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Jedi Training: Developing Habits of Perception in Our Disciplines

Gillian Parrish
Lindenwood University, gparrish@lindenwood.edu

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- Gillian Parrish, MFA

As longtime practitioners in our disciplines, we develop implicit skills that can be the source of some of the deepest learning for our students. In his book *Experience and Education*, John Dewey describes habit as "the formation of attitudes, attitudes that are emotional and intellectual…our basic sensitivities and ways of responding to all the conditions we meet in living" (35). Experiencing implies the sensing body, embodied learning, and Dewey does not shy away from the emotional dimensions of learning—both of which are often where the deepest learning happens, where students' passion for a discipline ignites, and where experts' best ideas originate. These often-overlooked dimensions of learning are also where empathy lives, and so it is there that knowledge might blossom not only into expertise but into wisdom. To facilitate this kind of development in our students, we need to 1) identify the habitual, underlying modes of sensing in our disciplines, and 2) design assignments for practicing these

modes in whole-person ways that engage our students not only intellectually, but in their embodied, emotional everyday lives.

Jedi training

An example of a quick and simple-to-implement course component that can integrate whole-person learning is something I call "jedi training": weekly experiential exercises crafted to cultivate essential habits of mind in my discipline. These low-stakes exercises yield big benefits by moving students away from their desks, toward new perspectives and deeper learning.

For instance, many seasoned writers have a habit of pausing to listen to what's around them. Listening encourages an admission of not knowing and the pursuit of odd hunches (a preverbal, embodied, affective mode of thought). These are some of the core skills we could expect to find in the creative processes of scientists, engineers, and mathematicians. And so, some of my jedi trainings give students a chance to practice listening-oriented skills requisite for good creative work. I might have them dip into an ethnographic mode and transcribe the heart of a conversation, foregrounding the pauses. Or I might ask them to sit and listen for the qualities of silence in different settings.

One student recently remarked that while graded weekly assignments would sometimes "put me in completion mode, tackling it like a computer," the jedi trainings "allowed me to move past [that]" so he could encounter the week's concepts in a more process-oriented, immersive way.

"A way of seeing the world"

In my courses, a polished piece of writing is not the point of the jedi-training exercises. Developing habits of a writer—sharpening a novice writer's senses and seeing oblique connections, getting a feel for the textures of words—is what I'm after. It is notable that in more than 10 years of implementing these exercises, students have often remarked that some of their favorite pieces of writing happen through these jedi-training exercises. And it is there that I often see them arriving at new ideas and strategies and their best work. Key to this is how the exercise is presented—free of the weight of being the "official" high-stakes weekly assignment, but rather a chance to try something new.

A recent student's final reflection captured the purpose of these seemingly small weekly exercises: "Instead of just sitting behind my laptop to get an assignment ready once or twice a week, poetry becomes a walk, an everyday walk and a way of seeing out in the world. Poetry is not something that just happens behind a screen—it is everywhere: in overheard conversations, in dreams, on billboards, out of the mouth of a homeless man or a soccer mom. It's up to us to pay attention."

So why jedi?

Jedi-training exercises require the kind of close attention and new ways of thinking that can lead to love for our subject matter. This kind of whole-person learning guards against abstraction, keeps us in relationship with the wider world, makes us better caretakers of people

and planet. For after all, as observed by my four-year-old niece: "We are all connected. In a web. Like the Force."

Tips for implementing

- Base your teaching on the understanding that everyone is a potential practitioner of your discipline.
- Notice your implicit habits of perceiving everyday life as a practitioner in your field. For instance, historians develop a habit of seeing an object or event within a context, and tracing the changes of its meaning. What ways of experiencing the world do you want to help students cultivate this semester?
- Design activities that allow students to practice your discipline's habits in their everyday lives. Ground these exercises in sensory experiencing and reflection.
- Communicate your exercises in an inviting tone that generates excitement so students want to take part in them. This is key.
- Make these weekly assignments so that experiences accrue into habits of perception in your discipline over the course of the whole term. (In small classes, this kind of assignment can easily be reported in class discussion or in weekly journals, and can be recorded in large classes as a brief weekly logbook entry.)
- Keep the exercises "low stakes" in terms of grading, rolled into participation points. This lets students take risks that can lead to creative breakthroughs.
- Allow your own work in creating these activities to be "low stakes" too. This freedom will lead to its own rigor of experimenting and arriving at new avenues for learning.

References

Dewey, J. (1997). *Experience and education*. New York: Touchstone, Simon & Schuster.

Gillian Parrish, MFA, is an inveterate teaching-geek and an assistant professor in the MFA Writing Program at Lindenwood University.