

The Zero Sum Game of Denigrating Students

Peter Kaufman

Teaching and learning are relational processes and it is nearly impossible to be in a constructive relationship, especially an educational one, when there are feelings of disrespect and disdain.

"It's depressing teaching some of these students, they are just so ignorant."

"I've come to the realization that students today don't want to learn."

"I'm tired of these students always wanting to cut corners and find the easy way out."

"I feel like it's a waste of my time trying to reach these students. They just can't think critically."

Sound familiar? These quotes are just a sampling of the denigrating remarks I often hear colleagues make about students. Sometimes I hear these comments in conversations, other times they are mentioned directly to me, and increasingly I hear them at faculty gatherings, both on my campus and at academic conferences. They are usually expressed when someone is discussing a specific classroom experience, an interaction with a student, or a general observation about higher education.

When colleagues express such scornful sentiments I find myself progressing through a series of emotions that range from surprise to embarrassment to aggravation. At first, I am taken aback that an instructor would express such disdain for students. Then I feel somewhat uneasy, much like I do when I am in the presence of someone telling an offensive joke. But rather quickly my amazement and confusion turn to frustration as I ponder how such an attitude bankrupts the educational process. I would think that after hearing these comments so regularly I would be less affected by them; however, just the opposite is true. With each passing remark I become increasingly bothered and annoyed and I fear a widening schism between teachers and learners.

Although some may view these comments as relatively benign and innocuous — as just blowing off steam — I tend to disagree. My own sense is that



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these disparaging remarks contribute to a culture of negativity, foster an anti-student climate, and produce a pseudo-Pygmalion effect whereby our negative perceptions of students become the tainted reality that affect our social interactions. Even if students do not hear our remarks and do not internalize our projections of them, the ways in which we perceive the educational reality may still affect the end results. Sociologists sometimes refer to this as the Thomas Theorem: If people define situations as real, they are real in their consequences. In this essay I take these comments seriously and I consider the consequences that may transpire when instructors express them. I focus on three processes: reinforcement of the student-teacher contradiction, exoneration of the teacher, and blaming the victim. These are certainly not the only damaging effects of such verbal denigrations but I limit my focus to these themes because they resonate with my personal and professional life.

A few important caveats before I begin. It should be clear at the outset that my purpose is not to stifle these feelings of anger and resentment. I recognize that teaching is not easy. As instructors, it is important that we acknowledge how we feel and that we have the space to express ourselves. I am also not trying to cast stones from my glass-enclosed house. I realize that all teachers, including me, have entertained such thoughts or have uttered such remarks at one point in their careers. My tone and purpose, then, are not meant to be personally accusatory but rather analytically forceful. My goal is to encourage us to be more mindful of what these remarks suggest and especially of how they may impact our educational practice. If teaching and learning are anything, they are relational processes and it is nearly impossible to be in a constructive relationship, especially an educational one, when there are feelings of disrespect and disdain.

The Student-Teacher Contradiction

In his classic text, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Paulo Freire (1970) highlights one of the main obstacles to a humanistic education: the teacher-student contradiction. This dichotomous teaching arrangement is reflective of a traditional classroom in which the teacher *teaches* and the students are *taught*. The teacher knows everything and the students know

nothing; the teacher is the subject and the students are mere objects. This model privileges the teacher as the all-knowing authority figure and reduces students to ignorant, subservient dolts. Freire refers to this model as the banking system of education because teachers view students as empty vessels that need to be filled with the teacher's extensive knowledge. In the banking approach to education the students do not have any say in the subject matter, the methods of assessment, or the mode of instruction. Why should they? After all, they are presumed to have no knowledge of the course content — isn't that why they are in school — so their role in the educational process is to be a receptacle of the teacher's expertise.

Within the discourse of denigrating students there is an unexpressed assumption, even endorsement, of the teacher-student contradiction. When we criticize students' intelligence, question their motivation, and doubt their level of competence, we are implying that they are unworthy objects of our talents and proficiencies. We know what they need to learn, how they need to learn it, and why it is important to them. We are so informed and so enlightened that any student who does not enthusiastically and energetically welcome all of our knowledge must be utterly hopeless. In short, we are subjects and they are mere objects. And for the students who fail to follow our instructions, refuse to do exactly as we say, or ask stupid questions, they are, quite frankly, helpless and really do not deserve to be in college in the first place. Of course, the great irony is that teachers who maintain the teacher-student contradiction in their daily pedagogical practice are setting students (and themselves) up for failure. When we do not welcome students into a dialogue with us, when we do not ask them what they want to learn, how they best learn, and why the material is or is not relevant to their lives, should we really be surprised when they act out, withdraw, and resist our lessons? Isn't it a bit disingenuous for instructors to criticize students for not wanting to learn if we have not invited them into the learning process in the first place?

One of the hidden problems with the teacher-student contraction and the denunciation of students is that both teachers and students are similarly oppressed, limited, and dehumanized. Freire (1998) ad-

dressed this topic at the end of his career in *Pedagogy of Freedom*. In this book he makes a final plea to teachers to reclaim their own epistemological curiosity as a means to re-humanize themselves. According to Freire, we can achieve this re-humanization by questioning, criticizing, and condemning the very haughtiness that produces our verbal denigrations of students: "As a teacher, I cannot help the students to overcome their ignorance if I am not engaged permanently in trying to overcome my own" (1998, 89). Only by entering the educational context with an open mind and a willingness to learn from others will we be able to comprehend the world in unimaginable ways. But if we are so dogmatic in our insistence that students have nothing to contribute, we deny them as well as ourselves the opportunity to experience education as the practice of freedom.

Every semester I invite students to join me on a day hiking trip in mountains that are located near my college. For the past ten years I have been taking students on a trail that includes a moderately strenuous climb up a steep rock scramble. Since many of the students are novice hikers, and in fact some have never even stepped foot in the "woods," the rock scramble always presents some challenges. It is common to hear expressions of fear, trepidation, awe, and uncertainty during our ascent. Inevitably, there are always some students who need to be coached and cajoled up the mountain, but rarely am I the one who does the coaxing. Instead, other students always end up taking the lead in guiding their peers, allaying their fears, ensuring their safety, and leading them up to the top of the climb. Although I certainly make my presence known by pointing out particularly tricky spots or offering suggestions about foot and hand placement, the students ultimately serve as guides for one another. And these roles are not in any way predetermined; rather, they arise spontaneously as students interact and problem solve their way up the trail.

When I think about the learning that occurs on the hiking trip, it is clear that although I provide the logistical support for the experience (set the date, get the permit, choose the trail, provide transportation, etc.), most of the educational dividends come from the interactions between the participants. The reason for this is not because my knowledge of the physical terrain is very limited; rather, it is because on this trip

everyone is both a teacher and a learner. Some students who join us on the hike enlighten the rest of us with their geological or biological understanding of the outdoors while other students share their considerable knowledge about climbing rocks and ascending much higher mountains. Other students have keen interpersonal intelligence and subsequently are instrumental in establishing a great group rapport. Even for those students who are novices, they readily teach (or remind) the rest of us about what it is like experiencing the outdoors for the first time.

Now imagine how this hiking trip might transpire within the traditional framework of the student-teacher contradiction. What names might I call those students who express some apprehensions about making it to top of the mountain? Wimps? Babies? Scaredy-cats? What about students who are completely unaware of the various dangers on the trail such as poison ivy and tick-infested grasses? Are they stupid, dumb, and ignorant? And what of the urban-dwelling students who never had the privilege or the means to traverse in such environs? Shall I dismiss them as unprepared and not belonging on this trip?

While some instructors have no qualms about belittling students' performance in the classroom, I find it less likely that anyone would verbally denigrate these novice hikers. But is there really a difference between the two? Although students may have more experience in their student role than in a hiker role, they probably have little to no experience dealing with such things as a particular instructor's teaching style, the subject matter, the books being read, the assignments and exercises they are asked to complete, and the other students with whom they are taking the class. Much like the hiking trip, each and every class is new terrain for students and faculty to navigate.

A few years ago I was sitting in a faculty meeting and a colleague said

I am the teacher; I am the intellectual; I am the expert. The students are not there to educate other students, that's my role. I am the educator and they are the students.

I do not recall the context in which this comment was made, but I do remember how forcefully it was ut-

tered. This comment was also made just a few weeks after that semester's hiking trip. That particular hike was especially unnerving for me because there were a couple of students who really had quite a bit of difficulty getting up the rock scramble. I remember thinking that if the other students had not helped the two unsure hikers make it to the top, our group would have been in a potentially precarious position because once you begin ascending it is more difficult and quite dangerous to turn back and head down. This same thing happens periodically in the classroom. Most professors have probably experienced being at a loss for examples, have found themselves unable to recall a specific word, or have realized they need help explaining a concept in alternative terms. In all of these situations it is usually students who come to our rescue and keep us moving forward on the path of learning. But such assistance can only occur if we suspend, if just for the moment, our affinity for the teacher-student contradiction. Clinging to the notion that we are the only authorities in the room will do nothing but stall our progress and breed the rigid attitude that my colleague articulated so clearly.

Exoneration of the Teacher

A second negative pedagogical outcome of denigrating students is that such verbal denunciations render teachers blameless in the face of educational problems. Implicit in these dismissive putdowns of students is the notion that *they*, not us, are the cause of our suffering. If only students were motivated, engaged, dedicated, responsible, capable, and smarter, then our efforts would be rewarded. It is especially surprising to hear such rants about the ineptitude of students when they are uttered by colleagues who fashion themselves to be reflexive, student-centered, and even radical pedagogues. I could understand, but not condone, such comments coming from colleagues who do not place a high premium on their educational practices. But I am perplexed when I hear these denigrations coming from those who appear, at least ostensibly, to be interested in and committed to the processes of progressive teaching and learning. Stephen Brookfield (1995) points out that being a critically reflective teacher requires that we examine the assumptions that underlie our work. Clearly, one of the biggest assumptions among col-

lege faculty seems to be that when it comes to poor student performance, we professors are absolved of any wrongdoing.

There is a Tibetan teaching called *lojong* that has been popularized by Buddhist practitioners such as Chogyam Trungpa (1993), Pema Chodron (1994), and Allan Wallace (1992). *Lojong* refers to "mind training" and the practice involves meditating on the fifty-nine slogans (or proverbs) that comprise the seven points of mind training. The *lojong* teachings arise out of the Mahayana school of Buddhism, the middle path, and seek to foster compassion among sentient beings. Those who practice these 59 slogans do so in an effort to cultivate loving-kindness and an awakened heart. I often find myself referring back to the 59 slogans, especially when I reflect on my role as a teacher. In particular, there is one slogan that I come back to repeatedly that I think is especially relevant to the notion of the blameless teacher.

Point three of the seven points of mind training is about transforming bad circumstances into the path of enlightenment. This third point contains slogans eleven through sixteen but it is slogan twelve, "Drive all blames into one," that sticks out in my mind. As Chogyam Trungpa suggests, "this slogan applies whenever we complain about anything" (2003, 43). By driving all blames into one, into ourselves, we move away from the practice of finding fault with others and instead we look introspectively to uncover the ways in which we are part of the problem. It is easy to cast blame onto others; indeed, in such an individualistic culture as ours we do it all the time. Our inclination to blame, criticize, and find fault with others is by no means unique to the classroom experience; however, for teachers to blame students for being ignorant, uninterested, and disengaged seems a bit ironic. After all, if students are not succeeding academically or falling short of *our* expectations for them, then it seems that we need to examine our own culpability in these failings.

By heaping blame on students, criticizing their efforts, and questioning their intelligence we exonerate ourselves from any wrongdoing. If students are ignorant, it is not because our teaching methods are ineffective. If they are disengaged, it is not because we are boring. If they are uninterested, it is not because we fail to make the material relevant to their

lives. And if they are cheaters, it is not because we buy into a system that emphasizes achieving grades rather than promoting knowledge. By blaming students instead of ourselves, we can continue feeling self-assured and self-righteous. More importantly, by failing to own our role in the students' shortcomings, we free ourselves from having to alter—much less transform—our longstanding and cherished pedagogical strategies. In effect, we lose *our* agency. Rethinking our curriculum, reexamining our pedagogical practices, incorporating techniques that reflect a variety of learning modalities, or even just asking students to explain their resistance or confusion to the material, are either dismissed as unnecessary or not worth the effort. This sort of argument brings us perilously close to a self-fulfilling prophecy of complacency and fatalism that I have already heard too often: "Look, if the students don't want to learn, then I'm not going to break my back to try and get them motivated." "Why should I bother going the extra mile if the students are not willing to take a few steps?"

The *lojong* slogan of "drive all blames into one" is not meant to be interpreted as some veiled form of masochism. The point here is not to accept full and total responsibility for everything that occurs in the classroom—certainly, some accountability rests with learners too—but this precept encourages us to reflect on the social situation and consider how we are major players in the construction of this reality. Any problems that students are experiencing must be recognized as *our* problems too, because we are co-creators of the educational process. We cannot even talk about students, much less denounce them, without recognizing that their status as students implicitly suggests our status as teachers. Similarly, the roles they fill as students—i.e., good student, awful student, motivated student, disinterested student—imply, at least to some extent, our role as teachers. It bears reminding that there is an inherent symbiosis between students and teachers, not just in terms of their respective identities but also their behaviors, their values, and, yes, their successes and failures. When we play the blame game we are pretending that this symbiosis does not exist. We are assuming, incorrectly, that students can exist apart from their relationship with teachers and, conversely, that

teachers can exist apart from students. By accusing students of not wanting to learn or of being stupid, teachers are implicitly implicating themselves of similar offenses. Criticizing students for having an antipathy toward learning suggests our own antipathy toward teaching because learning and teaching are reciprocal acts.

It is also important to bear in mind that most college instructors have very little, if any, training in educational pedagogy. Unlike primary and secondary school teachers who may take courses on developmentally appropriate teaching practices, social and philosophical foundations of education, and the incorporation of active learning strategies, many college instructors enter the classroom as relative neophytes who learn to teach largely by trial and error. Although these individuals may be renowned in their respective fields, their scholarly credentials do not necessarily make them competent teachers. Being an expert in Greek philosophy, 18th century British literature, or electrical engineering, does not mean that one can necessarily teach these ideas in a clear and engaging manner.

This is an important and sometimes difficult point for us to acknowledge. After all, holding a Ph.D. or some other terminal degree signifies that one has earned the highest educational credentials. Shouldn't that degree certify us as master teachers, particularly in the field of our expertise? This seems to be a prevailing attitude, or myth, that many college instructors cling to and it may well be responsible for many of their denigrating remarks toward students. The challenge for us is to recognize that our disciplinary knowledge does not automatically translate into pedagogical wisdom. If we strive to expertly teach our expertise, then we will need to turn the well-honed analytical and critical lens that we developed as scholars onto ourselves as teachers. Recognizing the myriad ways we may be to blame for students' off-putting academic behavior is one small step on this endlessly enlightening path.

Blaming of the Victim

The corollary to exonerating the teacher is blaming the victim. Let us just assume for the moment that many students do not want to learn, that they do view themselves as consumers and not learners, and

that they are, among other things, slackers, cheaters, sycophants, and corner-cutters who are disengaged, unmotivated, lazy, and ignorant. How might we explain their attitudes, their inabilities, and their aversion to learning? Does the current generation of college students suffer collectively from some inner defect that makes them reject the college experience? Or is there something about how they were socialized as students that inhibits, obstructs, and erodes their passion for learning? And is there something about our attitudes and our pedagogies that cultivate or reinforce this seemingly negative approach to the educational process? Although it is relatively easy to malign students and blame them for their own failings, it is more difficult to uncover the underlying social processes that contribute to and perpetuate this state of affairs. As noted above, this analytical undertaking is even more discomfiting if we turn the gaze onto ourselves and recognize our own role in this situation.

In his book, *The Passionate Learner*, Robert Fried (2001, 2) details a process with which many of us as teachers and learners are probably all too familiar:

Children come into the world with a desire to learn that is as natural as the desire to eat and move and be loved, [and] their hunger for knowledge, for skills, for the feeling of mastery [is] as strong as any other appetite. [But we] are less likely to see this same passion when we look at kids in school. Something happens to a child when learning is replaced by schooling. [T]oo many young people, when they enter formal schooling, feel the passionate learning of their early years begin to decline, often with permanent results.

How might we explain this loss of epistemological curiosity? What can account for the crushing of a child's spirit, what Erik Erikson famously called "the most deadly of all sins." Before we even try to understand this process we should, at the very least, acknowledge its presence. We must recognize that students are not entering higher education as educational novices; rather, they come to the college classroom as hardened veterans of the schooling process. For many of them, their educational experience has been dehumanizing, alienating, and oppressive. In

crafting our expectations of their behavior we must be cognizant of the path they took to reach us and the potentially deleterious effect this path has had on their innate love of learning.

Recently, I was listening to a colleague express frustration, even exasperation, at the fact that students were not reading the assigned material and consequently could not participate in class discussions. Because the texts were so complex and dense this instructor went through great lengths to make the material more easily digestible. Study questions were prepared, the reading load was reduced, and secondary sources of summaries and explanations were offered — all to no avail. Fed up with the situation, my colleague abruptly abandoned plans to foster a discussion-based learning environment and reverted back to a very traditional banking model of teaching in which notes were projected onto a screen to be dutifully copied down by students. Feeling stymied by the students' disinterest, their inability to comprehend the material, and their unwillingness to do the work, my colleague was resigned to "teaching to the test."

This scenario is probably one that many of us have experienced. But as irritating and bothersome as this situation is, it really begs the question of why *should* students do the work? At first, this may seem like a naïve question; however, if we sit with the question for awhile and really force ourselves to contemplate it, the answers may provide some valuable insight. Of course, we can gain greater understanding by asking students themselves why they do or do not complete assignments. More likely than not, their answers will reveal a means–end analysis that students have become experts at deciphering. If there is one thing that students have learned from all of their years of schooling it is how to manage the educational system for their own benefit. This expertise, or adaptation for educational survival, is probably even more characteristic of college students because they have navigated the system successfully enough to move from one level to the next.

When I think of the many denigrating comments that faculty make about students, the theme of student resistance to doing the assigned work is certainly near the top of the list. Whether it is falling short of reading loads, handing in late assignments,

or cutting corners illegitimately, the prevailing sentiment is that “these damn students just don’t want to make the effort to do the work.” Of course, this complaint is not just that students are not doing the work; rather, students are not doing the work because they are lazy, unmotivated, disengaged, or intellectually inferior. What I find particularly interesting about these explanations is that they are no different than the reasons that are often given for why poor people remain poor. The mainstream rhetoric that we hear from politicians, media pundits, and others, is that poverty is an individual problem that would be eliminated if poor people would just get a better attitude.

As an instructor of sociology, one of the greatest challenges I face is encouraging students to set aside these individualistic explanations and instead try to understand the structural and institutional causes of individual behavior. William Ryan (1971) popularized the phrase “blaming the victim” to highlight the tendency in society to incriminate and condemn individuals for the situations in which they find themselves. In my own discipline, C. Wright Mills (1959) similarly implored us to reject psychologisms — our inclinations to rely on individualistic explanations — and instead focus on the social conditions that bring about individual behaviors. Mills also made an important distinction between personal troubles and public issues. If something is affecting only a few people we may view this issue as a personal trouble that besets the individual. As a personal trouble we can seek personal solutions. However, when something is experienced or exhibited by many individuals then we are discussing a public issue. Public problems cannot be understood, much less be solved, by focusing exclusively on individual actions. To address them we must first be aware of their social origin before we can begin to prescribe social solutions. Apathy, disinterest, and disengagement among college students are as much public issues as persistent poverty.

The importance of distinguishing personal troubles from public issues cannot be overstated, especially in a society that overwhelmingly encourages us, erroneously, to see social problems as individual afflictions. Poverty will not be solved by blaming individuals or by expecting them as individuals to overcome a lifetime of structural disadvantages such as failing schools, dangerous and unhealthy neigh-

borhoods, diminishing economic opportunities, poor nutrition and health care, lack of reliable public transportation, and limited access to child care. Similarly, apathy, disinterest, disengagement, and even ignorance among college students cannot be adequately addressed if we do not understand the structural and institutional underpinnings that foster and perpetuate such maladaptive outcomes. The typical student in the United States faces an education based on rote memorization, a curriculum revolving around high stakes tests, and course content that has little or no connection to their everyday lives. Since students experience this educational reality day-after-day and year-after-year, is it any wonder that they have developed strategies to resist and escape such drudgery? Moreover, should we be surprised that they lack the skills, much less the desire, to engage in high order critical thinking? If we agree that students entered school with an insatiable thirst for knowledge and educational exploration, that their epistemological curiosity was boundless, then we must accept that something happened on their educational journey that sent this passion for knowledge into a deep freeze. As instructors we should not blame them for being victims of this process nor should we victimize them further; instead, we should work diligently with them to identify how this educational state of affairs came to be so that we can do everything possible to rekindle their enthusiasm for learning.

Concluding Thoughts

In *The Courage to Teach*, Parker Palmer notes that when he asks teachers to identify the biggest obstacle to good teaching the overwhelming response is “my students.” In discussing the “blame-the-student shtick” that he hears so often, Palmer (1998, 41) points out that our predilection for blaming students is “the conventional defense in any embattled profession” and that “the way we diagnose our students’ condition will determine the kind of remedy we offer.” These are important points to bear in mind not only in terms of the students’ condition but our own condition, and conditioning, as well. Just as we should understand the structural realities that have contributed to apathetic, disinterested, and unprepared students, we must also acknowledge the insti-

tutional milieu that has contributed to our own frustrations, resentments, and irritations. Work creep, micromanagement of our curriculums, larger classes, greater expectations for scholarship — all may impact how we approach our role as educators. If we are truly concerned with the processes of teaching and learning, we must be willing to consider not just who the students are as learners but also who we are as teachers. And this process of reflexivity must cover the full spectrum of our life as teachers from the institutional to the intrapersonal.

As I think may be true for many of my colleagues, I made the decision to pursue a career as a professor because I loved being a student. From kindergarten through college I relished the pursuit of knowledge. Learning new things was stimulating, discovering new realities was entrancing, and becoming more informed about the social, physical, and aesthetic world was empowering. After I graduated college I remember coming home after my first full-time job in the “real world” and thinking, “What have I gotten myself into and how do I get back to where I was?” Having such fond memories of being a student I find it particularly troublesome when I hear my colleagues lambaste them now. Granted, not all students are perfect, and I am not naïve enough to think that they all approach learning like most professors did when they were in college; however, I do believe that the process of learning is inherently infused with the potential to be stimulating, entrancing, and empowering. Since many of us in the academy are here because we love to learn, should it not be our goal to cultivate this same feeling among our students?

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