

Teaching Today

Can't or Won't: The Culture of Helplessness

We might provide the most detailed of instructions, but students will still find a reason to challenge those instructions as inadequate and shift the responsibility of the work to us, writes Lori Isbell.

By Lori Isbell

March 14, 2017

Recently, I received an email from a student asking me the name of a writer -- a writer whose book we'd been reading for two weeks. (And discussing in class. And writing about in class.) It was not a textbook, anthology or unusual digital source. It was an old-fashioned printed book containing one play by one writer.

I knew that the student owned the book, because I had seen her with it in class, and in fact, she had told me she was enjoying the reading. However, when it was time for her to do an assignment on the playwright ... well, she was stumped. She just didn't know his name.

I had to explain to her, carefully, and with what I hope was compassion, that if she hadn't picked up his name in the class discussions so far (or, I was thinking, in the course syllabus and calendar), then she could always try looking on the front cover of the book.

I share this story from my composition course at a midsize community college to make a point about the increasing "helplessness" of our students and their tendency to send emails and text messages of all sorts with the most basic questions about the most obvious matters. It is a helplessness, I believe, that is part feigned and part real, but nevertheless it is a problem that is eroding academe.

My colleague has a theory about the helplessness problem: he says students send emails as a deflection maneuver, and many are so reluctant to tackle the assignment at hand that they will employ a delaying tactic of sending inquiries instead. (Who is the writer? What was the assignment? When is the paper due? How long does it have to be?)

I think he's onto something. We might provide the most detailed of written and oral instructions, but students will still find a reason, an occasion or excuse, to challenge those instructions as inadequate to their needs and (attempt to) shift the responsibility of the work from them to us.

It becomes like a game of tennis, this batting around of responsibility. We serve an assignment over the net with clear guidelines and expectations, and they either let the ball drop, claiming they somehow weren't prepared (I didn't know ... You never told me ... The assignment sheet didn't say ...) or they question whether the ball was even fair in the first place (Too long! Too hard! Hey, out of bounds!).

We then serve it again, and again, to our great fatigue, but perhaps resolve that next time we won't bother to serve at all. Maybe next time, we think, we'll just hand the ball to the students

and thereby absolve them of actual effort. We'll put the students in charge of the game; we'll forfeit, give up.

Which is probably just what many of them are angling for.

Yet that is not necessarily because they lack academic ability -- although that may be true as well at the community college level -- but because they lack academic agency, it seems. They are unable or unwilling to recognize their own role in developing college skills, in earning a college education.

I should acknowledge here that I'm old enough to be a generation or two away from the academic and popular culture of today's traditional-age students. They have grown up in a world with ubiquitous screens, upon which it takes only a tap-tap or a few clicks to make lights and music swirl, phantasmagorias appear.

I can compare that to the early years of my own undergraduate education in which typewriters and even pencils were the tools of the day -- tools that couldn't as easily yield pleasures or produce work. To do research meant traversing to the campus library in person and thumbing through the card catalog, stacks of journals and books.

But more important, it meant working independently on assignments, removed from easy contact and communication with instructors. If one wanted to ask a question of a professor in those days -- specifically, over the weekend or in the wee hours of the night -- it would have required going to her house and doing a tap-tap on the front window.

An Institutional Acknowledgment

Yet nostalgia aside, I'd say evidence abounds of the growing helplessness of our students for academic tasks. I've recently discovered, for example, that many students can't or won't take notes. As soon as I write something on the board or project it overhead, a student inevitably calls out, "Can't you post that online? Can't you email that to us?" Some students don't even bring writing utensils to class, or paper or notebooks or the textbooks from which we're working. And I'm not talking about the textbooks that perhaps they can't afford -- that's a different sort of issue. I'm talking about textbooks for which they've already spent their money and now often leave under beds or in the backseats of cars.

I've had some students counter that they don't bring their books to class because they don't know when they'll need them, or what we're doing each day. When I refer them to our class syllabus and detailed daily calendar, they then counter that the calendar is, like, you know, confusing.

One of two things is true here: 1) they really can't read a simple table with dates on the left side and reading/writing assignments on the right, or 2) they just don't want to be responsible for reading it, as this might suggest they'd be responsible for the assigned work as well.

But I don't wish to rely on personal anecdotes for my case. On the contrary, I want to point out that at my college, and many others, there has been an institutional acknowledgment of the helplessness of students. We now have courses at my college, under the label of "student

success,” that are designed to teach (and award college-level academic credit for) things such as time management and a sense of self-awareness.

While I certainly value such skills and traits, and hope that my students have them or develop them over time, the very existence of such classes lends credence to the proposition that students lack these basic elements of young adulthood when entering college.

Furthermore, my college has recently approved a proposal (brought by a student group to the Faculty Senate) that both acknowledges and legitimizes our students’ demands of having access to instructors 24/7. We instructors must now include a pledge in our course syllabi to respond to student emails within 24 hours and to return all graded work (with feedback) in seven days. It seems our campus is formally affirming the danger I spoke of earlier: the shifting of more responsibilities from students to instructors.

So what do we, as instructors, do in the helplessness culture? Do we capitulate to students, ask ever and ever less, and respond to emails and provide instructions in increasingly redundant ways? Or do we stand and fight the battle for instilling in our students the kind of accountability, autonomy and self-awareness our institutions tout? To do the former, in my opinion, only degrades academe; to do the latter risks the wrath of both students and administration.

For the record, I’m not out to discourage meaningful communication between students and instructors, either in person or online. On the contrary, as a teacher of introductory classes, I take seriously my role as a mentor to beginning students. I spend many hours each semester meeting with students one-on-one and connecting them with support services for tutoring, financial aid, personal counseling and the like. Many have complicated -- even harrowing -- lives, so I make time for serious conversations about that.

But the majority of my interactions with students these days -- especially via email -- are not of the substantive or academic variety but rather banterings about whether an assignment is really due on the due date, or what we did in class last Tuesday if last Tuesday was an exam. I also occasionally receive the late-night rant in which an aggrieved student wants to know why he is failing the class, just because he has submitted a long series of failing papers and/or not submitted the papers at all.

I respond to those emails -- I respond to every email -- returning the ball back over the net and awaiting the next missive. I explain and repeat, reiterate, reaffirm. Yet I wish, as I am typing my fingers into nubs, my students might take their education into their own two hands.

Bio

Lori Isbell is a playwright and professor of English at Yavapai College.