

Maria Smith

Professor Tvordi

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Dear Dr. Fish,

After reading your essay, “Aim Low,” I had many thoughts about the issues you addressed concerning teachers and how they should be more relaxed about their duty as a teacher. Your essay was not only entertaining for me to read, but also got me thinking about issues in the education system that I had not thought of before. Instead of just thinking as a student and with the viewpoint of a student, your essay switched my focus to the teacher and what their responsibilities are. You mentioned that some concepts being taught at universities are a “mishmash of self-help platitudes” (4), and how those concepts are not academically advancing. This led to your main idea concerning academic and democratic values, and how the confusion of the two can easily damage the quality of education. Although your thoughts were interesting, and brought ideas to the forefront of my mind, I do not agree with some of your positions. The main issues I disagree with are: how teachers should not try helping people become better than they were, the fact that only academic teachings can be taught and learned in a classroom, and that academic and democratic values cannot intertwine.

There may be examples of students coming away from classes with a new perspective on life that might not be the best. But how many students, in contrast, come away from a class and teacher with a better perspective of themselves and the world around them? Sometimes there may be the classroom and teacher who are just a place that, as you say, seems like a “locked room” (2) where the students just have to wait until they can “escape” (2). Although this may be a good example of the mindset of some students, this example certainly cannot be true for all

students. As a student myself, I do not fit this example. School is not a place where I feel trapped and unable to leave of my own free will. I feel eager for class on behalf of the fact that I am excited to learn more and increase my own understanding. School is a place where students go to receive an education and become a better person through experiences and knowledge. Every experience shapes people for good or for bad. Knowing this, how does viewing the classroom as a “locked room” (2), like a jail, help add to the character of the student in the class? Making the classroom seem like a jail benefits neither the teacher nor the students.

Teachers have and continue to shape me into the person I am. Whether they have been a good influence or a bad one it does not matter. Teachers who present themselves and their classroom as a safe, comfortable, and open place help students have a better experience. These classes are enjoyable, and these teachers change lives for the better. One such class changed the life of a friend of mine. She took AP Chemistry in high school and struggled through it, but the teacher was always there for her and even gave my friend her phone number to make her help more accessible. As my friend is at college now, she still calls this teacher to get advice about classes, obstacles in life, and help with understanding chemistry assignments. This teacher has truly changed her life for the better. With such great potential for this positive influence for students, why would we want to tell teachers that they “can’t make students into good people, and they shouldn’t try” (3)? I think that if a teacher has potential to help at least one student, then why would someone try to prohibit that teacher from trying? I do not understand why prohibiting them from helping is a good idea.

The second issue I do not agree with you about is that only teachings considered fully academic can be taught in a classroom, nothing else. You claim that teachers are “responsible only for the selection of texts, the preparation of a syllabus, the sequence of assignments and

exams, the framing and grading of a term paper, and so on” (1), and not “responsible for the effects of their teaching” (1). I agree that teachers are responsible for many things and not others, but I think they are greatly responsible for the effect of their teaching. When teachers educate students in concepts that inspire them to change their major or even their whole lifestyle, the teacher has definitely had an effect on that student. There are many other lessons a person can learn from a class other than what is written in the textbook, lessons like the ones you mention in your essay:

“Self-understanding or self-knowledge; understanding of the relationship between the self and community; awareness of and willingness to take responsibility for the consequences of one’s actions for others and society; informed and responsible involvement with relevant communities; pluralism; cultural awareness and respect; ability to understand the value of one’s own and other cultures.” (3-4)

All these lessons are not considered fully academic, but that does not mean that they are not important enough to be addressed. There is more that can be learned in a classroom than just academic based principles.

I agree that teachers should maintain a close relationship with what they teach to the subject of their class, but I feel strongly that any student without the basic skills quoted above is less likely to succeed in their class. I do agree with you that teachers should be careful as to how much attention they give towards broadening goals, especially towards personal development, for fear that students might lose interest “in the disciplinary training teachers provide” (4). However, teachers should be able to take a small amount of time away from normal lecture and use it to brief students on these “not so academic” teachings to make sure their students have the necessary skills to do well in their class. Especially if the class has at least one freshman, this

approach would greatly benefit the class. If teachers are allowed to do this, the students in their class will be more successful and well rounded.

The third issue is about the relationship between academic and democratic values. According to Kevin McGrew, the definition of academic values is “a person’s desire, preference, or “wanting” for certain academic goals and outcomes.” (1) This means that academic values are peoples’ preferences, desires, and goals. According to the article “Learning to Give”, the definition of democratic values are “a system of beliefs and actions that give all people a voice, and are founded on the practice of equality of opportunity, rights, and treatment.” (1) Meaning that to acquire democratic values we have to gain equal opportunity to put for our opinions of our rights and treatments. The definitions of both are certainly not parallel in meaning, but do interconnect. Contrary to what you think and how “the confusion of democratic values and academic values can easily damage the quality of education” (5), I think that using both values can enhance the quality of education. Both values intertwine because in order to express our preferences and desires, academic values, we must be granted our democratic values, which are the equality of opportunity and freedom to speak.

When students become comfortable with feeling like they have an equal opportunity to share their opinions, I think the number of students involved in class discussions will increase. As a student, the first way I start getting comfortable with a class, and the teacher, is by feeling confident about my opinion, beliefs, and preferences. Once confident about my academic values, it becomes the teacher’s responsibility to invoke democratic values by giving students an equal opportunity to discuss each of our beliefs and opinions in a non-threatening environment.

The experiences that help everyone feel comfortable with having their own voice, and being treated equally, lead to classroom discussions centered fully on academic goals and

outcomes. There are facts to support that some bad classroom discussions have formed from teachers and students being disrespectful when sharing their opinion or focusing on an uncomfortable topic for a full day of class. However, there are far more times when memorable discussions take place fueled from not only a student's desired preference of what they want to learn, but also the feeling that they have freedom to be able to speak about what they want. If the classroom environment closes away from everything but focusing on academic values there will not be a way to reach the potential of what the class could learn.

From knowing many people who are students and being a student myself, I do not think that teachers should be relaxed about their duties because we are not relaxed about our duties as students. Teachers deserve to have diligent, hardworking, attentive students that are putting forth their best effort to excel in the class. Likewise, students deserve to have a teacher that will teach valid, applicable information, as well as care about the student and how they are doing in class. If teachers refrain from trying to help students shape themselves into better people, focus on just the academic lessons during class, and cut out the democratic values in a classroom, the experience for both the student and teacher will be mediocre.

There will not be an opportunity for the class to be great, life changing, or prolongingly influential. It will have become just one of the many classes students check off their list as having attended that day. It is at this point that teachers have given up because it "is simply not within their power to do... and they shouldn't try" (2-3). If it is not in a teacher's power to enhance the classroom for the students or even just one student, then who will? How are we, students and teachers alike, going to be able to reach our full potential if we eliminate these steps to get there? Teachers are critical to the academic success of their students, and they are also critical to influencing the student's overall success in life. Yes, teachers should be less

scrutinized and given more leeway to control what goes on in their classroom, but teachers should not be left to aim so low that they miss the mark entirely.

Sincerely,

Maria Smith

Works Cited

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