

On Judging the Quality of Today's Students

by

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A favorite pastime of today's teachers, especially college professors, is the trashing of their students.

"My students are terrible," is the common complaint. "They can't write, they can't calculate, and they can't think. They are woefully ignorant! They just don't measure up to the standards of the good old days when I was a student." And those "good old days," depending on the age of the critic, could be the 1940s, the '60s, or the '80s. Exaggeration aside, the complaint is that students today are not receiving the education that their predecessors did.

The facts, however, are a little more difficult to discern. Consider first of all that teachers have always complained about their students—"shop talk" style not unlike the complaints of sales representatives about their customers or employees about their bosses. Harvard Business School faculty in the 1950s complained about the math skills of their liberal-arts trained graduate students and a Harvard report in 1894 complained about grade inflation (quoted in [Kohn](#)).

I, too, have expressed complaints about my students' skills, especially the handling of decimals, but my A students do know where the decimal point goes and the others have a variety of reasons why they don't know or don't care to demonstrate that they do know. Interest or desire, after all, is a major factor in determining what people learn. Some, perhaps many, students just may not be interested in the subject of the complaining teachers' courses.

In my "good old days" of elementary school in the 1950s, it was common to have Jesuitical style contests at the chalkboard to see who could solve arithmetic problems the fastest. I was usually in the top three, but in a class of thirty-five students that leaves thirty-two who did not handle

the math as well. Similarly for spelling. So what? Well, almost all of those thirty-two students at the time likely did not go on to college and some may not have graduated from high school; today, most of their counterparts are sitting in college classes.* Whatever one thinks of the normal curve as it applies to intelligence (or motivation), the lower ends of the curve are now in college and probably affecting test scores and grades (not that I think much of either) and demonstrating lesser knowledge and skill than I had back in those good old days.

This phenomenon could explain declining SAT scores (not that I think much of the SAT—it's no longer referred to as an [aptitude test](#) and it predicts little about college success), as well as the lack of broad scale grade inflation that everyone assumes to exist. If grade inflation exists, it probably has occurred at the more elite institutions, the greater influx of weaker students in less prestigious schools keeping the grade point averages level or even declining ([1](#)). As education and social critic Alfie Kohn has said, "No one has ever demonstrated that students today get A's for the same work that used to receive B's or C's. We simply do not have the data to support such a claim" ([2](#)).

What about the change in curricula? Curricula change all the time. Teaching and understanding of the Greek language in ancient Roman schools declined in the latter part of the Empire (and, no doubt, teachers of Greek back then complained that their students didn't know anything!). In the early nineteenth century US, the university core curriculum consisted of math, Latin and Greek language and literature, and a strong dose of protestant Christianity. Science and history did not appear until the last third of the nineteenth century. And western civilization courses did not appear until the 1920s. (Term projects, the attempt to give students some individual choice and initiative in education, are products of the progressives.)

I would, of course, like my students to be better informed about American and world history, but then again, I took two American history courses in junior and senior high school and at least one course on world history,

but I only remember what I learned in college—when I was much more interested in the topic. And, oh yes, I was also taught, among other [myths](#), that George Washington chopped down a cherry tree and threw a silver dollar across the Potomac River. When I finally saw the Potomac as a young adult, I concluded, “Man, the Kansas City A’s sure could have used GW’s arm!”

And then there’s the “cacophony of teaching” that [Lawrence Cremin](#) (pp. 51-83) talked about in 1990. Teaching is everywhere, not just in the classroom. More so today with the Internet. That Shakespeare’s Hamlet in the early [1960s](#) (p. 35) was seen on television by more people in one night than had seen it since it was first performed in 1600 should make English teachers everywhere praise television, not just condemn it.

Bottom line: it’s not easy to compare today’s students with their grandparents, especially when most of the grandparents did not attend college (or have television or the Internet) and may have quit high school to go straight into a blue-collar job. (And most of my students’ grandparents attended school, if at all, in Mexico, China, or Vietnam.) It is also important for teachers to introspect about their own motivations for complaining about students. Are teachers just patting themselves on the back for being smarter than their students? Or are they genuinely concerned about teaching and, if so, why don’t they focus on the minds they are presented with and work to stretch them as far as the minds are capable. In the course of a year, one or two of the minds just might get turned on to the subject or method of the teacher and become eager to learn more.

After all, was it not one or two teachers that turned on the present teachers to become teachers? That’s how it happened for me. Inspiration, interest, motivation, method. Those are the fundamentals of a good teacher, not any particular subject matter. Get the light turned on in the student first. The subject matter will follow.

* Only 1.6% of the US population aged 15-24 was enrolled in college in 1900, 12% in 1950, and 38% in 2000 ([1](#), [2](#)). Other [calculations](#) indicate that 69% of high school graduates began college studies right after high school in 2005, whereas only 49% did in 1972—the implication being that the percentages were correspondingly smaller in earlier years.

** Teachers are motivated to learn. That's why they become teachers. They love their subjects and tend to expect everyone else to love it the same as they do (an unrealistic expectation). And, because of their motivation, most were good students, perhaps very good students, but the normal curve again, in motivation—never mind intelligence, means that many of today's students are not going to give a hoot about what the teacher is teaching. I think the critics delude themselves if they think their classmates in the good old days learned the multiplication tables or correct spelling or history, etc., as well as they did.