

UNDERSTANDING OR MEMORIZATION: ARE WE TEACHING THE RIGHT THING?

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Outline

▶ **Problem**

Outline

▶ **Problem**

▶ **Cause**

Outline

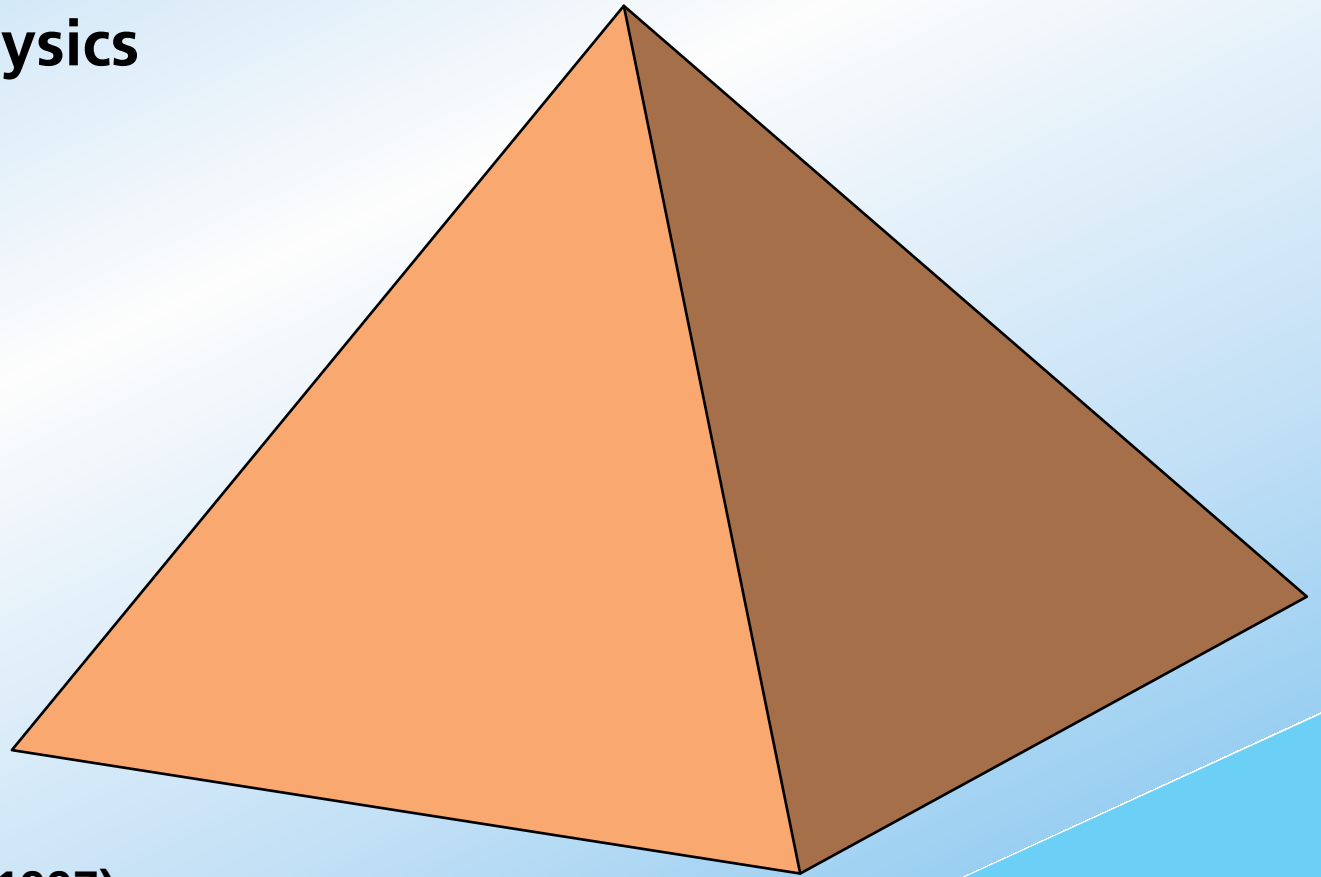
▶ **Problem**

▶ **Cause**

▶ **Remedy**

We have a problem

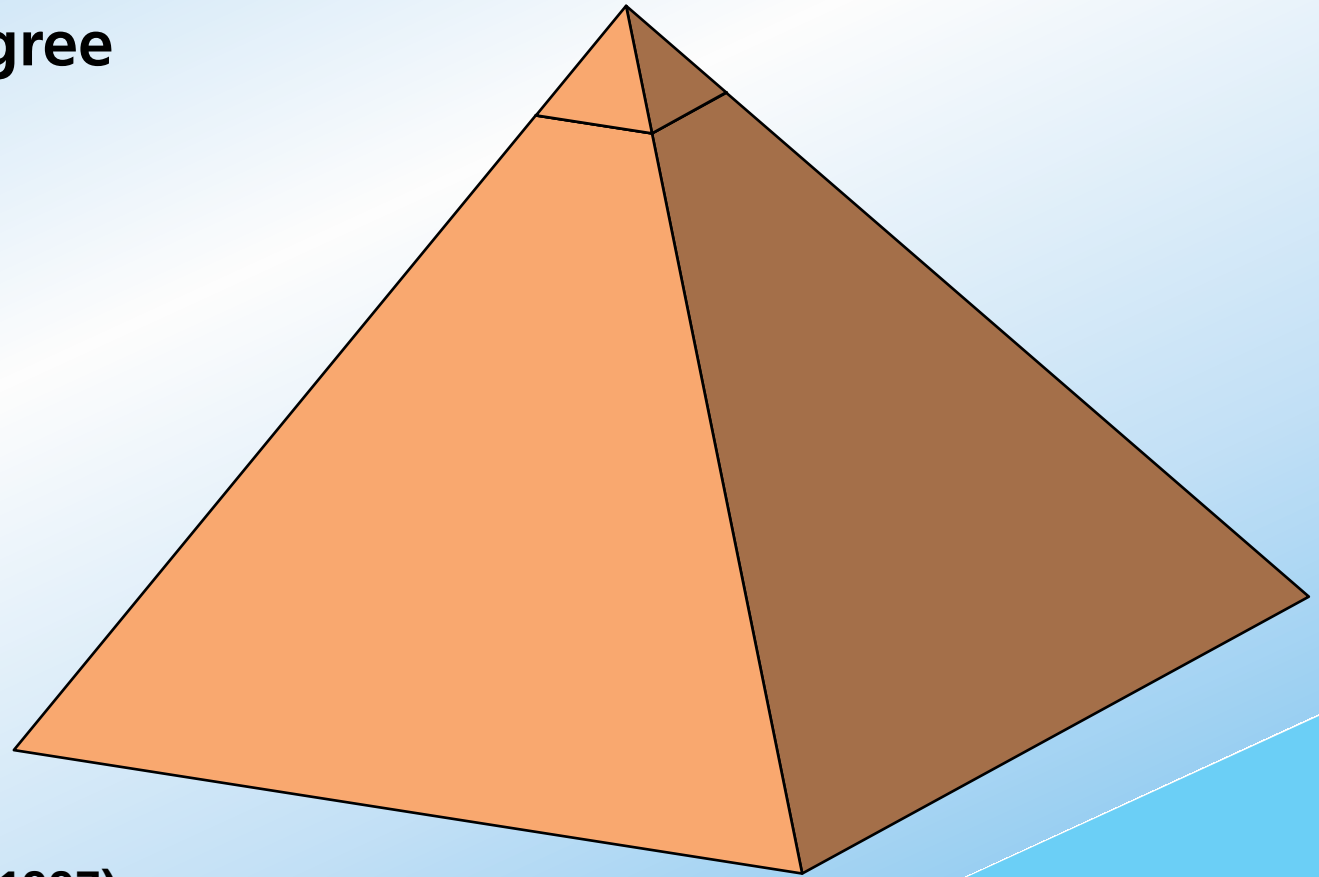
**380,000 students take
introductory physics
each year...**



AIP Report R-151.33 (1997)

We have a problem

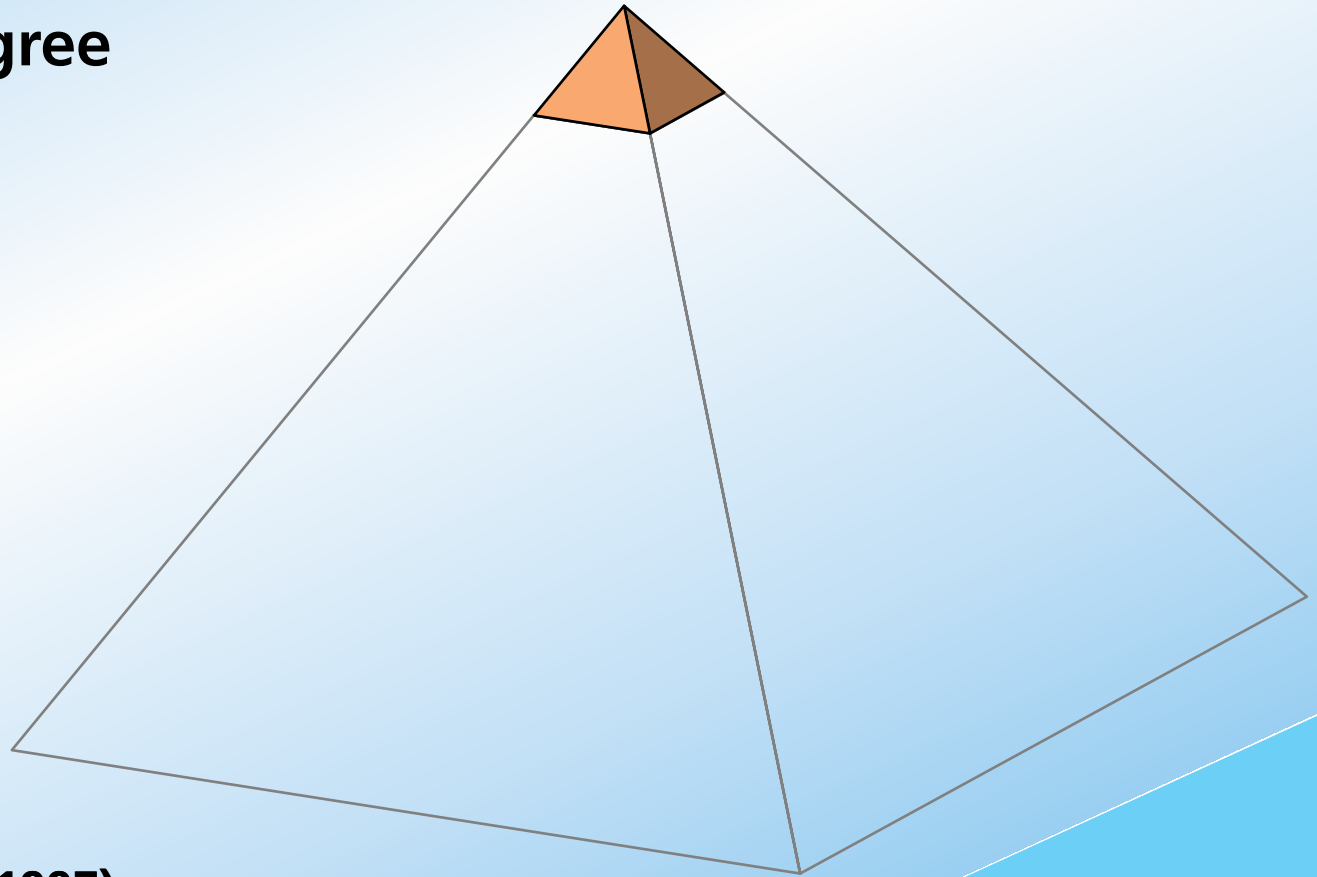
**about 1% of these get
a bachelor's degree
in physics**



AIP Report R-151.33 (1997)

We have a problem

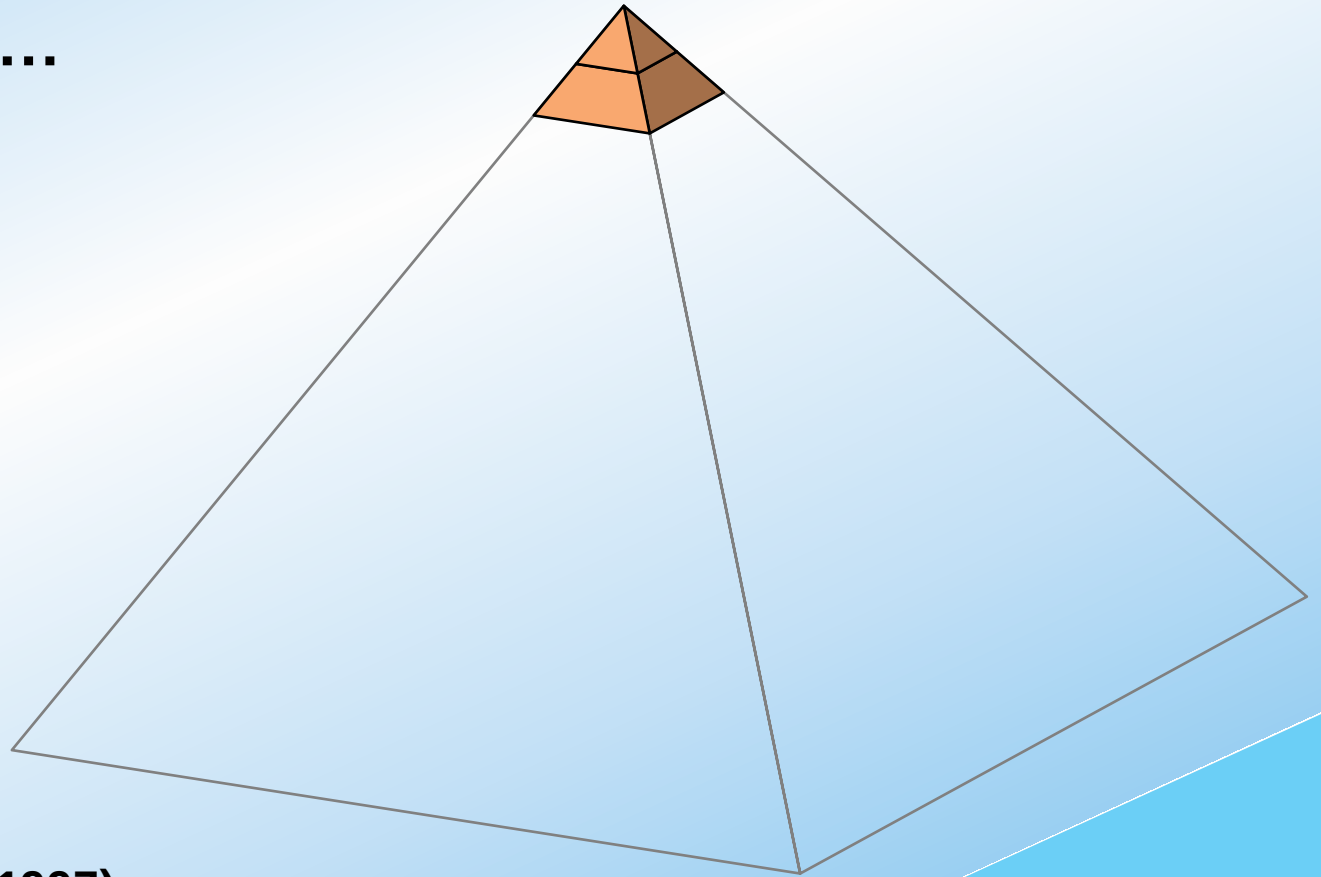
**Of the 4,300 students with
a bachelor's degree
in physics...**



AIP Report R-151.33 (1997)

We have a problem

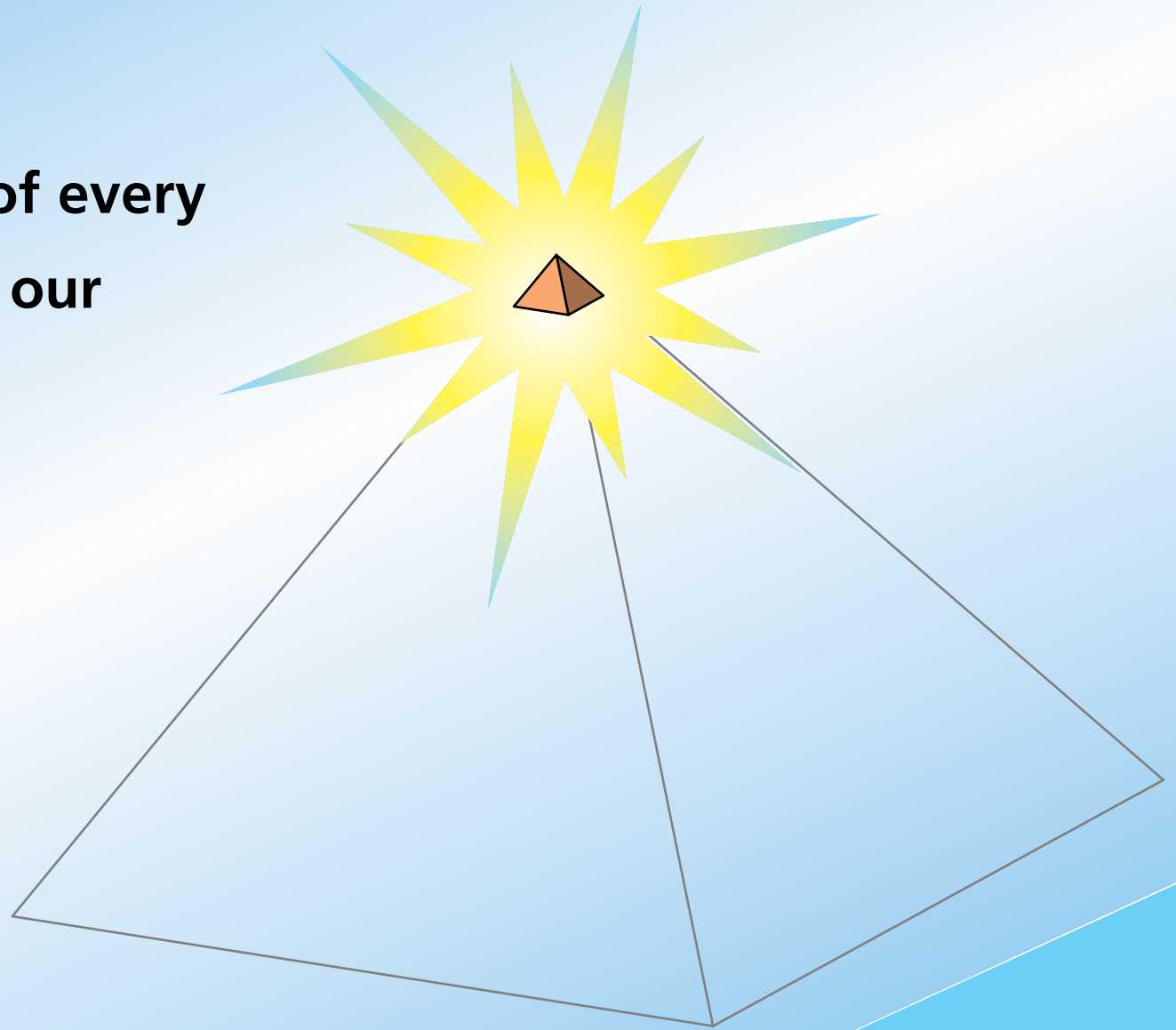
**about 35% go on to get a
Ph.D. in physics...**



AIP Report R-151.33 (1997)

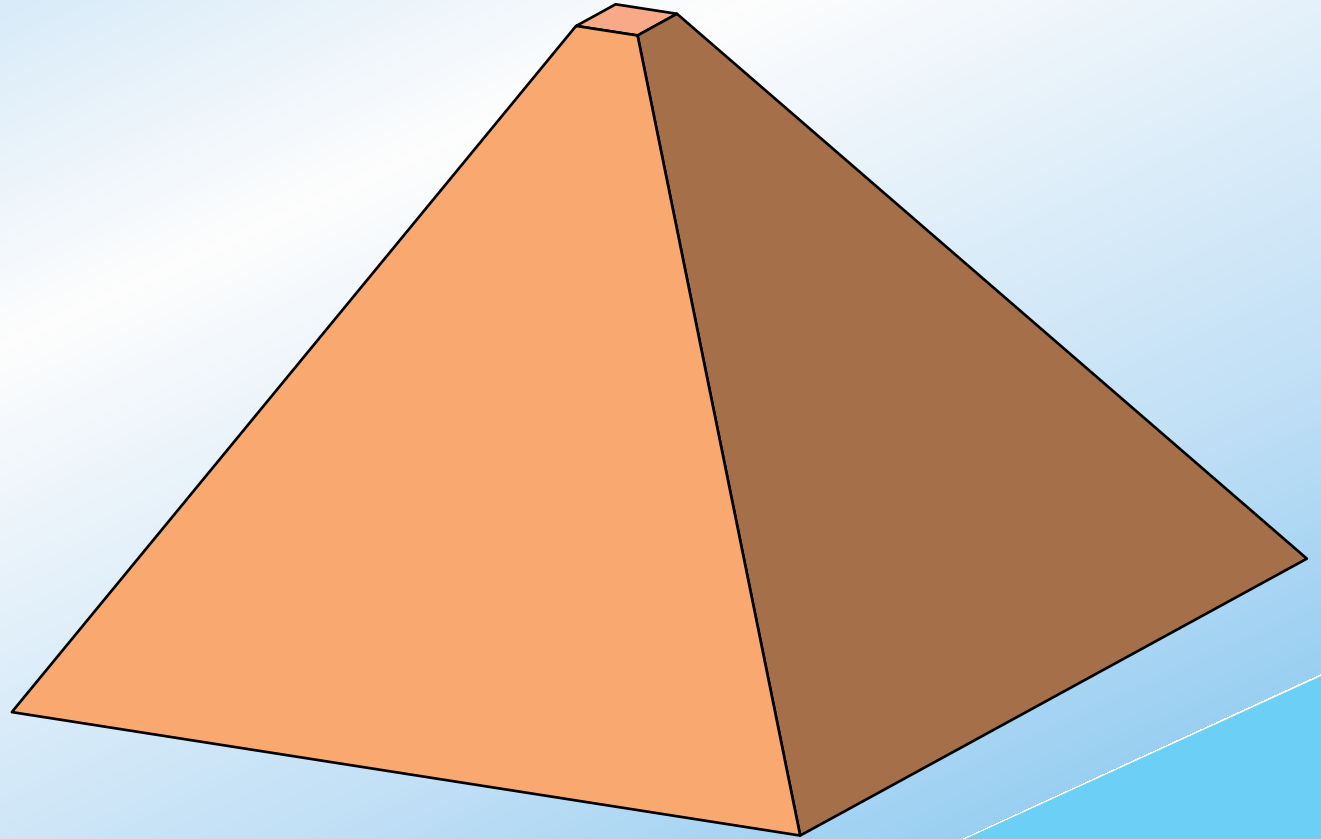
We have a problem

**That's one out of every
260 students in our
introductory
courses!**



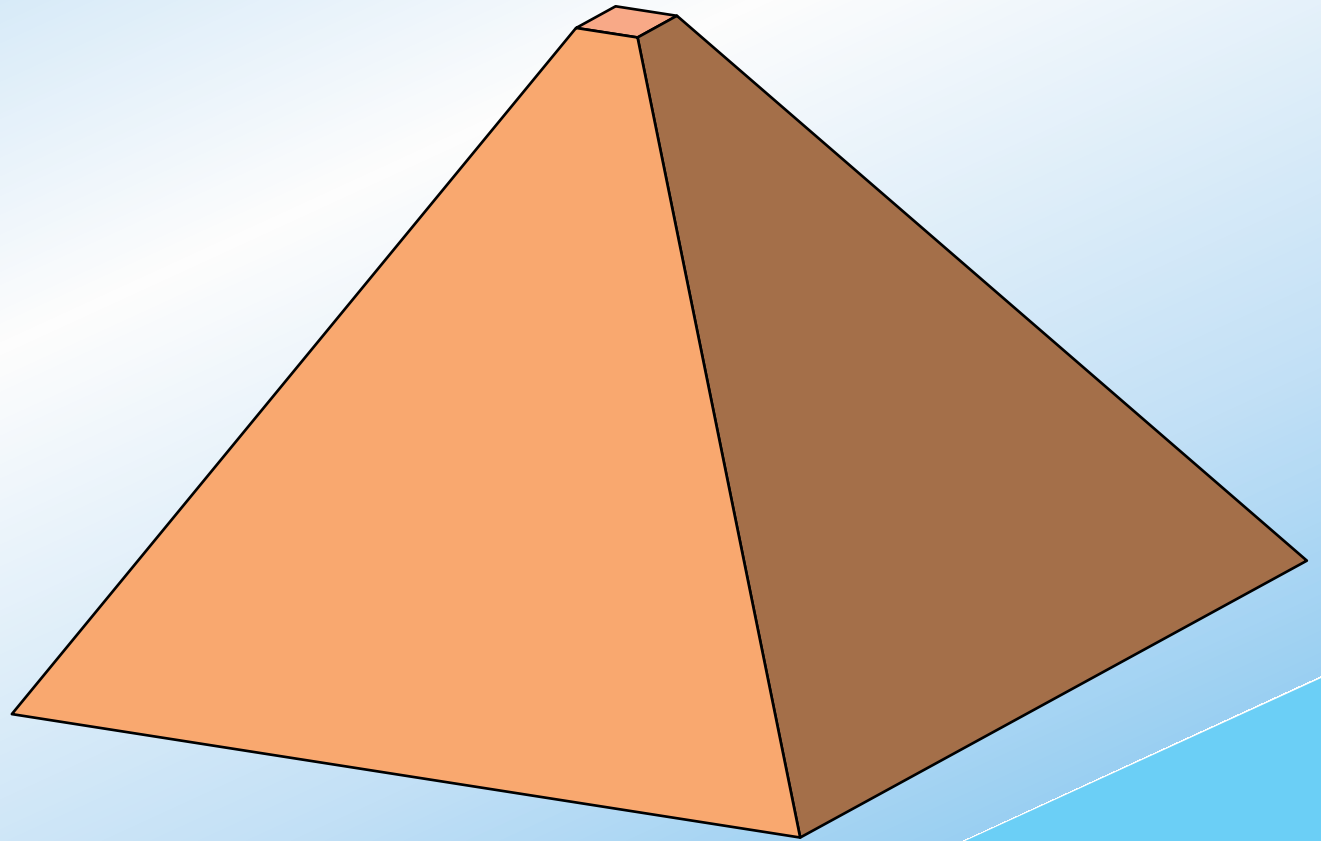
We have a problem

**What about the
other 259...?**



We have a problem

**What do we know
about these
students?**



We have a problem

Some disturbing symptoms:

- ▶ **frustration**
- ▶ **lack of understanding**
- ▶ **lack of basic knowledge**

We have a problem

Well, “hot” is a relative term...

You see, given temperatures rise, regardless of mass.

Yeah, Galileo observed rising temperatures will decrease with the exposure of an endothermic source.

Endothermic?

True transperence will persist until this one irresistible calorie interacts, thus altering the system.

We have a problem

Well, “hot” is a relative term...

You see, given temperatures rise, regardless of mass.

Yeah, Galileo observed rising temperatures will decrease with the exposure of an endothermic source.

Endothermic?

True transperence will persist until this one irresistible calorie interacts, thus altering the system.

Uh huh...

We have a problem

They know the jargon:

- ▶ **circular motion**
- ▶ **barometric pressure**
- ▶ **light radius**
- ▶ **something to the power times ten to the something**

We have a problem

They are aware of their lack of knowledge

- ▶ **I graduated from college but I didn't study *astronomy***
- ▶ **It's been a while since I've had physics**

We have a problem

They are aware of their lack of knowledge

- ▶ **I graduated from college but I didn't study *astronomy***
- ▶ **It's been a while since I've had physics**

...and they don't care!

We have a problem

Should we worry?

We have a problem

We'd better!

We have a problem


"I took four years of science and four years of math...

**A waste of my time,
a waste of the teacher's time,
and a waste of space...**

**You know,
I took *physics*.**

For *what*?"



A close-up, slightly blurred photograph of a diverse group of young people, likely students, smiling and looking towards the left side of the frame. The image has a warm, slightly desaturated color palette. The text "Why do we have this problem?" is overlaid in the lower center of the image.

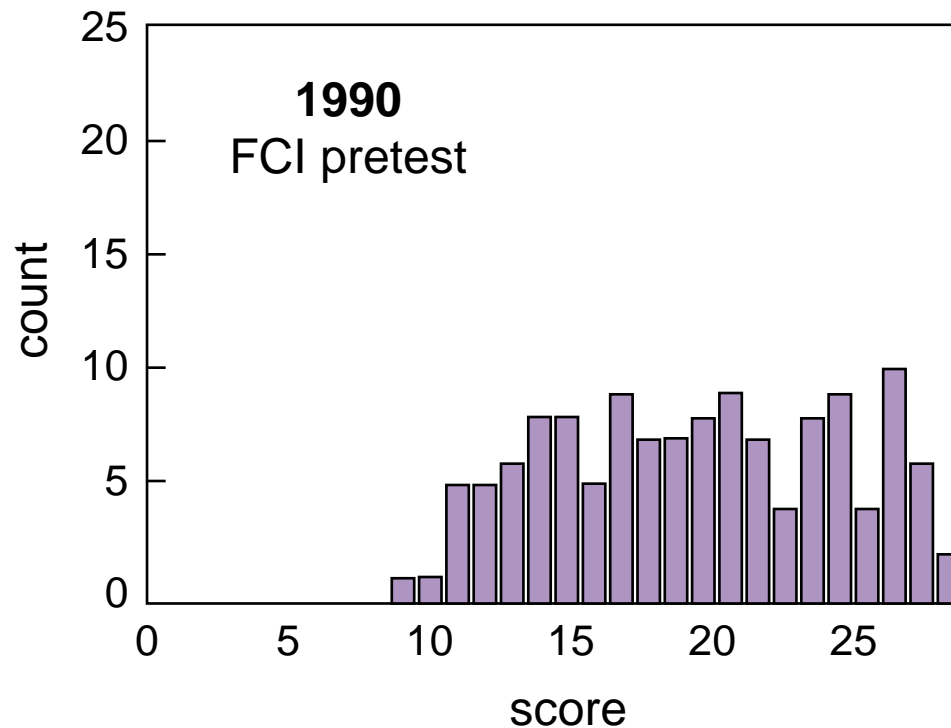
Why do we have this problem?

Why do we have this problem?

Lectures focus on transfer of information...

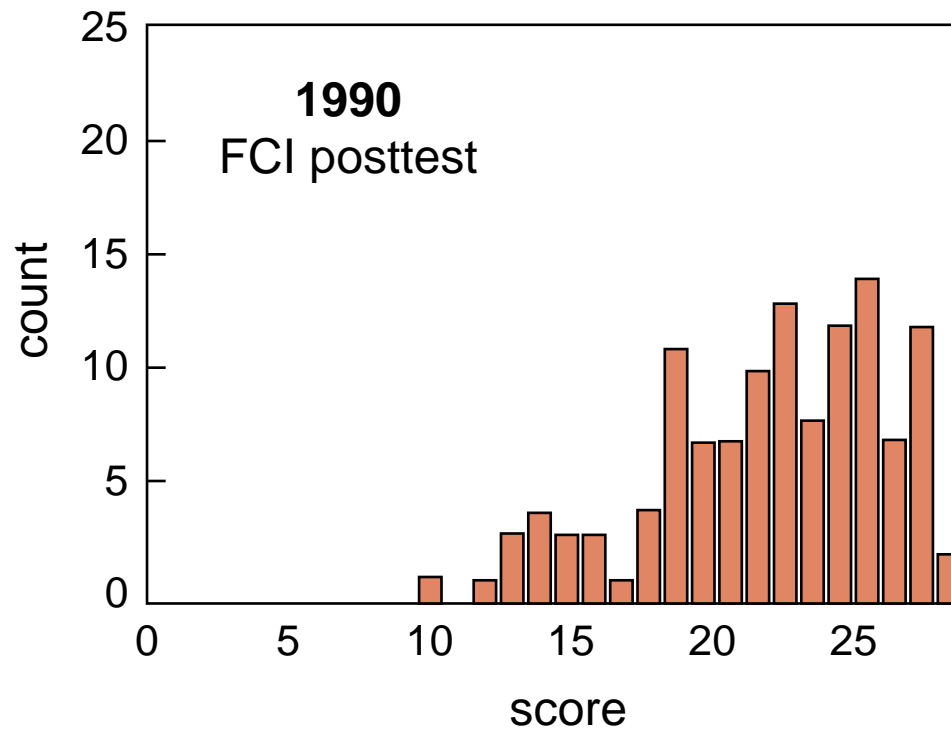
Why do we have this problem?

...but physics is not just information!



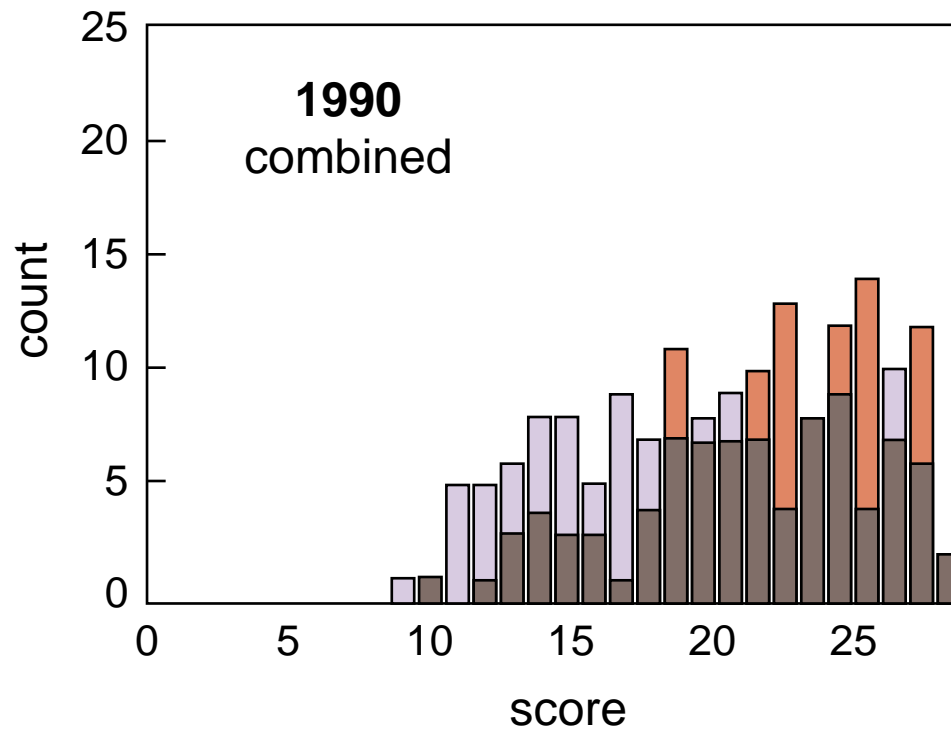
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...but physics is not just information!

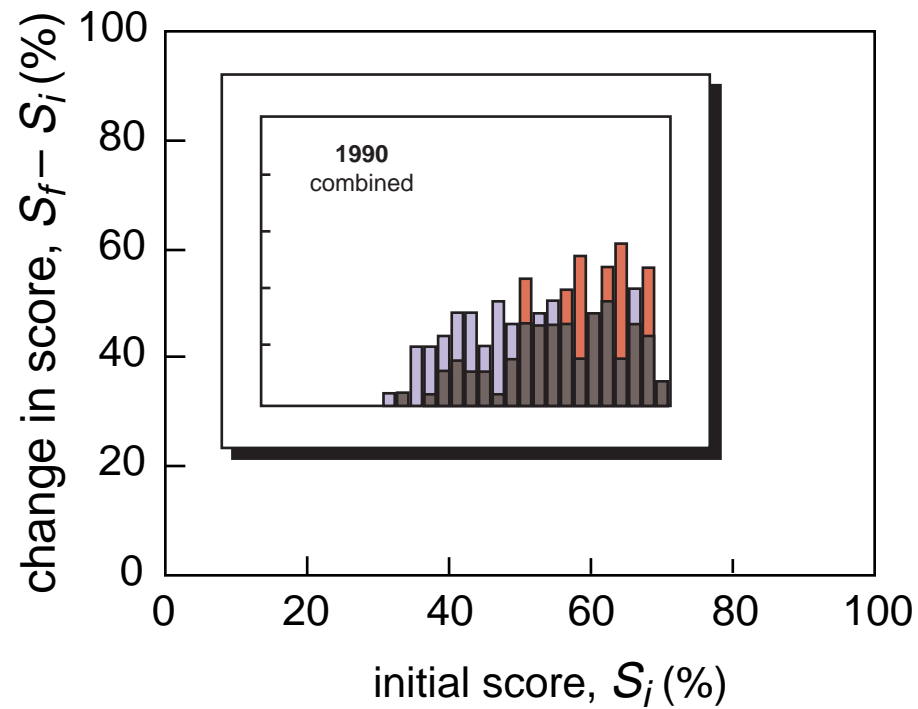


Why do we have this problem?

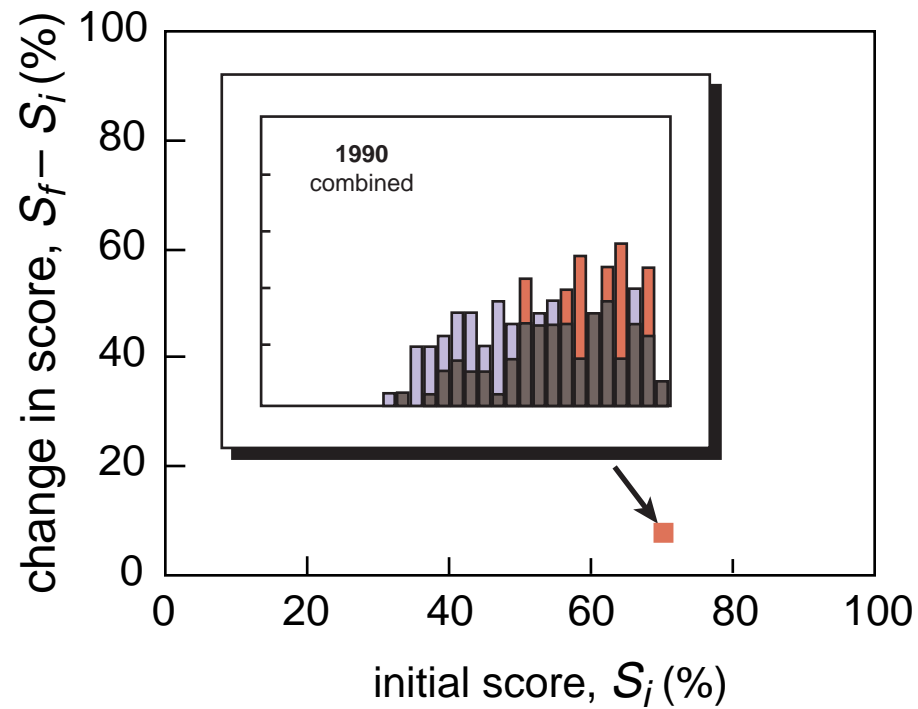
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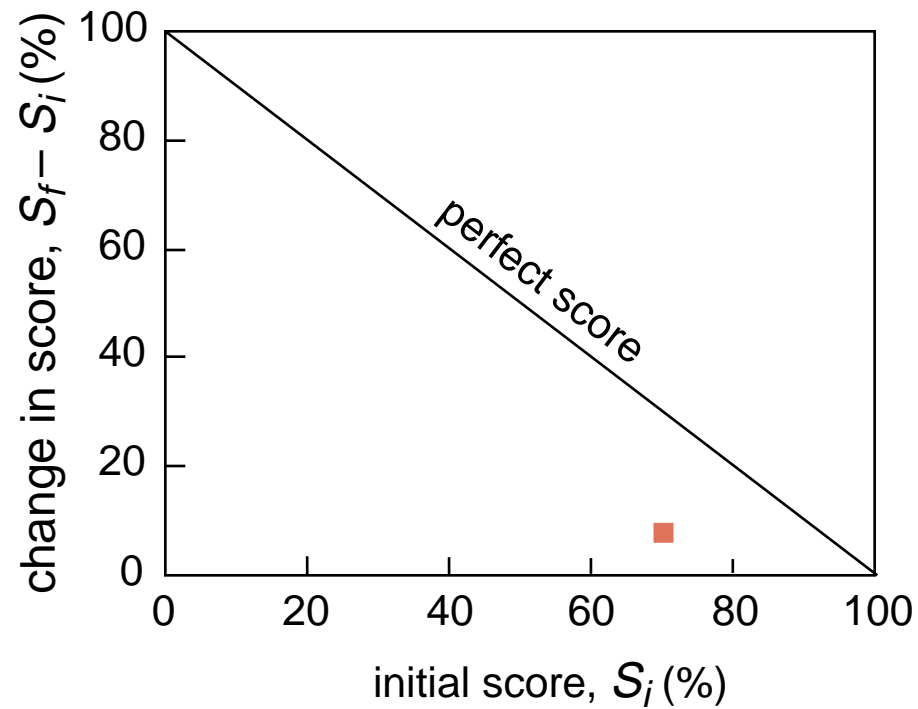
Why do we have this problem?



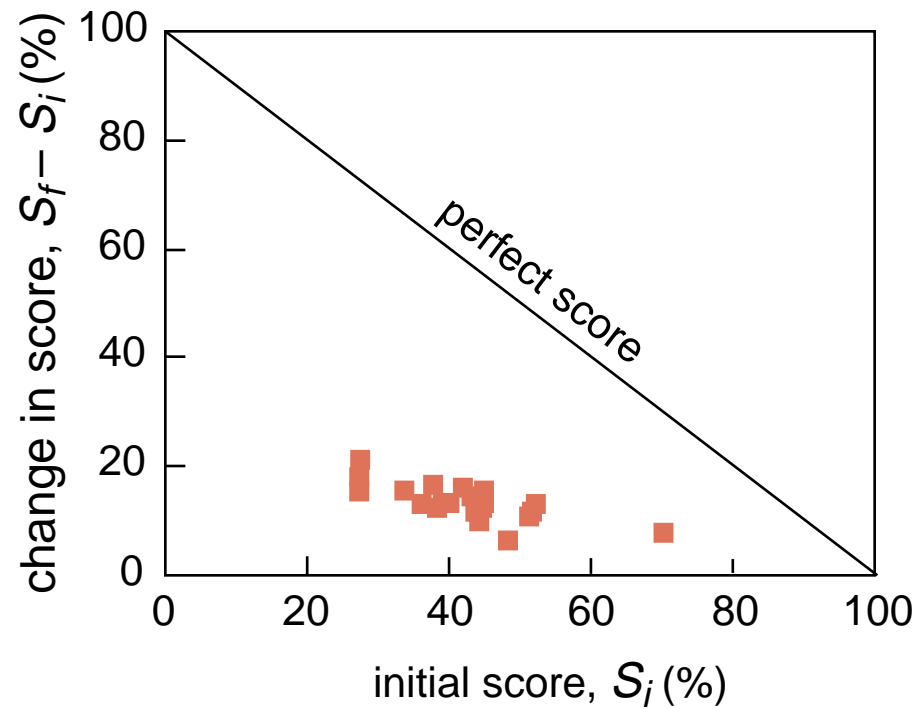
Why do we have this problem?



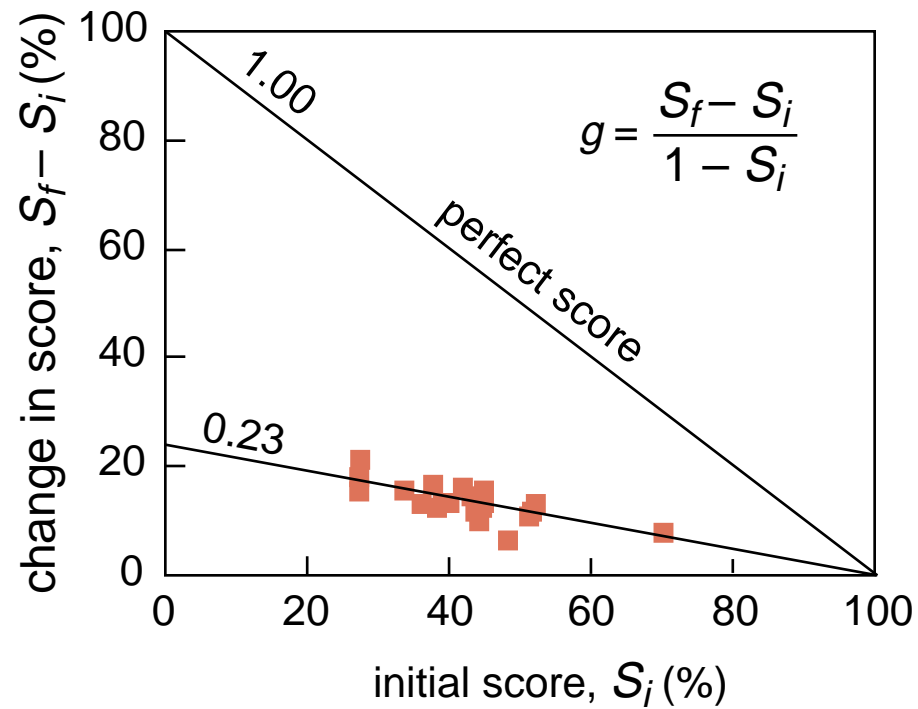
Why do we have this problem?



Why do we have this problem?



Why do we have this problem?

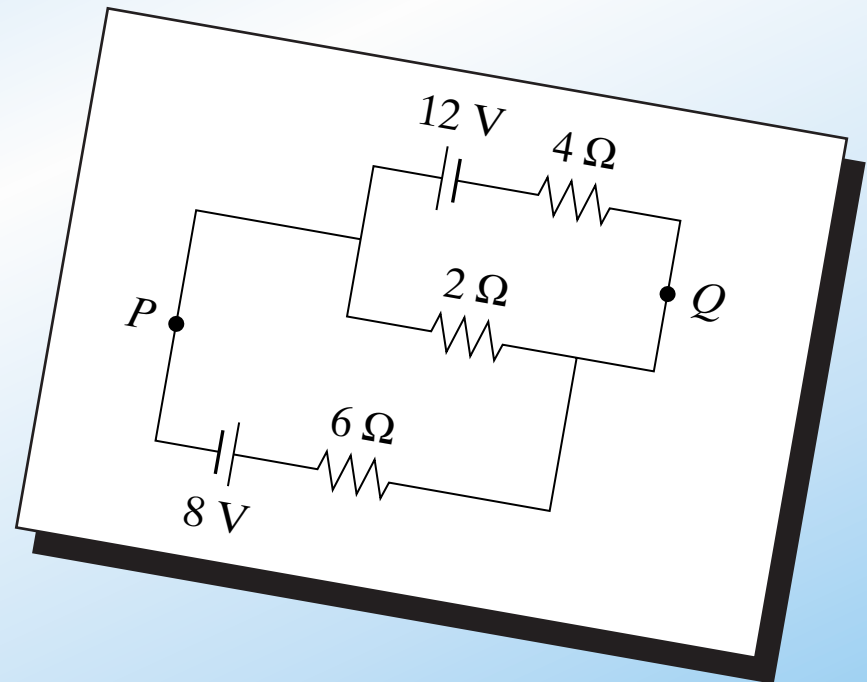


Why do we have this problem?

Conventional problems reinforce bad study habits

Why do we have this problem?

Conventional problems reinforce bad study habits

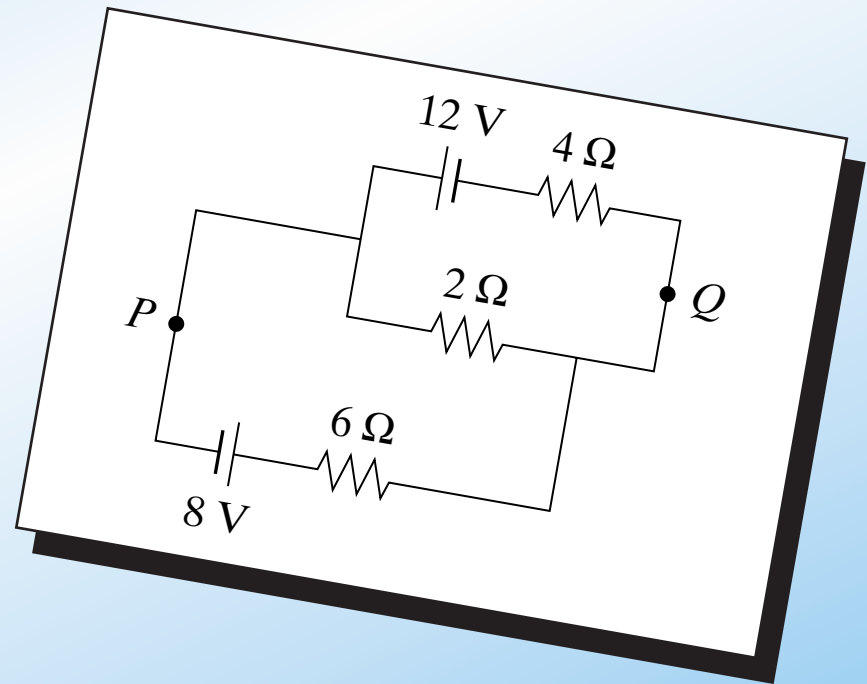


Why do we have this problem?

Conventional problems reinforce bad study habits

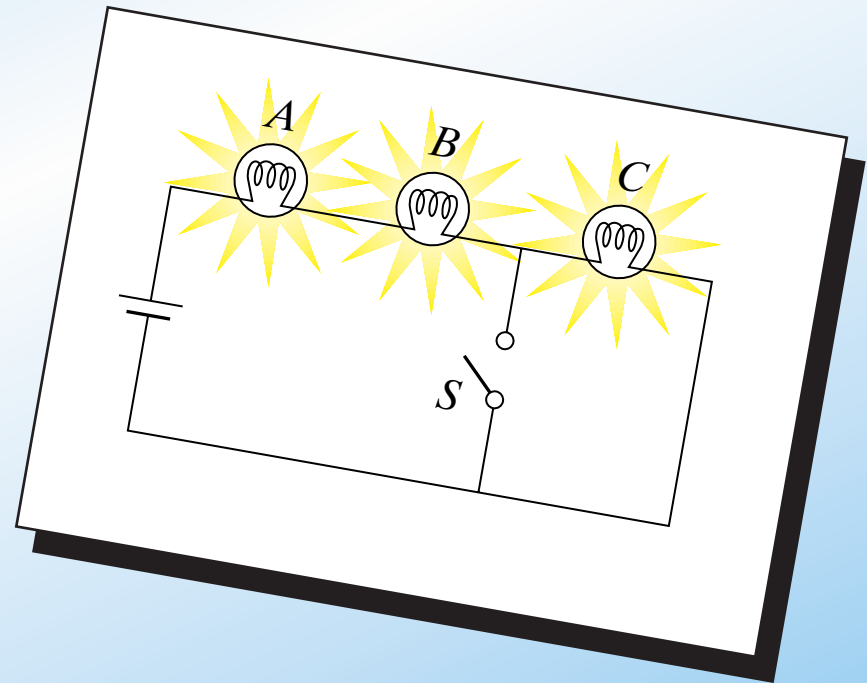
Calculate:

- (a) the current in the $2\text{-}\Omega$ resistor, and
- (b) the potential difference between points P and Q



Why do we have this problem?

Are basic principles understood?

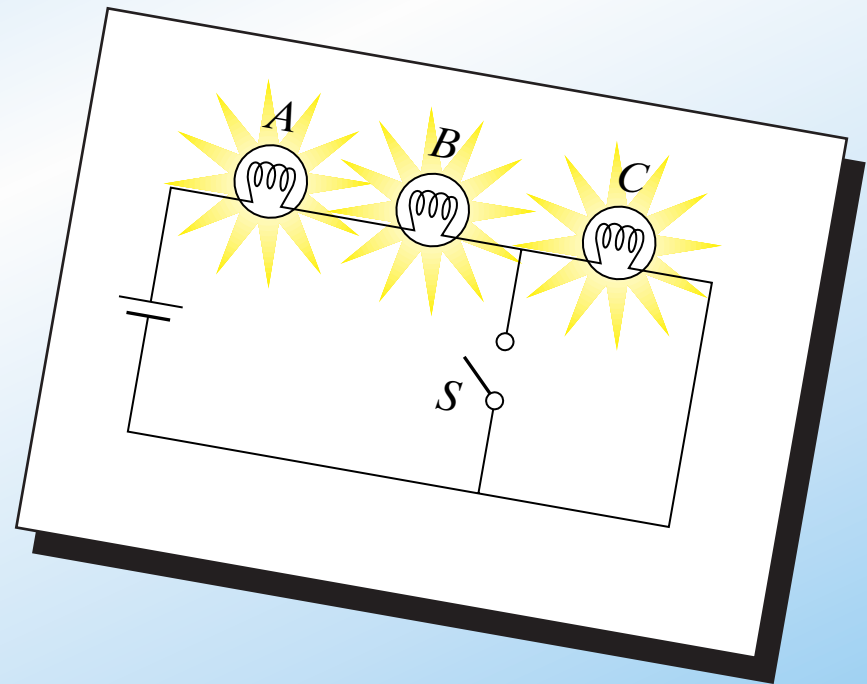


Why do we have this problem?

Are basic principles understood?

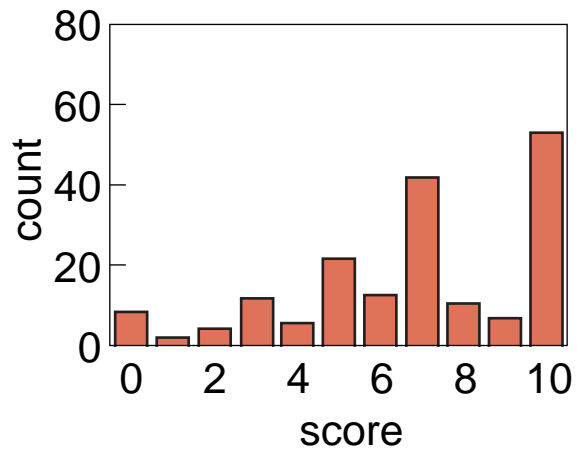
When S is closed, what happens to the:

- (a) intensities of A and B ?
- (b) intensity of C ?
- (c) current through battery?
- (d) voltage drop across A , B , and C ?
- (e) total power dissipated?

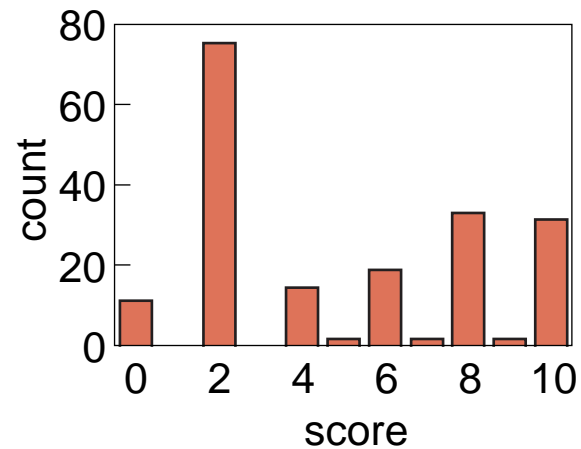


Why do we have this problem?

conventional

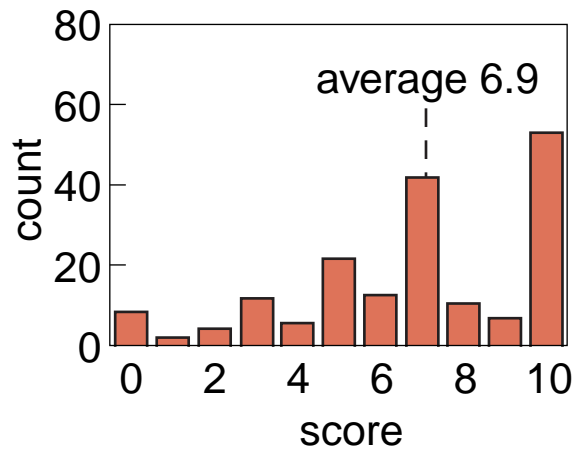


conceptual

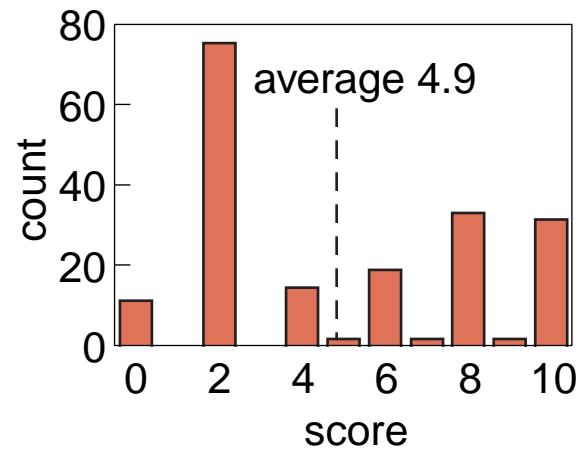


Why do we have this problem?

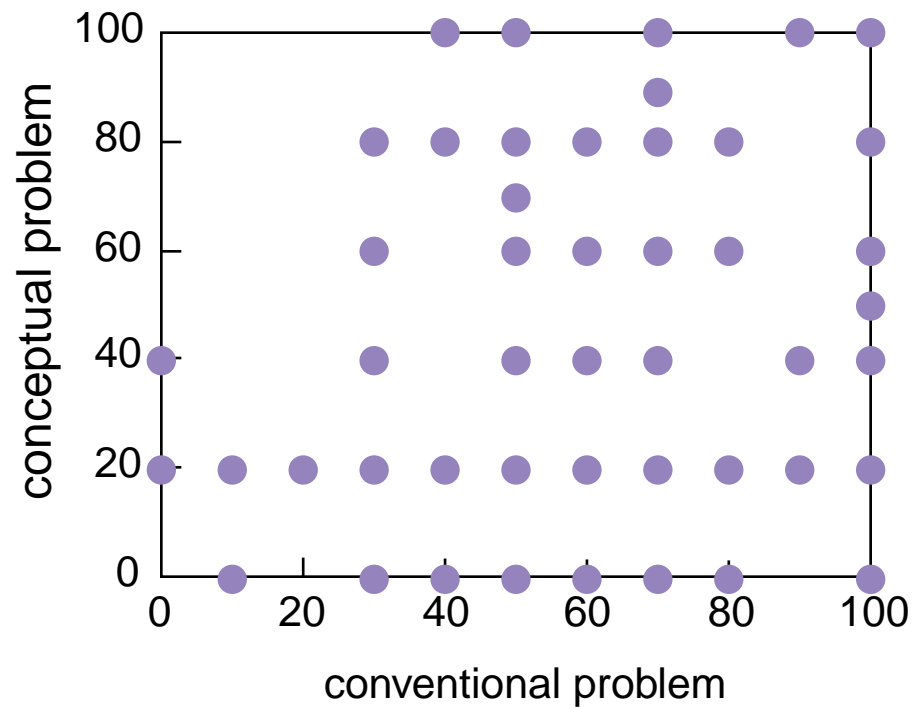
conventional



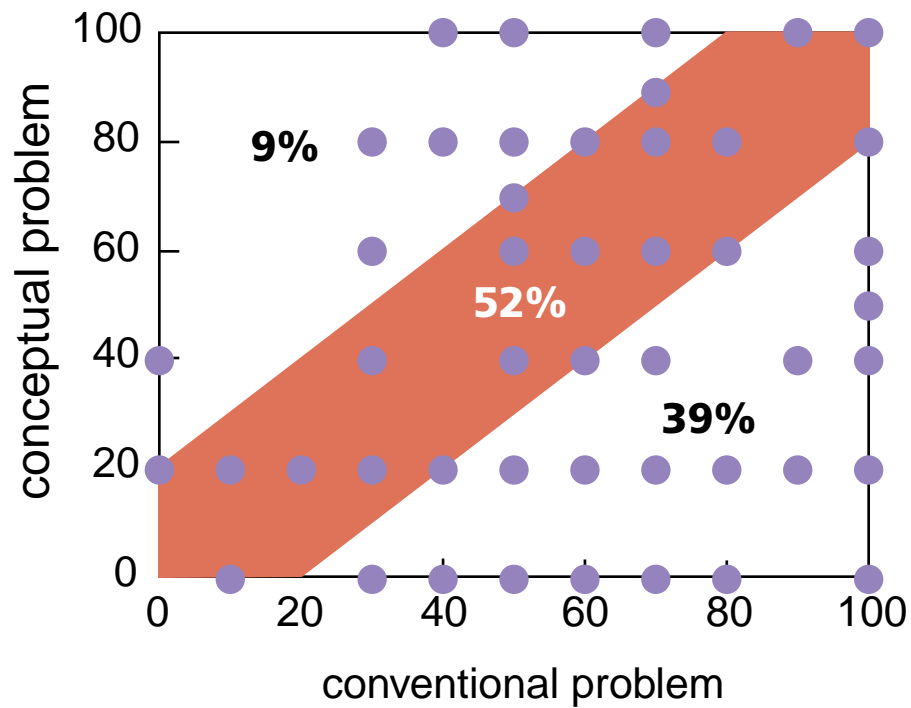
conceptual



Why do we have this problem?



Why do we have this problem?





So what should we do?

Peer Instruction

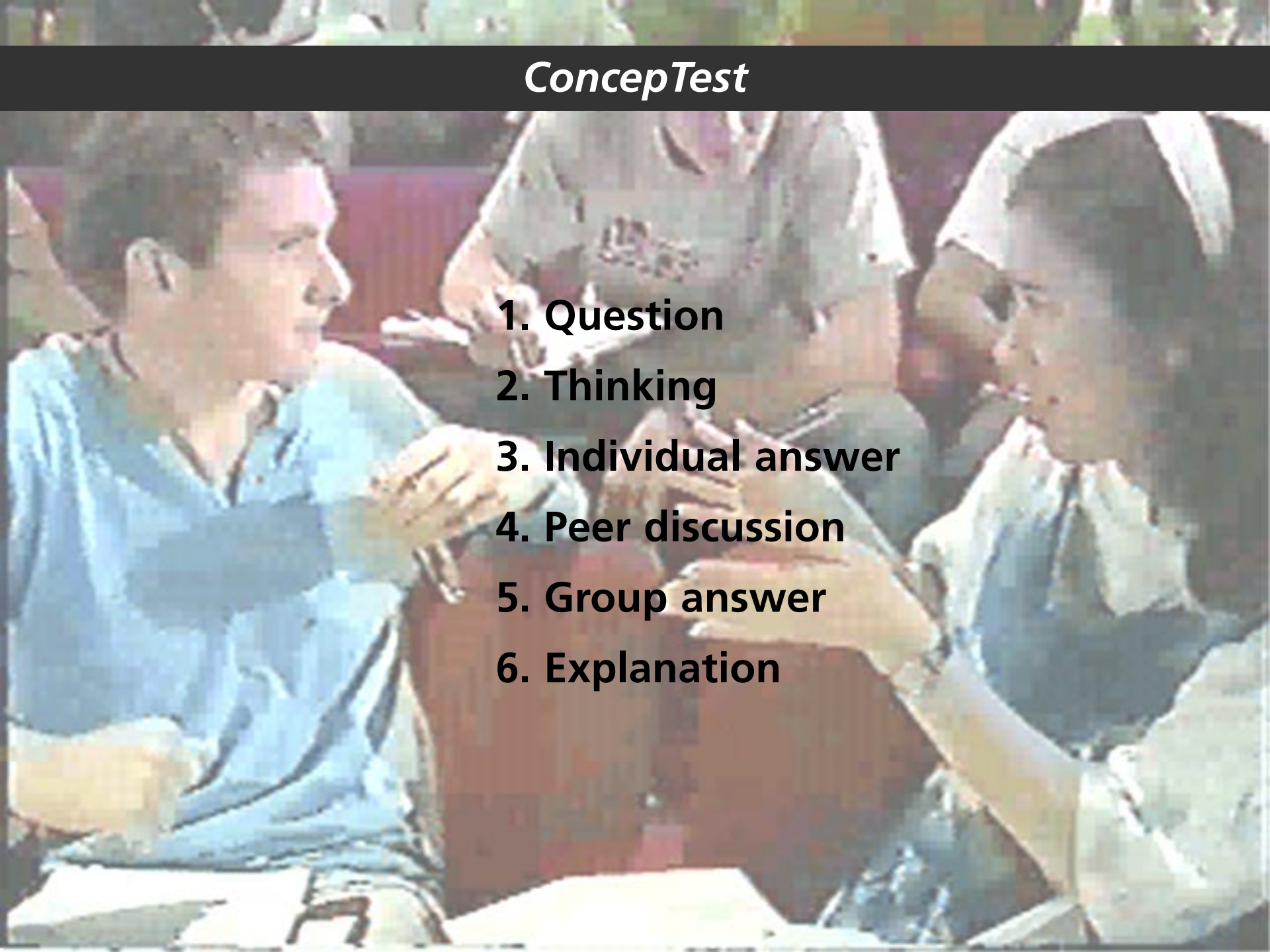
Help students take more responsibility for learning!

Peer Instruction

Main features:

- ▶ **Pre-class reading**
- ▶ **In class: depth, not coverage**
- ▶ **ConcepTests**

ConcepTest

- 
- A photograph of three students in a classroom. On the left, a male student in a blue shirt is looking towards the center. In the middle, a female student in a grey shirt is looking down at a book or paper. On the right, a female student in a white shirt is looking towards the center. They appear to be engaged in a discussion or activity.
- 1. Question**
 - 2. Thinking**
 - 3. Individual answer**
 - 4. Peer discussion**
 - 5. Group answer**
 - 6. Explanation**

Is it any good?

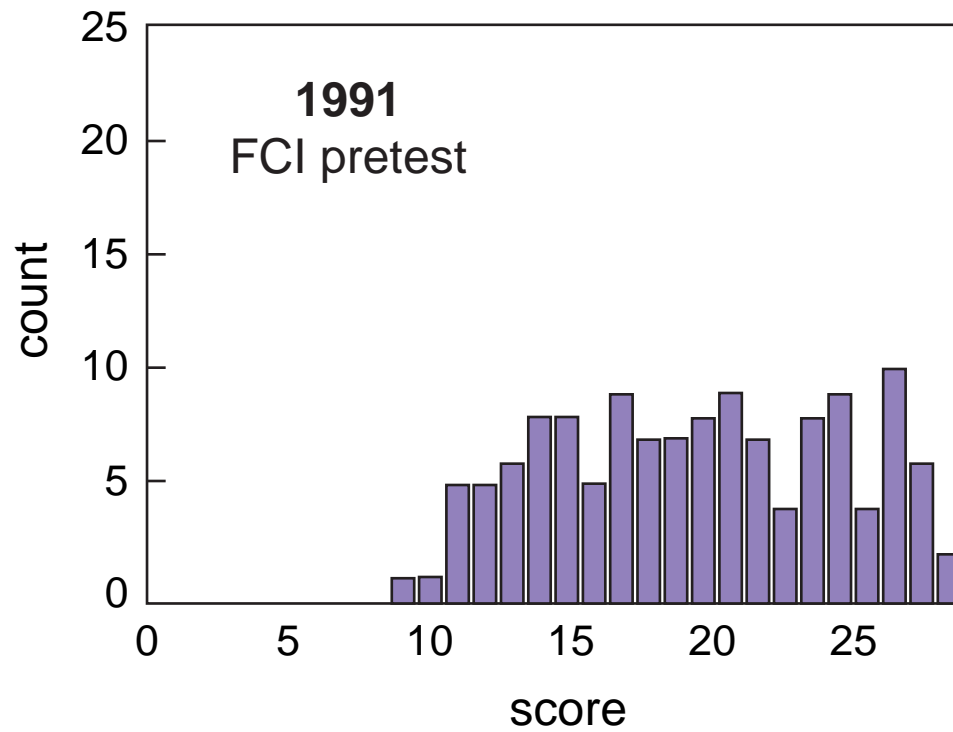
Is it any good?

► **Results**

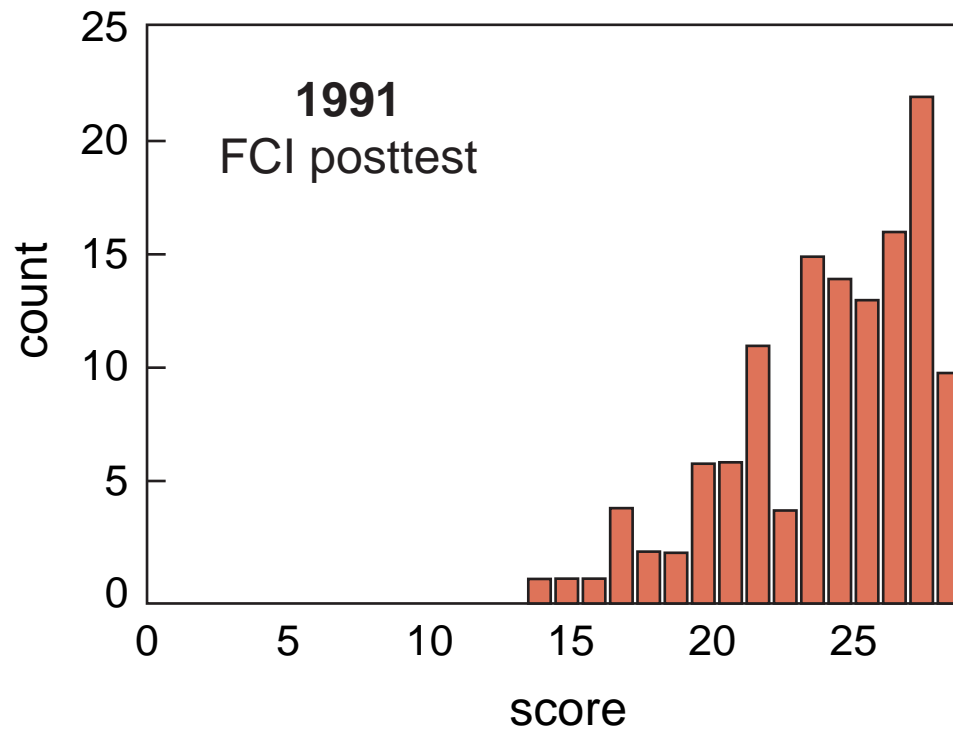
Is it any good?

- ▶ **Results**
- ▶ **Student Reactions**

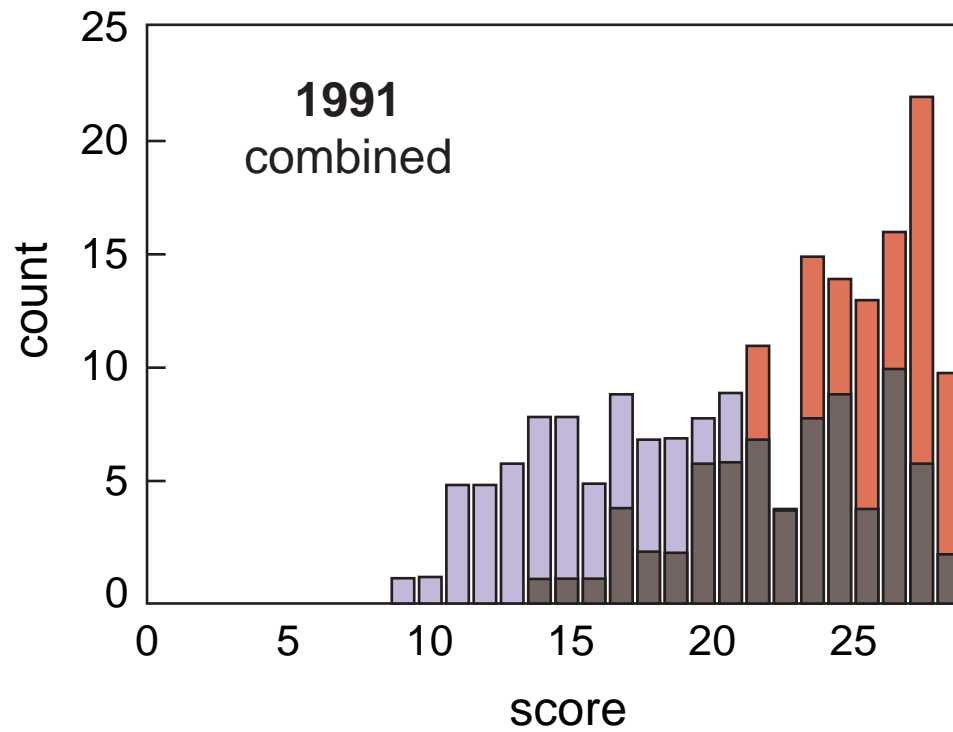
Results



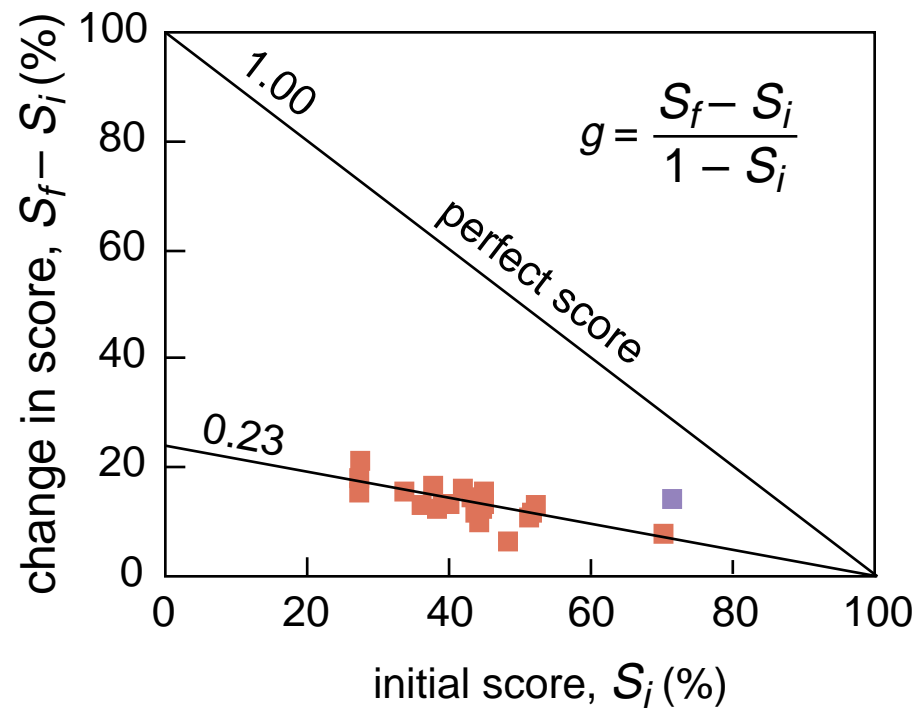
Results



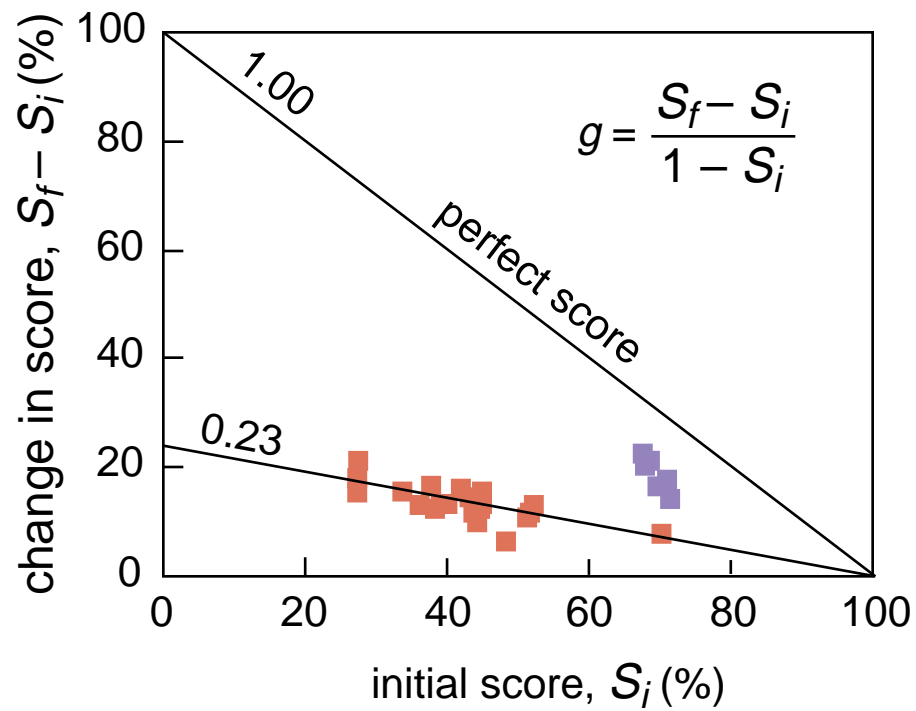
Results



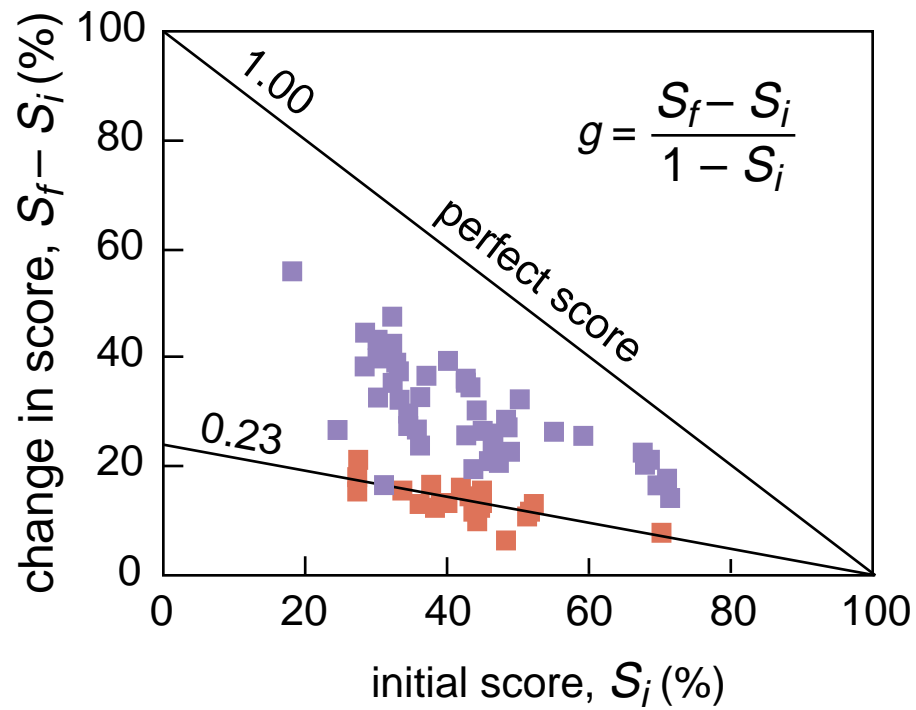
Results



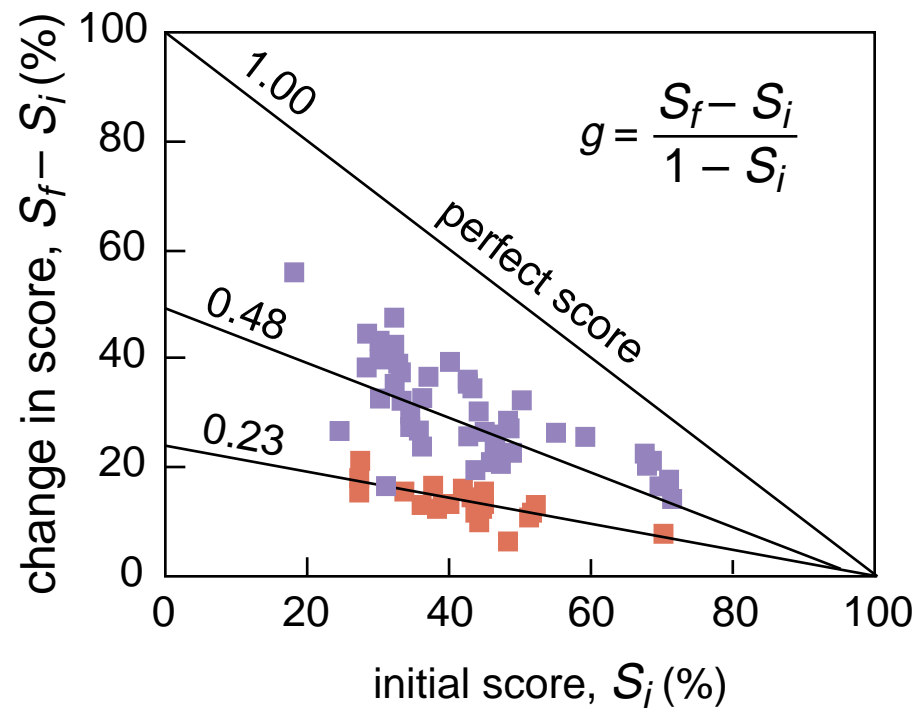
Results



Results



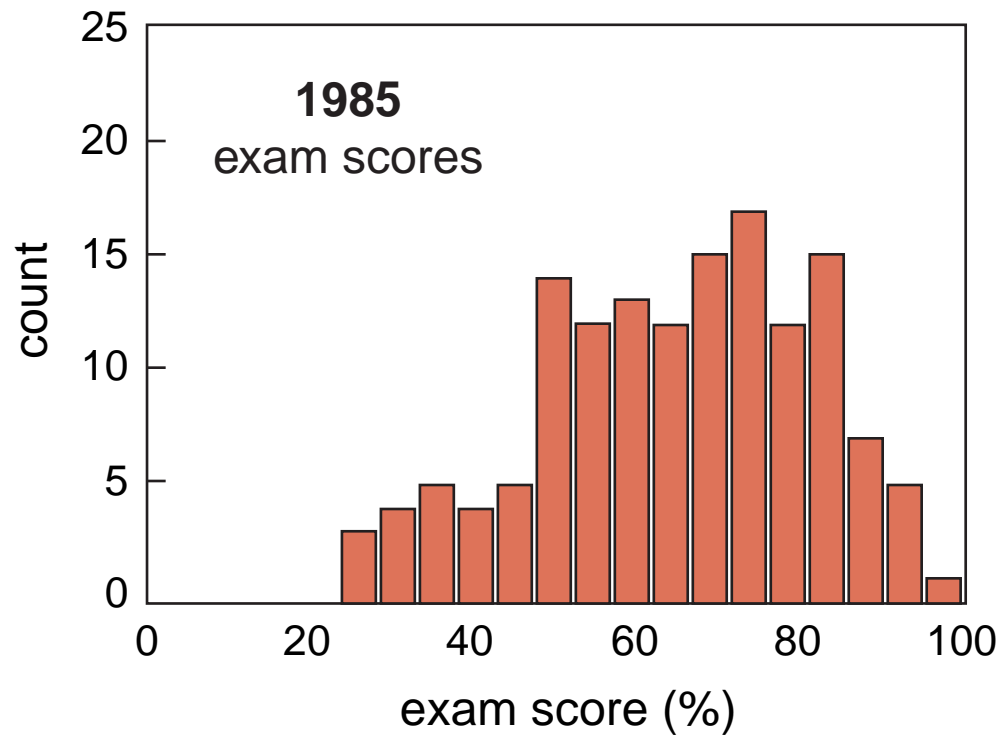
Results



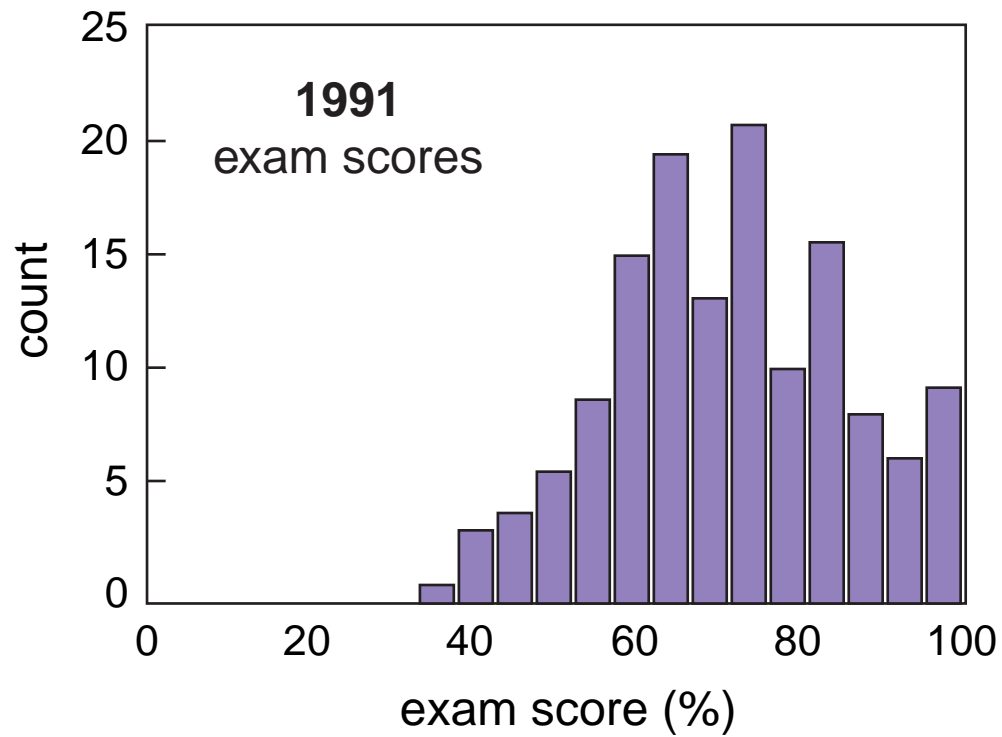
Results

What about problem solving...?

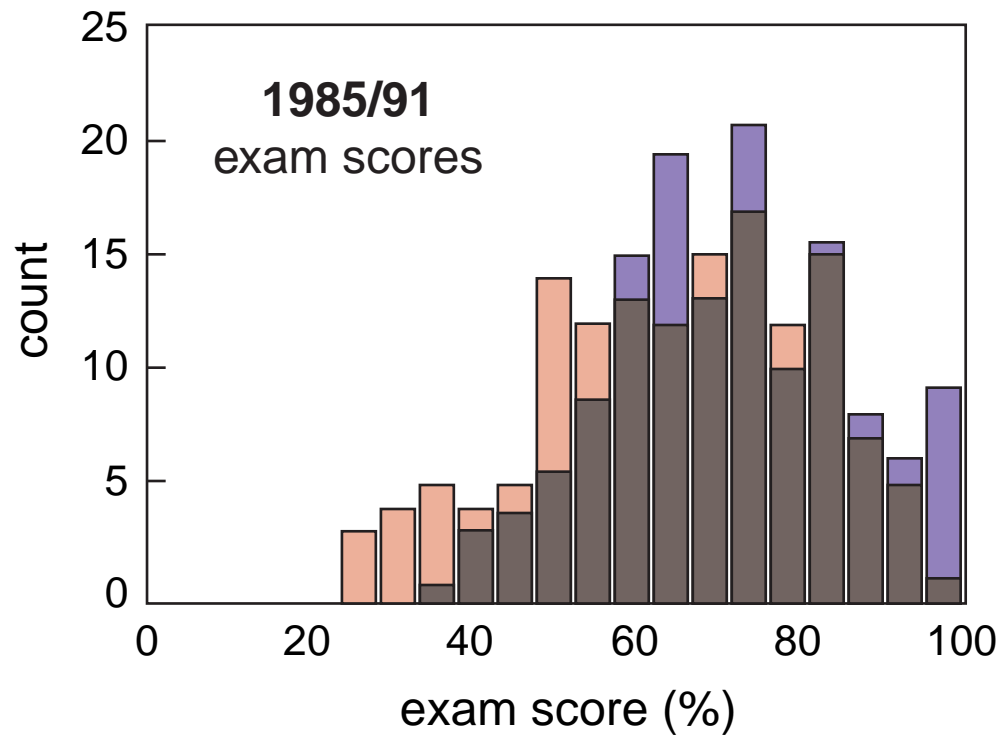
Results



Results



Results



Results

**So better understanding leads to better
problem solving!**

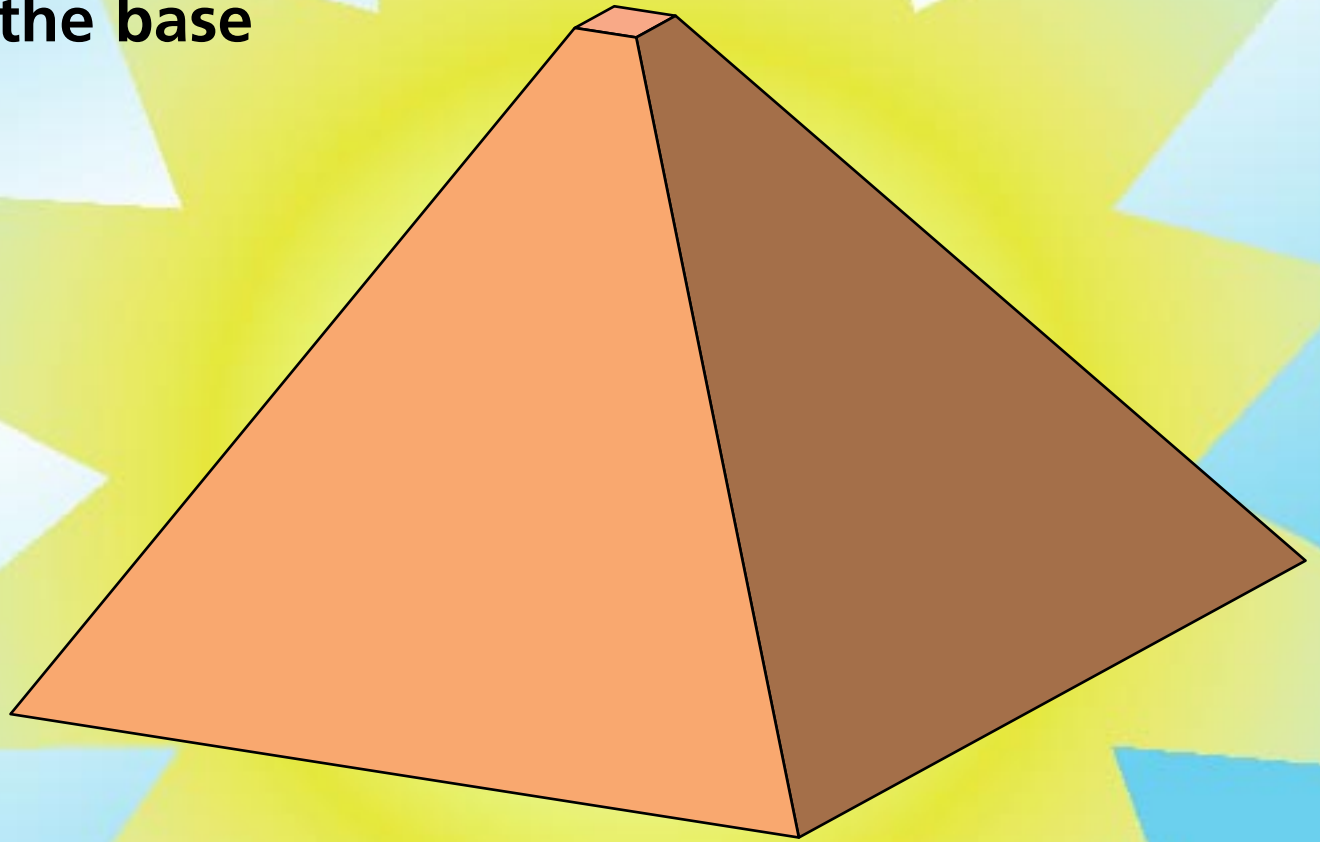
Results

So better understanding leads to better problem solving!

(but “good” problem solving doesn’t always indicate understanding!)

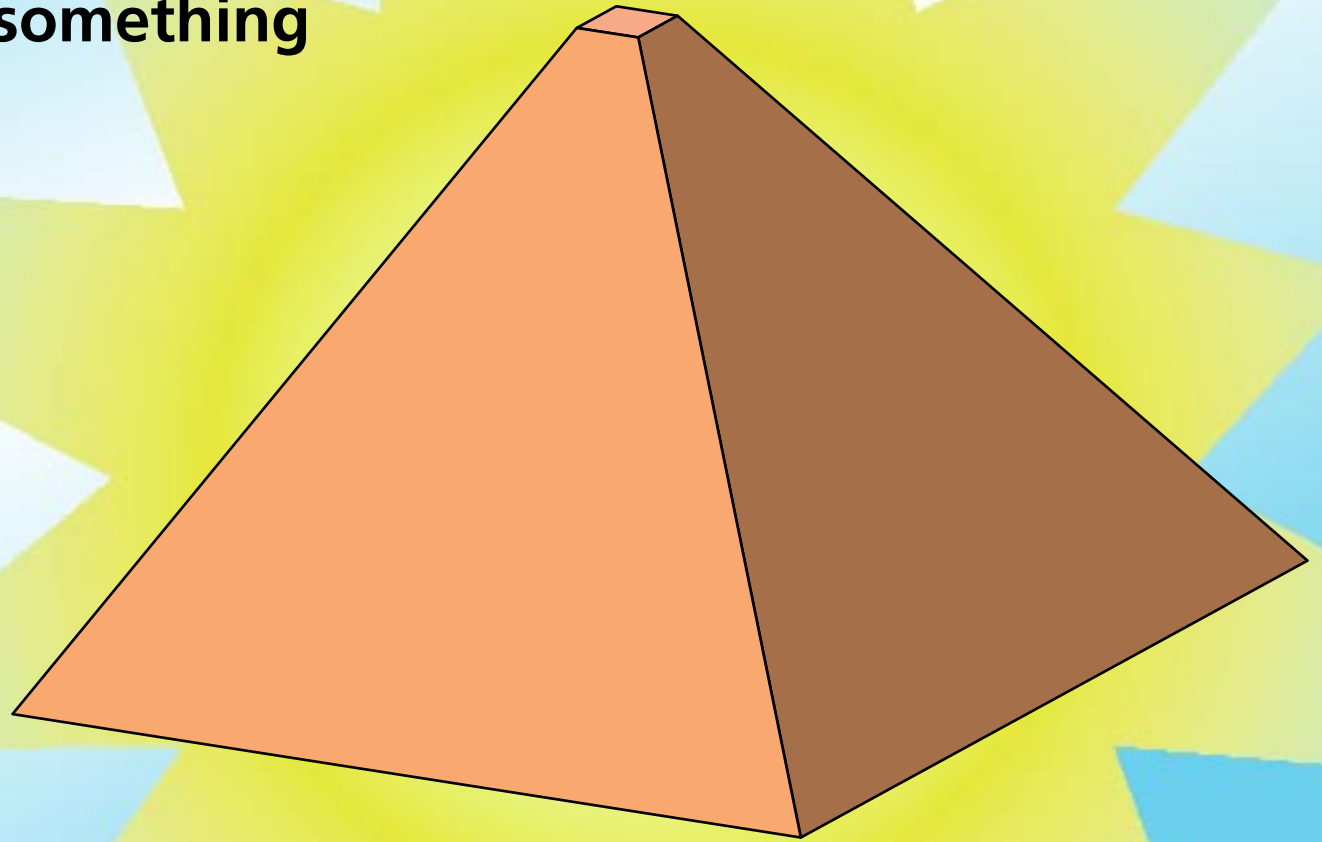
Conclusion

**Let's not forget the base
of the pyramid!**



Conclusion

**Let's give them something
of value!**



Conclusion

Challenges:

- ▶ **internal skepticism**
- ▶ **growing pains**
- ▶ **limited circle of influence**

Conclusion

Rewards:

- ▶ engagement
- ▶ improved understanding
- ▶ class is fun!

Funding

National Science Foundation

**For a copy of this talk and
additional information:**

<http://mazur-www.harvard.edu>