Why is this Relevant?

When I read about a concept in a textbook, I tend to view it in respect my experience: have I used this concept on the job? In the Operations Management course, “learning curve” was one of those concepts that I felt was focused more on the mathematics then I felt necessary. When I looked at this material for the first time, I asked myself “why is this relevant”? How could I explain to students that they must master logarithmic calculations to succeed when I did not believe that was important? I felt that the overall concept of the learning curve was more important than the detailed mathematical calculations.

Why do I think that? Back to experience: in 32 years of working in industry I did not have the need to do a learning curve calculation. I asked a former colleague, who had 40 years of industry experience and traveled 35 countries on company business, how many times had he calculated learning curve: once. For clarification, I am certain that the *concept* of learning curve is something that we all use regularly; however, the detailed mathematical calculation is something that we rarely do. Why do we spend so much time on the math?

In class I showed the students several very good websites that I expect would be the method that they would use on the job - rather than calculate learning curve by hand. I spent a lot of time “walking” students though the logarithmic calculations as we tested them on this. As the focus was on the math, so that students could pass the assignment, some students still had questions on the concept, which I had to cover again.

Bottom line: Sometimes I think the authors of textbooks get lost in the math and fail to explain concepts thoroughly. We may spend time on material (such as calculations) that look like we are testing knowledge, when we may be testing the mechanics of doing a calculation rather then testing the student’s conceptual knowledge.

What could make this concept make sense could be to ask students to relate their experiences with learning curve with some examples. Do they think they could identify a point where the learning curve flattened out?