

## *What's It All About—Learning in the Human Sciences*

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Two recent articles by John Tagg (2004a, 2004b) challenged me to wonder about the state of learning in the human sciences. His first article in *About Campus* raised the question, “Why Learn?,” and his second one focused on “Alignment for Learning.” It seems to me that Tagg’s concern that higher education is encouraging grade-grubbing careerism is one that Kappa Omicron Nu should be concerned about. Our members have the grades, or they wouldn’t be members. So, what is our responsibility to make sure that serious scholarship is a deep approach to learning—studying for life? The difference may be that the learning task is approached in two different ways: performance goals vs. learning goals. The one way shows positive judgment about learning, and the other way seeks increased competence.

### *Surface vs. Deep Processing*

A deep approach to learning requires that the learner engage in deep-level processing. This approach focuses on meaning—grasping the message, engaging with the underlying ideas. In contrast, surface-level processing concentrates on remembering as much as possible about the material and the strategies described. The performance goal is an A, and the learning goal is understanding.

Marton and Booth (1997) studied the conceptions of learning and found that students that have performance goals defined learning in these ways:

- ◆ Learning as increasing one’s knowledge
- ◆ Learning as memorizing and reproducing
- ◆ Learning as applying

In this same study, students that had learning goals defined learning in these ways:

- ◆ Learning as understanding
- ◆ Learning as seeing something in a different way
- ◆ Learning as changing as a person

Thus a person’s perspective, what is believed, manifests itself in the goals. Learning goals are about change. When one achieves the performance, the learning can go away. The course is finished—on to the next. Dweck (2000) theorized that learners who have little faith in their own capacity do not set learning goals. They aim for easy, low-effort successes, and outperforming other students. Those with learning goals believe that their abilities are not fixed and that they are subject to development or decline. Thus effort, difficulty, and setbacks will be experienced even with high confidence in their intelligence.

### *What to Do?*

Although it would be easy to place the blame on learners, they are reflecting developmental stages in realization of themselves as learners. The design of the learning environment has much to do with whether the learner gets “stuck” in the stage where performance goals are sought. If assessment places a value only on student work as quantifiable points, students will remain dedicated to performance goals. Students respond to the incentives in their environment, and education in this mode will continue to produce transcripts. Tagg (2004a) uses an interesting analogy: “Kellogg makes cereal; colleges make transcripts” (p. 3).

If the learning environment supports student development, institutions need to stop sending mixed messages—the need to think critically and develop own ideas but assessment with bubble sheets and graduate schools/employers mainly looking at grades. What the institutions say and do are not aligned. When persons select their own goals, they are important and valuable and worthy of hard work. The goals

of personal significance indicate intrinsic motivations. Intrinsic motivation, according to Wenger (1998) emerges from *practice*: “Practice is first and foremost, a process by which we can experience the world and our engagement with it as meaningful” (p. 51). His *Communities of Practice: Learning, Meaning, and Identity* explores how to construct and revise meaning through practice. Wenger proposes communities of practice as a means for negotiation of meaning. The tools consist of give-and-take with others— “assert, assess, and adjust meanings in light of personal and shared purposes. It is through practice that meanings grow into goals, that we shape our purposes in the matrix of contested possibilities that a community creates” (Tagg, 2004b, p. 12). Learning communities are an example of the communities of practice approach.

### ***Learning Communities***

Tagg (2004b) discussed “a cognitive economy that produces cognitive entrepreneurs, independent and reflective thinkers” (p. 14). Perkins (1992) studied what he called the “hot” cognitive economy and concluded that the following elements of the learning environment motivate the energy for deep learning.

- ◆ Goals – intrinsic goals
- ◆ Activities – frequent, connected, and authentic activities
- ◆ Information – consistent, continuous, and interactive feedback
- ◆ Time – long time horizon for learning through a connected curriculum
- ◆ Community – engaged communities of practice
- ◆ Alignment – related goals, activities, information, time, and community

Tagg proposed that the framework for a cognitive economy could be achieved through “learning communities, learning outcomes assessment, performance-based learning, portfolios, ability transcripts, capstone projects, self-assessment, first-year programs, service learning, undergraduate research, collaborative learning, and abundant combinations of and variations on them all” (p. 16).

### ***Now What***

Although most institutions have programs and practitioners that value and use deep learning processes, the key challenge is alignment for learning. The mixed messages from most institutions reinforce performance goals. So, the need to keep an eye on the big picture is critical to ensuring that students move through the developmental stages of learning from surface to deep learning. Although it is unlikely that a top-down master plan for realignment for the whole institution can be sustained, alignment can be achieved through personal reflection and engagement.

The individual educator has three choices: alter or suppress values, criticize the institution, or change it. Each educator can use the tools of scholarship and reflection to discover meaning and revise practice. Communities of practice can form in concert with others who are reshaping their work. In this manner, the context can be changed from a bunch of courses to alignment for learning. Kappa Omicron Nu can play a role by promoting the integration of academic and co-curricular goals. The Undergraduate Research Community (URC) and the “Kids and Careers” service learning initiatives are two examples of Kappa Omicron Nu commitment to alignment for learning.

I conclude with a plea: Look around the institutions you know and do your part as a volunteer, educator, or patron to identify the institutional structures and processes that are misaligned with the goal of promoting deep learning. Then, do your part in establishing educational goals and aligning the policies and practices to them.

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