

The whole art of learning: extracts & commentaries

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Lacan: I wouldn't be displeased if someone understood something (1972)

SOURCE

Jacques Lacan (1901-1981) (ed. Jacques-Alain Miller). "On Feminine Sexuality, The Limits of Love and Knowledge, 1972-1973." Editions du Seuil, 1975; W.W. Norton, 1998.

SETTING

Jacques Lacan (1901-1981) was a controversial philosopher/theorist who started his own psychoanalytic school of thought. For many years he gave a series of lectures to his followers who came from afar to Paris to hear him. In the extract below he is speaking to his classroom of students in 1972. His son-in-law J.-A. Miller transcribed (perhaps too meticulously) everything that was said in class.

EXTRACT

I would really like it if, from time to time, I had a response, even a protest.

I left rather worried last time, to say the least. It [the lecture] seemed altogether bearable to me, nevertheless, when I reread what I had said — that's my way of saying that it was very good. But I wouldn't be displeased if someone could attest to having understood something. It would be enough for a hand to go up for me to give that hand the floor, so to speak.

I see that no one is putting a hand up, and thus I must go on.

COMMENT

Lacan was so famous and he had such a cult following that it is doubly alarming when everyone was trying hard but nobody could figure out what he was trying to say, or at least felt confident enough to expound on it in his presence. Every professor can sympathize from time to time. We often blame student apathy when something like this happens, but surely that was not the case here, and I think is rarely ever the case. However, I suspect blame is to be had by everyone involved in a perfect storm of non-learning, where students and professor alike did not take responsibility in constructing a deep learning environment.

Derrida: American students keep asking 'could you elaborate?'

SOURCE

Jacques Derrida (1930-2004). "Jacques Derrida on American Attitude," <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u2j578jTBCY> (accessed 2019/8/10)

SETTING

Derrida was a central figure in the Deconstructionist movement in philosophy. He was based mainly in France at École Normal Supérieure, but he also spent several years at UC Irvine, even teaching a few classes in Irvine. In the extract below he gives some thoughts on American university students.

EXTRACT

During my office hours, [American students] just come and say, 'Could you tell me more about this or that? Could you elaborate on this?' This doesn't happen in France. You don't just say, "Could you elaborate?"

COMMENT

There is some truth to this, but in my experience European students ask a lot less of the professor in general. Weaker students in American ask "could you elaborate?" and weaker students in Europe say nothing. Not sure which is worse.

What is true, which Derrida surely also knows, is that the more dedicated students, both American and European, process a lot on their own and their questions arise from concerted self effort to break down conceptual or technical barriers that the material they have in hand plus their backgrounds enable them to recognize but may not enable them to resolve in a reasonable amount of time. That's how students learn best, and that's when the more experienced professor is of maximal help for a learning student.

Lowell: be thoroughly grounded in the old and the new (1930)

SOURCE

Amy Lowell (1874-1925). "The Process of Making Poetry." *Poetry and Poets: Essays*. Houghton Mifflin Co., Boston, 1930.

SETTING

Lowell was a famous American poet in the heyday of American poetry, and a leader of the imagist school of poetry. In her essay "The Process of Making Poetry" she gives advice to budding poets.

EXTRACT

I believe [a poet] should be thoroughly grounded in both the old and the new poetic forms, but I am firmly convinced that he must never respect tradition above his intuitive self. Let him be sure of his own sincerity above all, let him bow to no public acclaim, however alluring, and then let him write with all the courage what his subconscious mind suggests to him.

COMMENT

This good advice applies to any intellectual endeavor. If you are not thoroughly grounded in both the old and the new you frequently will only reproduce what others have done before or will be mired forever in trying to solve problems that others have already solved. Nevertheless, once you do become well versed in your intellectual sphere of interest (physics, mathematics, poetry, chemistry, economics, etc.) have the courage to follow your own path that you believe in. If you have a nagging feeling that you are just following a fad and you are not sure your views and approach are totally legitimate — well, you're probably right and you will see your conformist work rot like dead fish over a short period of time. I think that's what Amy Lowell is telling us.

Hardy: the slow grind into dust of Jude's scholarly dreams (1895)

SOURCE

Thomas Hardy (1840-1928). *Jude the Obscure* (novel), 1895.

SETTING

Jude, the title character of the novel, is trying to find a way to enter Christminster University to become a scholar. The extract below details some of his failed efforts.

EXTRACT

During the next week or two he [Jude] accordingly placed himself in such positions about the city as would afford him glimpses of several of the most distinguished among the provosts, wardens, and other heads of houses [of Christminster University]; and from those he ultimately selected five whose physiognomies seemed to say to him that they were appreciative and far-seeing men. To these five he addressed letters, briefly stating his difficulties, and asking their opinion on his stranded situation.

When the letters were posted Jude mentally began to criticize them; he wished they had not been sent. 'It is just one of those intrusive, vulgar, pushing, applications which are so common in these days,' he thought. 'Why couldn't I know better than address utter strangers in such a way? I may be an impostor, an idle scamp, a man with a bad character, for all that they know to the contrary... Perhaps that's what I am!'

Nevertheless, he found himself clinging to the hope of some reply as to his one last chance of redemption. He waited day after day, saying that it was perfectly absurd to expect, yet expecting. [...]

Meanwhile the academic dignitaries to whom Jude had written vouchsafed no answer, and the young man was thus thrown back entirely on himself, as formerly, with the added gloom of a weakened hope. By indirect inquiries he soon perceived clearly what he had long uneasily suspected, that to qualify himself for certain open scholarships and exhibitions was the only brilliant course. But to do this a good deal of coaching would be necessary, and much natural ability. It was next to impossible that a man reading on his own system, however widely and thoroughly, even over the prolonged period of ten years, should be able to compete with those who had passed their lives under trained teachers and had worked to ordained lines.

The other course, that of buying himself in, so to speak, seemed the only one really open to men like him, the difficulty being simply of a material kind. With the help of his information he began to reckon the extent of this material obstacle, and ascertained, to his dismay, that, at the rate at which, with the best of fortune, he would be able to save money, fifteen years must elapse before he could be in a position to forward testimonials to the head of a college and advance to a matriculation examination. The undertaking was hopeless.

COMMENT

I read *Jude the Obscure* as a teenager and none of its (in)famous criticisms of religion or marriage or sexual repression or anything like that had much of an effect on me. It was all small potatoes compared to what I, a budding academic, felt was the over-arching horror of the novel: the pure helplessness, frustration and anger of Jude's impossible dream to become a scholar. Jude tried to get into any college of Christminster (a fictionalized version of Oxford) but there was no path, despite infinite desire and infinite capacity to work for it. His station in life upon birth secured his fate to never have a chance.

It is very sad to think that there are still "Judes" out there now, even within our rich societies, with scholarly dreams having no little chance of realization. But universities in America and abroad are continuing to work hard on this problem.

Hugh of St. Victor: shameful to grow torpid in laziness (12th century)

SOURCE

Hugh of St. Victor (1096-1141). From C.H. Buttiner, ed. *Didascalicon*. Washington: Catholic University Press, 1939.

SETTING

Hugh of St. Victor was the leading Saxon theologian of the 12th century. He was a thinker and a scholar and an all around productive, impressive and interesting chap.

EXTRACT

It is one thing when you cannot learn, or to speak more truly, cannot easily learn, and another when you are able, and do not wish to know. For just as it is more glorious, with no facilities at hand, to attain wisdom by excellence alone, so it is more shameful to be vigorous in mind, to abound in riches, and to grow torpid in laziness.

COMMENT

All great achievers agree on one thing: you cannot be lazy. You can be brilliant and talented, but you still have to get it done. If you want to be productive, competitive and achieve something, get to work and don't let up. Dedication to achieving something worthwhile becomes intoxicating in time, and even more enjoyable than that stultifying new video game you just downloaded.

Pitkin: itch to understand and the whole art of learning (1931)

SOURCE

From W.B. Pitkin, *The Art of Learning*. McGraw Hill, 1931.

SETTING

Walter Pitkin was a former undergraduate student at University of Michigan (class of 1900) and later professor of journalism at Columbia University from 1912-1943. He was a prolific and interesting writer in America in the 1920s-1940s, publishing over 30 books. He was widely read by “regular Americans” who wanted to hang on tight in a rapidly rising nation.

EXTRACT

When all is said and done, your success as a learner depends enormously upon your philosophy of life. Your perspective determines what you are going to do about it; and the energies which emerge in your attitudes and emotions give vigor and scope to your ways of learning.

Do you see life as a mere struggle for money? Then you will shun all study which pays no quick cash dividends.

Do you look upon yourself as a creature of blind chance, helpless in an all-engulfing chaos of futility? Then you will probably find no pleasure in well directed intellectual effort.

Do you consider this world of yours and all its creatures simply as a curious, lovely, alarming, grandiose, noisy, gaudy, thrilling spectacle, which you contemplate as an innocent bystander? Then you remain forever an esthete and contemplative, uninterested in the deeper forms of learning.

Do you itch to understand every machine you see, every odd act of a friend, every absurdity of politicians and actors and debutantes, every obscure news item, and every strange light in the night sky? Then you have it in you to master the whole art of learning.

COMMENT

Sometimes students come to me and ask how can they know if they are well suited to a life of scholarship, to be a professor or professional researcher for decades and decades. I tell them that if they love the process of learning and research, and if they have dozens of questions they are bubbling over with enthusiasm to get to the bottom of no matter how long it takes to do so, and they wake up each morning with eagerness to tackle them that day, then they can know.

I stumbled across a question that is very much related: how do I know I have it in me to master the art of learning, which is so critical to a successful life of scholarship? The passage above is the answer provided by Walter Pitkin. In summary, you must “itch to understand”. I fully agree with Pitkin.

Calvin: my success was due to my teacher as a teenager, Mathurin Cordier (1550)

SOURCE

Bernard Cottret. *Calvin: A Biography* (translated from the French by W.W. McDonald).
Cambridge, UK: W.B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2000.

SETTING

John Calvin (1509-1564), the great Protestant reformer of the 16th century, had a rough start in his studies, but he was fortunate in his early teenage years to find himself in the classroom of Mathurin Cordier (1479-1564), one of the foremost educators in France's illustrious academic history. They met in 1523 in Paris at the Collège de la Marche. Calvin was 14, and his genius needed someone like Cordier to nurture it.

Calvin never forgot the unequaled influence that Cordier had in his intellectual formation, not only in learning Latin but also in learning how to learn. So few knew how to do that back then, since imitation of the Greek and Latin ancients was the highest form of erudition among the elites at that time. Cordier even used French in his classroom. This was considered quite gauche since French was considered a brutish language among the elites at that time. Latin was the only language a scholar should publish in. Calvin would later translate his master work, *Institution de la Religion Chrestienne* (1541), into the French vernacular of the day, perhaps being inspired by the example of his teacher.

Years later, Cordier and Calvin reunited in Geneva, which was a safe haven for the reformists. This time Calvin was the master. Their respect for each other remained strong. They both died in the same year, 1564 -- Calvin in May, Cordier a few months later in September. Cordier and Calvin are both buried in the Cimetière des Rois (Cimetière de Plainpalais now) in Geneva.

We know Calvin's feelings of gratitude for Cordier from the dedication to his old teacher at the beginning of Calvin's *Commentary on The Book of Thessalonians*. The extract below is from that dedication

EXTRACT

It is with good reason that you also have a place in my labors, since having first begun the process of study under your conduct and skill, I have advanced at least to this point of being able in some degree to benefit the church of God. When my father sent me as a young boy to Paris, having only some small beginnings in the Latin language, God wished me to have you for a short time as my preceptor, so that by you I might be so directed to the true road and right

manner of learning that I could profit somewhat from it afterwards. Since, when you had taken the first class and taught there with great honor; nevertheless, because you saw that the children formed by the other masters through ambition and boasting were not grounded in good understanding and grasped nothing firmly, but could only make an appearance with gusts of words, so that you had to start over and form them anew; being disgusted with such a burden, that year you descended to the fourth class. It was for me a singular favor of God to encounter such a beginning of instruction. And although it was not permitted me to enjoy it for long, since a thoughtless man, without judgment, who disposed of our studies at his own will, or rather according to his foolish whims, made us immediately move higher, nevertheless the instruction and skill you had given me served me so well afterwards that in truth I confess and recognize that such profit and advancement as followed was due to you.

COMMENT

Imagine Cordier watching the great Calvin preach to the masses at St. Pierre's Cathedral in Geneva, recalling back to that awkward young boy struggling through his Latin exercises, and knowing how instrumental he was in building the scholarly abilities of the young Calvin who later would change the world so profoundly.

A great teacher that can launch a youngster that reached such great heights indeed should be celebrated. So here's to Mathurin Cordier, and all the other dedicated and fantastic teachers out there like him.