

# Why Students Resist Learning



*A Practical Model for  
Understanding and Helping Students*

Edited by Anton O. Tolman and Janine Kremling

Foreword by John Tagg

"This book takes the challenge head on. It directly addresses the great and central problem: student resistance to active learning. . . . As far as I can tell, this is the first book to address the phenomenon systematically and in a way that brings together a variety of perspectives and disciplines that can help to explain it . . . [and] that integrates what we know about psychology, pedagogy, and learning science to construct a framework for recognizing, diagnosing, and addressing such resistance. . . . [Tolman and Kremling] give us an apparatus for solving the problems rather than just blaming the students."

—**John Tagg**, Associate Professor of English, Palomar College; and coauthor with Robert B. Barr of the seminal article "From Teaching to Learning: A New Paradigm for Undergraduate Education"

The purpose of this book is to help faculty develop a coherent and integrated understanding of the various causes of student resistance to learning, provide them with a rationale for responding constructively, and enable them to create conditions conducive to implementing effective learning strategies.

In this book readers will discover an innovative integrated model that accounts for student behaviors and creates a foundation for intentional and informed discussion, evaluation, and the development of effective counter strategies.

**Anton O. Tolman** is a professor of behavioral science and past director of the Faculty Center for Teaching Excellence at Utah Valley University. He has conducted national webinars and workshops on his integrated model of student resistance and the instruments he has created to promote student reflection on their learning approaches and readiness to change.

**Janine Kremling** is an associate professor in the Department of Criminal Justice at California State University, San Bernardino. She has presented at both national and international conferences on teaching and learning, specifically in the areas of student metacognition and the use of 2.0 web tools to improve student engagement and increase active learning.

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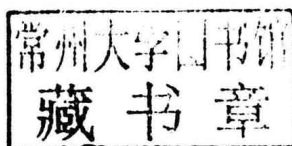
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# WHY STUDENTS RESIST LEARNING



## FOREWORD

**I**n this book, Tolman, Kremling, and their colleagues address what is perhaps the greatest challenge colleges and universities must face if they hope to achieve their purpose of providing an education of real value to their students. This challenge, student resistance to learning, has long been an excuse for inaction and an explanation for failure in higher education. This book turns that problem around and makes it an arena for progress and an apparatus for understanding.

The authors grapple with what is one of the core paradoxes of education: Students are the medium and agents of education; if they don't learn, education hasn't happened. But students are also the single greatest barrier to education, because if they won't learn, the best efforts of educators are wasted. We have too long spoken of education and teaching as if they were things we could do to students. But the harsh fact is that if students don't do the learning, and especially if they fight the learning, then the best we can do is conceal the fact or ignore it and play pretend. But if we whitewash or ignore the problem, the ivory tower becomes a Potemkin village, a papier-mâché façade, colorful and pretentious, behind which is . . . not much.

Ask a representative sample of teachers from nearly any college or university why students don't learn more in their pursuit of a bachelor's degree and many—I suspect most—of the responses will converge in identifying the chief culprits: the students themselves. Different faculty members formulate the complaint differently—some will see many students as lacking the requisite skills, others will see them as short on motivation, and a few will find entire generations deficient in focus and attention. Such perceptions are hardly new—we have good evidence that Abelard and his successors were disappointed with their budding clerks back in the 1100s, before the University of Paris formally existed. Indeed, there seems to be a predictable pattern at work: Just as every college president announces that this year's graduating class is the greatest ever, most of the faculty, in private conversations, bemoan that it is worse than in the good old days.

In our own day, however, much good work has been done to awaken the hidden learner in the apparently grade-grubbing, indolent, and slack-ing student. We know now (and if we do not know it, then we aren't paying



attention) that it is possible to inspire and cultivate a deep approach to learning, to prompt students to more engagement and better results.

It used to be common to think of *teaching* and *learning* as separate activities, and those who still think that way find it irritating that the two terms are so often linked together. The transformative insight is that teaching and learning are more like ballroom dancing than piano playing. You can play the piano by yourself, but it proverbially takes two to tango. If you don't have a partner, you just can't dance. It takes at least two for the teaching-learning transaction to happen. If nobody is learning, you aren't teaching, even though you may be practicing the steps in your private studio in front of the lecture hall.

Of course, the dancing analogy is a bit flattering to teachers. The relationship is not purely reciprocal. You can't teach without learners, but you can learn without teachers—as many of us confirm every day of our lives. The only really indispensable participant in the learning transaction is the learner. Without the engagement of the student, learning will never happen. Seen in this light, students who resist learning are not just an inconvenience. They undermine the central mission of the college. Many a professor has had the disheartening sense, after an unmistakable encounter with student resistance, of spinning her wheels. The question arises repeatedly in the teacher's mind: Am I wasting my time? And the answer is, if the student successfully resists real engagement with the learning process, yes, you are wasting your time. And the student's. And the resources and energy of the college.

One of the great attractions of the "traditional" class in which the teacher does the talking and little of the listening is that it is a wonderful way of concealing the results. In a large lecture hall, filled with the instructor's voice and image, with the students sitting silently, heads lowered to their notebooks or laptops, we have a pedagogy of opaque failure. The one-way mode of teaching makes it very likely that many students will resist learning but do so passively, by quiet withdrawal—into their laptops, their phones, their daydreams. Nobody actually knows what they're doing. So you can hope.

But now we know. We know that any pedagogy that asks students to do something on an ongoing basis is better than any pedagogy that does not. Teaching that asks students to talk, write, draw, act, manipulate widgets, design experiments, select and criticize the products of others, tell stories, or argue with one another is better almost always than teaching that just asks them to listen to somebody else talk. We know the ones who need to listen to someone else talk are the teachers. As technology has transformed education, this lesson has, if anything, become more vivid. Whether the class is in

person or online, simultaneous or asynchronous, teachers need to find out what the students are thinking and doing. And when teachers do, everything works better, and more learning happens; these teachers are experiencing the difficulties rather than ignoring them, handling the problems rather than sweeping them under the rug. Active learning works.

But as Tolman and Kremling bring vividly to our attention, when you move the students from passive to active roles, they often resist. They do not take their medicine just because it is good for them. They often complain that a contract has been broken, an unwritten rule transgressed: "But you're supposed to teach me!" "Why do I have to do all the work? You're getting paid for it!" "My other teachers don't make me do this!" "I never had to do this in high school!" And so it goes.

The irony is blatant and really quite agonizing if we dwell on it. What works to get students to learn, to learn resiliently, to learn what they can use and when to use it, is something students do not naturally like nor are necessarily drawn to. They fight what's good for them. We have the cure for what ails them, but they resist the treatment.

This student resistance feeds the preexisting faculty resistance to doing what works for education and creates the temptation to revert to the previous norm, to go back to lecture and multiple-choice tests, to hide our failures behind the curtain again. The problem with active learning is that the active learners don't like it, so we have to give them their way. Resistance can breed withdrawal and retrenchment, can make teachers afraid to really teach. This kind of resistance is therefore a major barrier to the progress of higher education and its students.

This book takes the challenge head on. It directly addresses the great and central problem: student resistance to active learning. And it addresses that problem in the right way. The wrong way, which—as suggested previously—we have been practicing in one form or another since the twelfth century, is to simply blame the students, as if education were a zero-sum game in which it is either your fault or my fault. The right way, the way Tolman and Kremling do it, is to recognize that student resistance is a systemic problem: Students do what they do for a reason, and that reason is often their experience of schooling. As we see in the following chapters, the reasons for student resistance are many and varied. Some students resist because of problems they bring with them to college, some because of their college experiences, some because of their experiences with teachers or other students. But student resistance is not magic. If we can understand the reasons for students' behavior, we can change it. That is the central project of this book: to understand why and how students resist taking a deep approach to learning so that

we can take a deeper approach to designing a curriculum and a pedagogy that can help them to grow, rather than let them shrink into their protective cocoon of resistance.

This is not the first book to address student resistance. However, as far as I can tell, this is the first book to address the phenomenon systematically and in a way that brings together a variety of perspectives and disciplines that can help to explain it. We can find anecdotes about student resistance sprinkled liberally through books and periodicals on college teaching and learning. What I, at least, have not encountered before is an attempt to construct a systematic and multidisciplinary theory that integrates what we know about psychology, pedagogy, and learning science to construct a framework for recognizing, diagnosing, and addressing such resistance. The anecdotes are important—and this book is full of them—because they help ground our understanding and make the phenomenon real and concrete. But if we stop our analysis with anecdotes, we run the risk of producing colorful complaints rather than solutions. So many of the stories we can tell treat the resistant student as a quirky anomaly. Of course, every student is an individual. But they are individuals whose behavior can tell us much if we will look for the patterns and pull in from disparate disciplines the wisdom that bears on choices and motivations. Tolman and Kremling tell the stories to find the patterns and give us an apparatus for solving the problems rather than just to blame the students.

The authors provide not only a design and framework for analyzing and addressing student resistance but also a role model for interacting with it. As suggested previously, the central move in pedagogy from poor teaching to good learning resides not in telling so much as in listening. Many of Tolman and Kremling's colleagues and coauthors are also their students. They not only listen to their students but also let us listen in, and the students share what it looks like from their perspective, the one that matters most. In reading the book, we are not being preached to; we are practicing what we need to do in order to understand how to proceed.

In his splendid book *Visible Learning: A Synthesis of Over 800 Meta-Analyses Relating to Achievement*, John Hattie (2009) summarizes the result of his meta-analysis of over 800 empirical studies on learning—what works and what doesn't. He summarizes the overall conclusion of this research by emphasizing the vital principle of transparency:

What is most important is that teaching is visible to the student, and that the learning is visible to the teachers. The more the student becomes the teacher and the more the teacher becomes the learner, the more successful are the outcomes. (Hattie, 2009, p. 25)

In this book, the teachers become learners, the learners become teachers, and thus they make visible to all of us what goes wrong, and how it can go right, in teaching and learning. If you are a teacher or care about what teachers do, you have much to learn.

John Tagg  
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I also want to thank my colleague and coeditor, Janine Kremling. She and I met at a Lilly West conference after I had presented my ideas and data on the instruments I developed to encourage student process metacognition. She was very interested in these new tools and began to use them in her own classrooms. We have collaborated on multiple presentations and research projects, and her input, feedback, and ongoing commitment to student learning helped convince me of the value of these ideas.

A fond thank-you goes out to John Tagg, whom I met while I was director of the former Faculty Center for Teaching Excellence at Utah Valley University (UVU). I had sponsored a reading circle on his wonderful book *The Learning Paradigm College* and was struck by the depth of his thinking on how to improve higher education; he and his colleague Robert Barr had also been responsible for launching a national discussion about the shift from an institutional focus on teaching to a focus on student learning back in 1995, a discussion that in many ways continues today. John and I have kept in touch since he came to speak as keynote at UVU's annual faculty convocation many years ago. John also, without being asked, contributed copy editing to many of the chapters and gave excellent input and feedback. Thank you, John, for your insights, friendship, and willingness to write the foreword for this book.

To my colleagues Christopher Lee and Trevor Morris, I express my appreciation. I realized as Janine and I started on this book that we would not be able to handle all of this material on our own. I sought out Chris Lee, with whom I had published a chapter on sharing power with students in the classroom and who had been an active participant and leader of our teaching academy, and Trevor Morris, who was on my staff at the Faculty Center for Teaching Excellence and who is more enthusiastic about psychology than most. Their eager willingness to take part in this project and

to work with students on their chapters (that was a stipulation) helped make this project feasible.

A thank-you also goes to David Yells, dean of the College of Humanities and Social Sciences at Utah Valley University, who, as I note in the preface, was the inspiration for pulling a group of students together and working with them on the book. He supported my work with a creative way to accommodate workload demands, and I am grateful for it. Likewise, the unflagging support of my department colleagues and department chair, Kris Doty, as well as the work of several teaching assistants, helped me to manage my teaching as we finished the book.

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## **Janine Kremling**

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my life and my thinking about student learning. I met Anton when I was a second-year faculty member, trying to improve my teaching skills. The key to my goal was to learn about the way people think, mindsets, and metacognition. When I heard Anton's presentation at Lilly West on metacognition and student learning, it clicked, and we have worked together on presentations and research ever since.

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