



Don't worry about how it looks. Focus on how it is.

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At the heart of many of our problems these days is an overemphasis on appearance as opposed to substance.

And while what something looks like obviously affects its perceived efficacy, we have taken this strategy to the extreme and it's affecting our collective future in ways our predecessors could never have imagined.

Everywhere you look, people are obsessed with the superficial instead of the substantive. An increasing number of my students seem more concerned about what grade they are going to get rather than what the grade supposedly signifies.

But the thing is, you can't fake expertise, and credentials can never take the place of competency.

To reiterate, acquiring a credential doesn't mean you have expertise in the thing the credential ostensibly denotes. You can even earn a degree and not master the content and applications the corresponding diploma allegedly represents.

Think about this. If the educational process was doing its job, there would be no need for certification examinations or licensure. A 4.0 GPA would signify you had completely mastered everything you needed to know about a given discipline.

But as we all know, that's not the case.

Part of the problem is our tendency to confuse formal education with intelligence. You can be a high school dropout and still be exceptionally smart. One of my grandfathers had a fourth-grade education; the other one made it to the eighth grade.

Yet they were two of the smartest people I've known in my entire life. If I were going to be stranded on a desert island, I'd prefer to have either of them by my side than most of the PhDs I know.

More importantly, they had no "airs" about them, if that saying still resonates with anyone.

Years ago, I had a supervisor who was more concerned with pleasing "them" instead of doing what was right. He would come to meetings and talk endlessly about how we should do something because "they" would like it.

"This will make us look good," was a phrase he used often. "They will be really pleased."

I have always had a problem with this approach to work, life, or anything else. How something looks can often be very misleading. I can make something that's totally useless – and even harmful – look "good."

But in the end, the truth always rises to the surface, and we are typically worse for it.

As many readers know, I'm an academic – a designation that I've found conjures up all kinds of incoherent misconceptions in some peoples' minds. Yes, some of the presumptions associated with the moniker are warranted, especially the ones that are self-inflicted.

The truth of the matter is academics can be very good at convincing others that they are changing the world when they aren't really doing all that much. Incidentally, this is why we have such a propensity for writing reports.

Over the decades, I have consistently tried to emphasize substance over exhibition – a practice that has occasionally put me at odds with some of my colleagues (as well as a few administrators).

Let me explain. When I assign a paper in which I want my students to tackle a complex problem, the first question I often get is “does it have to be in APA?” – referring to a formal style of writing that is heavy on adherence to an intricate set of rules designed to reinforce consistency over creativity.

By-the-way, and you can ask my current and/or former students about this, I usually reply with “I don't care if you use a crayon. Focus on your ideas and not how many spaces you should indent.”

The point being I don't want students sweating over heading structure and when to use italics. I want them to spend all their mental energy on solving the challenge at hand.

Seriously, I know instructors who would take points off if you came up with the cure for cancer but didn't write it up in APA style.

In my experience, if the insights they achieve are indeed extraordinarily astute, we can always get the paper into APA style later. My contention continues to be that anyone with rudimentary brain power can do that.

Main takeaway: In a culture obsessed with presenting an image, be someone who strives to add true value.

And for heaven's sake, stop worrying so much about coloring within the lines.



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