A Profile of Contemporary University Students: Implications for Teaching and Learning[1]

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At the beginning of every academic year, veteran professors face a stark and humbling reality: the age gap between them and first-year students widens again. The students appear not only younger but stranger. Unusual clothing, hair colour, body piercings, and speech patterns often assault the professor's senses. It is not long, too, before many faculty begin lamenting the students' inadequate academic preparation for university-level work. Reaching, let alone teaching, new students seems challenging if not impossible, and the most jaded faculty either try to avoid the first-year experience entirely or merely endure it until, mercifully, they reach the end of term.

I recommend a different perspective and a more positive approach. We can't do anything about the aging process, but as faculty and administrators we can attempt to enrich the teaching and learning experience in ways that deepen our students' (and our own) engagement with the university. Research is now demonstrating the academic value of student engagement strategies, and this alone is grounds for more optimism and less cynicism.[2]

To engage entering students, we need to know them better than we generally do, and in this brief paper, I will report — though by no means exhaustively — on what recent literature is telling us about the identity and aspirations of university-bound youth. Specifically, I address the following questions: what has changed in the transition from adolescence to adulthood; what do young people believe and value; how prepared academically are they for university; and what are some potentially rewarding teaching strategies? The generalizations that follow are risky, if not inadvisable, and inevitably open to challenge. Nevertheless, this discussion stems from what I believe is a valid premise: the better faculty and administrators comprehend their students, the better equipped their institutions will be to enhance the undergraduate experience inside and outside the classroom.

Substantial literature exists on the history, psychology and sociology of adolescence, and more recently on the subject of the transition from adolescence to adulthood. As a socially-constructed developmental category, "adolescence" was conceived in the late nineteenth century by American psychologist and professor, G. Stanley Hall. Drawing from prevailing theories of evolutionary science, child development, and eugenics, Hall contended that adolescence, which began at puberty, was a turbulent but necessary growth stage — a prerequisite for healthy adulthood. North American youth, who were already spending longer than previous generations in school before entering the workforce, needed time to mature physically, socially and intellectually. Dependency on adults was, for Hall, a

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[1] An earlier version of this article was prepared for the Centre for the Study of Students in Post-secondary Education, Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (University of Toronto, 2008).

[2] National Survey of Student Engagement, *Fostering Success: Engaged Learning for All Students, Annual Report 2006,* http://nsse.iub.edu/NSSE_2006_Annual_Report/ (accessed 13 September 2008).

positive developmental state which should be carefully nurtured and managed by parents, high schools, and youth organizations, and children's independence from their families should not be hastened.[3]

While much of Hall's work was eventually repudiated because of the hoary myths upon which it was built (including the contention that females were incapable physiologically and psychologically of fully escaping from a state of "semi-dependency" on males), the notion of a staged transition from adolescence to adulthood has endured.[4] Teenage culture in the post World War II period, and the rise of mass secondary and then post-secondary education, reinforced the perception — and reality — that young people do not move directly from childhood to adulthood. In the "normal" life course prescribed by parents, educators, government, and social agencies, males would complete their schooling, secure full-time work, marry, purchase a home, and have children. Women, typically, would obtain less education than men, possibly work until marriage, and become housewives. Sometime in their early to mid twenties, males and females would have thus achieved "independence."

Even in its heyday — from the 1950s to the 1970s — this understanding of the transition to adulthood was theoretically and empirically imperfect. It was built on an idealized middle-class experience and failed to account for the life course of working-class and rural youth who, with less formal education, entered the world of work sooner than their middle-class counterparts. Did this mean that with limited schooling the former matured and grew up more quickly than the latter? This question was generally not addressed in the literature. Nor did prevailing theories take account of the significant minority of married women with children who were employed full-time and part-time. Was their behaviour "normal" or aberrant?[5] Furthermore, one could have asked, though few did: does anyone, including adults, ever really become fully "independent" psychologically or sociologically? Should theories of maturation and social organization even be built around the dubious assumption that they do?

This latter question is especially pertinent today because sociologists and demographers have determined that since the 1970s dependency by youth on their families has increased in post-industrial societies, including Canada, the United States, Australia, and Europe. That is, youth leave home, enter the labour force, marry and have children later than they used to,[6] and even when they live on their own, they commonly require continuing financial support from their families to cover accommodation and/or educational expenses. As Roderic Beujot and Don Kerr note, "Adolescence and young adulthood appear to have become more delayed, protracted and less orderly than in the past. Recent changes in the timing [of] these intertwined and interdependent life-cycle events imply that the transition to adulthood has become increasingly extended well into the third decade of life."[7]

The growing participation of young people in post-secondary education, particularly women, explains, in part, these delayed transitions. So too does economic uncertainty and instability over the past

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[3] See Dorothy Ross, *G. Stanley Hall: The Psychologist as Prophet* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1972).

[4] See, for example, Hans Sebald, *Adolescence: A Social Psychological Analysis*, 4th ed. (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: 1992), esp. 111-13. On G. Stanley Hall's view of females, see Carol Dyhouse, *Girls Growing Up in Late Victorian and Edwardian England* (Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1981). On Hall's legacy, see Joseph Kett, *Rites of Passage: Adolescence in America, 1790 to the Present* (New York: Basic Books, 1977). On Canada, see Cynthia Comacchio, *The Dominion of Youth: Adolescence and the Making of Modern Canada, 1920-1950* (Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier Press, 2006).

[5] For critical treatments of consensus views of family life in the post-war period, see Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era* (New York: Basic Books, 1988); Joy Parr, ed., *A Diversity of Women: Ontario 1945-1980* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1995); and Mary Louise Adams, *The Trouble With Normal: Postwar Youth and the Making of Heterosexuality* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997).

[6] Statistics Canada, "Study: Delayed Transition of Young Adults," *The Daily*, 18 September 2007, www.statcan.ca/Daily/English/070918/d070918b.htm (accessed 10 October 2008).

[7] Roderic Beaujot and Don Kerr, *Emerging Youth Transitions Patterns in Canada: Opportunities and Risks – Discussion Paper* (Ottawa: Government of Canada, Policy Research Initiative, 2007), 9.

three decades. The "risk" society has diminished predictability in the life course.[8] Globalization and international economic competitiveness; the erosion of traditional employment sectors, such as manufacturing in Canada and the United States; the fraying of publicly funded social safety nets; the explosion of housing prices; the dramatic increase in the costs of post-secondary education accompanied by growing credential inflation — all have helped defer the transition to the traditionally understood "adulthood." Indeed, because of financial exigencies, children who leave home "are not necessarily gone for good." They frequently return home following post-secondary education, especially during periods of unemployment or under-employment. Such non-linear passages, in which the family home itself has become a type of "safety net," is turning the life course transition into "a process rather than an event."[9]

If one adds to this mix the tendency among baby-boomer parents to act assertively and protectively on behalf of their children, particularly in uncertain economic times, then we can better understand the outlook of students arriving at university for the first time. More often than not, they are still "dependent" on their families and will remain so throughout their university years. The subject of considerable parody, "helicopter parents" — descending on campus armed with supplies, questions, and demands — are a real phenomenon. Universities and colleges now ritually prepare brochures, websites, and orientation sessions for parents of first-year students, designed not only to inform and comfort them, but to encourage them to respect their children's autonomy and the institution's privacy regulations.[10]

Notwithstanding their enduring family links, university youth scarcely expect to be patronized or infantilized by administrators or faculty. The most recent Canadian national survey of teenagers (age fifteen to nineteen), confirming early studies, found that they valued "friendship and freedom" over anything else. Reginald W. Bibby explains that young people "recognize the importance of how they were raised. But they also believe that they themselves have a dominant place in determining what happens to them. They see the primary influences on their lives as their upbringing and their own willpower."[11] This sense of personal agency deepens as students enter post-secondary education. They value personal autonomy even as they "negotiate youth and young adulthood" through "social networks" and burgeoning relationships.[12] They expect to be "respected" and they respond positively to institutional supports, whether through academic advising, adequate athletic facilities, or the meeting of special needs.[13]

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[8] On youth, education, and the "risk society" see Lesley Andres and Maria Adamuti-Trache, "Life-course Transitions, Social Class, and Gender: A 15-year Perspective of the Lived Lives of Canadian Young Adults," *Journal of Youth Studies* 11, no. 2 (April 2008): 115-45; A. Furlong and F. Cartmel, *Young People and Social Change: Individualization and Risk in Late Modernity* (Buckingham, UK: Open University Press, 1997); P. Dwyer and J. Wyn, *Youth, Education, and Risk: Facing the Future* (London: Routledge/ Falmer, 2001).

[9] Barbara A. Mitchell and Ellen M. Gee, "Young Adults Returning Home: Implications for Social Policy," in *Youth in Transition: Perspectives on Research and Policy,* ed. Burt Galaway and Joe Hudson (Toronto: Thompson Educational Publishers, 1996), 61, 68.

[10] See Andrea Gordon, "Parents of University Students Get Crash Course in How to Let Go," *Toronto Star*, 23 August 2008; Susan Kinzie, "Orientation 101 for Parents and Freshmen: Letting Go," *Washington Post*, 26 August 2007; James E. Coté and Anton L. Allohar, *Ivory Tower Blues: A University System in Crisis* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007), 127-49.

[11] Reginald W. Bibby. *The Emerging Millenials: How Canada's Newest Generation is Responding to Change and Choice* (Regina: Project Canada, 2009), 24. Quotation from Reginald W. Bibby, *Canada's Teens: Today, Yesterday and Tomorrow* (Toronto: Stoddart, 2001), 30.

[12] Craig Jeffrey and Linda McDowell. "Youth in a Comparative Perspective: Global Change, Local Lives," *Youth and Society* 36, no. 2 (December 2004): 138-9.

[13] Finola Finlay, "Conclusion: From Research to Action," in *Student Affairs: Experiencing Higher Education*, ed. Lesley Andres and Fiona Finlay (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2004), 245.

In light of such research, I believe it would be simplistic, and likely inaccurate, to conclude that young people in university are more immature than they used to be because they are financially tied to their families for longer periods. Such an inference is possible only if one equates financial independence and living on one's own as the critical steps to adulthood — a model that was built, as we noted earlier, on perceptions of appropriate middle-class (primarily male) transitions.[14] That the majority of undergraduates in North America are now women, and that an increasing proportion are from cultural backgrounds in which independence from the family is neither idealized nor coveted, suggests that conventional notions of student and youth aspirations are anachronistic. Is it not possible to grow up *and* be deeply connected materially, and in other ways, to one's family? Can educational institutions (and families) not provide students with the space to exercise choice and autonomy while recognizing the enduring value of social relations and community bonding? Scholars need to rethink their conceptions and explanations of the transition to adulthood in their tracking of the contemporary life course, and post-secondary institutions would be well advised to account for these new realities in their academic and extra-curricular planning.

What else do we know about student values and orientations? Popular representations, bolstered by American survey research, portray current university students as more pragmatic, career-driven, and less idealistic than was the case in previous decades. "Since 1970, the percentage of freshmen who rate 'being very well off financially' as an 'essential' or 'very important' goal has risen from 36.2 to 73.6 per cent, while the percentage who attach similar importance to 'acquiring a meaningful philosophy of life' has fallen from 79 to 39.6 per cent."[15] Such statistics might tempt faculty to dismiss contemporary students as essentially shallow and indifferent to cultivating the life of the mind, but this conclusion would itself be superficial. Students have always linked post-secondary education to occupational prospects, and this association is by no means irrational. Whatever cultural and intellectual benefits higher education offers, governments, families, and individual students are unlikely to invest as heavily as they do in universities and colleges without some expectation of tangible outcomes. Furthermore, recent student attitudes are frequently compared to those of the 1960s and early 1970s — an unusually politicized, and arguably anomalous, era in the history of student life.[16] It should surprise no one that the economic instability of the past three decades has elicited considerable concern about "bread and butter" issues across the population, including among those of modest middle-class means from which so many post-secondary students are drawn.

As anxious as they are about their future incomes and status, students care about other things as well. A University of California (Los Angeles) survey of 112,000 American freshmen found that two-thirds considered it "essential" or "very important" for colleges to "help develop their personal values."[17] As Derek Bok notes: "At this stage in their lives, students are often seeking to determine their identities —

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[14] Comacchio, *The Dominion of Youth*, 25-7.

[15] Derek Bok, *Our Underachieving Colleges: A Candid Look at How Much Students Learn and Why They Should Be Learning More* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), 26. The author cites the following studies: Alexander W. Astin et al., *The American Freshman: Thirty-Five Year Trends, 1966-2001* (2002), and Linda J. Sax et al, *The American Freshman: National Norms for Fall 2003* (2004). See also *Chronicle of Higher Education*, 4 February 2005, A-33.

[16] A substantial amount of literature analyzes the history of student life in the United States and Canada. See for example, Helen Lefkowitz Horowitz, *Campus Life: Undergraduate Cultures from the End of the Eighteenth Century to the Present* (New York: A.A. Knopf, 1987); and Paul Axelrod and John G. Reid, eds., *Youth, University, and Canadian Society: Essays in the Social History of Higher Education* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1989).

[17] G. Jeffrey Macdonald, "Search for Meaning on Campus," *Boston Globe*, 12 June 2005, cited in Derek Bok, *Our Underachieving Colleges*, 38. For examples of Canadian surveys illustrating similar trends in the 1980s and 1990s, see Paul Axelrod, *Values in Conflict: The University, the Marketplace and the Trials of Liberal Education* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2002), 125-6.

what they stand for, how they want to live their lives, what experiences hold the greatest meaning. They welcome discussion about these subjects, whether they take place in dormitory rooms or in meetings to protest the university's investment policies."[18] Rousing animated debate about issues such as the environment, poverty, human rights, gender relations, abortion, the media, war and peace, globalization, and AIDS in classrooms and other campus venues is certainly not difficult. Indeed, the challenge universities frequently face is not one of sparking interest in socially important, controversial subjects, but rather of ensuring that the fervent dialogue they provoke remains civil, peaceful, and grounded in academic analysis.

Students' interest in the world around them, and in their own personal and moral development, is expressed in other ways. Many undergraduates are drawn to academic programs that include service learning or community work which, when well conceived and delivered, can enrich academic study.[19] Perhaps surprisingly, in a society so pervaded by secular values, researchers have unearthed a strong interest among youth and students in matters of spirituality and religion. Bibby's survey of Canadian teenagers found that while support for traditional religious institutions has declined, interest in spirituality among the "Millennials" remains strong.[20] The University of California survey of American undergraduates (cited above) found that 48 per cent believed it "essential" or "very important" for a college "to encourage their personal expression of spirituality."[21] These attitudes are evident in "secular" as well as religious colleges. A study by the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) concluded that students who participate in "spirituality/enhancing practices" are more likely to engage in "broad-cross section of collegiate activities . . . and to perform community service."[22] Noticeable, too, is the apparent tendency for campus clubs to be organized around ethnic and religious identities, particularly in large urban centres with culturally diverse populations.[23] Student concerns flowing from these commitments not only influence extra-curricular life but are increasingly likely to find their way into classrooms and lecture halls. York University professor George Fallis believes that as part of their obligation to contribute to a culture of responsible citizenship, universities should deepen their role as agents of "deliberative democracy," a form of civic engagement that encourages individuals to articulate and justify, through rational discourse, their values and beliefs. He recommends that this mission be embedded in reformed university curricula, and believes that in these especially turbulent times a wellspring of interest can be seen among students for this type of liberal education.[24]

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[18] Bok, *Our Underachieving Colleges*, 38.

[19] One study of more than 22,000 American college and university students found 30 per cent engaged in course-based (community) service learning and another 46 per cent were involved in some form of community service. Both students and faculty found that these initiatives contributed to the improvement of academic performance, the heightening of social awareness, the cultivation of leadership, and determination of career choices. See Alexander W. Astin, Lori J. Vogelgesang, Elaine K. Ikeda, and Jennifer A. Lee, "How Service Learning Affects Students," Higher Education Research Institute, University of California, Los Angeles, January 2000, http://scholar.google.ca/scholar?hl=en&q=author:%22Astin%22+intitle:%22How+Service+Learning+Affects+Students%22+&um=1&ie=UTF-8&oi=scholarr (accessed 10 October 2008). Among numerous studies of "experiential learning," see Linda Casey Matson and Ron Matson, "Changing Times in Higher Education: An Empirical Look at Cooperative Education and Liberal Arts Faculty," *Journal of Cooperative Education* 31, no. 1 (1995): 13-24; Garnet Grosjean, "Co-op Education: Access to Benefits or Benefits to Access," in *Student Affairs: Experiencing Higher Education*, ed. Andres and Finlay, 144-70.

[20] Bibby, *The Emerging Millennials,* 162-87.

[21] G. Jeffrey Macdonald, "Search for Meaning on Campus," *Boston Globe*, 12 June 2005.

[22] George D. Kuh and Robert M. Gonyea, "Spirituality, Liberal Learning and College Student Engagement," *Liberal Education* (Winter 2006): 45.

[23] Jen Gerson, "Changing Student Culture: From Social to Serious," *Toronto Star*, 10 October 2006.

[24] George Fallis, *Multiversities, Ideas and Democracy* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007), esp. 339-420.

But, faculty might ask, how can incoming students be expected to think and write competently and creatively if they are so ill-prepared for university level work? Anecdotes and polemics are in no shortage about collapsing academic standards in high schools, colleges, and universities. Much of this writing is part of an epoch-long genre in which teachers and professors condemn current generations of students for their frivolous and undisciplined approach to academic work. The institutions, invariably, are denounced for abetting this decline by embracing questionable academic fads which are at odds with core educational goals and values.[25]

While a good deal of this writing should be taken with a grain of salt, some kernels of truth are in these critiques in both Canada and the United States. Grade inflation in Ontario high schools, for example, appears to have been continuous since standardized graduate examinations were abolished in the late 1960s. In a 1994 study, Allan King and Marjorie Peart found that high school failure rates in Ontario dropped from some 20 per cent to 6 per cent in the decade following 1967.[26] Between 1983 and 1992, the share of university applicants with graduating averages of 80 per cent or higher increased from 38 to 44 per cent, reached 50 per cent in 1997, and has continued its upward trend.[27] And while the subject of grade inflation in Ontario universities has by no means been thoroughly explored, one study found that between 1973 to 1974 and 1993 to 1994, final grade point averages in eleven of twelve first-year subjects rose markedly.[28] In the United States, freshmen are putting significantly less time into preparing for classes than they used to, while apparently earning higher grades in the process.[29]

The importance of grades — inflated or otherwise — should not be exaggerated in the world of teaching and learning. But the evaluation patterns do suggest that many first-year students, having been identified as high achievers in high school, expect to retain this status in university whether or not it is merited. Instructors who mark relatively "harshly" may incur their students' ire, or worse. Above all, graders should be fair and prepared to explain their assessment decisions. The academic integrity of the institution is clearly undermined when the undeserving are inappropriately rewarded.

But marks only symbolize — however imperfectly — the academic encounter. What matters far more is the substance of the educational experience and, as a number of studies have shown, there are grounds for concern. Evidently, a fundamental contrast exists between the ways faculty and students approach learning. According to one researcher, most students succeed best in an academic environment based on "direct, concrete, experience, moderate to high degrees of structure and a linear approach to learning." But the majority of faculty are inspired by the "realm of concepts, ideas and abstractions" and they assume that students, like themselves, favour a high level of individual autonomy in their academic

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[25] See for example Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987); David Bercuson, Robert Bothwell, and Jack Granatstein, *The Great Brain Robbery: Canada's Universities on the Road to Ruin* (Toronto: McLelland and Stewart, 1984). For a discussion of the genre, see Paul Axelrod, "Romancing the Past: Nostalgic Conservatism, the Great Brain Robbery, and the History of Education," in *Historical Perspectives on Educational Policy in Canada: Issues, Debates and Case Studies,* ed. E. Ricker and A. Wood (Toronto: Canadian Scholars' Press, 1995), 61-74.

[26] Alan King and Marjorie Peart, *The Numbers Game: A Study of Evaluation and Achievement in Ontario Schools* (Toronto: Ontario Secondary Schools Teachers' Federation, 1994), 218, cited in Coté and Allahar, *Ivory Tower Blues*, 195.

[27] Council of Ontario Universities, "Facts and Figures 2006: A Compendium of Statistics on Ontario Universities," cited in Coté and Allahar, *Ivory Tower Blues*, 195.

[28] Paul M Anglin and Ronal Meng, "Evidence on Grades and Grade Inflation at Ontario's Universities," *Canadian Public Policy* 26, no. 3 (2000): 361-8.

[29] Bok, *Our Underachieving Colleges*, 112, 305-6; Coté and Allahar, *Ivory Tower Blues*, 16; George D. Kuh, "What We're Learning about Student Engagement from NSSE," *Change* 35 (March-April 2003): 28.

work.[30] Whereas students prefer "active, concrete learning," they are being taught by "faculty disposed to abstract, passive learning."[31] More needs to be done to bridge and integrate these perspectives, and the increasing use of experiential learning, referenced earlier, is one promising strategy.

First-year classes tend to be too large, too dependent for instruction on part-time faculty and graduate students, and ill-equipped to offer the depth necessary for students to cultivate critical thinking and writing skills. Arthur Levine notes as well a "convenience mismatch" between students and faculty. The former frequently have extraordinary work and family commitments off-campus, cutting into study time, while the latter are busy buying their way out of classroom teaching through multi-year research grants.[32] General education and interdisciplinary studies are too often richly promoted and thinly constituted. Nor, in light of the rather free-wheeling elective system, is it certain that students who specialize in one or two subjects will become deeply knowledgeable or proficient in their disciplines.[33]

Notwithstanding these pervasive challenges, professors and instructors can actually learn a great deal from students themselves about how to enhance the teaching experience. After scouring historical sources and contemporary survey research, I recently presented a paper on students' views (past and present) on what constitutes "good teaching," and I concluded that effective and engaging pedagogy has several core components.[34] Students respond positively to faculty who are approachable, both inside and outside the classroom. They respect the professor who treats them fairly, is open-minded, enthusiastic, and who leaves a distinctive intellectual mark. A well-honed sense of humour has advantages in the classroom but (thankfully) is not a requirement. Faculty who bore or intimidate students and who are disorganized or disrespectful are avoided (if possible), and remembered without affection by alumni. Such teachers harm an institution's teaching reputation.

Universities and colleges are beginning to address some of these challenges. Centres for the support of teaching which, among other activities, offer seminars to graduate students and new faculty, can now be found on many campuses. Awards for good teaching are more common, and research, such as that conducted by the NSSE, is persuading North American universities to be more responsive and imaginative in their undergraduate teaching practices. It remains to be seen whether such initiatives, in light of other university priorities, will be transformative or marginal.[35] Amid the intense competition for high quality students, universities which ignore the teaching question may do so at a high cost.

University teaching should be viewed as a dynamic, not a static, vocation. While students' perceptions of good instruction have evidently endured, the means used to achieve positive classroom results inevitably change, influenced by new currents in student culture and learning styles, by the

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[30] Charles C. Schroeder, "New Students - New Learning Styles," *Change* 24, no. 4 (September-October 1993): 21-6, cited in Christina Elliott Sorum, "'Vortex, Clouds and Tongue': New Problems in the Humanities?" *Daedalus* 128, no. 1 (1999): 254.

[31] Arthur Levine, "Worlds Apart: Disconnects Between Students and their Colleges," in *Declining by Degrees: Higher Education at Risk*, ed. Richard H. Hersh and John Merrow (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2005), 160.

[32] Levine, "Worlds Apart," 157-9, 164; James Downey, "Canadian Undergraduate Education: A Light Source in Need of Recharging," (speech to AUCC President's Circle, Saskatoon, 18 April 2007), 2-3, http://www.heqco.ca/inside.php?ID=106 (accessed 17September 2008). For an account of the erosion of classroom teaching time by faculty, see Kim Richard Nossal, "A Question of Balance: The Cult of Research Intensivity and the Professing of Political Science in Canada," *Canadian Journal of Political Science* 39, no.4 (December 2006): 1-18.

[33] Bok, *Our Underachieving Colleges*, 42-3.

[34] Paul Axelrod, "A History of Good Teaching: Student Perspectives," (2007 David C. Smith Lecture, Council of Ontario Universities, 1 November 2007), http://www.cou.on.ca/_bin/publications/speeches.cfm. For an abbreviated version see Paul Axelrod, "Student Perspectives on Good Teaching: What History Reveals," *Academic Matters* (February 2008): 24-7. See also Arthur W. Chickering and Zelda F. Gamson, "The Seven Principles for Good Practice in Higher Education," *AAHE Bulletin* 39, no. 7 (1987): 3-7.

[35] James Downey, "Canadian Undergraduate Education," 9-11.

continuing explosion of knowledge, and by revolutionary information and communication systems.[36] Faculty who are interested in these matters — and as I've indicated, I believe they should be — will learn a great deal from the relatively new literature on the "scholarship of teaching and learning."[37] The research reveals numerous ways of teaching well. "Deep" learning, critical thinking, effective writing, civic engagement, and ethical practice, among other educational objectives, can be mastered and infuse undergraduate, graduate, and professional education. Such approaches as "constructive controversy," "critical inquiry teaching," "problem-based learning," and "co-operative" education have all shown positive results.[38]

Thus, for classrooms to be more effective pedagogically, institutions need to acknowledge and address the different learning styles of students, including those from culturally diverse educational backgrounds. Students schooled in Asian systems, for example, may be accustomed to "serialist" rather than "holistic" instructional models where classrooms are "teacher-centred" not "student-centred." These students — along with many of their Western-schooled classmates, as suggested earlier — might find "participative lectures, brainteaser discussion, self-directed learning, disseminated reading, and ambiguity of teachers' answers to students' questions," puzzling and unsettling.[39] This does not mean that such students respond only to 'rote' learning; instead, they may well be laying a foundation for more complex forms of thinking. As Carolina Valiente further notes: "[W]hereas the Western cultures concerned with the 'process of learning' focus on the examination of ideas as base for developing skills, in East Asia the development of skills precedes the exploration of ideas." The way Eastern and Western communities understand and appreciate silence may have differences as well. In North American schools and colleges, students commonly earn marks for participating in classroom discussions. But in Confucian (or Aboriginal) culture, to be silent, or to use words sparingly, are "a demonstration of insight and wisdom and an illustration of respect for others' time and knowledge."[40] Instructors need to recognize and appreciate the engagement of quiet students — whatever their cultural origin — whose involvement in class may be different, but no less significant, than that of their more vocal classmates.

Perhaps the most radical shift in student culture and on the educational landscape in recent years has come from the impact of new technologies. Students now enrolling in universities and colleges have grown up in the world of the Internet, and are typically far more adept than their teachers and professors in its intricate usages. The growth of on-line courses, web-based conferencing, "smart" classrooms, and automated administrative systems typify institutional responses to these dramatic developments. But debates on the use of technology in teaching continue.[41] Proponents are convinced that access to new

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[36] Bob Sharpe, "Changes in Student Learning Behaviours," Council of Ontario Universities Colleagues Working Paper Series, vol. 5, no. 1 (December 2005), http://www.cou.on.ca/_bin/publications/onlinePublications.cfm (accessed 17 September 2008).

[37] See also Raymond P. Perry and John C. Smart, eds., *The Scholarship of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education: An Evidence-based Perspective* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2007), and various publications by Carolin Kreber.

[38] Examples of these practices can be found in Axelrod, *Values in Conflict*, 128-33.

[39] Carolina Valiente, "Are Students Using the 'Wrong' Style of Learning? A Multicultural Scrutiny for Helping Teachers to Appreciate Differences," *Active Learning in Higher Education* 9, no. 1 (2008): 75.

[40] Ibid., 78, 81.

[41] For lively presentations of different perspectives on the impact of the new technologies on education and culture, see Mark Prensky, "Digital Natives, Digital Immigrants," www.**marcprensky**.com/writing/**Prensky**%20-%20**Digital**%20Natives,%20**Digital**%20Immigrants%20-%20P (accessed 19 October 2008); and Sida Vaidhyanathan, "Youth and Technology: Generational Myth," *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (Chronicle Review), 19 September 2008, http://chronicle.com/free/v55/i04/04b00701.htm, (accessed 19 October 2008). See also, Mario John Corwell, "Is Technology Ruining Children?" *The Sunday Times*, 27 April 2008; Neil Selwyn, "An Investigation of Differences in Undergraduates' Academic Use of the Internet," *Active Learning in Higher Education* 9, no. 1 (2008): 11-22; Regina J. J. M. van den Eijnden, Gert-Jan Meerkerk, A. A. Vermulst, Renske Spijkerman, and Rutger C. M. E. Engels, "Online

knowledge and educational quality are enhanced by these practices, while skeptics believe that the "virtual classroom," like the introduction of educational television more than forty years ago, has been oversold. My own view is that the quality of electronic teaching, like traditional classroom formats, varies. Neither good nor bad in itself, its use requires careful and continuous assessment.

Equally important is the question of how, if at all, students' early and deep immersion in the world of cyberspace affects brain function, behaviour, learning styles, academic, and ultimately occupational performance. For example, does extended time on the computer enhance or diminish a student's powers of concentration? The preliminary literature on this and related subjects is often shrill and speculative, but the entire subject may yet speak to one of the most crucial educational issues of our time.[42]

Conclusion

This modest attempt to draw a composite picture of the contemporary student does not take account of those who are significantly older than most undergraduates, nor does it include those who have physical, psychological, or cognitive disabilities. With these important caveats, a relatively clear image emerges. While contemporary students, typically, are financially dependent on their families for longer periods than previous generations, like their predecessors they value autonomy, opportunity, and an authentic voice and identity. The product of schooling with uncertain standards and expectations, they have, in too many cases, an inflated view of their academic qualifications and accomplishments, but they respond well to superior, innovative teaching. They are practical *and* interested in existential issues. They come from increasingly diverse cultural backgrounds, and universities interested in enhancing their reputations internationally will respond creatively to students' varied educational expectations and needs. Students master new technologies easily and use them constantly, though neither they nor their institutions yet know the long term impact of these tools on the quality of schooling and post-secondary education. Today's students are, collectively and individually, a work in progress, simultaneously shaped by their environment and themselves agents of change in complex and uncertain times.

Communication, Compulsive Internet Use, and Psychosocial Well-Being Among Adolescents: A Longitudinal Study," *Developmental Psychology* 44, no. 3 (2008): 655-65; Teena Willoughby, "A Short-Term Longitudinal Study of Internet and Computer Game Use by Adolescent Boys and Girls: Prevalence, Frequency of Use, and Psychosocial Predictors," *Developmental Psychology* 44, no. 1 (2008): 195-204.

[42] Among many publications on adolescent brain research, see Jay N. Giedd, "Structural Magnetic Resonance Imaging of the Adolescent Brain," *Annals of the New York Academy of Science* 1021 (2004): 77-85. See also Daniel Levitin, *This is Your Brain on Music: The Science of a Human Obsession* (New York: Plume, 2007).