

Don't entertain students, educate them

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As you may have heard, next month Kentuckians will be voting in a referendum regarding whether to amend the state constitution to allow public funds to be used by charter schools.

At this point, you can relax. I'm not going to argue one way or the other on this hot button issue; I'll leave it to the citizens of the Commonwealth to sort this one out.

Instead, I want to talk about the current state of education, regardless of who's paying for it.

A couple of weeks ago I mentioned that only about 20-25 percent of my graduating class went to college, i.e., primarily those who excelled at academics. As a result, professors could have relatively high expectations.

With virtually everyone graduating from high school being encouraged to go to college, however, the expectations have necessarily changed. If the bar isn't lowered, many of those students would fail.

And they should fail if they can't master the material they encounter at the postsecondary level. But if professors fail too many students, they are usually the ones who get called on the carpet.

So, to survive, some instructors lower their expectations and with them, their requirements. Rigor drops to the point where the least common denominator can pass the course.

Seriously, if I held my students to the same standards I was held to when I was in college, most of them would drop my classes rather than risk receiving a failing grade.

I routinely had classes where I had to read three or four books and write three or four 15-page papers. Even with the "assistance" of AI, many students would consider that "too much" today.

And therein lies a huge part of the problem.

A more pressing concern, though, is what often passes for "teaching" these days. Somewhere along the line we replaced education with entertainment under the guise of engagement.

I realize if you are not involved in our schools or colleges, this may sound like a strange statement. But if you are associated with the academy at any level, you know exactly what I'm talking about.

So let me explain for the uninitiated.

Let's say you take a biology course. On the first day of class, someone at the front of the room asks you to get in small groups and discuss what "biology" means to you.

At this point, I'd recommend dropping the class.

Same advice if you ever walk into a class and the person responsible for teaching the class says something inane like "you are the experts." If you are an expert, why are you taking the course?

For generations we had a pretty good system.

People called “students” would enroll in a class taught by someone called an “instructor.” By definition, the instructor knew more than the students. The students would listen to the instructor explain things, ask questions, take notes - and then the instructor would make sure they understood by giving them an assessment of some kind.

Preferably an objective test.

This system produced generations of folks who knew things. It certainly worked for me. Throughout my educational career, I always assumed the person teaching the class, i.e., the “instructor” knew more than I did, and I was there to learn from him or her.

In more recent times, however, we seemed to have shifted to more of a “learner-centered” model. The problem with this approach is that motivating students often becomes more important than teaching them.

Some of the most engaging classes I ever took involved listening to a professor lecture for an hour, occasionally stopping to ask if we understood or to lead a discussion over the subject at hand.

I've been a faculty member for over 30 years. I have never seen myself as a “facilitator,” a “presenter,” or a “performer.” I have always been a “teacher.” And I have always tried my best to emulate those who came before me.

What happens when the facilitators get in charge of the system?

Look around. It's obvious.

You get a bunch of people who think “knowledge” is whatever they believe it is and “science” is just one of several equally valid ways of understanding and interpreting the world. Truth becomes relative.

Bottom line: We need to get back to educating students, not entertaining them. There's nothing inherently wrong with entertainment, it has its place. But it's not the primary purpose of education. Nor should it be.

By-the-way, I'm fairly certain when you go to the doctor and learn you need brain surgery, you probably hope the medical school where they got their degree practiced “education” and not “facilitation.”

“Everyone get into small groups and discuss what brain surgery means to you.”

Yeah, right.



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