We Are Smarter Than Our Students

By MIRIAM KALMAN HARRIS

I'm standing at the blackboard writing out words used to define the elements of fiction: "plot, character, setting. Irony, metaphor, symbol. Climax. Denouement."

The hum of chatter rises from the cluster of students over my right shoulder. They've been disruptive since the class began, since the semester began. Teaching at a community college with a student body predominantly under the age of 25 requires patience. Today, most of my students hadn't read the assignment and therefore failed the pop quiz I surprised them with. Undaunted by the F they'd just received, they continued to chat instead of listening, contributing, taking notes. As I turned to coach them into discussion about the John Updike story "A&P," one young woman blurted, "Ms. Harris, why are some of the same stories in each of our two books?"

"What? What do you mean?"

"Well, this book [our fiction anthology] has the same story by Poe as the other one [our writing-themes-about-literature text] does."

"I'm not going to answer that question right now," I replied. "It's not relevant to the discussion at hand. We can talk about course materials some other time. Now, tell me, what part of the story ... ?"

The buzz of voices rose in tenor. "Gosh. We asked a question," I heard them murmur. "Yeah, Ms. Harris, we really, really want to know," another student said. "You told us you wanted us to ask you things," whined yet another.

"Dr. Harris, I wanted to say, but didn't. I ignored their badgering and pushed forward. "Plot moves the story along -- plot structures the action the characters take as they conduct their lives. Plot asks why. Plot reveals intention."

"How, then, does setting in this story interact with plot?" I waited patiently. One student squirmed, two others yawned, another looked at the clock and began to stuff his blank notebook into his backpack. Someone in the back row giggled.

"Write a paragraph on the influence of setting on plot in 'A&P' and bring it in typed and double-spaced on Monday," I announced. "That will be all for today." I sighed, audibly.

After class, two students came up to find out how much the pop quiz would set back their grades if they'd failed (both
One woman waited quietly until they left. Her eyes sparked with hostility as she walked toward me. "You act like you're smarter than us," she said, each word sharp as a knife.

"Excuse me?"

"When we asked a question, you wouldn't even answer it. Why not?"

"We were in the middle of a lecture and discussion concerning the elements of story. I expect students to listen to these explanations and contribute to the discussion. I do not expect them to leaf through the text comparing tables of contents. Of course, it's fine to question the strategies of your textbook, but not in the middle of a lecture. Not during a class discussion on other important material." I began to edge out of the room, on my way to my next class.

But what I really wanted to say was, "I am smarter than you - meaning better-educated. If I'm not, what am I doing teaching you? If you already know what I know, then you should have placed out of freshman English. If you don't, open your book and your brain, please, and begin to answer the critical questions at hand. I'm trying to teach you to think and to write with critical insights, not how to evaluate course materials."

I should have sat her down then and there and told her exactly how much "smarter" than she and her friends I really was. She needed to hear that. She deserved to know.

More than once I've been called a snob. Intellectual snob, that is. Students mean the accusation as a slur, as in: "I know you're a doctor and all that, but you act like you're smarter than us, and that makes us feel bad."

The first time I heard such a comment, I was speechless. Who do they think we are? What kind of professor, with or without a Ph.D., isn't "smarter" than his or her students? And if we aren't smarter, then what in heaven's name are we doing teaching?

As an undergraduate, I considered my professors over-the-top brilliant. I knew so little, and their knowledge seemed so vast. I don't think it made me feel stupid, however; rather, I felt privileged to study with them. In my first semester at the University of Texas at Dallas, I took a literature course from Dr. Jon Thiem. He held himself at a distance from his students; most of us found his lofty attitude irresistible. His standards caused us to reach for our highest capacities, to do our best. If we could please him, earn an A or even a B, we knew we'd made progress.

Was I intimidated by his attitude? You betcha. But that intimidation motivated me to work harder. I'd no more have shown up for class unprepared than I'd have walked into class stark naked. And forget about not having my book with me. That would never have crossed my mind.
Dr. Thiem was a perfectionist. Yet when I’ve been accused of demanding perfection, my students intend to intimidate me into accepting the work as they are willing to present it. Students today take exception to professors' minimal expectations: They appear insulted when we so much as insinuate that they should bring their books to class, much less have them opened to the appropriate chapter. Some never even bother to buy the books. And taking notes? We want them to write down what we say?

Do I sound old-fashioned? I hope so, because I find the new fashion repugnant, and bad for the health of our country. Why do I react to my generation of professors' tales of woe with such pessimism? Because students aren't learning to respect others; because students think they don't need to follow proper procedures; because students have not learned to read with comprehension or to write with authority. And if we allow them to lower our standards, we will fail our students just as surely as they will fail us -- and themselves.

What can we do? We still have many good students, but how can we train the average student to respect learning; to admire other people's accomplishments; to stand in awe of their own privilege to study, learn, and improve their minds so they can improve their lives?

Rhetorical questions like those dominate conversations among academics at conferences and meetings across the country -- not just in Texas or the South, and not just in community colleges. We hear them from professors all over the country and at every level of institution. And we hear an odd explanation: We hear our colleagues refer to something called "consumer education." The term means that colleges and universities have been trying to please and appease students so that they will stay in school longer, so that they won't file lawsuits against faculty members for not giving them the grades they expect -- or, worse, for not passing them. It means that yet again, academic institutions -- like corporations, institutions that form the backbone of American culture -- have succumbed to the lure of the bottom line.

Our students' goals mirror our own. They, too, have bottom lines. They want a good grade as payment for showing up now and then. Learning may happen along the way, but that's not the point. The point involves the bottom line: the degree, the piece of paper they see as a ticket to success.

Students ask for grades like workers ask for raises. Who is going to tell them that grades are not compensation for work, but measurements of achievement? Not always accurate, it's true, but most of us come as close to fair and objective as we can. Grades, like salaries, are earned; but the similarity ends there. Those of us in academe need to clarify the distinction and make students realize that grades are not negotiable. It's our job to teach the meaning of education.

I propose a movement, a revolution not unlike the one in the
'60s, when students demanded a voice in shaping their own education. They were right to insist that their diversity and their goals be considered relevant to their courses. But now we of academe, even as we invite organized student input, must reassert our voice of authority, require students to master the curriculum, and penalize those who try to negotiate their way to a degree.

In addition to understanding that a grade is not something negotiated on the first day of class, we must make students aware of what it takes to earn a good grade. They need to know that simple actions like showing up for class, participating in discussions, taking notes, asking questions, and turning in assignments on time are critical to the quality of work that gets an A.

They must also be willing to cooperate with the feedback that we give them. We must make it clear that directions should be followed like a trail out of the forest, and that corrections to grammar and style do not reflect the professor's taste or what he or she "likes" to read. Corrections reflect the conventions not only of the English language but also of the field being studied.

We must also teach students to respect others -- both their classmates, most of whom are there to learn, as well as professors, who are there to teach, and who should be addressed by their appropriate titles: "Dr." if they prefer, "Mr." or "Ms." if they don't have Ph.D.'s.

Finally, we must also teach students to respect perfectionism. Earning an A in a subject means that you have demanded perfection of yourself, and that the grade reflects your achievement. In fact, it probably means you are "smart."

I, along with my colleagues, have earned the right to say: You're darn right I'm smarter than you. You know why? Because I learned how to learn from my professors, who were all, even the least effective ones, smarter than me back then.

Students should come first: After all, they are the reason we are here. But putting them first does not require that we put their education second. On the contrary: It means that we must help them redefine their educational goals and expectations. We must teach them to value discipline, to respect knowledge, to carve the chips on their shoulders into medals of accomplishment. We must help them earn the right to feel "smart," too. If we don't, who will?

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http://chronicle.com
Section: The Chronicle Review
Volume 49, Issue 7, Page B14