

## On Being a Good Student in My Course

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At this writing, I am three weeks into the semester as a professor instructing an undergraduate university course in the social, historical, and philosophical foundations of education. It is a required course for students in the elementary and secondary education programs in my college. So my students are preparing to become teachers. Almost universally, they come to my course armed with a set of "right answers" about schooling they have acquired in their other teacher education courses. A couple of labels for this perspective are progressive education and neo-Deweyianism (after the philosopher and educator John Dewey, 1859-1952), although as far as I can tell, these labels, or any others, aren't used. Rather, this left-of-center ideology and approach is put forth to students simply as good education. And more, as *the* good education: to be opposed to it, or to prefer some other way of doing business, is to be for bad education and, just possibly, to reveal that there is something bad about you; there is a moral loading to all this. For details on my take on what is happening, refer to three writings on this site: Totalism and Thought Reform in America's Universities, either the long or short version; How University Academics Think; and, How University Students Think. Though I don't think you need to do any background reading to get a good enough sense of what I am getting at in this thought.

A student in the course emailed me asking about writing we do during the three-hour class sessions on Wednesday afternoons and wanting to set up a meeting with me to talk about it. Below is a portion of my reply. We agreed to get together the hour before the next class and I saw this writing as an orientation for that meeting. Reading it over, you'll pick up what I see going on in teacher education in my college and my attitude toward it, and more fundamentally, what I think is involved in being a good student in my course, and a good student generally.

The writing for Wednesday will be 20-25 minutes on the Weissburg reading. [The assignment was to read the first two chapters of Robert Weissberg, *Bad Students, Not Bad Schools* (Transaction, 2010).]

The idea is that you are producing scholarship with regard to this

writing. Scholarship sheds light on something, reveals it, it points out something fresh, perceptive, useful. It's a "here is something I want you to take note of" contribution to a reader. It goes beyond a summary, or report, or "what I related to" or "what I got out of it" or "what I found interesting" or "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, that kind of thing). That's too easy; it keeps you on the surface. Rather, it is "here's something really important that is going on here."

You are not just reading and yellow-marking Weissburg or skimming through him; you are *studying* him in order to understand what he is saying from his perspective and then going beyond that to making sense of him and what he is offering and what it means the very best you can. You are pushing against the outer limits of your own intellectual frontier. That is how you grow rather than spin your wheels.

You are looking for the gift in Weissburg, and every writer, and everything in this course, that will move you beyond where you are now, to greater clarity, insight, perspective, to a greater sense of direction in your quest to be stronger and efficacious and more your own person in education and generally.

The focus, then, isn't so much on judgment, or critique, of Weissburg in this case, but rather on achieving deep understanding and the exploration of significance, and the perception of connections to other things, including readings in this course, and contradictions, and implications, and the identification of issues and questions related to Weissburg's presentation.

You are staying with Weissburg in this case. You aren't using him as a prompt to talk about yourself and what you think, give a speech, play education expert, anything like that.

People who want to control you promote certainty and a judgmental posture in you. They want you to think that you (along with them, in alignment with them) know what's up, you can be confident of that, and to check things out just enough to see whether you agree or disagree with whatever, whoever, it is, and then either to leave it at that or refer back to yourself and announce to yourself and the world what you are sure is right. You leave the writer, idea, claim, etc., behind and talk about yourself and play sage and set people straight. That's fine with your trainers because they know what you'll think and say because when you refer to what's inside you to do this you will find what they put it in you.

Studying in this course is seeking out what's new, different, what will extend you. It's not looking for occasions to give testimony ("I'm a member of the enlightened and righteous") and opinionize. You are probing for insight and issues and questions to be explored. The idea is to use your mind and investigate the world outside of yourself, to expand, grow, learn new things, not reiterate, and lock in, what you already

believe, wherever that came from.

Scholarship involves respect for people who are different from you and humility. Neither you nor I know everything; we need to be open to, and seek out, new people, new ideas, and to listen to people respectfully and not stand above them and feel superior to them if what we get from them doesn't square with what we believe is true and correct.

I want you to wake up, get off automatic pilot, to see the world as it truly is, in all its complexity and diversity, to become your own person, to be autonomous intellectually and in every other way, 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.

The evolution of good ideas and ways has not ended with the generation that immediately preceded yours. Your challenge is more than simply living out what somebody else has decided is true and best. It is to build upon where those who came before you, including me, have gotten and go beyond it. Part of that is figuring out what you can get out of Weissburg that will empower you. And using Wednesday's class session in the same way. 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 twenty or twenty-one 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.

Take advantage of everything: use every moment, including this course, to becoming a more informed, powerful, independent, self-directed, self-important version of the person you uniquely are."