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YOU'RE GOING TO NEED THIS FOR COLLEGE

Andrew Hollinger

When I first heard a teacher say, “You’re going to need this for college,” I was a high school student. I heard the phrase again when I began teaching 10th grade English, and I wondered, as a first-year teacher, whether that was the teacher version of “Because I said so,” or if, more tragically, it was what teachers said in response to the often asked, “Why do I have to learn this?” when they didn’t really know the answer. The teachers I worked with, however, were very smart and some of the most student-centered educators I’ve ever known, so it’s hard for me to fully believe that.

In fact, according to the National Survey of Student Engagement, high school teachers and college writing instructors agree about what skills and concepts are important: things like the writing process, creating multiple drafts, peer review, practicing certain genres. However, the survey also shows that the activities of high school students do not include writing as many drafts, practicing as many genres, or reviewing as many peers’ essays as their teachers agree is important. I don’t believe that teachers are intentionally giving their students short shrift. Instead, my guess is that between creating and executing lesson plans, dedicating class time to benchmark assessments and testing practice, and staying on top of all the paperwork and levels of management, practice time slips away. So, when teachers say, “You’re going to need this for college,” they might actually be saying, “Pay special attention to this skill. I know that this will help with your college work, and we won’t be able to spend a lot of time practicing.”

If “You’re going to need this for college” is shorthand for “Pay attention to something important,” why should we stop saying it?

Ignoring the Student

Teaching doesn't need to be a magic show; there's no reason not to let students see behind the curtain. Every year, about half my course load is first-year composition classes, and every year someone asks, "Why do I have to take this class?" Often, the student asking is frustrated that they have to spend money and time on a general education course whose benefit isn't immediately obvious to them.

Dismissing the situation might lead the student to suspect you don't know the answer or don't care about the student-teacher relationship. Either way, at that moment, you've lost the student's respect, interest, and motivation. Students who understand the mechanics of learning may become better at learning; if we can't answer "Why do I need this?" or "Why are we doing this?" then maybe we should reconsider the necessity of that lesson, skill, or learning objective.

Ignoring the Transition

As a learning rationale, using the shorthand phrase "You're going to need this for college" passes on the responsibility of meaningfulness to the next level of education. This is not to say that scaffolding skills (creating a sequence of learning/classes that build on each other—what is otherwise called *vertical alignment*) isn't valuable. It definitely is. Practicing a specific genre like a research report, for example, doesn't make much sense if the student hasn't yet learned about structure and organization and why a writer would want to impose a form on a piece of text. Passing the buck isn't scaffolding, though. It would be like telling students that we have to practice writing reports because college classes require lots of reports—as though the only reason to teach that genre before a student gets to college is because college teachers don't have time to teach it themselves. For example, while writing research papers students will often ask, "What does it matter how or if I cite my sources a specific way? Can't I just include the link where I found it and be done?" A you're-going-to-need-it-for-college teacher might respond, "This is just how they want it in college." Another teacher might, instead, pause and break for a mini-lesson on citations: why they look the way they do, what each method of citation values or reveals about the values of the potential audiences, and how citations have evolved with each style-book. The second scenario is messier and takes more time, but

the students will better understand the *why* behind attribution; it might even make their writing better as they spend time thinking about the value systems of potential audiences.

Worse than passing the buck, telling students that they'll need something for college suggests that it is a school-only skill and not something that might be important to their future work or life. So the skills, lessons, and concepts that we teach have time limits and boundaries. We know that isn't true, but students don't yet see that. The campus where I work serves a larger-than-normal non-traditional student community—students who have come back to school after years in the real world. Almost to a person, these students are focused. They know what they want to accomplish. And almost to a person, they say something like, "I wish I had paid more attention in high school/the first time I came to college." Too many people seem to understand that calculus or chemistry is necessary to being an engineer or pharmacist, but people often only see writing as a means to an end: the stockholder annual review brochure that communicates all the cool, *real* work the company did that year.

Ignoring Potentials

Our national obsession with college creates a social rift, a caste system, between the educational haves and have-nots. Education, as an institution, is a self-propagating system: We create our own audience by recommending more and higher courses, certifications, and credentials, and then we induct the best and brightest back into the system to further propagate that system. This, in itself, is not inherently unethical. All systems are interested in developing self-sustaining processes. What is problematic is to suggest that anyone not participating in the system is less for doing so.

For students who do not plan on going to college (for whatever reason), hearing "You're going to need this for college" is permission to stop paying attention because that skill has no larger context than school now and more school later. What we teach, however, does have larger implications. Sometimes it is the skill or concept, and sometimes the reach is about helping students learn how to learn, and how to enjoy or value their education. Whether or not a person's formal education includes college, surely we want our friends, neighbors, and coworkers to actively enrich their own lives. Creating a knowledge and ability line in the sand at college is a socially disruptive practice. We undermine our lessons, our field, our accountability, and our expertise when we tell students,

“You’re going to need this for college.” More important, though, is this: We quietly corroborate the argument that education is only about economics, that there is no reason to learn other than to achieve better pay or a nicer title. Those things are nice, to be sure. But being educated should ultimately be a personal endeavor. We learn because it’s fulfilling, because we are meant to grow.

If saying, “You’re going to need this for college” is how we side-step admitting that we don’t know why we are teaching something, then we need to think carefully about the assignments we foster or prevent, the thresholds we set, and the discussions that accomplished and emergent teachers have about them. And if saying, “You’re going to need this for college” is a way to truncate the conversation about *why* we are doing something in the classroom and *how* it will benefit students, we need to give ourselves and our peers permission to let learning get messy. In fact, it’s not that telling students the learning they are doing now will make more sense later or have a bigger payoff later (possibly, even, in college) that is bad. It’s ending the conversation there that’s wrong, suggesting that “later” is the pedagogical rationale and learning goal for some lesson or skill. If we want students to be sophisticated learners—and we should—whatever their personal and professional goals might be, then we need to let them see behind the curtain, pick at the machinery of learning, and let them ask difficult questions. We need to show them how learning works, and that it can also work for them.

Further Reading

For more about the role of creativity in education, Ken Robinson’s book *Finding Your Element* is a good start. He also has a number of TED talks, including the most viewed lecture in the history of ted.com on what the purpose of school is and could be.

For data about the transition and transfer between high school and college writing, read Joanne Addison’s and Sharon James McGee’s article, “Writing in High School/Writing in College: Research Trends and Future Directions.” For a good discussion on what writing is and how it is learned, see Linda Adler-Kassner and Elizabeth Wardle’s book *Naming What We Know*.

Finally, Mike Rowe’s Facebook page is a challenging source for thinking about education vs. Education. Steven Johnson’s book, *Where Good Ideas Come From: The Natural History of Innovation* is helpful for thinking about the kinds of environments that encourage

innovative thinking. And Kathryn Schulz's book, *Being Wrong: Adventures in the Margin of Error* is perhaps my favorite text, challenging the social and academic stigma that surrounds error.

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FYC/first-year composition, high school to college transition, threshold concepts, writing pedagogy

Author Bio

Andrew Hollinger is a lecturer at the University of Texas–Rio Grande Valley. A former high school teacher, he is interested in exploring the transitions students make between high school and college. He co-founded/co-edits *crosspol: a journal of transitions for hs + college writing teachers*. He also researches the (de/re)professionalization of the teaching class. Find him on Twitter @ashollinger.