Inferiority in Academia

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[http://www.ship.edu/%7Ecgboeree/inferior.html]

Everywhere I look in Academia I find inferiority. I'm not talking about funding or equipment or textbooks; and I'm not comparing us once more to the Japanese. What I find is people who don't feel good about themselves.

First, the students: They avoid math and science classes because "I'm no good at that stuff." They write terribly because "I can't write." They never ask questions because "I don't want to look stupid." They aim for C's because "I'm a C student." They seem thoroughly unmotivated because they don't believe the effort gets them anywhere.

And we agree with them. I can't tell you how many times I've heard colleagues joke, "My 10:00 class has the I.Q. of a can of beansprouts." Or heard them say "No matter how often I explain it, they just refuse to understand." Or "They just don't belong in college."

And yet, what is the average I.Q. of American college students? It's well above 100, well above average. And their motivation? It may sometimes be crude and materialistic, but they do really want to get good jobs, which they know depend on degrees, which in turn depend a lot on grades and passing that required English or math course. I find they often care a great deal about what their parents think of them, and even what their professors think of them, though they are unlikely to say these things in public places.

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So what's happening? Basically, they have been told and shown that they are inferior, over and over, by us and by our colleagues in secondary, primary, and – yes – even early childhood education. We show them this by repeatedly measuring them, comparing them with certain standards. If they "measure up," they are rewarded with a smiley-face sticker, cash for a good report card, or a four-year degree. If not, well, they are considered inferior. And with all the different subjects we inflict on them, nearly every student is "inferior" in something.

Take the archetypal example: "Math phobia." We take ninth graders and put them in Algebra. Note that they may have gotten A's or B's or C's in earlier math classes – "mastery" hasn't caught on because it doesn't fit neatly into our academic calendars. And note that no one – despite the great popularity of Piaget – has bothered to check on their "readiness." Then we confront them with X. "Teacher, what does the X mean?" "It represents any number." "Yeah, but in this problem what does it mean?" For a kid who still thinks it's okay to make fun of another kid's nose because, after all, he himself has a fine nose, that kind of abstraction is pure mystery.

Well, he takes the class and does badly. His parents point out that Johnny down the street did just fine, so it can't be the teaching. The teacher heartily concurs with their conclusion. So what's left to blame? "I guess you're just not good at math." With that attitude and a D in algebra, what do we expect when our boy takes Precalculus four years later?

We also compare students with each other. In the extreme form, we curve the grades, which means that only so many can get A's and some predetermined number get D's and F's. John Calvin would have loved it. In less extreme forms, we single some out for praise and others for criticism. No matter how much we insist on calling this feedback or positive reinforcement, what it means to the student is that some are better than others... and some are inferior.

We often present ourselves as standards. We stand before our classes, shining examples of learning – nay, of intellect itself – with carefully prepared notes (created with the help of several famous textbooks, and presented now for the umpteenth time), and we ask our students: "Any questions? If you don't agree, please say so! I encourage debate." And when someone actually does fall into the trap, we show him or her, gently and kindly of course, how they are wrong. "Any other comments? Please, feel free."

Why do we do this? Why do we look down on them and then blame them for being pains in the neck? You know, but I'll say it anyway: our own inferiorities. After all, we came through the same gauntlet. For some of us it was a matter of doing badly in math or science or English or the humanities and now needing desperately to prove to ourselves that, despite that flaw, we are still worthy. Others might protest: We had no trouble parsing sentences and solving quadratics! True enough – those were the things that made us feel good about ourselves, the things that made us forget the other things: not being popular, or attractive or athletic or artisic.... Later, we told ourselves that all those things didn't matter because, after all, we have the kind of qualities that truly count: intelligence and academic motivation.

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So every day in our classes we emphasize to students who have no desire to be professors, scientists, or literary giants, the value of those qualities. "Everyone should take calculus" we say – though most of us haven't used it since. But calculus was something we could do. It made us feel good about ourselves and better than others. Therefore, everyone should take calculus.... Q.E.D.

Some of us take it one step further: We actively "put down" our students in order to "raise up" our own shaky egos. After all, when we started graduate school, we were thinking Harvard, an internationally respected research program, small classes of highly motivated students nearly as brilliant as ourselves, the Nobel Prize.... And here we are, associate professors at Podunk U., teaching four classes a semester, and the promotion committee keeps looking the other way. The only evidence of our greatness that remains is the abyssmal inferiority of our students. It serves us to maintain that inferiority.

If you've read this far, you are probably not that kind of teacher. But you may, like me, have another kind of inferiority: I need to be liked by my students. All of them. So sometimes I give them what they want – even when I know it's not good for them. People like me are responsible for things like grade inflation and lowered standards.

As I'm sure you're aware, Alfred Adler came up with the inferiority idea independently of myself earlier this century. And he noted that this feeling is inevitable. We all begin, after all, as children, and children are small. So what should we do?

The essence of our task is this: We as teachers must get beyond our own feelings of inferiority long enough to allow our students a chance at getting beyond theirs.

First, let's change the climate, the atmosphere, of our classes. For example, we can stop emphasizing differences in native abilities and prior knowledge among students. We can reduce the emphasis on competition, testing, grading, and the like. Let's not try to catch them off guard with pop quizzes, or cover their essays with demeaning comments, or point out errors in a condescending fashion.

The key issue here is "comparison with a standard." Traditionally, this means a measurement of how well the student can recall or recognize certain material, use certain concepts, or solve certain problems. But to grade the test or paper and leave it at that is nothing but a condemnation of the person, and the only motivation that provides is to avoid condemnation in the future by increasing effort, hopefully, or by doing what is absolutely necessary given their understanding of what we want, or by making use of such educational short-cuts as cheating. And if our tests differentate on the basis of native abilities or prior knowledge, as is often the case, "increasing effort" is the least likely choice. Feedback is only feedback if there is a chance at correction.

Instead, standards should be an indication of progress. We should set high – but attainable – criteria for mastery, and then give students the time they need to reach these criteria, with frequent opportunities for true feedback. Papers are no different: We should give students the opportunity, time, and guidance to write a good paper, rather than punish them for writing a bad one.

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We must also stop emphasizing students' ignorance or incompetence in more subtle ways. Let's not present our material as gospel, to be believed at face value. If certain material is, in fact, accepted by the whole field, we should be able to show the reasons for that acceptance. Likewise, we shouldn't continually confront students with the "wisdom of the ancients " – the ancients, too, were once students. In other words, we must not encourage the worship of theories, theorists, methods, results.... Doing so sets up a perception, in our students and ourselves, of students as benighted savages in need of salvation – and ourselves as the messiahs to do it!

Neither, of course, should we go to the opposite extreme and spend our classes belittling great thinkers. Making fun of something is also a way of protecting our egos, of hiding our ignorance. Our students, presumably even less knowledgeable, are even more likely to continue the desecration we began.

Second, let's make an effort at replacing extrinsic motivation – grades, reinforcements, degrees – with intrinsic motivation. Very young children don't need to be rewarded for learning, or punished for not. They are delighted to learn! Learning is, in fact, delightful, if you aren't concerned at every turn with protecting or boosting your ego. Just the mere fact of being told to read a book, for example, makes it a chore. Ten years later (or, sometimes, ten years earlier) that same book, read for its own sake, is a pleasure. Somehow, as both experience and research show, extrinsic rewards and punishments drive out intrinsic delight.

It's not that, somehow, all intrinsic motivation is suppressed from the ages of six through twenty-six. The same student that is failing math or English may be capable of assembling an entire sports car from scrap or have the fashion savvy of a professional buyer, may know the words to ten thousand rock songs or the baseball statistics from before he was born, may, in fact, have knowledge and skills in some significant area which they have not yet revealed to the world at large. When they like something, they learn it. Just like we do.

What we need to do is put the student back at the center of the universe. We must start with how the student sees the world: What does he know? What does she like? What do they want out of life? Only then can we encourage some movement. Expecting them to be motivated by our perspectives is a little like encouraging your horse to take you to town by telling him about the beer you'll have when you get there. Beer has no value to a horse, no meaning, no relevance. I'm afraid that calculus or Freud or physics or Shakespeare often has no value to our students – until we, taking their perspectives, show them some value! And once you see the value in something, you are intrinsically motivated.

And you can't fail, really, with intrinsic motivation: It's the journey that counts, and the end only provides the direction. Extrinsic motivation, on the other hand, is nothing without its end: Since the rewards are artificially tied to the end criteria, how you get there is irrelevant. But if you don't get there, the trip was a failure. You have learned nothing other than your own inferiority.

There are many techniques that encourage students to recognize the meaningfulness of a subject: co-operative learning, learning-by-doing, guided design, class projects, individual projects, group discussion, and so forth. But even the humble lecture can have a lasting impact if it begins with the student.

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Third, we should actually deal with our own inferiorities. We can pretend we don't have them for only so long! Let's review our abilities, compliment ourselves on our accomplishments, our good natures, and so on. Of course, we can't ignore our true short-comings – which sometimes means learning to see them through our own defenses for the first time. We should make efforts to improve what we can, or accept what we must and compensate, realistically, where possible.

The best place to start is with the little things: If our notes are complete, neat, well-organized, and rehearsed, and we pay attention to our examples, voice, physical presentation, and so on, we replace ideals with manageable goals. Then we can replace self-flagellation for our failures with self-congratulation for our successes.

And we must learn to relax: The fate of our eternal souls does not hang on those fifty minutes. What's the worst thing that can happen if we lower our guard? They can ignore us and forget us. Big deal.

As is, this may sound a lot like picking ourselves up by our bootstraps. But we have others to help us: Friends, family members, lovers, and colleagues have been telling us that we are decent human beings for ages, despite their full awareness of our flaws, weaknesses, soft hearts, and double chins.

And our students will help us: As we take small steps toward creating an accepting atmosphere, encouraging intrinsic motivation, and developing self-confidence, they will like us more, be more open to what we have to offer them, do better – which in turn tells us that we are, indeed, not as inferior as we thought.

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