

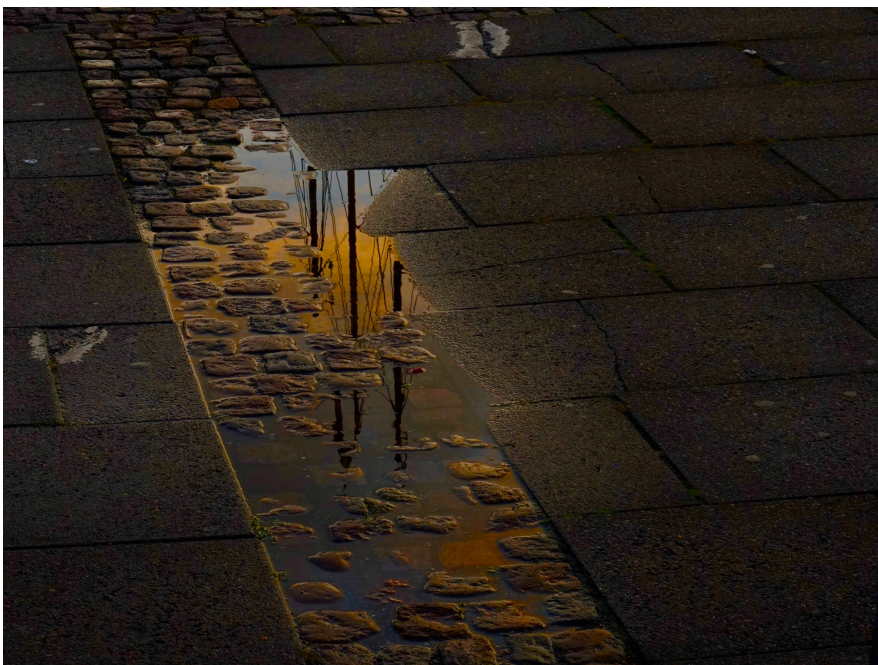


Academic Dispatch


August 23, 2019

The University of New Mexico is centered on minds. Our institution brings creative minds together, and this gathering of intellects creates tension. Within this tension and within the accompanying challenge, learning happens. Minds are changed, neuronal pathways rewired, new ideas are created. Deep learning happens when humans come together to explain, share, listen, reconsider, challenge, and reflect. In his book “How We Think,” John Dewey wrote: “Thinking is not a case of spontaneous combustion; it does not occur just on ‘general principles.’ There is something specific which occasions and evokes it.”

Dewey observed that learning is ultimately an internal process that happens within our own minds, but that learning begins with perplexity or doubt, when we are engaged with a problem or challenge presented by our environment. Teachers do not directly cause a student to learn, and all students ultimately learn for themselves within the physiology of their own brains. But teachers do, however, create the conditions that might cause the learner to enter that state of perplexity or doubt, by presenting a new problem or idea, by offering extrinsic encouragement or by understanding the learner’s intrinsic incentives, and by offering scaffolding on which to build new ideas. The learning environment that teachers build are not simply spaces, but an active and engaging setting where perplexity and doubt can be raised and considered. Without that active and engaging learning environment fed by genuine questions of interest to the learner, learning cannot happen.



As a community of educators, this is what UNM does. We build active environments for learning, and these environments span the classroom, the laboratory, the library, and the residence hall corridor. They span Cornell Mall and extend to the eateries along Central Avenue. Within these learning environments, humans grow and develop wisdom, and they craft new ideas that can change our New Mexico communities and communities across the world.



In this environment, the key to is to embrace the tension of contrasting ideas and contrasting minds with optimism and perseverance. When a colleague challenges us, presenting alternative interpretations, differing value systems or divergent thinking, an opportunity for learning has been presented. Taking this challenge as a positive is core to UNM's mission and to our personal growth. Wrestling with and reflecting on the new ideas that come from these encounters leads to the learning that will advance each of us as individuals, and all of us as a society.

In their book, "How College Works," Daniel Chambliss and Christopher Takacs note that the "... pervasive influence of relationships suggests that a college ... is less a collection of programs than a gathering of people." They report on a remarkable body of research that emphasizes the importance of creating opportunities for humans to engage as the social and physical beings that we are, in order to develop the intellectual tools that we need.

These points, that developing new ideas and growing our ability to understand and impact the world requires engagement with others and the sharing and collision of ideas, apply to all aspects of the work of UNM, from the learning of students, to the pursuit of our research mission, to the creation of cultural productions. We can joyfully engage with each other's challenging, maddening, crazy, and edgy ideas. Distilled, tested, and strengthened through our engagement with them, these ideas form the spirit of a great public university, and realized through action, they provide the means by which we improve the lives of our communities and families.

Have a great year!

James Paul Holloway

Provost and Executive Vice President for Academic Affairs

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