

U Can't Talk to Ur Professor Like This

By Molly Worthen | May. 13th, 2017

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Chapel Hill, N.C. — At the start of my teaching career, when I was fresh out of graduate school, I briefly considered trying to pass myself off as a cool professor. Luckily, I soon came to my senses and embraced my true identity as a young fogey.

After one too many students called me by my first name and sent me email that resembled a drunken late-night Facebook post, I took a very fogeyish step. I began attaching a page on etiquette to every syllabus: basic rules for how to address teachers and write polite, grammatically correct emails.

Over the past decade or two, college students have become far more casual in their interactions with faculty members. My colleagues around the country grumble about students' sloppy emails and blithe informality.

Mark Tomforde, a math professor at the University of Houston who has been teaching for almost two decades, added etiquette guidelines to his website. "When students started calling me by my first name, I felt that was too far, and I've got to say something," he told me. "There were also the emails written like text messages. Worse than the text abbreviations was the level of informality, with no address or signoff."

His webpage covers matters ranging from appropriate email addresses (if you're still using "cutie_pie_98@hotmail.com," then "it's time to retire that address") to how to be gracious when making a request ("do not make demands").

Sociologists who surveyed undergraduate syllabuses from 2004 and 2010 found that in 2004, 14 percent addressed issues related to classroom etiquette; six years later, that number had more than doubled, to 33 percent. This phenomenon crosses socio-economic lines. My colleagues at Stanford gripe as much as the ones who teach at state schools, and students from more privileged backgrounds are often the worst offenders.

Why are so many teachers bent out of shape because a student fails to call them “Professor” or neglects to proofread an email? Are academics really that insecure? Is this just another case of scapegoating millennials for changes in the broader culture?

Don’t dismiss these calls for old-fashioned courtesy as a case of fragile ivory tower egos or misplaced nostalgia. There is a strong liberal case for using formal manners and titles to ensure respect for all university professionals, regardless of age, race or gender. More important, doing so helps defend the university’s dearest values at a time when they are under continual assault.

It’s true that the conventions that have, until recently, ruled higher education did not rule from time immemorial. Two centuries ago, students often rejected expectations of deference. In 1834, Harvard students rebelled when some of their classmates were punished for refusing to memorize their Latin textbook. They broke the windows of a teacher’s apartment and destroyed his furniture. When the president of the college cracked down and suspended the entire sophomore class, the juniors retaliated by hanging and burning him in effigy and setting off a rudimentary explosive in the campus chapel.

Later in the 19th century, etiquette manuals proliferated in bookstores, and Americans began to emphasize elaborate social protocols. As colleges expanded and academic disciplines professionalized, they mimicked the hierarchical

cultures of the German research universities, where students cowered before “Herr Professor Doktor.”

The historian John Kasson has noted that back then, formal etiquette was not aimed at ensuring respect for all. It was, in part, a system to enforce boundaries of race, class and gender at a time when the growth of cities and mass transit forced Americans into close quarters with strangers. Codes of behavior served “as checks against a fully democratic order and in support of special interests, institutions of privilege and structures of domination,” he writes in his book “Rudeness and Civility.”



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address with professors who are young, nonwhite and female — some of whom have responded by becoming vocal defenders of old-fashioned propriety.

But today, on the other side of the civil rights revolution, formal titles and etiquette can be tools to protect disempowered minorities and ensure that the modern university belongs to all of us. Students seem more inclined to use casual forms of

Angela Jackson-Brown, a professor of English at Ball State University in Muncie, Ind., told me that “most of my students will acknowledge that I’m the first and only black teacher they’ve ever had.” Insisting on her formal title is important, she said: “I feel the extra burden of having to go in from Day 1 and establish that I belong here.”

When Professor Jackson-Brown began teaching in the 1990s, most students respected her authority. But in recent years, that deference has waned (she blames the informality of social media). “I go out of my way now to not give them access to my first name,” she said. “On every syllabus, it states clearly: ‘Please address me as Professor Jackson-Brown.’ ”

She linked this policy to the atmosphere of mutual respect that she cultivates in her classes. These days, simply being considerate can feel like a political act. “After this recent election, I’ve had several female students come to me and say, ‘I’m noticing differences in how men are treating me.’ It’s heartbreaking,” she said. “We’re trying to set standards for them that they may not see outside the classroom, places where you’d think there would be decorum.”

This logic resonates with some students. “Having these titles forces everyone to give that respect,” Lyndah Lovell, a graduating senior at the College of William & Mary in Williamsburg, Va., said. “They know they have to use these manners with everyone. Even if the underlying thoughts of prejudice will still be there to some extent, you give these thoughts less power.”

Insisting on traditional etiquette is also simply good pedagogy. It’s a teacher’s job to correct sloppy prose, whether in an essay or an email. And I suspect that most of the time, students who call faculty members by their first names and send slangy messages are not seeking a more casual rapport. They just don’t know they should do otherwise — no one has bothered to explain it to them. Explaining the rules of professional interaction is not an act of condescension; it’s the first step in treating students like adults.

That said, the teacher-student relationship depends on a special kind of inequality. “Once I refer to them as I would my best friend, I eliminate that boundary of clarity,” Ms. Lovell told me. She recalled how awkward she felt when the head of the research lab where she worked asked undergraduates to call him Willy. “All my friends were saying: ‘Oh, man, do we do this? He has a Ph.D. He’s a professor. Is it O.K. to do this?’ Sometimes I do, but he’s a great mentor, and it’s confusing. A lot of us like to preserve that distance.”

Alexis Delgado, a sophomore at the University of Rochester, is skeptical of professors who make a point of insisting on their title. “I always think it’s a

power move,” she told me. “Just because someone gave you a piece of paper that says you’re smart doesn’t mean you can communicate those ideas to me. I reserve the right to judge if you’re a good professor.”

But she ruefully recalled one young professor who made the mistake of telling the class that he didn’t care if they used his first name. “He didn’t realize how far it would go, and we all thought, this is awkward,” she said. “I had no desire to be friends. I only wanted to ask questions.”

During office hours, we have frank conversations about career choices, mental health crises and family tribulations. But the last thing most students want from a mentor is the pretense of chumminess.

Ms. Lovell said the very act of communicating more formally helps her get some distance on a personal problem. “When I explain my difficulties and struggles, I try to explain in a mature way,” she said. “I want to know: How would someone older than me think through this?”

The facile egalitarianism of the first-name basis can impede good teaching and mentoring, but it also presents a more insidious threat. It undermines the message that academic titles are meant to convey: esteem for learning. The central endeavor of higher education is not the pursuit of money or fame but knowledge. “There needs to be some understanding that degrees mean something,” Professor Jackson-Brown said. “Otherwise, why are we encouraging them to get an education?”

The values of higher education are not the values of the commercial, capitalist paradigm. At a time when corporate executives populate university boards and politicians demand proof of a diploma’s immediate cash value, this distinction needs vigilant defense.

The erosion of etiquette encourages students to view faculty members as a bunch of overeducated customer service agents. “More and more, students view the process of going to college as a business transaction,” Dr. Tomforde, the math professor, told me. “They see themselves as a customer, and they view knowledge as a physical thing where they pay money and I hand them the knowledge — so if they don’t do well on a test, they think I haven’t kept up my side of the business agreement.” He added, “They view professors in a way similar to the person behind the counter getting their coffee.”

But if American culture in general — including many workplaces — has become less formal, are professors doing students a disservice by insisting on old-fashioned manners?

When Anna Lewis left a Ph.D. program in English to work at a technology firm, she had to learn to operate in a different culture. Yet she has noticed that the informality of the tech industry can mislead new millennial employees.

“They see they can call everyone from the C.E.O. down by their first name, and that can be confusing — because what they often don’t realize is that there’s still a high standard of professionalism,” she told me. “At the intern level, these things are basic, but they require reminders: show up to meetings on time; be aware that you, yourself, are fully responsible for your work schedule. No one is going to tell you to attend a meeting.” In other words, young graduates mistake informality for license to act unprofessionally.

“There is some value in being schooled in more formal etiquette, developing personal and professional accountability, a work ethic and a level of empathy, which is very much valued in the tech industry,” Ms. Lewis said.

Here’s an analogy: We should teach students traditional etiquette for the same reason most great abstract painters first mastered figurative painting. In order to abandon or riff on a form, you have to get the hang of its underlying principles.

That means that professors should take the time to explain these principles, making it clear that learning how to write a professional email and relate to authority figures is not just preparation for a job after graduation. The real point is to stand up for the values that have made our universities the guardians of civilization.

And if you're going to write an angry email telling me how wrong I am, I beg you: Please proofread it before you hit "send."

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