

How To Be A Student

by Dr. John Steel

In so many of the public conversations in America lately on ways to improve our educational system, people seem to focus on things like buildings, computers, audio-visual equipment, teacher training, and so on. All of these things have varying degrees of importance in the overall project of getting people educated, but I am always reminded of the words of an old professor I once heard who said, “All you really need are teachers, books and students.” This will certainly sound simplistic, if not downright unrealistic, but I do think the statement embodies a truth so simple we often miss it: for education to happen, someone must be teaching and someone must be learning.

I would like to focus on the second part of this proposal because it is one that is often either neglected or grossly misstated. Regardless of anything else that may take part in getting you educated, one thing is absolutely necessary; and that is that you yourself must assume the part of a student in order for the other elements to have any genuine effect. Furthermore, I do not mean by a student merely a person sitting at a desk, doing his assignments, and calculating his average. Everyone goes to school in some manner or other, but not everyone is, in truth, a student.

Think of the gospel story of Christ teaching the multitude on a hillside. Who could have been teaching a more important lesson? And yet his listeners wandered ignorantly away by the thousands with little more understanding than they had before he spoke. Most of his audience was apparently content to remain in this unenlightened condition. Maybe they blamed the instructor for the lack of clarity. Nevertheless, away they all went – all, that is, but a handful.

A small band of fellows lingered after the crowd had dispersed to ask what in the world he meant by his cryptic lesson. Those were the disciples; those were the genuine students. It was not enough for them to say that they had heard the master speak. They wanted understanding, and they made it their own project to go after it. At some time or other, if you are going to be a real student, you must take your education on as your own project – a thing you pursue on your own, rather than a thing to which you are driven by parents and teachers.

Another aspect of the genuine student is the willingness to admit one’s own ignorance. Socrates, a fellow we now remember as a great philosopher, never actually claimed to be wise, but always insisted that it was his knowledge of his own ignorance that opened to him the possibilities of learning.

Sometimes in school we are afraid to admit what we don’t understand something. We don’t want to look ignorant or foolish in front of others. We want to protect ourself at such a moment with a smile and a nod, quietly pretending that we understand what we do not. This is a deadly habit. Your confusion will only be compounded as more and more incomprehensible words pass over you. Remember Socrates. Humble yourself and say, “I don’t understand. What do you mean when you say that?” Don’t be afraid to appear

ignorant; in fact, declare ignorance as your condition and you will suddenly be freed to learn in ways you could never have imagined while you were still busy protecting your pride.

Three examples stand out to me as stark illustrations of another characteristic of genuine student. The first is that of Rabbi Hillel, who came to Jerusalem as a young man to study at the great rabbinical academy there. His family lived meagerly so that he could attend lectures in the evening. Once, due to his poverty, he was unable to pay his tuition and could not be admitted to class. Nevertheless, after an especially severe night, he was found shivering and numb in the windowsill to which he had crept in order to hear the evening lecture.

The second example is more famous: Helen Keller who, though blind and deaf, learned to read, went to college, and wrote several amazing books. She collected an extensive library in Braille. So great was her thirst for knowledge, she sometimes read until her fingers bled.

Finally, a more recent example. The famous cellist Pablo Casals described his approach to learning pieces of music as a continuous effort to break the piece down into smaller and smaller parts until he could master every detail. This is far from the slipshod, overview mentality to which we can so easily succumb. A genuine student focuses on the details, seeking to master the minute parts, which can then be reunited in a truly admirable whole. Look for the beauty and the brilliance in the smallest parts of the things you study. Why are the numbers square? Why does Tennyson use a singular verb at the end of his poem, "The Flower"? Which end of the phospholipid is hydrophilic, and why? Never assume you are finished, and always pursue your studies in increasing degrees of detail.

You will only get the riches of understanding and wisdom by wielding an intellectual pick and shovel. You can do it, but it is *your* job to do. Make your education your own project, admit your own ignorance, allow no excuses, and focus on details. If you could start cultivating these four characteristics, you would be well on the way to becoming a genuine student.

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