



INNOVATION ABSTRACTS

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ARMORED IN THE STUDENT ROLE

While in graduate school, a classmate of mine would continually ask the professor, "Will this be on the test?" and, "Do I need to know this?" At the time, I considered it a little rude, and perhaps a little immature, but I have to admit it was helpful to know what exactly was going to be on the test. However, after asking, "Do we need to know this for the test?" one too many times, the professor stopped the lecture and said, "No, you need to know this to be an educated psychologist." Whoa! The class was secretly glad she got her come-uppance, and it reinforced my notion that it was wrong to ask, "What's on the test?" But I never really thought about *why* it was wrong to ask that question—until I became an instructor.

When a student constantly asks if something is going to be on the test, he or she takes what should be a learning experience and reduces it to a just-get-through-this-with-a-grade experience. The message is loud and clear that the course content, understanding the concepts, and where this course fits into the grand educational scheme are not important. The only thing that is important is to get out of the class with a satisfactory grade.

I have a couple of thoughts about how to respond when I'm asked, "Will this be on the test?" For instance, I could do what my professor did and call the student out by saying to the student, "Let's forget about the test. I'll give you an A in the class if you just focus on learning and understanding everything I'm teaching." But, I think that attitude could totally backfire. So, I am not sure I will take that approach. Instead, perhaps I will respond as follows:

"Part of being a successful and effective student is learning how to learn. In addition, your job is to demonstrate your learning via the test, your participation in class, or through your assignments. The lecture and assignments highlight what the instructor—who assumingly has been in the field for a while—understands to be important. You, on the other hand, need to be able to understand and interpret the class well enough to be able to foresee what will be on the test. The test is just a sample of the material we have covered. Your job is to

understand all of the concepts as best you can based on what I am telling you via lecture, slides, reading, quizzes, tests, and papers you are assigned to write. Stop trying to get me to spoon feed you only the information that will be on the test in an attempt to reduce your workload to that *sample* of information and, rather, strive to understand the *population* of the course material."

Now, I give a lot of leeway to students. As far as I'm concerned, students have "armor" on—meaning that they are allowed "not to know" things. They can ask any question, and it's the instructor's responsibility to provide the answer. Of course, students must do their due diligence by keeping up with their readings and taking good notes. But, in the end, students are allowed to take whatever time they need to understand the material being taught.

By the way, I love the student role. I love being in the position where I am not expected to know everything. I'm a very pushy student (always respectful, of course), but I don't have a problem with the possibility that I might look like an idiot by asking a question. I want to know the material, because if I fully know the material, I don't have to worry about what's on the test.

I've had my moments, even with all of the education I have obtained. I remember being in a neuro-feedback class where we discussed the battery life of the amplifier and the different things you might see on a screen. I was confused about the lesson, so I asked, "Why don't we just plug these in? Why are they all battery powered?" The instructor looked confused, and so did the class. He hemmed and hawed for a bit, while trying to answer my question. Looking back, I see now that he was trying to be respectful to me because we had just spent three days on the properties of electrical circuits and electricity. The answer to my question, "Why don't we just plug these in?" was, as was explained on day one, hour one, "So you don't electrocute your patient." Although I felt a bit foolish, the experience taught me a very valuable lesson. I truly believe that there is no such thing as a stupid question—only questions that are not designed to further students' understanding. So, my point is, students get to ask any question they want, and they deserve their instructor's complete respect.

One of the rating categories on ratemyprofessor.com is "easiness." I have a problem with this particular

rating because any subject can be easy if students study adequately and are well prepared by their instructor. I do not want to be viewed as an easy teacher, but instead, as a teacher who inspires, provokes, offers new viewpoints, and guides intelligent students through difficult material in a fun and interesting manner so they can feel a sense of mastery. Easy is about workload, and every class has a workload. My goal is to have a class that is full of very detailed and sophisticated material that students can master.

There is a certain amount of ambiguity tolerance that is demanded of students. In other words, they have to accept the uncertainty of not knowing how difficult the test is going to be, which they won't find out until they actually take the test. So, I tell students to polish their armor and ask their questions. As an old friend of mine once told me, the secret of getting straight A's is easy—simply know everything!

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