

# How do you get smart?

## By doing what smart people do

A student asked, "How do I get smart?" Unsure if it was a real question or smartass banter, I could've answered from experience. "Learning is ignited by curiosity, by empathy." Or more teacherly: "Mastery of content area knowledge is required."

I wasn't prepared with a *real* response then, but despite its messiness, the question was provocative.

The challenge for teachers is to help students acquire the knowledge, skills and habits of mind that "smart" persons use to operate successfully in the multiple discourses thrown at them. Knowing history, math, science, English is necessary, but it's not enough. You've got to be able to think critically and imaginatively, communicate across cultures, solve problems — while continuously updating these skills and more.

"How do I get smart?" By doing what smart people have done since long before Socrates: Use all your



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intellectual tools to come up with truthful answers to real questions, those essential questions that gadfly, fractious adolescents happen onto when trying to make sense of themselves.

Each aspect of this inquiry process is open to work on developing questions, finding resources, interpreting information, reporting findings. When inquiry is at the heart of your school experience, you are already doing what problem-solvers do.

Here's what will get students there: rigor (complex, provocative problems), thought (inquiry, knowledge, communication, reflection), respect for diversity (of interests, of abilities, of cultural and ethnic and linguistic

inheritances), authentic learning (real-world applications, working with adult experts, reporting to real audiences).

These are the basics, but students need some tools.

They need literacy that goes beyond getting the right answer or coughing up the facts (playing the school game). It's literacy with an edge: *You* analyze, *you* evaluate, *you* put it all together in an essay or a presentation, or a film, or whatever format, digital or otherwise, that includes all the creativity, clear thinking, all the insights they and their friends can pack into it.

If they are able to persuade or inform or edify the audience, they've also improved their skills for when they tackle the next question. And if it doesn't work, they analyze why — the first step of a new inquiry. Either way, the learning that occurs opens their eyes and ears to the full story, lets them get some traction in the truth.

When they're interested,

really care about something, they'll find the answers to their questions. They'll explore all available media for useful information. The newspaper is a menu of what's happening; books and articles, informational DVDs, movies, Oprah, the news, PBS, documentaries, Wikipedia, etc., provide grist. Notes become summaries become discussions: "That sounds great!" or, even better, "You're full of it!" *That* goads them to dig deeper.

They shouldn't wait for school to enjoy vivid storytelling or rigorous analysis. They

know how a focusing question helps them understand literature: What is love? ("Romeo & Juliet"); what do I stand for? (*To Kill a Mockingbird*).

Similar driving questions can be used to understand their world and especially other humans: How can people of diverse backgrounds transcend differences and work together to achieve worthy ends? ("Amistad"); how do we fight terrorism? (the 9/11 Commission report); why are some countries poor and some rich? (*The End of Poverty*); how did Hurricane Katrina flummox

our government? (*When the Levees Broke*).

"How do I get smart?" I would tell students: Sharpen your literacy and thinking tools, inquire deeply, get a handle on the context, get some answers, fight back. And when you grasp it, the truth will free you up to untangle the knots of problems my generation continues to dump onto yours.

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