

# College Education in America: “Learning to Be Stupid in the Culture of Cash”

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*You might think that reading about a Podunk University’s English teacher’s attempt to connect the dots between the poverty of American education and the gullibility of the American public may be a little trivial, considering we’ve embarked on the first, openly-confessed imperial adventure of senescent capitalism in the US, but bear with me. The question my experiences in the classroom raise is why have these young people been educated to such abysmal depths of ignorance.*

*“I don’t read,” says a junior without the slightest self-consciousness. She has not the smallest hint that professing a habitual preference for not reading at a university is like bragging in ordinary life that one chooses not to breathe. She is in my “World Literature” class. She has to read novels by African, Latin American, and Asian authors. She is not there by choice: it’s just a “distribution” requirement for graduation, and it’s easier than philosophy -she thinks.*

The novel she has trouble reading is Isabel Allende’s “Of Love and Shadows,” set in the post-coup terror of Pinochet’s junta’s Nazi-style regime in Chile, 1973-1989. No one in the class, including the English majors, can write a focused essay of analysis, so I have to teach that. No one in the class knows where Chile is, so I make photocopies of general information from world guide surveys. No one knows what socialism or fascism is, so I spend time writing up digestible definitions. No one knows what Plato’s “Allegory of the Cave” is, and I supply it because it’s impossible to understand the theme of the novel without a basic knowledge of that work - which used to be required reading a few generations ago. And no one in the class has ever heard of 11 September 1973, the CIA-sponsored coup which terminated Chile’s mature democracy. There is complete shock when I supply US declassified documents proving US collusion with the generals’ coup and the assassination of elected president, Salvador Allende.

Geography, history, philosophy, and political science - all missing from their preparation. I realize that my students are, in fact, the oppressed, as Paulo Freire’s “The Pedagogy of the Oppressed” pointed out, and that they are paying for their own oppression. So, I patiently explain: no, our government has not been the friend of democracy in Chile; yes, our government did fund both the coup and the junta torture-machine; yes, the same goes for most of Latin America. Then, one student asks, “Why?” Well, I say, the CIA and the corporations run roughshod over the world in part because of the ignorance of the people of the United States, which apparently is induced by formal education, reinforced by the

media, and cheered by Hollywood. As the more people read, the less they know and the more indoctrinated they become, you get this national enabling stupidity to attain which they go into bottomless pools of debt. If it weren't tragic, it would be funny.

Meanwhile, this expensive stupidity facilitates US funding of the bloody work of death squads, juntas, and terror regimes abroad. It permits the war we are waging – an unfair, illegal, unjust, illogical, and expensive war, which announces to the world the failure of our intelligence and, by the way, the creeping weakness of our economic system. Every man, woman, and child killed by a bomb, bullet, famine, or polluted water is a murder – and a war crime. And it signals the impotence of American education to produce brains equipped with the bare necessities for democratic survival: analyzing and asking questions.

Let me put it succinctly: I don't think serious education is possible in America. Anything you touch in the annals of knowledge is a foe of this system of commerce and profit, run amok. The only education that can be permitted is if it acculturates to the status quo, as happens in the expensive schools, or if it produces people to police and enforce the status quo, as in the state school where I teach. Significantly, at my school, which is a third-tier university, servicing working-class, first-generation college graduates who enter lower-echelon jobs in the civil service, education, or middle management, the favored academic concentrations are communications, criminal justice, and social work—basically how to mystify, cage, and control the masses.

This education is a vast waste of the resources and potential of the young. It is boring beyond belief and useless—except to the powers and interests that depend on it. When A Ukrainian student, a three-week arrival on these shores, writes the best-organized and most profound essay in English of the class, American education has something to answer for—especially to our youth.

But the detritus and debris that American education has become is both planned and instrumental. It's why our media succeeds in telling lies. It's why our secretary of state can quote from a graduate-student paper, claiming confidently that the stolen data came from the highest intelligence sources. It's why Picasso's "Guernica" can be covered up during his preposterous "report" to the UN without anyone guessing the political significance of this gesture and the fascist sensibility that it protects.

Cultural fascism manifests itself in an aversion to thought and cultural refinement. "When I hear the word 'culture,'" Goebbels said, "I reach for my revolver." One of the infamous and telling reforms the Pinochet regime implemented was educational reform. The basic goal was to end the university's role as a source of social criticism and political opposition.

The order came to dismantle the departments of philosophy, social and political science, humanities and the arts—areas in which political discussions were likely to occur. The universities were ordered to issue degrees only in business management, computer programming, engineering, medicine and dentistry – vocational training schools, which in reality is what American education has come to resemble, at least at the level of mass education. Our students can graduate without ever touching a foreign language, philosophy, elements of any science, music or art, history, and political science, or economics.

In fact, our students learn to live in an electoral democracy devoid of politics – a feature the dwindling crowds at the voting booths well illustrate.

The poet Percy Bysshe Shelley wrote that, in the rapacity that the industrial revolution created, people first surrendered their minds or the capacity to reason, then their hearts or the capacity to empathize, until all that was left of the original human equipment was the senses or their selfish demands for gratification. At that point, humans entered the stage of market commodities and market consumers—one more thing in the commercial landscape. Without minds or hearts, they are instrumentalized to buy whatever deadens their clamoring and frightened senses—official lies, immoral wars, Barbies, and bankrupt educations.

Meanwhile, in my state, the governor has ordered a 10% cut across the board for all departments in the state – including education.

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