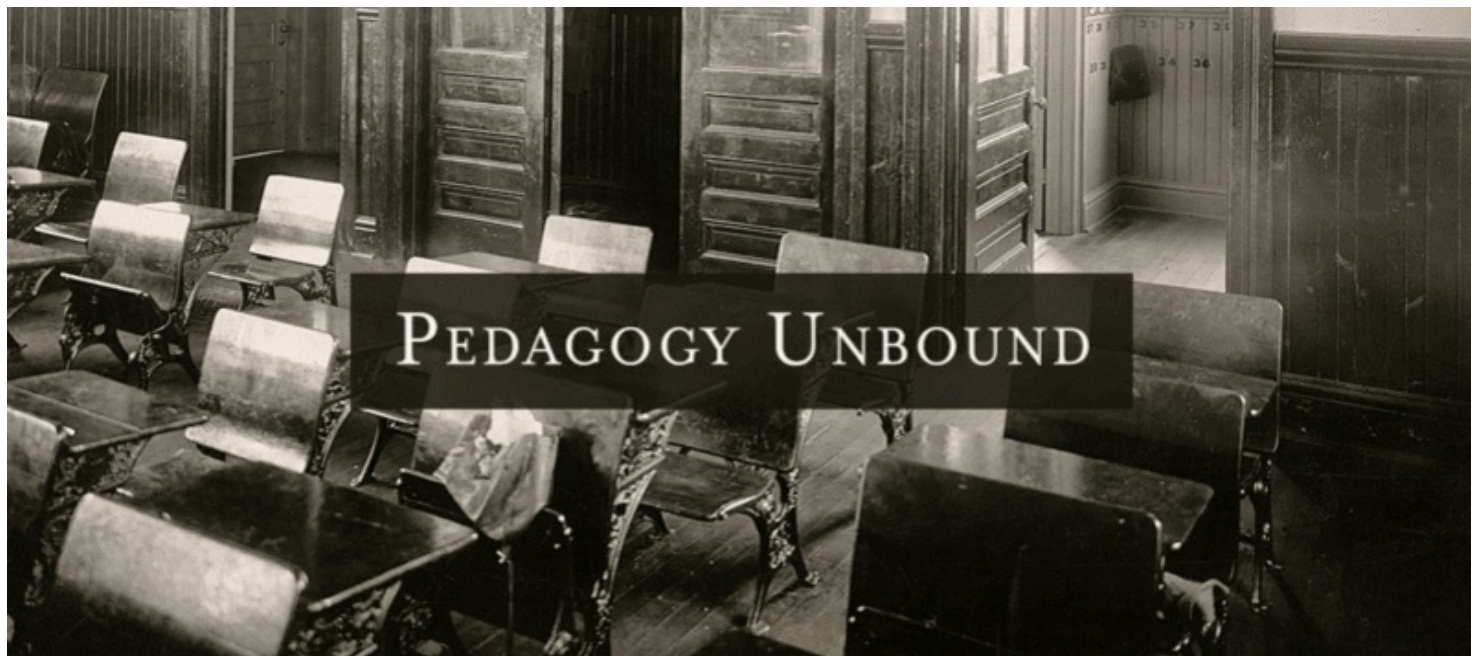


Sometimes Their Gripe is Legit

chroniclevitae.com/news/1828-sometimes-their-gripe-is-legit



June 14, 2017

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Halfway through this past semester, I sent an email to a student asking him, among other things, about his poor attendance and participation in my course. In response, after some earnest apologies and promises to do better, the student wrote: “My expectation for this class was to learn how to write and read at a college level. But so often, I feel like I am taking a gender issues class and not a writing and reading course — which frustrates me.”

The class in question is called “Writing and Reading,” and is indeed focused on helping students become “college level” writers and readers. But of course, to practice reading skills you actually need to read something. So I designed a course that focuses on feminism and related issues. About half of our readings have something to do with feminism, gender, or sexuality (the other half are readings about the writing process).

To what extent are we bound by our students' expectations for the course? When he signed up for a course called “Writing and Reading,” wasn't my student right to expect that it would only be about those two skills? Have I, in a sense, tricked my students by focusing on feminism in our readings and discussions when there's nothing about feminism in the advertised course description? We may not want to think of our students as customers, but they *are* paying for their courses. Shouldn't they have some control over their choices?

Those questions don't lend themselves to easy answers. And although I was slightly annoyed by the complaint — given that he had not, up to that point, shown himself to be the most conscientious student — I didn't think I should disregard it, either.

Reading about feminism, and discussing the issues in class, is a great way for students to develop and practice the high-level reading skills they will need going forward. Feminism, itself a practice of critical reading, offers a model of questioning the world that I think benefits students immensely. But it's up to me to sell this approach to my students.

[I've written before](#) about the benefits of leaving aspects of course design up to students. Yet as the professor, I take

for granted that I have a certain amount of freedom to teach my courses in the ways I see fit. My training, expertise, and position of authority all qualify me to set the conditions of a course, and to shape the reading list, assignments, and terms of assessment. But we as faculty should admit that this freedom comes at a price.

The authority to unilaterally decide on how we teach our classes, I would argue, comes with a responsibility to explain and justify those methods to our students. I view it as an ethical necessity — I'm going to take up a substantial amount of their time, ask for a substantial amount of their effort, and assess them on my terms. At the very least, I should have good reasons for doing what I'm doing. That's also a pedagogical necessity. Relying on "because I said so" doesn't get you very far when you're trying to convince students to come on board with you.

In my "Writing and Reading" class, I spend a lot of time explaining why we do the things we do, and that starts on the first day. In walking students through the syllabus, I am careful to discuss why we will read the particular texts listed, what I hope students will gain from the experience, and how I came to that conclusion. Although we inevitably talk about the content of the readings, I often try to steer the discussion to the aspects of the readings they should pay attention to as writers: the rhetorical moves, the way they are constructed, the ways a reading differs in approach from a previous piece.

All of that said, when I received the email complaining about the focus on feminism, I definitely thought about what might have gone wrong. Did I work hard enough to explain to students the purpose of my approach? Had I let the class veer off course? Was our focus on feminism turning the class into a gender-studies course?

Those questions were on my mind again more recently because I've been thinking about course evaluations. My previous column, in which I argued that [student evaluations are far from worthless](#), provoked some predictable ire in the comments section. One poster noted: "The very idea that an 18-year-old knows enough about my subject to evaluate my teaching of that subject is ludicrous." Another claimed that "student comments are largely useless" and "usually never rise above whiny complaining — which is what you would expect from 18-year-olds."

Maybe I should have adopted that same attitude in responding to my student — dismissed his complaint out of hand because he can't possibly understand my methods.

I don't think so. I'm convinced we must listen to our students. If our mission is to help them develop, then the students themselves have to be an important source of feedback. They may not be completely reliable judges of their own learning, but clearly they know how they're experiencing something better than anyone else.

Listening to our students does *not* mean we have to give equal credence to every comment or gripe from every student. Not only are students sometimes unreliable judges of their own learning, there are many times when the fault for their lack of learning lies with them — not with us. But we have an obligation to keep our ears open to student concerns nonetheless, whether they come to us in person, via email, or anonymously, through an evaluation form.

I'm still not sure how much substance was behind my student's complaint. Maybe he was just finding an excuse for his own poor performance. But his comment got me thinking about my practices in a way that can only be helpful to my teaching. It's made me reconsider how I approach the "Writing and Reading" course, and recommit myself to the values of openness and honesty in the classroom.

Certainly we can choose to react defensively to a student's complaint, to discredit the source, to convince ourselves that we always know better. But we don't have to.