

The Self-Correcting Process of Learning

082619

The idea that learning is a self-correcting process comes from a teacher of mine, the Canadian philosopher, Bernard Lonergan. ¹ What follows here is my own account prepared for college-level students, with a special emphasis on learning from reading.

Basic Assertions

All learning is asking and answering questions about experience. This is not a technique devised by educational experts. It is a way of learning that is natural to the human mind.²

The experience of reading raises questions about what the author means. It also raises the question of what the text means to you, the reader.

The Role of Questions

A concrete example will illustrate the key role played by questions in how we naturally come to understand texts:

In the film, *Bridges of Madison County*,³ an Iowa farmer, Richard Johnson, and his wife, Francesca, have died. They are survived by two grown children, Michael and Carolyn, who are both in the middle of marriage problems. In her will, Francesca asks that they have her body cremated and her ashes cast into the river under the Roseman Covered Bridge. They are surprised at her request. Michael thinks it means nothing; Carolyn suspects it means everything.



While digging through her effects, they discover photographs and a diary that astonish them. Years back, while they and their father were away for a long weekend attending a state fair, a stranger stopped at the farm to ask directions from Francesca. His name is Robert Kincaid, a wanderer at heart on assignment from *National Geographic* to photograph the many covered bridges in Madison County. Polite small-talk gradually circles around and deeper into life, commitment, work, desires, hopes, and disappointments. They both love Yeats. She touches his shoulder. He fixes a fence. They have dinner—for her, the first dinner for as long as

she can remember where conversation is alive and engaging. He sleeps on the couch for the night. Next morning she goes with him to photograph the Roseman Bridge. The rest you know or can easily guess.

Four days later, the husband and kids will be returning. Robert must leave. He asks her to go with him, and she deeply wants to. Happiness beckons her far beyond what she ever dreamed, but so does a profound guilt should she leave her family. One commentator notes that the climax of the movie is not in a bed but in a truck. Shortly after her family returns, Francesca and her husband are in town for groceries. From their pickup truck, she sees Robert leaving the general store on his way to leave the state. She puts her hand to the door handle, eager to leap out, but she doesn't move. She weighs the value of carrying through on family promises against pursuing happiness for herself.

She carries through on her promises.

Notice how Michael and Carolyn understand her diary. They will ask and answer questions about this evidence. Here Lonergan identifies four kinds of questions that seek understanding:

1. The objects: What are the things she is writing about?

Mainly, Francesca is writing about her relationship with Robert. She expects that after she dies, those who read her diary will experience questions: Who is this man? What was he up to?

2. The words: What do her words mean to her?

What did she mean by writing this: "In that moment, everything I knew to be true about myself up until then was gone. I was acting like another woman, yet I was more myself than ever before."

3. The author: Why did she write these words?

What were her feelings about y Robert? Why would she even think of leaving her own family? Why did she keep her deepest hopes secret? What inspired her to keep a diary in the first place? What values from tradition did she hold most dear?

4. Myself: What do her words mean to me?

Michael and Carolyn will ask, What happened to me when I read her words? What did I feel? What aroused my curiosity? What insights, realizations, and values have I gained? What sort of child of Francesca am I?

Self-Understanding

This fourth question needs some clarification. Authors write to influence readers, and intelligent readers would seek to understand not only the thing written about, the author's words, and the author, but also themselves.⁴

Reading for understanding is a two-way street. The priorities evident an author can raise questions about the reader's priorities. Michael and Carolyn likely wonder: Knowing we would find her diary, what did she hope would happen to us as we read it? Is the pursuit of my personal happiness really the most important thing in life? To save my marriage, indeed, to carry forward my inheritance of Mom's heart, what sort of person should I be?

An author may even challenge one's image of what the entire drama of human living is about—a challenge particularly evident in classic works. Should Michael and Carolyn leaf through Francesca's copy of Yeats' poetry, they might find this passage heavily underlined:

Then nowise worship dusty deeds,
nor seek, for this is also sooth,
to hunger fiercely after truth,
lest all thy toiling only breeds
new dreams, new dreams; there is no truth
saving in thine own heart.⁵

In reading this, it is Yeats who now engages them. With their mother and Robert they are touched by Yeats' vision regarding good deeds, the search for truth, and hopeful dreams as compared to the human heart. They feel what Yeats felt. Some people who read these words may recognize how Yeats' words express a world view that has been a part of the very tradition in which they were raised and which has long shaped how they read anything. Others will realize that Yeats' words upset assumptions in their inherited world-views that have long shaped their reading; they will feel invited toward a genuineness longed-for by countless other readers of Yeats. In the same way, people who aim to deepen their understanding of anything they read often take on ever deeper explorations of their feelings and assumptions well-known to readers like themselves.

In all these efforts, Michael and Carolyn follow no steps for understanding texts. They ask these questions randomly and gropingly—the manner natural to all human efforts to understand one another. They consider various plausible answers to their questions and to whatever new questions come to mind. They won't be satisfied until they establish some highly plausible and interlocking answers aimed at understanding their mother and themselves.

A Legitimate Method

Lonergan names this method *the self-correcting process of learning*. Everyone experiences the process; but only some have identified its elements for themselves.

The process is a spiral. When we try to understand any issue or person, we start with some provisional idea of their feelings and thinking; we try to support it with evidence; we discover that our first understanding needs refining; we consider a refined understanding; we check our refined understanding against the evidence; and so on, spiraling through provisional and increasingly refined understandings until our understanding seems fully supported by all available evidence and leaves us with no unanswered questions.

Regarding the understanding of texts, I start with some initial understanding of the object, the words, the author, and myself, along with questions about things that I've been curious about. I consider a possible understanding of what a certain passage means. I check it against what I understand of other passages, of other authors on the same topic, and of all the concerns within my horizon. If it satisfies my questions, I move forward; if not, I self-correct by considering a different understanding.

Gradually, by circling through questions, provisional understandings, checks for validity, and provisional answers, I may well come to a comprehensive understanding. I consider it comprehensive when my understanding ties it all together in a way that no new questions occur to me.⁶ As Lonergan describes this method, "The key to success is to keep advertent to what has not yet been understood."⁷

Since there are no clear steps involved, is it valid to call the self-correcting process of learning a *method*? No, not if a method must be a fixed list of steps designed to reach unquestionable *truths*. But if by *method* we understand any process that produces progressive and converging *understandings*, then it certainly is a method. The self-correcting process of learning does not guarantee unassailable truth. But it makes progress by posing questions and accumulating answers into an overall coherent understanding that survives the test of "most plausible understanding."

We can clarify this method by contrast with some common misconceptions about how to understand texts. The self-correcting process of learning is not:

A recipe with a fixed sequence of steps.

A search for examples that support one's existing beliefs.

A method guaranteed to settle all further questions.

An effort to find passages to quote in a sermon or paste into an essay.

An effort based on the assumption that words mysteriously contain meanings and, therefore, that to grasp meanings in revered texts like the Bible or the US Constitution, one must look hard at the words.

A one-way exploration that expects to learn about others without being personally affected.

It is rather an author-engagement event: It aims toward understanding the *objects* an author writes about, the *words* an author uses, the *author* as having personal feelings, interests and concerns, and one's own feelings, interests and concerns being changed by the author.

Moreover, the method works. This becomes plain if we accept that the goal of understanding texts is not absolute certitude but progress toward the most plausible understanding. How does one test whether one's understanding validity?

Since learning is asking and answering questions, the validity test is whether one's understanding meets all the relevant questions. And since the criterion for judging the correctness of one's understanding is the absence of further relevant questions, readers of any text must share their understandings with others for the simple reason that no individual can assume to know all the relevant questions. These questions arise among the community of readers who share their understandings of the sources of a text and themselves.

Progress also depends on avoiding bias against certain questions that may in fact be relevant. The objectivity of the process does not depend on looking hard at written words; objectivity in understanding is the fruit of subjectivities open to learning and alert to the dangers of bias.

Familiar Examples

Modern science is a good example of the effectiveness of this view. Scientists do not seek to establish truth. By presented explanations, they seek to evoke in others the best available understandings of evidence.¹

Newton did not aim to establish that things fall; he aimed to provide a plausible explanation of why things fall. Freud did not establish that people have psychological problems; he proposed plausible explanations of why people have psychological problems.

¹ A distinction between understanding and explaining is relevant here. Explanations are verbal expressions of understanding whose purpose is to evoke understanding in others. Explanations are neither correct nor incorrect: they either adequately or inadequately evoke understanding in others. Commonly, we discover misunderstandings in ourselves and in others when we attempt explanations of our what we understand. understandings.

Modern scholarship presents similar examples. Today, assertions made by biographers, historians, and biblical scholars about their subjects are not presented as true of all persons, historical movements, and biblical statements. They aim to promote a consensus among fellow scholars about what this biographer, this historian, and this biblical author *happened* to mean. Even when scholars disagree, whenever new textual evidence or new theories about learning or feelings or language come to light, open-minded scholars are eager to reconsider their understanding of certain texts.

The Habit of Comprehension

Practically speaking, to become a skilled learner, students should develop a habit of knowing the difference between comprehension and incomprehension. It's the difference between understanding and failing to understand. They should know this not by some definition but directly by personal experience in their everyday life. In ordinary conversations, discussions at work, listening to lectures, and in any reading whatsoever, people who have the habit of noticing what they don't understand readily seek help by saying, "Wait. I don't understand."

Students can develop a habit of comprehensive reading by keeping these four questions in mind:

1. Do I understand the *thing* the author is talking about?
2. Do I understand the *words* the author is using?
3. Do I understand the author of this text?
4. Do I understand the *effect on me* from reading this?

If you let these questions bother you, you may be surprised to learn that you often fail to fully understand what you read. This is not bad news. Learning where you fail to understand is learning. It is an essential step toward full understanding. Or, consider the opposite case: People who fail to understand what they read, but do not notice that they failed to understand, are likely to start talking about things they don't understand. A more intelligent person would realize that such talkers don't understand what they're talking about.

As you develop this habit of noticing what you fail to understand, you will find that all four questions are essential for reaching a well-rounded comprehension of anything you read.

— Tad Dunne

1 See Bernard Lonergan, *Method in Theology* (New York: Herder & Herder, 1972) 159-160, 208-9, 303. (Chapter 7, sections 3 and 4.)

2 The effort to understand meanings relies primarily on the reader *being intelligent*. Being also knowledgeable about facts is important but only preliminary toward understanding why these are the facts and how they came about.

3 Released in 1995, starring Meryl Streep and Clint Eastwood. Based on Robert James Waller's book by the same title.

4 Lonergan notes that these "four aspects are aspects of a single coming to understand." *Method in Theology*, 155 (Chap. 7, section 1).

5 From William Butler Yeats' "The Song of the Happy Shepherd."

6 See "Judging the Correctness of One's Interpretation," *Method in Theology*, 162-65 (Chapter 7, section. 1)

7 Lonergan, *Method in Theology*, 164 (Chapter 7, sec. 6). If I may add a personal observation, the habit of noticing exactly where we don't understand something is not established quickly. But the effort to develop the habit does speed up the process of reading for comprehension.