

'Tis the Season of Dead Grandmothers

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November 2, 2016

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Original Image: The Wizard of Oz (1939)

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If you spend any time listening to other teachers (particularly online, where complaining is almost an art form), you'll soon hear about [an epidemic of grandparents dying in the last two months of the semester](#), when big assignments are due and final exams start to get closer. Students will do anything to take advantage of us, the chorus sings, and the only defense is a strict adherence to the rules: Sorry, kid, but the syllabus clearly says "no extensions."

That attitude seems even more desirable when you read some of the criticisms of so-called "permissive-indulgent" instructors. Such teachers "fear doing anything that might create stress for students, stifle their personal growth, or hurt their self-esteem," [writes psychologist Douglas Bernstein](#). They coddle students, being careful not to be too harsh for fear of discouraging them. Even worse, those faculty "are eager to help students succeed, even if it means lowering standards for success."

Such writing takes as its model established research on parenting styles and translates it to the classroom. Those parenting styles — the research builds on [work done by Diana Baumrind](#) — typically consider two parameters: how involved the parent is and how demanding the parent is. So there are "authoritarian" parents, who aren't very involved in their kids' lives but nonetheless enforce rules like a drill sergeant, and "permissive-neglectful" parents, who are neither involved nor rule-bound. Neither type makes for very good parenting. Another model is the "authoritative" parent — one who is both responsive and demanding. And then there is the "permissive-indulgent" parent, who is responsive to a child's needs, but not very strict. The latter is the modern-day stereotype of the

coddling parent afraid to let children experience anything that might negatively impact their fragile self-esteem. This parent, [according to Baumrind](#), “presents herself to the child as a resource for him to use as he wishes, not as an active agent responsible for shaping or altering his ongoing or future behavior.”

It’s the specter of the permissive-indulgent parent that prompts calls for instructors to be strict and unfeeling in their enforcement of classroom policies. Critics fear the alternative, which, as Bernstein writes, is the sort of teacher who sees students “as children who need help and support to come to class, do their reading, and get good grades.”

But aside from that obvious straw-man argument — who would disagree that college instructors shouldn’t treat their students like young children? — I think it’s worth questioning the assumption that strict discipline is the same thing as demanding a lot from our students.

My point: It’s possible to be a demanding professor without being an officious one. It’s possible to care about your students and make allowances for them without fear that they’ll walk all over you. It is precisely because our students are not young children that we can be lenient sometimes, allowing extensions and make-ups on a case-by-case basis, showing them that we care more about their learning than about whether they checked all the boxes.

There are those who say we as faculty should treat our students like adults, and when they mess up they should face the consequences. I understand that argument. It makes sense, and you are certainly within your rights to clearly state your course policies on your syllabus and then expect students to follow them. But when complicating events inevitably occur — illnesses, crises, those dying grandmothers — you do have a choice.

To me, when we choose to be strict, no exceptions, we signal to students that adherence to the rules is more important than any other learning goal we have for them.

And we encourage “[satisficing](#)” — the pursuit of “good enough” at the expense of, well, something better. When our rules and policies appear to be so important, we encourage students to strive only to satisfy our criteria, rather than pursue their own goals. Remember: Extrinsic motivation [can actually be harmful to long-term learning](#). Students who do things just because the teacher made them do it are less likely to retain what they learn for the long haul.

There’s also a sense in which an emphasis on rules and discipline is itself a form of coddling. By granting so much importance to a set of teacher-imposed policies, you signal to your students that they are children who can’t be trusted to figure it out for themselves.

Better, I think, to be flexible with the rules, and strive to create a learning community where you don’t have to worry about students taking advantage of you. It helps to create [a cohesive and supportive community](#) in your classroom. When students come to know and trust each other, benign social pressure from peers can replace the threat of discipline from above in ensuring everyone follows the rules.

Here’s an example. Following the lead of [University of British Columbia professors Simon Bates and Alison Lister](#), I now allow my students to come up with a technology policy themselves. I bring up a number of possible concerns, but otherwise let students decide which devices can be used in class, whether phones should be put away or just kept silent, whether students can listen to music when working on class work, etc.

So far, I’ve found, students are much more likely to follow a policy they came up with themselves than when I impose my own. I have much less of a problem with texting in class now, and I don’t need to police the room, either.

Let’s take a moment to ask ourselves about the hypothetical student with the fictional dead grandmother: What have we done to make this student think that lying to get an extension is preferable to doing the work on time?

Students need to be responsible for their actions, certainly, but instructors need to be responsible for creating an environment that encourages students to learn. We should strive to create courses in which students want to do the work on time — because we’ve successfully made the case that doing the work on time will benefit them. We should

also look to make students trust us enough that if tragedy does strike — sometimes family members do die, you know — they feel comfortable coming to us and explaining why they need some extra time. In my classroom at least, there are more important lessons to learn than the value of following the rules.