

Faculty Work Comprehensive List

6-4-2020

Teaching the Whole Person: A Review of The Learning Cycle

Steve Holtrop

Dordt University, steve.holtrop@dordt.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/faculty_work



Part of the [Christianity Commons](#), and the [Education Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Holtrop, S. (2020). Teaching the Whole Person: A Review of The Learning Cycle. Retrieved from https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/faculty_work/1180

This Blog Post is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Collections @ Dordt. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty Work Comprehensive List by an authorized administrator of Digital Collections @ Dordt. For more information, please contact ingrid.mulder@dordt.edu.

Teaching the Whole Person: A Review of The Learning Cycle

Abstract

"*The Learning Cycle* is an intriguing collection of theoretical and anecdotal reinforcements for the concept that students are spiritual, emotional, social, and behavioral beings as well as intellectual beings."

Posting about the book *The Learning Cycle* from *In All Things* - an online journal for critical reflection on faith, culture, art, and every ordinary-yet-graced square inch of God's creation.

<https://inallthings.org/teaching-the-whole-person-a-review-of-the-learning-cycle/>

Keywords

In All Things, book review, The Learning Cycle, teaching, neuroscience, social sciences, Muriel I. Elmer, Duane H. Elmer

Disciplines

Christianity | Education

Comments

In All Things is a publication of the [Andreas Center for Reformed Scholarship and Service at Dordt University](#).

in things

June 4, 2020

Teaching the Whole Person: A Review of *The Learning Cycle*

Steve Holtrop

Title: *The Learning Cycle: Insights for faithful teaching from Neuroscience and the Social Sciences*

Author: Muriel I. Elmer & Duane H. Elmer

Publisher: InterVarsity Academic Press

Publishing Date: April 21, 2020

Pages: 240 (Paperback)

ISBN: 978-0830853830

The Learning Cycle is an intriguing collection of theoretical and anecdotal reinforcements for the concept that students are spiritual, emotional, social, and behavioral beings as well as intellectual beings. The authors, Muriel and Duane Elmer draw from a lifetime of Christian academic and missionary positions, bringing together learning concepts and personal experiences to illustrate the interplay among learning theory, brain research, emotional intelligence, habit development, character development, and overcoming barriers to personal change.

Starting with a story of one of their former Bible College students who left the ministry and soured on God, the authors spend the rest of the book answering the question, *what went wrong?* Or, how can Christian faculty better prepare students to persevere in their beliefs and worldview despite the many obstacles that life can entail?

Scanning the Table of Contents, I was attracted first to a chapter on “The Role of Emotion in Learning.” In this chapter, the author’s personal anecdotes from both his student and professor days aligned with some of my own memories of engaging less and

learning less in courses with more of an emotional challenge involved. Drawing on character development theory, emotions in the Bible, and the role of emotion chemicals in long-term brain storage, the author builds a case for effective teaching being emotionally safe and personal, not just academically competent. Since “emotions signal what we value,” students will value and retain more from a course where there is a good emotional connection and a strong sense of emotional safety.

To add “relational credibility” to “competence credibility,” teachers of all types are urged to try some additional outside-the-classroom approaches. For example, be willing to talk with “hang out” with or take a student to lunch. Invite students to your house for an evening. Provide half-hour timeslots instead of 15 minutes for advising appointments. Give open-ended discussion questions in class. Never criticize a student. Bring in case studies and ask students to tell their stories. These are the things, the authors remind us, that students recall decades later—not our lectures. Realize that if students never share a personal concern, their sense of trust or safety may not be very strong.

So, although the author used a bit of a straw man suggesting teacher education courses focus on coverage of the curriculum and avoiding emotions (when, in fact, popular curriculum books for the last 15 years actually say we should *uncover* the curriculum and *engage* students personally), I am still heartened to see this examination of emotion as part of a whole experience that can deepen learning.

I like the book’s organization, starting with “laying the foundation”—Truth is from God, in both special revelation and general revelation. Also, “knowing” isn’t just a cognitive thing. When we focus on only the cognitive domain of learning about the world, we tend to ignore the affective domain and the behavioral/affective domain unless we deliberately integrate those aspects as well. That concept of foundational knowledge is really the heart of this book.

Bringing this concept into our teaching means starting with our own hearts. The authors provide stories from the Gospels and discussion questions to help their readers assess how our actions may be contradicting our words. In a word-based business, it is a good reminder to meditate a bit on how we can bolster our words with our living: “When we live truth, people see Jesus and the gospel more clearly. When words and deeds fail to mesh, the message is compromised, weakened” (18).

This integration of word and deed applies not only to instructors but also to students. As our nation experiences fractured lives, marriages, homes, and communities with increasingly polarized views and growing intolerances, “Christians must offer an antidote” by helping to raise up a new generation of more integrated people. “Are we

inadvertently graduating hypocrites by the way we elevate knowing truth (cognition) without corresponding emphasis on living truth?" (21). Or, the authors probe, are we as Christian teachers making a difference, modeling vertical and horizontal reconciliation, and nurturing agents of reconciliation?

If we do not move beyond the merely intellectual, the authors warn, we are asking students to do all the work—alone—of figuring out if and how something applies to their lives. We are teaching the motions for swimming without ever letting students get in the actual water.

The authors are not, by the way, against lecture *per se*. They point out that “lectures were required in earlier times when books were not available, and lecture was the only way people could acquire information” (54). The book provides a chapter of pointers on effective lecturing, including the concept of mini-lectures with lots of time for student discussion and application in between.

A major emphasis toward the end of the book is helping students recognize and overcome barriers to change: “Jesus drives home the truth that hearing the truth does not always result in doing the truth” (110). First, we all need to check our bad habits: “Satan often needs to do nothing at all. Our own bad habits sabotage us” (106). We can also introduce students to S.W.O.T. analyses of their plans for change (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats)—the weaknesses and threats are the barriers.

Finally, people are successful in changing their behavior if they believe the change will be beneficial, respected others will approve, and they will have some control over making the change happen and overcoming the hindrances. The authors provide some specific steps for overcoming barriers to change: set realistic and achievable goals with small incremental steps, have group support and check-ins, learn from past successes, and welcome outside encouragement. A constantly available tool for the instructor at each step is the word “yet”: “You may not be getting it right...yet” (144).

Ending their impassioned plea for balanced learning, the authors offer “caution regarding imbalance” (195). Overemphasis on any one of their key points can incline people toward unhealthy traps:

- Recall -> hypocrisy
- Emotion -> instability
- Barriers -> paralysis
- Speculation -> inaction
- Change -> activism
- Consistency -> routine

The authors of *The Learning Cycle* have gathered some interesting personal experiences mixed with key learning theories and biblical concepts of knowledge and faith in action. This collection of case studies and learning themes urges Christian educators to engage students spiritually, emotionally, socially, and creatively as well as intellectually.