

Concrete Builds Strong Foundations: Also Student Learning?

In The Art of Changing the Brain, James Zull notes that higher education teachers need to begin with concrete examples because the abstract and theoretical have less meaning. Does our deep understanding of our field lead us to start with principles rather than concrete examples? If so, what happens to our students?

The Plan

Ponder the questions above, then find those "perfect examples" to illustrate principles critical to your discipline's foundation.

Here are some concrete examples from your CSUN colleagues:

- When discussing narrative, biographical, or autobiographical primary sources in a history class, students will often criticize a source for expressing bias, and therefore assume it is without any historical value. In order to encourage students to think more about the problem of bias, I ask them to imagine writing a historical account of their best friend's life at age 16. Could they really be objective about their friend? Invariably, they will answer "no," but they will understand that their recollections still have a certain historical value. [Clementine Oliver, History]
- To introduce an activity about identity in my Urban Education in American Society course, I use the metaphor of a SUITCASE: Every teacher carries with them into the classroom a suitcase full of the knowledge, beliefs, assumptions, habits, etc. of their particular social/cultural identity. Likewise, every K-12 student brings a suitcase with artifacts of their culture, family, community. The more aware educators are of the contents of their own suitcase, the better they can understand and build on what their students bring to class--rather than assuming those suitcases are deficient. [Susan Auerbach, Educational Leadership and Policy Studies]
- Before the class session on chemical bonding, one might ask the students to discuss different types of BONDING between things with which they are familiar, such as (a) bonds of friendship and (b) the bonding of two objects using glue or mortar.
- To better understand why the American Colonies broke away from English rule, students might compare that relationship with that of a parent to child moving from infancy through adolescence.

Food for thought!

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