

When Our Students Don't Respect Us

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By [THOMAS H. BENTON](#)

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Pride is seductive, and it makes us lousy teachers.

We're so brilliant, hard-working, and dedicated. We push the boundaries of human knowledge. We prepare the next generation for the challenges of tomorrow. But our merits are inadequately recognized. We're not paid enough. We don't have control over our institutions. And, to top it off, even our students don't respect us.

Every day is filled with countless half-remembered slights: students coming to class late, putting their feet up, sighing, talking audibly during a lecture, falling asleep. Sometimes they avoid calling us "professor," or misspell our names on papers. In rare cases a student may be openly contemptuous and disruptive in class. After all the sacrifices we've made, we don't deserve this, do we?

Of course in public we go on and on about how much we "love" our students. How much we "relish" the challenge of teaching. (I've written my share of teaching statements too.) But any class can become an emotional death by a thousand cuts.

It shouldn't surprise onlookers that professors have created healing rituals to deal with these daily stresses. One of the permanent features of academic collegiality is the gripe session about students' laziness, stupidity, and materialism: "Students aren't what they used to be. They're not interested in genuine learning; all they care about is getting a high-paying job after they graduate. Good grades for little effort -- that's what they're buying. Why, back when I was an undergraduate. ..."

The narrative of student decline gets repeated year after year, and the fact that this story has been told regularly since the beginning of time does nothing to prevent most of us from seeing our age as unique. Nevertheless, we must hold the last redoubt against the forces of darkness: our horrible students and the vulgar culture that produces them.

"We're like Gandalf, Gimli, and Aragorn riding out to meet an army of orcs and trolls."

The sage, self-congratulatory nodding begins. Then each professor in turn will present a twice-told tale of absenteeism, missed deadlines, criminal plagiarism, and outrageous classroom misconduct:

- "Aside from the two exam days, she never came to class. Her term paper was three weeks late. Then she complained when I gave her a B-."
- "I caught him red-handed with a term paper plagiarized from the Internet. He was so lazy he forgot to delete the real author's name from the last page."
- "I once saw a student eat an entire rotisserie chicken, a tub of mashed potatoes with gravy, and a two-liter Pepsi in the back of my class. He did try to belch quietly."

Of course, the responsibility for student misbehavior never seems to lie with us. We never ask whether we deserve to be disrespected.

I once asked a class how I could make my "cultural heritage" course more fun. One student in the back said, "Umm ... how about piñatas?" "Fun" was clearly beside the point, and the student -- not my pick as the brightest in the class -- clearly knew it when I didn't.

How many of us pander and condescend to our students? Dumb down courses and inflate the grades? Ask the students to sit in circles and voice learned opinions about texts that most of them haven't read? Give them cookies and praise their half-hearted accomplishments? Ask them to call us by our first names and evaluate us with "complete honesty"?

They see beyond the kindly platitudes about how much we "love" them, and understand how little we respect their abilities. We pretend to be open-hearted egalitarians, but the students know we are infantilizing them. And then we wonder why they sometimes act like bored children.

More often than not, when a student is disrespectful, it is because the student feels disrespected by the teacher. Even the most progressive teachers are disrespectful in a thousand subtle and not-so-subtle ways: facial expressions, body language, not remembering students' names, terse comments on papers, humiliating some students while playing favorites with others, making prejudicial judgments because a student looks like a model or an athlete. But, most of all, we do this by underestimating our students' intelligence and ability, by assuming that we not only know more about our subjects, but that we are superior to our students as human beings.

A student once said to me, "Just because I play football doesn't mean I'm stupid." I discovered he wasn't. He became a sensible leader in class discussions instead of a threat to my authority. He never learned to use the MLA citation method, but today he's a successful engineer who supports the local arts council.

What counts as intelligence depends almost entirely on context. I find that my students are as smart, diligent, and idealistic as they have always been -- as I was. But what they know, as a generation, is inevitably different from what my profession defines as knowledge.

Look at any classroom. Our students are yogis of self-discipline. Young women starve themselves to emaciated perfection. Young men return day after day to the brutalities of the playing field, coming to classes with their arms and legs packed in ice. Our students' heads are crammed with information that we regard as irrelevant but that will become the foundations of entire fields of study and economic growth. What we consider consumer culture, for example, is a highly complex symbolic system used to negotiate identity and power, and our students are the most sophisticated analysts of visual "texts" the world has yet produced. Almost every student who struggles in my classes turns out to be a prodigy in some other field of endeavor.

I wonder if we have been conditioned to "love" our students most when they flatter our pride: when they are under our control, when they do as we say, and make steps towards becoming like us -- people who live through repeatable, controlled experiences. We love our students when we feel superior to them. It's the "bad" students who awaken us to the reality of human relationships based on equality. In a society excessively segregated by age and status, our relationships with students are an opportunity for the transfer of ideas and values between generations.

We need to approach teaching with humility. Only when we do so will students treat us with respect. Only then will we deserve it.

Thomas H. Benton is the pseudonym of an assistant professor of English at a Midwestern liberal-arts college. He writes occasionally about academic culture and the tenure track and welcomes reader mail directed to his attention at careers@chronicle.com