

# Being/Becoming a Great Surgical Teacher

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***The following is a distillation of the key elements of the workshop and plenary presentation that I offered during the 2010 SLS Annual Meeting, held in New York City, Sept. 1-3, 2010.***

Teaching, much like surgery, is a performing art. As is true for becoming a fine surgeon, you can't become a fine teacher by only listening to lectures, or by only reading books, or without lots of “deliberate practice” (practice with reflection and feedback) (Ericsson, 2004).

Being effective teachers, like being effective clinicians, depends in part on what we do, and in part on who we are. In both domains we deal with people, and in both domains everything begins with an accurate and complete diagnosis. (Yes, great teaching also begins with being a diagnostician.)

Good brain research is confirming that we are all unique in the ways we perceive the world and in the ways we learn. We are even more diverse as learners than we are in the ways we manifest our medical needs. In the practice of healthcare, we have a long, appropriate tradition of recognizing each person's uniqueness. We do our diagnoses one person at a time. The evidence is now clear: we should be moving toward a similar pattern with learners in our work as teachers.

Inescapably, if we don't earn and sustain our patients' and our learners' trust, and if we aren't good listeners, we are incomplete as diagnosticians. When we're incomplete as diagnosticians we can't be fully effective as care-givers, whether we're functioning as clinicians or as educators.

Once we have an initial diagnosis, a series of additional tasks need to begin. Our latest findings from educational and brain research as to what we most need to do if we are to be effective teachers are now quite clear. At the very least, we need to be routinely focused on such questions as I've listed below.

## **Some questions to ask yourself about your work as a teacher:**

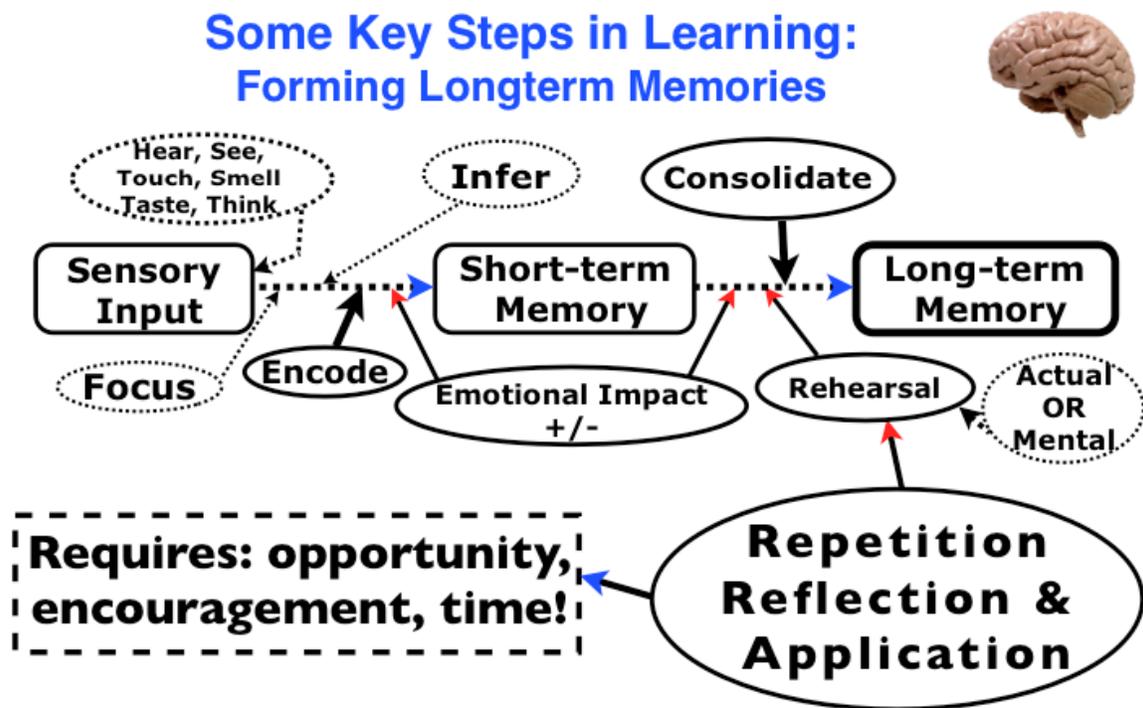
***(Might you already ask yourself the parallels of many of these questions, and take the implied steps, in your work as a surgeon?)***

1. Do I enjoy being a teacher?

- If not, are there ways I can make it more satisfying?
2. Do I seek to improve my understandings and work as a teacher?
    - Do I try keeping up with the educational literature?
    - Am I routinely reflective about the teaching I do (before, during, and after my teaching)?
    - Do I invite colleagues I respect to witness and critique my teaching from time to time?
  3. In different contexts, with different learners, do I make a point of trying various instructional strategies (such as telling, asking, showing, explaining, suggesting, expecting, observing, constructively critiquing)?
  4. Do I seek to help learners “stretch” themselves?
    - Do I get them to move out of their comfort zones, enough to be constructively challenged and achieve success, but not so much that they become counter-productively anxious?
  5. Do my instructional strategies reflect my awareness that my learners’ (and my own) habits of mind and habits of performance can be very difficult to change?
    - Am I appropriately patient with them (and myself)?
  6. Do I regularly ask and invite questions?
    - Do I allow enough time for them to think about their answers and to formulate their questions?
  7. Do I encourage learners to develop the willingness and skills they need for doing accurate self-assessments?
    - As preparation for monitoring themselves thru their careers?
  8. Do I regularly seek to earn and sustain my learners’ trust?
    - If they don’t see me as their genuine advocate, they are unlikely to be fully candid about their concerns and difficulties, without which I can’t be optimally helpful (much as I can’t be optimally helpful with patients if I don’t know their whole, relevant story).

**NOTE:** The diagram below will likely mean most to those who attended the workshop at the SLS meeting. Each step in this process needs some clarification and elaboration, which may not be self-evident if this is new to you. Adequate clarification would require more space than is available here.

**FYI:** We will update this summary of the findings of the latest brain science, and its implications for learning, in our next edition of this workshop, to be offered in conjunction with the 20<sup>th</sup> Anniversary SLS meeting in Los Angeles on Sept. 14, 2011.



(Summary of our current understandings)

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