

Do Teachers Know This?

David Pike

Abstract

A Communication Arts instructor in a Calgary Technical Institute discovers an opportunity to enlarge his vocation when a student asks him a simple four-word question. Methods of thinking and learning are soon integrated into the communications curriculum, and students, together with their instructors, are invited to develop more and better “TLC” capabilities as they study and practice their chosen disciplines. The article closes by suggesting, given the challenges we’re facing in working, learning, and living well together now, that we ask leaders in our communities and beyond the same question; and to encourage them to expand their leadership roles and the roles of the people they lead, focusing less on *what* to think, learn, and communicate, and more on *how*.

I started my mid-life career in college teaching in the late summer of 1981 when I was 33 by interviewing for the position of Communication Arts Instructor at the Southern Alberta Institute of Technology in Calgary, Alberta, Canada. Since I had recently married and become the step-father of two young children, I was happily focused on finding satisfying work and settling down. Heading to the far north, as I had every summer of the 70’s as a Geodetic Survey Foreman mapping the Canadian arctic during my extended studies in Geography and English Literature at Queen’s University, was no longer the attractive gig it was when I was solo.

Back home after my interview, my partner asked how things went. “Well,” I said semi-confidently, “I expected to be asked about my practically non-existent methods and experiences of teaching, but the department head saw Yukon in my CV and asked if I’d encountered any bears and I said yes and away we went. He asked what happened, and I told them about having to shoot two that came into our tents. “What did you do with them?” he asked. “Well, the ranger in Dawson City who had cleared us to shoot them if necessary, radioed that we had to skin them, and I said we’re surveyors, not bear skinners, and he said the fine for failing to preserve a pelt is \$600, so I skinned the bears and our camp man bundled the pelts up and drove them down the Dempster Highway to his office and...”. Sorry, but the department head kept probing for more details and... well, I think they’re going to offer me the job because I worked in the arctic and skinned bears: good qualifications for teaching tech students I guess. A faculty member on the interview panel seemed to sense she should ask me something about teaching and wondered if I’d be introducing students of say Nuclear Medicine or Automotive Technology to poetry. I said no which was the right answer given that every course in SAIT’s 60 programs that I surveyed before my interview was 100% practical.

Fast forward a few years: how was I faring in my new career? I was probably good enough but clearly not the greatest, getting by on some “tips for teachers” and avoiding the kinds of pitfalls my own least talented teachers and professors fell into. I still remember one student’s sardonic evaluation of my first term teaching efforts:

Q: How could this instructor improve his or her performance?

A: Speak English.

Ouch. But fair enough. After wondering if I was supposed to use one syllable words I figured out that I could add a synonym or embed a definition whenever I used uncommon words.

The courses I was assigned were narrowly focused on basic skills. While I liked the challenge of convincing the 35 or so mature students in each of my 5 courses per semester that communication skills were just as important as the technical skills they’d signed up for—sometimes even *more so*—the mountain of marking was exhausting. And I was beginning to realize that the *training* that I was hired to do seemed less interesting and less valuable in the long run than the *educating* I presumed we could and should also be doing along the way.

When I began introducing writing and oral presentation assignments that required students to read, think critically, and accurately represent, for example, the thesis and supporting evidence in an editorial, few could do this. Instead of the objective analysis I had requested, after demonstrating with examples, they submitted reactions and personal opinions. They were shocked when I pointed out that their submissions weren’t what the instructions specified. In their minds, their personal opinions trumped everything. It became clear to me and some of my colleagues that two more arts — the art of thinking and the art of learning—needed to be developed simultaneously alongside the art of communicating or we weren’t going to be accomplishing much.

So the TLC initiative (Thinking, Learning, and Communicating across the curriculum) was launched and a few of us began facilitating free extracurricular workshops through the Learning Skills Centre on better methods of reading-to-learn, note-making, remembering, focusing and managing attention, self-testing, using critical and constructive thinking frames to analyse arguments, solve problems, meet challenges, collaborate, and so on. And that’s when, during the break in one of my workshops, a participant who I remember as being in his late thirties, like me, approached me and said, “This is interesting stuff, David. Do teachers know this?”

“Do teachers know this?!”

Holy Cow. I don’t remember his name and he wouldn’t have any idea how much that simple little four-word question turned me towards a wider vocation than the calling that one of my grandfathers, both of my parents, many of my uncles and aunts, some of my best friends and, historically, many millions of others had answered before me. I think I babbled something about how most of us are hired primarily as subject matter experts (SMEs) and that we were expected to become teaching and learning experts (TLEs) over time by seeking feedback from our students, by consulting with our colleagues about best practices, and by attending regular professional development sessions.

But even as I was speaking, the needle on my Hemingway-recommended, built-in, shock-proof bullshit detector was jumping to life: I was failing to believe what I was saying. He'd just illuminated a major problem with post-secondary teaching: we tend to put our investments in our own PD in updating and extending our *subject matter expertise* and too often, according to student evaluations, our teaching and learning expertise is weak or missing in action. "Knows his/her stuff but..."

And how do the half of us who fall below the mid-point on student evaluations of the quality of teaching at our colleges and universities respond? Many no doubt endeavor to do better; however, some claim that students aren't qualified to evaluate, or that the instrument isn't valid, or that their rigorousness makes them unpopular, or that their job isn't to be liked. And so the gaps between their teaching and their students' learning get to live another year or two. Or ten or twenty.

Fast forward a few years: inspired by our students and by exemplary educators of post-secondary educators such as K. Patricia Cross, some colleagues and I have

- Opened the Teaching & Learning Centre (TLC) with an Olympic Legacy Fund Grant
 - faculty instructional skills development by and for each other as a complement to ongoing
 - student learning skills development by faculty and student tutors in the Learning Skills Centre (LSC)
- Used the TLC as a springboard for piloting
 - Instructional Skills Workshops (ISWs), experiential, peer-based 24-hour workshops
 - Facilitator Development Workshops (FDWs), for leaders of ISWs
 - Learning Styles Workshops (Kolb's LSI and Gregorc's Style Delineator)
 - Various experiential/interactive/discovery learning methods as alternatives to lecturing
 - Using Teaching Portfolios to collect the results of an individual's and/or a department's teaching innovations
- Contracted with local business & industry partners to revamp their in-house course designs and train their trainers in highly interactive, performance-based learning methods
- Worked with governments, post-secondary institutions, and corporate sponsors on international projects focused on improving teaching and learning methods in diverse countries such as Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyz Republic, Saudi Arabia, South Africa.

By 1998, when two colleagues and I had the opportunity to form our own independent educational consulting company to pursue more such stimulating development work and leave the least charming aspects of academic life behind—some of the more soul-squeezing meetings and leaders for example— we took it. And so *another* challenging and satisfying 17-year career unfolded nationally and internationally.

We were free to share what we'd been learning about better practices in curriculum design, instructional delivery, and program evaluation in careers that entailed being invited to collaborate intensely and briefly inside a wide range of distinctive, welcoming cultures.

These days, when asked if I'm retired, I say no right away and quote a woman who said, "If you say you're retired, people think you've left your brain in a park; so instead I say 'I've diversified my avocational, recreational, and volunteering activities!'" I'm reading a lot, listening to music, outfitting a cabin, facilitating workshops for hospice and palliative care volunteers, cavorting with grandchildren; and keeping the notebooks I've been keeping since 1968 during a first sojourn in Europe. It's my lifelong beloved method for noticing, remembering, thinking, and learning after reading and traveling or just looking out the window. The bear stories, the things students say, the questions your children ask—"Do plankton talk to each other?" "Do you sometimes wish you were more normal?"—are all there.

Recently I was thinking about the catalytic effect one student's simple question—"Do teachers know this?"—had on me. It's related to the question Michel de Montaigne, 16th century humanist, inventor of the essay, and hero of mine had inscribed over his door when he retired from public life at 38: *What do I know?* Another admirable, simple, skeptical question. Together it seems these two questions have continuously prompted me to respond and correspond. I seem to be doing it now.

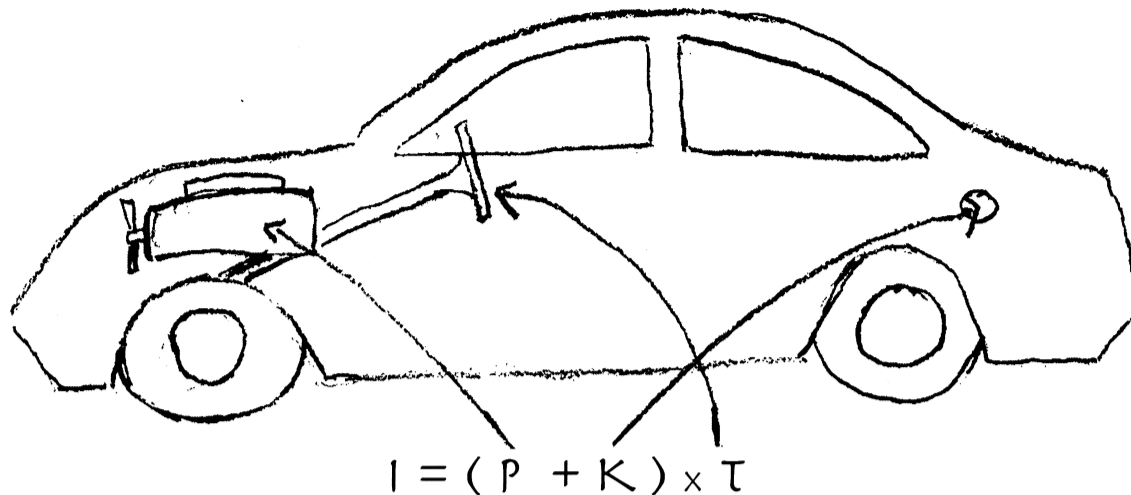
So here's a provisional answer to that *what do I know?* question: to be effective teachers or coaches or mentors, it seems we need to be more than just subject matter experts or talented practitioners of an art or a profession, passing our knowledge along. I think *we are especially the ones* who need to be actively developing the arts of thinking, learning, and communicating *in our own lives* so that we're better able to do that with others in the classrooms, studios, workplaces, and communities where we work and would like to be flourishing along with others.

Critical thinking specialists are convinced that the best way to develop intelligence is to focus at least as much if not more attention on developing *tactics* as on "covering the material" (I see a shroud being pulled over a corpse) or "delivering knowledge" (I see a truck backing up to a loading dock).

To drive this idea home, so to speak, I'll leave you with a formula, an image, and an analogy I adapted from the excellent work that critical thinking specialists Robert Ennis and Robert Sternberg have done on the question of how best to develop intelligence. I've suggested that participants draw it along with me at the end of various workshops I've facilitated. It's intended to persuade them to continue working on the teaching, learning, and critical and creative thinking tactics we'd just been practicing.

$$I = (P + K) \times T$$

Intelligence = (Power + Knowledge) x Tactics



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Intelligence = (Power + Knowledge) x Tactics

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In this analogy, intelligence can be thought of as a combination of

- intellectual horsepower, akin to I.Q.: its validity and developability may be a subject of debate but some forms of intelligence—e.g. facility with languages, music, or math—may be innate
- knowledge, similar to the fuel needed to power the engine: a little may take us a long way while some of us require a lot more, depending on our vehicle's design and the kind of trip we're taking
- & tactics: how you steer, accelerate, and brake your vehicle while getting it to take you successfully where you want to go.

In this formula, tactics can *multiply* whatever intellectual horsepower and knowledge you have been born with or acquired. The analogy has the added bonus of helping us understand why a high I.Q. and a great deal of knowledge don't necessarily take you where you want to go if you're not very good at steering or reversing course. Entrepreneurs are famously good tacticians (This was recognized by a University president who told a gathering of new faculty members he was always nice to his 'A' students because some would come back as colleagues; and he was especially nice to his 'D' students because some would go on to start hugely successful enterprises and donate millions of dollars).

Given the perils our world is facing now and our difficulty in coming to agreements on what to believe and what to do, I'm taking my cue from the unknown student who influenced *my* vocation and asking, "*Do leaders know this?*" Do they know how to refrain from simply announcing *what* to think, learn, and communicate and to attend instead to *how* to do these life-saving and life-enriching things. If not nearly enough of them do, then here's a great challenge for the leaders of leaders to take on.

Author Biography

David Pike has worked as a surveyor in the Canadian Arctic, as a communication arts instructor at the Southern Alberta Institute of Technology, then as the first coordinator of its Teaching and Learning Centre before turning to independent educational consulting and workshop facilitation locally and in developing countries. Currently he volunteers in hospice and palliative care, conducts workshops for new volunteers, and makes regular entries in a book he's been writing for some years—okay, 55—called *Notebooks of an Amateur Human Being*. He has an M.A. In English Literature from Queen's University in Kingston, Ontario. Contact davidlornepike@gmail.com

