



INNOVATION ABSTRACTS

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CALATRELLO'S HIGHLY UNSCIENTIFIC THEORY OF HALVES: A PRIMER FOR STUDENT SUCCESS

Those of you who know me know I occasionally may use some class time to regale students with leisurely pedagogical strolls down Amnesia Lane. Sure, some small-minded administrator might refer to such dramatic monologues as “course drift;” I prefer to call it teaching. Those of us who carry the battle scars of a Ph.D. program know that our real education—the life lessons we learned while we were learning—is what remains with us long after we have forgotten the book learnin’.

One of my favorite meanderings takes me back to early 1990s when I was studying English as an undergraduate at the Big House: UCLA. As a student—well in all areas of my life—I was (and continue to be) somewhat terrified of failure. Most of us are; few admit it. My father was a university professor, yet I was (at the time) the only of his seven children to pursue a higher education. I had done well at my community college, but I was quite anxious about how I would fare upon transferring to a major four-year university. After about two quarters at UCLA, I began to notice an interesting phenomenon. I could distinguish myself from my peers and better position myself to succeed if I did four things. In fact, I attribute whatever academic success I experienced then – and afterwards—to these four choices. I offer them to you now to use/ignore as you see fit.

Education—as with most things in life—is about choices and individual responsibility. Here, then, for the first time in print, is Calatrello’s Highly Unscientific Theory of Halves: A Primer for Student Success. Patent Pending.

- *Choose to go to class.* Out of 60 enrolled students, on any given lecture day, approximately half of them chose not to attend. I chose otherwise. I was immediately in the top half of my class or

numbered among the top 30/60. Please note that I achieved this ranking by simply getting myself to class (on time) every day.

- *Choose to pay attention in class.* Out of the 30 students who made it to class, at least half chose to daydream, sleep, read the paper, eat, drink (we did not have such novelties as cell phones in these primitive days). I chose to pay attention. I was now numbered among the top 15/60. Again, my advanced ranking was relatively easy to achieve here; good grief, I just showed up, stayed awake, and listened.
- *Choose to be prepared for class.* Out of the 15 who were there and awake, I soon divined that only about half of them chose to prepare/read for the day’s class. Sure, a few of my semi-conscious peers would give the obligatory affirmative nod, but none could/would speak intelligently about any of the material covered. I chose to read and be prepared. On that note, I found that by having to walk a good bit from the parking lot to class was a good time to think about what was going to be covered in the upcoming class. I distinctly remember walking up that hill to that beautiful building—Royce Hall—confident of this: half of my peers would choose to be somewhere else, half of the ones who would be there would choose not to focus. At this point, I was now ranked 7.5 out of 60.
- *Choose to participate in class.* Out of the 7.5 who had chosen to attend, pay attention, and prepare, only about half of us—maybe three—chose to engage the material—whatever novel, play, or poetry we were reading—and chose to participate with the professor. I was now sitting in the top 3/60. Not bad for a guy who barely graduated high school. I am also not prone to hyperbole.

I knew that I was certainly not the brightest or most intelligent student in my classes. I never was; however, I found that if I did these four things, I could—and often did—succeed in my coursework, and I did. I recall a professor sharing with me that in our Modern American



Poetry course (that numbered 60), he had assigned one student the grade of A and two others the grade of A-. I was never so proud of an A- in my life. When midterms or final exams came and my peers were nervous, I never was. What more could I have done? I had come to class, paid attention, read and studied the material; and I had discussed it with my professor and two or three of my real peers. Really, the 60 tuition-payers allowed the professor and three or four students to interact and transact something meaningful. I really should thank them all for paying for my education!

I will add that because I am not the smartest or the most gifted, I had to do one other thing. Make no mistake about it. I had to work hard; I had to say “no” to some things. But as I tell my students (and my four school-aged children), never be afraid of working hard.

Keep in mind that your mileage with this highly unscientific theory of halves may vary. You may, in fact, choose to ignore this plan for student success altogether. But do keep this in mind: those students who choose to follow these four suggestions are banking on dolts like you to ignore it; so go ahead, be mediocre. Really. It makes the rest of us look that much better. After all, the theory requires the majority to choose otherwise, to be lazy, to squander the opportunity it has been given with each day. Again, so much that may be loosely defined as “quality of life” comes down to the choices that one makes.

I can tell you this much: every day of my life I am glad that I chose to have—or should I say halve?—an education.

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