused on content related to the instructor’s discipline. When we receive our first academic appointment, we are thrilled to have the opportunity to share all of our specialized knowledge with our students. Even in introductory undergraduate courses, we enjoy bringing cutting-edge findings to our students. The positive effects of such

enthusiasm are exactly what is needed to excite our students and create positive attitudes among them. However, too much of a good thing often leads to negligence in other aspects of our responsibilities, namely, the facilitation of the development of our students’ intellectual skills. The thrill of discovering new knowledge and the importance of Coenzyme F430 Pentamethyl Ester are an important part of the teaching equation, but another foundational pillar—the thinking process underlying the research—is too often neglected in the classroom. A proper balance between promotion of positive attitudes, conveyance of content knowledge, and promotion of the development of intellect is necessary in teaching. We must continue to see the forest even though we specialize in knowledge of our favorite tree. All too often, the development of thinking skills is neglected in our curricula in favor of spending time on covering content and promoting positive attitudes.

In 1961, the Educational Policies Commission of the National Educational Association wrote, “The purpose which runs through and strengthens all other educational purposes—the common thread of education—is the development of the ability to think.” They elaborated by stating, “In acquainting students with the *strategies of inquiry* [my emphasis], the teacher can further their ability to identify and qualify generalizations, to recognize

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Professor Rob Balch

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While many students were at the beach and on the slopes last spring break, some students in Professor Rob Balch's sociology course found themselves in Arizona meeting Mormon polygamists. The trip was a voluntary excursion for students in his course titled *Sociology of Alternative Religions*, in which students study religious groups and cults from across the nation. Balch has visited many of the groups they discuss. He feels that bringing students on their own field trips strengthens their learning experience. "Field trips give students the opportunity to see the world the way people in these groups see the world," Balch said. "It helps them understand a point of view they usually view as weird at first glance."

"Field trips give students the opportunity to see the world the way people in these groups see the world."

Balch attended school at Arizona State University and earned his doctorate at the University of Oregon. He studied criminology and delinquency, which he taught at UM when he arrived in 1971. He quickly grew tired of the field and was relieved when another professor took over. "When you're teaching a course like Juvenile Delinquency people want answers," he said. "They want to know what to do about the problem. I never had any answers. It was frustrating because I had no experience in the field."

In 1975 he took a sabbatical to conduct research in Arizona. While there, he began reading about a cult known as Heaven's Gate in the newspapers. Organizers of the group scheduled public meetings where they explained how they thought people could reach heaven via a flying saucer. Some locals would disappear after attending the meetings, Balch said. "Twenty and 30 people at a time would disappear and their friends and family had no idea where they were," he said. "It was a huge mystery." Balch decided to see for himself what happened in the group, and infiltrated the Heaven's Gate cult by posing as a new member. He traveled to San Francisco, the site where cult leaders predicted prophecies to be fulfilled, and met with other cult members.

His experience studying Heaven's Gate sparked his interests in alternative religions. "It was a whole lot more interesting than my other research, so I decided to stay with it for a while," he said. "I really got into the phenomenon of new, unconventional religious movements and cults." He brought his interest back to The University of Montana. His office in the sociology department is filled with relics of his studies, including photographs of the Love Family, a former counterculture commune in Seattle which reached its height of popularity in the 1980's. The group later crumbled when evidence of drug trade and sexual abuse surfaced. There are also articles and photos from his 28 years studying Heaven's Gate, including a photo of the Hale-Bopp comet, which the cult viewed as a cosmic emissary beckoning them to another world and sparked its mass suicide in 1997.

Balch teaches a handful of sociology courses at the university, but features his research in the course called *Sociology of Alternative Religions*. One local group he studied in the 1980's was known as Baha'is Under the Provisions of the Covenant, a doomsday cult which had a branch in Missoula. The leader of the Missoula group predicted a battle of Armageddon would begin on April 29, 1980, at 5:55 p.m. in the form of a nuclear war between the United States and the Soviet Union. The group built bomb shelters in the area to prepare for the event, and Balch and his students got to tour the structures. "We explained who we were and they viewed us as potential converts," he said. "They opened their doors to us and we were there on April 29."

Balch has taken his students on numerous field trips to the former Aryan Nations compound in Hayden Lake, Idaho. In spring break of 1999 they ventured as far away as Oklahoma to visit another white supremacist group based in Elohim City. Another trip took them to Vancouver B. C. to visit a Hindu-based religious group. "It's

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Balch

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one thing to read about the groups—but its another to be there and talk to them first hand,” he said.

Balch’s own research has gained national attention. His work on the Heaven’s Gate cult maws the cover story of *Psychology Today* in 1976. He continues to write articles on the group. “I’m constantly amazed by the stuff people get involved in and build their lives around,” he said.

"The only good kind of instruction is that which marches ahead of development and leads it; it must be aimed not so much at the ripe as the ripening functions."

L. Vygotsky

Forest

(Continued from page 1)

statements which are not and perhaps cannot be supported by data, to move from data to appropriate generalizations, and to project new hypotheses. Emphasis on the strategies of inquiry can have the additional effects of arousing appreciation of the competence and work of the masters of these fields of learning and of contributing to the ability to reach the decisions required by responsible citizenship today.”

There is substantial research evidence that an inquiry-based instructional strategy is a key ingredient in providing students with the opportunity to develop their ability to think. The essential element in an inquiry approach is an information-to-concepts teaching sequence. When the information from which the great ideas from our disciplines is derived is presented *before* we draw conclusions from the data, we can ask our students to do some thinking for themselves. In this way, they develop their thinking skills. A student must practice thinking to refine and develop intellectual skills; in this aspect, thinking is like developing a good golf swing: practice is an essential but not sufficient component of learning. Students must be asked to practice their thinking skills. Our job as college instructors is to coach our students as they work on becoming proficient in the thinking skills inherent to our disciplines.

When I give seminars on inquiry instruction, I commonly entertain questions about a number of reasons why instructors believe they cannot put such a plan into action. Even though they agree with what theory and research shows, they feel as if the barriers to implementation are insurmountable. “It is too time-consuming to change my course.” “Students will not like having to think during lecture and my evaluations will be worse.” “We are not at an institution where students can solve inquiry problems.” “I won’t be able to cover enough content.” In response, I ask, “If students are gaining nothing more than the ability to remember a few facts for a short period of time, why bother with even the level of effort you now exert in lecturing?” Our goal is to facilitate a permanent change in our students’ intellect, and we must resist being lulled into contentment based on fleeting success on short-term measures of content knowledge. Good teaching does indeed require significant effort.

I encourage you to start trying an inquiry approach on a small scale. Change just one day of an expository concepts-to-information lecture into an information-to-concepts seminar-like approach. I assure you that the long-term gains that resultantly will be made by your students will be well worth the effort.

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