

Paper 4: Intellectual and Ethical Development in the College Years

Here in *Paper 4: Intellectual and Ethical Development in the College Years* we examine William Perry's account of students' ideas about the nature of knowledge and higher learning. Perry's work is significant because it was a rare *developmental* study of changes in student understanding.

Paper 3: Students conceptions of learning looked at Roger Säljö's 'snap shot' study of student conceptions of learning and related these to the notion of "deep" and "surface" approaches to study.

Paper 5: Research informed teaching explores the implications of this research for teaching in higher education.

Introduction

In *Paper 3: Students conceptions of learning*, we discussed Roger Säljö's study of the conceptions of learning held by a range of different student subjects. Säljö proposed a hierarchy of different conceptions, drawn out from students who were at different stages of understanding. Säljö did not, however, look at how his student subjects had developed their conceptions, nor at how their conceptions changed over time.

Here we look at a complementary account of student conceptions of knowledge and their related conceptions of learning, derived from a *developmental* study of students in higher education. Almost half a century ago, William Perry conducted a seminal study of students' intellectual development during undergraduate educationⁱ. Based at Harvard, Perry spent a number of years researching the learning experience of some of America's most carefully selected undergraduates. What emerged from his longitudinal study was a sophisticated and compelling account of the relationship between student intellectual endeavour and student intellectual development.ⁱⁱ

Illustrative extracts from Perry's interviews with students are supplied in Appendix 1.

In what Perry perceived (in the late 1950s) to be a newly pluralistic world of higher learningⁱⁱⁱ, he believed it essential to students' academic success that they came to understand and to manage the multiple frameworks and conflicting perspectives that confronted them. Stimulated by initial evidence of the variety of ways in which Harvard students responded to these challenges, Perry's study was an investigation of the ways in which students developed the capacity to cope with their intellectual environment.

A few seemed to find the notion of multiple frames of reference wholly unintelligible. (For example, in response to such an assignment as 'Compare the concepts of the tragic heroine exemplified by Antigone and Cordelia' these students would fail to perceive the direct object of the verb 'compare' and would write comparisons of Antigone and Cordelia, as persons, against the background of a single, implicit frame of reference...) Others responded with violent shock to their confrontation in dormitory bull sessions, or in their academic work, or both. Others

experienced a joyful sense of liberation. There were also students...who seemed to come to college already habituated to a notion of man's knowledge as relative and who seemed to be in full exploration of the modes of thinking and of valuing consequent on this outlook.^{iv}

Perry eventually produced a nine-point scheme of student intellectual development that he argued operated in cyclical fashion.

Students progress, he argued, from position one, in which everything may be explained and all knowledge is either right and good or wrong and bad; to position nine, in which the student regards all knowledge as contingent, but still makes commitments to principled positions. This cycle of development rotates throughout a lifetime, Perry claimed, as we move into new domains and encounter new experiences.

One of the virtues of Perry's study is its attentiveness to students' own accounts of their experience. It is in these (occasionally poignant and always revealing) records that we observe a strong affinity with the deep and surface learning paradigm. But we also discover more of what it means to be a student coping with the intellectual complexity of higher education.

The trajectory of development

The main features of Perry's scheme are summarised in the table below:

Main Line of Development	
Position 1:	The student sees the world in polar terms of we-right-good vs. other-wrong-bad. Right Answers for everything exist in the Absolute, known to Authority whose role is to mediate (teach) them. Knowledge and goodness are perceived as quantitative accretions of discrete rightnesses to be collected by hard work and obedience (paradigm: a spelling test).
Position 2:	The student perceives diversity of opinion, and uncertainty, and accounts for them as unwarranted confusion in poorly qualified Authorities or as mere exercises set by Authority "so we can learn to find The Answer for ourselves".
Position 3:	The student accepts diversity and uncertainty as legitimate but still temporary in areas where Authority "hasn't found The Answer yet." He supposes Authority grades him in these areas on "good expression" but remains puzzled as to standards.
Position 4:	(a) The student perceives legitimate uncertainty (and therefore diversity of opinion) to be extensive and raises it to the status of an unstructured epistemological realm of its own in which "anyone has a right to his own opinion," a realm which he sets over against Authority's realm where right – wrong still prevails, or (b) The student discovers qualitative contextual relativistic reasoning as a special case of "what They want" with Authority's realm.
Position 5:	The student perceives all knowledge and values (including authority's) as contextual and relativistic and subordinates dualistic right–wrong functions to the status of a special case, in context.
Position 6:	The student apprehends the necessity of orienting himself in a relativistic

	world through some form of personal Commitment (as distinct from unquestioned or unconsidered commitment to simple belief in certainty).
Position 7:	The student makes an initial Commitment in some area.
Position 8:	The student experiences the implications of Commitment, and explores the subjective and stylistic issues of responsibility.
Position 9:	The student experiences the affirmation of identity among multiple responsibilities and realizes Commitment as an ongoing, unfolding activity through which he expresses his life style.

Conditions of Delay, Deflection, and Regression	
Temporizing:	The student delays in some Position for a year, exploring its implications or explicitly hesitating to take the next step.
Escape:	The student exploits the opportunity for detachment offered by the structures of Position 4 and 5 to deny responsibility through passive or opportunistic alienation.
Retreat:	The student entrenches in dualistic, absolutistic structures of Position 2 or 3.

Perry's work (a careful analysis of unstructured yearly interviews with students) revealed a series of intellectual stages through which students pass during their undergraduate years. Students in the earliest stages understand knowledge and values to be essentially dualistic in nature. In position 1, students believe that authorities – teachers - know the right answers, and that these may be learned by hard work. This belief faces an intense challenge in the context of a pluralistic liberal education, but students may continue to cling to their original conviction.

If teachers appear not to be in possession of absolute right/wrong answers, this is explained away in position 2 as the teacher's choice not to divulge them for educational purposes, or as particular teachers being poorly qualified.

Another alternative explanation is supplied at position 3. Here the single right and good answer, distinct and separable from the plethora of wrong and bad answers, is thought not to exist yet. This is only because academic authorities have still to discover it. As students continue to grapple with the onslaught of academic pluralism, their epistemology is gradually remade. Eventually students abandon their determined dualism.

At position 4, some students now adopt an unrestrained relativism where everybody has a right to their own opinion, and only authority has any concern for right and wrong. Others decide that it is a peculiarity of academic authorities that they embrace pluralism, and thus the wisest strategy is to give them what they want. Students in this frame of mind still believe that the main reason for working in the newly relativistic way is because it is what the teacher wants. As Perry points out, however, students who begin to think independent-*like* thoughts are one step closer to true independence of mind

As pluralism becomes the more familiar stance, students explore its implications further (positions 5 and 6).

In the later stages of maturation (positions 7-9) Perry argues that students start to re-orientate themselves in a world they frankly accept as pluralist. They have perceived, he

suggests, that to live in the world as they now know and understand it requires some form of personal and intellectual commitment to views which cannot be regarded as right or wrong, but which can be judged to be better or worse. The life-long project of working through those commitments for themselves begins, continuing throughout adulthood as they try to make sense of new knowledge and experience.

Deferring developmental growth

Whilst he viewed the developmental journey as one that generally progressed in fits and starts, Perry also argued that some students will find ways of delaying, and, indeed, denying, a pluralistic world that they find threatening or unattractive.

Perry's scheme proposes three alternatives to growth: temporizing, retreat, and escape. In the first of these the student marks time, often explicitly understanding the necessity to stop and explore the new position at which he or she has arrived.

The retreating student by contrast has, at some level, perceived the implications of intellectual growth and, fearing them, decisively (even derisively) rejected them.

The student who escapes may do so in a variety of complex ways of which the two that are of most interest in this context are 'escape into competence' and 'escape into commitment'. Apprehending the seriousness of the intellectual demands that are being made, the student who escapes into competence maintains "a vestigial identity"^v by exploiting techniques and strategies that appear superficially to satisfy academic requirements. Motivated to succeed but retaining their intellectual detachment, such students have learned how to imitate the surface appearance of commitment. The students who escape into commitment are those who choose, at least for a while, the security of embedded values when the complexity of relativism becomes overwhelming: "the hope seems to be that through intensity of focus, all ambivalences will be magically resolved". Students who escape into commitment may not always return to the cosy world of values they knew as children. What they seek is a domain of absolutistic values, radical or conservative, progressive or atavistic, faithful or faithless.

Debate: Is Perry's study generalisable?

Perry's study was based around open-ended interviews with students following a modular curriculum at Harvard and at Radcliffe during the late 1950s and early 1960s. The particularity of his study thus raises some interesting questions.

[Although Perry and his collaborators interviewed both male and female students, the developmental scheme that he proposed did not differentiate between their experiences on the basis of gender. But do men and women students in fact experience the same cycle of development?](#)

The years since Perry conducted his study have seen the development of influential arguments against the view that men and women's ethical orientations and common-sense epistemologies are necessarily the same. We should be cautious here, however. This contemporary scholarship also resists the proposition that there is a stark dichotomy between men and women and their 'ways of knowing' and some of these later studies indicate their own debt to Perry's original work.

Perhaps the most widely read work on the gendered nature of ethical and intellectual development is that of Carol Gilligan^{vi}. Gilligan claims that traditional studies of male moral development ascribe most value to judgements based upon considerations of autonomy and individualism. Her own study of girls' moral development suggests that women value more highly aspects of relationship and connection, and, in consequence, make different moral calculations. Mary Belenky and her colleagues have also authored a much-cited account of womens' intellectual life, which affords an alternative account to the one offered by Perry.^{vii}

[Second, is Perry's scheme equally applicable to all students irrespective of their field of study?](#)

Perry's study dealt with students' experience of following a US modular style curriculum. The published interview extracts suggest that some of those students who found the relativism of the arts unsettling elected to read more science courses - but it is unclear whether they found there the intellectual comfort that they sought. Given their differing intellectual projects, do single honours science undergraduates follow the same trajectory of development as those in the arts? To what extent did Perry's students' views reflect the priorities of the programmes that they followed, and the approaches to teaching and assessment that they experienced?

[Third, do twenty-first century undergraduates more comfortably occupy a relativistic world well before they arrive at university?](#)

The intellectual assumptions that underpin the national curriculum are arguably quite different from those embedded in the intellectual life of schools that supplied young women to Radcliffe and young men to Harvard in the nineteen fifties. Anecdotal evidence would suggest that young people applying to Oxford are more than comfortable with relativism in both its moral and epistemological form.

These are important questions. Whether or not Perry's conclusions stand entirely unchallenged, many tutors have recognized in both their own and their students' behaviour the strategic positions that he outlines. We explore the implications of Perry's work for our teaching in Paper 5.

ⁱ W.G. Perry *Forms of Intellectual and Ethical Development in the College Years - A Scheme* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston 1968, 1970). Perry followed, in all, 140 undergraduates at Harvard and Radcliffe in four year cycles between 1958 and 1967.

ⁱⁱ Perry's is not the only account of student intellectual development. He acknowledged the similarity between his own account and that of Hunt, D.E. 'A conceptual systems change model and its application to education' in O.J. Harvey, ed. *Experience, Structure, and Adaptability* New York: Springer 1966 pp 277 – 302. See also Kitchener and King 'Reflective Judgment: Concepts of Justification and their Relationship to Age and Education' 2. *J. Applied Developmental Psychology* 89 (1981)

ⁱⁱⁱ This conviction derived from both his understanding of changes in the curriculum and of changes in the social context of the modern university. His study includes an analysis of Harvard examination papers in the humanities and social sciences between 1900 and 1960. They show a dramatic increase in the inclusion of questions requiring consideration of multiple frames of reference as the century proceeds. A similar phenomenon is readily observable in the examination papers of the Oxford Final Honours School.

^{iv} Perry, op.cit p. 4

^v Perry op.cit p.191

^{vi} C. Gilligan *In a Different Voice* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press 1983)

^{vii} M.F. Belensky et al *Womens Ways of Knowing: The Development of Self, Voice and Mind* (New York: Basic Books, 1986)

Paper 4: Intellectual and Ethical Development in the College Years
Appendix 1

Introduction

This document reproduces extracts from six of the hundreds of student interviews that Perry and his collaborators undertook. They were originally published in his book *Forms of Intellectual and Ethical Development in the College Years - A Scheme*.^{vii}

We have selected interview extracts that illustrate the developmental journey that Perry argues students will travel: an analysis of the interviews appears at the end.

Student A [Freshman - first year]

I don't know . . . in high school, public school, I used to really *like* history a lot. I used to be *very* interested in it, it really was one of the courses I liked *best*. Ahh . . . I . . . I . . . got here and I don't know what, I guess I must have changed a lot or else the *course* was very changed, or different, but I . . . it's one of the subjects I *don't* like.... I don't know, it's bringing in philosophy which I don't... ... I just don't find any use for... I'm interested in more about what-ah ... what the real things in history are . . . what the real causes are. And well, I mean they're, they're real interesting, but they get you all confused. They seem to be always in threads coming in and always . . . Ideas of a hundred guys that you've never heard of before. They seem to just ah, confuse you more than help you, I mean.... I think they're trying to get too complicated. They put a thousand little, they try to think of maybe a thousand little ideas that forced this and that. And I always tend to try and simplify.... It's, I don't think that there are that many reasons for history . . . or a certain event happening as they make it out to be....^{vii}

Student B [Freshman - first year]

One comes to Harvard expecting all sorts of great things, and then one hits these, these Gen.Ed courses which are extremely, ah, I don't know, they're just *stupid* most of them. I've taken two, I'm taking Nat. Sci. and Hum., both of which I found, well, it's an extremely confused sort of affair, nobody seems to know anything...[about Nat. Sci.] It's supposed to teach you to - ah, reason better. That seems to be the, the excuse that natural science people give for these courses, they're supposed to teach you to arrive at more logical conclusions and look at things in a more scientific manner. Actually, what you get out of that course is you, you get an idea that science is a terrifically confused thing in which nobody knows what's coming off anyway.^{vii}

Student C [Sophomore - second year]

I found that you've got to find out for yourself. You get to a point where you, ah, see this guy go through this rigamarole and everything and you've got to find out for yourself what he's talking about and think it out for yourself. Then try to get to think on your own. And that's something I never had to do, think things out by myself, I mean. In high school two and two was four; there's nothing to think out there. In here they try to make your mind work, and I didn't realize that last year until the end of the year.

I: You kept looking for the answer and they wouldn't give it to you?

Yeah, it wasn't in the book. And that's what confused me a lot. Now I know it isn't in the book for a purpose. We're supposed to think about it and come up with the answer!^{vii}

Student D [year of study not indicated]

I guess I'm thinking specifically of one course I took this year, this required humanities course. It's a literature course, and tries to outline an approach that can be used on almost any kind of literature. I started off a little bit less well than mediocre, because I couldn't see what they were trying to do. In the papers we wrote you were supposed to take this particular approach to reading material that they were trying to outline for you. And as the course went along, my grades got consistently higher as I understood their approach. Finally I came to realize about the middle of the second term that they were trying to get you to look at something in a complex way and to try to weigh more factors than one, and talk about things in a concrete manner. That is, with words that have some meaning and some relevance to the material you were studying. And all of a sudden my grade just shot right up and stayed right up...

I: This was a lift.

It was. It really was...for that to happen. To understand all of a sudden. I mean, to realize . . . the realization of the understanding was what was quick . . . just what the club was driving at and then to use that in the course and suddenly see the grade go right up. That was really a great lift, a matter of extreme personal satisfaction!^{vii}

Student E [Senior, third or fourth year of study]

Well, we're talking about . . . if we're talking about the value of a liberal education, maybe one of the things is that you kind of take

complexity for granted, or it teaches you to do this. And therefore you kind of dismiss. . . . You, you can't even talk about taking a simple approach to something, you just kind of, I mean it's just a way of looking at things which is complex and therefore you can't talk about being complex as, as a conscious policy. I mean it's not a conscious policy, it's, it's just something that's been absorbed into you...I don't think you can say, well, I'm going to take a simple approach to this problem and a complex approach to that one, I mean, looking at things, if it's just the way you do something.^{vii}

Student F [Senior, third or fourth year of study]

Well, lets ah, lets talk about something that's concrete, something that I've thought recently. I wrote my last paper about two weeks ago, and it was for an English course. And in this particular English course it seems that ah, they want each sentence or the, the party line in the course, seems to want each sentence just loaded with the ambiguities of the particular novel. In other words, your sentences have to be as complex as the novel was, and have the same, same double meaning, and the same ambiguity, and it seems to me unless you carry this through you're likely to get the word "over-simplified" written at the end. They, they don't seem to like you to take a position, and try to defend it. They want - admittedly there is a position, there is a position implied in taking both sides, or trying to see both sides - but I, I sometimes tend to feel that novelists stress one side or the other, just as political theorists stress one side or the other - Hobbes stresses the sovereign over the individual, although the individual is there, things like that. It seems to me that writing this sort of work isn't quite as valuable as, as being able to take a position and defend it in a particular case... for instance, if I were running for political office tomorrow, I couldn't take the other fellow's position - I might see it, but I couldn't take it...It seems to me that much that I've been forced to do here, this taking of two sides at once, just suspends my judgment. There is a value in it; of course there's a value in, in seeing any perspective, or any one particular facet of, of a problem. But there's also a value in, in being able to articulate one side more than another.^{vii}

Annotation

This explanation of the interview transcripts draws upon Perry's scheme of development, and the 'positions' that it outlines.

Freshman A:

Identifying him as student currently at Position 2, Perry describes the reaction of Freshman A as one of 'uncomprehending complaint' at the academic authorities, those whose teaching is deliberately founded in a relativistic epistemology. Freshman A has

been confronted for the first time (in his awareness at least) by the notion of history as a tale of competing interpretations.

Freshman B and Sophomore C:

These students are also at Position 2. Students in Position 2 may pursue a path either, broadly, of rejection of 'Authority', or accommodation to its 'games'. Freshman B scorns authority's whims, whilst Sophomore C believes that he has discovered the 'rules' of 'the teachers' game'.

Student D:

Student D is at Position 4. Perry uses this interview to illustrate the paradoxical path towards independence of thought that the student begins to master at Position 5. At Position 4, Student D has discovered, explains Perry, that "independent-*like* thought gets good grades. Genuine independence of thought, with all its implications, is an issue to be met later. It is enough for the moment to assimilate, under Authority's guidance, the discovery of coherence and congruence..."^{vii}

Senior student E:

Senior E reveals the extent to which his beliefs about the nature of knowledge have changed and, with them, his way of thinking. Perry comments that by the time this student had reached his senior year, he could no longer remember making the discovery of complexity. "He is no longer aware of conceptualising *about* the complexity of things; he simply perceives things as complex."^{vii} From this extract we can tell that he has progressed at least as far as Position 5.

Senior student F:

At Position 6, Student F is exploring the nature and implications of intellectual commitment. At this stage, Perry suggests, "college can feel to some as if it were even holding one back in too diffuse a relativism".