

Miner Thoughts

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There are at least two ways to look at learning. One is called the "Empty Jug" approach and the other is called the "Mining" approach.

I am sure you have had plenty of Empty Jug experiences.

According to this view, students--like you--are an empty jug, waiting to be filled with knowledge. The teacher has the knowledge, hidden away in another jug. You open your jug and he pours knowledge into you from his jug.

Too many people approach teaching like this, I regret to say, and I believe you should resist it when you encounter it, if you do, at UH.

The other view says that knowledge is like a vein of gold buried somewhere deep in the Earth. The teacher is a prospector with some ideas about where the gold might lie (though she might be wrong). She also has some tools that she thinks might be useful in mining the gold (though there might be better tools).

You are a miner. It is up to you to dig for the gold yourself. Or even to decide if you want to dig (but if you are in the class, then the teacher must assume you are there for some mighty strenuous digging). You should probably try digging where the teacher suggests, and with the tools she gives you. But you should also try digging elsewhere sometimes, and with other tools.

And you should then tell your teacher, and especially the other miners, what success or failures you have had.

The point is, obviously, that learning is a cooperative effort between you, your teacher and your students. There are many truly excellent teachers at UH--people with great knowledge, insight, and dedication. There is so much you can and should learn from them. Let them teach you, openly and willingly. They are not only good at finding existing knowledge. They are also outstanding at producing new knowledge--at creating new gold out of old gold, and sometimes out of dross.

At the same time, you know things that your teachers do not know. You have insights, perspectives, and certainly experiences which they have not had. You have something to teach them. You really do.

And you have an obligation to share your knowledge with them, just as they have an obligation to be willing and able to learn from you. No matter how wise and famous they may be, there are plenty of things they do not--and can not--know, because they are not you. They cannot see the world through your eyes unless you let them--just as you will not learn from them, unless you let them teach.

Sharing knowledge and experiences is important.

And not only between students and teachers, but also between students and students. All teachers should arrange their classes so students have a chance to learn from

each other. Even the most specialized, abstract, or quantitative subject, where methods and answers seem to be absolutely cut and dried, have some elements that are subjective and personal, which can and should be used to let students share ways of learning and solving problems with each other.

Finally, while teachers deserve respect and civility from their students, students also deserve to be treated respectfully and civilly by their teachers. This certainly means that within the classroom and without, a teacher should not harass or intimidate you with impunity. You don't have to put up with any bullying or coercion--physical, psychological, intellectual, moral. You have your rights as a co-miner of the educational lode.

And more than rights, you have power. You have influence. You are what the University is all about. You don't have to take it.

There are, of course, many formal procedures you can follow, or officials to whom you can turn if you feel you are being picked on or treated unfairly. They are there for you to use. And use them if you must.

But don't use them if you don't have to. You may not know how powerful you are! And how many levers of influence and control are in your hands, if you will only use them. Just the fact that you grew up at a different time and place from them is important. You know events, people, songs, movies in ways they do not. Those are valuable sources of your power. You are young--your future is ahead of you. Your teachers are older, often much older, and they may both envy and resent your youth and vitality. Use that difference to your advantage if you need to. You have the power also that comes from unity and solidarity--with your fellow classmates, through ASUH, through various support groups (especially for women or various ethnic, or "special needs", organizations), and, often, through your ties with the local community which many faculty do not have. Faculty have their Union, it is true, but it is not the same as the more personal and affectionate sources you have.

But usually, all you need is yourself, your own presence and persistence. Just walk up to your professor and present yourself and your concerns. Ninety-nine times out of a hundred, that is all you need to do. When it isn't, draw upon the other informal and formal sources, if necessary.

Remember that humor, rather than threats and confrontation, is by all odds the best strategy, if you feel harassed. Virtually all--no, ALL--teachers want to be co-laborers in the mines of knowledge if you let them know that is what you want and expect.

So close your jug--which is anything but empty--and instead snap on your miner's light, shoulder your pick, join with your teacher and fellow students, and start digging.