

A Memo to My Students Re: College and the Real World

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To: My Students
From: Your Teacher
Re: College and the Real World

I just read about a senior engineering student who was presenting a design project in an upper-division business communications course. In the presentation, he talked about what he would do if he were a “real” engineer. His teacher asked him what it was about what he was doing that wasn’t “real” engineering. He’d designed the project. He was presenting it to a group of his peers. He answered, “It’s school—not real engineering.”

I have a feeling that’s how a lot of you think about what’s happening in school, and in a certain sense you are right. What happens in college and what you’ll be doing in your career aren’t the same, but really and truly they aren’t as different as many of you seem to think. Furthermore, when you believe what you’re doing in school isn’t the real deal, that changes how you approach your work. Rather than seeing it as preparation for professional life, you see it as stuff the teacher makes you do. When they’re only assignments (i.e., hoops to jump through) and not real work, that motivates you to figure out what the teacher wants, do it well enough to get the grade you need, and not worry about whether you learn anything from the experience.



The same goes for classroom policies—too many students think they’re things that matter to the teacher but probably won’t matter later in life, or if they do matter in the world of work, well, you’ll do them then. So for the time being, you can arrive to class late (and make up an excuse, if you’re asked), and you can come to class unprepared (good chance you won’t be caught). When it really matters, you tell yourself, you’ll get to work on time, be prepared, speak up and contribute without fear, collaborate on projects, and make professional presentations. But you’re

missing a chance to practice doing all those things now. Learning how to do them in college is easier and safer than figuring out how to do them in the “real” world.

I recently had a student complain about somebody in his group who wasn't contributing or doing his fair share of the work. He told me that I shouldn't make students work in groups because it wasn't like “real” group work. On the job, he told me, “people don't screw around” when they work together. I felt a bit like laughing. In my job, I'm regularly in groups with coworkers who don't contribute or care about the success of the group. Furthermore, when it's a “real” work situation where professionals are being paid to get a job done, it's not always the best idea to take group problems to the boss. College is the perfect time to figure out what actions a group can take when one of its members isn't delivering the goods.

I would agree that not all faculty assignments seem terribly applicable to the real world. As a professional, you won't be asked to write term papers with references in APA format, but you will have all sorts of writing assignments—persuading a potential client that your company has the best product, providing customers with clear, nontechnical descriptions on how to run your software, or perhaps outlining what employees do well and what they need to improve as part of a performance review. You won't have the same kinds of tests on the job that you have in the classroom, but your knowledge will be tested, and on-the-job exams are not scheduled. More likely, the boss will simply show up at your cubicle, point your way in a meeting, or e-mail or text you a question that requires an immediate answer.

You can think of college as a way station where you hang out before you get on with the rest of your life. That's not against the law, and no teacher can prevent you from doing that. But you're cheating—not the teacher, not the course, not the department, not the college—you are cheating yourself, and you deserve better. You may decide that a course isn't important or that an assignment doesn't matter. That's your call. But please, don't base that decision on the assumption that what's happening in college isn't “real work” that doesn't matter in the “real world.”

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