

A Brief Review of The Seven Laws of Teaching (John Milton Gregory)

My goal is to give you a brief overview of the Seven Laws of Teaching by John Milton Gregory. Gregory published the Seven Laws in 1884. They are widely applied in ACCS schools -application of the Seven Laws is very much a part of ACCS accreditation. Some educators criticize Gregory as being too “modern” or too “mechanical”—that he applies an overly scientific approach to teaching – using “laws” as though they were physical laws that would work in chemistry or engineering. But if you read him carefully it is obvious that he understands the humanity of teachers and learners.

Begin by Thinking about Two Notions of Education:

1. Development of Powers (skills/disciplines)

Training faculties of body and mind to learn skills -Necessary because of immaturity.

Corresponds to **The Art of Training** –the development and cultivating of the powers of the mind and body. (holding pencil or how to participate in Socratic discussion).

2. The Acquisition of Knowledge

Furnishing of the mind with knowledge –facts and truths -Necessary because of ignorance.

Corresponds to **The Art of Teaching** –systematic inculcation of knowledge.

These two –training and teaching, cultivation of the powers/skills and communication of knowledge, make up the teacher’s work. These are inseparable --We can only train by teaching, and we teach best when we train best. But we must keep the two distinct in our minds and watch for progress in both as we teach. The Seven Laws address the Teaching but must be mindful of the “training” aspect.

The Laws of Teaching

Teaching in the simplest sense is the communication of knowledge. It is painting in another’s mind the mental picture in one’s own. It is shaping a pupil’s thought and understanding to the comprehension of the truth the teacher wishes to communicate.

The Seven Laws address seven distinct elements or factors.

- Two Personal Actors –a teacher and a learner;
- Two Mental Factors –common language/medium and a lesson/truth to be communicated.
- Three Functional Acts/Processes: that of the Teacher, that of the Learner, and a final or finishing process, that of Review and Application.

These Seven Laws appear obvious, even simple, but they are important to apply. The Seven Laws are like the instruction manual for IKEA furniture -you might think you don’t need them, but eventually you will read the manual. I look for these things in my teacher observations –not because Gregory wrote this book or ACCS includes their application in their accreditation standards. I look for these things because these are what great teachers do. You can mechanically apply these laws and still fail to be a great teacher -there are other factors involved in effective classical instruction. But you cannot violate these laws and be an effective teacher.

LAW #1: The Law of the Teacher (ch. II) (*1st of Two Personal Actors*)

A teacher must be one who knows the lesson or truth or art to be taught.

Stated as a Rule: Know thoroughly and familiarly the lesson you wish to teach; or, in other words, teach from a full mind and a clear understanding.

- Inadequate knowledge leads to inadequate teaching. Almost too simple to state but we must understand the significance of this law.
- The fuller the knowledge of a topic/concept, the fuller the ability to connect it to wider truths and show it in its greater context -to explain and illustrate. The deeper the knowledge, the greater the passion, enthusiasm, and confidence.
- Teacher readiness gives students needed confidence –put them at ease. The teacher’s competence inspires and encourages the student to learn.

RULES FOR TEACHERS

- Prepare by fresh study. Study until you can explain it in simplest terms. But be patient with the growth of your knowledge.
- Plan for study time; read additional books, etc. Study/Learning in advance allows you to digest and gain insights into topic.

COMMON MISTAKES

- Neglectful preparation -learning just more than the students know. Being unprepared and filling the time with your own stories and verbosity.

Teachers must teach from a deep well. New teachers must be patient with this. Most first year teachers struggle –their wells are not yet deep.

LAW #2: The Law of the Learner (ch. III) (2nd of *Two Personal Actors*)

A learner is one who attends with interest to the lesson given.

Stated as a Rule: Gain and keep the attention and interest of the pupils upon the lesson.

Refuse to teach without attention.

- **Three Degrees of Attention** (labels are not Gregory's)

Passive Attention: Eyes and ears on teacher, but the mind is passive.

Active Attention: Student has roused self to interest, but probably motivated by duty, reward, sympathy, grades, etc.

Engaged Attention: The student feels interested. Eyes and ears are joined by heart, mind and soul. This is when the most effective learning takes place. Hardest to achieve, but obtainable.

- Knowledge is NOT passed from one person to another like a material substance. Thoughts and ideas can only be communicated by being rethought. The student's mind must be put to action in the same way as the teacher's mind is active. The student must actively think what the teacher is thinking -moves beyond "listening" to "thinking" about the lesson content. **The thinking student is an engaged student is a learning student.**

RULES FOR TEACHERS

- Never begin a lesson or class exercise without the full attention of the students. Stop when you don't have full attention and wait until it is regained. Never allow inattention.
- Never exhaust student's power of attention -move to something else, take break, stand and stretch, etc. Use variety and change of pace -adjust as needed. Be age appropriate in expectations and lesson length

COMMON MISTAKES

- Starting or continuing lesson w/out students' attention
- Exhausting students' power of attention -going too long or teaching when they are tired.

LAW #3 – The Law of the Language (ch. IV)

The language used as a medium between teacher and learner must be common to both.

Stated as a Rule: Use words understood by both teacher and pupil in the same sense –language clear and vivid alike to both.

- Law #3 follows logically from Laws 1 & 2. The teacher knows the lesson to be taught and the learner attends with interest. The Law of Language connects the teaching teacher and attending student with a common medium of communication.
- LANGUAGE IS THE VEHICLE AND INSTRUMENT OF THOUGHT.
- The speaker/teacher is responsible for the correct hearing/interpretation of the hearer. The learner must understand the teacher --but not until the teacher understands the learner. The teacher must communicate in language common to both.

RULES FOR TEACHERS

- Know the language/words of your students. Assess student knowledge and comprehension regularly.
- If student does not understand, be prepared to explain differently. Think ahead for lesson content that might be difficult to understand. Use illustrations, analogies, objects, etc.

COMMON MISTAKES

- Forgetting that children are often hesitant to ask for explanations. Never ask, “Does everyone understand?” Ask specific questions that confirm a student’s understanding.
- Assuming that if the student looks interested, it means he understands your words.

LAW #4: The Law of the Lesson (ch. V)

The lesson to be mastered must be explicable in terms of truth already known by the learner; the unknown must be explained by means of the known.

Stated as a Rule: Begin with what is already known to the pupil in the lesson, and proceed to the unknown by single, easy, and natural steps, letting the known explain the unknown.

- The first three laws dealt with the teacher, learner and language. This law deals with the truth to be learned, process to be mastered, or problem to be solved. The Law of the Lesson essentially states that students learn the new truth/process/problem solving by aid of the old and familiar. The path of learning is from Known Truth to Unknown truth.

- Practically speaking –We apply the Law of Lesson by:

Review what they already know: This establishes a baseline or starting point.

Use terms familiar to the students. -Check comprehension. Assess knowledge.

Proceed with graded steps from the known to the unknown. Present the information in clear logical progression.

Check mastery of NEW Knowledge. Provide a new problem to solve; have students apply what they have just learned to a new activity. Never ask, “Does everyone understand?”

RULES FOR TEACHERS

- Find out what the students already know. Review and clarify what they know and then move forward from this starting point.
- Use age-appropriate steps & expectations. Use illustrations that are familiar and suitable. Fix each step, each new piece of knowledge, in the student’s mind before proceeding to the next. Make sure your steps are organized.

COMMON MISTAKES

- Neglecting to ascertain student prior knowledge. Not connecting new learning with old.
- Proceeding in steps that are not logical, sequential, and orderly.
- Failure to fix each truth/concept in the student’s mind before proceeding to next.

LAW #5 Law of the Teaching Process (ch. VI)

Teaching is arousing and using the pupil's mind to form in it a desired conception or thought.

Stated as a Rule: Use the pupil's own mind, exciting his self-activities. Keep his thoughts as much as possible ahead of your expression, making him the discoverer of truth.

- > Law of Teacher, Learner, Language & Lesson. We now look at the actual act of teaching. Teaching is stimulating the student's mind to think. #5 & 6 -most difficult to grasp.
- The Law of the Teaching Process is keeping his thought as much as possible ahead of your expression, placing him in the attitude of a discoverer or an anticipator. Make your pupil a discoverer of truth -one who finds out for himself. This is like a "Connect the Dots" drawing.
- "True teaching is not that which gives knowledge, but that which stimulates pupils to gain it. It may be said that he teaches best who teaches least; or, better still, he teaches most whose pupils learn most without his teaching."

RULES FOR TEACHERS

- Adapt lessons to ages and tastes of the students. Appeal to the senses in younger students, to reasoning/reflective problems in older. Relate lessons to present circumstances of the students –connect lessons to their daily lives.
- Use a "hook" –excite their interest and draw them into the lesson.
- Be patient with the pupil's discovery process. Don't answer your own questions too quickly.
- Ask questions at the end of a lesson that will encourage fresh inquiry for next lesson. Teach students to ask, What? Why? How? Where? When? Whom? Ask "WHY" 10X each day.

COMMON MISTAKES

- Spoon feeding information/concepts into student's minds by simply telling/lecturing them and not provoking them to think through material on their own.
- Expecting students to remember what they never learned. The students will not remember what they have not truly "thought" about.
- Not allowing students time to think and respond to questions.

LAW# 6 The Law of the Learning Process (ch. VII)

The Law of the Learning Process: Learning is thinking into one's own understanding a new idea or truth.

Stated as a Rule: Require the pupil to reproduce in thought the lesson he is learning –thinking it out in its parts, proofs, connections, and applications till he can express it in his own words.

- Sounds similar to #5 Law of Teaching Process, but it is quite different. The Law of the Teaching Process is getting the student to think on his own. Law of the Learning Process is getting the student to reproduce what he has learned in his own words.
- Just as pouring out information is not true teaching, mere memorization, mimicry, or regurgitation of the teacher's words is not true learning. The student must understand and be able to translate the ideas and principles into their own thoughts & words.
- Learning Stages
 1. Memorization of the lesson content –student able to recite the words, vocab, formulas.
 2. Understanding –the student grasps the thought of the lesson. He understands
 3. Translation –student can put the lesson into own words w/out loss of meaning.
 4. Proof –student seeks for proof of the lesson content –He can answer the why question.
 5. Application –student uses and applies the lesson. He asks, "What is the good of it? How can it be applied and used?"

NO Learning is complete until all five stages obtained.

RULES FOR TEACHERS

- Train students to pay close attention to actual words –learn to be precise –to think with nuance. Ask students to express in their own words the meaning of the lesson as they understand it. Require the restatement to retain ALL of the original meaning.
- Ask students the Why? Question -OFTEN --Cultivate independent learning and research.

COMMON MISTAKES: Violations of this law are perhaps the most common/damaging to a lesson.

- Moving forward in a lesson (or to the next lesson) before the student has had the chance to think it through to clear understanding.
- Memorization is important but must not demand memorization without grasping the meaning. (Be discerning with the younger students.)

LAW #7 The Law of Review and Application (ch. VIII)

The Law of Review and Application: The test and proof of teaching done –the finishing and fastening process –must be a re-viewing, re-thinking, re-knowing, re-producing of the knowledge taught.

Stated as a Rule: Review, review, review, reproducing correctly the old, deepening its impression with new thought, correcting the false views, completing the true.

- All else being equal, the best teacher is the one “who secures from his pupils the most frequent, thorough, and interesting reviews.”
- Review is more than mere repetition –more than just rethinking the same thoughts. Review involves fresh conceptions and new associations. The more a truth/concept is reviewed by different methods, angles, applications, the more it settles into long-term memory.
- Review must also vary with the subject and age of students.

Younger students –simple repetition may be suitable.

Older students –a thoughtful re-study requiring deeper application.

Latin conjugations –translation using new words with learned endings.

Math –working different problems that apply learned process or facts.

History & Lit –review that requires new application or requires students to make new associations or connections.

RULES FOR TEACHERS

- Review is ALWAYS a good thing –always in order, always appropriate. Have set/scheduled times for reviews.
 - At beginning of EVERY Lesson review previous lesson.
 - At the end of every lesson review what you have covered.
 - Before a test/exam (or after several lessons), schedule specific time for review.
- Review what’s been taught before it is forgotten and needs to be re-taught.
- Study guides, games, recitation, drilling, rapid fire Q&A –all help in review.

COMMON MISTAKES

- Having rushed/hurried/unplanned review –Not being intentional in review.
- Waiting too long to review –covering too much material before a review. Review as you go. Do little reviews frequently, larger reviews less frequently, but regularly.
- Having a review that is simply a mindless repetition of what you covered before. Be Careful of Study Guides -do not allow test taking to be mere regurgitation.