

Open Letter to a Good Student

Dear _____,

Again, you're doing very well. This is a fun group, and I've really enjoyed teaching all of you, and you in particular.

We as a society somehow have somehow come to think that education is some sort of purchase/sale agreement. I have [information], I give it to you for a fee (tuition), I devise some sort of test (more or less tricky) to see if you really have [the information], and if you do, I certify that you have [the information] and give you a [degree]. You can use that degree to get a job, maybe, which is probably why you paid tuition in the first place.

So, if I correct a student, she must not have given the information back to me correctly. Bad. From this perspective, push-back from a teacher indicates some sort of failure, and you do not want to many of those. They add up, and may even go down on your permanent record! Keep that sort of thing up long enough, and you might not get your degree at all and will have wasted your tuition. Bad all around! But that's the disastrous case. Students are only admitted to this Program if they are in good standing, so they rarely if ever fear total failure, but they are often anxious, afraid to be corrected, at least at first, and I understand that.

Well maybe our entirely hypothetical student has failed a little, but so what, we all do at some point, and that's the point at which we are thinking/learning. Get to the point of failure, where you don't know and have to think, and then it gets interesting. Or, more often in law and especially with good students like you, the student isn't simply wrong, doesn't precisely fail, but doesn't really succeed, either. There are many different things to say, and she has to use her judgment about what the better view might be, which is what I mean about becoming more sophisticated, and it is scary. Best to peer through the Zoom cloud and hope somebody else says something.

Of course, you need to learn stuff – facts matter. But despite the received view in these United States, education is not ultimately like going to the grocery store, where you buy your groceries (facts), pay your bill (tuition), get your receipt (degree) and you are done. That's certification, which is a related but quite different thing, like clothes relate to but are quite different from the wearer's body, indeed clothes are not truly clothing until they cloak a body. Yes, you need certification from an accredited school if you want to get a license to be a lawyer, just like you need to pay for groceries if you want to leave the store without getting arrested. But while paying for your groceries is legally required, holding a receipt doesn't make you a cook, much less a good one. Repeating facts on a test (even the bar) might get you a license, but it doesn't make you a good lawyer, and it is light years from making you a social thinker.

I don't know if you play or have played sports, but I think practicing a sport is a better metaphor than grocery shopping for understanding what I'm trying to say about education, especially adult education, and what I'm trying to do in the Program. You can make it to the NBA, or in your case the WNBA, and your coach will still yell (well depends on style) at you, not because you're not a great player (you're in the WNBA!) but because you can be even better. Or, from our

perspective, as we think about political economy, there is always more to think. So, if you get it wrong, I have to fix it. If you get it right, I try to build on it. To students, both feel like push back, correction, but in both cases I am trying to help you take the next step. I cannot take the step for you. (Plato says somewhere that teaching is impossible, overstated for a reason.) But I am taking you seriously – I really want you to take that step. And that’s hard for students who are used to getting it “right,” getting their “A” (gold star), getting their teacher to shut up and move on with a smile, to understand.

(Yes, by implication, I think that most education, even some very prestigious education, does not take students sufficiently seriously. We call that “learning outcomes.”)

So, it’s not really about being a star student and getting “the right answer” any more, is it? Nor is it that the student needs to give the teacher what he wants. I personally don’t want anything from you guys – again, apart from wanting you to take that next step, getting a little closer to understanding at least some pieces of your (our, the) world.

And after a few more weeks we’ll quit, but only because the semester is over, not because we’re somehow done. With what? Law? Capitalism? Political economy? History? Right. I’ll call S_____, or one of my other friends, and we’ll discuss the same stuff we talk about in class. We’re not finished, either, haven’t quite yet attained God-like understanding. Imagine.

And you will go off and have a brilliant career, and we’ll all be proud. Soon you’ll be able, like any of our speakers, to tell me stuff about the world, even the world of finance, that I don’t know. And while I won’t be finished trying to understand, my job as a teacher will be done, at least in the basic ways.

So, keep up the good work, and I’ll help as best I can. Because you have the talent to take many, many steps.

Cheers/stay safe,

David