



Facing a difficult problem: figure it out

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“Figure it out.”

Three words that summed up the advice I received from my father whenever I was faced with a challenging problem. Three words that shaped me into the person I am today.

Unfortunately, you don’t hear those three words as much as you used to. In far too many cases, they seem to have been replaced by “Here’s what you need to do.” Or “I’ll take care of it.”

As a result, we have a generation or two of folks who never had to figure anything out for themselves – and are now ill-equipped to navigate their relationships, careers, and life in general.

When I was in school back before the war, my teachers stressed critical thinking and rational problem-solving. And the focus always seemed to be on real world applications.

Countless times, I was encouraged to “figure it out.” I didn’t much like it at the time; it was frequently a very uncomfortable decree. But like many of the more beneficial lessons I learned growing up, those experiences gave me the knowledge, wisdom and motivation to accomplish whatever success I have been able to achieve.

Consequently, I have carried this approach into my teaching at Western. I am certain I have frustrated countless students over the last few decades with my insistence that they “figure it out.” Hopefully they eventually came to appreciate the intent of that admonition.

As anyone who has ever had me as an instructor can attest, there are three rules I have in all my classes: 1) Think for yourself, 2) Speak your truth, and 3) Live out loud. I cover these at the beginning of every course; I even hand them out in a form suitable for framing.

Seriously, what’s the alternative? Having someone think for you, speak for you, and live for you? Not a recipe for a very meaningful – or productive - life as far as I’m concerned.

Here’s the dilemma. In school, the teacher typically provides students with a problem for which the teacher already knows the answer. Then they grade their students on how close they get to the “right” answer – and there is usually one correct response.

In the real world, however, the solutions to most of our problems are not predetermined; they are typically open-ended and messy - and the way to proceed is often veiled in obscurity.

By-the-way, this is why I don’t use “rubrics” in my classes – much to the chagrin of my colleagues and supervisors. A rubric tells the student what you are looking for in an assignment, which inevitably impedes imagination, creativity and innovation.

I repeatedly remind my students that most problems have multiple viable solutions – any of which might be appropriate for a given set of circumstances. What I expect them to be able to do is make a convincing, evidence-based case for what they think should be done.

Coming up with a defensible course of action requires students to think through what they are proposing instead of trying to figure out what I'm looking for, which is the last thing I want them to do.

Bottom line: We need to ditch the cookie-cutter, standards-driven approach to education and teach students how to be resourceful, outside-the-box practical thinkers who have the smarts, the tools, and the dogged determination to face whatever comes their way with finesse, self-confidence, and a data-driven plan.

So, if we want to make our educational institutions – at all levels - more responsive to society's ever-evolving, increasingly complex needs and demands, then the path forward is simple.

We need to tell students to “figure it out.”



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