

Students or Children?

Written by Dylan Kissane

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DYLAN KISSANE, NOV 12 2013

One of the cultural differences that is most striking about teaching in the private sector of France's higher education industry is the way that French schools infantilise their students. A few examples from recent weeks really push this point home for me.

Over the last couple of weeks CEFAM professors submitted Mid Term Grades to the administration for all students in their classes. These Mid Term Grades are not final and won't appear on any official transcript, but they do allow students to see how they are travelling in a course and are often used as a tool of motivation by professors seeking their students to do more. Hence, a student who really wants to finish with an A in a course can be expected to push to react to their Mid Term Grade of a B+ with renewed enthusiasm, pushing through the final few weeks of the course towards a (hopefully) improved final grade.

These Mid Term Grades, however, are not only delivered to the students but also to their parents. This state of affairs would not occur in my native Australia nor could it occur in the USA where strict privacy laws regulate what can and cannot be shared about students with outsiders. The general justification for this sharing of information is that, in most cases, it is the parents who pay the fees of the school and it is therefore the parents who should be informed about their child's progress. While this is plausible, it still does seem to me to be rather strange reasoning when almost every student in the school is a legal adult.

Another example I have in mind relates to attendance and absences. Here at CEFAM students are required to attend every class and their attendance and participation counts for around 20% of the final grade in any course. This by itself is not unusual and students remain free, in most cases, to choose not to attend a course if they are willing to face the obvious consequences for their final grade. Allowances for participation and attendance are not uncommon in courses in the US, the UK or Australia, as are courses where attendance is optional. Alternatively, I remember one particularly interesting course that I took as an honours student that had only two assignments (a mid-term paper and a final paper, each worth 50%) and no attendance requirement, yet almost every student came to every lesson.

Here at CEFAM, though, we take it a step further. Should a student be absent too often their parents are contacted, much in the same way the parents of an absent high school student might be contacted by the school to enquire as to the whereabouts of their truant son or daughter. Again, these are legal adults who have chosen to skip a class or classes knowing the consequences, yet the school rings around after them as if they were children lost in the city of Lyon.

Finally there is the Professor-Parents evening, held just last week here at CEFAM. This evening allows students and their parents to discuss one-on-one with professors their performance in a course. I will admit it is generally a good evening and I enjoy the chance to reach out to those parents whose children are doing well just as much as I appreciate the opportunity to explain to weaker students once again where they can improve. Yet it also occurs to me that this is much like the Parent-Teacher evenings that my high school used to hold back in Australia. It certainly does not remind me of anything that I experienced as an undergraduate in Australia, even in my first nervous year at the University of South Australia.

I should be clear at this point that these examples are not exclusive to CEFAM; instead, they are common across

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other private business schools and the wider private education sector here in France. Common as they are, they do seem to me to infantilise our students, reminding them that they are only adults in the eyes of the state and certainly not in the eyes of the school or, by their implication, their parents. This cultural tradition – for this is what I hold it to be – of not treating adults as adults until they have completed their studies makes it harder to prepare students for the professional world when they are treated as children until the very moment we push them out into that world with their diploma.

As a professor, I prefer to look at my class as a group of students willing to learn rather than children forced to learn about politics. Sadly the private education culture here in France often conspires to prevent this.

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Read more from Dylan Kissane in his e-IR blog [Political Business](#)

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