

BAD ATTITUDE

Confronting the Views that Hinder Students' Learning

BY VINCENT RYAN RUGGIERO

SOME YEARS ago, while conducting a workshop, I had an interesting conversation with a teacher who had recently been a runner-up for "Teacher of the Year" in her state. Even though she had been in the profession for about 15 years, she seemed to have retained the high enthusiasm and optimism of a beginning teacher. Nevertheless, something was troubling her. "A few years ago, when I returned from a sabbatical," she explained, "I noticed a difference in the students. They seemed less interested in learning, more impatient, less polite to one another, and less respectful of me than my previous classes had been. At first I decided that the students probably were no different, but that being out of the classroom for a year and working with adults had affected my perception.

"When the impression didn't go away but became stronger," she continued, "I thought I might be experi-

encing burnout. But that didn't seem likely because I was still excited about teaching and enjoyed interacting with students. In addition, preparing lively and interesting lessons had always been a strong point for me, and I was sure the lessons I was then using were at least as good as any I had used in the past. Eventually, I decided my original impression had been correct—the students had changed, in fact were continuing to change, and not for the better."

My interest in that teacher's story was heightened by the fact that my own experience in the classroom supported it. And since that time, hundreds of teachers have shared similar stories with me. Indisposition to learn seems to be considerably more widespread than it was a generation or two ago.

What is the cause of this indisposition? Depending on which pundit one reads, the fault lies with teacher



incompetence, parental dereliction, or socioeconomic deprivation. Without denying that these factors exist and in many cases seriously aggravate the situation, I propose that they are not the main cause of the problem. That cause is the *attitudes* students bring to the classroom, attitudes that obstruct teaching and thwart learning.

The negative attitudes we see in our students can be traced to ideas of “selfism” advanced by modern philosophers and/or psychologists throughout this century and, in some cases, in previous centuries. Of course, very few students are familiar with the original expression of these ideas, but many are familiar with popularized (and sometimes distorted) versions of the original ideas. And virtually all students have been exposed to the advertising industry’s and the entertainment and communications media’s glamorization of

the self-help message. This glamorization may have a more powerful effect than reading because it occurs when the mind is essentially at rest.

The concept of self-improvement has undergone dramatic change since 1911, when Ambrose Bierce mockingly defined self-esteem as “an erroneous appraisal.” Good and bad character are now known as “personality differences.” Rights have replaced responsibilities. The research on *egocentrism* and *ethnocentrism* that informed discussion of human growth and development in the mid-20th century is ignored; indeed, the terms themselves are considered politically incorrect. A revolution has taken place in the vocabulary of self. Words that imply responsibility or accountability—*self-criticism*, *self-denial*, *self-discipline*, *self-control*, *self-effacement*, *self-mastery*, *self-reproach*, and *self-sacrifice*—are no longer in fashion. The lan-



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guage most in favor is that which exalts the self—*self-expression, self-assertion, self-indulgence, self-realization, self-approval, self-acceptance, self-love*, and the ubiquitous *self-esteem*.

Not content with self-adulation, many psyche-strokers have escalated their message. They now urge self-worship! Swami Muktananda chants, "God dwells within you as you; worship your Self," confirming the message of Ramtha, the reportedly 35,000-year-old warrior who speaks through the actress Shirley MacLaine. Ray Bradbury, science fiction writer turned theologian, preaches, "We are God giving Himself a reason for being." Psychologist Will Schutz exults, "I am everywhere, I am omniscient, I am God." And New Age author Jack Underhill inspires his readers by proclaiming, "You are the only thing that is real. Everything else is your imagination...."

The hyperbole may have increased, but the essential message of selfism has been the same for almost four decades. Such prolonged exposure to any theme is bound to influence not just young people but adults as well. As a result, many adults outspokenly champion that message and strongly resent any criticism of it. Others have not formally embraced the message but tend to regard it favorably and are skeptical of arguments against it. Still others are not so much favorably disposed to the message as they are familiar and comfortable with it and therefore disinclined to question it. Taken together, the number of people in these classifications is larger than the number who have become suspicious of selfism and are therefore willing to subject its claims to critical examination. Fortunately, the latter group includes many teachers, undoubtedly because they, more than any other group, have had to deal with the consequences of selfism.

Why Students Aren't Learning

The cartoon shows a blackboard with "A, B, C, D, E, F, G" written on it. The teacher stands with chalk in her hand, having just been interrupted by the little boy standing at her side. "I hope that's about all of them," he says. "I'm beginning to lose interest." Every teacher knows that beneath the humor lies the depressing reality that many students share the little boy's perspective. For them schoolwork is a useless distraction from

the unceasing enjoyment they believe to be everyone's birthright. Their lack of motivation prevents them from acquiring basic skills and knowledge, as well as from developing the habits of dependability and persistence necessary for success in school and in life. They attend class irregularly, refuse to do homework, and are contemptuous if not downright hostile toward their teachers and peers.

Pundits are largely oblivious to the problem posed by such behaviors, no doubt because they are so busy crying malfeasance and reciting the old accusatory litany: "If the students haven't learned, the teacher hasn't taught," "The more teachers are paid, the less they accomplish," "Their workday and workyear are too short," "Tenure has ensured incompetence," "The teachers' unions have too much power." Nor are teachers the only objects of such criticisms. Parents, too, are presumed to be shirking their responsibilities, and being too permissive, indulgent, and quick to defend their children, even when the behavior in question is not merely disruptive but criminal.

No reasonable person will deny that there are incompetent or irresponsible teachers and parents; in fact, a strong argument could be made that the extent and degree of dereliction are greater today than they have ever been. But the carpers too conveniently ignore another, in some ways more significant fact—a great many, and perhaps most, of today's parents and teachers espouse values very similar to those of past generations:

They urge students to become active participants in learning and in life.

They stress that truth is discovered by study and reflection.

They emphasize that the essential ingredient in achievement is effort.

They value informed opinions over uninformed opinions.

They urge a more demanding moral standard than personal preference.

They portray intellectual activities as rewarding and satisfying.

They believe self-improvement involves changing one's self.

They place a high value on critical thinking and encourage its development.

They urge students to practice self-discipline and make their lives count.

The Source of Opposing Values

If large numbers of teachers and parents have not abandoned these time-honored values and in fact are doing their best to promote them, who or what is causing so many young people to adopt *opposing* attitudes? The answer is so obvious that one can only marvel that the pundits have succeeded in ignoring it: *mass culture*, the ideas and values disseminated by the entertainment and communications media (books, newspapers, magazines, popular music, radio, and television) and by the advertising industry.

In opposition to active living, mass culture promotes a spectator mentality and a desire to be entertained.

In opposition to objective truth, mass culture extols subjective, design-it-yourself reality—"If I believe it, then it is true for me."

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In opposition to achievement through effort, mass culture promotes achievement through proclamation—"I am good, I am talented, I am wonderful."

In opposition to informed opinion, mass culture suggests that all opinions are equally meritorious.

In opposition to a demanding moral standard, mass culture extols doing whatever feels good.

In opposition to intellectual activities, mass culture teaches that the only satisfying activities are those that dazzle the senses.

In opposition to improvement through constructive change, mass culture promotes accepting and asserting one's self and inflicting self on others.

In opposition to thinking, mass culture (particularly the advertising industry) plays on the public's needs and desires and prompts people to suspend critical judgment and accept biased testimony as fact.

In opposition to self-discipline, mass culture lauds immoderation and lack of restraint.

In fairness, it should be noted that media and advertising people did not conceive these ideas themselves; they merely encountered the thinking of various scholars and researchers (often in popularized form) and embraced that thinking. The idea that morality is relative and subjective, for example, derives from such philosophers as David Hume and Bertrand Russell. (As the Roman statesman and philosopher Cicero once remarked, "There is nothing so ridiculous but some philosopher has said it.") And the notion that self-esteem is indispensable for achievement can be traced to humanistic psychology, notably the work of Abraham Maslow and Carl Rogers. In some cases, mass culture represented the original ideas faithfully; in others, it oversimplified or otherwise distorted them. But in every instance the disseminators have presented the ideas more powerfully, and to a vastly wider audience, than the scholars had done. Theories that once were accessible only to advanced students of narrow areas of specialization are now broadcast, often dramatically, to millions of people who lack the maturity or educational background to evaluate them discerningly.

Consider the impact of a single medium, television. By age 18 a person who has watched three hours of television a day (from age 5) will have been exposed to over 14,000 hours of mass culture's ideas and values, enhanced by laugh and applause tracks, background music, and other devices of emphasis. Much of that time, of course, is devoted to commercials, which, since the advent of the 15-second commercial in the 1980s, occur at a rate of 44 per hour. The average television viewer is bombarded with more than 48,000 commercials annually, each of them a cleverly designed appeal, wrapped in the values of mass culture.

Among the myriad themes of popular culture, three are particularly powerful and inimical to learning: self-indulgence, impulsiveness, and instant gratification. Self-indulgence says, "I am entitled to do or say whatever I wish because I am more important than other people"; impulsiveness, "I should follow my urges because spontaneity is more desirable than reflectiveness and restraint is repressive";

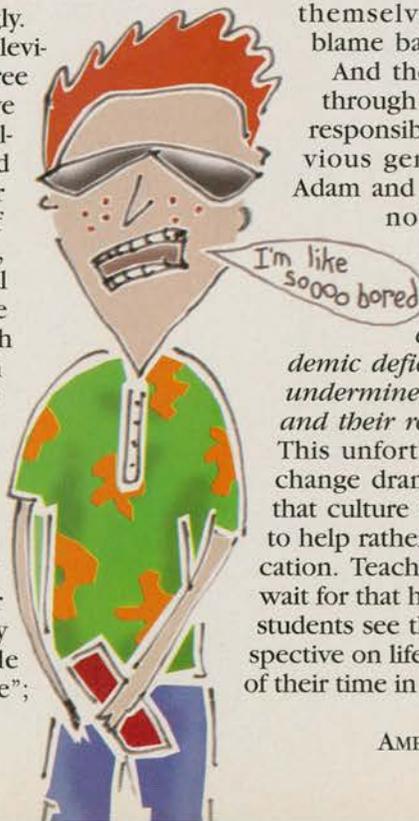
and instant gratification, "Pleasure delayed is pleasure denied." The logical corollary to these themes is that anyone who promotes self-control, restraint, and delayed gratification—notably a parent or a teacher—is ignorant of human nature, obstructive of the process of growth and development, and in violation of other people's inalienable rights.

Little wonder that movies depict parents and teachers as nerds, neanderthals, or worse. Or that best-selling self-help authors like Wayne Dyer and Peter McWilliams scorn the lessons of home and school. Dyer (1995) informs his readers, "You are sacred, and in order to know it you must transcend the old belief system you've adopted" (p. xii). (Imagine the extraordinary arrogance and gall required to condemn so cavalierly *all* the lessons of *all* parents and teachers!) McWilliams (1991, 1994) goes further, defining "evil" as the "unnecessary life experience" or "learned junk" imposed on unsuspecting students by parents, teachers, and other authorities. He advises his readers to reject that "shell of imitation good" and seek the genuine good, which lies where else but in everyone's core self, that lovely "sea of peace, calm, and joy."

From all indications these writers, and the legions of others who share their good child/evil adults perspective, are quite serious. More's the pity, for their theory defies common sense. They would have us believe that everyone comes into the world virtuous and wise and becomes evil and foolish only when parents and teachers begin to guide their development. The problem is, the parents and teachers were once children themselves. How did *they* lose their virtue and wisdom and become corrupters of the young? Are *their* parents to blame? And were *those* parents not deprived of their perfection by *their* parents before them? Where did it all begin?

The self-help gurus and other sages do not follow the logic of their position and ask these pertinent questions because doing so would allow those convenient villains, teachers and parents, to absolve themselves by pointing the finger of blame back to the previous generation. And the inevitable infinite regression, through which every generation assigns responsibility for its condition to the previous generation (all the way back to Adam and Eve, who blamed the devil), is not nearly so much fun for the pundits as blaming flesh-and-blood contemporaries.

Silly theories aside, *the principal reason for today's academic deficiency is that mass culture has undermined young people's desire to learn and their respect for parents and teachers.* This unfortunate situation is not likely to change dramatically until the purveyors of that culture acknowledge their responsibility to help rather than hinder the process of education. Teachers, of course, cannot afford to wait for that happy eventuality; they must help students see the fallacies in mass culture's perspective on life now so they can make the most of their time in school.



Recognizing Obstructive Attitudes

Before students can be motivated to alter their attitudes, they must first understand which ones are beneficial and which create obstacles to their success and personal fulfillment. The most obvious way for students to achieve this understanding would be to have them analyze their own behavior, conceptualize and evaluate the underlying beliefs, and decide whether they are reasonable. Not only is that way too sophisticated and difficult for the great majority of students, particularly younger students, to follow; it also demands a level of interest and motivation relatively few students possess. The approach taken in my book, *Changing Attitudes*, and its companion workbook, *Thinking Critically About Attitudes*, is considerably easier and more practical: providing students with already conceptualized and expressed ideas and guiding them to test the ideas against their own experience and knowledge. In this article, we will examine several widespread, unhealthy attitudes and consider the context in which each is likely to occur and the way it blocks learning. More importantly, we will probe the error of each attitude and identify an alternative perspective that enhances rather than impedes learning. This treatment, alas, will not be—indeed, *cannot* be—entirely free of controversy because we teachers have been exposed to the same mass culture that has corrupted students' attitudes and values. Although that culture may not have affected us nearly as broadly or as deeply as it has our students—for example, it may not have succeeded in displacing our core values—we cannot reasonably deny its existence or the likelihood that it has to some extent affected our thinking about important matters.

Two brief examples will illustrate the fact that mass culture influences teachers as well as students. If a professor had said 40 or 50 years ago, "There are no right answers in this course," the students would probably have reported him or her to the dean for admitting incompetence or for proclaiming that a course they were paying good money for lacked meaningful content—or both. Then, in the late 1960s and early 1970s the "no right answers" saying was heard in classrooms around the nation. Did it miraculously occur independently to a few hundred thousand people? Hardly. Political correctness of the day required that professors talk like that (much as it required them to arrange classroom seating in a circle and adopt the attire then fashionable among students). Instead of objecting to this disclaimer, many otherwise brilliant individuals willingly surrendered their better judgment and proceeded to chant "no right answers here," often for years, apparently never once wondering whether this mantra harmed students' motivation to learn or contradicted the "objective" testing used in the course.

The second example is more contemporary. Legions of elementary and secondary

school teachers remind their students at every opportunity, "You can be anything you want to be and do anything you want to do. There are no limits except those you impose on yourself." Since they say this in complete seriousness, they obviously have never pondered the odds of a tone-deaf man singing lead tenor at the Met or a 5' 1" woman playing center for the Los Angeles Lakers. No matter how pure the intentions of such teachers, they are talking lunacy, and cruel lunacy at that. Life itself imposes all kinds of restrictions on us all, and the earlier in life we learn it, the less traumatic the realization will be. Some of us are positively overflowing with musical potential; others couldn't carry a tune with the combined assistance of Pavarotti, Domingo, and Carreras. Some have impressive mechanical aptitude; others couldn't program a VCR if their lives depended on it. And so on down the long list of capacities.

Why are so many teachers committed to the "you can be anything" message? Certainly not because they have no other choices. With a small investment of imagination, they could think of half a dozen inspiring things to say that have the additional virtue of being sensible and honest, things that build genuine rather than false confidence. No, they say it for no other reason than that the self-help industry has proclaimed that students won't feel good about themselves unless they say it, and if students don't feel good about themselves they are doomed to failure.

Some readers may take offense at the suggestion that teachers, as well as students, are vulnerable to fallacious thinking. This reaction is understandable. For several decades, mass culture has incessantly promoted the notions that any ideas one has are necessarily correct because one has them and that acknowledging one's limitations destroys self-confidence. Far from being the insights they are purported to be, these notions have proved to be powerful obstacles to progress in the various academic fields, as well as impediments to students' learning. They promise intellectual liberation but create slaves to whim, first impression, and self-serving interpretation. If we want students to defer judgment, give every idea a fair hearing, and base their evaluation on an idea's strengths and weaknesses rather than on its familiarity or compatibility with their personal viewpoint, we must model this behavior through good example. Preaching alone will not be enough.

A Strategy for Dealing with Attitudes

Attitudes are difficult to address in the classroom because the beliefs that underlie them are seldom expressed verbally and thus tend to remain below the level of students' consciousness. To say that these beliefs are not expressed in words, however, is not to say there is any great impediment to expressing them. Similarly, to say students are generally unaware of their attitudes does not mean



they cannot *become* aware. It is possible, in the words of the cliché, to “get in touch with” our attitudes, and not just in the sense of experiencing them. We can apprehend them intellectually, know them *in terms of the beliefs they flow from*. A male chauvinist might, for example, come to the realization that his attitude toward women could be accurately stated as “Women are inferior to men,” “Women exist to be dominated by men,” or even “Women are contemptible.” This realization would enable him to assess his attitude.

The strategy for helping students to cultivate more positive attitudes is rooted in this maxim: *The sharper and more complete one’s awareness of a phenomenon, the more fully it can be understood and evaluated*. By expressing attitudes as beliefs, we make them accessible to logical analysis. Such a transformation is in no way artificial because attitudes and the beliefs that fuel them are interwoven. Every attitude implies one or more corresponding beliefs. If I display hostility toward you, the implication is that you have done something to me to warrant my attitude. If you have done nothing to me, my hostility is clearly misplaced. If I consider your presence in “my” workplace or neighborhood, or your very existence, to be an of-

fense against me, my hostility is not only misplaced but profoundly illogical. As long as my hostility remains below the surface of consciousness, I will undoubtedly never be disposed to test its appropriateness. Only when I encounter it as a belief, either through my own effort at self-understanding or through reading or addressing a homework assignment, am I likely to be able to appraise it.

Simply stated, the strategy for dealing with attitudes is to (1) determine the specific attitudes that impede student learning in your course, (2) express the attitudes as beliefs, and (3) guide students in analyzing the beliefs and reaching conclusions that reflect both the principles of logic and the students’ own experiences. Of course, many students have little or no acquaintance with logic and, given mass culture’s elevation of feeling over thought, are inclined to view their own experiences shallowly and are indisposed to trust logic. Moreover, the knowledge that a belief is unreasonable will not automatically lead to rejection of the attitude associated with it. Still, one thing is certain—the more insight students gain into the beliefs discussed here, the more difficult it will be for them to maintain unhealthy attitudes such as the ones that follow.

Unhealthy Attitudes

“Being myself makes self-discipline unnecessary”

For almost half a century, psychologists have focused more attention on “being” and “becoming” than those concepts had received in any previous age. Unfortunately, the result has been befuddlement rather than insight. If an author had titled a book *On Becoming a Person*, say, a couple of hundred years ago, he would have been thought intellectually deficient. Educated people would have said, “Dear fellow, one doesn’t become a person—one simply is a person. To speak of becoming what one already is is ludicrous.” But times change. In the allegedly enlightened mid-1900s, Carl Rogers’ book of that very title became a bestseller and profoundly influenced both the profession of psychology and mass culture. Rogers (1961) expressed this view of being and becoming:

I find I am more effective when I can listen acceptantly to myself, and can be myself...When I accept myself as I am, then I change...We cannot change, we cannot move away from what we are, until we thoroughly accept what we are. Then change seems to come about almost unnoticed. (p. 17)

In this and other books, Rogers resurrected Rousseau and scorned the historic wisdom that had been shared throughout the centuries by virtually every intellectual tradition, West or East. Moreover, he created a confusion that has plagued the self-improvement industry up to the present. Virtually every book, article, tape, seminar, workshop, and educational program on the subject rhapsodizes about becoming, developing, and actualizing the self—and then promptly contradicts itself by defining the process in terms of

being what one already is. This near unanimity is understandable—to approve the idea of changing the self would be to commit heresy against the doctrine of inherent goodness and individuality.

The popular expression of the self-help message is “Let yourself be—put aside artificial constraints and inhibitions and allow the authentic you to burst forth.” With prior restraint of the self branded anathema, we should not be at all surprised that students regard self-discipline as an impediment to self-actualization.

The challenge to teachers is to help students overcome the prevalent confusion about being and becoming. Common sense supports the traditional view that we are all persons by virtue of being human. Our personhood, like our humanity, is utterly complete, and it is ludicrous to speak of becoming what we already are. Because the essence of becoming is change, we can become only *what we are not*. Change, of course, may be either a matter of degree or of kind, so we can both gain qualities we don’t now have and also enlarge the qualities we do have. The unmannerly can acquire manners, the cruel can become kind, the monolingual can master other languages. Similarly, those who are already studious, tolerant, patient, or compassionate can become more so. Change, of course, is not always for the better. Accidentally or by choice, we may become worse than we were. Everyday experience reminds us that we can ill afford to relax our effort to improve.

This understanding of becoming blends perfectly with the ideas that we are imperfect rather than inherently wise and good, and that both individuality and knowledge are gained by effort rather than being in-born. All of which underlines two axioms upon which genuine self-improvement, in or out of the classroom,

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