Stereotype Threat and Unlearning to Learn

It is not hard to learn more. What is hard is to unlearn when you discover yourself wrong~ Martin Fisher

A quick Google search allows one to identify jokes about blondes, people of color and females. Stereotypes are the basis for these jokes. A stereotype is a rigid mental image that summarizes whatever is believed to be typical of a group. Stereotypes assert that blondes and people of color are dumb and that females aren't good at math or science. There is no persuasive evidence that blondes or people of color are less intelligent than others or that females cannot excel in a math or science class but the fact that such beliefs persist results in consequences. One of these consequences is called stereotype threat. A study at Stanford found that stereotype threat can cause Black and Hispanic students to underperform on standardized tests 40 points. Stereotype threat also lowers some female scores on the math portion of the SAT by about 20 points (Gorlick, 2009).

Humans develop their identity through group membership (age, sex, race, and ethnicity). Oftentimes groups are defined by negative stereotypes. Stereotype threats are created when individuals conform to the negative stereotypes…becoming that which society believes to be true. As the individual conforms to the negative stereotype, anxiety results and often causes the individual to underestimate their true ability and underperform. If you spot stereotype threat in your courses, you might want to stress the idea of unlearning to learn.

Unlearning involves confronting the old with the new. It involves shedding prior knowledge, beliefs, ideas and becoming aware of new knowledge, beliefs and ideas. Unlearning involves looking beyond the surface and challenging existing knowledge. This knowledge can be the self-knowledge which causes stereotype threats or common sense assumptions. According to Martin (2001), "A significant barrier to learning for mature students is the extent to which established perceptions, values and beliefs can filter and block their ability to transform their understanding of the world in which they live" (1). Many students in the classroom actively or passively resist learning because they feel they are not capable. In order to reduce such behaviors students need to be engaged and develop a passion for learning. In essence, students learn more deeply when:

1. They try to answer questions or solve problems they find interesting, intriguing, important, or beautiful
2. They can try, fail, receive feedback, and try again before anyone makes a judgment of their work
3. They can work collaboratively with other learners struggling with the same problems
4. They face repeated challenges to their existing fundamental paradigms
5. They care that their existing paradigms do not work
6. They can get support (emotional, physical, and intellectual) when they need it
7. They feel in control of their own learning, not manipulated;
8. They believe that their work will be considered fairly and honestly
9. They believe that their work will matter
10. They believe that intelligence and abilities are expandable, that if they work hard, they will get better at it
11. They believe other people have faith in their ability to learn
12. They believe that they can learn (Research Academy for University Learning, n.d.)

If faculty encourage students to take these steps and accept the challenges such steps present, stereotype threats can be eliminated and student minds will be open to new and challenging ideas.

If you are interested in learning more about these ideas, there is a workshop, Unlearning to Learn, being held on Friday, February 10 in Science East 204. A light lunch will be served. To register you may go to www.svsu.edu/workshops or call our office at 989-964-4050.

References

Gorlick, Adam. (2009). *Stereotype threat harms female, minority performance.* Stanford University News. Retrieved from
http://news.stanford.edu/news/2009/february25/stereotype-threat-harms-latent-ability-022509.html
Martin, Paul R. (2001). *Unlearning and learning.* Retrieved January 31, 2012 from http://lsn.curtin.edu.au/tlf/tlf2001/martinp.html
Research Academy for University Learning. (n.d.). *Natural Critical Learning Environments.* Retrieved January 31, 2012 from
http://www.montclair.edu/academy/services/ncle.html

Using persistent links with journal articles

Persistent links allow researchers to permanently access journal articles. These sources provide a unique link for nearly every journal article located in the Zahnow Library databases. Both faculty and students find persistent linking helpful. Persistent links can be added to V-space courses by faculty when they require students to access specific journal articles for course assignments. This can be done through the library's Electronic Reserves Service or faculty can add the links to V-space directly. When persistent links are used, copyright permission is already met since students access the articles using their SVSU username and password. Students working in groups find persistent linking helpful when sharing journal articles with classmates for research projects and assignments.

The trick to persistent linking is locating the link within the various databases. The URL in the browser window is not usually the persistent link but a link that will expire when you exit the database. Terms used to identify persistent links are not standard among the database vendors. To assist faculty and students with persistent linking, a research guide has been created which includes step-by-step instructions for finding an article's persistent link. For more information visit the "Persistent Linking" research guide at http://librarysubjectguides.svsu.edu/purls or call the Reference desk at (989)964-4242 to speak to a librarian.

February Workshops

February 9 4:00-5:00 Z303
Identifying and Coaching Students for Successful SRCR Proposals

February 10 12:00-1:00 SE 204
Unlearning to Learn

February 24 12:00-1:00 SE 201
Lunch and Learn; The Importance of Reflection & Mindful Thinking

Designing Engaging Writing Assignments

In professional development workshops, faculty often discuss the challenge of designing meaningful, engaging writing assignments. There is also discussion in these workshops regarding the benefits of in-class writing. Fortunately, Auburn University's Writing Program has created what they are calling a "digital symposium" which is intended to address each of these concerns. This website has two video tutorials which focus on the "why" and "how" of designing engaging assignments. The third addresses "writing to learn," a procedure to help teach content in the classroom through writing. Each video is accompanied with some very helpful handouts. If you have questions regarding writing assignments, it would be worth your effort to visit this website:
https://fp.auburn.edu/writing/designingClasses.aspx

Upcoming Events

Two of our larger events are now being planned. The first is the *Adjunct Faculty Awards Reception* which will be held on Friday, April 27th at 6:00 in Curtiss Hall. This reception honors those adjunct faculty who have taught here at the University for a number of significant number of years, those who have completed the LEAD Experience and the winner of the Mary H. Anderson Award for Excellence in Adjunct Faculty Teaching. The second is the *All Adjunct Faculty Fall Orientation* to be held on Thursday, August 16th. This orientation begins with a dinner and the Deans and Chairs are invited to dine with you. Later new adjunct faculty will be acquainted with the University and experienced adjunct faculty will be provided with professional development opportunities. So—Save The Date!