The Myth of Memorization as Education

By William W. Berry, III, Assistant Professor of Law, CETL Advisory Board Member

In an age of “common core” and “no child left behind,” many students have a high school experience that indoctrinates them to equate education with memorization. Like “excellent sheep,” these students want to know merely what they need to know to make an A (or in some cases, a B). They expect the professor to provide a lecture—a subject matter “sermon”—that they can memorize and regurgitate. Products of the information age that they are, such students believe that if they put in the effort to memorize the information, they deserve a grade commensurate with their efforts. I worry that such students are missing the point of education entirely.

Indeed, true learning—real education—goes so much further than just memorization of facts. Indeed, the value of a good sermon is not in the information it conveys, but instead in the lessons it teaches. Education, then, is not simply absorbing the knowledge itself, but instead being able to use the knowledge to better oneself, serve others, and create change in the world.

This does not mean that learning the relevant information is not important, and in most cases, essential. It just means that mastering the information is merely the beginning, and not the end, of the educational process. Stopping with the informational knowledge is like watching a football game by only looking at the box score. Yes, you have the facts, but you missed out on what really happened, and what it really means.

Another analogy is perhaps helpful. If one wants to build a house, one must understand the difference between a hammer and a screwdriver. Being able to name the tools themselves, however, will not accomplish much. Even understanding how the tools are supposed to work may not go far towards completing the project. Possessing the ability to actually use the tools is what ultimately matters to the success of the endeavor.

What this does not mean, however, is that education is merely the acquisition “skills-based” traits or “practical experiences” that will enable one to perform a particular trade. Indeed, the oft-cited dichotomy between theory and practice rings false. High quality higher education—the kind that permeates so many of the classrooms on our campus—marries theory with practice, unites conceptual understanding with application, and links creative ideas with real-world outcomes.

In my experience, nothing can make a classroom come alive like a group of students who move beyond memorization and wholeheartedly engage with ideas. Grappling with how to use concepts is a far more interesting and challenging exercise than simply memorizing information. Seeing students really think—using information as a means of achieving a panoply of ends rather than simply being an end in itself—remains one of the great joys of teaching.

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UM FacChats, Faculty Coffee & Conversation

Hosted by the Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning (CETL)

FacChats are a new program that CETL has started this semester. These are designed to be informal discussion groups where faculty can come, have some coffee/tea, and chat about a particular topic related to teaching and/or learning.

On Thursday, October 22nd we held our first FacChat. Several faculty from various departments across campus came to talk about JiTT (Just in Time Teaching). We had a good talk over coffee, tea and snacks.

The next FacChat is scheduled for Wednesday, November 18th at 3:00 PM in Lyceum 200. Our topic will be on Teaching Evaluations. What have you learned from teaching evaluations? Do you get the information you need to truly make improvements? We hope you can join and share ideas over a cup of coffee/tea! Click here to RSVP.

For more information about FacChats and to suggest topics for future discussions, please visit our webpage at: http://cetl.olemiss.edu/facchats.html

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Faculty Global Development Seminar
Presented by the Division of Global Engagement

In Summer 2015 several UM faculty attended various Council on International Educational Exchange (CIEE) Faculty Development Seminars around the world. Come join us for lunch to hear your colleagues discuss particular topics from the seminar and how they will use the information to enhance the globalization of their classroom and/or research. On Thursday, November 5th at noon in the Union Ballroom, Jody Holland, Catarina Passidomo, and Elizabeth K. Ervin will discuss their experiences in Peru and China. Please RSVP by Nov. 2nd to elgilles@olemiss.edu.