Professing Through the Years

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The short walks from classroom to office have felt a lot more onerous this semester, and it’s not just the endless, merciless winter that’s bogging me down. It may not be polite to say it, but it’s my damn students. How much more apathetic could these kids possibly be? How much more shrinkage could their attention spans reasonably endure? And can someone tell me why students who need to be manipulated into reading a &\*%\*?&$ poem chose to be English majors in the first place?

I’m losing my patience. I spend too many hours each week planning detailed lessons catered to the needs of each class, offering extensive feedback on students’ papers, and rearranging my rather unforgiving schedule to meet with those who actually want to know how to improve those papers (without having to go so far as to read the course syllabus or—*gasp!*—proofread). Worse, the amount of mental energy I expend outside of class, trying to analyze their apathetic behavior, is beginning to border on embarrassing. Is it the fact that I’m naïve enough to have reasonable expectations? You know, expectations that a student might actually raise a serious question, or even react somehow to the fact that Gloucester just had his [eyes plucked out](http://www.shakespeare-online.com/plays/lear_3_7.html)? What used to be my solace, teaching, has unexpectedly become a significant stressor in my life.

I want to be clear, though, that I’m tormented by my impatience. I’m the guy who used to cringe every time a colleague would curse out his students—or even mock them. A decade ago I published a book, in which I claimed that “The most basic thing I have learned in more than 10 years of teaching in the American higher education system is that our students are many things, but they are not stupid and they certainly are not helpless. If you adopt the attitude now that they are, you will be bitter and angry for the rest of your career.” Back then, I was trying to stress to beginning teachers that feelings of frustration with students might say more about our own shortcomings than theirs. Recently, when I brought up my teaching “depression” with some friends at the local pub, a clear split emerged between those who believe students really have become more difficult and those who think the “difficulty” is within us. One of them accused me of being “nostalgic about a moment that never existed.”

In 2005, it’s true, I was about 30 years old, and coming off a very good teaching decade—if the evidence of “good teaching” is high evaluations, external awards, and students who appear to genuinely like you. What I didn’t realize, of course, was how relatively easy “good teaching” was at the time, in spite of the fact that I knew less, had less experience, and, in many ways, taught the specific content of the courses less effectively than I think I do now. I can’t know how much of a factor my age was in determining my “likeability” and, therefore, my teaching effectiveness, but I have no doubt it *was* a factor. As close in age as I was to the students themselves, why shouldn’t they have found me more relevant? Now, in my 40s, I’ve made the shift from a quasi-peer, one who just happened to be more educated than them, to a potential father-figure. And let’s face it: Most healthy 19-year-olds ought to be rebelling against their fathers. I may as well be an extra-terrestrial. Students these days often enter my classes on the defensive—“never trust anyone over 30,” and all that—and this changes the game.

Nobody told me there’d be days like these.

Back in graduate school, during TA orientation and the first-semester teaching practicum, a kind of universalist pedagogical model reigned: *This is how you write a lesson plan. This is how you foster discussion. Now go ahead and teach for the rest of your life!* Almost all skills-based pedagogical training in higher education tends to be limited to this first semester of our academic careers, but we aren’t the same people at 40 that we were at 25, and that’s not the only life change that’s relevant here. One friend insists, for instance, that the student-teacher relationship really changes at 60. Some female friends tell me it all works differently for women than for men, but that life’s changing phases nonetheless cause women similar problems. A quick survey of my own graduate advisees suggests that age 30—my own pedagogical highpoint—marks for some teachers a significant turning point in their careers. Whenever such changes occur, help is hard to find, and giving up on students can seem a lot easier than seeking advice from seasoned colleagues or changing one’s entire teaching philosophy.

So how much of the problem is me, and how much of it is my students? A basic tendency of each generation is to baffle the generations that came before it. So when I lament the basic state of affairs in the university classroom, am I simply being nostalgic? Too cranky? Have I lost the ability to remember what it was like to be 19?

On the morning I began writing this column, my university locked down for two hours due to a bomb threat. After my Shakespeare class ended, the students informed me we were required to stay put until the administration issued an all-clear announcement. Stuck in the classroom together for almost an hour, I was surprised to find myself having a great time talking to them. We chatted about the basketball teams and the miserable job prospects for the soon-to-be graduates in the room. They told me about the “bad” teachers in my department (which always makes me feel better). The discussions reminded me of what office hours used to accomplish prior to email taking over as our primary form of communication: individuation and personalization of both parties in the student/teacher relationship. (I’m not lamenting the rise of email, mind you, just the fact that it’s made certain aspects of teaching harder.)

I used to be more aware when I thought about my “damn” students that I was thinking about a minority whose immaturity actually rose to the level of my consciousness. Given the chance to engage a few of these students more personally, it’s easier to believe in the promise of the majority.

I suppose you can sense it coming, the pious ending where I assert that, as the result of a bomb threat, I’ve rediscovered the joys of teaching young people. The truth is, I’m not feeling it. No matter how self-aware or empathetic I try to be, with age I continue to feel less patience for apathy, irresponsibility, and distractedness in our students. They are adults, after all. (Of course, the corporate university has done much to infantilize them and normalize such behaviors, but that’s a different column).

Mine is increasingly a love/hate relationship with the students, but I don’t want it to be. I would like nothing more than to reestablish that rapport I cultivated so easily with them when I was younger, precisely so that I can teach them more effectively now. I want to do it, though, without becoming the creepy older professor who tries too hard or uses up valuable class time on “get to know you” exercises. With every passing year, I find myself struggling more to figure out the ideal place for meeting these forever-young people. How much of the pilgrimage towards this place is my responsibility, and how much of it is theirs? Won’t somebody just give me the right answer?



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