

In the Basement of the Ivory Tower

THE IDEA THAT A UNIVERSITY EDUCATION IS FOR EVERYONE IS A DESTRUCTIVE MYTH. AN INSTRUCTOR AT A “COLLEGE OF LAST RESORT” EXPLAINS WHY.

By Professor X

Illustration by Marcellus Hall

I work part-time in the evenings as an adjunct instructor of English. I teach two courses, Introduction to College Writing (English 101) and Introduction to College Literature (English 102), at a small private college and at a community college. The campuses are physically lovely—quiet havens of ornate stonework and columns, Gothic Revival archways, sweeping quads, and tidy Victorian scalloping. Students chat or examine their cell phones or study languidly under spreading trees. Balls click faintly against bats on the athletic fields. Inside the arts and humanities building, my students and I discuss Shakespeare, *Dubliners*, poetic rhythms, and Edward Said. We might seem, at first glance, to be enacting some sort of college idyll. We could be at Harvard. But this is not Harvard, and our classes are no idyll. Beneath the surface of this serene and scholarly mise-en-scène roil waters

of frustration and bad feeling, for these colleges teem with students who are in over their heads.

I work at colleges of last resort. For many of my students, college was not a goal they spent years preparing for, but a place they landed in. Those I teach don't come up in the debates about adolescent overachievers and cutthroat college admissions. Mine are the students whose applications show indifferent grades and have blank spaces where the extracurricular activities would go. They chose their college based not on the *U.S. News & World Report* rankings but on MapQuest; in their ideal academic geometry, college is located at a convenient spot between work and home. I can relate, for it was exactly this line of thinking that dictated where I sent my teaching résumé.

Some of their high-school transcripts are newly minted, others decades old. Many of my students have returned to college after some manner of life interregnum: a year or two of post-high-school dissolution, or a large swath of simple middle-class existence, 20 years of the demands of home and family. They work during the day and come to class in the evenings. I teach young men who must amass a certain number of credits before they can become police officers or state troopers, lower-echelon health-care workers who need

credits to qualify for raises, and municipal employees who require college-level certification to advance at work.

My students take English 101 and English 102 not because they want to but because they must. Both colleges I teach at require that all students, no matter what their majors or career objectives, pass these two courses. For many of my students, this is difficult. Some of the young guys, the police-officers-to-be, have wonderfully open faces across which play their every passing emotion, and when we start reading “Araby” or “Barn Burning,” their boredom quickly becomes apparent. They fidget; they prop their heads on their arms; they yawn and sometimes appear to grimace in pain, as though they had been tasered. Their eyes implore: *How could you do this to me?*

The goal of English 101 is to instruct students in the sort of expository writing that theoretically will be required across the curriculum. My students must venture the compare-and-contrast paper, the argument paper, the process-analysis paper (which explains how some action is performed—as a lab report might), and the dreaded research paper, complete with parenthetical citations and a listing of works cited, all in Modern Language Association format. In 102, we read short stories, poetry, and *Hamlet*, and we take several stabs at the

only writing more dreaded than the research paper: the absolutely despised Writing About Literature.

Class time passes in a flash—for me, anyway, if not always for my students. I love trying to convey to a class my passion for literature, or the immense satisfaction a writer can feel when he or she nails a point. When I am at my best, and the students are in an attentive mood—generally, early in the semester—the room crackles with positive energy. Even the cops-to-be feel driven to succeed in the class, to read and love the great books, to explore potent themes, to write well.

The bursting of our collective bubble comes quickly. A few weeks into the semester, the students must start actually writing papers, and I must start grading them. Despite my enthusiasm, despite their thoughtful nods of agreement and what I have interpreted as moments of clarity, it turns out that in many cases it has all come to naught.

Remarkably few of my students can do well in these classes. Students routinely fail; some fail multiple times, and some will never pass, because they cannot write a coherent sentence.

In each of my courses, we discuss thesis statements and topic sentences, the need for precision in vocabulary, why economy of language is desirable, what constitutes a

compelling subject. I explain, I give examples, I cheerlead, I cajole, but each evening, when the class is over and I come down from my teaching high, I inevitably lose faith in the task, as I'm sure my students do. I envision the lot of us driving home, solitary scholars in our cars, growing sadder by the mile.

Our textbook boils effective writing down to a series of steps. It devotes pages and pages to the composition of a compare-and-contrast essay, with lots of examples and tips and checklists. "Develop a plan of organization and stick to it," the text chirrups not so helpfully. Of course any student who can, does, and does so automatically, without the textbook's directive. For others, this seems an impossible task. Over the course of 15 weeks, some of my best writers improve a little. Sometimes my worst writers improve too, though they rarely, if ever, approach base-level competence.

How I envy professors in other disciplines! How appealing seems the straightforwardness of their task! *These are the properties of a cell membrane, kid. Memorize 'em, and be ready to spit 'em back at me.* The biology teacher also enjoys the psychic ease of grading multiple-choice tests. Answers are right or wrong. The grades cannot be questioned. Quantifying the value of a piece of writing, however, is intensely subjective, and English teachers are

burdened with discretion. (My students seem to believe that my discretion is limitless. Some of them come to me at the conclusion of a course and matter-of-factly ask that I change a failing grade because they need to graduate this semester or because they worked really hard in the class or because they need to pass in order to receive tuition reimbursement from their employer.)

I wonder, sometimes, at the conclusion of a course, when I fail nine out of 15 students, whether the college will send me a note either (1) informing me of a serious bottleneck in the march toward commencement and demanding that I pass more students, or (2) commending me on my fiscal ingenuity—my high failure rate forces students to pay for classes two or three times over.

What actually happens is that nothing happens. I feel no pressure from the colleges in either direction. My department chairpersons, on those rare occasions when I see them, are friendly, even warm. They don't mention all those students who have failed my courses, and I don't bring them up. There seems, as is often the case in colleges, to be a huge gulf between academia and reality. No one is thinking about the larger implications, let alone the morality, of admitting so many students to classes they cannot possibly pass. The colleges and the students and I are bobbing up and down in a

great wave of societal forces—social optimism on a large scale, the sense of college as both a universal right and a need, financial necessity on the part of the colleges and the students alike, the desire to maintain high academic standards while admitting marginal students—that have coalesced into a mini-tsunami of difficulty. No one has drawn up the flowchart and seen that, although more-widespread college admission is a bonanza for the colleges and nice for the students and makes the entire United States of America feel rather pleased with itself, there is one point of irreconcilable conflict in the system, and that is the moment when the adjunct instructor, who by the nature of his job teaches the worst students, must ink the *F* on that first writing assignment.

Recently, I gave a student a failing grade on her research paper. She was a woman in her 40s; I will call her Ms. L. She looked at her paper, and my comments, and the grade. “I can’t believe it,” she said softly. “I was so proud of myself for having written a college paper.”

From the beginning of our association vis-à-vis the research paper, I knew that there would be trouble with Ms. L.

When I give out this assignment, I usually bring the class to the college library for a lesson on Internet-based research. I

ask them about their computer skills, and some say they have none, fessing up to being computer illiterate and saying, timorously, how hopeless they are at that sort of thing. It often turns out, though, that many of them have at least sent and received e-mail and Googled their neighbors, and it doesn't take me long to demonstrate how to search for journal articles in such databases as Academic Search Premier and JSTOR.

Ms. L., it was clear to me, had never been on the Internet. She quite possibly had never sat in front of a computer. The concept of a link was news to her. She didn't know that if something was blue and underlined, you could click on it. She was preserved in the amber of 1990, struggling with the basic syntax of the World Wide Web. She peered intently at the screen and chewed a fingernail. She was flummoxed.

I had responsibilities to the rest of my students, so only when the class ended could I sit with her and work on some of the basics. It didn't go well. She wasn't absorbing anything. The wall had gone up, the wall known to every teacher at every level: the wall of defeat and hopelessness and humiliation, the wall that is an impenetrable barrier to learning. She wasn't hearing a word I said.

“You might want to get some extra help,” I told her. “You can schedule a private session with the librarian.”

“I’ll get it,” she said. “I just need a little time.”

“You have some computer-skills deficits,” I told her. “You should address them as soon as you can.” I don’t have cause to use much educational jargon, but *deficits* has often come in handy. It conveys the seriousness of the situation, the student’s jaw-dropping lack of ability, without being judgmental. I tried to jostle her along. “You should schedule that appointment right now. The librarian is at the desk. ”

“I realize I have a lot of work to do,” she said.

Our dialogue had turned oblique, as though we now inhabited a Pinter play.

The research-paper assignment is meant to teach the fundamental mechanics of the thing: how to find sources, summarize or quote them, and cite them, all the while not plagiarizing. Students must develop a strong thesis, not just write what is called a “passive report,” the sort of thing one knocks out in fifth grade on Thomas Edison. This time around, the students were to elucidate the positions of scholars on two sides of a historical controversy. Why did Truman remove MacArthur? Did the United States covertly support the construction of the Berlin Wall? What really

happened in the Gulf of Tonkin? Their job in the paper, as I explained it, was to take my arm and introduce me as a stranger to scholars A, B, and C, who stood on one side of the issue, and to scholars D, E, and F, who were firmly on the other—as though they were hosting a party.

A future state trooper snorted. “That’s some dull party,” he said.

At our next meeting after class in the library, Ms. L. asked me whether she could do her paper on abortion. What exactly, I asked, was the historical controversy? Well, she replied, whether it should be allowed. She was stuck, I realized, in the well-worn groove of assignments she had done in high school. I told her that I thought the abortion question was more of an ethical dilemma than a historical controversy.

“I’ll have to figure it all out,” she said.

She switched her topic a half-dozen times; perhaps it would be fairer to say that she never really came up with one. I wondered whether I should just give her one, then decided against it. Devising a topic was part of the assignment.

“What about gun control?” she asked.

I sighed. You could write, I told her, about a particular piece of firearms-related legislation. Historians might disagree, I said, about certain aspects of the bill's drafting. Remember, though, the paper must be grounded in history. It could not be a discussion of the pros and cons of gun control.

"All right," she said softly.

Needless to say, the paper she turned in was a discussion of the pros and cons of gun control. At least, I think that was the subject. There was no real thesis. The paper often lapsed into incoherence. Sentences broke off in the middle of a line and resumed on the next one, with the first word inappropriately capitalized. There was some wavering between single- and double-spacing. She did quote articles, but cited only databases—where were the journals themselves? The paper was also too short: a bad job, and such small portions.

"I can't believe it," she said when she received her *F*. "I was so proud of myself for having written a college paper."

She most certainly hadn't written a college paper, and she was a long way from doing so. Yet there she was in college, paying lots of tuition for the privilege of pursuing a degree, which she very likely needed to advance at work. Her deficits don't make her a bad person or even unintelligent or

unusual. Many people cannot write a research paper, and few have to do so in their workaday life. But let's be frank: she wasn't working at anything resembling a college level.

I gave Ms. L. the *F* and slept poorly that night. Some of the failing grades I issue gnaw at me more than others. In my ears rang her plaintive words, so emblematic of the tough spot in which we both now found ourselves. Ms. L. had done everything that American culture asked of her. She had gone back to school to better herself, and she expected to be rewarded for it, not slapped down. She had failed not, as some students do, by being absent too often or by blowing off assignments. She simply was not qualified for college. *What exactly*, I wondered, *was I grading?* I thought briefly of passing Ms. L., of slipping her the old gentlewoman's C-minus. But I couldn't do it. It wouldn't be fair to the other students. By passing Ms. L., I would be eroding the standards of the school for which I worked. Besides, I nurse a healthy ration of paranoia. What if she were a plant from *The New York Times* doing a story on the declining standards of the nation's colleges? In my mind's eye, the front page of a newspaper spun madly, as in old movies, coming to rest to reveal a damning headline:

THIS IS A C?

Illiterate Mess Garners 'Average' Grade

Adjunct Says Student 'Needed' to Pass, 'Tried Hard'

No, I would adhere to academic standards, and keep myself off the front page.

We think of college professors as being profoundly indifferent to the grades they hand out. My own professors were fairly haughty and aloof, showing little concern for the petty worries, grades in particular, of their students. There was an enormous distance between students and professors. The full-time, tenured professors at the colleges where I teach may likewise feel comfortably separated from those whom they instruct. Their students, the ones who attend class during daylight hours, tend to be younger than mine. Many of them are in school on their parents' dime. Professors can fail these young people with emotional impunity because many such failures are the students' own fault: too much time spent texting, too little time with the textbooks.

But my students and I are of a piece. I could not be aloof, even if I wanted to be. Our presence together in these evening classes is evidence that we all have screwed up. I'm working a second job; they're trying desperately to get to a

place where they don't have to. All any of us wants is a free evening. Many of my students are in the vicinity of my own age. Whatever our chronological ages, we are all adults, by which I mean thoroughly saddled with children and mortgages and sputtering careers. We all show up for class exhausted from working our full-time jobs. We carry knapsacks and briefcases overspilling with the contents of our hectic lives. We smell of the food we have eaten that day, and of the food we carry with us for the evening. We reek of coffee and tuna oil. The rooms in which we study have been used all day, and are filthy. Candy wrappers litter the aisles. We pile our trash daintily atop filled garbage cans.

During breaks, my students scatter to various corners and niches of the building, whip out their cell phones, and try to maintain a home life. Burdened with their own assignments, they gamely try to stay on top of their children's. *Which problems do you have to do? ... That's not too many. Finish that and then do the spelling ... No, you can't watch Grey's Anatomy.*

Adult education, nontraditional education, education for returning students—whatever you want to call it—is a substantial profit center for many colleges. Like factory owners, school administrators are delighted with this idea of mounting a second shift of learning in their classrooms, in

the evenings, when the full-time students are busy with such regular extracurricular pursuits of higher education as reading Facebook and playing beer pong. If colleges could find a way to mount a third, graveyard shift, as Henry Ford's Willow Run did at the height of the Second World War, I believe that they would.

There is a sense that the American workforce needs to be more professional at every level. Many jobs that never before required college now call for at least some post-secondary course work. School custodians, those who run the boilers and spread synthetic sawdust on vomit, may not need college—but the people who supervise them, who decide which brand of synthetic sawdust to procure, probably do. There is a sense that our bank tellers should be college educated, and so should our medical-billing techs, and our child-welfare officers, and our sheriffs and federal marshals. We want the police officer who stops the car with the broken taillight to have a nodding acquaintance with great literature. And when all is said and done, my personal economic interest in booming college enrollments aside, I don't think that's such a boneheaded idea. Reading literature at the college level is a route to spacious thinking, to an acquaintance with certain profound ideas, that is of value to anyone. Will having read *Invisible Man* make a police

officer less likely to indulge in racial profiling? Will a familiarity with Steinbeck make him more sympathetic to the plight of the poor, so that he might understand the lives of those who simply *cannot* get their taillights fixed? Will it benefit the correctional officer to have read *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*? The health-care worker *Arrowsmith*? Should the child-welfare officer read Plath's "Daddy"? Such one-to-one correspondences probably don't hold. But although I may be biased, being an English instructor and all, I can't shake the sense that reading literature is informative and broadening and ultimately good for you. If I should fall ill, I suppose I would rather the hospital billing staff had read *The Pickwick Papers*, particularly the parts set in debtors' prison.

America, ever-idealistic, seems wary of the vocational-education track. We are not comfortable limiting anyone's options. Telling someone that college is not for him seems harsh and classist and British, as though we were sentencing him to a life in the coal mines. I sympathize with this stance; I subscribe to the American ideal. Unfortunately, it is with me and my red pen that that ideal crashes and burns.

Sending everyone under the sun to college is a noble initiative. Academia is all for it, naturally. Industry is all for it; some companies even help with tuition costs. Government

is all for it; the truly needy have lots of opportunities for financial aid. The media applauds it—try to imagine someone speaking out against the idea. To oppose such a scheme of inclusion would be positively churlish. But one piece of the puzzle hasn't been figured into the equation, to use the sort of phrase I encounter in the papers submitted by my English 101 students. The zeitgeist of academic possibility is a great inverted pyramid, and its rather sharp point is poking, uncomfortably, a spot just about midway between my shoulder blades.

For I, who teach these low-level, must-pass, no-multiple-choice-test classes, am the one who ultimately delivers the news to those unfit for college: that they lack the most-basic skills and have no sense of the volume of work required; that they are in some cases barely literate; that they are so bereft of schemata, so dispossessed of contexts in which to place newly acquired knowledge, that every bit of information simply raises more questions. They are not ready for high school, some of them, much less for college.

I am the man who has to lower the hammer.

We may look mild-mannered, we adjunct instructors, but we are academic button men. I roam the halls of academe like a

modern Coriolanus bearing sword and grade book, “a thing of blood, whose every motion / Was timed with dying cries.”

I knew that Ms. L.’s paper would fail. I knew it that first night in the library. But I couldn’t tell her that she wasn’t ready for an introductory English class. I wouldn’t be saving her from the humiliation of defeat by a class she simply couldn’t handle. I’d be a sexist, ageist, intellectual snob.

In her own mind, Ms. L. had triumphed over adversity. In her own mind, she was a feel-good segment on Oprah. Everyone wants to triumph. But not everyone can—in fact, most can’t. If they could, it wouldn’t be any kind of a triumph at all. Never would I want to cheapen the accomplishments of those who really have conquered college, who were able to get past their deficits and earn a diploma, maybe even climbing onto the college honor roll. That is truly something.

One of the things I try to do on the first night of English 102 is relate the literary techniques we will study to novels that the students have already read. I try to find books familiar to everyone. This has so far proven impossible. My students don’t read much, as a rule, and though I think of them monolithically, they don’t really share a culture. *To Kill a Mockingbird*? Nope. (And I thought everyone had read

that!) *Animal Farm*? No. If they have read it, they don't remember it. *The Outsiders*? *The Chocolate War*? No and no. *Charlotte's Web*? You'd think so, but no. So then I expand the exercise to general works of narrative art, meaning movies, but that doesn't work much better. Oddly, there are no movies that they all have seen—well, except for one. They've all seen *The Wizard of Oz*. Some have caught it multiple times. So we work with the old warhorse of a *quest narrative*. The farmhands' early conversation illustrates *foreshadowing*. The witch melts at the *climax*. *Theme*? Hands fly up. Everybody knows that one—perhaps all too well. Dorothy learns that she can do anything she puts her mind to and that all the tools she needs to succeed are already within her. I skip the *denouement*: the intellectually ambitious scarecrow proudly mangles the Pythagorean theorem and is awarded a questionable diploma in a dreamland far removed from reality. That's art holding up a mirror all too closely to our own poignant scholarly endeavors.