

Murray State Teaching Chronicles

Connecting the Teaching Community at Murray State University

2006 • Edition 1

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Introducing Our Special Edition of the Murray State Teaching Chronicles

by Linda Miller, Director Center for Teaching, Learning & Technology (Murray State University)

Welcome to a special edition of the Murray State Teaching Chronicles! For this edition we have something a little different from our standard fare. The idea for this special edition came from a workshop *Teaching Online: The Impact of Technology on Course Design* that CTLT held last fall. It was delivered online. Faculty from across the Commonwealth were invited to participate. More than 160 faculty joined us. The resulting workshop was a wonderful example of collaboration among public universities, independent colleges and the Kentucky Community and Technical College System. Faculty shared experiences, ideas and enthusiasm. The excellent discussions reprinted here came from group conversations in a module on our changing students. As this topic is relevant to educators across the state, we sought permission to reproduce some of the discussion here. It confirmed for us the dedication, energy and thoughtfulness of Kentucky faculty. We think you'll agree that Kentucky students are lucky to have them!



You can find the series of Murray State Teaching Chronicles online at <http://racernet.murraystate.edu/mstc/>

Remember the Kentucky Conference on the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning.

When: May 24–25, 2006

Where: Marriott Griffon Gate Resort in Lexington, KY

For more information:

<http://cpe.ky.gov/calendar/statewide/facdev.htm>



The Red Ink Corner

by James Ricky Cox, Department of Chemistry, 2005–06 Teaching Scholar-in-Residence at CTLT (Murray State University)

As Linda outlined in her introduction, this is a special issue of the *Murray State Teaching Chronicles* (MS/TC) devoted to the “Changing Student.” In this edition, we have several thought-provoking articles by faculty and staff members who participated in an online workshop (Teaching Online: The Impact of Technology on Course Design) that CTLT developed and delivered across the state of Kentucky in November 2005. An important aspect of this workshop was a discussion on the changing attitudes and culture of students and the appropriate response in higher education. The discussion generated on this topic was particularly good and we were compelled to publish the thoughts of various participants in this edition of the MS/TC.

Although the MS/TC is a forum to disseminate ideas and promote dialogue on teaching at Murray State, this special issue has contributions from faculty and staff, with diverse backgrounds and job descriptions,

across the state. The majority of contributions to the MS/TC will continue to be from the Murray State community; however, we will occasionally invite some outside work from around the state and beyond.

We are already collecting submissions for Vol. 3 of the *Chronicles* and I hope to have a variety of articles from across campus. Please give serious thought to contributing your time and wisdom in order to continually improve the teaching and learning environment at Murray State University.

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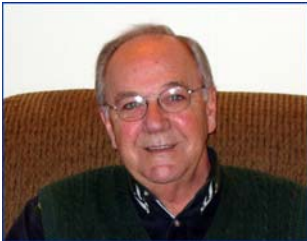


Teaching Online

the impact
of technology
on course design

Introducing “The Changing Student” Conversation

In November 2005, the Center for Teaching, Learning and Technology (CTLT) developed and delivered an online faculty development workshop for faculty and staff across the state of Kentucky. This workshop focused on the impact of technology on course design and the changing student. The changing student module of this workshop was facilitated by Hal Rice of CTLT and involved a discussion board thread in Blackboard. Hal’s initial post is on the following page and provides his thoughts on the characteristics of current college students. Participants in the workshop were asked to respond to Hal’s post and provide their own thoughts on this subject. The threads in this discussion were excellent, and we decided to convert a diverse set of posts into articles for a special edition of the *Murray State Teaching Chronicles (MS/TC)*. We hope you enjoy this special edition devoted to the changing student.



The Changing Student

by Hal Rice (Murray State University)

The students we find waiting in our classrooms today are very different from those we saw just a few years ago. These students have grown up in a world that has overwhelmed them with information and in an environment that has created a population that sees no value in gaining information simply for the sake of possessing it. The resulting attitude is one of knowing the information is there for the taking whenever it is required so why worry with it now. Growing up in world with a constant bombardment of external stimuli has also given us a generation of students with little patience for reading text or listening to lectures. No value is placed on intellectual pursuits solely for the sake of knowing. They want a sound byte and a quick video clip, which will result in a quick conclusion to the matter at hand. Each course they take is seen as a stand-alone stepping-stone leading to a certificate, which will open the door to employment opportunities. They come to us ill prepared for academic work and may even have a sense of entitlement that says if they just show up at appointed times they will move through the system.

We are seeing a much larger percentage of non-traditional students in our classrooms. By non-traditional we are talking about those students above the age of 25 who have already been in the work force and may have already started a family. Many of these students are either returning to school to complete a degree or to work on a postgraduate degree to help them move up the economic ladder. Others have lost jobs due to a changing economy and are looking to education to prepare them for some other occupation.

“The students we find waiting in our classrooms today are very different from those we saw just a few years ago.”

In years past, these non-traditional students were among the best because they had seen the value of education in the real world, but today many instructors are reporting that this is no longer the case. They may feel bitter for having to start over again and resent that they are not seen as having value in the work place without some sort of certification. Since most of them are working and supporting a family, they expect their education to work around these other obligations. Education is seen as just another thing on a long checklist of things they need to do and not as a long-term investment for the future.

With both groups of students, the result is students who are not really engaged in the learning process. They do not comprehend the necessity of taking what has been learned in one course and carrying it over to other courses or to the next level of study.

Much of the above may be seen as an entirely negative overview of the current crop of students in the higher education today, but not everything about the students of today is bad. They are very intelligent and have some very altruistic characteristics. They have grown up in a world that is vastly different than most of us were familiar with from our days as students. They process information differently and have a different approach to problems they confront when compared to past generations.

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Teaching Out of Time

by Ann Beck (Murray State University)

I think that when I feel “out of time” in my classroom I am aware that I am very concerned about the students who don’t respond to the traditional stimuli. I wouldn’t complain about the lack of response if I didn’t care about these “new” students. I’ve recently returned to teaching after five years of working within my discipline in the public sector. From my limited perspective, I’ve noticed that there are now many more students who have this ticket-punching perspective and expectation about the University experience.

For my part, I don’t like being “commodified” by this increasingly common student who sees this “learning” process as a ticket-punching exercise and who views me as one relatively unimportant ticket-puncher. I was and continue to be attracted to teaching/learning because it is a highly interactive endeavor that requires trust, suspension of belief and disbelief, and emotional engagement. More than ever before, I am constantly asked or required to “advertise” and “demonstrate” my “value” to students, administration, and the general public. I had hoped that I entered an honorable trade or craft or profession that did not require such hyping. Now, like everyone else in this “neo-liberal” world, I feel reduced to one more little voice hawking my wares on a street filled with noise. I think the constant competition wears down both me and the students.

I certainly think that a virtual or actual university might be a place for reflection and learning for anyone at one time or another in one’s life. I value the existence of universities as centers within a storm where the participants can engage in active learning with each other. I’m not so sure that many others in the larger social community see the university in the same way. Universities seem to me to be the modern monasteries and I’m always hopeful that I can engage a few of the students into the adventure promised by this life of the mind connected to the heart of the world. I’m willing to try a number of teaching and learning methods to do that. Yet, in the end, I’m inviting them into a “discipline” that requires the development of certain knowledge, skills, and

abilities related to the consideration and generation of ideas and knowledge. I want them to discover, from their own efforts, the endless reward that follows “becoming.” If students reject ideas and knowledge, or don’t believe the skills and abilities are worthy of their investment, I am not willing to manipulate them through fear, or simplicity, or a belief that they can get the discipline for “almost nothing.” There is no “becoming” in that life, only possession.

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The Changing Student Calls for a Change in Focus

by Cathy Hunt (Henderson Community College)

One of the shifts that has occurred during my 25-year teaching tenure, and is even now still evolving, is the shift from an emphasis on teaching and the instructor to a focus on learning. The discussion prompt: “We should not be concerned with students who are not responsive or bored with traditional teaching methods” is certainly a throw back to that earlier paradigm.

While the “learning-centered” shift is certainly bombarding us now with a deluge of “buzz-words,” at its core is a fundamental belief that it is primarily the work of instructors to create learning environments which not only make it possible for students to learn but actually maximize their ability to do so.

I think it may be unrealistic to say that **all** students can learn, **all** things, at **all** times. However, if I reach such a conclusion about a particular student before I have provided options for learning and assessment which allow that student the ability to achieve and demonstrate that learning, I have fallen short of my goals and teaching values. Students, with their differing learning styles and experiences, may not be responsive to “my method,” probably fashioned after “my learning style,” but they may respond with creative genius in another mode.

Now I admit that this has been, and continues to be, a real challenge for me as a long-standing biology lecturer. However, I think that one of the

things I have found so inviting and stimulating about teaching online is that the experience challenges me to find new ways to facilitate student learning and new ways for students to demonstrate their learning. After all, even as a “skilled” lecturer, I don’t want to be a “talking online head.”

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“I think that one of the things I have found so inviting and stimulating about teaching online is that the experience challenges me to find new ways to facilitate student learning and new ways for students to demonstrate their learning.”



Addressing the Needs of the Changing Student

by Stacia Keith (Elizabethtown Community and Technical College)

How do we respond to the changing student? As teachers, we MUST be concerned with the needs of all students. While some students continue to be able to excel with traditional teaching methods, others are finding themselves incapable of doing well utilizing a lecture format. While part of the issue arises from our “pick and choose” mindset with regard to the information we need/want, the issue also develops from the fact that our elementary, middle and secondary schools have completely changed their teaching methodologies over the last several years. Students are not prepared in the same manner that we were. Gone are the days of working individually in the classroom, long periods of silence and loads of homework that can never be made up if not turned in on time. In their place are mass quantities of group work (even at the elementary school level), constant talking and interaction, and class time to do homework (which if you don’t turn it in on time can usually be handed in until the end of the quarter, many times without penalty).

Consequently, our students are not coming to us with the preparation we would like or would expect. They have not been taught to learn in the same ways that we were. Thus, we must respond to them accordingly. No, we cannot hold their hands. They must be held accountable for acting like adults and must take responsibility for their learning or lack of it. However, we cannot turn a blind eye to the circumstances that confront us. As far as I can tell, we have two choices: change primary and secondary education or adapt to

the current circumstances. While I am an advocate of change, wholeheartedly believe that our primary and secondary education systems are doing students an injustice, and plan to work hard to affect change at those levels, I realize that change does not happen overnight. Thus, I must adapt to my students’ needs. Besides, there’s nothing wrong with mixing things up a little. I would be bored to tears if I didn’t change my courses, assignments and teaching style a bit from time to time. Of course in communication, interactive classrooms are a necessity.

“As far as I can tell, we have two choices: change primary and secondary education or adapt to the current circumstances.”

Many advocate the position that if students do not excel in the learning format that higher education has typically provided, then higher education is not for them. They believe that teaching in the same lecture-style-only format weeds out the undesirable students. I find this mentality preposterous. Certainly higher education is not for everyone, but it should not be reserved for the elite, the exceptional. Everyone deserves at least the chance to achieve his or her goals. We must work to “think outside the box,” and go beyond our “comfort zones” in order to bring students opportunities to learn in ways they can understand and enjoy. If we do not work to adapt, we face the danger of becoming a country club of learning.

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As Students Change, Teaching Does, Too

by Wren Mills (Bowling Green Technical College)

When I first read, “We should not be concerned with students who are not responsive or bored with traditional teaching methods,” I thought to myself, “*But what are traditional teaching methods these days?*” What was considered traditional 20 years ago is now out-dated in some schools (depending on the money they’ve had to invest in technology). At my school (Bowling Green Technical College), Smart Boards and Sympodiums are the norm, and many of us use these interactive devices daily in our classes to engage our students and enhance our lectures. When I go to Western Kentucky University to teach my night class, I’m lucky that the class is scheduled in one of the computer classrooms in the department, which is equipped with a computer for each student and a projector, as well, but most instructors don’t have those resources to work with. Therefore, what is “traditional” to me and my classes and schools may not be for lack of tools in others.

With the changing definition of “traditional teaching methods” in mind, there are so many reasons students might be non-responsive or bored, but the number one and two reasons in my experience are that they are nervous about the coursework (especially in composition classes where they all feel they can’t write well) or they are not challenged. I make sure to gain a personal connection with my students early each term so that I know what their attitudes and feelings are about writing in order to help combat these two causes of poor engagement...

but as I move into the frontier of online teaching, will it be so easy for me to do this with my classes in that medium? I’ll find out over the next few months! I have high hopes that I’ll still be able to do it as I’m an avid emailer and truly enjoy reading what my students write for me.

“As a student, if you’re disinterested and disengaged no matter what your instructors do to try to engage you, perhaps this isn’t the time for you to be in school.”

And last but not least, I must agree with the final statement—a college degree *isn’t* for everyone; however, anyone who wants to try should be allowed to find out for him/herself. I teach at a technical college and a four year university. I see two different levels of higher education

students each day...and at each institution, I can tell which students don’t belong in the setting they’ve chosen—there are ones who should move up a level or down a level and others who should maybe just get a job and try again in a few years. It’s all about maturity, desire, and being able to pursue a goal, I think. As a student, if you’re disinterested and disengaged no matter what your instructors do to try to engage you, perhaps this isn’t the time for you to be in school. While some students are better equipped intellectually to succeed, I think each student has a chance at succeeding and should take that chance if he/she wishes to take it.

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The changing student...or is it the changing instructor?

by Jim Nilson (Northern Kentucky University)

The changing student...or is it the changing instructor? I think a little of both. Within the last 30 or so years, you can compare the way students react to the way an instructor teaches as well as the way instructors react to the way students learn to a sine and cosine path. For all of those non-math folks, you can think of a cosine path as the inverse of a sine path. At certain points along the path, both curves are on the complete opposite end of each other, while at other times they intersect at the same point. Think about the beginning days of an entirely web-based class. How advanced were the students with the technology? How new was this same technology to

“More focus can now be placed on the learning experience and less on the technology behind it.”

those first-time instructors? Chances are the students were farther advanced with using the technology. Jumping to the present day and age, one might argue (I would include myself in this category) that today’s teachers are more comfortable with today’s technologies. More focus can now be placed on the learning experience and less on the technology behind it. In that respect, today’s learners are going to have to adapt and evolve just as the instructors have evolved themselves.

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A Workable Compromise?

by James Rogers (Murray State University)

In many cases, it isn’t the student’s fault for considering traditional lecture boring. As Hal mentioned, students are growing up in a culture that is all about being entertained. While I don’t think we should try to become entertainers in the classroom (I would certainly find that a challenge), we do need to understand the overall background and culture of the students and be **willing to adapt**. I don’t think that requires a big change; most students will appreciate the effort you are making no matter how small it might be. At the same time, we must work to influence the students in a way that will help them to realize that higher education isn’t just about a piece of paper that will lead to a better job. If we as faculty are

“...we must work to influence the students in a way that will help them to realize that higher education isn’t just about a piece of paper that will lead to a better job.”

willing to adapt our styles and they, as students, are willing to see our view of higher education, maybe we can find some common ground somewhere in the middle. For the faculty who are unwilling to change and the students who are unwilling as well, neither will be effective in the long run.

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The Always-changing Student

by James Vail (Elizabethtown Community and Technical College)

The student has been changing ever since there has been a student, and the student will continue to change. The student today has many more and different opportunities than the past student. If I go back to my 'student' days, I had only a couple of choices for where to eat, what to watch, where to go on Friday night, etc. We had pool, pin ball and 'Pong' (one of the first computer games for those who have never heard of it) and not much else. Now there are hundreds of choices for everything and with these opportunities comes changes in priorities. The student today has a different set of priorities than the student of the past. Students view education as something that should always be exciting. They get very 'bored' quickly and 'drop' in and out of the classroom at regular intervals.

The computer, I think, is a part of this being 'bored' since it can be very exciting all the time. (If you do not believe this, how do you explain the hours and hours spent playing games on the computer? We could only

play so much 'Pong' before we got bored with it.) I am seeking a new (for me) way to address the student of today, and since the computer may be the cause of the need for change, it may also be the solution.

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So here I am, a teacher from the '70s (I did not get my first computer (64 K) until the early '90s) trying to learn how to meet the needs of the student from the '00s. Computer and web-based instruction may be the way for these students (and others). The worst thing is that by this time next decade, the student will have changed again and I will be seeking yet another way of making students appreciate and participate in education.

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The Entitled Student – True Confessions of a Junior Faculty Member

by Michael Hatton (Northern Kentucky University)

Each year we “gird our loins” and attempt to make learning fun and exciting while we also propagate the appropriate responsibility and professionalism required for our specific disciplines. In the shuffle of each new year we share the successes and failures of the previous semester with our colleagues, brainstorm ideas for increasing retention, and share articles and other resources to boost one another’s creativity. In the midst of this positive energy, however, there are many educators who are quick to point out “what not to do” in the classroom. For example, “Don’t employ lecturing as your only teaching style because it is only beneficial for one learning modality.” As educators I think we have all been in both situations, either staunchly holding on to a proven teaching method which over time has grown stale and dull, or being quick to criticize the work of our colleagues.

Now that we have gingerly crossed into the twenty-first century, educators are being faced with a new

“I believe that the first step towards addressing these new issues is to start from a personal and professional level.”

challenge—a challenge that our own society has created and one which requires us to work even more closely as colleagues to remedy. As Hal Rice

accurately describes in his article, “The

Changing Student”, we are faced with two emerging forms of students. The first breed of student has been trained to de-value the pursuit of knowledge for personal gratification and thus places the sole value of an education upon the salary it will generate for him/her upon graduation. The second breed of student has evolved from our once beloved non-traditional students who used to compensate for our younger student’s... shall we say, charm. Unfortunately, there is a trend among non-traditional students to sink to the same level of discipline as their younger classmates. With the changing attitudes, and dare I say temperaments, of our students, how should we adjust as educators to meet these new challenges in the classroom?

I believe that the first step towards addressing these new issues is to start from a personal and professional level. As educators we must remember to refresh ourselves through conferences and other opportunities for professional growth. At a recent faculty retreat, the chairman of my department proceeded to ask the faculty questions which directly related to our approach as educators. Some of the questions he posed included:

- How often do you update your syllabi?
- How often do you change your resources and texts?
- How often do you try new teaching styles and approaches?
- How often do you go to conferences or take classes?

While the value of personal and professional development can never be measured, I believe that

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there is a larger issue which needs to be addressed. As our students and world continue to rapidly change around us we are expected to make similar shifts. I fear, however, that higher education has made too many concessions, or at least has accidentally abandoned some fundamental standards that we hold so dear.

In keeping with the need to constantly evaluate my material and teaching styles, I attempt to utilize a variety of techniques, media, and technology in my classes. As Rice points out, however, current students are less willing to make the necessary adjustments for higher education. For the educational process to succeed, the students must still equip themselves for class. If the student doesn't read an assignment, then it doesn't matter if I lecture or if I have a class discussion, creative project, or multimedia presentation. As educators, are we spinning our metaphorical wheels in an attempt to "razzle dazzle" our students instead of focusing on the truly pertinent materials.

For the student who does not prepare for class, it is obvious that they will probably do poorly in the course. The question that all educators struggle with is why some students specifically choose to not invest in their education. I believe that there are three

scenarios which can describe what is happening in our classrooms.

"The question that all educators struggle with is why some students specifically choose to not invest in their education."

1) The "good" students in the class who do their work end up becoming frustrated by those who are slacking off. The "slackers" and their apparent lack of engagement hinder the progress of the course. The "good" students then begin to devalue the

education received in this course and ultimately question the competency of the professor.

2) The "bad" students are "bad" because they have developed poor study skills which have not been addressed by previous teachers. If the student genuinely has an issue or problem, the professor may be less willing to believe them if fantastical excuses have been previously used. This in turn creates a cyclical pattern where the student may become discouraged and completely give up in the class or on his/her personal education in general.

3) Teachers are faced with three types of students in their classes: those students who do rise to the top, those in the middle, and those whose attitudes are less than idyllic. The professor must decide if they are approaching their class from an ensemble perspective or simply willing to let the stragglers make the choice not to learn. Is one approach to teaching better than

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the other? Such questions only breed frustration within the professor which can ultimately lead to complacency and can extinguish every flicker of passion and creativity.

That being said, I believe that today's educators are finding themselves in a delicate and often frustrating situation. Yes, students are different today than they were even five years ago. Yes, educators do need to adapt and change their approaches to parallel contemporary society. However, just like raising children, we can't always give our children what they want because as parents we realize that there are things which might hurt them. At the same time we must instill within them the desire and yearning to be independent learners. Fostering and supporting their interests in the hope that they will develop a drive towards success, dedication, and passion should be one of our primary goals. At the same time, there is something to be said about maintaining the high levels and standards utilized by educators for hundreds of years. The goal of having students exhibit professionalism and dedication in their work and classroom behavior should be a requirement and never an elective.

“May we never forget that learning is a life-long process and the need to continue studying and staying active within our own discipline is paramount.”

Attending a college or university should be fun and exhilarating, but the focus on education and personal growth should never take a back seat. While I don't advocate creating unachievable requirements, I do suggest we revive the academic standards which seem to have fallen by the wayside in our attempt to reinvent ourselves as educators and academic institutions. By holding our students to these higher levels of quality, we too must break free from the bastions of our ivory towers and notice the changing world around us. May we never forget that learning is a life-long process and the need to continue studying and staying active within our own discipline is paramount.

Online learning or technology-enhanced learning is beneficial because we can further the trend of readily accessible information and learning tools for our students. We must also realize the benefits that multimedia can have for our students and that it allows us to address all learning styles and modalities. What the student does with all of that readily accessible information, however, is entirely up to them.

Having raised an entire generation on the availability of point-and-click instant information and gratification, are we now reaping what we sowed? We

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have taught our children that information does not need to be explored and retained but can be simply looked up on the internet. The notion of critical and conceptual thinking has also been abandoned for a more laissez-faire attitude. Our students may not be able to function critically and analytically, but they sure can regurgitate a writing prompt from a portfolio.

So how do we address these two new “breeds” of students? As I have discussed, it requires two parts for success. First, the educator must introduce new ideas, styles, and technologies into the classroom and the learning process. In addition, we must continue to seek personal excellence in our own scholarly and professional pursuits. Second, with the introduction of these new forms of learning, it is imperative that we do not abandon the principles of higher education or the standards necessary for the success and professional growth of our students. In order to accomplish the second objective, however, it requires us to examine a very taboo subject in higher education.

The notion that not all students are “right” for college or should pursue a college degree has been debated for many years. Recently, it seems that this topic has become even more the focus in academic circles. I believe that we must directly address this issue if we are ever going to make progress. For example, if we were to take the notion of “survival of the fittest” and apply it to higher education, doesn’t it seem natural that not every student will succeed, regardless of the efforts of the instructor or institution? Every year we

see students realize that college is not for them. This does not mean that they become second-class citizens simply because they are not pursuing a degree. In fact, many of them become skilled and highly trained workers that those of us with degrees usually rely upon on a daily basis. It is time that we stop blaming ourselves, or being blamed by administration, for this lack of retention.

Education should definitely be available for every single person, regardless of any physical, mental, or economic characteristic. In an age where colleges and universities must beg for every dollar they receive from state and federal funds it is no wonder that such a great emphasis is placed upon retention. The retention of students is then based upon the need for funding instead of the ability and likely success of those same students in an academic or professional setting. Students should not be haphazardly passed through the system for their mediocre work because this simply reinforces their notion that they are paying tuition in order to get an “A”. The notion that an education can be bought, and the accompanying false sense of entitlement, must be destroyed.

Perhaps instead of always figuring out how to make the general student “happy”, we should uphold the notion that going to college and getting a degree is a difficult thing to accomplish. There is a reason we call it “earning” a degree. When we downplay the work and extreme dedication that it takes to get a degree, we begin to see an over-saturation of degree holders

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who, if truth be told, didn't fully earn their degree but were simply passed through the system.

In conclusion, we've only just begun to address the issue of the changing and entitled student. While we might be able to exact change through the introduction of new techniques, technologies, professional growth, and the adherence to the standards of higher education; this is merely a theory. The only proven thing that we can do as educators, however, is to simply do our part and to let the students do theirs. I believe that we can further qualify our "part" by providing a model for our students to follow. Are we teaching just to get paid or are we doing it because we love what we do? When educators create a genuineness in the classroom and create intellectual relationships with students, then we show how invested we truly are in their education and future. The power that we have as educators is not based on our use of technology or on our disciplinary skills, but in our ability to connect on a personal level with our students...a connection which will always surpass any technology or learning modality.

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While we might be able to exact change through the introduction of new techniques, technologies, professional growth, and the adherence to the standards of higher education; this is merely a theory.

