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Student Shaming and the Need for Academic Empathy

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The Purpose of Education

This article is part of a series that questions and attempts to clarify the overall goal of public education. Responses to this call investigate how the nature and intentions of higher ed have changed over time. The discussion is ongoing — see [all articles in this series](#) or [the original call for papers that prompted them](#) and consider [adding your voice](#) to the conversation.

“I feel I have just been beaten down with everything I have ever written.” The confessions begin at first reluctantly. Then, they gain momentum: “Writing feels like going on a long scary roller coaster with the Grinch anxiously waiting on the other side to judge me.” Who is this Grinch, you may ask? The answer is clear: “It’s almost as if my teachers set me up to fail and take pleasure in that failure.” These quotes from first-semester college writers demonstrate how the “red pen of death” shapes the student experience of an academic culture of humiliation. These perspectives, shared in a developmental writing class, are further described in Camfield’s [“Mediated-Efficacy: Hope for “Helpless” Writers.”](#)

Students feel shame when teachers make reductionistic snap judgments based on visible student performance. While often focused on student writing, as in the comments above, student shaming is not confined solely to the classroom. Readers of the *Chronicle*, *Inside Higher Ed*, and other campus-life publications have likely witnessed very public instances of faculty venting about displeasing student behaviors. So, too, have we noted a parallel increase in student shaming in our personal social media accounts, to such an extent that what began as privately shared concerns became inspiration to enter public discourse on the subject of shame. From our respective administrative positions in writing programs and faculty development, and with over four decades of combined teaching experience in higher education, we are deeply troubled by what appears to be a normalization of behavior that needs to be critically examined.

We began our investigation of this phenomenon by observing trends in our digital networks. We noticed three dominant motifs emerge, in which mocking and shaming work together to undergird a capitalistic hierarchy that dehumanizes and commodifies students. In our own Facebook feeds, for example, we have seen sarcastic comments about students who have

plagiarized, often ridiculing learners' claims—framed as disingenuous—of confusion around citation practices. A broader and more pervasive motif frames students as stupid, lazy, and unoriginal. Pieces in the *Chronicle's* "[Dear Student](#)" column, such as Reed's "To My Student, on the Death of Her Grandmother," fall into this category. Again, in our personal social media feeds, we have seen faculty disparage students for spelling errors, grammar mistakes, cultural misconceptions, and so forth. A third motif involves the scolding of students due to an egregious lack of social etiquette or appropriate register when addressing faculty, as summarized by Molly Worthen's in "[U Can't Talk to Ur Professor Like This](#)." (Note: Worthen does not herself shame students here; we refer to this article as it summarizes prominent faculty frustrations).

The Harms of Student Shaming

Some might defend these rants by asserting shame's alleged pro-social functions. Social scientists have long noted that shame is used to police social borders. In "[The Vital Role of Shame in Society](#)," Richard V. Reeves extols the value of using shame to deter a range of destructive behaviors, from smoking to racism to teen pregnancy. In *Born to Be Good: The Science of a Meaningful Life*, Dacher Keltner describes embarrassment as shame's handmaiden and an essential prosocial emotion "that brings people together during conflict and after breeches of the social contract" (76). Moreover, he argues that embarrassment can "provoke ordinary acts of forgiveness and reconciliation" (94), if a transgressor can feel appropriately shamed and make amends. Perhaps this, then, is how some student shamers justify their actions.

However, [Brené Brown offers a definition of shame](#) as "the intensely painful feeling or experience of believing that we are flawed and therefore unworthy of love" (60). She observes that shame produces fear, risk-aversion, and the creation of a negative shame spiral. In Brown's description, shame has no prosocial effects: "Researchers don't find shame correlated with positive outcomes at all—there are no data to support that shame is a helpful compass for good behavior" (72). Given the comments we opened this article with, shame not only hurts students but in fact also creates barriers to equitable teaching and learning.

Others might characterize rants against students as harmless or even argue that venting is healthy and critical to managing the emotional toll of faculty work, perhaps even building community amongst beleaguered professors. Yet this is not what seems to be happening, especially in the digital sphere. When students are subject to public scorn with limited or no ability to respond, any presumed prosocial contract is breached, and faculty are unable to tap into an empathetic understanding of what prompted the behavior in question. Digital shaming disallows a possibility for understanding that [Jesse Stommel suggests](#) can be achieved "by listening seriously to the voices of students and recognizing that students can be drivers of the conversation about the state of education." Broadly, student shaming undercuts the mission of higher education to collaboratively build critical thinking skills, leadership, and citizenship.

Student shaming also contradicts the values that underpin many of our own equity-oriented research agendas. [J. Brooks Bousoun notes this hypocrisy](#) in "True Confessions: Uncovering the Hidden Culture of Shame in English Studies," calling shame "the dark twin of our intellectual pride" (626). She invites us to consider the blame we assign students as a manifestation of a much broader culture of academic one-upmanship to which faculty also fall victim. Of course, this cycle starts early, in elementary schools that teach comparison and competition. As Ellen Langer says in *The Power of Mindful Learning*, "teachers are some of the most caring people among us. They are recruited, however, into a system that, in part, is mindless. Tests, grades, and

labels are part of the judgmental culture of schools” (xvi). Academic hierarchies established early on are only reinforced by the politics and practices of graduate school, and replicated beyond. Indeed, there are so many opportunities to feel “less than” within academic culture: an idea dismissed by teachers, colleagues or classmates; a job not gotten; a promotion not granted; a voice ignored in a meeting; the article rejected or book not published. As resources and positions dwindle, the value of higher education is increasingly called into question, and the stakes feel higher, our educational spaces can feel increasingly combative. In such a context, embattled faculty shaming even-more-vulnerable students fails to get to the root of the problem and perpetuates a toxic culture.

Further, in this adversarial climate, teaching—or even caring about students—is considered a mark of shame and reinforces the false binary between pedagogy and scholarship. In “Pedagogy of the Distressed,” Jane Thompkins vividly recalls [the prevailing view of teaching](#) when she began her faculty career: “that thinking about teaching was the lowest of the low and that anyone who occupied himself with it was hopelessly beyond the pale and just didn’t belong in higher education” (655). Residues of this attitude endure. Though many of our institutions rhetorically prioritize pedagogy, we have yet to see widespread practices in higher education that place teaching on equal ground with research. Faculty must reconcile themselves to the fact that in job market, tenure, and promotion deliberations, among others, scholarship commonly outweighs teaching. Instructors’ decisions to prioritize precious energy and funding resources into scholarship over teaching is not for a lack of wanting to pursue pedagogical development, but rather due to the ingrained rules for how to succeed in academia. Shame ensures that no one asks too many questions or challenges this status quo. This dissonance between pedagogy and scholarship is a symptom of a larger academic identity problem. As [Cathy N. Davidson describes](#), “Even if professors are actually teaching a lot and spending a good portion of their time in that effort, the overall ecosystem of higher education does not reward good teaching in the same way it rewards (and requires) measurable ‘outputs’—peer-reviewed articles, books, professional papers, and grants, as well as ‘citations’ of their work in articles by their peers (212). Here, we consider how shaming erupts from this ecosystem, which privileges visible performance outputs over invisible teaching labor.

A widespread—even if unspoken or rhetorically denied—disdain for teaching, coupled with a culture that promotes competition and shaming, creates a ripe field in which students become the objects of displaced scorn. As Brown notes, “when we feel shame, we are most likely to protect ourselves by blaming something or someone” (74). And if caring about teaching is shameful, the best way to avoid censure is to denigrate students as loudly as possible. Consequently, perhaps as a mechanism for shoring up limited and illusory power, the academy—which ideally would embody and reward meaning-making, collaboration, and collegial relationships between knowledge workers—is rife with suspicion of implied slights and pernicious pessimism.

Thus, the disdain for teaching and students may also be bred out of a kind of thwarted idealism, sometimes manifested as cynicism. We’ve heard professors wax nostalgic about a magical time when all students were well-prepared for college, were motivated, polite, and innately skilled. Such a fiction can only lead a professor to find the gritty reality of living-breathing students a let-down. Some let this disappointment degrade into deep pessimism. Martin E. P. Seligman observes that [pessimists have a specific narrative approach to life](#) that attributes negative experiences to permanent, personal, and pervasive factors. Within such a toxic mindset, fostered by an academic culture of power jockeying, if one student cheats on an exam, all students are dishonest, and students who cheat are expressing their particular disrespect of you, their professor.

Lest readers think we are taking academic shaming too seriously, let us consider other consequences of the practice. In a recent study of student writing self-efficacy, [Eileen Kogl Camfield noted](#) not only students' pessimistic mindsets regarding the possibility of their own success, but also their "learned helplessness," the belief that failure is inevitable, causing them to give up before they begin. The roots of an academic shame culture must form a part of conversations around student success and retention in higher education, especially for students from historically marginalized populations or with less exposure to the unwritten rules of academia. However, failing to recognize the link between student shaming and faculty shame might doom well-intentioned student support efforts.

Imagining Alternative Approaches

As a start, re-imagining academic culture is necessary both to unearth the roots of academic shaming and to build academic empathy. [Adrienne Marie Brown observes](#): "Many of us have been socialized to understand that constant growth, violent competition, and critical mass are the ways to create change. But emergence shows us that adaptation and evolution depend more upon critical, deep, and authentic connections, a thread that can be tugged for support and resilience" (14). Such networks are made possible only when we assume the best of our colleagues and students, and this may require active cognitive reframing. Rather than seeing students as hopelessly flawed, professors might consider more optimistic alternative narratives: Perhaps the student who failed to turn in her paper worked a double-shift the night before. Perhaps the young man who omitted your title when he spoke to you had no idea how to address a professor because he was the first in his family to attend college. [Seligman observes](#) that optimists see adverse events as discrete, not permanent. They do not take setbacks personally, nor do they overgeneralize from one bad experience. Just because one student disrespectfully used her phone in class does not mean all students will do so. Optimistic, growth-oriented narratives take time to frame but can be stimulated through intentional, nurturing learning communities. Transparent, learner-centered, and contemplative pedagogical practices seed authentic connections in our classrooms that can blossom into greater equity on campus and beyond.

Directed re-framing of our inner-narratives does not merely involve how we *think* about things; it can require new uses of language and ways of communicating that might, in turn, affect how we *feel* about our relationships with our students and ultimately act toward them. Below, we gather a list of pedagogical approaches that we have employed in classroom and faculty development spaces to re-calibrate mindset and humanize—as opposed to demonize—students. These ideas only begin to scratch the surface of possibilities, and we hope that readers will add additional approaches.

Create an Oasis

Clear the space for empathy with centering activities that allow students (and teachers) to leave distractions at the door and focus on the learning at hand. Short breathing exercises or a few moments of quiet writing can help us center and build connections.

Build Community

Create welcoming learning environments in which all may get to know one another more deeply as the weeks go on. Early on, learn students' names and additional facets of their identities that they volunteer. Weave community-building activities into the semester's activities, deepening

trust and a sense of connectedness. Opportunities to explore values and goals, such as the drafting of personal “mission statements” or exploring hopes, fears, and possibilities for the class, can help students own their learning experiences. Deep, guided listening activities challenge students to move beyond “surface” or “interruptive” listening and attend empathetically to what their colleagues are saying. Practices such as [loving kindness meditation](#) can cultivate thoughtfulness in our students and ourselves. Berkeley’s [Greater Good in Action](#) site offers a wealth of additional approaches that can build focus and relationships in classroom or faculty development spaces.

Choose Depth over Breadth

Over-full syllabi prioritize “coverage” over deep learning, compromising meaningful connections to material and creating faculty and student anxiety in the process. Doing more with less content provides students adequate opportunity to learn and succeed.

Understand and Maintain the Distinction between Faculty Roles as Coach and Judge

While ultimately we will be assigning course grades, we do not need to operate as gatekeeper all semester. Adopting a “coaching” identity creates an investment in student success and communicates belief in student ability.

Teach Transparently

Ensuring that students understand why they are being asked to do the various assignments in your course can result in more careful work. Consider ways of communicating the “course narrative” early and explaining how subsequent assignments contribute to the larger frame. Additional [transparent](#), [learner-centered](#) teaching techniques can optimize success.

Develop Humanistic Assessment Methods

Find or develop assessment frameworks that illuminate the human emotions and processes that go into academic work. For example, we have found two tools that support student writing—an area of guarded vulnerability for many of our students—particularly useful. The first is a **writing rubric** that relies on the reader’s “fund of attention” (and the degree to which this is activated or inhibited) as the algorithm through which prose is evaluated. Readers are coached only to mark places in the text where engagement is sparked and to flag areas where attention wavers or questions arise. They are not encouraged to edit at the sentence-level or use judgmental assessment rhetoric (e.g., instead of “awkward,” FofA readers might say “I had trouble following here”). What results is a dialogue that builds on the best of what appears in the text, valuing prose as integrated and as collaboratively produced by reader and writer. Thus, opaque composition jargon and rigid rules of grammar—in short, those things often used to bludgeon student writers into shamed submission to the professor’s expertise—are minimized. Instead, our approach aims to flatten the hierarchy between professor and students by insisting we all are “readers” together. This approach is more fully described in the forthcoming article “Activating the ‘Fund of Attention’ to Empower Student Peer Review” that will appear in *The Journal of Teaching Writing* (spring 2018).

Along with this reader-based rubric, we have begun experimenting with student **stylistic self-annotation**. By labeling their various stylistic moves, students can communicate concepts that they understand (e.g., a “hook”) but may not yet fully perform. Self-annotation allows us to look

for what the student meant to do and does know rather than simply seeking out errors. Such a window into a student's mind offers a richer perspective on the learning experience and activates instructor empathy.

These are just two tools that help to make more visible the humans producing work we are tasked with evaluating and that allow us to appreciate the sometimes emotionally-charged learning processes that lie beneath the products we see. A wide range of activities could be implemented to add this meta-layer to student work.

Imagine alternative narratives

When we don't have clear windows to explain visible student performance, we can empathetically imagine explanations that assume the best of our learners. For example, while we might be tempted to attribute a late assignment to disengagement, we have a choice to cast that behavior in a more compassionate light. The student may be undergoing a crisis or negotiating competing and overwhelming demands.

Encourage Regular Reflection

Ask students to reflect on the learning process to optimize meaning-making, synthesize the emotional with the cognitive, and fuse the personal with the material.

Breaking the Cycle of Shame

In the end, we do not claim to have discovered the single key to understanding the recent spate of public student shaming, nor do we believe we have come up with one-size-fits-all solutions to the problem. We do, however, believe it is a deep symptom of trouble in academic culture, and we hope we have opened some new avenues for collective conversation. It is worth remembering that [Dacher Keltner lists](#) cooperation, smiles, laughter, teasing, touch, love, compassion, and awe as not just prosocial emotions but essential components of species survival. These same components — along with meaning-making, collaboration, and collegial relationships — are the very keys to developing [what Brown calls](#) “shame resilience” (74–83). How often do we encounter these on campus?

Shame has us locked in a vicious cycle that is not helping the academy maintain healthy social cohesion. Instead, it perpetuates an insider-outsider culture where only the most savage survive. We must evolve better mechanisms for working and living well together. In practicing more compassion for students, so, too, we might learn how to practice more compassion for ourselves — thus activating a beneficent cycle that could change the system. Shame thrives in darkness. To disrupt it, we must first learn how to compassionately call it out. Once we become more accustomed to acknowledging its pervasive-yet-often-hidden presence, we can weaken its power. Then, we can foster shame resilience by replacing toxic narratives with new empathetic scripts. This rewriting of the academic story will take patience and practice and may ultimately allow us to better see and appreciate our students in their full humanity.

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