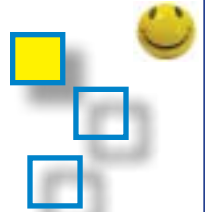


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## Education and Consumerism: Using Students' Assumptions to Challenge Their Thinking

WITH INCREASING stridence, college students and their parents frame their educational expectations with a consumer paradigm, viewing professors as their employees, universities as consumer markets, and degrees as commodities. As a humanities professor, I have always bristled at this equation. However, I see a way to use this metaphor for good purpose. Rather than fight this flawed mentality, I present the consumer model during one of our first class sessions and engage students in an exploration of its applicability to the educational enterprise.

First, I endorse the maxim that "you get what you pay for." Second, I encourage students to conceive of the course (at least temporarily) as a transaction and our student-professor relationship as a business relationship. As a professor of creative writing, literature, and composition, I never thought I would write that sentence. However, embracing the consumer paradigm that has made educators grind their teeth is a way to test students' assumptions about the purpose and value of a college education, the responsibilities of both the student, the professor, and the institution, and the standards by which consumers should assess the worth of a product. In form, this discussion might resemble the negotiation of a contract between two parties who want to define the terms of a purchase or an exchange of goods or services. Though I have the key components in mind before the class begins, I engage the students in constructing the language and defining terms and conditions of this contract.

In the part of this discussion, which may consume one or more class sessions, I ask students to define the content or skills suggested by the course description that have a clear market value, encouraging them to think in terms of specific companies, types of work, or industries that they hope

to enter. For example, I ask, "Based on my descriptions of this course's content and objectives, what specific skill or knowledge can you acquire that could have a real and practical value for \_\_\_\_\_ (individuals in a particular field or industry)? Why is that skill or knowledge valuable, desirable or useful to \_\_\_\_\_ (employers in that particular industry)?"

Next, I ask them to consider pricing. In one sense, students are acquiring intellectual and social goods that they will later sell or trade to someone else who wants them. So I ask, "What should this valuable knowledge or skill cost you to acquire? Can it be purchased or does it have to be earned?" Then I ask them to consider why a future employer would be willing to pay for this good, and what price that employer would consider reasonable. The point of this discussion is to challenge students' assumptions that they are the consumers in this equation. A more useful application of the consumer model acknowledges that the "product" universities are generating is the student's mind and professional readiness. If students can see that they occupy a different space in the equation, then they can begin to think differently about what is at stake for them as a participant in the educational exchange.

Once they have wrestled with these questions, I ask students to consider the terms and conditions of the student-professor relationship. As one of many suppliers who help produce prospective employees for the world's industries, I generate various grades of intellectual capital. Likewise, I have various grades of raw material available for students to transform into that intellectual capital. High-quality skills and knowledge are available, but only at a high price. Cheaper quality intellectual goods are available for a cheaper price. I ask students what currency they can use to acquire these

intellectual goods. The most astute students recognize quickly that "their money is no good here." The currency that works is time and attention.

Before we conclude the exploration and application of the consumer metaphor, I press one other element. It might be tempting for students to view the university as a large manufacturing enterprise and professors as various mechanisms in an assembly line process. However, assembly production is only way to create goods. One of the reasons private, liberal arts, face-to-face education is expensive is that it can be individualized. Our goods are shaped by hand, and no two students come out with exactly the same intellectual, spiritual, or imaginative acuity.

### An equitable investment on both sides

Ultimately, this discussion can help us to define the nature of our obligations to one another. As we negotiate the contract,

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## Good Teaching is Like Good Parenting: The Benefits of an Authoritative Teaching Style

Jonathan F. Bassett and Timothy L. Snyder  
Lander University

INTUITIVELY, PEOPLE might expect good professors to set demanding goals for students that push them to maximize their potential, while also establishing emotional rapport in order to encourage students to persevere in the pursuit of those goals. These same expectations would seemingly apply equally well to good parents. About three years ago, the authors of this article began having conversations about the appeal of generalizing the concept of parenting styles from developmental psychology to the teaching styles of university professors.

A well accepted classification scheme used in developmental psychology (Baumrind, 1971) categorizes parents as having one of four styles. These styles are determined primarily by the factors of nurturance and control. Nurturance refers to how much and in what ways parents express feelings of warmth, concern, and affection for their children. Control refers to how much and in what ways parents establish rules, set limits, and shape the behavior of their children. Parents low on both the nurturance and control factors would be labeled as neglectful. These parents are not involved in the lives of their children, do not express love for them, and do not attempt to regulate their behavior. Parents high on nurturance and but low on control would be labeled as permissive. These parents express love for their children but make no efforts to set or enforce rules. Parents low on nurturance but high on control would be labeled as authoritarian. These parents express little warmth towards children but set strict rules and expect them to be obeyed absolutely and unquestioningly based on fear of severe punishment. Parents high on both nurturance and control would be labeled as authoritative. These parents express warmth and care for children and set appropriate standards for their behavior; however, they explain the rationale behind these standards so that children will follow rules because they see the value in doing so not because they fear punishment for not doing so.

It does not take a great stretch of the imagination to transpose this system onto university professors. The neglectful

professor is just going through the motions and is not engaged with his or her teaching or students. She/he does not care about students and does not set rigorous academic standards. The permissive professor enjoys interacting with students, is empathic and friendly towards them, perhaps even gives entertaining lectures, but does not push or challenge their intellectual development. The authoritarian professor has a reputation for requiring a rigorous and demanding workload, as well as being strict and unyielding in rules for classroom conduct, attendance, testing, and assignment due dates. She/he also expressed little concern for students' welfare and is likely perceived as tough but not caring. The authoritative professor sets high academic standards and expects obedience to syllabus policies but attempts to gain such obedience by fostering rapport with students and convincing them that the class standards and policies were designed with their best interest in mind.

The authoritative parenting style has been documented as the most effective (Baumrind, 1967; Lamborn, Mounts, Steinberg, & Dornbusch, 1991), so it seemed a plausible hypothesis that the authoritative style would also be the best way to teach. A review of the literature revealed that several authors (Barnas, 2001; Bernstein, 2001; Walker, 2009; Wentzel, 2002) had presented logical arguments for the similarity between parenting styles and teaching styles and for the superiority of the authoritative style. However, there was little in the way of empirical validation for these arguments.

Our first step in attempting such validation was a collaboration with Daniel Rogers and Courtney Collins at Kennesaw State University. We had students at Lander and Kennesaw rate actual professors for classes in which they were currently enrolled using an instrument originally developed for measuring differences in how parents assert control, which had been modified slightly for our purpose to assess how professors assert control over students. Permissive styles were exemplified by statements like "In a well-run classroom the students should have their way as often as the instructor did." Authoritarian styles were exemplified

by statements like "Whenever the professor told me to do something, she/he expected me to do it immediately without asking any questions." Authoritative styles were exemplified by statements like "I knew what the professor expected of me in the class, but I also felt free to discuss those expectations with her/him when I felt that they were unreasonable." Professors described by their students as higher on the authoritative style of exerting control were perceived as setting higher achievement standards, fostering more interest in learning, being clearer, being more helpful, and being a better quality teacher overall (Bassett, Snyder, Rogers, & Collins, 2013).

Next, we asked Lander students to pretend that they were representatives on a committee reviewing job applications for a professor position. The experience and qualifications of the candidates was equivalent but they differed as to whether comments from previous students portrayed them as having a permissive, authoritarian, or authoritative style. Students recommended the hypothetical teacher described as having an authoritative style more strongly than those described as having permissive or authoritarian styles (Bassett & Snyder, 2013).

Most recently, we had Lander students describe their best and worst university professor using an instrument that yields separate measures of nurturance and control. Students rated their best professor as higher on both nurturance and control than their worst professor (Snyder & Bassett, 2014).

The results of our research point to the benefits of an authoritative teaching style characterized by high levels of both nurturance and control. The authoritative style is associated with more favorable student perceptions and, at least based on self-reported measures, with better student motivation, grades, and learning outcomes. We invite you to consider how you set standards for and exert control over students' behavior as well as how you try to encourage and support them.

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students have an opportunity to define learning outcomes in terms of quality and caliber. If the class is a rhetoric and research writing class, for example, then we can specify what distinguishes high-quality communication and research skills (Egyptian cotton) from low-quality skills (burlap). Both are serviceable, but they make very different impressions on the one who wears them. We can clarify what distinguishes high-quality syntax and vocabulary (silk) from basic literacy (polyester)? Furthermore, we can determine fair pricing for both the high-quality goods—intellectual contribution and risk-taking, active engagement, advance preparation—and the cheaper knock-off: minimal attendance, mediocre intellectual exertion, predictability.

Finally, I ask students to consider what their teacher's investment in the transaction should be. If instruction can be understood as the kind of time, care, and expertise that a carpenter might invest in fine cabinetry, then what constitutes superior instructional investment? And what would mark

instruction as basic—just enough to satisfy the minimum requirements? If the consumer model is one the students want to embrace, then level of investment should be equitable on both sides of the table.

If in education, as in business, we get what we pay for, and the real currency with which students acquire knowledge and/or professional skill is their time and attention to the task of learning, not their money, then what students get from the class and from the instructor should match what they've paid for that educational experience. If students don't want to pay a premium price for premium intellectual goods, then they shouldn't expect to get premium personal attention from the instructor. I remind students that my initial investment in the course is equitable. Everyone gets the same syllabus, the same assignments, equal opportunity to participate in or lead discussion, identical lectures (yes, on occasion I still give lectures), the same research and reading assignments, the same intellectual invitations and challenges. Unfortunately, some students just want a bargain; they spend a little to get a little. Others want the premium goods, willingly investing exceptional intellectual capital to

get the good stuff. If we adopt a consumer mentality as the model for higher education, then it only makes sense for the instructor to match students' intellectual investment penny for penny.

Engaging students in an analysis of the consumer model creates an opportunity for decision-making. Some students will likely reject this model, arguing that it is insufficient, ill-fitted, or inappropriate to the mission of higher education. Others will endorse the consumer model even more passionately, recognizing the complexity, rather than the oversimplification of this metaphor. Either way, they are thinking. And that's a check I will happily cash any day.

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