

EDUCATION WEEK

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COMMENTARY

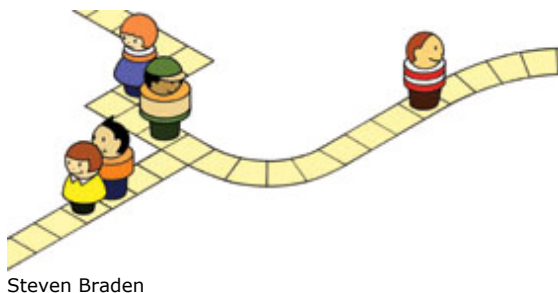
Educatocracy

By Alec M. Resnick

I once tutored a bright and energetic young high school student named Dan. He was intensely motivated, goal-oriented, and respectful. For years he had juggled sports, school, church, an active social life, and a plethora of the proper civic activities, as well as extensive family obligations, without complaint. He always made the honor roll. He was an all-around good guy who was successful, handsome, and disarmingly modest to boot.

Alas, Dan was unhappy.

No surprise here. We're bombarded with stories of overburdened, overstressed teenagers, children of the



achievement ethos who cannot relax. We bemoan the pressures that push kids into the massive machinery of higher education while we snap up copies of *U.S. News & World Report's* "America's Best Colleges" issue. If we see the contradiction, we do nothing to change it. Nonetheless, this discussion is old hat.

One day, Dan was confounded by an old rival of a math problem. He sighed with exasperation, "Not this crap again." Bemused, I tried to continue. Before I finished my second sentence, Dan hit the well-worn Formica of his desk in frustration, exclaiming, "I don't want to know *why* it's like that. Just tell me how to do it on the test. Write out the first step, the second—" I interrupted him, pointing out that memorizing any one set pattern would do him no good. He rolled his eyes; I continued with the lesson.

While working with Dan, I found that he would wait for me to complete a few steps, and then, when my prodding became sufficiently energetic, do one of two things. Either he would give up entirely, flustered and angry, or he would attempt to force patterns where there were none. He regurgitated steps, numbers, and relationships specific to past examples and tried to extend them to all problems, missing the underlying ideas in the process. When this failed, he became more confused and less motivated.

As I grew more impatient with his obsession with producing an answer, I moved on hastily, with increasing ineffectiveness. Dan's frustration fermented, transmuting into bitterness. "Math sucks! What am I going to use it for, anyway? This stuff is too hard. I only care because I need to keep my



GPA up.”

In my own 17 years of education, I’ve found that Dan is much more the rule than the exception. From a small public school in west-central Florida to the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, I’ve consistently encountered people who act and react in creative, original, and ingenious ways when confronted with real-world problems, but freeze in an academic context, failing to muster anything but the dullest, most lackluster thinking.

Dan’s problem was not unique. The conditions that created his difficulties afflict each and every student. The difference between the successful and unsuccessful student is that the successful student has adapted more effectively to the system, to playing the game. The more closely, quickly, and cheerily you can follow the lead of the adults around you, the more successful you will become.

What matters to these adults? Grades, scores, prestigious colleges, good jobs—in short, success. Youths and adults from all backgrounds know that education is the way to scramble up the socioeconomic ladder.

This means more and more students are becoming *professional* students earlier and earlier. School is their job. And, so the ethic goes, a productive worker is a good worker. Though what exactly they produce is unclear, there is no question as to what they become: fully credentialed, well-schooled students. They become the modern aristocrat, the educatocrat. They are marked by dean’s lists and honor rolls, stellar SAT scores and relentless community service, glowing letters of recommendation and moving personal essays: all those elements stuffed into that oversized envelope sent off to a dream college the winter of senior year.

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On the small scale, this means that professional students are always looking to produce the alleged bedfellows of success as defined by the College Board or the National Honor Society or *Who’s Who Among American High School Students*. The problem is that none of these have anything at all to do with learning.

Any measurement founded upon a combination of fear (of failure and the associated bogeymen) and bribery (prestige and the trappings of success) cannot reveal anything of import. Companies such as Kaplan Inc. make billions teaching students how to take tests. They don’t make billions by teaching students, but by training them in the art of *appearing* to have learned. This should not surprise us—it is exactly what we require of our students: to produce those signs which we have decided indicate intelligence and diligence.

The atmosphere to which this burgeoning culture of omnipresent carrots and sticks is partner suffocates the carefree curiosity that should be the hallmark of a good student. When we try to motivate students by fear or greed, we inevitably force them to shut away vulnerable instincts of curiosity and trust.

Education has become a commodity. Even if that fact remains unarticulated, students of all ages understand that at the end of all their schooling is a valuable degree.

Education *is* a prudent investment; it is *the* commodity to hoard. When graduating from high school was still significant, its value was a result of its relative rarity. A high school diploma represented a good education. But a sizable majority of American students now graduate from high school. This means that a high school diploma has lost its cachet in the job market. More and more people are

going to college, because that's what it now means to get a good education.

As long as education is a commodity, its rarity, rather than its content, will determine its market value. This vicious circle will continue. We are spending more time studying more narrowly just to remain competitive. How will it end?

These conditions inevitably encourage students to hyperfocus on production, in all its varied forms. Students are more worried about grades than learning, answers than questions, ends than means. This misplaced emphasis is manifest in cheating, the boom of the test-prep industry, the culture of stress engulfing college admissions—all are direct results (and reinforcing causes) of the pervasive obsession with production rather than education.

Recently, I was speaking with a friend who was then a teaching assistant for MIT's multivariable-calculus course. I asked him about his experience with this producer-learner split, and was flabbergasted by his response.

He said that *more than half* of the students in his section consistently and flagrantly copied answers on problem sets. Moreover, he said that when he complained of this to fellow teaching assistants, they cynically acknowledged that they were in the same boat. Worse, the confirmation was laden with apathy: Cheating was a de facto policy among students.

Students who would consistently ace the weekly problem sets would barely scrape by when tests came around, my friend said. When his students did (far too rarely) come to him for help, their strategies in confronting problems and trying to master new concepts closely paralleled Dan's "pattern-matching," as my friend termed it.

There is a clear dissonance in our society between the interests of those who give the grades, those who get the grades, and those who want the grades. Grades are intended to be a byproduct of learning, a measure independent of the process. But for anyone who has been pushed to study those few extra hours to pass that upcoming midterm or to ace that final, the proposition that grades are merely ancillary to the learning process is patently ridiculous.

The situation has grown so dire that students at top universities cannot imagine learning without school, motivation without grades, success without measurement. The nation's best students have become so tied to the system they have mastered that the system has mastered them. What's worse is that school has in some ways left them worse off than they were when they began their education. In most cases, all they have gained is a knowledge of facts, and they have lost confidence in their ability to think, learn, analyze, and absorb unaided.

Unless young people can be convinced that their futures should not be ensured by some sort of recipe, the divide between those who can play the system and those who fall short will continue to grow. With education as the basic commodity of success today, the stratification of this skill also means socioeconomic stratification in the long run.

All of this hit home to me on a subway ride in Boston. The metropolitan transport authority has provided advertising space to Kaplan, and in one ad a montage of well-groomed, appropriately multicultural students splits a clean, purple background in half. The text of the ad says simply, "Higher score. Brighter future." Not "Smarter kid. Brighter future." or "Harder worker. Brighter future." A higher SAT score. Are we willing to pin our children's futures on something that a test-preparation company sells?

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