

Why I Should Never Answer My Emails

Right after reading the *New York Times* front page story on Tuesday, February 21, about college professors and student emails, I received this message from a student:

Professor Early:

I am in your class on 19th century American realism. I am really upset to know that you have been writing a blog for the *New York Times* for the month of the February. I really think it takes time away that you should be dedicating to your classes and your students like me. It seems like a big distraction and I don't understand why professors are permitted to do stuff like that. Now I know why you refused to read the three rough drafts of my paper. You are too busy writing columns. My parents are paying a lot of money for me to be here and I think the least you can do is devote your full attention to your duties as a professor. Besides, I don't think the blog is very good, anyway.

Cathy

This is fair sample of a certain type of the 50 to 60 emails per day I receive from students. It is one of the more striking hazards of my job to have to sift through so much snippy communication from them. What surprised me about the *Times* piece was that it was not "above the fold," as the demands made by students upon the professoriate through emails approach something of a minor crisis in higher education. What the student does not understand is that my dealing with the enormous amount of emails I receive from them everyday really distracts me from my job more than anything else. We are treated so much like camp counselors these days by a lot of middle class brats rather than as the truly learned men and women we are. Excuse my momentary intemperance but the burden of this is frustrating. I might even wind up having to deal with my students perhaps a fifth as much as my sister who teaches high school, which would, indeed, reduce the American university to, well, nothing more than a high school, which, it is rumored, it nearly is now.

I always try to be judicious in my answers, as, of course, someone must play the grown-up in these exchanges. At first, in receiving this email, for instance, I was tempted to say something about how it was pointless to read a rough draft of a paper in advance since the final product that will be turned in will be a rough draft anyway and no better than the earlier versions. And I certainly wouldn't write that the *Times* blog is hardly a distraction, it is, in fact, the class that is a distraction from my being able to do my real work, writing, publishing, and consulting (such as the latter is for an English professor who can't write a touching memoir about dead mentors or being an exceptional teacher himself with students who love him to death), and earning extra money from giving high-faluting lectures on totally irrelevant subjects to finance the retirement that I am destined to endure until I am at least ninety-five. (Professors live a long time, insurers say.) No, no such answers as those. I shall say that the blog does not take away from my ability to do my classes, indeed, it enhances my abilities as a teacher as it sharpens my mind and disciplines my pen. Cathy, you would hardly want a professor who did nothing but think of his or her classes all the time with no other intellectual outlet. Besides, the *Times* hardly ascends to the level of the intellectual. I am not writing pieces for an academic

journal here that would be extraordinarily demanding and, of course, enduring and imperishable. These are mere mental ephemera, impressionistic drivel, bagatelles, that take no more than ten or fifteen minutes to be composed. Moreover, I am broadcasting the name of the institution among thousands, perhaps millions of readers, making the school famous in some circles, and this increases the value of a degree. I do this because I am mindful of how much your parents are paying for you to attend and value added to the degree in any way we can is vitally important to all of us who teach here.

Among my emails are the usual bits of students complaining about not getting an A in a course (I never give a grade above a C as I fight against grade inflation), confessing some secret matter about their sexual orientation that they could never reveal to their parents, complaining about how I teach my classes, complaining about how I fail to keep my office hours and appointments (I must always remind them of how busy I am so that they will appreciate my worth and how, when I spare five minutes or so to see them, that it is really something very special.) . I hear constantly about how much they drink and how much unprotected sex they have, and how hang-overs and episodes of venereal disease prevent their being able to attend class. I understand that these irresponsible, poorly written excuses are really cries for help and I try as much to serve, too, as a counselor, although I am not paid for this.

But the emails I would like to bring to your attention are those I have received about the blog. For instance, I received this from an African American student:

Dear Professor Early:

I was really disappointed reading your blog about Black History Month and Coretta Scott King. I think you fail utterly in providing proper intellectual guidance and a sense of commitment for black students. You are a very poor role model with all your ranting about self-doubt and your criticism of blacks. You sound like a poor man's Shelby Steele. In fact, I think you are nothing more than another one of those black conservatives out here with a hustle for the white folks to get recognition and money, not wanting to deal straight up with the racism out here but blaming the victim. I had heard rumors about you before and now I know they are true. Besides, you don't write that well anyway. Sounds like crappy James Baldwin to me.

Greg, seeker of enlightenment

(I am sure this is not representative of all the black students, some of whom actually like me because I do, after all, know a lot about W. E. B. Du Bois and I once said that the Black Panthers had some good points. I think Tupac is pretty important, too)

This came from a conservative:

Dear Professor Early:

I am writing to say that your blog is a disgrace to the university. Not only does it lack any appreciable intellectual content or any engagement with substantive public issues, it is poorly written. You are a perfect example of what happens when Affirmative Action is permitted to dilute the quality of the university and we have third-rate majors like Black

Studies. (I understand you use to be the director of that program.) All you guys can talk about is race and you don't even do that well. I bet your classes are nothing but polemical, guilt-inducing rants against whites and capitalism, the very whites and capitalism that made you possible. We'll probably be monitoring your class next semester and "out" you for the incompetent race hustler that you are.

Adam Smith (Not My Real Name, In Case You Don't Know Who Adam Smith Is)

(I am sure this is not representative of all the conservative students, some of whom have taken my classes and appreciated my strictness, my authoritarian demeanor, and my ability to talk about dead white men with some real knowledge.)

Clearly, the blog has not gotten the positive response I had hoped from the students. I have also received criticism from gay students (for not discussing gay issues), from feminist students (for not discussing gender issues), from Latino students (for not writing the blog in Spanish), from leftist students (for showing insufficient solidarity with the cleaning and service people, all of whom are either black like me or Mexican like Vincente Fox), from Asian students (for failing to talk about China, Taiwan, India, Pakistan, Japan, Korea, or any place in the Pacific), from anti-war students (for failing to talk about the war or for not flailing Bush). I must remind this latter group that I am not, after all, a real columnist and that to discuss the war, Iraq, or Bush would momentarily leave Tom Friedman and Maureen Dowd with nothing to write about.

The lot of a college professor is hard, especially dealing with students and their opinionated email that fails to appreciate what we professors are and what we do. But I shall answer them all dutifully and politely, seeking the teachable moment in all of this.

The email about the blog that I most appreciate was from a group of students known as U.S., which stands for United Slackers. They told me they were disappointed that I did the blog at all as it was work. Their motto, I learned, is DO NOTHING UNLESS ABSOLUTELY FORCED AT GUNPOINT THEN DO ONLY THE BARE MINIMUM. I wish I had followed their advice.

Gerald Early