

## PERSPECTIVE

### The Ethics of Education (Including Environmental Education)

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I have been struggling with this topic for quite a while. It seems like I am always receiving a comment about how poor our education system has become and shouldn't I be able to write a motivating piece on the ethics of education. Because I thought I should be able to do that, it has bothered me that I could not. Today I deduced that I could not write this because there are no ethics of education.

Over the past year I have come across college graduates who cannot write a sentence, much less a paragraph. High school graduates in the state of Florida are not required to ever have diagrammed a sentence. Students are taught to write how they speak. After all the time I spent learning what a future past perfect verb was, I wanted to pass on the pain, but can I?

I can attest to the fact that not understanding the intricacies of sentence structure has led to gross misinterpretations of regulatory codes. I can attest to the fact that I have had graduate students who think that literature research is done on public domain net sites. I once asked for a literature search and received the reply that no relevant literature existed. No references existed *on the Internet*, but the student learned the wonders of the Q series stacks at the library that same day. I know that statistics have become the answer, not the guidepost, to deductive thought. Models have become an infallible doctrine instead of a tool for sensitivity

analyses. One year I accepted an adjunct post and taught two sequential classes in the same topic, each building on the other in subsequent semesters. The first was a prerequisite for the next and the students were all the same. During the second semester of that year I learned that I, as the teacher, was not allowed to hold the students responsible for material covered the previous semester. On one occasion, the topic of educational adequacy was discussed and we compared my transcripts (1973 degree) to the transcripts of the graduating seniors in the class I was teaching (1999). The degree requirements had fallen by approximately 20%. One year I took points off of an essay exam for misspelled words, dangling participles, and cumbersome sentences and paragraphs (ecology class). I was admonished.

Still, I struggled with the ethics question. Then came the revelation: there are no ethics of education. The fact is that the student is not the product of a single set of ethics. There are the ethics of the educators, the ethics of the Board of Regents, and the ethics of the educational administrators, but perhaps most importantly, there are the ethics of those being educated.

The ethics of the educators have been exposed to me in one dramatic instance wherein a director of a newly formed environmental policy program was recruiting biology majors by telling them that they could get the same degree and not compete with the pre-med students by switching to the new program. The ethical violation is the lie that an environmental policy degree was the functional equivalent of the biology or zoology degree. In another instance, I am aware of a student who switched to an environmental science degree to avoid taking organic chemistry. Will that person be able to perform as a working biologist?

But I mentioned that most important is the ethic of the person being educated. Over the past several years, I have learned that the student in my classes is much more concerned about the grade earned than about the material learned. The educator has probably fostered that position, but the working world doesn't care. Out here, what matters is what you know, and that you know it right now, rather than what grade you got in introduction to ichthyology. So while the student has lowered the bar, the educator hasn't necessarily fought the trend. We now prep students for exams instead of reviewing concepts and thoughts. We develop little signals to let the students who are awake know that a test question is being covered. The capstone of this line of thought is the current rumblings about how teachers at all levels should not be allowed to fail students at any level because it is embarrassing and lowers their self esteem. (I did not make that up.) The student should be demanding to be educated and fully educated, not worried about whether they will be liked if they get a C.

As faculty, do we sit in faculty meetings and demand higher standards from the administrators or do we quietly think that we don't have to do the tedious work that is on the chopping block?

I suggest that altruism in college is misplaced. Being hard on students will prepare them for a world where you don't repeat the class: you get fired, or sued.

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