

Education and Learned Helplessness

William Matthew McCarter, University of Texas-Arlington

Federal, state, and local governments spend hundreds of millions of dollars on developmental education because so many students are underprepared for higher education. There are myriad ways that students are often academically underprepared for college, however, students often put themselves at a disadvantage when they leave high school and attend college because they fail to understand that there are very profound differences between the public education that they have and the higher education that they are seeking. This is especially the case for many of America's community college students who feel that they are going into the 13th grade and not that they are attending one of America's institutions of higher learning. After nearly a decade of teaching in higher education, one of the larger problems I see in terms of education is how "learned helplessness" is cultivated in students in many of today's secondary schools.

One of the ways that high school teachers fail their students is by giving those students too much support. This "support" is what helps to cultivate "learned helplessness." While I would agree that both high school teachers and college and university professors should give their students the support they need, I believe that high school teachers go too far. However, I can't say that high school teachers are entirely at fault. I think that they are only responding to the demands of standardized testing in American high schools. Because of the high stakes testing that has accompanied the NCLB legislation; high school teachers cannot allow students to fail these exams. As a result, instead of providing students with problems to be solved, these high school teachers are forced to tell students what they must learn. This, in turn, becomes the baseline for what students consider "learning" to be. Because of the demands of high stakes testing, high school teachers must summarize the main ideas of the texts that students should

be reading. They must outline notes for the students, provide them with study guides, and provide them with pertinent questions about the texts. In short, high school teachers must do the thinking for the student instead of providing students with a safe environment where they can go through the messy complications of thinking for themselves.

Instead of allowing their students to wallow in the complexity of the world in which we live, high school teachers must construct a static reality that can be memorized and then spewed out onto a multiple choice exam when test time comes. This is precisely what the Brazilian educator, Paulo Freire, called "the banking concept of education" in his landmark book, *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. All of these things that are designed to "help" the student – the outlines, the study guides, etc. – only further inhibits any thinking that the student may have to do for themselves. Instead, this is the "thinking" that the student expects to be done by the teacher when the student gets to college. Before a student can attend college – especially at the community college – the student must take an exam (often it is the COMPASS test). One of the things that students must do while taking this exam is understanding the inferences in the texts that they read. Students often don't do this very well and, as a result, must take a developmental course to help them to cultivate this skill set. At that point, the student often expects the instructor to provide them with the study guides and outlines that point out these inferences for the student and the cycle continues.

A student's inability to understand inferences in the text also manifests itself in the research process. If students are expected to do any research at all in high school, they are also often given too much help as they go through the research process. Again, instead of allowing their students to wallow in the complexity of a problem, they often short cut this research process by allowing the students to begin their research from a position of certainty. This leads to students looking for sources that agree with their position and, if the students are

required to find any sources that might challenge their prior assumptions, they are often token sources that enable the student to set up a straw man argument in an either/ or binary position. This only teaches the student that he or she was right all along and didn't really need to do any research in the first place. It only reinforces the sense of certainty that people have and doesn't challenge their assumptions or preconceptions about the world around them. This also leads to students embracing a neat and tidy view of the world and stresses its blacks and whites leaving little room for the grays that really make up the dynamic reality in which we live. Again, this scenario also echoes the very thing that Paulo Freire argued against in "The Banking Concept of Education."

Once a student learns that all they have to do is ask enough questions and the teacher will "tell them the answer" (as if it were that simple and there was only one definitive answer), why would they do anything else? Once a student becomes accustomed to the teacher doing their thinking for them, why would they go through the messy complications of doing it themselves? Why is it that "I don't get it," seems to be the most ubiquitous statement in academia and the universal precursor to learning? Why is it that when the instructor tries to engage in a dialogue with the student (what Freire would consider to be the real prerequisite to learning) by asking a question like "what is it that you don't get," that more often than not, the student answers the question (almost reflexively and without thinking) "everything?" It makes me wonder how many times in the past that same student had made that same statement and answered that same question ("what don't you get?") with that same answer and, as a consequence, the teacher said, "Let me help you" and then either on paper or in a verbal answer, gave the student a point by point analysis of the text or idea in question. It makes me wonder how when all of us, from the kindergarten teacher on up through the university

professor, are going to start replying to the statement "I don't get it" with the statement "you need to" instead of "let me help you by telling you the answer."

Those of us who teach in the humanities can learn a lot from the folks over in the math department. When students solve math problems in algebra class, they have to put the points on the Cartesian graph and then connect the dots on the graph by drawing a line. If those of us in the humanities give our students too much help, we are basically drawing the points on the graph for them and then telling them to connect the dots. We are solving more than half of the problem for them. This has huge consequences in that students will not develop the critical thinking skills they need to function in a global economy (even the math people will tell us that before the student can apply a mathematical formula to a phenomenon, they must be able to understand the phenomenon first). It also has huge consequences for the humanities in that if all there is to it is just connecting the dots, then how important is it anyway?

We need to make it abundantly clear that there is more to learning than just connecting the dots and we also need to let our students know that if they have yet to understand the phenomenon, they need to because that, too, is part of the problem that they are to solve. Maybe then we can empower our students to engage with the various phenomena they encounter in the humanities in meaningful ways. Maybe then we can help provide our students with the self-efficacy that comes from being able to conceptualize a problem and posit a solution. Maybe then our students will be able to conceptualize the problems in their own lives and develop strategies to solve those problems as well. Maybe then the messy complications of trying to understand a phenomenon and asking one's self questions about that phenomenon will once again be the precursor to learning instead of "I don't get it." Maybe then "learned helplessness" will finally take its place on the ash heap of history next to eugenics, small pox, and the Edsel.