

Learning at a Deeper Level

by Dale Lugenbehl

(Published in *Teaching Philosophy*, December 2003, Vol. 26. No. 4, pp. 351-9)

"Philosophy is not a theory but an activity." Ludwig
Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*

I have always seen philosophy as a practical discipline that is highly relevant to daily life. My intention has been to help students become aware of, and question, their unconscious, culturally-produced assumptions about who they are, how the world is put together, and what is really of value. Over time, I have come to recognize that much of what we call education emphasizes knowledge that reaches no deeper than the verbal level--and, in fact, I believe this is true of much of what we learn, whether it is in a class, from a book, or from a conversation. If what we learn does not go beyond the merely verbal or conceptual level, then we have missed something very, very important.

I. What is Deeper Learning?

Let's begin with an example. The first week of each philosophy class, I always devote time to the topic of learning to delay judgment. Delaying judgment simply means resisting the habitual impulse to immediately leap in and agree or disagree--to evaluate--some idea that we have just heard about. To delay judgment means to take the trouble to understand what is being said--identify the main claims being made, clarify the meaning of key concepts, and understand the reasons being offered in support of a view before deciding whether it makes sense or not. We also spend some time examining why it's important to do this: it is not possible to do an adequate job of evaluating something without first understanding it and it is also unfair to the person presenting the view to attempt to do so. In talking about this in class, students readily agree with the idea of delaying judgment and freely acknowledge that rushing to judgment is neither intelligent nor fair-minded. And, when asked to do so on an exam, they more often than not can do a very adequate job of explaining what is meant by delaying judgment.

But their ability to provide a verbal explanation of something does not mean they have deeply understood it. Very frequently the same students who did such a fine job of explaining delaying judgment on an exam will not actually delay judgment in classroom discussions or elsewhere. When this happens, I may ask students to explain what is meant by delaying judgment and find that they can do so perfectly well, but when I ask whether they have actually been doing so in our present discussion they are surprised to find themselves answering with a "no."

Clearly there is a lesson here for me as an instructor. It now seems clear to me that the students in this situation had not had what they learned filter down into their consciousnesses to the point that they could recognize non-delayed judgment in themselves or others on their own (without someone to point it out to them). Nor was delaying judgment something that they