



Approaches to Teaching

Over the years, Wilderness Awareness School has developed an approach to working with our students that is extremely effective and also quite intangible. As Jon Young often warns: “Coyote Teaching works!” The trick for us has been to explain to people why it works, and how to do it. In our efforts to do this, we have identified three important approaches to teaching, and we will devote an article to each. Last issue, we focused on *The Art of Questioning*. This issue, we focus on what we call *Didactic Teaching*. Stay tuned for when we tackle the most nebulous concept of them all—the *Trickster/Transformer approach*—in our Summer issue.

The Art and Science of the Didactic Approach

By Chris Laliberte, Program Director

Often disparaged as “the thing we most hated” about our schooling experience, the art of presenting information directly is nonetheless a valuable skill to have in your teaching and mentoring repertoire. Telling people information straight out, or “giving people answers” are not inherently bad things to do. On the contrary, the art of didactic teaching is an important color to have on your mentoring palette. When used appropriately, it can be a very effective way to transmit important information quickly and clearly.

Engaging students

For the didactic approach to be effective, students must be interested in receiving the information. If they are not, no amount of fancy technique is going to make your lecture effective. So a large part of the art of didactic teaching is learning to discern when students are ready for it—better yet, eager for it.

The didactic approach can actually be

a good tool for engaging students. Remember all those fun factoids that friend of yours is always rattling off? Well, having a wide range of those little tidbits at your disposal is like having lots of different lures and baits in your tackle box. “Hey! Did you know that. . .” Consider it like going fishing—you throw out a handful of “cool facts” and see when they bite. With a little practice, it’s quite easy to see—body language changes, eyes light up, and students begin interrupting you to tell you what they know. Now they are engaged! Just remember—it’s bait! You are really just discovering what will “hook” the interest of the students.

The most crucial aspect of engaging students is your own ability to accurately perceive and constantly monitor the level of a student’s interest. Especially when lecturing, you must be eternally vigilant to the body language and eye/facial expressions of your students. If they begin to fade, you’ll just be wasting your time continuing on in didactic mode. *Next issue will focus on techniques for engaging ‘difficult’ students.*

Didactic Presentation Skills

Here is the short list of important tips for effective didactic teaching once your students are genuinely interested:

- Attend closely to when students are ready for information—don’t do their work for them!
- Be conscious of your priority—is it more important that information be conveyed quickly and accurately, or that the students struggle with figuring it out for themselves?
- Be clear in your own mind of the points you want to make.
- Consider the rule of three: tell them



what you are going to tell them, then tell them, then tell them what you told them. Repetition is great.

- Go slow and leave time for the information to sink in before going on to the next thing.
- Watch for jargon or “insider” language that students won’t understand.
- Watch carefully for signs of confusion—ask students to explain in their own words what you just covered to check if they are really understanding it.
- Allow students to ask questions as they come up—don’t worry about “breaking your flow.” If they are holding a question, they won’t really be able to attend to what you’re saying anyway.

The most important thing to remember in using didactic techniques is that mixing in participatory elements—like the Art of Questioning (see last issue), or giving students small activities or mysteries to explore—is a crucial part of keeping students with different learning styles engaged. The classic reputation that didactic teaching is “boring” comes mostly from this simple fact: a painting with just one color *can* be pretty boring. For the most part, the didactic approach is best viewed as one color among many, one that needs to be mixed skillfully with other colors to get the effect you want.

