On Not Knowing[1]

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When I teach undergraduates, I constantly encourage questions. I use the familiar teacher's encouragement, "There's no such thing as a stupid question." Like so many of the teachers you've had, I'm sure, I explain that a question can help not only the student who asks it but also all the student who didn't ask but were unfortunately too embarrassed to ask. Sometimes asking the question helps the student articulate an idea so that the answer comes naturally even without help.
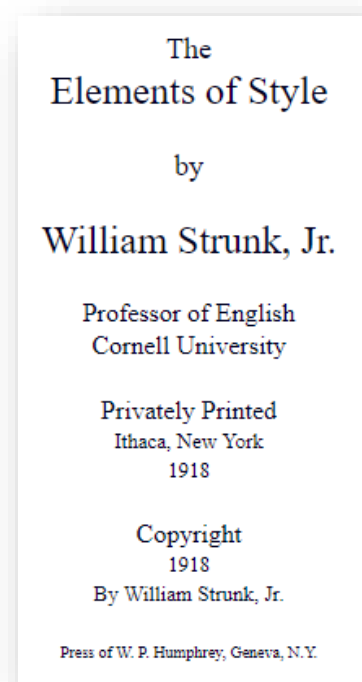
In face-to-face classes, I often demand quick answers from my class -- they are supposed to fill in the blanks when I ask them to. I'll say, "Don't worry about making mistakes. I don't care if you make a mistake -- I'm more interested in getting you actively involved in thinking about the question and responding. It's not a problem making a mistake or not knowing an answer."

Occasionally, a student will actually apologize for asking a question or for making a mistake. Many times under those circumstances, I have said, "Look, everybody makes mistakes. I make mistakes. My teachers made mistakes. Great scientists make mistakes. The issue is not preventing mistakes but learning from them."

One of the horrible neuroses visited upon innocent children by incompetent elementary and high school teachers (not by good ones) is fear of making a mistake or of demonstrating ignorance. Children become fearful of offering an answer in case it leads to ridicule or punishment.

I always remember reading about Professor William Strunk (1869-1946) of Cornell University, who, according to his student and editor E. B. White, ". . . scorned the vague, the tame, the colorless, the irresolute. He felt it was worse to be irresolute than to be wrong. I remember a day in class when he leaned far forward, in his characteristic pose — the pose of a man about to impart a secret — and croaked, 'If you don't know how to pronounce a word, say it loud! If you don't know how to pronounce a word, say it loud!' This comical piece of advice struck me as sound at the time, and I still respect it. Why compound ignorance with inaudibility? Why run and hide?"[2] Or in other words, why miss the opportunity to be corrected and thereby learn the pronunciation?

All of us have forgotten the name of someone we've already met. I've seen people go for long painful minutes refusing to admit that they can't remember someone's name. Why suffer? First of all, I don't assume that people will remember my name; I certainly don't feel insulted by such an innocent failing. I often introduce myself to people I haven't seen for long time in case they don't remember my face. So when I don't remember somebody else's name, I just say, "Well hello! Good to see you again. But please forgive me -- I don't remember your name." Nobody has ever been anything other than gracious and friendly in telling me their name.

The
Elements of Style
by
William Strunk, Jr.

Professor of English
Cornell University

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1918

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[2] (Strunk 1918)

When I make a mistake in class, I correct it loudly, so that no one remains in doubt. And as you know, when I make a mistake in one of the MSIA quizzes (O how often that's happened!), I give an extra point to the first student to identify the error and thank her for spotting the problem. In contrast, one of our students wrote that challenging a quiz question in another course her colleagues had been involved in was a prescription for disaster. How despicable.

I remember challenging a test our biology class was given in my first year at McGill University, when I was 16 (in 1966!). We were told to memorize the Latin names of 10 plants. I protested that memorizing names without understanding the names' origins or anything about the plants was a meaningless ritual. Even though I knew the names, I refused to answer the questions on principle. Of course, I got a zero in the test, but I still think it was right to challenge a stupid question. A better teacher would have listened to the reasoning and changed the test.

Recently, a student wrote to me about a technical term used by his employer. He said that he didn't know what it meant and hadn't been able to find explanations on the Web. I wrote back that I didn't know what it meant either and that in his place, I would say to my employer, "I don't know what that means. Can you tell me more about it?"

Fourty years ago I was teaching database theory at John Abbott College in the West End of Montréal. I had taken my entire class to Place Ville Marie downtown to hear a lecture on Oracle databases. This was a great opportunity for the students to dress up, bring business cards, and meet all kinds of interesting people, some of whom might be possible employers. There must have been 350 people in the audience that day. Partway through the talk, the speaker showed a slide which referred to the matrix analytical method for something or other. I put up by hand and said, "Excuse me, but I don't know what the matrix analytical method is." There was a moment of silence, and then the speaker said in a strangled voice, "I don't either."

It turned out the slides were from some other speaker and he was just filling in. The audience exploded with good-natured laughter.

Fifteen years later one of my students from that class wrote to me and mentioned the incident as one of the most valuable experiences in his time at John Abbott. He said it taught him that there is nothing shameful about not knowing something.

So the next time someone uses a word you don't know or refers to a method you haven't heard about, treat it as an opportunity, not a problem.

With a bright, eager expression and genuine anticipation in your heart, simply say, "I don't know that! What does it mean?"

Work Cited

Strunk, W. & E. B. White. 1918. *The Elements of Style*. Bartleby. Accessed Mar 01, 2019.
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