

# “Dear Students”: Breaking Bread at the Terminus of Learning

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*Let this be a lesson to you students. You are now coming to the end of another semester, arbitrarily designated as having an even number of weeks, crammed with a range of objectives that no doubt most of you have not met. For one thing, you did not read. But my, did one try to encourage you. You will have a chance to punish your teacher with absurd course ratings and meaningless criteria. You will be able to “rate your professor” in the worst sense of the practice.*

Modern education, if nothing else, is the elevation of admired, if predictable failure, over heroic, diligent success. The latter are always seen as the tossers of the classroom, because they let the side down. Let’s face it: the mediocrats will always get top billing from the managers, largely because the mediocrats are the managers.

Do not, however, despair. To have you, dear students, in the classroom, is to feel vitality and strength, to find a sense of purpose. Despite every attempt by the educational commissars to hack, diminish and denude the worth of a university education, some of you have realised that a love of the word and the feeling for learning is a love like no other. It is orgiastic in release, and cathartic in cleansing: to be able to wash, bathe and cleanse in a text, and leave it invigorated. To be able to feel glorious cerebration.

Ultimately, you are the only reason the academic functions, why the university breathes in its staggered, desperate way, escaping the shot that will end it. The only reason the teacher or instructor has any calculable worth, can turn up on their hindlegs and brave a sea of faces in the muddled search for knowledge, hoping that a message might mind find its mark in the dark recess of a journey.

That student-teacher relationship is almost more important than a love affair or conjugal union. It is an admission of unadulterated trust, a conveyance of one being’s wonder into another’s quest to shape it. For in that union, the mind plays with thoughts expressed, the

assignments and papers submitted depictions of an inner self, a vulnerable being held up for the most intense questioning. The instructor reads the student's work as a full statement of effort, defect and all, weakness displayed, error prostrate.

It is the task of the instructor to show a way to best understand such defects, to warn of the potholes in the learning life, to issue caveats over those gnarly points where you might be caught out. Make sure you do not trip over a source with origins that may compromise its worth. (The opinion of a law company website can hardly rise to the level of a court opinion, as much as the authors might think it does.) Make sure you state a claim clearly. Avoid the clunky, the waffly, the syntactically vicious. The savagery of conciseness will set you free.

In recent years, you can even say decades, that sacred union between yearning, curious student and profound, eager pedagogue has been assailed, if not destroyed altogether. The bureaucrats have decided to mock and ridicule the academic as ornately irrelevant, a clown in the front of a room who deserves nothing but contempt. Somewhere along the line, a number of risible morons decided that students and teachers were somehow equal in their possession of knowledge, presuming that all opinions have equivalent weight. That bastard beast known as the lectorial was born – or was it the “flipped classroom”? Some academics have turned into bureaucrats, the Vichy-Quisling class who have sold out their own in an effort to rise up that greasiest of poles: middle management. In such desert spaces, ideas, and learning, go to perish in horrible ways, most commonly by means of the spreadsheet.

A relentless pushdown, even pulverising of the beauty that is abstract learning, complex form, Platonic ecstasy, has been taking place across teaching institutions, largely in the hope of securing more students who are best treated as dunderheaded gullible consumers than learning vessels filled with wonder. The advent of the coronavirus pandemic simply added a drug-filled impetus to the measure, a nightmarish fuel to the fire of isolated despair. Get online everyone: you know you want to.

On this day, we are engaged in that most glorious of occasions an instructor, a lecturer, a pedagogue can ever have with their students: break bread and reflect sweetly upon the weeks passed. It is a most solemn yet deeply felt occasion. It is the end of the semester, and when you leave this classroom, a vestigial thought might stir on what you learnt. At an opportune moment, it might comfort you, even save you.

This is unlikely to happen in the future. We are now at a terminus – of sorts. Universities may be liquidated (in some cases, deservedly) by the gibbering hordes and minions of the Artificial Intelligence revolution. Lectures and seminars will become programmatic spouts and spurts arranged and organised for delivery, leaving academics to suicide in libraries without books. Essays will be derivative, machine products, tested on the quality of the AI function, rather than the quality of the human endeavour. The idea of a crafted essay with all its beautiful, unintended faults: the misplaced colon, the split infinitive, the tormenting tautology, will pass into an anodyne, textual sludge called technological perfection. When that happens, we all best take leave, and depart this earth. But even then, it could be artificially generated.

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