Welcome back everyone! This promises to be an especially exciting year as we prepare for our move to the New Campus next fall. I would like to extend a special welcome to our new faculty and to our first group of post-docs.

This issue continues with the theme that we started last spring, namely that of exploring and understanding our student’s intellectual development with the aim of helping them attain higher order thinking skills. We discussed studies (Perry, 1970; King and Fischer, 1994; Baxter Magolda, 1992) that showed that most students entering college are not ready for higher order thinking. This is particularly true of our students who, for the most part, are the product of an educational system where memorizing information is rewarded with success.

In the past two issues of New Chalk Talk, we specifically referred to W. Perry’s seminal work to guide us in understanding our students. In his work, Perry recognizes different “stages” of intellectual growth for students. He divided these stages into four broad categories – dualism, multiplicity, relativism and commitment – and we discussed the dualistic stage where students perceive knowledge as “received truth” and believe that all problems have uniquely “right” answers/solutions which “authorities” know. Finally we suggested strategies to help students move on to the multiplicity stage.

In this issue we will address the characteristics of the next three stages: multiplicity, relativism and commitment. Students transit into the multiplicity stage when they are forced sooner or later to recognize that experts and authorities sometimes disagree. They come to realize that uncertainty is legitimate, and that, at least in some areas, no one knows the answer. The transition is difficult and students are often frustrated. Some students may even resist their teacher and oppose anything he/she advocates demanding justification and evidence (Egyptian students are typically shyer than their American counterparts and may not express their resistance overtly).

Slowly, they learn to reach their own conclusions without relying exclusively on experts and learn to understand other points of view. While this development is an advance over dualism, multiplists typically see all opinions as equally valid. They do not attempt (or do not know how) to evaluate evidence which they may confuse with unsupported personal opinion. Because

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"everyone is entitled to his or her own opinion," they may be surprised when their work is criticized and may view the criticism as arbitrary. Our role as teachers is to provide them with a framework to develop skills needed to help them interpret and evaluate information from multiple viewpoints.

For this, I would recommend the Wolcott-Lynch “Steps for Better Thinking” framework which is shown on page 3. This framework can provide students at different stages of intellectual growth with the necessary support that they need to progress from the less complex to more complex cognitive skills.

Typically freshmen and sophomores need to develop Step 1 skills while upperclassmen should focus on their Step 2 skills. Once they learn how to distinguish between weak and strong arguments and how to prioritize alternatives or solutions (Step 3) they have entered Perry’s relativistic stage. At this stage students typically have a hard time taking decisions on complex social, political or personal issues because of the diversity of choices.

The majority of college students never get past relativism and the highest stage, "commitment", happens later on in life after they have genuinely reflected and integrated knowledge with personal experience. This is when they commit to a position (choice of career or a decision regarding their personal lives etc) with the realization that intellectual growth is an on going process.

Sources:


### Task Prompts for Different Levels in “Steps for Better Thinking”

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<tr>
<th>Steps for Better Thinking</th>
<th>Task Prompts That Address These Skills</th>
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| Step 1: Identify the problem, relevant Information, and Uncertainties (low cognitive complexity tasks) | - Explain why people disagree about ______________.  
- Explain why ______________ can’t be known with certainty.  
- Identify aspects of ______________ in which uncertainty is a major factor.  
- Explain why even an expert about ______________ can’t predict with certainty what will happen when ______________.  
- Create a list of information that might be useful in thinking about ______________.  
- Consult experts and explore literature or other resources to:  
  - Create a list of issues related to ______________.  
  - Create a list of different points of view related to ______________.  
- Identify a range of possible solutions to ______________.  
- Sort pieces of information to identify reasons and evidence that support a given solution to ______________. |
| Step 2: Explore Interpretations and Connections (moderate cognitive complexity tasks) | - Discuss the strengths and weaknesses of a particular piece of evidence related to ______________.  
- Interpret and discuss the quality of evidence related to ______________.  
- Interpret and evaluate the quality of the same body of evidence related to ______________ from different points of view.  
- Compare and contrast the arguments related to two or more solutions to ______________.  
- Identify and discuss the implications of assumptions and preferences related to one or more points of view about ______________.  
- Identify and discuss the implications of your own experiences and preferences for how you think about ______________.  
- Develop one or more ways to organize information and analyses to help you think more thoroughly about ______________. |
| Step 3: Prioritize alternatives and Communicate Conclusions (high cognitive complexity tasks) | - Prepare and defend a solution to ______________.  
- Identify which issues you weighed more heavily than other issues in arriving at your conclusion about ______________.  
- Explain how you prioritized issues in reaching a solution to ______________.  
- Describe how the solution to ______________ might change, given different priorities on important issues.  
- Explain how you would respond to arguments that support other reasonable solutions to ______________.  
- Identify the most important information needs of the audience for communicating your recommendation about ______________.  
- Explain how you designed your memo/presentation/_________ to effectively communicate to your audience.  
- Describe how you would communicate differently about ______________ in different settings. |
| Step 4: Integrate, Monitor and Refine Strategies for Readdressing the Problem (highest cognitive complexity tasks) | - Describe the limitations of your proposed solution to ______________.  
- Explain the implications of limitations to your proposed solution to ______________.  
- Describe conditions under which you would reconsider your solution to ______________.  
- Explain how conditions might change in the future, resulting in a possible change in the most reasonable solution to ______________.  
- Develop strategies for generating new information about ______________.  
- Establish a plan for monitoring the performance of your recommended solution to ______________.  
- Establish a plan for addressing the problem strategically over time. |

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Share with us your experiences by contributing to the New Chalk Talk series, or by sending comments/suggestions to aellozy@aucegypt.edu, pandeli@aucegypt.edu