Performances of Understanding

There's a distinction in the scholarship of teaching and learning between teaching for knowledge and teaching for understanding. The former asks learners to recall or recite knowledge they've acquired. The latter demands that learners also be able to perform a variety of moves in response to that content: they might, for example, compare, generalize, explain, offer evidence, extrapolate, consider alternatives, provide rationale, or apply skepticism. When we teach for "performances of understanding," we enable students to actively use and engage course content, facilitate their learning for transfer, and develop them toward **metacognition**.

Most importantly, when we teach for performances of understanding we acknowledge that learners both retain more and are more able to transfer their knowledge to new learning if they actively use rather than simply receive and recall course content.

Some ways to elicit performances of understanding:

Performances of understanding can be elicited at all points of the learning process, and for all kinds of course content.

- Students can be asked to perform their understanding of an assignment (e.g., *What is this assignment designed to help you learn? What will be challenging about this assignment? How will this assignment build on the previous one?*) or the syllabus (e.g., *What values does this grade breakdown reflect? Using the bibliographic information available on the reading list, what do you expect to be most drawn to and why?*).

- Students can be asked to perform their understanding of a course reading (e.g., *How can we apply X's theoretical framework to the case under discussion? What questions remain unresolved after reading Y article? What rhetorical moves did this writer make that you might consider using in your own writing?*).

- Students can be asked to perform their understanding of a lecture you've just delivered (e.g., *Who wants to tell me how today's lecture builds on last week's? What pieces of evidence did I supply to support the argument that X's model is sound, and how might you use the same evidence to make a different argument? Can someone explain the formula on the board using their own words?*).

- Students can be asked to perform their understanding of their progress toward a goal (e.g., *What do you think you need to work on most urgently to improve in your next draft? What steps will you take to work toward that goal? Can you identify the topic sentences in your essay? What pieces of evidence might best support the argument you've put forward?*).

- Students can be asked to perform their understanding in whole-class discussion, small-group discussion, in pairs, in conversation with you, or with **in-class writing** or speaking exercises.

References

Perkins, David. "Teaching for Understanding." *American Educator: The Professional Journal of the American Federation of Teachers*, vol. 17, no. 3, 1993, pp. 28-35.

Wiske, Martha Stone, editor. *Teaching for Understanding: Linking Research with Practice.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1998.

See also

Metacognition
Speaking to Learn
Writing to Learn