

Critical University: 1

Structure of the learning situation

By YORK STUDENT MOVEMENT

Most of us come to university with the honest hope that we will learn more about ourselves and the world around us. Stimulating experiences with new people that we meet and discussions about what we are thinking will help us see how we fit into this society. We hope to find an environment for confronting ourselves, for thinking about the lives we lead and for making decisions about what we are going to do with our lives.

We discovered that we can learn a lot about ourselves and Canadian society at York — not by fitting in and trying to absorb what is being taught, but by developing a critical perspective on what kind of university and society we're being fitted into, on why we're being fitted into it, and on how what we are taught tries to convince us that, somehow, the whole mess makes sense. York University does not exist to serve the real needs of students or the real needs of the vast majority of Canadian people. It exists for the minority of people in Canada and their servants within the university. For both of these groups, perpetuating a system that makes most people miserable makes sense, because it makes them money. The system provides alienating jobs or no jobs at all, forces people to live in crowded and overpriced housing, and pollutes their bodies and their minds.

A critical perspective on York has to try to understand two closely related dimensions of living and learning: the first is the form and structure of the learning situation — faculty-student relations, the lecture system, tutorials, grading. The second concerns the content of what we are told to study.

How We Learn

After a little while at York, we begin to see where and how "learning" is supposed to be taking place. There are lectures, tutorials, essays done individually in the library or your private study place, and exams. Although there are obvious surface differences between these "high points" of learning at York, they all have four basic characteristics, which point to York's assumptions about how people learn:

Master-apprentice

Learning is organised on a top-down, master-apprentice basis with course directors at the top of the "iron ladder", tutorial leaders in the middle, and students at the bottom. A PhD and perhaps a few scholarly articles qualifies the prof as an expert — not only in a whole subject area such as social science, but also in teaching, although he has had no direct preparation for how people teach or learn. He will make most of the important decisions about what will be taught and how it will be taught, and about how to evaluate it through assignments and exams. These decisions will be faithfully carried out by the tutorial leaders — don't forget, having fought their way up from student status, they now have a personal stake in the ladder — they want to be course directors someday. Meanwhile, at the bottom, there are the students, who are assumed to be empty heads whose role is to absorb the knowledge being passed on in lectures and assignments. They are assumed to have no experience in social problems, government, etc., in which to root learning. The student as sponge. The top-down, master-apprentice form of learning is clearest in the grading system.

As Atkinson dean Harry Crowe has said: "The basic relationship in a university . . . if the university is to be a seat of learning, must be a master-apprentice relationship."

Students are forced periodically to "perform", in essays and exams, to show how well they've absorbed the prof's ideas and ideas from assigned readings. This "performance" will be graded A, B, C, . . . F etc. Students who learn the rules of the game and decide to play it can churn out "performances" with increasing ease.

In studying, they concentrate on those points the prof. tells them are important, not on those related to his own interests or experience. If he thinks the course is nonsense, he saves this opinion for common room conversations and lets no hint of it emerge in his essays and exams. The power to grade is the most effective way of keeping students in line throughout the year. If you cut lectures and tutorials, it will be difficult to give the "right" answers at exam time. If a student challenges the prof about what or how he's teaching, he takes a risk; he needs those marks at the end of the year, and the prof gives them. The power of the course director to determine the criteria for passing and failing corrupts the entire learning process. The power to be the final judge of how well the student has learned is a power few faculty or departments will willingly share or turn over to the students.

There is another twist to the "iron ladder" at university: faculty move up the ladder not by being good teachers, but by doing research that leads to publishing scholarly books and articles. In all fields, there are psychological rewards that come from winning the respect of one's fellow scholars — respect gained by research and writing rather than by teaching.



Competition

The top-down, "iron ladder" aspect points to the characteristic competitive quality of living and learning at university. There's only so much space on each rung; some are going to make it, some are not. Since we are not evaluating ourselves and our fellow students, but are evaluated by criteria external to our common situation, we find ourselves competing against each other for grades. (an A has no meaning if there are no Cs and Fs.) In tutorials, we have to get a good piece of the leader's attention and score some impressive points in discussion — otherwise, he won't have much on which to grade performance. The competitiveness of the learning setting often leads to some bad scenes in getting scarce books for essays and in highly competitive exam preparation. This competitive aspect destroys the dynamics of learning, which should be between students, with a faculty resource person as part of the group, and reinforces the top-down, master-apprentice dynamics.

Individualism

The competitive aspect points us finally to the individualistic nature of learning at York. The top-down structure enforces a learning relationship between individuals — master and apprentice. The power of grading reinforces this individualism: writing essays and exams, the only basis for grading at York, is a lonely, individual, private affair. This in turn leads to competition among students as individuals. Destroyed is the possibility of creating a communal learning experience, where students and resource people commonly define the problems they want to study, how they want to study them, how they can do communal work assignments and how they want to evaluate them.

Thinking And Acting

The master-apprentice, competitive and individualistic assumptions about how we learn, produce and reinforce the most dehumanizing aspect of learning: the split between thinking and acting. Lots of interesting "ideas" get tossed around in lectures and tutorials. Some profs may even criticize aspects of the university. But as long as learning is based on the master-apprentice relationship, and unrelated in an integral way to our experience in university and elsewhere, there is no danger that anyone will act upon ideas. That's why we can study how the poor are powerless before government bureaucrats or how the Cubans are

building a new society without relating either to our experience in Canada or with bureaucrats at university. Acting to change the situation we live in and studying and participating in the creation of new structures has no part in "education" at York. Thinking may be "free", but acting is strictly controlled.

Key To Understanding

The key to understanding these basic characteristics of the learning situation at York is the realization that how we learn is shaped by the needs of the interests in Canadian society the university exists to serve. One of the indispensable functions of the university is training students in attitudes that will make them useful to the businesses, government departments and educational institutions where students will eventually look for jobs.

They need people who will accept unquestioningly and who think and act within the norms and attitudes required for the smooth functioning of the Company, the Department, the Profession. Take the classroom situation, for instance. When you tell your prof that grades and exams are irrelevant to the learning process, he may well say, in the best liberal tradition, "You're absolutely right. Unfortunately the department insists on them and there's nothing I can do about it. However, I'll bring it up at the next Faculty Council meeting." The same situation applies to the employee-manager relationship. The employee will ask for more say in work assignments or increased fringe benefits, and the manager will say, "You're absolutely right. You've been a good worker. Unfortunately the head office decides these things, and there's nothing I can do about it. However, I'll bring it up at the next executive meeting."

So the elite who run Canada need people socialized to top-down work relationships, where those below work within the limits determined by those on top and where people assume the experts know what's best for them, competitive human and work relationships, an individualistic, "every-man-for-himself" ethic, and the split between thinking and acting beyond the limits defined by the institution or company. You don't hear many serious objections to this in companies, professions, or university faculties, do you? Things seem to be going pretty well. They should. People have been well fitted for it by our educational system.

If the present structures and dynamics of the learning situation at York are geared to adjusting us to the present status quo in Canada, we can also glimpse a new kind of society in the creation, now . . . of a learning situation which relates knowledge and experience in a communal effort to understand and change the world we live in.