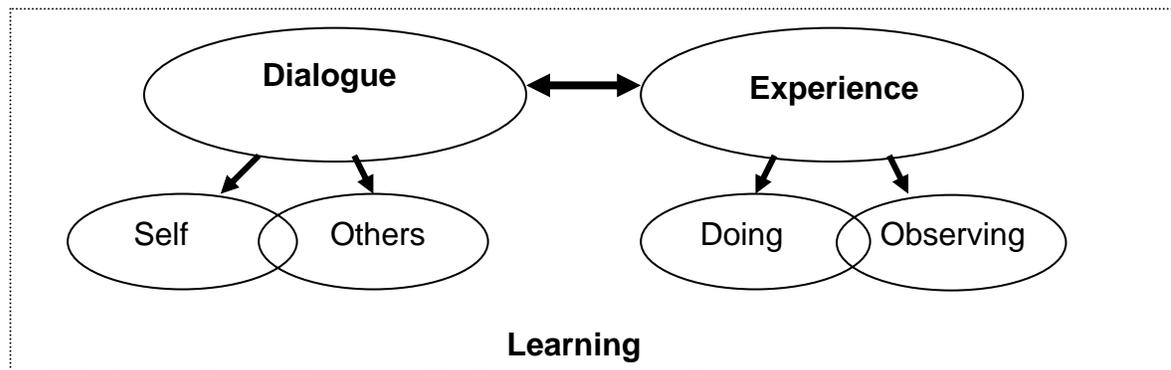


Developing Engaging Lessons: Students Work More—You Work Less

We often feel we must carry the entire responsibility for students' learning—a kind of “Atlas Complex.”¹ We do have responsibility to teach but we do a disservice to students when we try to “do the learning,” too. Our task is to create opportunities for students to learn and create conditions that require “engagement” not just attendance.

In the model below, engagement springs from two conditions: dialogue—where students must purposefully talk about course content in relation to their experiences. The notion of **dialogue** points to student communication in many forms: writing of various kinds from reflective journals, to term papers to class notes to postings on discussion lists. **Experience** points to personal, everyday experiences, as well as class exercises, labs, experiments, internships, etc. For example, students in a communication course may be assigned the task of making some specific observations about specific uses of language in specific interpersonal contexts which they then analyze in a reflective essay. In class, the students share their data sets and analyses for the purposes of uncovering patterns of behavior. Finally, they are charged with accounting for the patterns they claim using theory discussed in readings and lectures. The students are not passive recipients of knowledge, but users of it and creators of it—serious intellectual work that we know from our graduate studies is **engaging**.

A Model of Engaged Learning²



Student engagement requires reflection (dialogue with self about a topic or problem) and dialogue with others (authors, other students, instructors); the stimuli for the talk and writing are observations and experiences that pose problems that need to be resolved.

Whether you are teaching the history of ancient India or C++, engaging problems inherently form the core of the course you are teaching. These are really what engaged you as student and what will engage your students as well.

Take a moment and list some of the significant problems that drive your discipline. (For example, in communication studies, a significant problem has to do with understanding how meaning is made, maintained and modified in different communication contexts: interpersonal, public, mediated, etc.)

From your list, identify some problems are central to courses you are now teaching. (For example, in an introductory, survey course in communication studies, the problem of “mistakes in understanding” requires students to analyze their experiences and collect data from themselves and others to figure out how meaning can be properly created interpersonally, in groups, when speaking publicly or when using the mass media.)

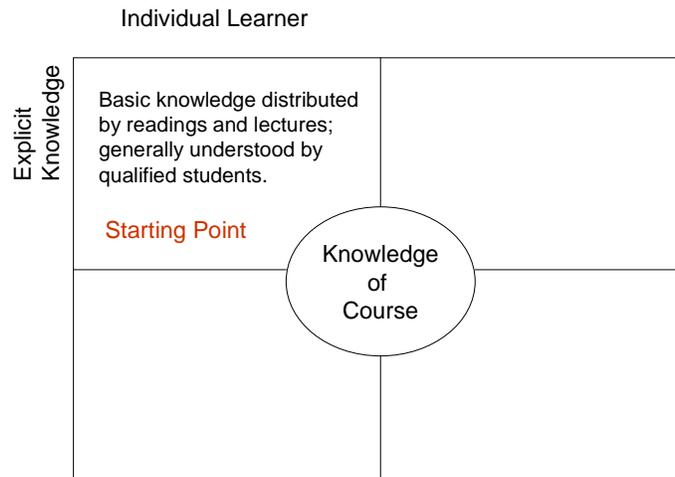
List ideas that come to mind for creating engaging problems for your students that will drive them purposefully into the course content:

Engaging Students at All Levels of Their Major

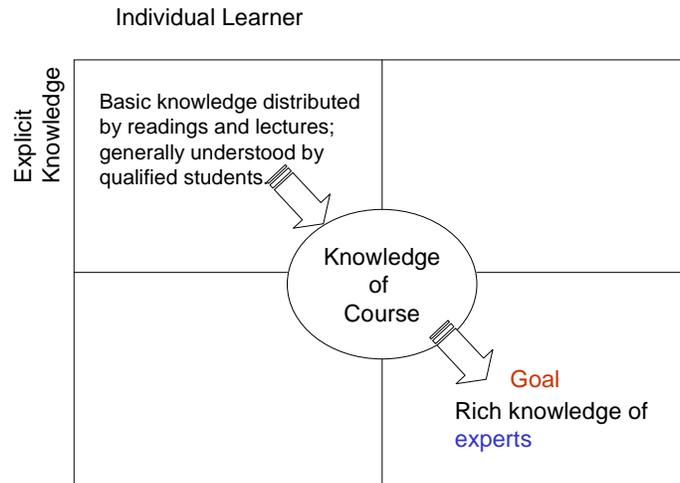
Getting students engaged requires a variety of teaching approaches from lecture to discussion to short-term collaborative work to long-term group projects. The secret of engagement is not as simple as “getting rid of lectures.” The complex secret to engaging students is organizing the content around significant issues and questions of knowing in your course as it relates to your major and discipline.

Once those are laid out, and you provide resources for students to resolve those interesting and relevant problems, you can set the students to working in substantive ways on solving those problems. You do some of the work and the students do some of the work—the hard work of making sense of complicated bodies of knowledge that you may have been trying to deliver to students. Your job shifts from “line-worker” to “supervisor.”

The following diagrams illustrate the relationship between “dialogue” and “experience”; between student and instructor roles.



This is the starting point for most undergraduate courses. Individual students are new to content and generally lack expert knowledge or skills. Learning basic content is foundational to becoming “qualified” in any profession and the typical starting point is explicit, direct instruction (lecture) which lays the groundwork for building more complex knowledge in a course and in a major.



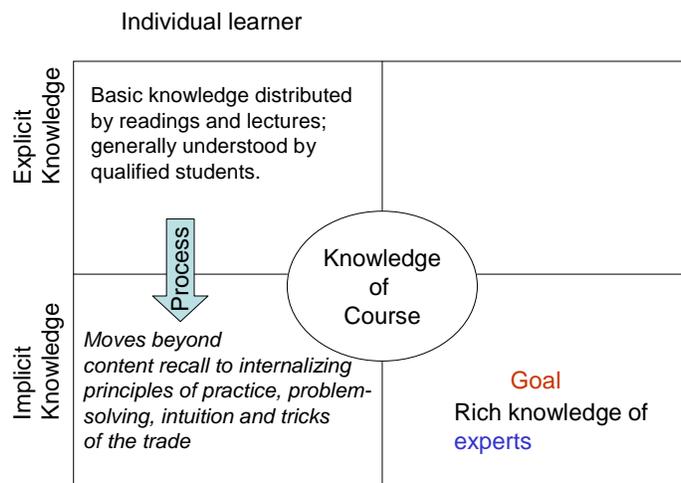
Expertise is the goal of disciplinary courses, more or less. The higher the level of the course, the more professional expertise is targeted. We often try to move students from one quadrant to another by ourselves—doing the hard work of collecting, analyzing and synthesizing information into coherent and meaningful bodies of knowledge to deliver to students. While appearing to be a direct route, it is one that actually circumvents the students. Students remain dependent on us as the source of key questions and information; they remain “clean and unruffled” from the messy work of digging into the content and issues surrounding the creation of the content which is unfortunate for them. (It is also where we have the most fun learning!) Students cannot be made into experts; they must evolve in their expertise.

What distinguishes you as expert from the students that you are teaching?

How did you get to where you are as expert? What were some of the things necessary for your expertise to develop? How can lessons and courses be designed to create those (or at least some of those) conditions for students?

Two qualities that distinguish you from your students are these: first, your knowledge of the topic is much more complex and elaborate than theirs; second, some knowledge has matured into principles of practice that you use as a matter of course—it becomes implicit and can be difficult to explain to novice students.

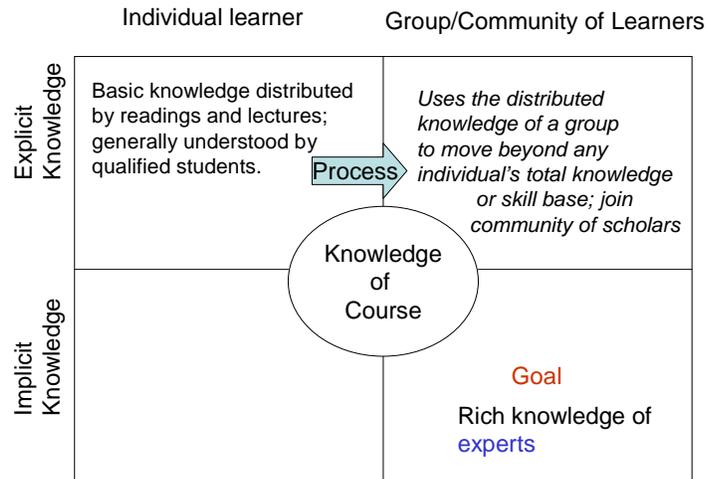
We achieved expertise through practice--through solving increasingly ill-formed problems. Our job is to provide some basic knowledge for students, but more importantly it is setting problems for students to solve that seriously engage their thinking.



List some specific principles of practice for solving problems that you employ as an expert in your content field.

What can you do to help students discover the principles you have discovered?

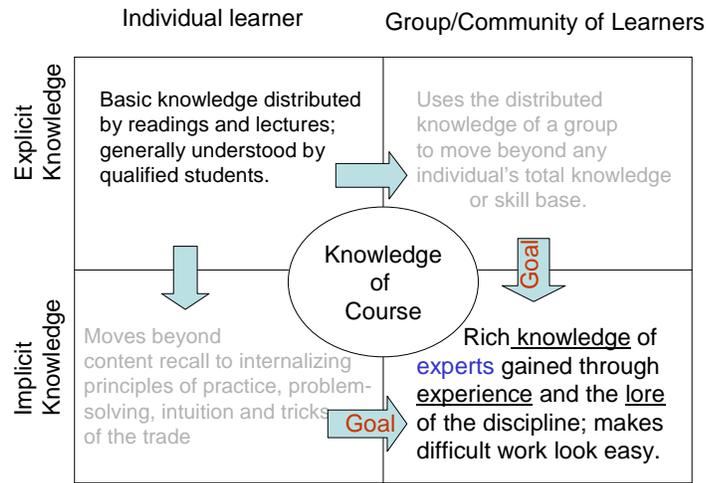
Expertise develops, in large part, from dialogue with colleagues who are struggling with the same knowledge and practice problems we face. We help each other understand the reality that poses significant problems and conundrums for us; we argue with each other about how to collect and interpret relevant data. Engaged students do the same. When students work together on significant problems, they do what research teams in industry, government and academe do—they serve as information repositories for each other; they share work; they challenge each other. Without opportunity to do this, movement toward expertise will be stymied.



Deep learning is associated with interaction among people learning together. The process does not stop even after formal instruction is completed; that's why formal and informal professional associations are important.

Recall your experience in graduate school with other grad students as you shared your insights, experiences, skills, etc. List some “breakthroughs” for you that resulted from intense work with colleagues and professors.

Talk with colleagues about how you can facilitate interactions among students and you that will facilitate the evolution of your students toward disciplinary expertise.



Dialogue and **experience**, as we defined them above, are essential for **engaging students** in their learning. The benefit to instructors is that teaching is intellectually interesting, while diminishing our workload. As described in quadrant four, over time, **engaged students develop knowledge that is deep, complex, elaborate and applied**. We help students achieve this state of being over time by providing opportunities for them to talk seriously about their learning experiences which, under our supervision, helps them evolve from novices to experts.

The central questions that we must confront are:

How can we design our courses to engage students through dialogue and experience?

What activities will be most useful and appropriate for our courses? [For assistance, see handouts titled, "[A Quick Guide to Engagement](#)" and "[Patterns for Facilitating Engagement](#)"]

¹ Finkel, Donald, and G. Stephen Monk. Teachers and Learning Groups: Dissolution of the Atlas Complex, in Bouton, C. and R. Y. Garth, eds. Learning in Groups (New Directions for Teaching and Learning, no. 14), San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1983, pp. 83-97.

² Thanks to L. Dee Fink, University of Oklahoma Instructional Development Program, for the basic model.



Mark R. Stoner. (2006) California State University, Sacramento. Presented at University of Zurich (Switzerland) and University of Lancaster (UK).