

A WORD TO THE NEW
HUMANITIES PROFESSOR

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IF SUCCESS IS WHAT YOU CRAVE, IF PROSPERITY and esteem, tenure, preferment, and promotion are what you desire—and who does not?—then you might begin by studying your admissions office brochure, the pictorial ad for your school. Whatever its overt designs, this book is also a manual for pedagogical success, a discreet academic version of *The Book of the Courtier*; if you read it with your eyes open, you need know no more.

In these brochures, these ads, two photographic genres predominate. One genre is a version of Romance; its subject is easy pleasure, the world as the readers wish it to be. Students are arrayed in a conversational garland, lounging on well-tended grass. The sun smiles down. They are talking freely, savoring one another's company. If there are books on hand, they've been tossed carelessly aside. This is not about dialogue or dialectic, not about effort. These students are in the Bower of Bliss, intoxicated by each other's presences, relaxed, happy, stress-free.

The other sort of photograph is quite different. In this genre, which is a version of futuristic-Utopian, a group of students presses tightly in on a large, forbidding piece of electronic equipment. It is high-tech, high-powered and, to you probably, completely mysterious. This picture is not about good times. Serious business is unfolding. A thrill of purposeful engagement rises from the page.

Generally missing from both sorts of pictures are intrusive adults, professorial types, who might inhibit the fun in the first kind of picture, or undermine the students' pure self-motivation in the second. What's missing from both these sorts of photographs, to put it bluntly, is you, the professor. And in this there is a valuable lesson. Don't let it be lost.

Pleasure and high-powered training: the sweetly meandering discussion and the high-tech initiation, these are the things a student can now expect, in fact demand, from an American college. You, invisible, self-abnegating, ever-agreeable, will provide these commodities. You will provide them or—more than likely—you will find yourself another line of work.

How does a contemporary humanities professor abet the pursuit of enjoyment?

First of all, he must contrive to present all course material in an agreeable manner. Reading assignments should be slight: for one semester, three or four “long” books, that is books of over 250 pages, will more than do. The instructor must understand that those students who actually read the books will for the most part do so glancingly. In high school they have learned to budget their time, to be efficient, which means they have learned to skim, extracting “the main points.” The teacher should not be surprised to see that those books that have been opened are streaked occasionally with highlighter. Those who have “read” an assigned novel will, in general, know who the main characters are and what, in large scale terms, has come to pass.

But they will not at all object to being reminded of these things, and those who have decided not to crack the book will believe it to be the professor's responsibility—what else is she being paid for?—to tell them

in amusing detail what went on inside. Some students believe it is up to the teacher to describe the book so appealingly—to advertise it, in short—that, later in life, given leisure, they might have a look.

The summary and description should be carried on in a diverting way. There ought to be copious reference to analogous themes and plots in recent popular culture. Jokes ought to be offered at the expense of at least some of the characters, preferably all. The author, no matter how distinguished, should be referred to with no more veneration than attaches to the creator of a reasonably successful TV sit-com. In no event should the instructor hint that the author, or the characters in the book, are in any way superior to the students who have condescended to encounter them.

Students should be assured continually that by virtue of living later in time than the author, they naturally know a great deal more than she possibly could. Sometimes authors will anticipate, or dimly guess at, a piece of contemporary wisdom, in which case they are to be quietly congratulated. Generally, authors whose works appeared more than two decades ago are caught up in errors endemic to their times and need to be brought up short. The teacher should give the students every chance to do so. If this process can be effected with the aid of an up-to-date theoretical vocabulary, all the better.

The proper atmosphere for an enjoyable classroom is relaxed, laid-back, cool. The teacher should never get exercised about anything, under pain of being written off as a buffoon. Nor should she create an atmosphere of vital contention such that students lose their composure, speak out, become passionate, express their deeper thoughts and fears, or do anything else that will, later on, cause them embarrassment. Embarrassment is the worst thing that can befall one; it must be avoided at whatever costs.

It is important here to distinguish being cool from being ironic. Cool is a state of superiority and skepticism maintained at a consistent level. It is an attitude. Cool does not fluctuate. It is democratic and egalitarian in that it meets all phenomena with the same measure of blank detachment. It is programmatic and readily assumed.

Irony is something different. To be ironic is to express skepticism about this or that outside phenomenon, and also—at times—about one's own powers of apprehension and judgment. Cool never undermines the self; it is directed outward. Irony can be self-subverting. It can demonstrate lack of self-esteem, and is therefore to be avoided.

Irony is also inconsistent, in that it relies on judgment. The ironist is more skeptical about some things than others and communicates as much. Irony, by virtue of being selective, is elitist. Irony can also hurt people's feelings. One must never be ironic in front of students because some of them will not understand the application of the irony, will become confused, and potentially offended. Irony can also make things unclear. One is bound as a professor to be as clear as possible at all times.

Satire—that is to say, protracted irony—is pure poison; no customer-respecting professor should ever conceive of indulging in it.

Cool, on the other hand, is OK. Being cool is a sign of confidence. Being cool indicates that one has made all of the judgments that matter in life and made them correctly. Cool is consistent, steady, and reliable, where irony is uncertain, fluctuating, and insecure. Cool is frozen irony.

The teacher should be friendly, though not overly intimate, concerned, but not intrusive. She should be in her office as many hours per week as possible. Office availability shows dedication and indicates that the student is getting a good value for his dollars. But the student almost never visits the office. One-on-one conversation can sometimes drift toward disturbing topics—why I'm desperate to transfer to the commerce school, although all of my favorite classes are in the arts; why my sorority has never had a black member; why I have to take these pills so as not to become disablingly depressed—and such topics can be uncomfortable. Comfort is all.

Email is the preferred form of communication. With email, there is more control. The conversation is in no danger of jumping the rails. One can ask one's own business-like questions; one can set the tone. The professor should answer email communications within three hours time. She should not refer the student to this or that book, but answer

personally, from her own knowledge, fully and in detail, but with the fewest necessary number of words.

The professor should continually make self-mocking references to her authority and her stock of learning. She should indicate that all the time she has spent acquiring her considerable knowledge may have been wasted, given new developments, such as the Internet, which have changed everything, making much of the past irrelevant. The professor should refer with a respect that stops tastefully short of sycophancy to the large stock of pop culture knowledge that all of her students possess simply by virtue of having grown up with unparalleled access to TV, movies, and recorded music. She should compliment their remarkable “visual literacy” from time to time. She should use this term—which generally refers to such feats as identifying the TV shows parodied on a given Simpsons episode—in rebutting Philistines from outside the academy who claim that many students are now willfully non-literate, don’t read and don’t want to.

In choosing what to teach, the professor should meet his students half way. He should realize that he has his culture, which may feature, let us say, the novels of Jane Austen and Charles Dickens; the poetry of Emily Dickinson and Walt Whitman; the history-writing of Frances Parkman and Edward Gibbon; the psychoanalysis of Freud; the social thought of Plato, Jefferson, Marx, and Arendt; and the jazz of Coltrane. But students have their culture, too. Insofar as he is in a position to do so, he should offer—it would be presumptuous to say “teach”—courses in the more demotic, vital, and diverse popular culture that the students inhabit.

In doing so, it is important that he not be chauvinistic. He must take seriously the possibility that another’s experience with Anne Rice might be just as vitally nourishing as his own experience with Emily Dickinson. He must consider the possibility that Dickinson, with her difficulty, helps sustain an elitist high culture and that reading and teaching her reaffirms class divisions, while Rice, whose accounts of sado-masochistic and pedophilic bliss are available to all, moves us toward true equality. He must, in short, learn as much as possible from his students.

He must take very seriously, but never quite go so far as to articulate, the central lesson that his students have to instill: that he is a service provider, not entirely unlike the dentist, the stock broker (before etrade), and the man who comes to clean the pool. He must remember that he works for them, and that they, all things considered, are very indulgent bosses, but that he ought not to forget on what side the toast is buttered and by whom.

As to grades, he should understand that students care nothing about them. They say this repeatedly, in emails, and in his office, when they come, so it must be so. But this established truth needs elaboration. Students do not care about grades—as long as certain protocols are observed. The first of these protocols is what one might call the default standard. The default standard dictates that if a student comes periodically to class, does some self-determined quotient of the reading, and hands in a semblance of every assignment, the grade will be a B plus. The slightest effort beyond this minimal share is grounds for an A minus. All other grades are As.

This sort of grading, which may appear unjustifiably high to outsiders, is pedagogically useful in that it keeps the students happily engaged and does not discourage them (students now are easily discouraged). It also induces them to write positive course evaluations. Negative course evaluations can have an unfortunate effect on a professor's career. Negative course evaluations that include charges of, say, racism, or sexism, no matter how imaginary, can have disastrous effects. It is best to follow the grading policies that have been laid down, informally, by the students. Pay lip service to administrators' calls for tightening grades, but understand who, in this instance, the real policy makers are.

If you follow this advice, elaborating and extending it as you see the need, you will be likely to produce the right quotient of enjoyment to succeed as a current professor of humanities. But enjoyment-production is only half of your job. For students are aware that college is also serious business. There is a time for relaxation, but there is also a time to set to work.

Besides creating pleasure, you must also help the student to acquire skills that he or she can turn to profit in the future. You are, or should be, a facilitator, not a “sage on the stage,” but a “guide on the side.” You must teach—no, rather you must help the students to acquire—skills in communication, critical thinking, technology, and team-work. Without these skills, it is unlikely that anyone can be truly successful in tomorrow’s high-stress, high-competition world. Without these skills, a person cannot call him- or herself truly educated.

As a communications facilitator, you will be compelled to work very hard. Your comments on all written products submitted by students must be copious. The students and their families are paying good money, and it is here that they want to see you earn it. It is important that your comments be clear, precise, and practical. Students need to know what they have to do in order to improve as communicators. Note every error; correct every mistake in grammar, spelling, and punctuation. When an argument is not well-structured or when a sentence is ambiguous show the student how to remedy the problem. Rewrite the relevant passages if need be.

You must understand that writing is a form of technology whose function is to transfer information from one person to another, or one site to another. Nothing must be lost in the transfer. It is not your function to comment on the ideas per se. Students’ ideas are their own and they have a personal validity. Despite past opinions on this subject, you have no right to judge them. What you can judge is skill at expression and presentation. A paper arguing that Hamlet and Iago are actually brothers separated at birth may seem to you misguided. This fact is irrelevant. The issue for you to ponder is whether the essay is well-written, presents its points lucidly, and is organized along coherent lines. To succeed in life, a person needs to know how to get his or her ideas across. You are instrumental in helping students to develop this capacity.

Lack of clarity that comes from technical inability is something that you must remedy. But there are other kinds of occlusion that you also need to help students avoid. Though a metaphor can sometimes make things more understandable, the general tendency of metaphor is to produce multiple meanings, and those meanings lead to imprecision,

and accordingly to confusion. It is a good idea to help students purge their writing of metaphors, similes, and other potentially mystifying figures of speech. Poetic writing, which was once thought to enrich experience by unfolding more and more layers of meaning and possibility, more ways of regarding a given idea or phenomenon, is now understood to be counter-productive.

Like irony, metaphor can make matters confusing and cause people to feel uncomfortable. Metaphor and irony can make students feel stupid and, at a good college, where students have high SAT scores, no one can accurately be described as stupid. Metaphor, like irony, can contribute to self-esteem problems. But once one has realized that the purpose of writing is to convey information, and not to unfold or discover the life of the inner self, or to create original visions of the world (we now know that there is no such thing as originality, anyway), then problems associated with metaphor and other mannered forms of writing tend to disappear.

As everyone now realizes, the computer is the most significant invention in the history of humankind. Students who do not master its intricacies are destined for a life of shame, poverty, and neglect. Every course you teach should thus be computer-oriented. Computers are excellent research tools, accordingly your students should do a lot of research. If you are studying a poem by Blake like “The Chimney Sweeper,” which depicts the debasement and exploitation of young boys whose lot, it’s been said, is not altogether unlike the lot of many children now living in American inner cities, you should charge your students with using the computer to compile as much interesting information about the poem as they can. They can find articles about chimney sweepers from 1790s newspapers; contemporary pictures and engravings that depict these unfortunate little creatures; critical articles that interpret the poem in a seemingly endless variety of different, equally valid and interesting ways; biographical information about Blake, with hints about events in his own boyhood that would have made chimney sweepers a special interest; portraits of the author at various stages of his life; maps of Blake’s London. Together the class can create a Blake-Chimney Sweeper website: www.blakesweeper.edu.

Instead of spending class time wondering what the poem might mean, and what application it might have to present-day experience—activities which can produce only disagreement and are probably futile anyway since there is no truth about literary works, just interpretations—students can compile information about the poem. They can set the poem in its historical and critical context, showing first how the poem is the product and the property of the past and implicitly how it really has nothing to do with the enlightened present except as an artful curiosity; and second how, given the number of ideas about it already available, adding more thoughts would be superfluous.

Computers have made everything much easier in life, chiefly because you can buy anything you want using them and get it delivered almost immediately. But the internet is also good because it erases the old puzzlement about the differences among wisdom, knowledge, and information. Everything that can be accessed online is equal to everything else. No piece of data is intrinsically more important or more profound than any other. Therefore, there really is no more wisdom; there is no more knowledge; there is only information. Nothing has to be taken as a challenge or an affront to what one currently knows and values. And that fact can be very freeing.

At one time, ill-natured people used to say that excessive use of certain kinds of technology, and uncritical celebration of it, could be bad for you. These people, many of whom were German Jews who had to flee Hitler and thus had developed a resentful attitude toward life, said that technology could make you someone who felt possessed with god-like powers. If you spent too much time manipulating objects, these people suggested, you could begin treating people as though they were objects, too.

They felt that technology gave you an abstract and utilitarian relation to life, and that instead of seeing rocks and flowers and trees, you began seeing foundation material, interior decor, and timber. They thought that technology could make you cold and unsympathetic to the living world. Another man, a philosopher who wrote earlier in this century and was taken to be very gifted, but who discredited his work by becoming a Nazi, talked about how technology could make one forget the strangeness of Being. Technology, as he saw it, tended to separate us

from wonder and from questions like “Why is there something instead of nothing at all?” But things have changed. Lately, with the coming of the computer, most of us have stopped worrying about these issues and nothing really bad has happened. It seems clear that we did not need to be concerned about them and that the resentful men and women, probably because of their traumatic life experiences, had it wrong.

Another thing that students need to acquire are skills in group interaction and cooperation. It is important that you break your students into groups as much as possible and let them engage in the uninhibited exchange of ideas, their ideas. As everyone now knows, the students have within them the answers to all questions that matter; they merely need a supportive and non-judgmental environment in which their thoughts can emerge. (Plato, it turns out, was right when he endorsed anamnesis, the view that we all knew the truth in a prior life but that, on being born, forget it, so that we need not so much to be informed as to be reminded. Or at least Plato was right about American students of the present.) It is important that you do not intrude on these discussions with your sophisticated terms and your experienced perspective. Keep in mind: your views may be flawed. And the students, given time, will do productive work on their own.

But, of course, answers are not really the point. The point is learning to work together and to get along. High grades should go to the people who cooperate best, no matter what you, with your biases, might think about the eventual product. In the future, it may be very important to be able to please and even placate the group. Learning how to submit your so-called individuality to a collective may be a good professional skill and could be a good survival skill as well.

Pleasure and training: these are the things that you offer, and the more modestly and unobtrusively you do so, the better. If you do your job well, you will get the appreciation you deserve. Students in coming years will write you letters about their prosperity and happiness and about how much you did to facilitate them. They will thank you for your patience and your ability to convey important skills. They will praise your powers of communication. They will say that they never could have done it without you, and you will feel both grateful and exalted.

But the road will not always be smooth. Sometimes you will encounter a student who offers a particular challenge, and you must be ready for it. This is the sort of student who comes to college with mistaken expectations. Perhaps he has spent some time reading about Socrates, who asked annoying, self-important questions about everything; or perhaps in high school he had a teacher who encouraged her students to ask about what bearing the things they were reading might have on their lives.

This student comes to college expecting more of the Socrates business. He doesn't care all that much about skills and wants to know whether you think his ideas are true or not. He doesn't write all that badly, but often he sinks into needless ambiguity and confusion. He talks a lot in class. One time, a colleague of yours sees him in the library with a book open. He is laughing his head off. Another time he is seen reading the newspaper and crying. Why, your colleague asks, would anyone read the front page of a newspaper and weep?

This student works hard; in fact he works too hard. He's in your office all the time asking bothersome questions and wanting to know the names of fresh books to read, as though the syllabus isn't enough. He writes stories and other things that are not assigned. He plays in a band.

He is also cynical. He laughs at you and others when you talk about cultivating skills that will land good jobs. He mocks the whole idea of training. He says that most of the internet looks like an electronic shopping mall to him. He says that he has no idea what he wants; he's uncertain what way of living is the best. He's confused about what goodness really is, who possesses it, and how it might be acquired. He'll be happy to talk about job skills, he says, but only after he's got these questions answered, or at least is on the way to answering them. Though he often says abrupt and potentially embarrassing things to them, many of the other students actually seem to like him.

It's important to use patience when dealing with such students. They are a challenge, certainly, but they can also be very rewarding. Guiding them from their current confusion onto a better path can provide one of the strongest professional satisfactions there is.

One of the difficulties in doing so, one must confess, is the kinds of feelings these students can provoke in you, the teacher. They often bring on a very powerful nostalgia. They take you back to a time before graduate school when you too perhaps thought that certain great works of art and reflection could guide you to a renovated self, when you thought that it might be worthwhile to try to become more like this or that hero or thinker you encountered in a book. These students take you back to a very impassioned time, to be sure. But it was also a turbulent and unproductive time. You know better now, and with your guidance so will this wayward, gifted student. For he needs you. He needs your wisdom and experience. He needs you to put him on one of the straighter more satisfying roads.

Despite his apparent confidence, and even occasional bursts of what appears to be joy, this is really a troubled individual. Deep in his heart he does not want to be as he is. On some level he wants to change. For to be someone who sits in the library, in public, reading a common everyday newspaper with tears flowing down his cheeks, what kind of life is that? What kind of future could such behavior, uncorrected, ever prepare him for?