

Message to My Freshman Students (by Keith Parsons)

For the first time in many years I am teaching a freshman course, Introduction to Philosophy. The experience has been mostly good. I had been told that my freshman students would be apathetic, incurious, inattentive, unresponsive and frequently absent, and that they would exude an insufferable sense of entitlement. I am happy to say that this characterization was not true of most students. Still, some students are often absent, and others, even when present, are distracted or disengaged. Some have had to be cautioned that class is not their social hour and others reminded not to send text messages in class. I have had to tell these students that, unlike high school, they will not be sent to detention if they are found in the hall without a pass, and that they are free to leave if they are not interested. Actually, I doubt that the differences between high school and university have ever been adequately explained to them, so, on the first class day of next term, I will address my new freshmen as follows:

Welcome to higher education! If you want to be successful here you need to know a few things about how this place works. One of the main things you need to know is the difference between the instructors you will have here and those you had before. Let me take a few minutes to explain this to you.

First, I am your professor, not your teacher. There is a difference. Up to now your instruction has been in the hands of teachers, and a teacher's job is to make sure that you learn. Teachers are evaluated on the basis of learning outcomes, generally as measured by standardized tests. If you don't learn, then your teacher is blamed. However, things are very different for a university professor. It is no part of my job to make you learn. At university, learning is your job -- and yours alone. My job is to lead you to the fountain of knowledge. Whether you drink deeply or only gargle is entirely up to you.

Your teachers were held responsible if you failed, and expected to show that they had tried hard to avoid that dreaded result. I am not held responsible for your failures. On the contrary, I get paid the same whether you get an "F" or an "A." My dean will not call me in and ask how many conferences I had with your parents about your progress. Indeed, since you are now an adult, providing such information to your parents would be an illegal breach of privacy. Neither will I

have to document how often I offered you tutoring or extra credit assignments. I have no obligation whatsoever to make sure that you pass or make any particular grade at all.

Secondly, universities are ancient and tend to do things the old-fashioned way. In high school your education was basically a test-preparation service. Your teachers were not allowed to teach, but were required to focus on preparing you for those all-important standardized tests. Though it galls ideologues, we university professors still enjoy a large degree of academic freedom. That means that the content and format of your courses is still mostly under your professor's control, and the format will probably include a good bit of lecture, some discussion and little or no test preparation.

Lecture has come under attack recently. "Flipped learning" is the current buzz term among higher-education reformers. We old-fashioned chalk-and-talk professors are told that we need to stop being the "sage on the stage," but should become the "guide on the side," helping students develop their problem-solving skills. Lecture, we are told, is an ineffective strategy for reaching today's young people, whose attention span is measured in nanoseconds. We should not foolishly expect them to listen to us, but instead cater to their conditioned craving for constant stimulation.

Hogwash. You need to learn to listen. The kind of listening you need to learn is not passive absorption, like watching TV; it is critical listening. Critical listening means that you are not just hearing but thinking about what you are hearing. Critical listening questions and evaluates what is being said and seeks key concepts and unifying themes. Your high school curriculum would have served you better had it focused more on developing your listening skills rather than drilling you on test-taking.

Finally, when you go to a university, you are in a sense going to another country, one with a different culture and different values. I have come to realize that the biggest gap between you and me is a cultural difference. I have absorbed deeply the norms and values of an ancient academic culture and they are now a part of me. You, on the other hand, come to my classes fresh from a culture with different values, one that finds academic ways strange and hard to understand.

Take the issue of documentation. For an academic, there is something sacred about a citation. The proper citation of a source is a small tribute to the hard work, diligence, intelligence and integrity of someone dedicated enough to make a contribution to knowledge. For you, citations and bibliographies are pointless hoops to jump through and you often treat these requirements carelessly. Further, our differences on the issue of giving or taking proper credit accounts for the fact that you so seldom take plagiarism as seriously as I do.

If you want to know the biggest difference between you and your professor, it is probably this: You see university as a place where you get a credential. For your professor, a university is not primarily about credentialing. Your professor still harbors the traditional view that universities are about education. If your aim is to get a credential, then for you courses will be obstacles in your path. For your professor, a course is an opportunity for you to make your world richer and yourself stronger.