

Education and Elevation
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I just read a review of a book called “My Freshman Year” in which the author, an Anthropologist, spends a year as a freshman at a major university to study the culture of undergraduate students. One of her conclusions is that students don’t really read much, and so she decides to shorten her syllabus to include only the reading that she will cover in class. The review, in my opinion correctly, points out that this seems to be perverse response. However, I think it is quite indicative of the “teaching environment” on many campuses and especially in elementary and secondary education. It seems as if we are letting the students’ lack of interest drive us, rather than our interest and excitement drive students.

It seems to me, educationally, we are in a race to the bottom. There is serious pressure, at least in the collegiate setting, for teachers to “meet students where they are.” An example of this is reducing the reading load since students don’t read much. I hear this sentiment echoed in many places. Instructors teaching college algebra and particularly the first college calculus courses are finding fewer and fewer students capable of handling this introductory calculus course. I have seen recommendations for instructors to make these courses somehow easier and more accessible for students. The only interpretation one can take from this is to “water them down.” I have heard serious suggestions that statistics courses not be taught “with so many numbers.” I have even heard people suggest that economics reduce its reliance on graphs.

I don’t disagree with the broader idea that our courses need to be relevant to students. The problem with many students is that they don’t yet know what things are actually relevant to their lives: they are, after all, living in the rarefied atmosphere of a college campus. Their lives, and reasonably so, revolve around classes, part time jobs, romances and parties. Frankly that’s all fine and reasonable. For the most part, that’s probably what 19 and 20 year olds ought to be doing. Our job should not be to reduce our syllabus to meet their lives, but rather to lift them into their place in society. We should demand that they read many different things and confront many different opinions and ideas. We should demand that they come to us prepared for studying mathematics, economics, literature, art, history, biology, physics and a host of other subjects. Which ones they particularly choose are up to them.

Our job is to make these subjects come alive. I do think that this is where many of my colleagues (broadly speaking) fall flat (and I’m sure I have on multiple occasions). I think too many of my colleagues have forgotten what it was that excited them about their subject. Or perhaps more importantly who it was that excited them. I will never forget some of my early economics teachers whose courses inspired and motivated me.

But it’s not only the subject that I ultimately pursued that was taught with excitement. I had an Art History course my senior year. As a right brain male, the idea of taking an “Art Anything” course was not appealing, but for a variety of reasons that’s where I ended up. The course was focused upon European art from the fall of Rome to

the Renaissance. That means it was mostly focused upon religious art and especially churches and cathedrals. I have never looked at a church building the same again. I know, and can apply, terms like “clerestory,” “apse,” and “nave.” This summer, on a trip to Ireland, I toured a number of simple churches built between 700AD and 1400AD: exactly the period I studied in school. And I recognized and noted a great deal of the important aspects of the construction and art of those buildings. It wasn’t that the professor had “come to where I was.” It was that she was excited and interested in her own topic.

Students need to bare some of the responsibility for the loss of excitement in the classroom. Nothing takes the excitement out of teaching more than questions like “will this be on the exam?” or “how will this help me get a job?” It might not be on the exam, but it’s still worth learning. It might not help you get a job directly, but you might be a better employee or colleague because of it. It might also, god forbid, simply make you an “educated person.” I know, you only want the education in order to get the job. Someday though, after you’ve worked in the same job for a number of years and things have settled in and you’re no longer the “Young Turk” (do you even know what that means?), you will turn around and ask “is this all there is?” The answer is no, there is so much more. We tried to show it to you in College.

In short, our job as educators should not be to “come down to the student’s level” but rather to elevate, to enlighten, and to excite those students. In short: to educate. Our educational system, at all levels, seems to have forgotten this. We seem to have focused increasingly on how education is used in the marketplace. While that’s important (hey, I’m an economics, of course it’s important) I’m concerned that there is more to life and hence to education than simply learning a trade. As work to reform our schools, these ideas need to be kept in mind.