

On Being a Good Student in My Course (Revised)

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As I write this thought, it is four days until the beginning of the fall semester, 2012 at the university where I am a professor. I've decided this semester it would be helpful if on the first day of classes I were to distribute and discuss with my students a statement outlining, as precisely as I can, how I want them to approach their work in the course and why. I wrote a three-page statement with the heading, "Being a Good Student in This Class." It comprises this thought.

I've not done anything like this before in the many years I have taught at both the secondary and university levels. I've always just handed out a syllabus with course goals, required and optional readings, assignments, evaluation procedures, and the like, and I'll do that again this semester. What I'm adding this time, and I'm struck by the fact that it has taken me so long to see the need to do this, is let students know in writing what I want them to be like in the course; another way to say it, how I want them to see their role. In times past, at the beginning of courses I've alluded to what I was looking for from them, and now and I again I've gotten into it as the course proceeded, but I've never been systematic and explicit like this. I think writing this up might be helpful to both students and me; putting precise words to what you want to happen in the world helps make it happen. It gives you clarity and purpose and direction.

Putting together this statement was prompted by an email from a student in a course I taught last semester that asked me to be clearer about what I expected from him in a reading and writing assignment that was to be completed by the next class. I answered him in a return email and included it as a thought on this site ("On Being a Good Student in My Course," February, 2012). As time got close to the beginning of this semester, I concluded that I might be able to use that reply/thought as a statement at the beginning of courses to help all my students understand better what I want from them. As I looked the email/thought over, however, I decided I wanted to modify and expand it, and I've done that enough to warrant its inclusion here as a separate, revised thought. I put it here with the hope that it might give students some direction in how

to view themselves and their work in school; and that faculty might use this statement as a jumping off point in deciding, really, what they want their students to be like and in compiling their own statements along this line.

Whether it is helpful to anyone else, it has helped me to take the time to write this. I feel clearer about my priorities and directions with reference to students than before. I'll see how things go Monday and for the rest of the semester.

Here's the statement. See what you think.

Being a Good Student in This Course

The work for you in this course is to engage in scholarship--maturely, with utmost seriousness, with all you have in you. Scholarship sheds light on something truly important, reveals it, points out something fresh, perceptive, and useful about it. Scholarship extends understanding and perspective, deepens it, takes it further. Scholarship stretches you, strengthens you, empowers you, makes you more autonomous, more your own person, more efficacious. Scholarship takes hard, focused effort, but when it is done right it is personally highly rewarding. When undertaken in a way that honors the process, scholarship is a way to feel good about yourself and this part of your life.

The challenge here is to use your mind and to develop your mind, to hone your ability to think independently and well. Your job is to get out of yourself, to investigate reality outside your familiar context and experience, to learn new things. This is not a place to reiterate, and thereby lock in, what you already know (or think you know) and already prefer, wherever that came from.

This course is about your seeking out what's new, different, that which will move you beyond where you are now. It is about becoming significantly better at the end of the course than you were at the beginning. It's not about looking for occasions to perform ("Look at me!"), give testimony ("I'm a member of the enlightened and righteous"), opinionize ("Here's what I think on this topic"), talk about yourself ("Here's what happened to me"), or offer off-the-top reactions to something that comes up in class ("This is my response to what was just said").

This course is a place to be active rather than passive, to probe intensely for insight and perspective and identify issues and

questions and explore them and seek out and understand alternative ways of thinking and acting, rather than simply let things wash over you, so that you can choose what is true and right for yourself and not have it imposed on you or inculcated into you.

Scholarship involves respect for people who are different from you, and it involves humility. Neither you nor I know everything. We need to seek out new people, new ideas, diverse explanations and points of view, and listen to people respectfully and carefully and not stand above them and feel superior to them if what we get from them doesn't square with what we have been conditioned to believe is true and correct.

This course focuses on the scholarly examination of writings on schooling. By scholarly examination I mean understanding the writing from the writer's perspective (not yours), making sense of it, analyzing it, figuring it out, noting its underlying assumptions and values and ideology and intentions (what it's trying to accomplish), gaining insight into it, discerning its weaknesses and strengths, seeing its internal connections and contradictions, giving meaning and significance to it, seeing its implications, noting its relationship to other writings and claims and outlooks, thinking creatively about it, and using it to become personally clearer and more directed and strong. And it is about sharing the best that has come out of your exploration of it with the rest of the class in writing and in-class exchanges.

I'll use a reading we have coming up in a few weeks, a couple of chapters from a book by Robert Weissburg entitled *Bad Students, Not Bad Schools*, to illustrate what I'm looking for from you with regard to the reading.

Ideally, you are not just surface-reading and yellow-marking Weissburg or skimming through him; you are *studying* him in order to understand what he is saying from his frame of reference, from his point of view, from his experience base, and then going beyond that to make sense of him and what he is offering and discern what it implies and where it fits and where it gets you. You are pushing against the outer limits of your intellectual frontier with all you have in you. That is how you grow rather than spin your wheels or kill time.

The focus in this course isn't on judgment, or critique, of Weissburg in this case, or using him as a prompt to talk about

yourself and say what you think, give a speech, look good, or play education expert. Rather, it is on achieving a deep understanding of Weissberg and his outlook and his arguments, and thinking analytically, critically, about what he offers. This contrasts with simply taking in what Weissberg says, or connecting with him only to the extent that you pick up whether you agree or disagree with him or like or dislike him and then announcing that to yourself and the world. That's too easy, too shallow; it won't expand you, you won't grow that way. It wastes your time, and time is precious and finite. Don't throw it away. Don't trivialize your life by going through the motions, here or anywhere else. If this course isn't good for you, get yourself to someplace that is.

Use the readings in this course to becoming a more informed, powerful, independent, self-directed, self-important version of the person you uniquely are. In your course writing and in-class verbal expressions, share the best, more insightful, most helpful, outcomes that have resulted from your investigation of the readings. It's a "here is something I want you (the reader, the listener) to take note of" contribution. It goes beyond a summary, or report, or "what I related to" or "what I got out of it" or "what I found interesting," beyond "here's my opinion of it," or "here's my reaction to it" (I like it, don't like it, it's good, it's bad). Rather, it is "here's something really important in this writing that I very much want you to see."

Respectfully, I want you to wake up, get off automatic pilot in this area of inquiry and generally. I want you to see the world as it truly is, in all its complexity and diversity, not as you have been told it is, to become your own person, to be autonomous and powerful intellectually and in every other way, and to chart your own path in life. I don't want you to think like me or be like me or anybody else. I want you to become yourself at your very best and to live freely and self-directly from that base. The evolution of good ideas and proper and just ways to be has not ended with my generation or yours. I don't want your lives to come down to simply living out and serving what those in power at a particular time have decided is true and best and in their interest, simply conforming to the conventional wisdom they establish.

Take maximum advantage of this learning opportunity. Be a true student here, a true scholar. Don't minimally engage your work. Don't play audience. Don't endure. Don't wait things out.

Don't play judge or critic. Don't be a cynic. Don't assume that at eighteen or twenty or twenty-one or twenty-two you already know everything there is to know about education or anything else. That's the posture people who want you to become a foot soldier in their army want you to have, because it keeps you in their groove. My hope for you is that you achieve the best possible positive results in this course rather than, at the end, try to make do with the reasons why you didn't attain them.