Connections, Weight and Anchors: a Model of Learning
Kevin Kvalvik Feb. 2003

I envision the mind like an open bed truck into which we try to place random objects while sailing down the highway. Educators serve as assistants in this process. When we teach we share information that may possess certain connections and a specific weight. Weight causes the information to stay in the vehicle, while lighter information must be tied down and anchored to remain inside.

Weight and connections are generally indicators of interest or value to which the listener ascribes the information. Information that is easily taken in and then retained has more weight. Data that seems either obscure or unimportant to the listener has less weight. Information that fits into an existing context/schema is often more easily attached to an existing mental structure; these are the connections, or the straps to affix new information to the old.

Some of this process may be a matter of will, depending on the listener's own set learning skills. Learners may be able to assign weight and value themselves as a matter of will. But, paying *attention to* and *retaining* information is an ability that is not distributed in an equitable fashion. However this is not so much a measure of intelligence, but an indicator of how much will must be exerted by the learner to enter into the process of ingesting knowledge.

Those individuals who have a sophisticated database of understanding already at their disposal often have a context for acquiring more information and of a more diverse ilk than others. For instance, an individual who has already received a rigorous liberal arts education has been given a context for a reading of MacBeth and a discussion of the same. It is in keeping with other information that the learner already possesses as it relates to other playwrights, other works by Shakespeare, other works of literature, other works of the period, and so on. While a person whose own background has not included much traditional Western education, will have to find connections in terms of the affective content

(anger, jealousy, ambition, etc…) how it relates to him/her personally. Either way if connections are not found and made, the piece may not fit in the cognitive puzzle projected by the learner, and as such will not be retained, much less understood.

Much of this is tangent on connections which the information will form with existing information. In a less standard educational context, those who are aware of sports scores will easily remember an aberrant earned-run-average from a pitcher, while the same information may be lost on a person without a context for understanding, appreciation and retention. The ability to remember variations in music is easier for the dedicated musician, and so colors to the artist. Simply put, understanding is contextual. If this context exists then often adding new layers of understanding will prove an easier endeavor. These connections work like cognitive straps tying down information that will otherwise blow off the back of the truck.

However, there is also novelty as a point of weight. If one sees an elephant at the circus it may soon be forgotten, while if the same person sees the elephant in their backyard it will be retained a lifetime. So while items in context have connections, items out of context may have more weight.

One must also factor personal interest into this model for teaching: It is common for K12 instructors to find that students who otherwise exhibit little appreciation or interest in traditional models of literature, have memorized myriad books of iambic pentameter written by rap stars. This in turn has caused educators to try and contextualize their discipline in that of popular culture. Although these worlds are not mutually exclusive, one must be careful in trying so desperately to find a fashion for tying information down that it does not completely devalue the subject matter. In this instance, instructors who try and strap poetry or literature to some anchor in the students value system, rap music, may be admitting that the actual curriculum itself has no weight. In many cases, a subject does possess weight as

well as connections and the teacher's job is to assist in establishing weight in the student's schema.

This model may seem teacher-centered. This is a discussion of learning and facilitating learning. If group interaction, individual discovery, or argumentation is the method used, the same rules apply: the learner must have a context for understanding, and the information must posses some weight. Both of these are likely to be established in *meaningful* group work. But group work without the structure may easily decay into interactions about items that possess affective weight, but are well outside the parameters of the course objectives. Learner-centered instruction, if misused may also become learner-driven instruction. Although this second description may sound very good and democratic, the fact is that it also only complements the top twenty percent: those who have the direction and the motivation and the context for seeking and securing new points of understanding. For the majority of learners, the instructor is there for a reason. They require the direction and the structure the teacher provides.

Within every class environment there exists a variety of learning styles and a variety of motives for being in attendance. Many students have the ability to assign weight to topics and then ingest them. As educators the job has never been to focus on the bright and gifted and facilitate them by shoveling on more. Also, it is possible that students who assign weight to, and stack more and more objects in their mental truck bed keep the information, but do not necessarily have the connections and the understanding of what it is they have access to. Educators are in the enviable position of working with different types of learners with a variety of contextual backgrounds and a diverse set of learning styles to help them discover their own anchors and the patterns that connect knowledge to meaning. The mission is not merely stacking more information on those who are already are doing the job themselves.

I find this model helpful as it reminds me that we do not remember it all, nor can we convincingly retain that which we have picked up. The goal is to find anchors

and contexts for understanding and then continue to tie new information down and use it and help others do the same. This model sees information as transitory, and learning as a journey, not a destination.

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