

Right Brain Thinking

Dennis L. Calkins
Head of the Upper School

Daniel Pink's recent bestseller, *A Whole New Mind*, was the subject of my most recent article last month. Mr. Pink envisions a world in the 21st century in which those who are adept at right brain thinking skills will be primed for greater success both professionally and personally. Right brain thinkers, as I hope we all remember, are those who are adept at creating, empathizing, recognizing patterns, making meaning, feeling empathy, thinking in a non-linear fashion, and grasping the big picture.

In the Upper School, there is ample evidence that we are providing our students with opportunities to engage the right hemispheres of their brains. The courses we require our students to take, the discussions that take place in class, and the challenges and choices we place before our students every day require our students to hone their right-brain skills. In addition, the kinds of questions we pose to our students are crucial in developing right brain thinkers.

There is no doubt that thinking at the highest levels depends entirely on asking the proper questions. There are no easy answers to complicated questions. Difficult and complicated questions require thinking skills that often favor right-brain thinkers. To illustrate my point, I have chosen six questions, one from each of our academic disciplines, that appeared on final exams given to our students at the end of the first semester last month.

First, from Grade 11 American Studies, the following question: "What is the difference, if any, between the reality of being American and the ideals and self-image we hold?" Four months of reading and discussion were necessary before it became appropriate to pose this question. Students who can handle such a complicated question must be able to see patterns, make meaning, and grasp the big picture.

From Comparative Religion, a course for students in Grades 9 and 10, "What does the term "Ethical Monotheism" mean? Describe how the 10 commandments illustrate this concept." Again, this question asks for students create meaning and to make a big-picture connection from one concept to another.

From Conceptual Physics and Chemistry, a 9th Grade level course, "Explain how the Law of Conservation of Mass applies to a chemical reaction." Any question in which the word "applies" is used requires students to make connections and focus on the bigger picture.

From Advanced Latin, a course for 11th and 12th graders, "Write a character study of Pugnax Miles, making direct reference to the Latin to illustrate your observations." Students surely must know their Latin to deal with such a question, but they are also required create meaning, think in a non-linear fashion, and grasp the big picture.

From Problem Solving, a mathematics elective course for students in Grades 11 and 12, “You have 12 ball bearings, one of which is heavier than the others. By appearance, you cannot tell which one is heavier. What is the minimum number of weighings you must do on a balance type scale before you can determine which ball bearing is the heavier one?” Here we have a question from mathematics, perhaps the most traditionally left-brained academic discipline, for which linear, sequential, logical thinking is necessary, but not sufficient. Students who can handle this question must be creative and be able think in a non-linear fashion as well. (If you care to make an attempt at this problem, Mrs. Holmes might be willing to share the solution.)

And finally, from Grade 10 English, “Journalist and author Norman Cousins wrote, “Death is not the greatest loss in life. The greatest loss is what dies inside us as we live.” Responding to this quotation, write an organized well-developed essay supporting, refuting, or interpreting it through the literature we have read this semester.” Could there possibly be a “bigger picture” question than this to ask of Grade 10 students? No right or wrong answers exist – the students’ ability to create, make meaning, and see the big picture are the important skills....and of course, our students are asked to demonstrate their ability as skillful and competent writers as well.

Questions like the ones listed above do not magically appear for the first time on final exams. Students in the Upper School deal with similar questions on a daily basis – questions that ensure that our students are developing and engaging the creative, non-linear, big-picture portions of their brains. I believe Daniel Pink would approve of our effort to prepare our students for successful lives in the 21st century.