

# The Kids Are Still Alright

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*Image: Kevin Van Aelst*

What annoys me about the teaching profession, more than anything else, is the constant grouching about students. A certain slice of the faculty seems to enjoy complaining about how bad their students are — especially, of course, today's students, who are clearly worse than any other generation in history. I've been hearing the same gripe for my entire 33 years of college teaching.

Mostly, the kvetching is limited to impromptu hallway conversations — "You won't believe what one of my students said/did/wrote today!" Now and then, the complaints pop up in committee meetings, and occasionally lead to an all-out gripe-fest. As I listen to the gripers, I find myself wondering: "Why did you go into this profession, and stay in it so long, if you have such a low opinion of students?"

If all the doomsday predictions were true — if students' writing were actually getting worse year after year — then by now they would have reverted to scratching crude glyphs in the dirt with sticks. In reality, my students' writing actually seems to have improved slightly over the past 10 years, perhaps as a result of all the emphasis that public schools place on writing these days, along with advances in technology that make simple spelling and grammatical errors almost a thing of the past.

Far too many faculty members, however, persist in complaining (loudly) that students today "aren't what they used to be." Is that simply generational bias? The firm conviction that the world was a better place when we were young? I think so. Perhaps what we fail to consider is that the world seemed to be a better place when we were young *because* we were young. Our health was good, we hadn't yet developed that paunch or cellulite, hadn't started losing our hair. The possibilities that life offered seemed limitless.

As far as I can tell, after more than three decades of teaching, students haven't really changed all that much. Sure, the technology is more advanced, and it can enable bad behavior as well as good: Just as it's easier and quicker to type that paper or locate that source, it's also easier to find ways not to pay attention in class.

But I don't know that the inclination not to pay attention is any greater today than it ever was. If anything, back in my day, we were remarkably creative in finding ways to goof off. We didn't have Facebook, Snapchat, or YouTube at our fingertips; we were stuck with surreptitiously playing hangman, reading *Lord of the Rings* (guilty), or doing our math homework.

That's not to excuse bad behavior (theirs or mine), but to suggest that perhaps we should be a bit more patient with our students and stop interpreting their occasional inattention as indicative of deep character flaws or the demise of civilization.

If I'm right — if students haven't really changed over the last several generations — then what *has* changed? Why, we have. As middle-aged faculty members, we've become more cynical, less idealistic, grouchier. We've come to have such low expectations of students — because, you know, they're really bad and getting worse every year — that they sometimes oblige us by living down to those expectations.

Once we recognize that we're a big part of the problem, how can we turn things around? How can we adjust our own attitudes while at the same time doing a better job for our students? Here are some suggestions.

Look for the good. I maintain that, far from being worse than previous generations, today's college students are actually among the best and brightest young people I've ever taught. They're remarkably versatile, caring, adventurous, open minded, and funny. Those qualities can make them a joy to be around, if we'll simply stop obsessing about their perceived failings and focus on the positive.

One of my favorite things about the teaching profession is that being around young people all these years has helped to keep me young — or at least young at heart.

Ignore the negative hype. Maybe we tend to focus on the negative because we are inundated with information about what slackers today's kids are, how poor their interpersonal skills are (because of social media, you know), and how little they know about important matters.

Some of those complaints are true, of course — but they've been true of every generation of young people, to one degree or another. There were plenty of times my parents worried about me being a slacker, and plenty of times my teachers shook their heads in dismay over my disgraceful ignorance. Are today's young people really any worse than previous generations? Worse than we were, at their age? I think if we're honest, we'd have to say no.

Consider the pressure they're under. One difference I can see between today's college students and my generation is that, if anything, kids today are under much more pressure than we were.

They're expected to know, at an earlier age, what they intend to do with their life — to choose a major, land an internship, find the perfect job. At the same time, grade inflation has made it far more difficult to get into a good college, or a good degree program, than it used to be. I felt pretty good about getting into a decent graduate program with a 3.85 GPA. My son, with a 3.97, was concerned that he might not get into his university's business school (thankfully, he did).

And so, while we as faculty members have an obligation to hold students' feet to the fire academically speaking, perhaps we shouldn't add to that the extra pressure of unrealistic expectations based on flawed memories of how wonderful things used to be.

Expect excellence. There's nothing wrong with holding students to reasonable academic and professional standards or having high expectations in terms of their behavior and performance. In fact, that's one of the very best things we can do for our students. To paraphrase Thoreau, "Let every professor make known what kind of students would command his or her respect, and that will be one step toward obtaining them."

We just have to make sure we're doing it for the right reasons and not merely because we're annoyed at them or

feeling "salty" (as the kids say) because our life isn't quite going the way we imagined when we were their age. High expectations should be a natural result of our high regard for students and our deeply held belief in their potential — not a means of browbeating them or extracting penance.

Forgive them for being young. I'm convinced that the main reason for generational bias is that, as older people, we're naturally envious of the young. Whoever said "youth is wasted on the young" was probably not very young at the time.

It's true, though: We do tend to look at 20-year-olds — with their energy, their enthusiasm (for, we sometimes think, the wrong things), their natural optimism about the future — and wish we still possessed those qualities, combined with the benefit of our life experience: "Ah, if I'd only known then what I know now." It can be difficult not to feel a tiny bit resentful that their lives are mostly still ahead of them, while much of ours are behind us.

And so we sometimes retaliate by creating frankly ridiculous rules and expectations. Because "that's the way the world works," and it's our job (or so we think) to teach students those hard life lessons. Or else we mistake our own curmudgeonly outlook for reality, failing to recognize that cynicism as a perception is just as skewed as callowness.

Embrace the differences — and the similarities. Ultimately, the key to relating effectively to young people is to acknowledge your common humanity. Yes, there are significant differences between you and them — from tastes in music to fashion choices to (perhaps) political leanings. No, they've never seen some of the TV shows you grew up on or watched some of your favorite movies or read nearly as many books.

But those are just surface differences. Far more important is the fact that you and your students share many things in common. Like you, they just want to be happy. They want to be successful. They want to share their lives with family and friends. In addition to teaching them about your subject matter, you can also set a great example of how a well-adjusted adult behaves, both professionally and personally. They can learn a lot from you, and not just about academics.

And you, in turn, can learn a lot from them. I admit: It does make me feel young(er), as I read their papers and listen to students, to learn about their slang, their music, their fashion — even if I don't embrace much of it. This has become especially poignant for me since my youngest went off to college last year. I no longer have teenagers at home to keep me "hip" — or as hip as I'm likely to be, anyway. I now have to rely on my students for that.

More important, though, as a teacher, I learn from them every day — about what works and doesn't work in a college classroom, about what has and hasn't changed in society, about things that had never occurred to me, and wouldn't, left to my own middle-aged devices. Rarely a day goes by when I don't find myself saying to a student, during a class discussion, "That's a really good point. I'd never quite thought of it that way."

Best of all, I find myself being reminded by young people every day that life is good and beautiful and exciting and worth living. That is a debt I can never fully repay. But I think I know where to start: by not trashing them in the hallway for my own or my colleagues' amusement.