

Higher Education through Discombobulation

BETSY CHITWOOD

In “‘Have It Your Way’: Consumerism and Education,” Simon Benlow explains the important difference between a customer and a student. For example, he writes, “When I think back to the best teachers and professors in my education, I recall those who demanded everything contrary to the consumerist mentality. They insisted on active students; they made us read staggering amounts of material and then actively put that material to use; they prompted us into confusion and disorientation; they made us uncomfortable, and then, sometimes, offered paths to clarity.” After reading Benlow’s argument in her second-semester college writing course, Betsy Chitwood wrote the following essay in which she supports Benlow’s point by arguing for the value of confusion in the learning process.

I have fond memories of my mother saying, “I’m all discombobulated!” It’s really just an interesting way of saying you’re confused or disoriented. Of course she said it to make me laugh and so I didn’t see confusion as a negative aspect of life. But neither did I realize that confusion is an important element to learning. Confusion and disorientation are important in the learning process because these emotions force us to go beyond what we know in search of answers. Also called cognitive disequilibrium, confusion and disorientation create a motivating challenge to students to

explore and take risks as they step out—or are pushed out—of their comfort zone.

My own experience is offered in support of this learning process. Stepping out from my familiar surroundings and entering the military brought about a disorientation that remains unmatched to this date. Military training included: becoming a member of a new culture, long hours of study, physical training, adhering to a regimented lifestyle, no personal time and all this (and more) on very little or no sleep. This learning process, albeit an extreme example, motivated me to take risks and seek ways to succeed in my chosen career. The impact of the disorientation was in direct proportion to the personal growth brought about by my “education” and it definitely shaped who I am today.

Evidence from academic research supports this theory. In a study by Craig and Graesser at the University of Memphis, college students participated in an introduction to computer literacy by using AutoTutor, an intelligence tutoring system (ITS). The study, which tracked the effect of confusion and other emotions on students’ responses, showed that a higher percentage (68%) of learning gains were achieved when the students were met with confusion (4). Researchers Dalton and Crosby, in their study of cognitive or psychological disequilibrium, note its usefulness in gaining higher understanding and personal growth. And developmental psychologist Erik Erikson used the concept of “crisis” to describe the experience of reaching the point where you wrestle with confusion to reach the higher

ground of understanding. Some are reluctant to take on the challenge, but those who find their learning experience slow, but steady, realize that the challenge will realize their knowledge and self-awareness. Psychologist Lawrence Kohlberg, to disequilibrium as a means of understanding concerning moral situations stating, “We are stuck at conventional and struggle moral reasoning of thinking” (2). Psychologist Nevitt Sanford suggests that psychological discord produces growth. This conflict pushes students to their inner limits and understanding, joining their process with a new level of knowledge.

Some may disagree with confusion as a tool in the learning process, arguing that students may remain stuck in the confusion or challenge. But we are not all alike, not all have the same effect. Although some may be motivated by a challenge, others need support in order to step into the balance between challenge and support. This is the key. From parent to professional, we need an awareness of a student’s needs to meet challenges and their learning climate uses a balance of support appropriate for each educational level (qtd. in Dalton and Crosby).

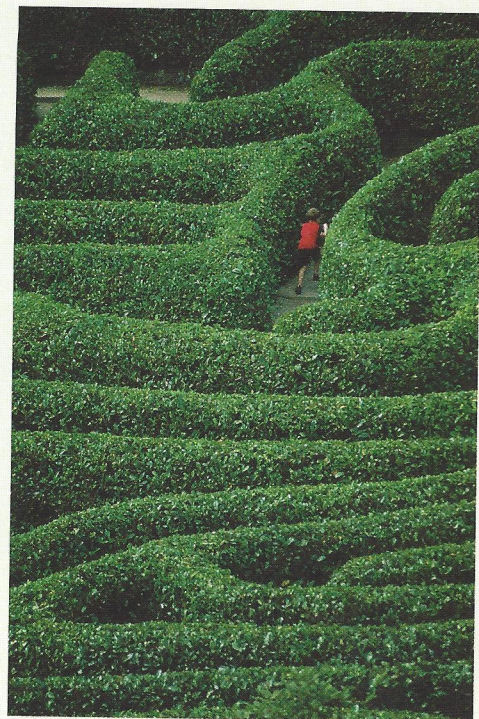
5 We must all face confusion. Anytime we encounter something we don’t understand, and knowledge that is not stored in our memory

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ground of understanding (2). Students who are reluctant to take on the challenge will find their learning experience stifled and their education slow, but those who meet the challenge will realize a higher level of knowledge and self awareness. American psychologist Lawrence Kohlberg refers to disequilibrium as a means to improve understanding concerning moral and ethical situations stating, "Without such conflict and struggle moral reasoning can become stuck at conventional and conformist levels of thinking" (2). Psychologist and educator Nevitt Sanford suggests experiences of psychological discord produce internal conflict. This conflict pushes students to go beyond their inner limits and enter into new understanding, joining their previous knowledge with a new level of knowing.

Some may disagree with the use of confusion as a tool in the learning process, stating that students may remain at a standstill if the confusion or challenge is too great. Since we are not all alike, not all techniques will have the same effect. Although students may be motivated by a challenge, some may need support in order to step into learning. Finding balance between challenge and support is the key. From parent to professor, a teacher needs an awareness of a student's ability to meet challenges *and* their need for support. Chickering suggests that an optimum learning climate uses a balance of challenge and support appropriate for each student's educational level (qtd. in Dalton and Crosby 1).

- 5 We must all face confusion at times. Anytime we encounter something we don't understand, and knowledge is required that is not stored in our memory banks, we



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will be confused. Confusion won't last long if we realize that it is a means to an end. We need to think it through, find answers—or whatever is required—and gain understanding to go on. Each time we find success, we can draw on this experience to take on the next challenge. If we are not willing to use confusion to our advantage as an educational tool, we may feel frustrated and not know where to turn. If this continues we may become discouraged in our education, lose motivation, and give up or struggle along while we seek ways to alleviate these feelings.

In his essay "Have It Your Way": Consumerism Invades Education," Simon Benlow states, "the best teachers . . . prompted

us into confusion and disorientation . . . and then, sometimes, offered paths to clarity." Paths to clarity must be found as we seek to restore an inner harmony. Students who search out their own paths will find these paths lead not only to higher understanding, but more importantly, they are building character, confidence and producing the content of who they are becoming.

Confusion and disorientation, appearing to some as negative, unwelcome intruders, are actually the seeds of personal growth and higher understanding. If we see these emotions as seeds of opportunity, and not something to be avoided or anesthetized, we will find that we have the fortitude to face them head on. If we take what knowledge we have and add what we can acquire, we will reach higher awareness on an educational and personal level.

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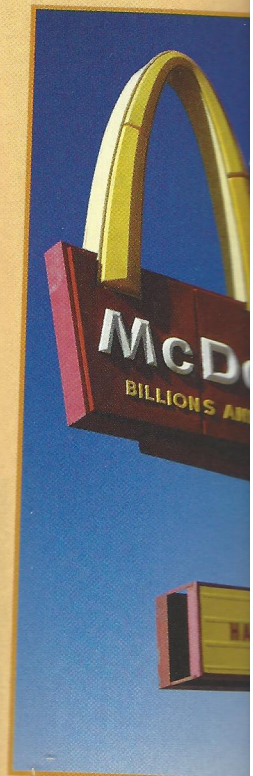
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Analyzing Argument

1. What is the essay's main claim?
2. What argument is the essay a response to?
3. What support strategies help the reader accept Chitwood's claims?
4. What additional support strategy might Chitwood use and why?
5. How does Chitwood's voice help the reader understand and accept her position? Use excerpts from the essay to support your claim.
6. How could Chitwood make her argument more insightful by introducing more opposition?



What is the value of

Analyzing Argument

1. Make a list of details (e.g., flag, and so on). How does this appeal to adults? How does it appeal to children?
2. Beyond this photograph, what other evidence do you have to support your claim?
3. Make a list of the products and other fast-food items that McDonald's, of fast-food restaurants, sell.
4. What do children gain from eating fast food?