

Where We Stand

By Albert Shanker, President
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“Pseudo-education”

Please inform Mr. Toom about the grading system and instruction methods of THIS country.... I earned a grade of A in my college algebra and trigonometry courses so it makes no sense for me to be doing so poorly in this course. Please straighten this man out.

This note from a student in “business calculus” was part of Andrei Toom’s introduction to the customs and ways of American colleges and college students. Toom, a Russian mathematician who had come to live in this country, had a lot to learn. He describes the process in “A Russian Teacher in America” (*Journal of Mathematical Behavior*, v. 12, pages 117-139).

Toom took it for granted that his job was to teach his students to be flexible, independent thinkers who could look at a problem they had not met before and figure out how to deal with it. He was amazed to find that most of them were more interested in his grading scheme—how much their homework and quizzes and tests would count towards their grade and what kinds of problems would be on the final—than in what they’d be learning. In fact, their goal seemed to be to learn as little as possible—as long as the grade was right. “Their first priority,” Toom found, “was to get papers that certify that they are competent rather than to develop real competence.”

This attitude seemed to Toom like an odd perversion of market principles:



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It is the basic principle of the market that everybody tries to get as much as possible and to pay as little as possible. There is nothing wrong with this: When I buy something, I try to save money, and everybody does the same. What is wrong is that some students apply the same rule to learning: They seem to think that they BUY grades and PAY for them by learning. And they try to PAY as little as possible! In other words, some students seem to think that it is a loss whenever they learn something.... After every test I explained correct solutions. Many a student said: "Now I understand." I was glad: The purpose of my teaching was achieved. But some said it with regret, which meant: "This understanding is useless because it came too late to provide me a good grade."

Toom was also surprised to find out that the students' notion of college education as a mere credential was not frowned on by the faculty and administration. Administrators went along with students' demands for good grades. One told Toom a cautionary story about "some students [who] had sued universities for better grades, and won." Teachers who preferred research to teaching went along with this notion, too. Toom talks about mathematicians who, unable to land a "good position"—one in which they could avoid teaching—taught "as mechanically as possible," which encouraged students "to learn as mechanically as possible."

Some people excuse bad teaching by saying: Since students buy it, it is OK to sell it. But pushers of drugs say the same. It is the responsibility of specialists to do the right things even if laymen cannot discriminate between right and wrong. It is the responsibility of teachers to teach in a way which really develops students' intellect.

Americans are very proud of our country's pre-eminence in the world; we are proud of the fact that, when the Soviet Union fell, its former citizens rushed to adopt our economic and political system. But when Andrei Toom looks at U.S. colleges and universities, he is reminded of the "pseudo-education" in the Soviet Union—of the way credentials took the place of competence—and its disastrous effect on science, the arts and government. We may be nowhere near embracing a phony scientific creed like Lysenkoism or a bankrupt economic creed, but Toom has some sobering observations about where we are:

Those who learn for grades expect to succeed in their business. TODAY they are right insofar as almost every American who has a degree, however ignorant, can live better than even competent people in much poorer countries around the world.... But this cannot last long in the situation when "competence" and a diploma tautologically mean each other. The advantages enjoyed by Americans are the results of real competence and real efforts of previous generations.... And someday ignorant people with degrees and diplomas may want power according to their papers rather than real competence. We Russians have some experience of this sort.... It is clear to me right now that the winners in the modern world will be those countries which will really teach their students to think and to solve problems. I sincerely wish America to be among these.

A slightly abridged version of Andrei Toom's article will appear in the fall issue of *The American Educator*.