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BLANK SLATES AND INTELLECTUAL SELF-CONFIDENCE

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A professor once told me that most of the students in his classes were ‘blank slates.’ They arrive on the first day of class with little applicable background knowledge. Through the semester they are filled with knowledge, and, perhaps more importantly, taught how to organize and interact with that knowledge. At the time I was just happy to have been excluded from that characterization. I intuitively knew it was problematic, though I did not focus on why. In the months since, I have been thinking more and more about that offhand comment and its implications for education. I have realized that I do not agree with it, and that such a perspective carries the risk of squandering what might be the student’s most valuable possession—the uniqueness of his or her mind—and also of interfering with personal growth in a formative period.

For me, education should help students discover their personalities. For society, it is to produce intelligent and responsible citizens; optimally, the two can intersect. This self-actualization is a lifelong project. Its fulfillment is perhaps the highest human achievement, at least according to humanistic psychology as epitomized in the work of Abraham Maslow. The college years are probably the most important and fragile period in this process, and any inhibition in this stage, even unintentional, can have serious consequences.

One particularly problematic form of this inhibition is a loss of faith in the self, which in time hardens into passivity. In the academic sphere, this is most visible in the cases of those who have never found success in school, and decide that it is not for them. They often develop an inferiority complex in intellectual matters and allow others to speak for them. These people who have little confidence in their intellects and who approach affairs of the mind passively can never achieve that self-actualization, a process that requires simultaneous fulfillment of every part of the individual. In this essay, I want to focus on intellectual passivity in students who end up in the top-ranked colleges.

When students enter the classroom on the first day of, for example, *History 117: Tartars on the World Stage*, they may not know much about Tartar history specifically, especially in comparison to the professor. But discrete content is a small part of intellectual development. Furthermore, the relevant content of a history course frequently extends far beyond the readings and the particular issue at hand and includes all of history, all of tartar culture, anthropology, sociology, religion, etc. Nobody is a blank slate, because the slate is so broad and its surface has been filled over the years. Whatever individuals have filled in is unique, valuable, and applicable to academic questions. Background knowledge and experiences can be both the foundation of and the impediment to academic progress. To rank background knowledge and experiences according to relevance displays some arrogance on the part of the professor, who dares to think that he or she knows of all the ways that a discipline may be addressed.

I want to see a more thorough valuation of students’ background knowledge and experience. Educators should remain sensitive to content that does not adhere to a normative vision of what adequate or relevant background knowledge entails for a given subject. After all, problems are

solved through application of diverse and often surprising perspectives—especially those difficult problems that have been approached again and again with traditional methodology and background knowledge to no avail. Inviting such application would lead to students gaining greater academic self-confidence and comfort with taking unusual and creative approaches to problems.

This is more of a problem when we turn from content to form. Everybody has a store of functions that they use to make sense of new information—maybe they are innate, or maybe picked up in childhood or in the early years of school. Perhaps both. These functions are an important part of the personality, with significance that extends beyond the intellect. When a student learns how to interact with information in the classroom setting—in a situation as mundane as instruction on how to write the introduction to a research paper—their personality gets modified. This is usually a more subtle process than explicit instruction: the “right” ways to approach questions or readings are picked up by osmosis over time.

In my experience, the best professors gently integrate new modes of thinking into their students’ existing machinery. These are the professors who change lives. They’re the ‘oh captains my captains’ remembered for valuing the individual student’s contributions. Others take a more impersonal approach to the question of what exactly constitutes a college education, or what should differentiate the mind of a new freshman from that of a graduating senior. Among these are the ‘blank slate’ professors.

It seems to me that characterizing a student’s intellect as a methodological blank slate writes off a substantial chunk of her personality as deficient. If this happens enough to the student, they will, likely without even noticing, begin to lose faith in their innate ways of thinking, and overvalue those of the professor. Might the sense of inferiority felt by some colonized people in comparison to the colonizing culture be a relevant parallel? If one is told enough even tacitly that her ways of thinking are wrong and others are right, she will begin to internalize the criticism and suppress her existing methods for dealing with and synthesizing information. A whole section of personality will grow passive, and the individual will with varying degrees of enthusiasm adopt orthodox academic methodology.

If this eclipse of self goes over well, the student may progress through college writing paper after paper applying affect theory, third-wave feminism, or Marxism to the course material, burying his personal lens under the weight of borrowed intellectual techniques. Perhaps this is more gratifying in the short term than doing poorly in one’s classes. But I worry that in the long term students will turn into ciphers of methodological trends in the humanities. This defeats the purpose of higher education, which is to produce creative and free-thinking adults.

Perhaps these problems are nothing new. And I certainly do not see any clear way to get around the economic necessities that constrain institutions: the economy requires college graduates with a consistent set of skills. But it also requires people with extraordinary mindsets, people that could easily be dismissed in an academic setting. Colleges should approach students with the awareness that unusual skills are crucial to success in today’s world—even, or especially, when these skills seem too ambiguous to quantify. I have some suggestions for navigating these conflicting imperatives.

I ask professors, then (and students, who are just as likely to devalue their own minds and overvalue the professor's and the material), to be aware of this tradeoff, and to continually check the arithmetic—to measure the distribution of power between students and teachers against the economic, personal, and academic imperatives that inform classroom life. Professors have the unique chance to preserve and develop students' personalities while also transmitting skills that are necessary for success, as well as the skills that they, themselves, have honed from years of study. They should stretch this opportunity to its limit. In turn, students should learn to respect both their unique reserve of knowledge and experience with that of their professors. A student who moves through college without intellectual compromise is, to me, a success story. Finally, professors and students should keep the competing goals of education firmly in their minds, every day engaging issues of power and value in the classroom.