Teaching Students to Learn While Learning

An Evidence-Based Approach to First-Year Retention

With a focus on structuring the first 30 hours like they matter – because they do.

February 4 – 5, 2026

Louisana Board of Regents

Meauxmentum Summit IV

Lafayette, LA

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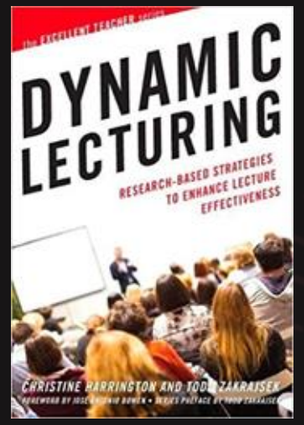
I strongly believe in looking at issues from multiple perspectives.

And asking for assistance much more than I did early in my career.



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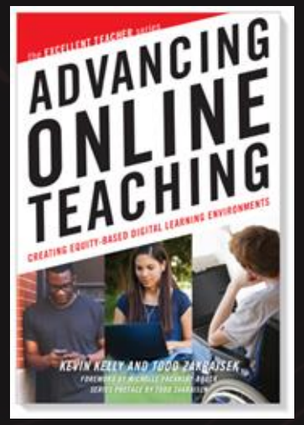

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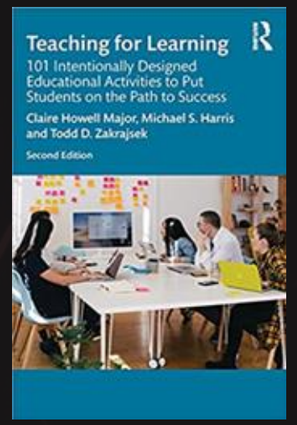

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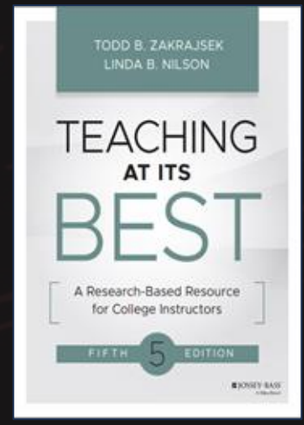

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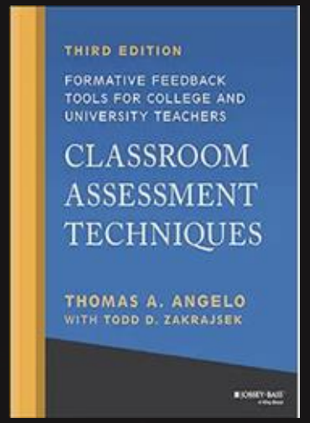

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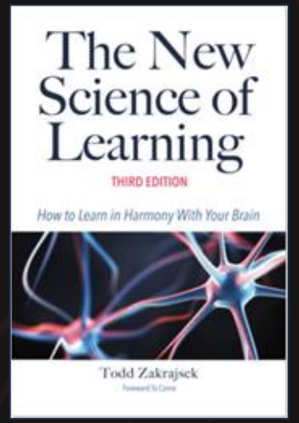

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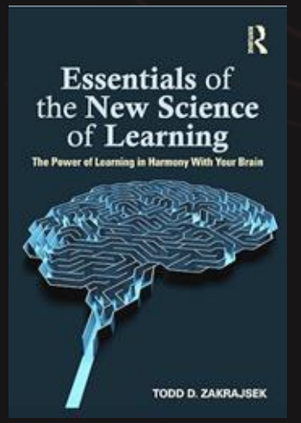
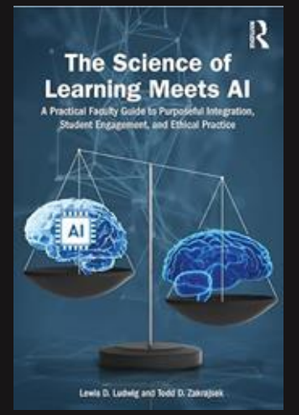


2025



2026

Why This Workshop Matters

The Challenge

Nearly 1 in 4 first-year college & University students do not return for their second year. We know opportunities in life decrease substantially for those individual.

The Opportunity

The first 30 contact hours shape habits, beliefs, and momentum. We have the power to guide that trajectory so that the students not only survive ... they thrive.

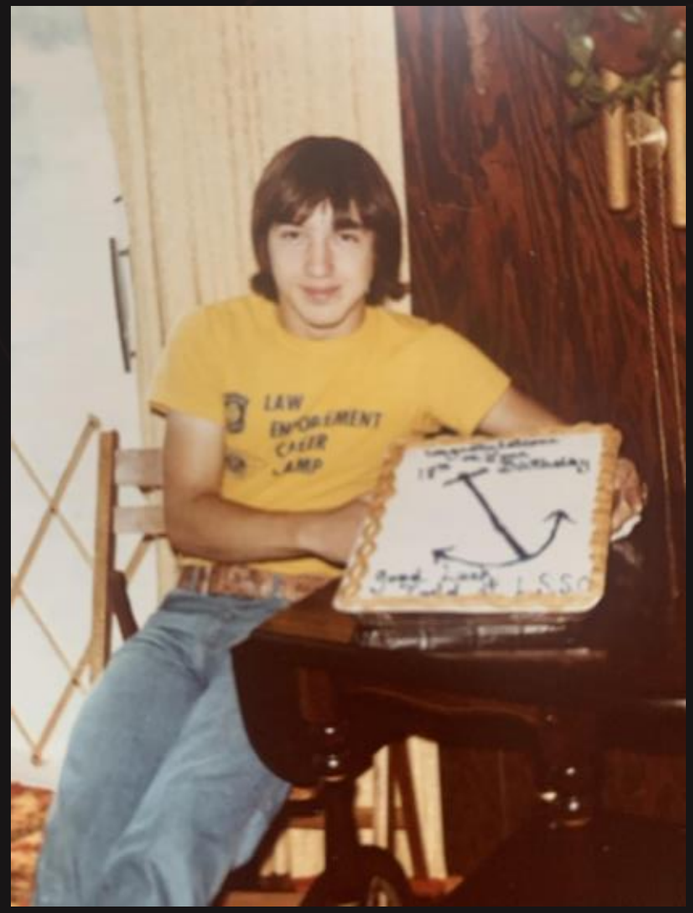
The Approach

This is a systems conversation, not a deficit model. We're building on what we already do—just more intentionally. I like to remind people that Appreciative Inquiry (building from your strengths) was the original AI.

Why This Workshop Matters to Me

My Grades; First in Family to Attend College; My First 30 Hours

Introduction to CJ	D-
Physics	F
Calculus	F-
Chemistry	F--
Psychology –	



This Topic Matters to Me Because it Changed My Life

From Struggle to Understanding

I was a solid high school student. Within the first 30 hours I thought that although I was a good high school student, I wasn't smart enough to be a college student.

I also now know that if I had flunked out, the faculty would have blamed me for it. That group of 25% of the students dropping out contain some excellent students.

My life changed more than I realized when an adviser told me that I needed to learn *how learning actually works*.

I started getting better grades with LESS work.

That single shift changed everything: my grades, my confidence, my entire academic trajectory.

My advisor told me about learning how to learn: Neither of us expected I would I built a career out of it.

Campuses for which I have facilitated a workshop or delivered a keynote.
The number of students faculty from these schools all together easily numbers in the millions.
I would have likely never done this with that one advisor.

Alabama
Alabama Agricultural and Mechanical University
Auburn University
Bishop State Community College
Samford University
University of Alabama

Alaska
University of Alaska Event in Valdez
University of Alaska-Fairbanks

Arkansas
Harding University
University of Arkansas

Arizona
AT Still University
Northern Arizona University

California
California Polytechnic State University - Pomona
California State University - Monterey Bay
California State University - Pomona
Loyola - Marymount, CA
Pepperdine University
Riverside City College
University of California - Berkeley

Colorado
Regis University
United States Air Force Academy

Connecticut
Norwalk Community College
Quinnipiac University
Southern Connecticut State University
Yale University

Delaware
University of Delaware

Florida
Adventist University of Health Sciences
Bethune-Cookman University
Daytona State College
Florida International University
LEACOM School of Pharmacy
Nova Southeastern
Seminole State College
University of Central Florida
University of Florida
University of West Florida
Valencia College
Webber International University

Georgia
Augusta University
Bainbridge State College
Berry College
Brenau University
Clark Atlanta University
Dalton State College
Emory University
Georgia State University
Georgia Tech University
Life University
University of Georgia
University of Georgia System

Hawaii
Hawaii Pacific University

Idaho
Boise State University
Northwest Nazarene
University of Idaho

Illinois
College of Lake County (Webinar)
DePaul University
Eastern Illinois University
Harper College
Illinois State University
Indiana University Purdue at Calumet
McHenry Community College
Northern Illinois University
Roosevelt University
University of Illinois

Indiana
Indiana University School of Medicine
Indiana University - Bloomington
Indiana University-Fort Wayne
Indiana University-Purdue Univ South Bend
Indiana University-Southeast
Indianapolis - STFM
Ivy Technical College - Fort Wayne
Ivy Technical College - Kokomo

Iowa
Des Moines University
Grandview University
Iowa Western Community College
Iowa State University
Palmer College of Chiropractic
Morningside College
Northern Iowa State University
Simpson College

Kansas
Kansas State University
AT Still University

Kentucky
Bellarmine University
Murray State University
Northern Kentucky University
University of Kentucky
University of Louisville
University of Western Kentucky

Louisiana
Loyola University - New Orleans, LA
Nicholls State University

Maine
Husson University

Maryland
Frostburg University
National Institute of Health
United States Naval Academy
University of Maryland - College Park
University of Maryland System

Massachusetts
Bridgewater State University
Massachusetts Institute of Technology
Quinnipiac University
Suffolk University
Western New England University

Michigan
Adrian College
Baker Community College
Central Michigan University
Ferris State University
Kettering University
Lake Superior State University
Lansing Community College
Michigan State University
Michigan State University College of Osteopathic Medicine
Mid Michigan Community College
Mott Community College
Northern Michigan University
Oakland University
Saginaw Valley State University
Siena Heights University
University of Michigan – Flint
MinnesotaMinnesota State University – Mankato
St. Mary's University
University of Michigan - Dearborn
Washtenaw Community College

Minnesota
Metropolitan State University
University of Minnesota - Mankato

Mississippi
University of Mississippi
University of Southern Mississippi

Missouri
Mercy Medical Residency Program, St. Louis
University of Missouri - Kansas City
University of Missouri - St. Louis

Montana
Montana State University

Nebraska
Creighton University - Omaha
Union College - Lincoln Neb
University of Nebraska - Lincoln

Nevada
University of Nevada
Nevada State University

New Hampshire
Rivier University

New Jersey
New Jersey Council of Community Colleges
Middlesex County College
Stockton University
Rowan University

New Mexico
Las Cruces High School
New Mexico State University

New York
Alfred College
Columbia University
Hobart and William Smith Colleges
Hofstra University
Iona College
Kingsborough Community College
Marist College
Nassau Community College
New School
New York Medical College
Niagara University
Rochester Institute of Technology
SUNY - Alfred College
SUNY - Oneonta
Suffolk County Community College
University of Buffalo
West Point Military Academy

North Carolina
Alamance Community College
Appalachian State University
Brevard College
Duke University
Durham Technical College
Fayetteville State University
Greensboro Technical College
Highpoint University
Impact Alamance
Johnson & Wales University
Louisburg College
Mt. Olive University (Webinars)
North Carolina State University
North Carolina Wesleyan College
Rowan-Cabarrus Community College
Shaw University
Southeastern Area Health Education Center
UNC School of Medicine - AHEC
UNC - Charlotte
UNC - Chapel Hill
UNC - Greensboro
UNC - School of Medicine
UNC - System
UNC - Wilmington
University of Mount Olive (Webinar)
Wayne Community College
Wilkes Community College
Wingate University

North Dakota
City Valley State University

Ohio
Christ College of Nursing & Health Sciences
Columbus State Community College
Cuyahoga Community College
Denison University
Heidelberg University
Kent State
Kenyon College
Miami University
Ohio State University
Ohio University
Ohio University at Ironton
University of Akron
Wright State University

Oklahoma
Oklahoma University Health Sciences Center
University of Central Oklahoma

Oregon
Pacific University - College of Optometry
University of Oregon
Southern Oregon State University

Pennsylvania
Bloomsburg University
Drexel University
Edinboro University of Pennsylvania
Gannon University
Harrisburg Area Community College
Indiana University - Pennsylvania
Lycoming College
Northampton Community College
Pennsylvania State University
St. Joseph's University – Philadelphia
Temple University
Thomas Jefferson University - Philadelphia
Villanova University
York College of Pennsylvania

Rhode Island
University of Rhode Island

South Carolina
Clemson University
Florence-Darlington Technical College
South Carolina State University
South Central Technical College
Tri-County Technical College
University of South Carolina

South Dakota
South Dakota State University
South Dakota State University - Sanford School of Medicine

Tennessee
East Tennessee State University
Lee University
Rhodes College
Tennessee Tech University
University of Tennessee - Chattanooga

Texas
Alamo Colleges
Blinn College
College of Mainland
Fort Sam Houston
Lonestar Community College (Web - Keynote)
Lonestar Community College
Palo Alto College
Parker University
Rice University
Sam Houston State University
South Texas State College
Southern Methodist University
Texas Christian University
Texas Tech University
University of Mary Hardin - Baylor
University of Texas - Commerce
University of Texas- San Antonio

Utah
Weber State University
Utah Valley University
Brigham Young University

Virginia
George Mason University
Jefferson College of Health Sciences
Liberty University
Liberty University College of Osteopathic Medicine
Lynchburg College
Mary Baldwin University
Northern Virginia Community College
Randolph Macon Women's College
Virginia State University
Virginia Community College System
University of Virginia
University of Virginia - School of Medicine

Vermont
Northern Vermont University

Washington
Bellevue College
Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation
Tacoma Community College
University of Washington

Washington, DC
George Washington University

Wisconsin
Chippewa Valley Technical College
Herzing University (Webinar)

West Virginia
Fairmont State University
University of West Virginia

Wyoming
University of Wyoming
(291 not counting countries below))

Due to space countries listed without institutions.(see toddzakrajsek.com)
Austria
Canada
Brunei-Darussalam
Germany
Hong Kong
Ireland
Jamaica
Macau
Saudi Arabia
Scotland
Sweden
United Kingdom

CORE PROBLEM

When were you first asked to demonstrate learning (e.g., tests, quizzes, papers)
When were you taught how to learn how to learn?

We expect students to learn and produce information about what and why, but we rarely teach them how.

A vast majority of us learned how to learn through trial & error, implicit assumptions, and advice from individuals who are not educators trained in learning, memory, and cognition. They develop ineffective study habits. Without learning the how along with the what and why many students struggle. Because they don't know learning involves struggle for most everyone at times, they interpret their struggle as failure. They disengage when momentum matters most.

Advising Happens By Design—Or By Default

1

The Hidden Truth

The most influential advising in the first semester doesn't happen in an advisor's office. It happens inside courses—especially in the first few weeks.

2

The Reframe

Every interaction, assignment, and piece of feedback is already the process of advising students about how to approach learning, persistence, and belonging.

3

The Invitation

I’m not asking you to do something extra. This is an invitation for you to make what you're already doing more intentional and more powerful.

The First 30 Contact Hours

1

Week 1-2

Habits form: How do students approach reading, note-taking, and preparation?

2

Week 3-4

Beliefs solidify: Does struggle mean failure, or is it part of learning?

3

Week 5-6

Momentum begins: Students either build confidence and capacity—or start to disengage.

This window is critical. What happens here and compounds throughout the semester, impacting whether students return next year.

Some of the Most Important Advising Pertains to:

Hidden Curriculum and Implicit Messages

Whether we intend it or not, advisors and course instructors answer critical questions for first-year students:

- **Do I belong here?** Am I the kind of person others will accept as I am?
- **Can I use my phone to take notes?** What technology is allowed?
- **How much effort is enough?** What does preparation really look like?
- **Is there a point at which I should drop a course?** Is this worth the investment?
- **What is the appropriate amount to talk in class?** What are expectations nobody tells you about?
- **How much help from AI can I legitimately use in this class?** How do I keep from getting into trouble?
- **A few others?**

LEARNING SCIENCE

Just Enough to Be Useful

I'm not going to try to teach you a what we know about the human brain with respect to learning.

I am going to touch on a few topics that tend to have a strong impact on students learning how to learn that you can use to help them in those critical first 30 hours.

Learning Feels Hard at times Because It Is

Productive Struggle

Effortful thinking—the kind that feels challenging—is exactly what builds durable learning. Ease during study often signals shallow processing. Bjork studied desireable difficulties for many years.

The Misinterpretation

Students who don't know this misread difficulty as evidence they don't belong or aren't "good at" the subject. They give up instead of leaning in.

The Advising Move

Normalize struggle early and explicitly. Frame difficulty as a sign learning is happening, not a signal something is wrong.

Expectations and Understanding of Value of the Effort

People run and work out expecting to expend energy. Here, no pain no gain. Classroom motto?

Retrieval Builds Memory Better Than Rereading

The Science

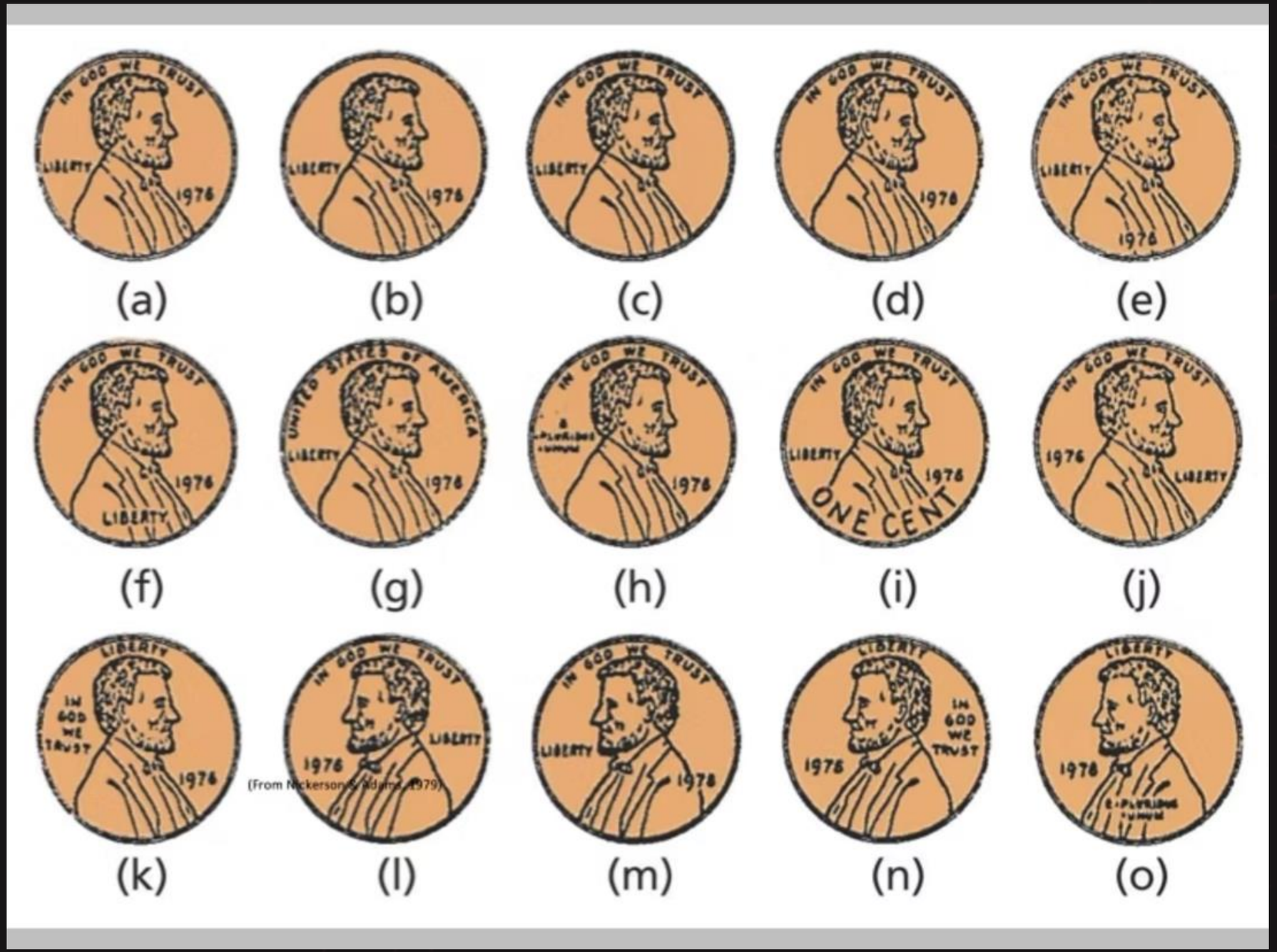
Attempting to recall information—even imperfectly—strengthens memory far more effectively than passively reviewing material. This is called the **testing effect**.

What Students Often Do Instead

Most students reread notes and highlight text because it *feels* productive. But familiarity isn't the same as retrieval strength.

The Consequence

Every practice opportunity we design is advising students about how to study. Low-stakes quizzes, reflection prompts, and practice questions teach retrieval—if we frame them that way.



Students need to be told that it is natural for our brains to learning a bit too

Help Students to Recognize that Beliefs Shape Persistence More Than Ability

Mindset and Self-Efficacy Matter

Those who believe intelligence is fixed disengage faster when challenged and find feedback as criticizing. Those who see ability as developable persist through difficulty and see feedback as helpful. Advise student to add "Yet" to any statement that starts with "I can't ....."

Belonging Uncertainty

First-gen and underrepresented students are especially vulnerable to interpreting early struggle as proof they don't belong. Advise students that many feel like they don’t fit in and that it is helpful to find others who are similar to them.

Feedback as Advising

How faculty others respond to your work—the language, the framing, the tone—influences your beliefs about whether struggle is normal or disqualifying. Advise students to talk to faculty when uncertain about feedback.

I never lose, I win or I Learn -
Nelson Mandela

Know the Level of Your Learning

An illustrated figure (pyramid) of Bloom's Taxonomy with the six steps listed, one on each level. Make it with muted colors.

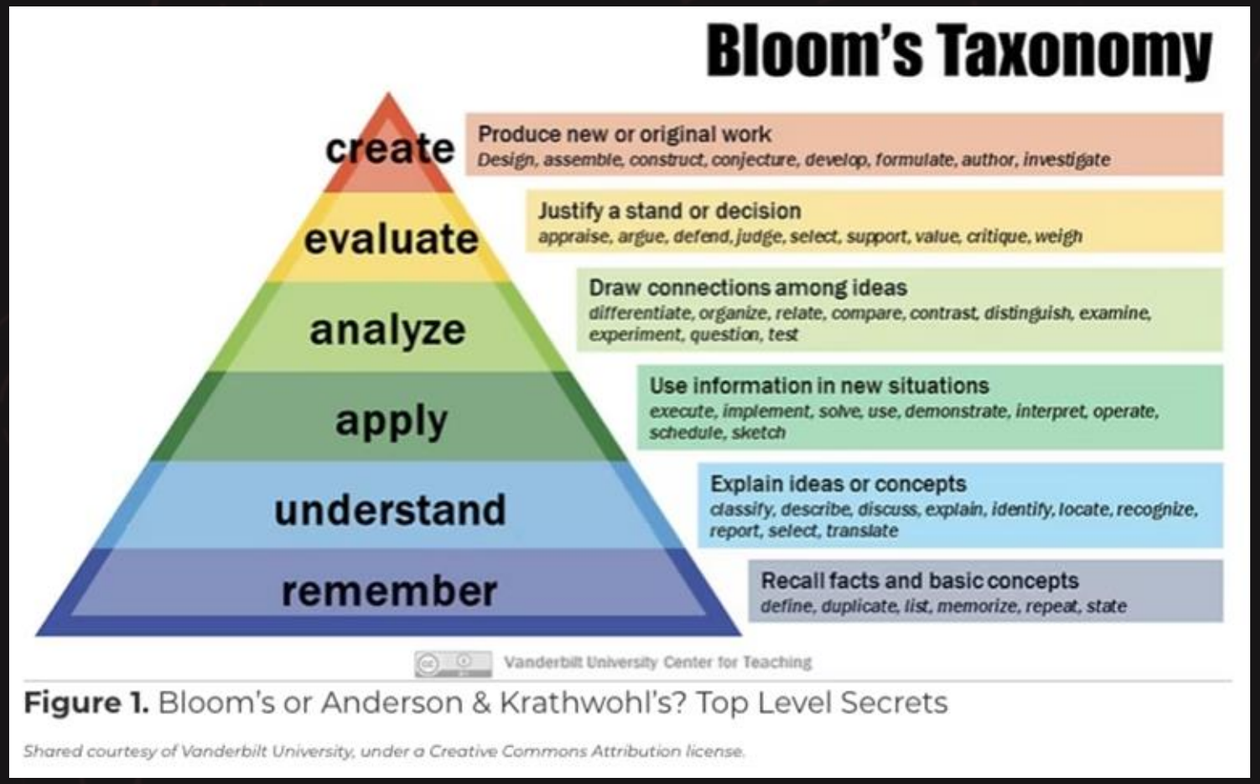


Figure 1. Bloom's or Anderson & Krathwohl's? Top Level Secrets

Shared courtesy of Vanderbilt University, under a Creative Commons Attribution license.

Teach students they are responsible for the work they submit. If it is garbage, it tell you something about the person submitting the work.

Know The Level of Your Learning

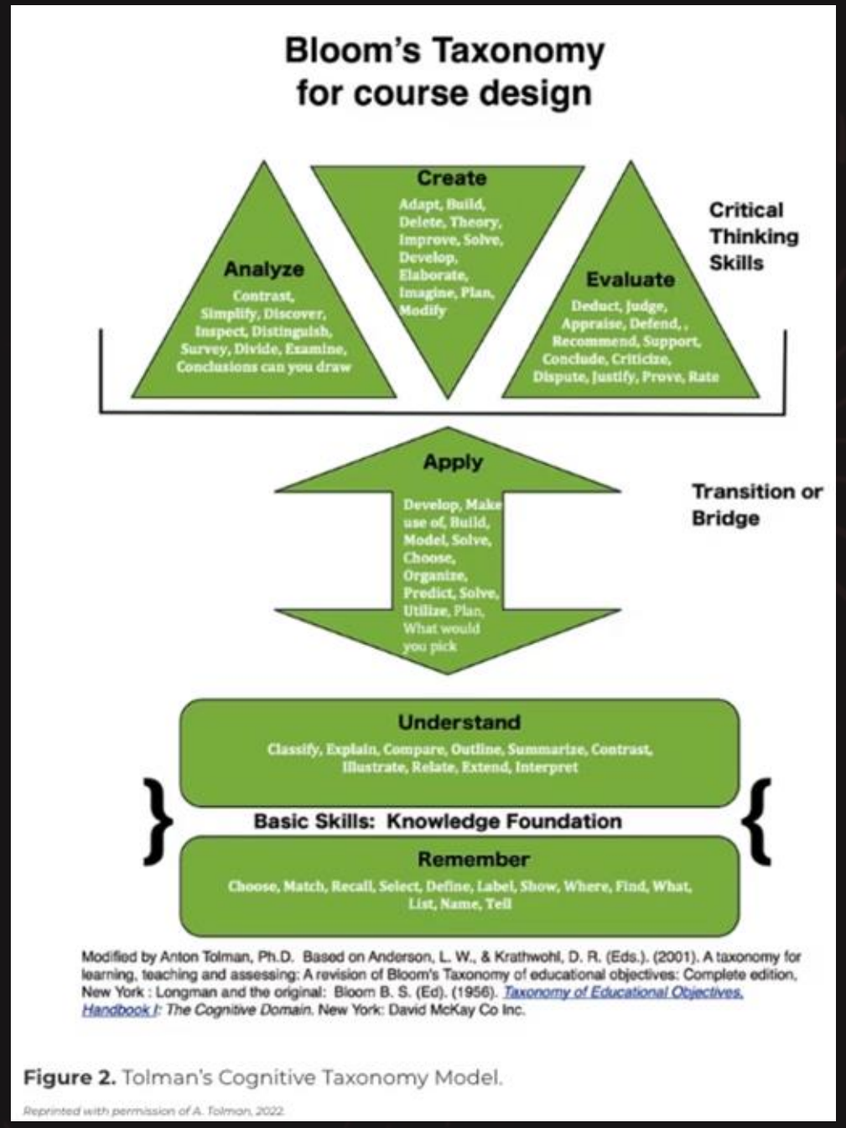


Figure 2. Tolman's Cognitive Taxonomy Model.

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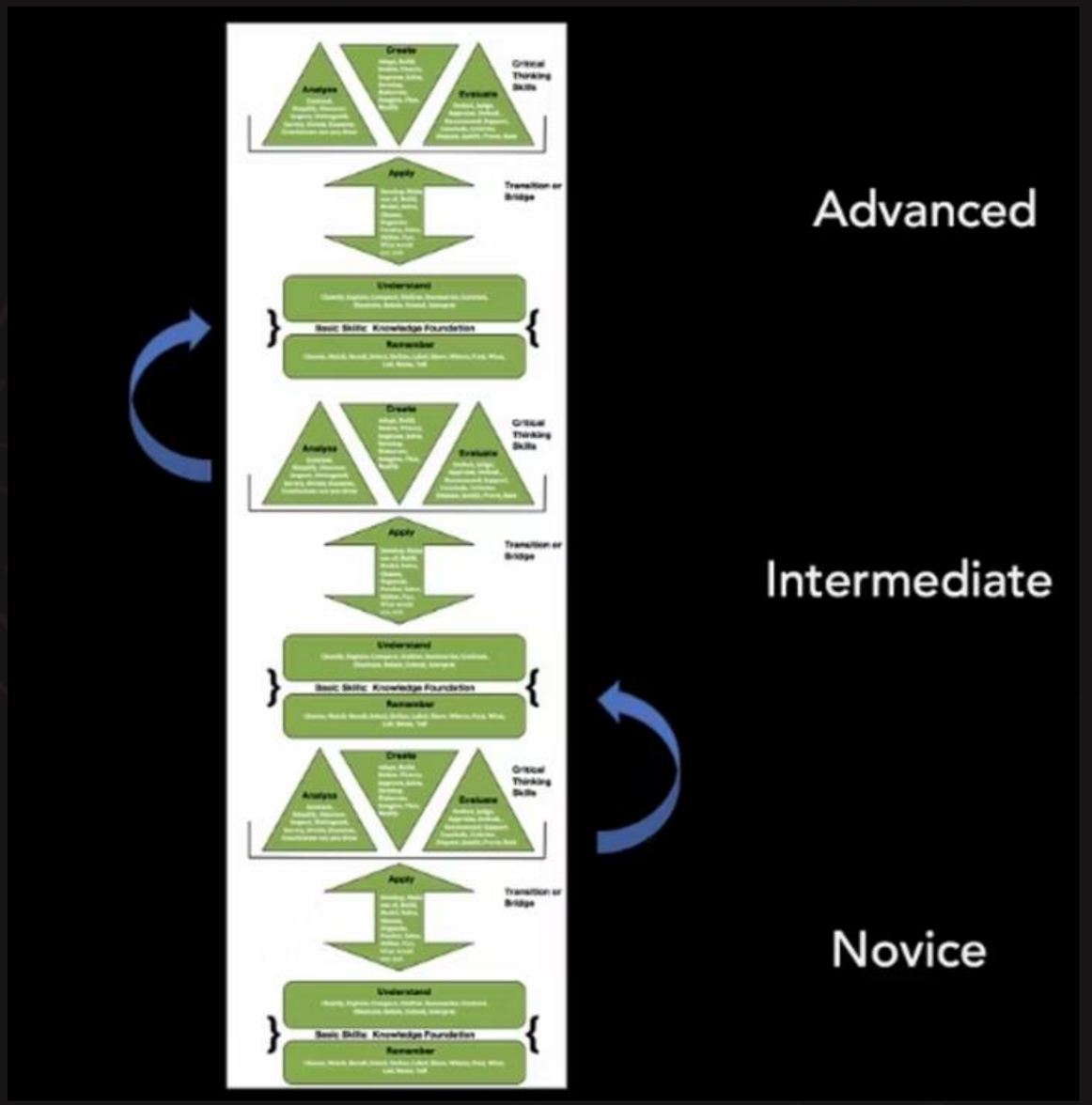

https://www.scholarlyteacher.com/post/maybe-we-should-stack-bloom-s-cognitive-taxonomy

Timing Is the Multiplier

> These principles matter most **early**, while habits are forming, beliefs are still flexible, and students are saying to themselves, "should I stay or should I go."

Interventions in week 10 are valuable. But interventions in week 2? Those compound. They shape the lens students use to interpret every subsequent challenge. Those in the health professions often discuss the downstream effect.

TEACHING STUDENTS TO LEARN

Embedded, Not Extra

The Traditional Model

Advising happens in designated spaces: advising appointments, academic support centers, tutoring sessions. These are important, but often reactive. Particularly when student come for help when struggling.

The Proactive Model

Advising is embedded in course design. Brief explanations, intentional practice, and strategic feedback teach students *how to learn* while they're learning your content.

A Few Suggested Options During the First 30 Hours

01

5-Minute Explanations

Brief, direct explanations of how learning works, such as automaticity, spaced practice, growth mindedness, sleep, exercise, elaboration.

02

Early Low-Stakes Retrieval

Ungraded quizzes, reflection prompts, or think-pair-share activities that give students practice recalling—and can teach them about metacognition, particularly if you have them estimate.

03

Guided Reflection on Study Strategies

"How did you prepare for today? What worked? What didn't?" Make study strategies visible and discussable and teaches student value of reflection.

04

Normalizing Struggle

Syllabus language, in-class comments, and feedback that frame difficulty as expected and productive. Teach students to look carefully at syllabus, explicit and implicit information.

05

Explicit Coaching on Preparation

"Here's what effective preparation looks like for this assignment. Here's why those strategies work.” This can be very helpful with respect to self-efficacy .

Key message: These take minimal time but create high leverage.

A Few More Small Moves With Potential for Big Returns

Keep These Quick and Minimal Effort

You don't need to add new assignments or redesign your course. Teaching students how to learn is about making small, strategic shifts in what you're already doing.

Another option is a 2-min learning tip at the end of each class period (or beginning). Asking students to give it a try and see if it works for them. Examples include:

- Read material very quickly and then slower whille taking notes as needed (leave hi-lighter on desk).
- Practice the strategies we learned today. Use ChatGPT in a role play.
- Provide a reflection prompt and suggest students reflect after reading or studying.

These moments compound and require only a minute or two.

AI & LEARNING

Reframing the AI Question

1

Old Question

"How do we prevent students from using AI to cheat?"

2

New Question

"What guidance are we giving students about learning *with* AI in ways that build capacity?"

This isn't about policing. It's about advising students toward uses of AI that supports the cognitive work that builds learning, not replacing it. Offloading is tempting, but it is dangerous for learning.

The Boundary That Matters

> AI doesn't change how learning works—it changes how visible our advising needs to be. Advising will also be increasingly more valuable.

It is so important I will say it again a slightly different way. Students need to learn to recognize when AI supports learning and when it short-circuits it. Without that guidance, they default to convenience—without understanding what it is costing them.

Learning-Supportive AI Use: A Few Examples

Generating Practice Questions

Ask AI to create practice problems based on course material. Then attempt them without AI assistance. This supports retrieval.

Explaining Concepts—After Attempting

Struggle with a concept first. Explain new concept to AI and then ask what was right and what needs work. AI could also provide feedback on practice problems.

Acting as a Project Manager

Load in course requirements and ask AI to set up a study plan. What should be studied when, how best to practice, and suggestions for healthy snacks.

Guiding principle: AI should come **after** thinking, not instead of thinking. The cognitive work is the learning.

Also - AI can be used for many of the planning aspects of learning (e.g., when should I start writing, or how to work well in groups.)

When I die, I want my group members to lower me in the ground so they can let me down one last time.

Imagine you are a student and have just been assigned to work in a group of 5 for a semester-long project to research an unknown person in the field of study who did something valuable but never got the recognition they deserved. The assignment is for the group to turn in a 10-page group paper. All members of the group will also participate in a 30-minute presentation where any person in the group may be asked about anything presented (so everyone must a bit of knowledge of all aspects of what is being presented).

What prompt might you use to help increase the probability the group will be able to finish this task?

(No: Find the person, write the paper, and outline the presentation is not acceptable. Ok, since you brought that up, how might you make this assignment AI resistant.)

Prompt: I have a big exam on Friday, and I will be having some long study sessions. Please give me some ideas about what I should have around for snacking. :

Example of a Way to Use AI that Students Often Don’t Think About:

Study snack suggestions for a big exam.

Fueling your body with the right nutrients is crucial for optimal brain function during intense study sessions. Proper nutrition can significantly enhance focus, memory, and energy levels, helping you perform your best during exam preparation.

Brain Boosters

Enhance cognitive function and memory.

- **Nuts:** Almonds, walnuts, and cashews are packed with healthy fats and vitamin E.
- **Berries:** Blueberries, strawberries, and raspberries are rich in antioxidants.
- **Dark Chocolate:** Improves blood flow to the brain (in moderation).

Sustained Energy

Maintain steady energy levels without crashes.

- **Greek Yogurt:** High in protein, keeps you full and focused.
- **Whole Grain Crackers with Hummus:** Provides complex carbs and protein.
- **Apple Slices with Peanut Butter:** A balanced mix of fiber, healthy fats, and protein.
- **Trail Mix:** A homemade mix of nuts, seeds, and a few dried fruits.

Things to Avoid

Steer clear of snacks that hinder performance.

- **High Sugar Snacks:** Candies, sodas, and pastries lead to energy crashes.
- **Heavy Meals:** Can cause drowsiness and divert blood flow from your brain to your digestive system.
- **Excessive Caffeine:** May lead to jitters and anxiety.

Hydration & Timing

Keep your body and mind in top shape.

- **Stay Hydrated:** Drink water regularly throughout your study sessions; dehydration can impair concentration.
- **Small, Frequent Snacks:** Aim for small, balanced snacks every 2-3 hours to maintain consistent energy and focus.

FACULTY APPLICATION

Designing Advising Moments

Reflection Prompt

Think about your first 30 contact hours—the first five weeks of your course. There are already likely moments when you're already implicitly advising students about concept related to them learning how to learn:

- How to prepare for exams.
- Where students tend to struggle in a challenging area of content.
- Steps in writing a paper.
- That it is a good idea to read before class.

We have considered many examples in this session.

Many of the individual elements already exist. The question is to what extent are they intentional? Think backward design.

Early Investments Compound

Week 2

One quick explanation of how automaticity impacts learning. Students begin to reframe struggle.

Week 4

One low-stakes retrieval opportunity. Students practice effective study strategies.

Week 8

Students now applying those strategies independently in all classes. Self-Efficacy, confidence, and capacity build.

Semester's End

Students persist through challenges, perform better, and are more likely to return next year — and continue to build on what they are learning about how to learn.

Oh, and hopefully they learn that they can learn how to learn. For me, because of good advising, I never received and F- - again. Four of my faculty that semester would have let me drop out of college and likely never given it a thought. Tim Sawyer saved my college career. Not only was I the first family member to go to college, I was also the only one in the family to go to grad school, run a teaching conference, write a book, be invited to give a lecture/presentation in Slovenia (where my Zakrajsek clan is from), teach a college course,

Quick Share

Turn to a Neighbor

Share one new thing you could start to teach students based on this session you feel you could do fairly easily.

- How will you teach this to your students?
- To what extent will the thing you chose lead to even more learning?
- When in the first 30 hours will it happen?

Time: 2 minutes

This isn't about perfect plans. It's about making one intentional choice and telling it to another person. That increases commitment and clarifies thinking.

Students advising is happening everywhere in The First 30 Hours.

> The question is whether our advising results in confusion—or creates learning meauxmentum.

The Core Message

- Teaching students how to learn during that first 30 hours is a small investment that compounds into confidence, persistence, and completion. It's proactive advising at its most powerful.

Thank You

Questions? Thoughts?

Let's continue the conversation about how we can support our first-year students—not just with what we teach, but with how we teach them to learn.

Maybe we can help them create their own educational butterfly effect for their entire academic lives.