

Expectations

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I have received a “request” instructing me to post “course expectations” on Canvas “ASAP.” My initial inclination is to simply say that there are no course expectations for MATH 6701 this semester. At any rate, I refuse to allow “expectations” to play any significant, much less central, role in my course. I am more interested in learning and offering students an opportunity to think and learn. Perhaps I should say more. The idea of building education around expectations (rather than learning) is fundamentally anti-intellectual and based on the promotion of “lowest common denominator” standards, and other even (as far as I am concerned) less savory motivations. One of the first “educators” to explicitly suggest this approach to education was Johann Gottlieb Fichte, the founding rector of the University of Berlin in the kingdom of Prussia. He said: “If you want to influence the student at all, you must do more than merely talk to him; you must fashion him, and fashion him in such a way that he simply cannot will otherwise than what you wish him to will.” Expanding on this theme Fichte wrote also “Education should aim at destroying free will so that after pupils are thus schooled they will be incapable throughout the rest of their lives of thinking or acting otherwise than as their school masters would have wished.” Horace Mann, the father of American public education, was impressed with the practice of Fichte’s ideas in Prussia and wrote in 1841 “if Prussia can pervert the benign influences of education to the support of arbitrary power, we surely can employ them for the support and perpetuation of republican institutions.” This vision was elaborated by Frederick Taylor Gates between 1891 and 1923 with perhaps the ultimate conclusion summed up as follows: “In our dream, we have limitless resources, and the people yield themselves with perfect docility to our molding hand. The present educational conventions fade from our minds; and, unhampered by tradition, we work our own good will upon a grateful and responsive rural folk. We shall not try to make these people or any of their children into philosophers or men of learning or science. We are not to raise up from among them authors, orators, poets, or men of letters.

We shall not search for embryo great artists, painters, musicians. Nor will we cherish even the humbler ambition to raise up from among them lawyers, doctors, preachers, politicians, statesmen, of whom we now have ample supply.”

It may not seem an obvious connection, but these are the sentiments behind the expectations based education which is becoming more and more popular at the current time. It might seem especially surprising that the demands for such statements of “expectation” come from students, but indeed a small vocal minority of students have been so thoroughly indoctrinated with this absurd thinking that requirements for such statements are codified in various declarations with presumptuous titles like “student bill of rights.” On the other hand, I suppose it is the natural tendency of students (especially students who really do not have a good idea of why they are pursuing education or what they want to learn) to be attracted to such things and be occupied with various “rights” to avoid learning. Far be it from me to infringe a student’s right not to learn something. I repeat: I have no expectation. But I still find it difficult to comprehend the motivation. Students used to ask me often (and of course they still do) “What was the average score on the exam. My response was always the same: Why on earth would you be interested in comparing yourself to something that is average?”

What makes sense to me is to try to learn something. When I was a student it never would have occurred to me to ask what was the average on an exam. I can’t imagine what that might have had to do with me learning something. In fact, it has nothing to do with learning anything. Essentially the same comment applies to grades in general. When I took courses in college, it never really occurred to me to worry about grades. I thought grades were simply a kind of evaluation (of the professor) of what I had learned. Maybe that was naive. Nevertheless, I’ve thought about grades quite a bit over the 30 or so years I’ve been interacting with them in one way or another, and my conclusion is that the only arguably reasonable basis for assigning them is based on what a student has learned or “mastered.” This is really the only thing a professor needs to be (or can be) qualified to do, that is, make such an evaluation.

It has become, somewhat surprisingly and somewhat painfully, evident to me over the years that, generally, administrators (and now most students too) have little or no interest in this evaluation of learning. There is just no “market” for that, so to speak. Thus, people want “expectations” with the obvious corollary that a student can “meet expectations” and “earn a good grade” without learning much of anything. It’s also true that grades are probably used as various gateway indicators having little or nothing to do with learning as well. So my response is: Maybe all this makes sense

with regard to the grades. If no one (except maybe other professors—and maybe that in connection with having power over others) is interested in having my (presumably competent) evaluation of what a student has learned, I'm okay with that. But still, I am interested in students learning. I'm interested in embryo philosophers, great men of science, artists, poets, men of letters and such—maybe lawyers and politicians not so much. So, I'm going to try to organize my courses to allow the best (and the average and the worst) to learn something. And if someone is interested in grades (which by this point everyone knows really have little or no meaning at all) that person can choose his own grade for himself. I think I may have sort of strayed from the topic of expectations, and I'm probably getting close to getting myself in trouble. But I think I've also said about what I want to say, so I'll basically stop here.

If you are a student, and you're interested in learning, in this case, in this semester, learning something about complex analysis (and reviewing linear algebra and ordinary differential equations), then you should take my course, and you'll be just fine. We'll all be just fine, and we can happily let the administrators go pound sand. If you are interested in expectations, then quite honestly, you should drop the course and go find someone whose expectations you can meet. If you are interested in expectations and you still insist on taking my course, you'll probably still be fine, and you might learn something in spite of yourself.