

They're Just Not That into You

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OKAY, OKAY, I ADMIT IT: I'M A HOTTIE. And I agree with whoever said that my taste in shoes is pretty impressive (I'd say impeccable, but I don't want to niggle). However, by way of an open-letter response to the student who complained that I wasn't available to his/her satisfaction: just because I wasn't in my office the one time you bothered to come by doesn't mean I'm inattentive to students. You have to understand, we profs are busy people! We don't sit around in our offices from the end of one class until the beginning of the next. No, we teach other courses, and we're obliged to attend meetings. Our e-mail is suffocating. We supervise graduate students, and we live for the rare moments when we can slink off to the library, pursue our own research interests, and—hello? Hello?? Hello???

If rants like this have no student audience on the other end, it's only fitting, since the main problem with instructors reading RateMyProfessors is one of address. Put bluntly, RMP is not written for us to read. I'm not even positive that it's "about" us in any simple, straightforward way. Rather, RMP is a medium through which students communicate with each other about the things that matter to them. Like all subcultural communication structures, it comes with its own internal, unofficial rules of interpretation. Not being privy to those, we are unlikely to decode it successfully. That's

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why our observations tend to the dismissive (“It’s such an impoverished genre.”), the selective (“It’s true that my shoes are great, but it’s totally untrue that the course was too demanding!”), the defensive (“You have to understand, we profs are busy people ...”) and the trivial (“They think *he* deserves a chili pepper?”). Hardly the stuff of critical thinking.

I suspect that one of the reasons RMP is so disturbing to us as instructors is not just that we’re outside of its address but that it lays bare the gulf between students and instructors that persists in spite of our many strategies to democratize our classrooms. The desire some of us have to shed our authority, the liberal pluralism that holds every comment to be equally helpful to class discussion, the dangerously conformist interest in having students “find their voice” through our courses, and the idealist hope that lies behind peer editing exercises, that students might see each other as significant audiences for their writing, come across to students as performance demands, implicit answers to the question we refuse to answer directly: “But what *exactly* are you looking for?” This bottom-line thinking is not a function of the corporatization of the academy, but it is endemic to a structure organized around grading. High marks have always been the primary currency of coursework. (Admittedly, as university education in Canada becomes more and more expensive, the correlation between grades and dollars becomes more visible, and so the distinction between students and consumers starts to blur. But this is hardly a new phenomenon.)

What RMP shows us is that in spite of our attempts to democratize the classroom, students don’t see themselves as the equal partners in learning that we might like them to be. On the wrong end of the gradebook, they don’t always want what we think they should want. We want engagement, hard work, and curiosity. We want students to take the subject matter seriously and to put forward their genuine selves in class discussions. We want them to love what we love, or at the very least to understand and respect it. We want them to learn. These are laudable, immodest aims, and the moment we want something less noble is the moment we should reconsider a career in teaching.

But let’s not pretend that all of our students necessarily want the same things, especially students in the early years of university education, who are the primary users of RMP. Rebekah Nathan’s undercover anthropology *My Freshman Year: What a Professor Learned by Becoming a Student*—a sobering account that should be required reading for every teacher of university students—points out that what students want is very pragmatic. Students, like professors, are busy people with many competing demands

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on their time. Thus they want good schedules, a timetable that consolidates classes so that they have enough free time left to do their homework, hold down increasingly necessary part-time jobs, and socialize. According to Nathan, this last factor is not to be underestimated. More and more, students want “the college experience.” Seeing themselves not as young adults but rather mature adolescents, undergraduates want time to interact with friends, to fit in, and to be cool. Whereas we might want them to debate issues and ideas, they are far likelier to be interested in talking about their bodies and their relationships, televisions and gaming, drug and alcohol experiences (Nathan 98). Consider this: “The notions ... that peer culture is of central importance and that, for most segments of the student community, academic life is tangential to or at odds with peer culture are consistent with every major study of college life” (Nathan 99).

This is not to say that students are captive malcontents, grumbling about every term paper and every peer-editing exercise. Nor is it to suggest that they are disinterested parties to their own university experience, merely putting in time until they get the degree that will propel them into adulthood—they are not merely “learning to labour,” in Paul Willis’s memorable phrase. But they are shrewd. They will select some courses on the basis of personal and even scholarly interest, but they also want a couple of guaranteed high marks each semester. They want to take the “best” courses, whatever that means to them (and I suspect the definition changes campus by campus, so that literary theory might be popular at some schools while introductory sociology is the cool class somewhere else). Within the classroom, students understand the discursive norms that ask them to voice opinions; however, it is probably dangerous to confuse these voiced opinions with the intellectual and political being that many of us hope students will arrive at by “finding their voice” in our terms. Overall, students are savvy enough to know that the playing field within the classroom is not level and that authority does not disappear once the discussion begins. They know they are under judgement from the instructor and—something we disavow—from their peers, too. Thus they do not necessarily eschew democracy in the classroom, but their sense of what that might mean is radically different from ours. In Nathan’s words, “Equality in the classroom usually amounts to ‘invisibility’; don’t be too noticeable is the rule, whether that means acting like an outstanding student or a troublemaker” (91).

My guess is that these aspects of college experience are what students are evaluating in RateMyProfessors. They pass around the kind of information they want according to the norms of their undergraduate subculture.

Because students are already in a closed community, they can communicate very efficiently. They don't need an engaged discussion of the ins and outs of a class; they want to convey information as efficiently as possible so that they can all move on. We distrust seeing students talk to each other about our classes not because it's personal (though when it's personal, it can be awful) but because this is the moment when the gulf between us and them becomes most apparent. RMP is not about us. We are not being addressed in any sense of the term.

However, it is worth taking RMP seriously because it might clue us in to a similar problem of address within a more legitimized vehicle: official teaching evaluations. Typical in all undergraduate classes throughout Canada, these questionnaires ask a series of standardized questions that are to be answered on a bubble sheet or, more progressively, in students' own words. They are strictly anonymous and delivered to the instructor only once the final grades have been submitted and approved. They are supposed to provide honest feedback to improve teaching and learning. But do they? Anyone who has served on a committee for teaching evaluations will have seen the recommendation "Give this prof a raise!" I find this comment poignant because, as with all commentary through official teaching evaluations, it rarely finds its addressee. Understandably enough, students imagine that they are reporting to instructors' bosses ("Was any of our employees particularly helpful to you this year?"). However, chairs and deans, particularly in large units, are likely to read annual evaluations in a cursory way, looking for particularly outstanding or spectacularly bad teachers. The real readers of official teaching evaluations are instructors ourselves, and they arrive too late to be of any specific value for the course that's just ended. It's as easy to be reassured, even flattered ("Oh, good, they did feel that I respected them.") as it is to feel outraged ("I know who wrote that comment!"), but there is no opportunity for engaging in dialogue about what didn't work in a classroom, and why. Nor is there an opportunity for us to explain our pedagogical moves to students. Talk about an impoverished genre!

Much better, in my opinion, would be to figure out ways of talking about teaching and learning directly to each other. This needn't be heavily meta-critical, and it needn't take away very much time from content. Simple measures like mid-course evaluations would be a fine start. These could be as simple as a "Stop/Start/Continue" exercise, in which students jot down things they wish you would stop doing, start doing, and continue doing. The key to making this work is taking up these responses in class: "Several of you want to see more group work, but a sizable minority would

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like to discontinue it altogether. How shall we solve this?” Even better than this exercise would be a face-to-face conversation organized around the question “How are we doing?,” where the “we” is understood to include both instructor and students. Ideally, this conversation would begin with students identifying their own learning goals as well as where they fall short; in other words, it would demand that they become responsible and self-conscious learners. It would also permit us to share what we know about pedagogy, while learning what we don’t know. Such a conversation would require careful and open-minded listening from us, not to mention imagination and courage—because we may know the material well, but we don’t always know our students best. We would have to put ourselves on the line: now, there’s a democratizing move! If we concentrate on the project of teaching and learning within our classes, we might learn to ignore RMP completely.

Works Cited

- Nathan, Rebekah. *My Freshman Year: What a Professor Learned by Becoming a Student*. Ithaca and London: Cornell UP, 2005.
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