

Whitehead's Rhythm of Education...

Romance >>> Precision >>> Generalization

By David Wm. Brown Middletown RI February 2019

Besides university classroom teaching, my work in the U.S. and abroad has focused on creating new courses and curricula, extension programs, mid-career learning, and outreach education for leaders. Two mental “pictures” have been especially helpful to me when doing this: One I’ve already told about in this website—[David Kolb’s Learning Styles](#).

The other comes from **Alfred North Whitehead**, a philosopher who was concerned about 1920s “education” too often being just disjointed chunks of knowledge inserted into students’ minds.

Whitehead observed that good teaching links to students’ own curiosity, and their desire to put what they learn into good use. He urged that courses and curricula evolve around three well meshed phases of learning:

Romance stage that opens up the subject in a relevant, exciting, mind-stretching manner

This chart by D W Brown, Feb 2019

Precision stage that brings more background and facts, and provides solid concepts and skills

Generalization stage that blends the parts, and encourages making use of the learning in fresh ways

I think that this sequence can be useful to you who are students too, not just teachers! It can help you to be more conscious of what learning phase you’re in, and to make the most of it. It can help you to choose universities, programs of study and electives that best fit. It can help you to assess the kinds of work experiences and internships that would be most relevant.

Alfred North Whitehead brought these and other ideas together in his book, *The Aims of Education* (New York: Free Press, 1929). Yet decades later, the same shortcomings in courses and curricula are still all too common. Interest in Whitehead’s “rhythm of education” has continued.

Here on the next page is more about him and his ideas.



Newport RI elementary students had a live 2018 chat with spacecraft astronauts—exciting part of STEM education!

Alfred North Whitehead (1862-1947) was a multifaceted philosopher with solid roots in mathematics and sciences. Born, educated, and early career in England, in 1924 he became professor of philosophy at Harvard. Education was just one of his explorations.

Here is a [simple one-page application of Whitehead's Rhythm of Learning](#). It focuses on what one can learn from and add to paintings. It might be useful in your own teaching. This comes from [the Polk Bros Foundation Center for Urban Education at DePaul University](#), which is finding interesting ways to enable families in Chicago to expand and utilize their knowledge.

Here's an open-source slide set from by a thinker-teacher who depicts Whitehead's learning rhythm in innovative manner: [Barry Casey's 2009 SlideShare](#). He starts with how Hegel's thesis-antithesis-synthesis framework influenced this.

[This portion of the article about Whitehead in the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy](#) nicely captures his educational outlook.

For more about Whitehead's wide range of interests and thoughts, see the clearly written article, "[Alfred North Whitehead \(1861-1947\)](#)" in the *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. It's by [Gary L. Herstein](#)—a reflective teacher with much high-tech real-world experience.

Another good article is in *Religion on Line* -- "[Why Whitehead?](#)" by [Robert S. Brumbaugh](#) of Yale University.



Extension and conservation field days usually blend all three phases of Whitehead's learning rhythm—like this one about good plantings and practices for wetlands near your home.

Question to think about ... Besides teachers and educational writers, maybe media people (reporters, TV hosts, commentators, bloggers, etc.) could use Whitehead's romance-precision-generalization framework too... and still get good ratings?

[Back to Dave Brown's website](#)