


The Hardest Students to Teach

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Some students are more challenging to teach than others. They require pedagogical skills of a different and higher order. Sometimes it's easier to sigh and just turn away. And that's legitimate in the sense that students (indeed, people of all sorts) have to figure things out for themselves. But many of us were such "works in progress" when we were in college, and a teacher (or several of them) ended up being instrumental in moving us in more productive directions. It's for that reason I'd like us to consider some of these challenging students, each one a unique individual, but many displaying the same counterproductive attitudes and actions. Descriptions of these students come much more easily than solutions to what's holding them back. Said more directly, my goal here is to start this conversation and ask for your wisdom, insights, and experiences with students who are tough to teach.

The Student Who's Cruising – The one who is just going through the motions, doing coursework with the least amount of effort. Often these students are polite, sometimes even apologetic, but they're fundamentally uninterested in learning what's being taught in the course, and one strongly suspects they're not interested in any of their courses. Can personal attention make a

difference? Can showing you care inspire even a modicum of motivation? What about choice? *"Is there a way you could do this assignment that would make it more interesting?"* What about challenge? *"Study hard for one exam—put your brain to the test so you know what it can accomplish."* What about confrontation, constructively framed, but still in the student's face?



“Why isn’t coursework part of your agenda in college?”

The Entitled Student – The one with the consumer orientation to education. The credential is all this student wants—that ticket to the good job, that’s what matters. Courses outside the major or program are a waste of time and should be treated as such. These students shop for the “easy” courses, and if the prof doesn’t deliver what’s needed, course evaluations are used to get even. What about a focus on the skills needed in every profession—listening, teamwork, critical thinking, problem-solving—that can be learned in any college course? What does paying for college entitle students to? Anything beyond the opportunity to learn?

The Student Who Can’t Do It – The one who can’t write, can’t do math, can’t sing, just doesn’t have the ability and believes that without the “gift” there’s not much point in trying. These are students with detailed stories of defeat, a litany of experiences all adding to the “can’t do it” conclusion. Does providing these students with a different narrative work? Does having a teacher who believes in you can make a difference? Can assignments be designed so that students discover what they *can* do? Will demonstrations of progress help convince them?

The Student Who Cheats – Lots of students cheat, so even if you aren’t sure about the actions of any given student, you can be sure there are those in your course who do. They feel grade pressure and the need to please parents. They justify their actions with the “everybody does it” argument. They don’t think cheating hurts them, particularly if they’ve decided the course content is irrelevant. But cheating stunts the growth of personal integrity, and it’s that conversation we should be having with students.

The Student Who Only Cares About the Grade – These are the students you can get to do anything for a point or two. They frequently struggle to separate themselves from how they scored on a test, so any grade implicates their worth as a human being. And they happily accept a good grade whether or not there’s any learning associated with it. Could we be talking more about learning and less about grades? Are there ways to show that learning matters more than grades?

Two points in summary: Maybe the best we can offer these challenging students is our vision of their potential, unclouded by their behaviors. And we may never know that we made a difference. Writer T. C. Boyle had three college teachers who were instrumental in his discovery that he could write. Of one of them, he observes, “He saw something in me—in my writing and my intelligence—and he tried to promote and encourage it.” Boyle says of this teacher who became his mentor, “I hurt him. I didn’t attend classes. I hung with the losers.” But that teacher’s vision caused Boyle to move in a new direction. He started to read books.

What students do you find difficult to teach, and how can we better reach them?