

A Higher Degree Of Indifference

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I am planning the fall syllabus for my University of Maryland writing course, and my thoughts keep wandering back to an evening a few weeks ago, when I flipped on the news and watched, dumbstruck, as the announcer described this year's Woodstock: trucks in flames; destroyed ATM machines; flying rocks; police in riot gear; toppled scaffolding towers that held the very lights that had illuminated the show, which the kids had each forked out more than \$150 to see.

Before every semester, I ask myself: What will interest my students? How will I engage them in class? This year--particularly after watching that mindless destruction--I have found myself asking those questions with greater urgency. It is hard for me not to see those scenes from Woodstock '99 as another face of something larger--a growing detachment that I've noticed among many of my students.

In the argumentative writing course I'll be teaching this fall, students learn how to define, analyze, find causes for, and then propose solutions to a "problem" through a series of papers.

Following and then integrating cultural trends is critical to the course's success or failure--and a challenge I've always enjoyed. I try to stay abreast of issues such as falling high-school test scores, drug use on campuses and current events, not just to help students find ideas for papers, but also, simply, to engage them.

There's no question that the liveliest discussions and best writing begin with passion. When my class is working well, ideas, opinions and feelings are shared, dissected, fine-tuned, and both the students and I learn something new--about ourselves, about each other, about the world.

But something has shifted in the past couple of years.

Last semester, many of my students drifted in late, slumped into chairs, made excuses to leave early and surrounded my desk when papers were due, clearly distraught over the looming deadline. "I can't think of any problems," one told me. "Nothing interests me."

I copied essays about racial tensions in urban neighborhoods, heroin addiction among Houston youths, the rich versus the poor, living with AIDS. I handed them out. I showed them "problems."

The next day, I would ask simple, introductory questions. "What was the author's main point in the essay?" Blank stares were followed by uncomfortable silence.

I included a series of essays in my course packet from Harper's and the New Yorker that raised questions about whether the homeless are mentally ill, who should take care of them and the likely causes of and solutions to the problem. Long silences punctuated only

by the hum of the air conditioning system prompted one student to blurt out, "Do we really have to talk about the homeless again?"

Last fall, five students, all male, wanted to write about the "problem" of the instant replay in televised football games.

It's easy and tempting to adopt the fuddy-duddy approach, to explain this behavior in negative generalizations: They're lazy. They're stupid. They lack a moral conscience. Back in my college days . . . (fill in the blank).

But it is not that simple. There is more going on below the surface. The vast majority of my students seem ill-equipped to engage in academic discourse. For whatever reason, they don't know how to--or care to--express their views, particularly on heated social topics. In the Socratic sense, they have never learned how to argue properly.

Even when they have read the material I provide, they hide beneath their baseball caps. (Several elderly professors with whom I team-taught in Texas a few years ago required all boys to remove their caps in class.) When called upon, the students often slump in their chairs, shrug their shoulders and mumble, "I dunno." One of my Maryland colleagues, who has been teaching since 1992, said, "Often, I feel as if I am invading their space simply by asking them a question."

I find myself paying new heed to the outpourings about our society's declining civility, the increase in public profanity, the decline in politeness. Much of it has been blamed on our lifestyles: living in air-conditioned, closeted suburbia; interacting on the Internet; driving among the Beltway drones. Anonymity breeds rudeness. Much of it has been blamed on television, on the glamorization of crudeness on TV shows such as "Roseanne," "Beavis and Butt-head," and "South Park"--shows many of my students either grew up with or have come to as young adults.

I'd always considered that sort of analysis as the rantings of the right, but I have found myself increasingly disheartened and sometimes confused by the students' inability to express themselves in a socially traditional manner.

Whatever the reasons, students in my classes seem to crave anonymity. And when they do interact with each other or with me, they sometimes seem resentful and angry.

This behavior is not limited to my classes. "I think today's students are brighter and more capable electronically and far more worldly than we were in college," one colleague has told me.

"But they don't know how to 'grease the skids.' Previous generations, even up until the early '90s, somehow grasped the fact that they had to put on an act in public."

To help grease those skids, Maryland now offers a two-credit course called "University 101," recently made mandatory for all incoming freshmen in the College of Arts and

Humanities. The course teaches students how to "do the U," introducing them to the library, the writing center.

But perhaps more important, the class also focuses on etiquette--how to conduct oneself in a public setting.

"We teach them the importance of being on time, that you shouldn't chew gum, you can't get up and walk out of class early, don't bring drinks to class," explains Gabriele Strauch, associate dean of Arts and Humanities.

Strauch, who has been teaching since 1985 and has taught this course for the past two years, says she has noticed a shift beyond the usual challenge of overcoming a high-school mentality.

"Students today view themselves as consumers," she says. "They don't take 'no' for an answer. There is a strong sense of entitlement, that we owe them something, which can be both good and bad."

Another one of my colleagues says he also has noticed a hardening of attitudes and a preoccupation with the bottom line. "The students are less patient," he says. "They don't want to muddle through the speculative process. In college, I remember reveling in not being sure. Today, we want them to think through an issue, but they want results." Some students view the examination of ideas that I promote in my course as a waste of time.

I've tried to think through the reasons for this change. College enrollment has increased dramatically since the 1960s.

"I was the first in my family to ever go to college," says that same colleague. "When I first got to the university, I thought I had walked into a cathedral."

And he remembers treating it as such.

I stubbornly operate on the belief that the university may be the last place in society where people are free to explore, let loose, find meaning. It distresses and saddens me that my students are missing this luxury, this privilege to postpone the often narrow and results-oriented path of the working world, and allow themselves to breathe and think.

Perhaps this fall I will try to entice them with the topic of Woodstock '99. The topic of violence. Or anger. Or belligerence. Or civility.

Perhaps I will show them clippings from the event--lean, sweating, short-haired young men manhandling young women in the mosh pits, tossing burning debris into the evening sky.

Perhaps they will want to analyze that and propose a solution. Or perhaps it will not occur to them that there was anything happening that needs solving.

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