

## **Bad professors**

The Cranky Professor

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Have you ever had a bad professor? You haven't? Well, neither have I.

Some professors I've had have been better than others. Yet I can't remember any I would say were bad. And I've taken courses from at least thirty different professors.

A university professor is simply a person who has thought long and hard about some aspect of the world and gets paid to convey her or his thoughts about it. So it's not really surprising that bad professors are few, if any. If you've thought long and hard about something, likely enough you're going to have something interesting to say about it. Anyone prepared to listen attentively is going to learn from you.

Still, every once in a while we I hear rumours of a bad professor. Jones goes too fast, someone complains, or Smith goes too slow. McDale talks the whole class long, McDain lets students talk forever. Now I've been in courses with professors rumoured to be bad. My experience has been that while the descriptive part of the complaint might be true (yes, Jones does go fast), it doesn't support the complaint itself. I've acquired much of value from both the fast and the slow professor, and I've learned something about the art of thinking from both talkative and quiet professors. (I prefer slow and careful professors and I'd rather hear from the professor than from classmates, but that's just me.)

I wonder whether those few students who have actually judged a professor to be a poor teacher have a narrow or false view of what a university professor is supposed to do or how she is supposed to do it. I wonder, that is, whether students who find their professor bad have misconceived either the professor's role or, more importantly, their own.

A student at a university aspires to be an intellectual. She is intent on acquiring the abilities of an intellectual—an ability to think through a matter deeply and from all angles, an ability to let evidence and argument, rather than desire or convention, guide her thinking, and an ability to live comfortably with doubt and uncertainty even as she strives to find and understand the truth. A professor at a university is a tool for the student to use in acquiring these abilities. The trick is to discern just what sort of tool the professor is.

If your professor is a hammer, then don't waste your time in her course trying to get some sawing done. Instead, find a nail and a board, and use that hammer to drive your nail. Of course, maybe you would rather saw than hammer. Fine. But your

professor is a hammer; trying to use her as a saw is just going to bring you frustration and grief. Anyway, you don't really know that much about hammering yet, at this stage of your career. Perhaps by doing some hammering you will come to want to do more. Most importantly, an intellectual needs to be able to handle a hammer as well as a saw. Your professor is your opportunity to acquire or to develop an important skill.

A serious student takes seriously her responsibility to her professor and to the course. That is, she attempts to discover just how best to use her professor, just what she can best—and what she cannot best—get from him in her pursuit of becoming a skilled intellectual. A serious student who isn't enjoying her professor will ask herself whether she has got a handle on what's going on in her course and on what her professor is trying to do before judging that her professor isn't very good.

One used to hear that there are no bad kids, just kids who are misunderstood. That's almost certainly false. To bring it closer to the truth, though, just substitute "professors" for "kids."