

A Learning Experience

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[Note: This is an extract from a supporting statement I wrote some years ago as part of a teaching post application. Among other things, the application required me to describe a formative learning situation in which I was involved and what I learned from it. I still feel the description encapsulates my learning and teaching ethos.]

I would like to describe a learning experience I had as a college student at New York College in Athens. As part of my studies in philosophy I read one of Plato's Socratic dialogues *Meno* (385 BC). The dialogue, which deals with Plato's views about knowledge acquisition, uses an example in which Socrates conducts a practical experiment in order to show Meno (his main interlocutor) how a slave boy who lacks all education is nonetheless able to reach the correct answer to a complex geometrical problem.

Socrates draws diagrams on the ground asks the boy questions about them, which he answers as best he can. Choosing his questions carefully and building on the boy's previous answers, Socrates gently helps the boy to get a deeper and clearer understanding of the structure of the problem and the steps needed to solve it. In the end the slave boy recognises the solution himself.

Neither the actual mathematical problem nor its philosophical significance for Plato is important here. Rather, it is the exciting idea that in learning how to solve the problem, the slave boy does not have his head passively filled with facts; he is not 'spoon-fed'. Rather, he actively tries out several possible answers and realizes that they do not work. And through this active process of trial and error and hard thinking, he comes to 'see' the correct answer for himself and to recognise it as such. Or at least, that is how it must have seemed to the boy, the student. But of course it could not have happened like this if Socrates (the teacher) had not made his contribution.

Prior to the experiment, Meno calls Socrates a 'torpedo-fish' because, Meno says, he numbs his victims by challenging their confused and incoherent views. But in fact Socrates sees himself as a 'midwife', who, by certain strategies of questioning is able to help his student give birth to genuine understanding and reliable knowledge.

What struck me about this was that there is an enormous difference between acquiring facts and genuine learning. Socrates could have taught his student a fact very easily by simply supplying the answer to the problem. But then, for the student, the answer would have been merely a piece of isolated information, unconnected to any deeper understanding of the problem and related problems. It would have been like a tool he owned but did not know how to use. If the student had simply been given the answer, he would not have *understood*; he would not have matured cognitively in the way he did by a trial-and-error process of learning.

The student genuinely learned by discovering the answers himself. And it is this process of actively engaging with the subject matter that is genuinely rewarding and cognitively important. Fact acquisition may be necessary for students to be able to become actively engaged with the process of learning, but it is by no means the whole story and it is only a part of what is involved in genuine learning.

The process of active, engaged learning has been my ideal ever since, and I love sharing this understanding of education with students and colleagues. This is what keeps me in education, both as a learner and as a teacher.

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