

THE TROUBLE WITH STUDENTS

by Andrew Furman

A colleague of mine is sure he knows the trouble with our students, and he rarely neglects to remind the rest of us at our frequent college faculty assemblies. We might be talking about the state budget crisis, promotion and tenure criteria, the status of our search for a new university provost, the chronic shortage of office space...whatever. Yet to him, the trouble with our students ever seems pressingly germane. He raises his hand and waits patiently for our assembly leader to recognize him, per *Roberts' Rules of Order*. Having secured the floor, he stands, somewhat stooped, as if from the great strain of educating undergraduates day in and day out.

Our students can't write, he bewails in his mellifluous British accent, glancing meaningfully—unless it's my imagination—toward those of us in the English department charged with teaching students this crucial skill. Worse, he continues, they can't even think. His oft-invoked example: "They're incapable of distinguishing the difference between the phrases, 'most Germans were Nazis,' and 'most Nazis were Germans.'" And SAT scores. Don't get him started on SAT scores! The average SAT scores of

Andrew Furman is chair of the Department of English at Florida Atlantic University in Boca Raton. He is the author, most recently, of Contemporary Jewish American Writers and the Multicultural Dilemma (2000). His essays and book reviews have appeared in Tikkun, The Miami Herald, The Chronicle of Higher Education, MELUS, ISLE, Image, and elsewhere. His first novel, Alligators May Be Present, is forthcoming in 2004 from the University of Wisconsin Press.

Florida's high school students are higher than the scores of students in only one or two other states in the Union. "In a good year we beat out Alabama," he avers, "but not usually"—the familiar refrain always good for a few laughs.

In short, our students lack smarts. That's the trouble. According to him, at least.

It has never occurred to me to challenge my colleague's assertions before our assembly. For one thing, I haven't had the time or inclination

to check his statistics with regard to our foundering SAT scores. What's more, I like him and trust him. (Would a Manchester man lie?) On the whole, I suspect he's right about our students' ill-preparedness for the intellectual rigors of a university education. We teach, after all, at a large public university in south Florida, funded on a shoestring but with bargain basement matriculation fees. Charged with serving a region that continues to grow at a geometric rate, our university, like

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several large state universities, struggles to accommodate growth while simultaneously maintaining quality in its academic programs. Few of our students spring from affluence. Most are products of our beleaguered public secondary education system. (It is to our enormous embarrassment in south Florida that many of our schoolchildren attend classes in glorified trailers densely packed in rows, resembling army barracks.) Several students work at least one job in addition to taking classes; several already have spouses and/or children to support.

So, it may be as my colleague claims, too many students here can't write and can't think. Big surprise, I say.

Yet, regardless of the arguable veracity of my colleague's claims vis a vis our students' remedial needs, it seems to me that he hasn't truly engaged the issue at hand. Granted, I've only been teaching for 13 years or so. But as I ponder what I consider to be the trouble with my students over the years, I can't say that their impoverished intelligence most immediately flashes across my mental screen. In every class I teach, I encounter a few exceptionally bright students, several perfectly capable yet underwhelming students, and a few who give the impression of being hopeless dullards. I would venture to guess that the same essential formula, in varying degrees, applies to professors from Harvard to Humboldt Community College. Why quibble over percentages?

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skills, or lack thereof, as it is their humanness, their nagging corporeal presence, that complicates matters so. Professors and students forge nuanced and often volatile relationships that cause all sorts of trouble. I'm not thinking about sex here. Sorry. No, I'm thinking of the more prosaic, and more pervasive, troubles that accompany the intellectually and emotionally charged relationship between professors and students.

There are three kinds of students that come to mind here, if I might be overly reductive for a moment: students who feel too much, students who know too much, and students who ask too much. Students who ask too much exasperate us with their out-sized demands. You've all had such students. You probably have a couple now. They're the students who send you e-mail and can't understand why you haven't responded after two hours; the students who wait for you at your door at the beginning of each office hour and monopolize your time discussing matters that bear little relation to the course in which they're enrolled;

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the students who wonder whether it would be okay to bring their pet pug or iguana, who suffers from separation anxiety, into class with them. My favorite recent example of a student who asks too much was a student of mine last semester, an aspiring fiction writer, who approached me with her behemoth manuscript (from a separate course) and asked me whether I would be willing to read it for her. Fair enough, but wait. "I know you're busy," she acknowledged, "so it's no rush." *Phew*, I exhaled. "Take your time with it," she continued. "Like, two weeks?" Students, of course, have every right and reason to be anxious about receiving feedback from their professors. Such anxiety plagues creative writing students particularly, whose work cuts so close to the bone.

But two weeks?

The students who know too much are far more vexing than the students who ask too much. They're the students who call you on the carpet immediately in the middle of class should you dare utter the incorrect publication date of a Dickens novel or stress the wrong syllable upon mentioning Faulkner's Lafayette County. These are the students who seek detailed clarification when it seems, in passing, that you've conflated French Feminist and American Feminist theoretical precepts; the students who blithely refer to secondary works of criticism you've never read (but ought to have) during classroom discussion. In *Lucky Jim* (1954), Kingsley Amis created one of literature's most memorable students who

knows too much in Mr. Michie. He's the character who dogs his lecturer, Jim Dixon, across campus, pestering him for a syllabus of a prospective Honours course, inquiring whether the course proposes to offer an analysis of scholasticism.

"This question illustrated exactly why Dixon felt he had to keep Michie out of his subject," Amis writes. "Michie knew a lot, or seemed to, which was as bad. One of the things he knew, or seemed to, was what scholasticism was. Dixon read, heard, and even used the word a dozen times a day without knowing, though he seemed to. But he saw clearly that he wouldn't be able to go on seeming to know the meaning of this and a hundred such words while Michie was there questioning, discussing, and arguing about them" (28-29).

The students who know too much are the ones who, to put it simply, make you look, and feel, stupid. Of course, the worst crime such students commit, through no fault of their own, is that they unforgivably remind you of how annoying you once were when you were a student.

But it is students who feel too much who are far and away the most troubling of the bunch. The students who—through no design of their own—affect us most powerfully, and painfully. They range from the mere thin-skinned students, the ones who mistake the pin-prick of constructive criticism for a mortal gouging, to those with deep-seated emotional problems. If I've learned anything as a professor, I've learned of the terrifying significance packed into every word we say or write to our students, or every word they inadvertently hear.



With Talmudic scrutiny, they analyze the pitch and timbre of even (perhaps especially) our most throwaway phrases. I'm constantly reminded that a flippant joke I might make around a seminar table at a graduate student's expense can potentially throw that student into an emotional tailspin for a week; a sloppily administered dose of criticism on a paper, regardless of the grade, can make an undergraduate positively morose.

"Do you know how it can be with a teacher, and you're young," a character in Denis Johnson's recent novel, *The Nature of the World* (2000), reflects upon learning of his former professor's death, "you've got nothing yet, only what he confers on you? Every word he said was gold. Then suddenly I hated him. He betrayed all my worship" (43-44). Students, indeed, crave their professors' approbation (Look, Professor Pinsker, I used "approbation" in a sentence!), and often grow downright surly when such approval is withheld.

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The students with the more serious emotional problems are especially problematic, mainly because they tend to seek our guidance and support and we're so ill-equipped to help them. In short, we're not credentialed. "I'm not psychotic anymore," one of my recent students assured me after turning in her memoir detailing her struggles with schizophrenia. "Really I'm not," she continued. Despite her assurance, her palpable fragility—her quavering voice, the trembling of her hands—made me ever wary to proffer the kindest of criticism of her written work. Mightn't even the tenor of discouragement from her professor send her reeling over the edge?

While professors of English and biology and accounting and history surely ought not be held responsible for the emotional health and well-being of their students, the fact remains that many of us feel responsible, at least to a considerable degree. As Philip Roth's aging professor notes in *The Dying Animal* (2001), we are, for better or for worse, in loco parentis for our students while they are in our charge.

This wouldn't be so terrible, in my view, were it not for the brutally short time we function in this capacity. Students flit into our lives, and just as we form our ineluctable attachments, they flit away. I'm not sure I would have it any other way. While I hear from former students from time to time, and am happy to hear from them, it's not exactly a practicable option to remain in steady contact with the hundreds of students

who find their way onto my roster.

Still, it's just as true that at odd times I find myself wondering about what happened to one of my former students. And it's usually one of the students who feels too much whom I find myself wondering about: the young man from Barbados, who suffered from depression and barely made it through my Literature and the Environment course (Did he make his way back home?); the young woman who dropped my American literature survey to care for her terminally ill mother (Will she ever return

to school and graduate?); the awkward freshman on a soccer scholarship who visited my office frequently and sat for long minutes with nothing much to say, and then suddenly vanished, leaving a terse, cryptic note informing me that he had moved to California (Might I have been more patient with him?).

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Yet as troublesome as the students are with whom we develop these emotional bonds, equally troublesome is the ever increasing student

cohort with whom we cannot quite, well, connect. It's really all about math. We get older while our students, more or less, remain the same age. Consequently, we are destined to suffer a gradual slippage from the interior, and exterior, lives of our students. This may not be such a bad thing. Yet, relating to students matters to most professors, even if we sometimes wished that it didn't. I may not have commanded much respect among my students during my years as a graduate assistant at a gargantuan, football-crazed university in the Big Ten. My students in freshman composition knew I was just a lowly graduate assistant and flaunted their recalcitrance with abandon—shuffling past my lectern 15 minutes late, the yeasty aroma of the past night's debauchery trailing in their wake as they made their way to the back row, where they proceeded to crack gum and jokes rather than attend to my disquisition on the lofty rhetorical concepts of ethos, logos, and pathos. But at least back then I understood their jokes; at least I could empathize with their adolescent angst that fairly exuded from their pores, having not quite outgrown my own adolescence.

Faced increasingly with the cold hard truth that my "pop" culture is no longer quite my students' "pop," I've attempted earnestly, perhaps too earnestly, to bridge our gap in various ways. Somehow I think it's important, especially when it concerns our greenest undergraduates, that I know the world in which they live if I am to communicate effectively with them regarding the intellectual worlds in which I live, worlds which,

hopefully, they will choose to inhabit as well, if only from time to time. So I try to watch some of their movies, garnering the occasional puerile thrill, but finding them downright boring on the whole; I listen to their music, perplexed at the appeal of a mean-spirited white rapper and somewhat less perplexed, but no less disappointed, by the appeal of a lithe, navel-baring female singer who can't sing. I'm such a sport that I even watch MTV on occasion, to the consternation of my spouse. I stare at the blur of images, the flashes and blips of footage that I suppose count as "scenes" in their various shows, and I can't help but think, *No wonder my students can't sit through a chapter of Walden.*


I try peppering my lectures with more timely references, hoping to jolt my slumbering students with the caffeine of recognition, but rarely do such attempts come off well these days. I thought it was fairly hip of me, for example, to draw a parallel in a recent American Novel class between the sexual angst of Alanis Morissette and a certain

female protagonist we had encountered in the book under discussion. But instead of appreciative nods of recognition, I looked out toward a sea of mischievous, barely suppressed laughter.

"What?" I couldn't help but inquire.

"She's, like, *sooo* 90s," one of my bolder students informed me.

After one of my many references to *Seinfeld* flopped last semester, one of my well-intentioned seniors suggested that I watch a show called *South Park*. "It's really part of the vernacular now," he claimed. While the episode I watched introduced me to countless barnyard variants of a common vulgarism, it also left me wondering how anyone who used the word "vernacular" in conversation could bear to watch a show like *South Park*. All of which is simply to say that as hard as I try to remain current, I cannot help feeling like the piddliest of prop planes chasing the sun slipping beneath the horizon.

The upshot of all this, I suppose, finally brings us to the heart of the matter: the trouble with students. The trouble with students (and what, I suspect, more fundamentally bothers my vocal colleague) is that we care about what they think and feel and say, and they care about what we think and feel and say, and sometimes it would be better—or at least less painful—if we, and they, didn't. 

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