

"One repays a teacher badly if one always remains nothing but a pupil."

Nietzsche, "Thus Spoke Zarathustra"

Infantilisation

(transitive) To reduce (a person) to the state or status of an infant.

(transitive) To treat (a person) like a child.

<http://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/infantilize>

A structure of feeling

"[T]he extent to which we repeat our childhood experiences is quite extraordinary ... [W]hen we meet someone new we impose preconceptions upon them based on our childhood relationships. Unwittingly, we confuse them with characters from the drama that was once our family life. The stranger's name, their way of talking, how they look, any one of hundreds of tiny details can trigger memories from the original family script, which we then impose on that new person."

Oliver James. (2003) *They **** you up*. Bloomsbury.

Identity positions and extended childhood

Marketing categories:

Kidults, Adultescents

A Knowing 'postmodern' identity position - Playing computer games, watching Teletubbies, reading Harry Potter, wearing Hello Kitty

Grow up!

"for many young people, the world of adulthood is imposing in the extreme, and it is also almost impossible to define the moment when you become an adult. In this way, childhood becomes drawn out and extended as long as possible, simply because there's no clear point defined by society to say when it should stop. In other words, there is no longer a notion of 'coming of age'. The age based barriers, usually 18 and 21, are not given much importance outside of big birthday parties or the law. Certainly not enough of a change in the way an individual relates to society is present to stave off the notion that we're still at a stage of not being a Proper Grown Up. True, we may have a job, a car, a house or even kids, but damn, we're still not this mythical Proper Grown Up."

<http://everything2.com/title/infantilisation>

The parental function

Cultural infantilisation and institutional infantilisation - a critical confluence

The parental function

Can be invoked unwittingly

Can be invoked momentarily or can be longer lasting

Can be invoked institutionally as well as through the behaviour of individual academics

Standing in the gap

Despite our best professional efforts to refuse the parental function, we can fail.

Negative conditional sentence structure: "If you don't include the citations you may not get a pass" ... If you don't eat your greens

Some academics explicitly accept the parental role:

"How, moreover, do we familiarize our students with the established mores, scholarly and social, of our professional culture? *When* do we even start what I suppose some would regard as the professional equivalent of toilet training?"

Hallet J. *Classics as a Way of Life: Acculturating the Aspiring Classicist* - Presentation for University of Pennsylvania Classics Graduate Education Group March 18, 1995
<http://www.rhul.ac.uk/Classics/CLGD/acculturating.html>

Academic language of parenting: Alma-mater, Doktor-vater, The word Pedagogy

Not to be confused with:

Academic Darwinism - survival of the brightest.

"Turning teaching into therapy is destroying the minds of children, young people and adults," Dr Hayes told Times Higher Education. "Therapeutic education promotes the idea that we are emotional, vulnerable and hapless individuals. It is an attack on human potential." ... "therapeutic education" is at odds with objective intellectual inquiry and the acquisition of knowledge because it views the emotional skills associated with learning as more important than subject content.

Newman, M. 'Infantilised' students and staff rapped, 12 June 2008 THES Online
<http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/story.asp?storycode=402376>

On the surface, an objective refusal of the parental function returns as an image of the indifferent or punishing parent ...

Institutional context

- The rapid rise in student numbers that has led to strategies of homogenisation and massification of the learner experience.
- The expansion of the multiple roles expected of a modern academic to include applied research, administration and marketing alongside traditional teaching and research, reducing opportunities for student contact and relationship building.
- The need for remedial attention to the skills and knowledge expected of sophomore students which predisposes an academic to see those students in terms of what they cannot do.
- Assessment modes that have seen a shift to computerised testing and pre-printed, or tick box, assessment sheets - removing the simple human contact provided by handwritten notes in the margins.
- Assessments which have become over-burdened by legalistic provisions to counter plagiarism or collusion but which can also 'over-specify' the required elements of the submission, for fear that the student's response may break the marking model, unless it conforms to a fairly rigid structure.

Institutional context

"whenever I had to deal with issues outside of the [x] department, such as admin issues I was treated fairly and my issues resolved. However, to the people at the top of the university I was little more than a statistic."

2nd year student

"[The way some] modules were handled made me feel little more than a number to the university. I felt the modules I took were taught really well and were enjoyable but spoiled when the guys at the top decided you could fail your whole degree if you didn't fill out some forms.

3rd year student

The characteristics of a depersonalised student experience in relation to the larger institution, provides a context in which individual academics come to 'stand in the gap' between the student and the institution - a situation that interpellates the academic in the parental function.

Research method

Reactive research: In response to a small number of student emails with the words 'I felt like I was being treated like a child' in relation to their course

Email survey (n=50)

Drilldown/second email/interview (n=10)

“if a lecturer says something like ‘if you don’t do this then you won’t pass’ ... it makes us feel child[ish].even though we know they are telling the truth...if they keep repeating [it] we get to the stage when we want to tell them either to be quiet...that we’re old enough now to make our own mistakes ... or ‘that’s fine if your going to treat us like that then we will act like that.’

(2nd year student)

“I felt like a child being told by a grown up that $1+1=2$... He even did this in front of other student which seemed to succeed in making me feel dumb ... *It was only in that one lesson and that day. It did not last long but after that I’m hesitant* to ask for his help again and viewed him as my last resort.”

3rd year student

I was made to feel embarrassed and patronized - as if I should know what I’d done wrong and how to correct it. As if I was completely dense! I felt like he was looking down his nose at me, expecting better. I knew I hadn’t done well but I was taking steps to knuckle down and improve my work; what else could I do? ...

...No University student who has gone through at least thirteen years of education to get to that point - should be made to feel like a child in a higher education environment.

3rd year student

“after approx 3-5 min[utes] into the meeting the lecturer actually chuckled to themselves and then said to me “this is easy, how can you not understand this coursework. I have first year students who understand this stuff already.” This led to me becoming very angry and prompted me to walk out of the meeting feeling incredibly down, as I was made to feel stupid.”

2nd year student

“I know that I personally enjoyed the coursework from the lecturer’s who knew my name and took an interest in my work - I wasn’t just another face. Whereas with lecturer’s who I wasn’t so keen on (or weren’t so keen on me), I would find getting the motivation to do the work for their module a lot more difficult. I associated it with negative feelings which meant I did not enjoy doing the work”

2nd year student

“Positive feedback! This is the way to motivate a student. In a lot of ways, it is similar to the ways a child should be treated when teaching them good behaviour; positive feedback encourages students to do more and work harder as they know it is appreciated. This, however, is the only way in which a student should ever be treated in a similar way to a child! We are grown ups, just like the lecturers ... but a few years behind!”

3rd year student

So it's all about academic bedside manner, then?

Not entirely.

I am suggesting that an awareness of 'the parental function' and the behavioural and linguistic 'scripts' that invoke it should be a part of an academic's reflective armoury.

Have we really thought through what a healthy, productive, adult student/tutor relationship should be?

Mentoring is not parenting

Some remedies

Personal tutorials - particularly with new students - providing mentoring and 'socialisation' within the institutional context. Strong evidence to suggest a positive link with student retention and satisfaction.

HESA (2005/06): Oxford Brookes retained 89% of its first year students.

"In 2005 we introduced pro-active personal tutoring through group tutorials, delivering study skills instruction while building tutor-tutee relationships that had been lost with the introduction of electronic student management systems. All academic members of staff are Personal Tutors and have pastoral responsibility for their tutees throughout their course."

Bedisti, E. Robbins, S. 2009. *Comparing and evaluating the impacts on student retention of different approaches to supporting students through study advice and personal development*
www.actiononaccess.org/download.php?i=1468

Some remedies

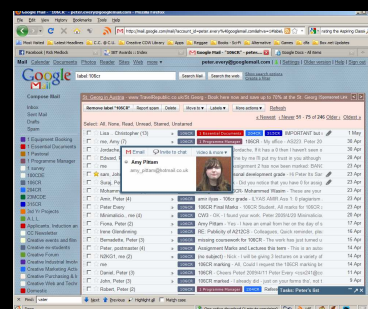
"A lot of the times if the university (or lecturers for that matter) want something from us they will email and email and remind etc. but if we want something in return such as help or information, then we will not get any response or just get passed around from department to department"

2nd year student

Email group send. Most email systems (as well as Google mail) allow you to construct group addresses. Occasional mails that do not demand anything, but that offer contact to targeted groups of students (say year groups), are perceived positively ...

Aide-memoire

I wrote a small script to add students' pictures to their email addresses in Google - very useful for learning names.



Forums

Students express severe doubt about using forums if they believe they are being monitored by staff but not responded to (Every, P 2008 - iPED paper)

Solutions: Private student forums, no forums or active academic involvement.

Use positive feedback and feeder questions e.g. "... I see your point - and it's a good one, but could you find some evidence for...."

Social Networking

I have found Facebook to be an invaluable tool for tracking and communicating with ex-graduates.

With current students, however, Facebook is more problematic (the 'creepy tree-house' syndrome)

"I still found it odd that both you and [other named tutor] added me on Facebook. Whilst it wasn't an issue, I just thought it broke my conventional understanding of a student / teacher relationship."