



Mike Foreman photo

The student's nemesis

Year end essays - the annual headache

By ULLI DIEMER

Essay-writing is a matter of determination. Procrastination is a matter of genius.

This conclusion must be evident to anyone comparing the way students avoid doing essays with the quality of the final product. More sheer resourcefulness and ingenuity — often born of the genius of desperation — go into the art of procrastination than into the supposedly cerebral and creative activity of writing undergraduate papers.

Recently however, there has been a trend to combat the unhappiness which students feel with their educational experiences. This has taken the form of 'free', 'unstructured' and 'liberated' courses, dealing with issues of 'relevance to today's world'. These allow more autonomy for students and loosen structures in established courses through increased emphasis on discussion and essays rather than exams.

The results have been disappointing to many. There have been indications that the professional faculties do not like to accept these 'Mickey Mouse' course credits. More surprisingly, there has been little change in the nature of the learning experiences which take place in the 'free' courses. Writing essays, for example, seems to call forth the same kind of ingenious procrastination as always.

It seems puzzling. Young, long-haired, professors who lived through the heady days of the sixties when alienation was rediscovered and when the university was exposed to everyone as a barbarous monstrosity in a brutal society, are now setting up courses which are supposed to be liberating experiences. (The courses are born not only of a fascination with attempts to transcend inhuman human relations, but of guilt on the part of young academics who have to rationalize teaching in an institution they once criticized so uncompromisingly.)

MARX AND LAING READINGS

They teach their students about alienation, about repression. Marx and Laing are on the reading lists. (And naturally, the readings are not compulsory; the student should read them because she feels a genuine urge to do so.) Emphasis on the necessity of authentic experience is the order of the day. (Not universally, of course, but only in the 'free' courses.)

And yet. The failure of so many of these courses is so utter that even the faculty offices are beginning to notice. And on their own terms, in their attempts to create unalienated learning experiences, their failure is an open secret.

There is a problem in teaching about alienation, in studying Laing. Alienation exists. And studying it makes a student more aware of the fact. She becomes aware of it, but does not know how to go beyond it. But being conscious of the fact without knowing how to go beyond it makes school, more oppressive, harder to bear. She realizes that she is powerless to change the situation.

Writing essays, she realizes, is a ritual, a game, but a massively vicious one. It is a matter of concealing ignorance from the professor, of trying to fit into an external mold of pre-set standards. The essay may be an intellectual product, but it is not her thing, she does not feel like an intellectual.

The problem is no easier in 'liberated' courses. With their stress on the students' right to determine course content, on far-ranging discussion, informal relations in the classroom, and lack of structured assignments and reading lists, they attract people in search of easy credits in droves. And the educational experience they were set up to provide, based on commitment and self-discipline, (difficult even under the best of circumstances for students who have always been subjected to external discipline) becomes all that more difficult.

Often courses such as these drift along through an entire year without facing the problems that the course outlines promises to deal with. Much of the activity amounts to simultaneous masturbation, where people groove on expressing ideas formulated — often incoherently — before they ever came to the course, ideas to which others listen with at best half an ear. The amount of real communication of challenging ideas in these courses is often minimal.

PROFESSOR'S ROLE IS SAME

The professor, who ordinarily plays a 'leadership' role in

seminars and discussion groups, is reluctant to take that part in the 'free' course. The reason is generally a commendable reluctance to 'lay trips' on people. As a result he sits back and says nothing. Or, alternatively, he tries to manipulate (often) without meaning to) and drag his point of view out of others with leading questions. (And so he winds up 'laying a trip' anyway and one that is harder to deal with because it is less obvious.) The alternative is for students and professors to exchange ideas on a basis of equality, so that superior authority would not automatically be associated with the professor's views. But, again, the bother is that professor and students are in fact equal, in knowledge, or, more importantly, in power. And this can't and shouldn't be forgotten.

Indeed, 'free courses' are a fad that help to develop new ways of cracking the whip. The increased degrees of freedom allow greater variety in the forms of behaviour that can emerge in the classroom. But underneath it all, students still experience the same kind of authority relations (although they may no longer be aware of them).

The more indirect and subtle uses of authority are deceptive. In such a setting, both professor and student come to believe that they are in a dialogue, that they are equals as people, even that a new and revolutionary kind of learning is occurring. And these myths are viable as long as the participants perceive what happens solely in terms of appearances.

But the world goes on. And the underlying authoritarian reality remains. In the long run, the demands of the university assert themselves. Deadlines, essays, grading occur because ultimately the bureaucracy has control over both teacher and student. And whether they like it or not, both professors and students must live up to the demands of the institution.

Essay time is a time when the contradictions inherent in 'free courses' have to be faced. Despite all pretensions of lack of structure, despite all drift, despite everything, this time of year produces dilemmas. Like it or not, the professor must hand in marks by a certain date. They must be real marks, marks that a computer can digest. No amount of protestation about no measure for the quality of an educational experience will do any good. The student must put something down on paper. No matter how good she may have felt about her experience in the course, no matter the hypocrisy of ignored beliefs, it must be done. Otherwise the professor, liberal, sympathetic, radical, feely or simply traditionally authoritarian, will be passed off. And who can blame him?

It's all innate in repressive tolerance. The student can feel free (as can the professor, with perhaps more justification) but when it comes to the crunch, she isn't. But now she is supposed to motivate herself to conform to the external authoritarian structures, rather than be forced to it.

R.D. Laing, a guru of the 'unstructured' courses, might formulate it as follows: There are rules. You must live up to the trust put in you by producing academically acceptable work. You must do this because you want to. You must not recognize the existence of a rule that says you have to do it. You must not recognize a rule that says you must want to, whether you want to or not. You must not recognize the existence of these rules ... etc, etc, ...

For many students, the conflict inherent in the situation, the contradiction in trying to act out freedom within a structure where it is impossible, makes itself most clearly felt in writing essays.

The student chooses an essay topic that is relevant and interesting, something that she herself wants to do. But, so often, the same problems develop as before: chronic procrastination, and writer's block. Why?

ESSAYS AND 'FREE' COURSES

Marx's definition of alienation provides a useful framework: "Man's powers become an object, assume an external existence, exist independently, outside himself and alien to him and stand opposed to him as autonomous

power." When the student's intellect, her ability to think and to organize ideas, becomes subordinated to the production of essays, things defined by deadlines and marks, the situation is no different than if a worker's ability to work, his labour-power, is sold to a capitalist. The fact that the essay is written 'voluntarily' — that the student has chosen the topic — is irrelevant. She must write about something, produce something that can be marked. In that there is no choice.

An interesting essay topic doesn't change the situation. It isn't the 'innate nature' of an activity that determines if it will be alienating, but the context in which it occurs. For example, typing, or working in a factory, or teaching, are not in themselves alienating activities. They only become such when they are performed because the worker has sold his ability to work to someone else.

CONTEXT, NOT INNATE NATURE

In the context of the university, where the student is not freely choosing his learning experiences, essay-writing is an alienating activity.

An understanding of the nature of educational institutions and relationships doesn't transform them. The problems cannot be analyzed out of existence, they cannot be made to disappear through acts of will, through the attaining of consciousness.

When you understand that some of the best parts of the individual are engaged not in writing the essay, but are in fact actively opposing it, then you begin to understand why persons who clearly have much intelligence, wit and vigour often function abysmally in 'learning' situations of various kinds. The life-powers are being expended elsewhere. The irony of the process is that the most vigorous parts of the personality are condemned and opposed as being not of the self, while the parts of the personality are condemned and crushed in the socialization process, and actually in the service of external impositions (doing the assigned essay) are identified as the self.

Consciousness of this process can even worsen the situation. The conscious person realizes that the causes of her anger, guilt, frustration, etc, are not immediate persons or situations. The professor who assigned the essay had no choice in the matter. He is responsible to the chairman, who is responsible to the dean, the government, the voters ... Obviously, then, it is foolish to react angrily against the immediate object of irritation, for it is not the real obstacle. The problem is the 'system'.

With this kind of reasoning, the conscious person constructs an abstract model of his own and others' oppression, and opposes it with an abstract anger that can vent itself in practice only in blow-ups over petty frustrations, or against the self. Paradoxically then, analysis and understanding of the situation function also as a neurotic device for avoiding strong feeling.

Because the problem is unsolved, it tends to remain in the front, as it were, of the consciousness. Other problems like the intellectual work involved in writing the essay, recede.

As a result, the unconscious attention, directed elsewhere, must be actively repressed. But the repression cannot be successful, since the problem remains unsolved. The energies must find an outlet elsewhere. Consequently, the individual often becomes deeply involved in trivial activities. Small trivial tasks are then sought out constantly (procrastination) because they are chosen not imposed. They provide an excuse for not doing the other thing (the essay) and help to keep it out of mind and reduce awareness of the oppression involved in being forced to do the essay. Attention is fixed on one part of actuality (or many parts) in order to avoid another part of the actuality, which is unpleasant.

CONFLICT STALLS COMPLETION

So it's possible to choose an engrossing essay topic yet still find completion impossible because of an inability to 'put it together'. The problem is an unconscious attention directed elsewhere, to the conflict in being aware of alienation involved in doing an essay, and the necessity of doing it anyway.

On another level, the problem is the unfinished situation which needs to be completed before the personality can move

continued on page 11