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Wake Up and Smell the New Epistemology

By Tim Clydesdale

Popular epistemologies are funny things. The latest one slipped into our party unannounced, slowly replaced all the food and decorations, and then stared back blankly when we asked how our Mexican fiesta had turned into a country-western barbecue. Only after the tequila wears off and we piece together the evening do we realize, with embarrassment, that the change has been a long time coming.

For decades, we professors and administrators drank deeply of notions like "knowledge for knowledge's sake" and "the transformative power of the liberal arts," paying little heed as the American populace shifted from widespread respect for the academy to considerable skepticism of it. Today our students occupy the leading edge of that popular shift, with no real interest in the elitist notions that we consume so readily. But they are wise enough to keep their views private, given the economic necessity of attending our party.

Our students arrive on our campuses with years of experience in observing disputes about what is and is not known, and with well-established ways of handling such things. For example, should they view Thomas Jefferson as the brilliant author of the Declaration of Independence and a "founding father" of the United States, as a political hypocrite who owned slaves and impregnated

them, or as a dead president irrelevant to their own lives but important to their history teacher? Similarly, how should they view global warming, illegal immigration, and evolution?

One of my students put it this way: "It is imperative that someone studying this generation realize that we have the world at our fingertips — and the world has been at our fingertips for our entire lives. I think this access to information seriously undermines this generation's view of authority, especially traditional scholastic authority." Today's students know full well that authorities can be found for every position and any knowledge claim, and consequently the students are dubious (privately, that is) about anything we claim to be true or important.

Contrast that with 50 years ago, when students would arrive in awe of the institution and its faculty, content to receive their education via lecture and happy to let the faculty decide what was worth knowing. Even 25 years ago, that pattern still held among most students. But it holds no more. While students often report satisfaction with their institution and its faculty, after interviewing some 400 students on 34 campuses nationwide, I found few in awe of their institutions or faculty, many averse to lectures, and most ambivalent about anyone's knowledge claims other than their own.

Of course, this new epistemology does not imply that our students have become skilled arbiters of information and interpretation. It simply means that they arrive at college with well-established methods of sorting, doubting, or ignoring the same. That, by itself, is not troubling. Many professors encourage students to question authority, and would welcome more who challenged and debated ideas. But this new epistemology carries some heavy baggage — indeed, it is inseparably conjoined with personal economics. Short of fame or a lottery win, today's students recognize that a college

degree is the minimum credential they will need to attain their desired standard of living (and hence "happiness"). So this new epistemology produces a rather odd kind of student — one who appears polite and dutiful but who cares little about the course work, the larger questions it raises, or the value of living an examined life. And it produces such students in overwhelming abundance.

This is where many begin the blame game, and where I part ways with them. Polite, dutiful, and disengaged students deserve neither blame nor scorn. They have become exactly what one would expect of those born during the information age and reared in America's profoundly pragmatic culture. They are, moreover, not all that different from the population as a whole. Aside from adopting new technologies more readily and accepting new familial patterns more quickly, they are very much America's sons and daughters. Pinning a generational label on today's students is unhelpful at best and a disservice to all.

A better and more productive response begins with us — faculty members and administrators. We cannot expect a skeptical populace to reverse course of its own accord. The onus is on us to better convey the value that a robust intellectual life adds to the public good. And we need to begin by respecting our students (and the wider public) not just as persons but as the arbiters of knowledge that they have become. Specifically, we must respect students as thinkers, even though their thinking skills may be undeveloped and their knowledge base shallow. Moreover, our respect must be genuine. Students have keen hypocrisy sensors and do not like being patronized.

Respecting students as thinkers means we need to reveal, not hide, the intellectual journeys we have taken, and make transparent the

intellectual transformations we have undergone. Respecting students as thinkers thus involves a number of changes, including meeting students where they are, so that they trust us to develop their intellectual skills and expand their knowledge base; balancing our elitist values with democratic and more widely achievable goals; and, perhaps hardest of all, lowering the lofty opinion we hold of ourselves and accepting the public obligation that our privileged position entails. To return to my opening analogy, rather than complain about the disappearance of our fiesta, we need to put aside our sombreros, don cowboy hats, and let our guests teach us a few line dances.

Fiesta traditionalists might start screaming: "You've got to be kidding! I didn't climb to the top of the educational ladder to put on cowboy boots and starting dancing for a bunch of disengaged, consumerist students!" So let me be perfectly clear: I am not asking for more entertainment and less substance in our classrooms. I am asking for a paradigm shift in how we approach our students that parallels the paradigm shift in the broader culture. I am asking instructors to see the two questions that the new epistemology emblazons across the front of every classroom — "So what?" and "Who cares?" — and then to adjust their teaching accordingly.

Back when students held us in awe, sat willingly for lectures, and assigned us the work of deciding what knowledge was worth knowing, we organized our classes around our disciplines. We chose what knowledge needed to be conveyed to students in what order. Now that our students assign us no more authority than anyone else, show no patience for lectures, and decide what's worth knowing themselves, we need to reorganize our classes. We need to teach as if our students were colleagues from another department. That means determining what our colleagues may already know,

building from that shared knowledge, adapting pre-existing analytic skills, then connecting those fledgling skills and knowledge to a deeper understanding of the discipline we love. In other words, we need to approach our classrooms as public intellectuals eager to share our insights graciously with a wide audience of fellow citizens.

Perhaps an example would be helpful. Take the survey-of-dance course, offered nationwide as a way for students to satisfy fine-arts requirements. Instructors traditionally organize this course the way the discipline is structured, beginning with prehistoric dance, following with the diversity of tribal and folk dances, then moving on to the emergence of dance as high art, and so forth. All of those topics are important, mind you, but I can see students nodding off from here.

By contrast, an instructor who respected students as arbiters of knowledge in their own right might begin with the forms of dance students know or do themselves. Next, the instructor could encourage students to articulate the criteria by which they decide which dancers are better than others, and which dance forms are more appealing. From there, the instructor could demonstrate how the dance forms that students already know have evolved out of prior forms and genres, and have a dancer demonstrate evolving styles within a genre or two. Next, the instructor could take the whole class through a dancer's workout, lest the students think good dancing requires little effort. From there, the instructor could go in a number of directions, such as introducing students to the art of choreography, showing video clips to demonstrate how different choreographers stage the same piece, and illustrating how some of the most innovative choreography is rooted in deep historical and cultural knowledge of dance.

Personally, I prefer the dentist's chair to the dance floor, but I

would look forward to such a class, and so would most students. More important, students enrolled in such a class would sharpen their analytic skills, gain a wider knowledge of dance, and develop respect for both dance and the study of dance that would stay with them for decades. Some would say this is simply good pedagogy — I wholeheartedly agree. Good pedagogy is the product of instructors who respect, understand, and creatively engage their students.

The problem is that too many professors see good pedagogy as optional, as something only for teaching "superstars," rather than as a set of learnable techniques that critically support our wider purpose. Perhaps those professors assume that an absence of complaints indicates that their pedagogy is "good enough." But an absence of complaints may indicate only how accomplished students are at appearing polite and dutiful (especially when the professor's grade distribution suits them).

A slice of humble pie is in order: Just 19 percent of Americans with bachelor's degrees express "a great deal of confidence in education," and only 31 percent express the same about "the scientific community" (compared with 28 percent and 43 percent, respectively, among Americans as a whole), according to the 2006 General Social Survey. It is time we disabuse ourselves of the view that obliging and dutiful students are engaged and transformed students.

By respecting students as thinkers and meeting them where they are, we set the stage for good pedagogy and take a critical first step toward rebuilding the public's trust. But we must be realistic about what good pedagogy can accomplish. It is not a panacea — it will not create a society of lovers of learning in which our social ills will finally be cured. (A well-known pedagogy expert came to my institution and ended his talk with that very claim.) Even the best

teachers will not convert every student into a lifelong learner who embraces knowledge for its own sake. That is a commitment that must come from within; it is an intentional decision to swim against powerful cultural and economic currents.

We need to understand that college students with an intrinsic love of learning, an appreciation for complexity, and a drive for discovery almost always possess those traits before they report to our campuses. Though we can fan into flames the sparks that these future intelligentsia bring with them, except for the occasional late bloomer, we fail miserably at creating sustained intellectual fires among the vast majority of our practical, credential-driven students.

A better and more widely achievable educational goal should therefore be to inculcate a respect for learning and the pursuit of knowledge. I doubt anyone can teach another to love learning, and the attempt frustrates students and professors alike. (Imagine a dance instructor trying to turn every student into a season subscriber to the local ballet company.) But I do believe effective teaching can instill respect — specifically, respect for the critical work we do as scholars and educators. Such respect is the seed from which the public's trust in us will grow.

Sowing that seed is essential, but seeds also need water, soil, and sunlight to flourish. Likewise, the work of public intellectualism must go on outside the classroom as well. Others have made that case eloquently in these pages, so I shall simply underscore their appeals with a few suggestions.

First, I applaud the efforts of leaders of scholarly associations to promote and reward the work of public scholarship, despite membership pressure to preserve the status quo, and I encourage those associations to continue that work. Second, I respect the efforts of many agencies that support academe to promote general

dissemination of research results and encourage other sources of financial support to do the same. To be sure, there is a place for highly specialized research programs; I simply ask program officers to ensure that each call for proposals includes a question about how results will reach a general audience and that responses to that question be considered in the proposal's evaluation.

Third, some of us need an attitude adjustment. It is not just residential-college students who live in a bubble — many faculty members do as well. We take for granted our privileged status, become consumed by petty controversies, talk only to ourselves, and ignore the wider public that makes our work possible. It is tempting, I know, to want to curse the culture and withdraw into like-minded enclaves. But neither catharsis nor retreat will satisfy those who demand accountability, raise financial support for public higher education, or generate more students who cherish college as an opportunity to learn and think.

Even though our interests often diverge from those of the general public, we remain beholden to it. With a few adjustments at our end, we can begin to rebuild trust among a critical mass of fellow citizens: our students. Our fiesta is clearly over, but a Tex-Mex party has the potential to please guests and hosts alike.

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