

The Professor-Student Barrier to Growth

by Marcia Yudkin

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She sat down in the chair I indicated, unwound her scarf and unbuttoned her jacket. "I don't know if you remember me," she began.

"Of course I remember you!" I was astounded. Linda Harrison had been one of 15 students in a discussion section that had met weekly, just the previous semester, my first as a philosophy professor at Smith College. How could she suppose I wouldn't remember her?

When I thought about it later, my astonishment was tempered by the reflection that when I was an undergraduate I imagined myself part of a fog of names, faces and personalities to my professors, a fog that might clear when I spoke up in class or besieged them during office hours, but would quickly and inexorably descend again. After all, they had so very many other students and such other important things to think about. But later that week I heard my colleagues reminisce about students who had graduated five years previously. So it wasn't true!

That was the first of several startling comparisons I made between the views from the students' and the professors' sides of the desk. Another occurred after having brooded about what seemed to me an epidemic of absences from class. It had to mean that they thought me boring or incompetent. I confessed to a senior in my other class my anxiety over the number of students who skipped my intro course. "Hmmm," she said, "does it meet early in the morning? Or right after lunch? Or in the evening?" My worry dissipated.

I remembered that there were lots of reasons for skipping class, like allnighters, personal crises, extracurricular commitments and general lethargy, reasons that had nothing to do with me, the professor.

It took another odd experience to make me recall that as a student I would not have believed that a professor could take my absence personally. A student in my intro course interspersed her written responses to assigned "thought questions" with remarks about the class, including one to the effect that she was able to observe me during class while remaining unobserved herself so that while she knew a lot about me, I knew nothing about her.

"Not true," I wrote in the margin. "Your face is a giveaway." Facial expressions, even in a class of 45, registered vividly. I would pick out resentment, interest, confusion, and happy struggling with new ideas. I would notice who was and wasn't there. I realized that when a student, I believed I was invisible, protected by a sort of one-way screen. That was mistaken too.

When I began teaching, I had a definite conception of my role in the classroom: I would provoke students to take responsibility for our progress through the course by being active participants in discussion. The goal of studying philosophy, I thought, was for them to incorporate the material, issues and questions into their lives. I would keep lectures to a minimum and encourage lively verbal exchanges in class and individual thinking on paper. I warned students at the outset that if they wanted to memorize without getting involved, they should go elsewhere. In my classroom they would be making discoveries. Unexpectedly, I made discoveries there too.

One day, when everything was going right and there was an exhilarating interchange about whether Descartes' attempt to use reason to prove the existence of God made sense, a student returned toward me and asked, "What do you think?"

All the other heads turned toward me, and there was silence while I balanced on the horns of a dilemma: if my opinion, as the professor's, carried more weight, I shouldn't give it. But if I held back my view I would be doing what I wanted none of the students to do. I took a deep breath and acted as if I were one of them. I told. Forty pencils moved, and the discussion ground to a halt. Anyone looking in would have seen me sitting in the circle, but really I was on the other side of the desk, standing in full academic regalia.

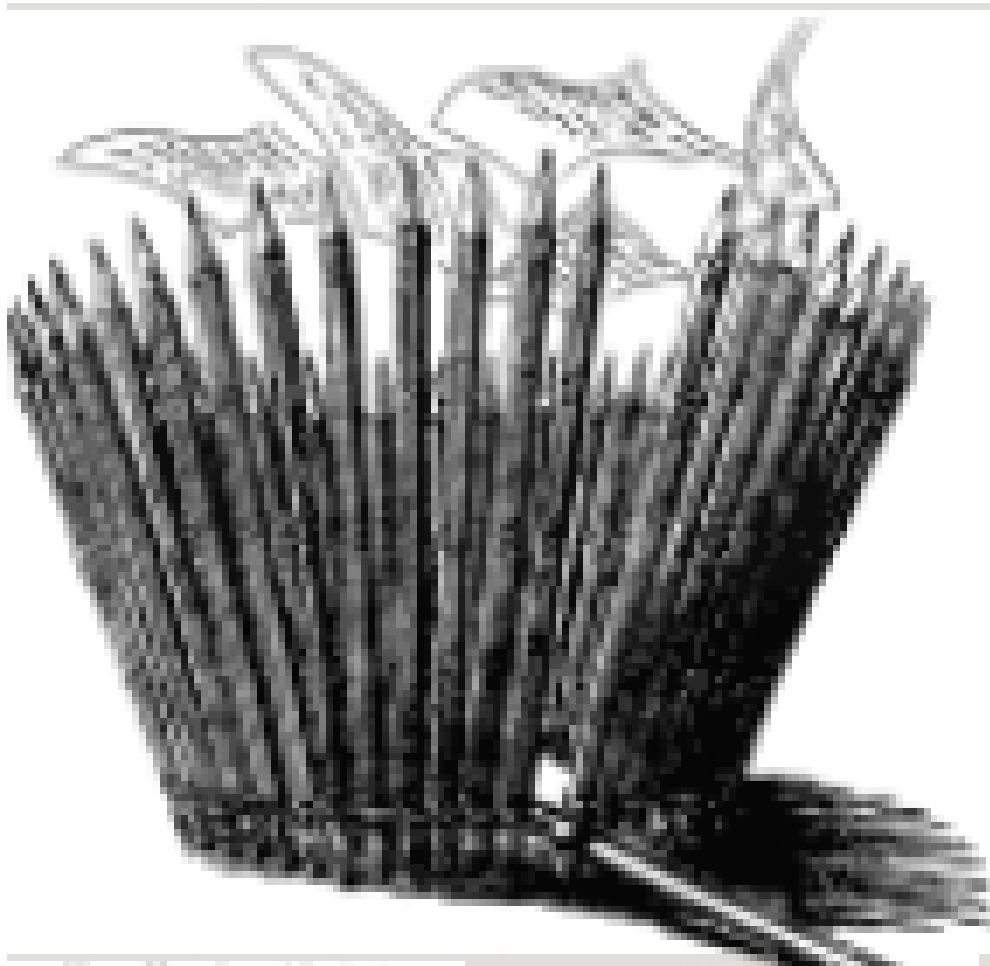
As much as I tried to subvert the traditional role of professor as authority figure, it refused to disappear. It would lurk like a ghost and materialize when I thought I had exorcised it. At evaluation time, I would get some evidence that my strategy worked: "Best course I've had at Smith. We were made to think for ourselves instead of having answers handed to us that we had to regurgitate." But I also got advice like this: "Less discussion by ignorant students and more lectures by the knowledgeable prof."

Why did she think I was knowledgeable? It was an assumption I might have made in her position too, that the Ph.D after my name in the catalogue meant that I knew something. I thought my age and appearance would aid me in transcending the traditional image of a professor. At 28 I still look about 20 and dress as I did when a student. Sometimes it does help, but when students cease to think of me as an authority figure, there is another role waiting in the wings: that of a pal. When that comes into play, if I announce firm deadlines for papers I am assumed not to mean it, or if I fail to give an A to someone with whom I have had good rapport, I am reproached: "How could you do this to me?" I have violated our compact as chums.

The upshot is that after two and a half years of teaching I see the roles as obstacles I am not capable of removing alone. I can shove the desk into the corner of the room, but then I may be trampled upon by students unaccustomed to its absence. In any

case, the struggle to move it away must begin again with each new group of students.

The roles of professor and student prevent me, when a whole discussion section clams up, from finding out what is wrong. I also believe the roles prevent many students from developing a questioning habit of mind and self-reliance that would be theirs for life. As a philosopher, I am inclined to pose my concern as a question: wouldn't it be better for everyone if the views from the two sides of the desk were not so different, if the roles of professor and student were broken down?



A [digitized version of this piece](#) with mangled paragraphing can be found in the *New York Times*' archives.