

Commentary

Professors Should Take Student Ideas Seriously

By David Lempert

The irrational reaction of your reviewer Judith K. Little (fall 1997) when she “literally threw” her complimentary copy of my book, *Escape from the Ivory Tower: Student Adventures in Democratic Experiential Education*, “across the room,” highlights exactly the relationship between students and professors that ought to be hotly debated and tested.

Instead of disregarding student ideas, professors should listen more attentively. Students can and should play an active role in helping to benefit their communities—and they can, while increasing their capacity to learn, developing their skills, and gaining new knowledge. This is the point of my book

Though Professor Little fails to

recognize herself in the book’s description of contemporary educators, she is among those creating barriers to a dialogue from which she could greatly benefit. It was those educators who don’t treat students as equal and respected partners in their own learning who inspired me and several of my peers when we were students to develop more healthful, respectful, and active forms of learning.

Students know that the world is more complex than a textbook portrayal and that there is more than one right answer to social or human problems. They know that there is a panoply of creative and different solutions that could be tested using a variety of skills and perspectives.

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Students know what it means to be in an educational setting where they are respected for their potential to develop their own views. But it is all too common for students to find professors who thoughtlessly throw their work back at them because the students disagree with the textbook approach.

With fellow students, I developed the projects and theories described in *Escape from the Ivory Tower* because we were ready for a more inclusive educational model that would focus on skills and processes. We hoped to then invite teachers like Professor Little to work with us, to share in our excitement and sense of achievement and to test and troubleshoot our initiatives in a reasoned and non-threatening way.

The student-driven model that we developed is completely different from the traditional model of classroom learning. It also presents a strong challenge to the approach of “experiential” and “service learning” that is now in vogue in universities. Many students, including those who designed the projects presented in *Escape from the Ivory Tower*, find these programs as paternalistic, undemocratic, routine, and uncreative as the approaches they’re designed to supplement or replace.

Probably what attracted Profes-

sor Little to review *Escape From the Ivory Tower* was the hope that she’d find the political ammunition and step-by-step guidelines for easily implementing “service learning” programs or “participatory research” in the form that she’s become used to.

These “internships” place student labor at the disposal of community-based organizations representing the disenfranchised and the “unseen” and endear faculty members to those select groups on whom they bestow this free student labor.

But we think that, as deserving as these organizations are, there is more to education than taking a relatively menial job for credit and writing about it. The projects that we describe include efforts by students to reform institutions they’ve participated in. Those more traditional programs would have merely sent these students to “intern” in such institutions.

All too often those who quote Paulo Freire and his idea of incorporating the community into dialogue as a means to empower ordinary people fail to see that the first community that needs to be included in any dialogue about education is the students themselves.

The issues that deserve to be debated in a responsible way in

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these pages are not whether our projects are successful everywhere we have tried them. The real debate is where we can go from here and how these ideas can be adapted elsewhere.

What is “democratization” in education and what can we do to prepare students, teachers, administrators, and community to achieve it? What is the role of students in their education and how do we equalize the relations between students and faculty, as well as create a constructive relationship with the community?

Who is “the community” and how exactly can the “community” be integrated best into the process of higher education?

What are the ethics of taking the classroom into the community and, just as importantly, what are the ethics of not doing so?

Who has the moral authority to make these decisions, and how? Which methods most empower students but also assure development of skills and ethics?

Through our own “thought and action,” we came up with one set of answers and prepared a practical guide and a set of syllabi and project descriptions to make it easier for others to apply and test them elsewhere. But there are still many gray areas, and we welcome the discussion at the next step.

The answers we provide have

worked for students and innovative faculty members from schools like Stanford, Berkeley, Harvard, and Brown, in several departments. But it is true, as Professor Little points out, that the students at these schools are “elite,” the settings are urban or suburban, and the possibilities are not the same as those in many other schools or community colleges.

It is also true that elite students may need to learn different skills in order to better appreciate the role that they play in our society and what their own moral blinders are. We welcome the work of students and young faculty who can test and report on how the models we describe apply or don't apply in their schools and communities.

We welcome open and public debate on what role universities play, beyond the role run by and for professors or administrators, or by well-funded political interests who have hijacked the debate in the national media.

We welcome a debate that listens to students and disseminates full information on all of the different experiments in education.

While *Thought & Action* may not wish to be prominent in this debate, the debate isn't going to go away. The students who pioneered

these programs are now gaining greater visibility as they (we) take them to the next generation.

Xavier Briggs, who led one of the student-taught courses at Stanford described in *Escape From the Ivory Tower*, is now designing similar programs at Harvard's Kennedy School of Government, as a young professor there.

Jim Pitofsky, another student facilitating the same course, has founded IDEALS (Innovative Democratic Education And Learning through Service), a nonprofit association bringing democratic experiential education to elementary and secondary schools.

I have been leading workshops

and consulting all over the world, putting democratic experiential education models into curricula in universities on several continents.

We've put ourselves at intellectual and emotional risk to test and accredit a new approach to learning, for which we've had little personal reward other than the desire to make a difference. At every place where these ideas have been heard, they've made a difference.

Let's open up the discussion. Let's listen to what the students are saying and engage their ideas, facing up to what's wrong, rather than hiding and throwing it back in their faces, if not out of noble reasons, then for self-interest. ■