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In Defense of Academic Publishing

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ACADEMICS ATHLETICS COSTS GOVERNANCE INNOVATION POLITICIZATION

In Defense of Academic Publishing

MAY 24, 2009



Geoffrey Vaughan

0 Comments

EMORY UNIVERSITY PROFESSOR MARK BAUERLEIN AND GEORGE LEEF RECENTLY argued that faculty are spending too much time researching and not enough time teaching. Their argument, however, is premised upon a high-school model of teaching. It assumes that all the information a student needs is communicated in class, with homework assigned to reinforce those lessons.

This “teaching” model might work for the study of languages and mathematics and the vocational parts of higher education such as accounting and engineering, but not for the liberal arts.

In the liberal arts, professors and their students are engaged in the same enterprise—reading and understanding a text. Reading *Julius Caesar* is not mere homework, as it probably was in high school, but the very substance of one’s education. The role of the professor as teacher is limited: to organize a schedule of readings, explain some of the background, lay out a way to understand or interpret the work at hand. Professors are doing what students could do for themselves if they had the time and inclination to read a large number of scholarly monographs and essays. Very few undergraduates are about to do this, so we faculty are still needed, but the central character of higher education depends on the professor having a different role than did teachers do in high school.

Yes, professors’ lectures can deepen an understanding of literature like *Julius Caesar* or a philosophical work such as Hobbes’s *Leviathan* and draw attention to features the students might have missed. But the lectures are not more important than reading and understanding the work.

When professors are actively involved in research, students can begin to see that they and their teachers are engaged in a common project of learning through reading and writing, a project that they and their professors are conducting at different levels of sophistication. Just as the student tries for an ‘A,’ the professor tries for the top journal in the field. Peer review is the faculty’s way of being graded. In the end, the student might accept a ‘B’ and the professor a place in a second-tier journal.

Essays, presentations, and exams no longer seem irrational and punitive, as they did in high school, when students see their instructors doing the same thing.

Furthermore, if faculty do not regularly put themselves in front of their peers for review and criticism—of the sort they dole out to their students on a regular basis—what is to prevent them from becoming self-satisfied tyrants and petty bureaucrats? The humility forced upon one by a negative journal review or harsh questions at a conference presentation is a good experience for professors who normally stand in

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front of their students with vastly superior knowledge of the field and, hence, in a seemingly unassailable position.

And students need the example of adults who continue to learn through their research. Ironically, for many students, nothing in college or university indicates to them that they are adults and that their academic responsibilities are as serious as those of paid professionals such as fishermen, tree surgeons, or plumbers.

Instead of seeing themselves as part of the academic tradition of scholarship, students have come to view college as an extension of high school, albeit with more freedoms and fewer classes. If professors increasingly resemble high school teachers—albeit with more freedoms and fewer classes—they do little to erase this perception. Ph.D.s conferred many years ago are not enough to distinguish either themselves or their classes from what students have already seen before.

True, published monographs and refereed articles are not the only way for faculty to subject themselves to scrutiny and to demonstrate mastery of a craft. And, yes, undue attention to research at the expense of teaching one's students can become a problem in the modern academy, as Bauerlein and Leef contend. But a proper balance that leads students and professors to understand their work as more similar than different might engage students in academic work and reform our understanding of the often maligned and mischaracterized enterprise of scholarship.

If my students were skipping class because they were so deeply engaged with reading Shakespeare that they lost track of time, I would praise them (not bury them in absence notices). Choosing Shakespeare over me would be the mark of an educated mind; doing the opposite may well be submission to pedagogical tyranny, unworthy of our mutual goal.

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