

How social cues undermine learning process

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What's a student to do? How is she to see through the mixed signals so that she can make the best of her time at university?

The central task of a university is to nourish intellectual life. Universities may choose to undertake additional tasks, certainly, but not at the expense of nourishing intellectual life. Otherwise, they cease to be universities, even should they keep the title.

Students understand this, even if only vaguely or implicitly. Most students value for their own sakes study and hard thinking, and are keen to deepen their understanding of the world and to exercise and develop their intellectual skills. They come to university aspiring to live and to grow as intellectuals.

For the student, the process of learning is marked by a series of small goals: understanding a difficult reading or lecture, formulating a question or criticism clearly, giving an insightful presentation, appreciating a sound interpretation or constructing one oneself, devising or executing a revealing experiment, writing a well-argued paper. These small goals become means to larger goals: a course successfully completed, a good term or year, a degree attained.

Each end is an accomplishment, especially given the risk of failure, and should be enjoyed as such. And yet the process itself is really where the action is. A student who cannot find a happy exhilaration in academic tasks is a stranger to intellectual life and a mere visitor to the university.

Sometimes, though, the larger goals become more important to the student than the process. That's when the student becomes concerned with grades rather than with learning. She starts to value the degree she seeks merely as a credential. Then the whole endeavour of education gets corrupted.

I'm speaking not just of plagiarism and other major forms of cheating, but also of a slew of attitudes and practices that undercut the process and, thereby, leave the student, even as she graduates, uneducated. Deliberately taking easy courses is one of these practices, as is dropping a course because you got a C, or trying to write to the professor's taste, or avoiding controversy.

Now, of course, students are concerned with jobs and careers and, maybe, with justice, peace, and changing the world. They are also concerned with maintaining their self image and with how they appear in their class-mates eyes. These concerns amount to strong pressures on students to forsake education, perhaps just a little bit here and there, in favour of high grades and credentials, or in favour of positioning themselves for what they want after graduating.

Professors and administrators (and their fellow students) can help students resist these pressures by sending the message that university is about learning and education, that the point is the process. They can help by honouring academic integrity and diligence in students.

And yet students receive the contrary message almost every day—from parents, from the government, from business and industry, from universities themselves, even. The contrary message is that what matters is what happens after you graduate. This is the message students get when they're told that education is the new currency, or that the final exam is known as the bottom line. They come to believe that university is only about preparing them for their career, or for the economy, or for citizenship, or for curing the world's ills. Then they conceive their task as a university student as simply that of acquiring the skills, attitudes, knowledge, or, worse, credentials to get on with the important stuff.

Maybe the first step in seeing through the mixed signals is making clear to oneself that becoming educated can be valued for its own sake. The second step is acknowledging that one does value it for its own sake.