

# Classroom self-defense

*The author of this article, Ron MacDonald, was a graduate student at this university. The opinions expressed by him are not necessarily representative of the Gateway staff.*

Take my arm!  
Take my leg!  
Oh Baby, don't you take my head!  
— Rolling Stones, "Let It Bleed"

The masters of this University don't spend much, if any, time listening to the Rolling Stones. Having already ripped off your arm and leg — it costs you or somebody else an arm and a leg just to get into this place — they are going to spend most of their time and effort over the next seven months trying to take your head. You may want to resist this particularly vicious piece of larceny, and this article is written in the hope that it may aid your resistance and hence your survival. It's called Survival in the Classroom because the classroom is the main place where the masters perform the massive surgery necessary to separate your head from the remainder of yourselves.

## initiating the surgery

Surgery of this kind is especially difficult when the victim is unwilling. Now some, even many, of you may be willing victims, but the masters can't take a chance on how many may be unwilling, so they take certain measures to anaesthetize you for the operation. First of all, they isolate each victim-to-be from all the other victims-to-be so none of us will be able to compare notes on what's happening to us or about to happen to us. That way, we can't be sure that what we think is wrong is really wrong, and every time one of us asks the doctor (professor, department head or dean) whether something is really wrong, they can tell us without fear of contradiction that what's wrong is wrong with each one of us, and send us to the counsellor. Like this:

Student: "Sir, I just can't seem to get started on this paper. I don't know what's wrong with me. I sit down to write and nothing comes out. What should I do?"  
Professor, Department Head or Dean: "Now, look. I assigned this paper to everybody in the class. It wouldn't be fair to the others if I let you off. You'll just have to write it. Maybe you should see student counselling about your study habits. Are you getting enough sleep?"

Now the trick here is that *nobody* in the class can write the damn paper. Some people can fake it and get in some words on paper, but nobody can really write a paper on any of the topics given. But each of us is alone with our incapacity and our inability and nobody lets us in on the secret — there's nothing wrong with us, it's the *paper* that's screwed up. Who the hell can relate to writing a paper on the political culture of Belgium, for God's sake, when the reality we live in is one in which four of our friends got busted last night for possession of dope, Weber Brothers is going to tear down the house we're living in next month, we're trying to figure out what's wrong with the relationship we have with the woman or man we're living with, and we keep sleeping in in the morning and missing our classes?

You'll notice how you're isolated almost as soon as you walk into the classroom. Early in the year, you'll be made aware that there are EXAMINATIONS coming up, and those examinations are going to determine whether you make your year, which in turn determines eventually whether you get a diploma, which in turn determines whether you get that nice job with one of Washington's branch plants, or have to go on welfare or work as a file clerk in Woodward's credit department. Now the interesting thing about examinations is that they are strictly a lonely trip. It doesn't matter how many people write a given exam, each one of those people is alone with the exam paper, it's *his* or *her* knowledge against *their* questions, and if you get help from anybody else in the examination room, that's CHEATING and you're failed and kicked out of school.

"success"

Furthermore, you aren't the only one who's after that nice job with Imperial Oil of Canada — a lot of other people in the classroom are after it too. There are more people than jobs, so not only are you *alone* in the examination room, but you're working *against* everybody else in there. That's called competition. In this part of the world competition is about as important as anything can be. Now if you're smart, and you really want that Imperial Oil job, you'll be working against the other people in the classroom not only when you're writing the exam, but

classes you have to attend, what mark you get on your exams, in other words *how* you win success. Of course, in the process they're going to take your head, but what the hell, there's a price for everything, isn't there?

You are isolated in the classroom — that's why you feel up-tight the minute you walk into it (which might explain why it's so damned hard to get up in the morning). Alone, you are the slave to the professor's master. When he teaches you out of American textbooks, you can't do anything about it because you're alone — you *have* to be alone to be a success in this world, right? When he teaches you things

Weber Brothers shouldn't be allowed to rip off the whole damn neighborhood and turn it into concrete towers patrolled by rent-a-cops, seems like maybe it isn't real after all, like maybe Weber Brothers and the other land speculators have a *right* to kick us out of our homes. They mess up your head so thoroughly that you can't think straight about anything, and then they take over your head and do your thinking for you, on television, in the newspaper, at the office, right in your own bedroom where you're just lighting up that joint for a quiet toke or two. They can mess up your head until you actually start believing women need vaginal deodorants.

## organizing

What do we do about it, then? Well, the most efficient way to find out what's behind the screen is to break down the screen. And since that screen is a screen of rules, written and unwritten, we're just going to have to break some rules. Not because we're violent and vicious and irresponsible and unprincipled, but because somebody is doing something violent and vicious and irresponsible and unprincipled in our selves, namely taking our heads, and we can't really relate to that. Maybe we'll begin by breaking the unwritten rule that says we have to be alone in the classroom. Like we could start discussing what's going down in the classroom among ourselves. At the start, if the professor won't let us do it in class time with or without his presence, we might get together after the class and find out if *everybody* in the class feels alone, if *everybody* has trouble relating to the paper, if *everybody* lives in fear of the examinations, if *everybody* lives in fear of the professor's power over their whole lives, their entire futures. Then we might start thinking about what to do about it.

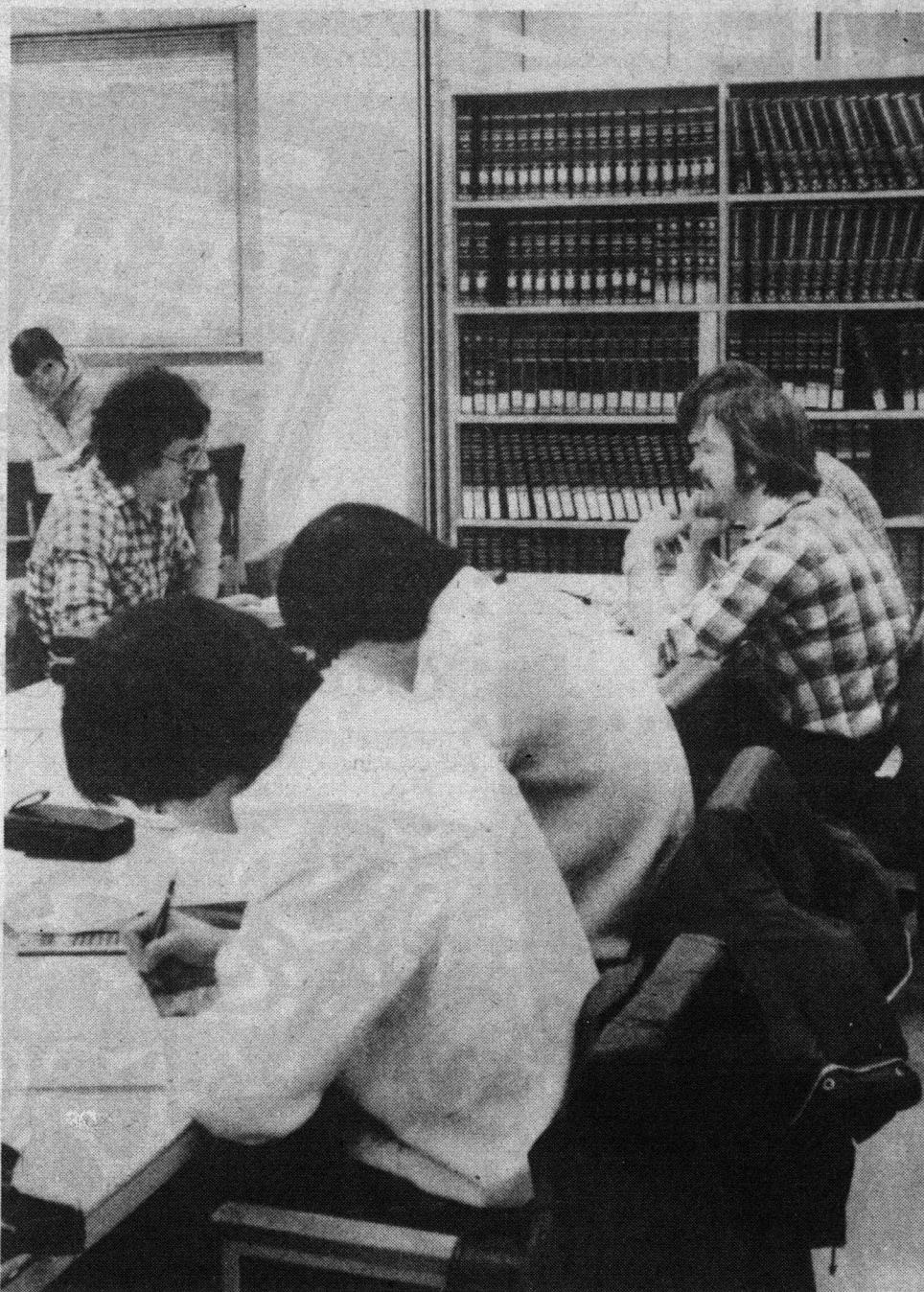
Then we might break another unwritten rule and start thinking about why it is that we all have to be alone in there, when we are the majority. We might work up some ideas on what we would like to be taught, how we would like to learn it together, how we would like to sit together in the classroom instead of in nice little rows so that all we can see is the back of somebody's head. Then we might actually get together so well that we'll form a Classroom Student Defense Organization (that's right, *Defense* — they're trying to take your head, remember?) and start presenting that professor with some *demands* about what goes down in the classroom and how it goes down.

## present the demands

*Classroom Student Defense Organization: (notice you don't call him "sir" anymore — he isn't any better than you, you know). "Fred, we've formed a Classroom Student Defense Organization and we've drawn up these demands here, and we want to rap about them with you. We demand the right to determine course content, the right to organize the physical set-up in the classroom, the right to tell you when we want a lecture and what we want it on, the right to determine what books will be read, the right to have class sessions without you being there, the right to assign our own final marks at the end of the year, the right to dispense with any and all examinations."*

*Fred: "Well, okay, let's see the list there, and I'll tell you which ones I think we could do. Now, the physical set-up in the classroom. I think we could change that anytime you want to. There's certainly no problem there. And some of the others, there, on course content and textbooks and so on, we could certainly talk about that. I've always said I wanted feed-back, you know. There are some problems, though. On the textbooks, you have to order them about three months ahead at the bookstore, and even some of the ones I ordered aren't in yet and it's already November. And the course content is flexible up to a point, but the department sets certain stuff that we just*

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Students conspiring to overthrow the oppressive university regime.

also when you're preparing for it, which is all through the rest of the year. In other words, make sure while you're in the classroom that you clasp every bit of knowledge you can in your own little bosom and/or head and don't let anybody else have your best ideas, because they'll give you an advantage on the all-important examination. Sound familiar? Right on. In this place, you *own* knowledge, just like you own as much of everything else around you as you possibly can. Owning a lot is called success.

## the hierarchy

Now that you're well and truly on the road to success — that is, now that you're well and truly alone in that classroom — they can really go to work on you. First of all, the big masters — deans, department heads, General Faculty Council and so on — have little masters called professors who do the actual surgery on your head. The professors aren't the deans' and departments heads' masters, though; the professors are *your* masters. And that makes you a slave. Professors are your masters because they have power over you — they have power to determine what they teach, how they teach it, when and how you can ask questions, how many

that are absolutely irrelevant to the reality of your own life, you can't do anything about it because you're alone. When he tells you that oppression isn't oppression, that exploitation isn't exploitation, that women aren't people, that capitalism is good for the people, that schizophrenia is an individual problem and not a social one, that building dams without regard to their social consequences is good engineering, that teaching Indian children to be white helps them adjust and be happy, you can't do anything about it. Because you have to be alone. That lonely master-slave relationship is the screen behind which the surgery on your head is carried out each day in the classroom so that people become niggers and walk out the other end of the assembly line ready to take their places on the bigger, better assembly lines with Muzak and water coolers out there in the bright, green world. And you probably can't drop out, because you probably owe the government or the bank or your parents a few hundred or a couple of thousand dollars just for the privilege of being here in the first place.

Well, those are the rules. The rules screen the surgery. They don't actually physically remove your head, but they take it and mess it up so you keep thinking that what you *know* is real, like you *know*