

The Writings of Guy Bensusan

Many of us have followed the writings of Dr. Guy Bensusan for a long time. Others are just discovering him. He is a frequent contributor to the DEOS listserv, and freely shares his rich experience and philosophy. Over the years, Ed Journal has published a number of his articles. He has given his kind permission to publish these each month starting with his writings of about five years ago.

His philosophy and practice have continued to grow with the advent of new technology and the acceptance of distance learning as a viable and effective alternative to traditional methods of teaching. He is the master teacher, leading us into new paradigms of teaching and learning. Through these writings he will take us on a journey of exploration and discussion. He will show us how to motivate students and achieve results with anywhere-anytime collaborative learning that are the envy of most classroom teachers.

The *Bensusan Method* is enriching the lives of tens of thousands of students. Ed Journal is grateful to have Dr. Bensusan present this series of articles each month so that you, your colleagues, and your students can enjoy and benefit from his experience.

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Formulate sequences of ascending personal assignments

By Guy Bensusan

One goal of self-actualization is that learners can learn on their own when the questions they formulate lead them from one step to another through a series of ever-more-elevated levels of comprehension. If a learning-centered teacher can organize assignments adequately, this can also occur as a method for helping students lead themselves through the course. If we consider one of the visual thinking tools discussed in chapter A-2, such as The Ladder, we can adapt and develop the idea. The Ladder model suggests a hierarchy of rungs beginning at the bottom with a student's reactive response, then climbing to components and techniques in the subject, then to cultural context, to sources of information,

author bias, school of thought, and so on. Those levels, applied to specific student-selected topics and discussed thoroughly during class time, can be the basis for assignment design that the student can work on, step-by-step, for the entire term.

I call this approach "The Escalator," because, as with a department store or airport escalator, the rider rises and is carried to an ever-higher level by actively stepping-up as well as being lifted by the mechanism. This is a case where one plus one can equal three for the student, who, recognizing the existence and characteristics of the many levels, anticipates them, seeks them out, and thus goes beyond mere data because of the pre-cognition involved. At the same time, what is learned on the first step becomes valuable in thinking out and formulating what will happen on the second one, while the actions undertaken in steps one and two become a solid basis for the third, until the end of the term and the top of the escalator is reached.

Moreover, this escalator system is only one part of the larger learning picture. In addition to these essays, each student must self-assess at the beginning, middle and end of the term, and must create a project in which he or she demonstrates ability to apply course principles. It should be noted here, that the essay series (which are six, or one every two weeks in my current system) is not graded as they are completed. Nor are they checked in by the teacher as part of checking-up and record-keeping. Rather, the student, assigned completion of one step every two weeks, accumulates them in order in a work portfolio. More on this is in Chapter C-1, but here it is enough to say that the teacher must allow students to be responsible, asking for help if they need it, but otherwise on their own.

So let us turn to a six-step escalator process and describe each of the parts along with what happens when a student follows the instructions. The Escalator has the following parts:

6. Resolve
5. Recast
4. Probe
3. Consult
2. Verify
1. Imagine

We begin with number one. As soon as the students have selected a topic to work on throughout the term, which they do during the first week as we discuss the Hexadigm cultural model in class (see more complete description in Chapter A-2), they undertake to write an essay of ideas and questions based upon their application of the cultural model principles to the topic they have chosen. Moreover, they must do this without looking anything up in their dictionaries, textbooks or encyclopedias, and they must not go to any library. It must all come from their intrinsic knowledge, imagination and, or course, pre-conditionings.

Thus, imagining they have chosen pottery in a course on Mexican Arts and Culture, they need to formulate their initial assembly of ideas and questions by carrying the idea of cultural sequences through from the pottery of early Indians, through the arrival of Spaniards with their own pots, then to whatever ideas and wares which may have arrived during the colonial era with Africans brought into Mexico, or Chinese and Filipinos having come across on the Manila Galleon trade. At the same time, they would set up categories for the pottery, such as figurines versus religious or household items, toys, and so on.

Continuing with the cultural sequences after Independence, they would consider what new pottery ideas and uses would have arrived from Europe and other parts of the world once Spain had ceased to be the mother country and Mexico was a nation on its own during the years of the industrial revolution. Then in the 20th century, with new arrivals from around the globe, and new materials, questions would continue about how pottery has changed or remained the same.

Turning to the second part of the Hexadigm, questions would now revolve around Mutual Influences. How, for instance, would the pottery of the Indians be likely to change with the arrival of the Spaniards? What kinds of things would cease to exist and which of them would be perpetuated? Vice versa, since the new arrivals wanted their traditional pottery, would they ship it from Spain and Europe or try to make it in Mexico, or both? How would that affect the styles, the decoration, the actual objects --- and who would be the potters and how might they affect the pottery?

The third element, Regional Diversities, now becomes the focus of the students'

thinking as they study about the geography of Mexico, the resource from which different clays, slips, colors as well as cultural elements would have an impact on the overall topic of pottery. Modernizing Technologies would enter the picture as new machines, kilns, and production methods would be invented to meet the demands of travelers and increased populations. The students would continue to work on their own, developing data for further essays.

Before doing that, however, they will write up their first essay, find a class colleague to swap essays with, and try to help each other in comprehensive thinking. They will also seek to expand their pre-library writings, developing and up-dating them. In class I will ask one or two students to talk about this process and to outline their overall thinking in relation to their selected topic. Most students in the class will have chosen other topics (since I have made a list of seventy-five), though there are some duplications. The value of this is that the paired sharing that had taken place earlier now opens up to the entire class, where more ideas are exchanged as I ask questions to flesh out the Hexadigm principles.

At this point, the students have successfully completed their first assignment, and have done so based on their residual or internal knowledge as well as their imaginations, applications of a model and initial interaction. There is a sense of accomplishment, some solid structure and orderliness to their thinking, and when they do go to the library, they will be looking for specifics which they will superimpose upon their investigation and thus will not be at the mercy of the resources which they find in the library. They will be in charge of their research now --- and will have slots in their mental outlines into which they can fit any data that they find.

Now it is time to move to the second stage. I tell them, "go find your resource materials and see how much of what you have already thought through can be verified by information in books, videos, interviews, or whatever other data sources you can find." By the next day I am getting phone calls about how much they found on some parts and how little they found on others. Or they are stymied and impatient because the topic they wanted to look up in the computerized catalog was not to be found. In most cases, their first instinct is to come back to me and complain that there was something wrong with the assignment, or that the library is totally inadequate, and they will need to change their topic.

So the following class period starts with a rush! I start off knowing what is going to happen with a "Good morning, and tell me what you learned." One after another their frustrations and disappointments with their library come tumbling out. I will ask, "What do you think are the problems here? Why were you so successful with your initial essay and so unhappy about your research? Why do you think you did not find everything you thought you would?"

Suddenly new ideas hatch about not looking in the right place, or not being sufficiently creative or clever enough to look under other categories! I mention, "Whose vocabulary are you going to have to use if you want to use the Library

organizational system?" Eyes light up when they realize the expanded potential. Some students, of course, will have already figured it out --- others need merely to be reminded. Some students locate partial answers to their search while others who find nothing need to be led or assisted to other trails. We sometimes spend an entire period just discussing the process, and what has been learned as a result.

We also talk about why some subjects have not been written about as well as others, and why the library, with all its books, does not have them all right there. This introduces the topic of inter-library loans, and we talk about the difference between locating a specific book somewhere else, and looking for other ways to get at what they want to know. Extending their search gives them a better understanding of the resourcefulness each investigator must possess. We also talk about non-library information sources; some will seek out professors on campus with expertise in the topic they have chosen; some will go to the internet and listservers; some will look around for others in the course who are working on the same topic.

In all, it is a most productive development session and my greatest concern is to make sure that everyone has been dealt with one-on-one so that they will stay with it and not quit from any disappointment or sense of failure. Just about everyone finds for a start on the second essay despite the esoteric nature of some of the topics. The disappointment does not come from failure but rather from a comparative mindset. John may know, for instance, that Mary found nine books but he found only two; it is the perceived disparity that constitutes a sense of failure.

This may be the touchiest point in the course, so I always encourage the student to go back, giving them vocabulary hints and ideas about encyclopedias and journal articles if necessary. By the next class session, frustration may still exist, but spirits are higher as more information has been found, and it is now time for them to write their second essay, describing and assessing their second level experience, and preparing for their collaborative session.

In the third, or Consult stage, I ask students to do four things: one is to create a group of at least four students, two is to swap their second essays (so that each student reads at least three other stories), three to discuss their stories with each other, and four to write an essay in detail on what they have learned from the experiences of the first three stages.

We are now ready for the fourth essay, called Probe, in which they start thinking about the nature of the resources they have found. Everyone has by this time come up with several books, articles, videos, interview data or other information, and the assignment here is to select the three most significant resources, those which are being relied on most heavily, and evaluate them. We spend time in class talking about this, as well as reviewing the topic in several chapters of the text.

The student needs to realize the importance in all research of persistent inquiry

into the validity of each source. They must probe into the authors biases and background, the purpose of the book and for what audience it was written. There are also other questions about when and where the book was written, and what is said about it in reference works.

One must also compare books or articles with others on the same subject to find parallels and opposites. I tell students that information is one thing and point of view is another, and the latter influences the former. They should be able to make observations on which author they think provides more valid information and why, and what school of thought or interpretation the author seems to be following. Most significant of all, I ask them to go back to their first essay to comment on the parallels and dissimilarities between the research design they initially formulated and how the author handled it in his published work. Finally, I ask them to get together in small groups and again compare notes.

The fifth essay, called Recast, moves into the area of interpretation. Here I want the students to think more deeply about Schools of Criticism or Thought or Interpretation. While there are chapters in the textbook on these, which they have as assigned reading, I also spend at least one class session setting up a simulation. We will pick a topic we can openly work with, and one that can easily be assessed: for instance, architecture. Having made an initial run-through on architecture with the Hexadigm, which by now the students are thoroughly familiar with, we will select a group of six or seven imaginary professors from different academic disciplines and nationalities.

In our simulation discussion, we may choose, for instance, a US cultural Historian who is a Navajo Indian, a Spanish Anthropologist, a Japanese Environmental Scientist, a German Architect, a Mexican Political Scientist, and a female Engineer from India. Or, we can move in another way and invite someone who believes in Geographic Determinism, another who sees life in terms of Jungian Archetypes, a third who is ---, well, anyone! I will ask class members to set up some role-play as we try to figure out how each of our imaginary honored guests would want to deal with their assessment of Mexican architecture from the Indian, Colonial, National and Current eras.

Not only is it enjoyable and often humorous, but it lays a dual and triple foundation for the next essay the students have to write. In this fifth essay they examine the thinking of various schools in our interpretational world, including deconstructionist groups who are so rapidly changing our ways of seeing and thinking. The final part of the essay needs to be dedicated to assessing which of the arguments they find most compelling and why. Once again, I ask the students to work in small groups and compare.

This collaboration helps the students get into their final essay, which is a resolution of all that has happened during the course, including a review of the learning experiences they have passed through. The emphasis of this essay is, as its title on The Escalator suggests, Resolve. In essence, the question is, And Where Are We Now? At this point, what conclusions have we come to? We

recognize we have been changing our visions, viewpoints, and depth of comprehensions, and have attained the ability to see many layers at the same time, as well as point out strengths and weaknesses in the information we have gathered in support of our projects.

It has taken several year for me to develop this formula, due to the following reasons; I can only experiment with one or two new elements each semester, I can only move forward from where I was before, I cannot think of all the possibilities at once, and I can't go too far each time, as everything I change in one area means that I have to readjust many other elements down the line. However, last summer I used the Escalator for the first time, and since it was a four week session that met daily for almost two hours, I set up four steps --- internal, external, analytical and comparative.

One essay was due each week. The students worked well, even though the system was new to them. I gave them two options: either receiving an evaluating grade per essay, or retaining their work in a portfolio until the fourth week and receiving their grade then. Most of them took the second option.

In the fall I tried it again, and since we were now dealing with a fifteen-week semester, I decided to add two steps, one that would focus on collaboration, and another that would create closure at the end. I changed the visual model to six levels, made student portfolios due by the end of the thirteenth week, and left the final two weeks for summing-up and evaluations. During those two weeks I also reviewed the portfolios. For the first time, no one asked, "How am I doing?" When I asked why, the class response was, "We do not need to ask because we know where we are and how we are advancing."

As we talked about it more, several students mentioned what had happened to them during the process. Though many had started with some real misgivings, they all said that the six steps constituted a solid structure with a logical sequence that gave them definite goals to work towards, a clear understanding of what came next and a precise number of tasks to complete. Some even admitted to having used a book or encyclopedia to help them over the stage fright of that first essay on their selected topic, which was supposed to come from their existing knowledge, imagination and step-by-step working- through of the Hexadigm.

I asked about that part: did it make sense to them not to go to the library until they had worked through their research design? The response was a unanimous, "Yes." Pushing farther, I asked why they thought so. I assumed they would give me the reasons I had given them at the first of the semester, that it would establish their outline for entering into the investigatory phase, keep them from being at the mercy of whatever information they could find in books at the library, and place them in command both of their initial search as well as the remainder of the rising steps on the Escalator.

They did say these things, but they also revealed much more. Several students stated that they were amazed with the sense of self-confidence they achieved by

finding they could write five or six pages on their topic before they went after information. It gave them a powerful feeling that their innate intelligence was not only satisfactory, but fully capable of undertaking exploration into research topics. Many said they had never felt that before, and instead had always felt inferior, confined, afraid of and unequal to the learning task.

Another side lay in their response to the phrases, "autonomy," "self-learning," "learning-centered," "self-direction," and "lifelong-learning." To some of the students, these were nothing but buzzwords that they had heard many times, but had never understood. Now many of them felt they could see a definite difference in the approach, which focused on information-only as opposed to what we had done with several steps on the stairway.

The transfer idea was frequently repeated. What they learned with the models and applying them was very useful in their other courses; they did better in many of those courses because of the Hexadigm, The Ladder, Bias, Evaluating Sources of Information, and Schools of Interpretation. This was a surprise to many who thought that history was one subject and music was another and that the two would never meet, neither in the generative nor the analytical sense. It also got some of them into a bit of an encounter with other professors when they used our vocabulary and concepts in evaluating information from those classes. However, part of the learning process lies in knowing when to speak up and when to keep one's mouth shut.

A final point that was pleasing to me was the ease with which the idea of the subjectivity of information was perceived. It had previously been assumed by many that facts were facts, and the way they were written about was the truth of the matter. Through our examination of multiple points of view and whose facts actually got into the textbooks, it became clear that they needed to pay close attention to where information came from. This idea actually provided us with a lengthy and useful closing discussion on the relativity of information on the Internet source, and how we would need to find ways to assess and evaluate it. I am looking forward to seeing what happens next term.