



## Lies We Live by: Some Academic Myths and Their Functions

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*This article addresses seven beliefs about college teaching prevalent among academic people, arguing that all are myths: (1) We are a self-governing community of scholars; (2) It is impossible to teach people to teach; (3) It is impossible to define good teaching; (4) It is impossible to measure or evaluate teaching; (5) Classroom observation of teaching is an infringement upon academic freedom; (6) Student evaluation of teaching is useless and/or meaningless; (7) Undergraduate students, at least, are generally stupid and unmotivated. Analysis of these beliefs, all of which are demonstrably untrue, suggests that we maintain them for self-serving purposes: to define ourselves into a status and reward-bearing social category in which most of us probably do not belong; to free us from all accountability for classroom performance, and to rationalize laziness and irresponsibility in teaching. The article closes with some suggestions for rectifying the situation.*

## Lies We Live By

### Some Academic Myths and Their Functions

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**T**he subject of this article is some widely prevalent myths of our profession, hoary with age, and rubbed smooth with repetition; myths that most of us first learned as graduate students, have heard repeated endlessly, and have probably resorted to at one time or another ourselves. As social scientists, we know that when demonstrably false beliefs are (1) widely held, (2) of long-standing and, (3) never subjected to inspection, they must serve practical functions for those who hold and perpetuate them. This theoretical rule of thumb would seem to be especially true for a situation such as the academic, in a profession supposedly devoted to the ascertainment of truth by inspection of evidence, where, when evidence contrary

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to the belief is offered, it tends to be rejected out of hand. In cases such as that, we must surely accept the logic that the myths are serving some function for their holders. This is the case I wish to explore with you today: The myths—"lies" might be a better term, because their falsity is unquestionable—we academics often live by, and my conjectures as to why we do. The latter are not flattering to us.

### **SOME LIES WE LIVE BY**

Listed below are my versions of seven common academic myths concerning teaching. They could be further compacted to number only five, or expanded considerably; that is unimportant. This is simply the form in which I find it convenient to discuss them. You will recognize them all, although you might phrase them somewhat differently. Not one is new; I have found them all in academic statements from the nineteenth century and they may go back to much earlier European origins. All of them are false. Some are sufficiently pernicious that we are justified in naming them as lies.

- (1) We are a self-governing community of scholars.
- (2) You can't teach people to teach. Teachers are born, not made.
- (3) You can't define good teaching. Teaching is so various an enterprise, and the people who do it so various themselves, it is useless even to discuss the matter.
- (4) You can't measure or evaluate teaching. One person's standards are just as good as another's in such matters, and teaching is so personal or idiosyncratic an activity that no general standard can be valid. Quantitative assessments, especially, pervert the subject they purport to assay.
- (5) Classroom observation of teaching by peers or administrative superiors is an infringement of academic freedom.
- (6) Student evaluations of teaching are useless and meaningless. Most are only popularity polls and because learning is difficult and usually resisted, popular teachers are merely entertainers, showmen or women pandering to transient and nonintellectual student interests. Students cannot judge the quality of teaching and do not

know what they want or need in any event; most do not recognize good teaching when exposed to it.

- (7) Undergraduate students, at least or especially, are usually stupid, lazy, unmotivated and unmotivatable, and so on.

Each of these common academic beliefs is false in one way or another. Some have specific consequences or side-effects for us, but certainly, taken as a group, as a constellation or belief system, we can make some reasonable conjectures about the purposes they serve. Let us begin by examining them one by one to discover their falsity and make some guesses about their latent functions or consequences. Because this is not a research paper, I have not attempted to provide specific documentary citation for each argument. The bibliographic materials referenced in Goldsmid and Wilson (1980) and McKeachie (1978) are adequate to support my contentions about each except the first, which is more complex and essentially historic.

(1) "We are a self-governing community of scholars." While this is so commonplace as to be trite, a staple of the *AAUP Bulletin* and academic after-dinner rhetoric, it is historically false in its essential implication regarding American institutions of higher education and their faculties. And it is factually false in its description of the role that most of us, in actuality, perform, wherein lies its secret venom.

For American academics, the notion of a "community of scholars" probably has its historical origins in the British residential college, the Oxford and Cambridge models. And the faculties of those immensely exclusive, elitist, and once totally endowed institutions were, at one time in fact, self-governing communities, virtually independent and autonomous from all other agencies and authorities—even, to some extent, the law. With the exception of the College of William and Mary before the American Revolution, no such case has ever existed on American soil. American colleges and universities are and have been from the beginning governed from without, by corporate boards of nonacademic people or by the state itself. American faculty members are and always have been corporate employees, governed by others.

But this fact is only background, and peripheral to my concern with teaching. Central is not the word "community," but

“scholars.” Once Johns Hopkins had brought the German model of the university to the United States, and research became the *sine qua non* of the academic role, the status-bringing and status-bearing activity for academic men and women to pursue, and virtually the only path to professorial fame and fortune, we defined our work as that of scholars. Most of us, in fact, are not—not if we ask what it is we are paid by our institutions to do and what in fact we spend most of our time doing. We are teachers.

(I do not mean of course that teaching should not be informed by scholarship, or that the two are independent or inconsistent or contradictory enterprises. I mean merely that most of us actually earn our livings in the classroom, expend most of our working energy in teaching-related activities, and in fact publish little in the way of research scholarship. I will go further and offer the opinion that a great deal, indeed most, of what most of us do publish is of no great moment and will have no lasting impact, if any at all, on the knowledge base of our various disciplines.)

Why, then, do we wish to define ourselves as “scholars” rather than teachers? What purpose does this serve? Well, obviously, if status and reward are attached to scholarship rather than teaching, it is useful for us to seek to be identified as pursuing the former rather than the latter. “Teaching” is what happens in the secondary and elementary schools, something done by people without the Ph.D. we all worked so hard to obtain. But beyond that, if we are “scholars,” are we not given a degree of license to neglect or ignore the hard and relatively unrewarded work of teaching? Do we not, if we are “scholars,” deserve lower teaching loads, and secretarial help, and better office space, and all of the other “perks” that accompany that status, including having someone else do the mundane chores such as student advising and the instruction of recitation sections? Does it not even sometimes grant the license to be ill-prepared for class, indifferent to student needs and problems, and permit a kind of arrogance toward our clients we resent when we experience it ourselves among physicians? I think, just maybe, that it does.

(2) “You can’t teach people to teach (good teachers are born, not made).” This myth is one I call a lie. We not only can teach people to

teach, we do so all the time. The military services have been doing it systematically—and successfully—since before World War II and even made some efforts along that line in World War I. It is possible, and I have argued elsewhere, that we cannot teach people to be great teachers, but that is a different matter entirely. We cannot teach creative genius in any endeavor of which I am aware. The fact of the matter is, however, that teaching, perhaps especially at the college level, is mostly made up of a series of relatively routine acts, the proper approach to the sequencing of which is pretty well established for different kinds of subject matter. Most of them are essentially simple acts, which anyone of normal intelligence can learn to perform without great difficulty. Certain attitudes (toward students, the subject, the role itself) are probably necessary for success, but these, too, can at least be told, demonstrated, and exhibited to novices. And certain values are probably necessary as well, about treatment of students, about the worth of one's subject, about fairness and objectivity in evaluation, and so on. Most of these, however, are already matters of conventional agreement in the academic professions. I hold that any successful undergraduate student who knew the material well enough could be made into at least a satisfactory college teacher by methods already well known, if the person in question wanted to undertake the training and then to do a decent job of work. Experience helps, and perfects, but is not essential. The classroom is not a forbidden temple where we practice an arcane art known only to initiates who have been touched by The God. It is, rather, an ancient and quite mundane workplace where a well-understood craft can be routinely practiced. I would never argue that many, perhaps most, college teachers do teach well, only that they could. There's nothing either mysterious or genotypic about it.

The functions of this belief seem readily apparent: What cannot be taught cannot be learned, so we do not have to bother to seek out and master better ways of doing things instead of our familiar practices. Further, if good teachers are born, and cannot be made, then if we have some sense that students are dissatisfied with our performance, well, there's nothing we can do about it: We are what we were born to be; a few of the Elect were given Talent, the rest of us must

get along as best we can, and the students simply have to endure us. That's the way things are: easy.

(3) "You can't define good teaching (it and its practitioners are too various)." Despite the fact that this statement is nonsense on its face, we've all heard it countless times. Of course we can define good teaching! We can define it—or anything—any way we want to, and the obvious way to go about a definition of satisfactory teaching is to insist that each of its purportedly wildly various practitioners define it by its effects, by the results or consequences he or she hopes to elicit from the performance—and then create means of ascertaining, or at least taking a bead on, whether or not they were obtained.

This is, in essence, an insistence upon teaching by objective. It allows for individual variation in style, purpose, and practice by letting the teacher define for him- or herself what it is that is aimed at. But in the insistence that one's teaching have an aim, I do not believe we would find anyone willing to demur. And if we would all agree that we have some purpose in our instruction, then surely we should wish to know whether we are attaining it, if for no other reason than to avoid involving ourselves in meaningless and hence wasteful endeavor.

The obvious function this pleasantry serves is betrayed by the last sentence in my original statement of it: "It is useless to discuss the matter." If we can convince ourselves or others that something is so esoteric, so mysterious, or so completely idiosyncratic as to be beyond even discussion, then obviously there is no point in paying any attention to it. It can be dismissed as meaningless or irrelevant, and thus we are freed to get on with other pursuits, and to ignore any requirement that we pay attention to the quality or consequence of what we spend so many hours in the classroom and seminar doing. This myth frees us from all accountability for our major wage-earning endeavor.

(4) "You can't evaluate teaching (there is no agreement on standards)." This is especially pernicious because it leans for its face validity on a piece of truth, that is, that there is no conventional

agreement in most of our disciplines on what constitutes good teaching. But the contention that, therefore, teaching cannot be evaluated does not follow. In the first place, people do evaluate our teaching all the time. The students certainly do, and so do our colleagues and superiors. Students do it informally from impression, dormitory gossip, and prejudice. Our colleagues and superiors do it largely from student hearsay, or the occasional specific complaint. It seems apparent that we might be better off with some procedure more objective and more systematic.

In the second place, the lack of existing standards does not prove that no standards are possible, or that agreement within disciplines and specialty areas, or among particular colleagues, cannot occur. Teaching in skills courses, for example (statistics in sociology, fossil identification in archaeology), can be readily evaluated by the simple criterion of whether students learned what they were supposed to, the body of which is widely and conventionally agreed, and is in any event defined by the class syllabus. Teaching by objective, discussed earlier, provides the same kind of objectivity on goal-attainment, if sometimes less precision for objectives difficult to demonstrate.

But there are many elements about teaching that are readily ascertainable or evaluated. Students, for instance, are more expert than any of us on some aspects of a teacher's performance: Is he or she normally on time for class? Are office hours kept? Papers returned promptly? Does the instructor normally appear to be prepared to teach the class? Does the course description accurately depict what happens? Were grading practices explained and then followed? And so forth. I would not argue that doing such things properly in and of itself constitutes good teaching, but I think it reasonable to hold that failing to do them is poor teaching.

Additionally, it is certainly possible for a department chair or colleague to sit down with an individual, discuss the goals of a course and the means proposed to achieve them, attend and observe classes, question past and present students, study examinations, syllabi, and other written materials, and derive reasonable judgments concerning teaching effort, skills, and, at least loosely, success. To deny that



such evaluation is possible is almost, in effect, to deny that social science is possible, or that valid judgments of observable behavior can ever be made.

The social function of this myth is readily apparent. If evaluation of teaching is impossible, then it is foolish to attempt it, or even talk about it. And we are freed from responsibility for what we do in the classroom. No one can judge us, or tie our reward structure to the activity in which we spend most of our time and for which all but a fraction of us are in actuality paid. The possibility of quality control over our major work is denied, and so it becomes not just foolish, but unjust, to attempt it, and any administrative superior who suggests or demands it is arrogantly exceeding his or her authority and will necessarily perform the activity with caprice.

(5) "Classroom observation of teaching by peers or administrators is an infringement on academic freedom." This myth, while obviously self-serving, is probably made possible only by our general ignorance of what the concept of academic freedom does and does not mean. It does not mean now and has never meant freedom to do or say anything we please in class, and neither the AAUP nor the courts have ever said that it does. Indeed, the courts have specifically held that responsible academic authorities have not only the right, but the duty, to appraise and evaluate their subordinates, not just to ensure that they are doing their jobs but to protect them against the charge that they are not. The AAUP has recognized this by implication, and explicitly recognizes the right of chairs, deans, or similar overseers of teaching, to enter and observe the classroom. About academic freedom, the AAUP Guidelines (1973: 2) state, "The teacher is entitled to full freedom in research and in publication of results, subject to the adequate performance of his other academic duties . . . the teacher is entitled to freedom in the classroom in discussing his subject, but he should be careful not to introduce into his teaching controversial matter which has no relation to his subject . . . limitations of academic freedom because of religious or other aims of the institution should be [i.e., may be] clearly stated in writing at the time of (initial) appointment."

The concept of academic freedom, then, is clearly recognized by our major professional body as being limited to our freedom to do

and publish research and teach our subject matter; it is a political bill of rights for teachers, guarding them from oppression or reaction to their performances as members of a subject matter discipline. It frees us to teach our subjects as we understand them, to tell the truth about them as we see it. It does not free us from the professional responsibility to perform our classroom tasks as well as we are able or from administrative supervision to ensure that we are doing so.

The function of this myth is clear: It is to permit us to be irresponsible in our work. If no one has the right to oversee what we are about in the classroom, then we are free to to—or fail to do—anything we wish. It is a warrant for carelessness and sloth.

(6) “Student evaluations of teaching are meaningless and are, in effect, mere popularity polls.” I have already suggested in discussion of a previous myth that in fact students can make informed judgments about a lot of things, some of which only they can observe. They are, after all, the audience before which teaching is performed, and by the time they arrive in college, they have considerable experience in that role. Further, research on student evaluation has shown that collective student observation on individual teachers is consistent over time, and is valid (in the statistical sense) when students are asked to rate matters they are competent to assess. I agree that it is foolish to ask students to rate an instructor on “knowledge of his or her subject matter” in a course, as many student ratings do. But most course and instructor evaluations will show high agreement among members of classes asked to evaluate matters of their own observation or reaction. Further, the body of existing research can be read to demonstrate that, in fact, good teachers usually are popular, although not that popular teachers are necessarily good. And there is evidence that student ratings in general even agree on the characteristics of outstanding teachers: Goldsmid, Gruber, and Wilson (1977) report a research on the qualities perceived among people receiving Outstanding Teacher nominations at the University of North Carolina over a period of years, and find consistent clusters of dimensions. In a content analysis of 2,900 statements made by 978 students and faculty members in support of their nominations, concern for student mastery of course materials, enthusiasm about their subject matter, and a genuine in-

terest in their students as persons were mentioned by a third, a fourth, and a fifth of the nominators, respectively. Statements of similar clusterings are reported by other investigators of the same phenomenon. Students do know what they want in teachers and, at least regarding their treatment by teachers, what they need—and good teachers seem to have it.

This myth, of course, is merely an extension or special application of the former one. It is especially dishonest in that it takes aim at the one public before whom we do perform, our constant audience, and denies their ability or competence to make any judgment about that performance. By denying even that teachers who are popular with students may have some reason for being so, it denigrates their work and raises lack of popularity to an implicit virtue. Further, it removes from the evaluation process the one category of people who see us often enough, and in sufficient numbers, to provide some degree of objectivity and unanimity in their collective judgment. How useful!

(7) "Undergraduate students (if not graduate) are stupid, unmotivated, and so on." Although this may be the most prevalent of all our myths, a portion of it is clearly nonsense. College students are not in general stupid or they would not be in college. No one can seriously argue that the undergraduate population anywhere resembles the normal curve of I.Q. (The lower half of the curve just isn't there.) Certainly some students who do not have the ability or aptitude for college level work occasionally slip through the admissions procedures, as do occasional psychotics and delinquents, but these are usually quickly weeded out and hardly represent the norm for a student body. Even if, say, I.Q.s of 100 were the bottom layer of the student population (which is not the typical case), this still means that college students are drawn from the more intelligent half of the human race.

That many American students, at least, may not be particularly motivated to intellectual endeavor is probably to some extent correct. But even if true, this is a product of the culture, not of the students themselves. The United States still harbors significant enclaves of anti-intellectualism, know-nothingism, and suspicion of knowledge and knowers. And admittedly, there will always be some

students no individual teacher can reach, and perhaps no teacher at all. These, again, are not the norm. Far more typical is a kind of openness to most of what we have to say, a willingness to explore, and the occasional explosion of energy and commitment when something excites interest. It is our task to arrange a variety of experiences to stimulate those reactions, knowing that no one of them will work for all of our students. Given the nature of our culture, we must try to motivate them; it is hardly reasonable, under the circumstances, to expect them to ignite themselves.

This myth, I think, is often merely a reflection of the prevailing conventional contempt for the undergraduate student, an attitude many of us learn in graduate school. It serves to pump up the ego of the teacher (he or she becomes the Keeper of the Flame surrounded by hordes of the *ignorati* who do not know better), and it rationalizes indifferent and lazy teaching. After all, if what we are engaged in is truly the casting of imitation pearls before real swine, what difference does it make if we try to polish the pearls or perfect the cast? The swine won't appreciate the effort. It is easier, and more rational, to go through the motions in the classroom, and save our passions and our energies for the audience that will appreciate us: our colleagues.

This, then, is the lot. Whether the reader agrees with my assessments or not, it isn't a pretty or flattering portrait. But wait, it gets worse: Let's summarize the discussions of the functions these myths perform for us, looking for consistent themes among them—do a kind of content analysis.

Number 1 permits us to identify ourselves with research rather than with teaching in order to claim the prerequisites and emoluments of the former, whether we do it or not, while ignoring our teaching and our students. Number 2 permits us to ignore much that is known of learning theory and pedagogy, rationalizes doing nothing to improve our classroom performance, and, in effect, licenses laziness. Number 3 permits us to dismiss any consideration of good and bad in teaching practice by denying the utility of any attempt at evaluating it and, hence, by implication, accountability, or responsibility in doing it. Number 4 denies the very possibility of evaluation, hence accountability, and, further, any administrative attempt to ac-

comply with it. Number 5 denies the right of anyone else to evaluate us or hold us accountable for what goes on in the classroom and thus becomes a warrant for carelessness and sloth. Number 6 denies the ability of our principal audience to judge our performance. Thus as 4 and 5 have denied the logical possibility or right of our administrative superiors to hold us accountable, now 6 tells us that our students can't, either. And just to tie it all together, number 7 inflates our egos, rationalizes lazy and indifferent teaching, and justifies putting our energies elsewhere.

Looked at as a whole, we can see that the functions of the lies we live by fall into three more or less discrete categories. The first permits us to identify or define ourselves into a reward- and status-bearing social position whether or not we belong there in terms of what we actually do, or whether that is in fact what we are employed to do. That the institutions in which we are employed sometimes agree that this is an appropriate description of our task, and that some have actually encouraged us in the belief, does not reduce our own responsibility in the matter. The fact is clear that most academics, at most institutions, are teachers, not researchers, and that even at some of those institutions that consider themselves "research universities," most faculty members in fact produce little substantial research, although almost all are expected to perform substantial teaching.

A secondary category of function for our myths is that which centers on freeing us from any accountability, to anyone, for our classroom performance. The myths deny the possibility of evaluation of teaching, the utility of it, even if possible, and the legal right of our employers to do it even if it is possible and useful to do so. As a kind of afterthought, we also deny the possibility that the public we immediately serve, our clients, can have anything useful to tell us about our performances—that they, too, can be ignored.

And finally, it seems clear that a third category of mythic theme rationalizes laziness in teaching, telling us that it is not important to keep current with what our disciplines have to say about learning, and that it is needless to try to improve our skills: **However we choose to do it is good enough.**

These are damning indictments. Some of our most cherished beliefs about the activity in which we spend the majority of our professional careers are not only untrue, but arrogant, mean-spirited, self-serving, callous, and irresponsible as judged by conventional professional ethics. We are weighed by our own words and found wanting. It is a time, perhaps, to bury the sick and visit the dead. For not far in the immediate future, the legislatures and boards of trustees await us, with their increasing demands for accountability on the part of the professariat, and their too-often simple-minded remedies for the ills they somehow discern befall us.

What can be done? I would I had a magic wand, but lack one. I can suggest one or two small steps toward redemption that we can each take as individuals, perhaps saving thereby our own professional souls if not our profession. One step is to call lies, "lies," and to dispute them when our colleagues repeat them. Like the endlessly repeated falsehood that we are grossly underpaid, the lies we live by are demonstrably untrue, and the evidence that they are is readily available. Most of us know their falsehood already, and need only be reminded of it. A second step is to undertake responsibly, for ourselves, to do the best we can at what we are in fact paid to do, and what it is so preeminently important that we do: teach our students. The task of educating the young is never over and ever critical. The future of our society and our civilization depends upon us to do it. It is not, after all, a small thing to which we are called. We are engaged in an ancient and honorable craft. Let us at least attempt to be worthy of it.

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- Page 1 of 1 -



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