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My Summer as a Bad Student

OBSERVER

WE ALL COMPLAIN about our weak students--their slacking off during group work; their bizarre inability to comprehend simple directions; their disorganization; their need to tell us how smart they really are, despite appearances; the way they sometimes put their heads down on their desks.

Imagine my dismay when I enrolled in summer school and found myself exhibiting most of those behaviors. Returning to the classroom as a student after working as a professor for almost 20 years has changed the way I look at my own students--and has been profoundly humbling for me. Because I was not just a returning student, but a bad student.

This past summer, I enrolled in the University of Virginia's Summer Language Institute. I was in the early stages of a project about my grandparents, the Communist leader Earl **Browder** and his Russian wife, Raissa Berkmann. I needed to be able to read family letters as well as materials from Soviet archives.

I didn't think intensive Russian was going to be easy, but I suspected I was good at languages--I spoke Danish fluently as a child, and had a fairly easy time when I studied German 25 years ago. One of my students sent me an article demonstrating that it was no harder for older people to learn languages than for younger ones. There would be memorization involved, I knew, but I usually delivered my talks without notes.

The class met for nine hours a day, with an optional 10th hour during the final two weeks of class. The goal of the course, which the linguistics professor Mark Elson had been teaching for 32 years, was to enable students to acquire two years of Russian in less than eight weeks.

Almost everyone else in the class was around 20 years old. The chemistry major beside me seemed to memorize everything with ease. Three students behind me all had at least a year of Russian; their answers rolled off their tongues. All around me, students sat diligently taking notes, their index-card files lined up in front of them with their highlighters and pencils.

I was freaking out. I had no idea what was going on and no idea how to begin figuring it out. As a somewhat lax English major, I had never really mastered basic study skills. Being a professor required a very different skill set. And now my deficiencies as a college student were coming back to haunt me.

I stayed up too late working on homework; so much for all the times I had told struggling students that they would be better off sleeping more, trying to stay calm, and taking advantage of available resources.

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BY THE END of the first week, I'd lost it in class, telling Mark Elson that I could not do this, that I was too old, that I couldn't remember anything. He responded that people acquired language at different rates, but that if I didn't keep trying, there was no chance that I could progress. That obvious truth proved to be the best and most comforting piece of advice anyone gave me about the process.

The male students ignored my outburst. Most of the female students told me they felt the same way, expressed their sympathy, and offered to help me study. Olivia showed me her system of taking notes. Rachael made me a starter set of flashcards. My 13-year-old daughter helped me buy the right school supplies. I thought of the custodian in my building. If Mary could get her GED in her 40s, which seemed infinitely more difficult, I could hang in there with the 20-year-olds in my Russian class.

Yet I kept exhibiting all of the inexplicably bad behavior of students I had taught over the years.

One day I was the slacker who derailed my group's presentation. I was exhausted, and it seemed more fun to talk American politics with a fellow slacker than to construct a Russian dialogue. When it came time for our performance, the third member of our group sat in confused, miserable silence while we faked our way through the assignment. The next day, I apologized to him--but I also understood, in a way I never had before, why students would goof off in class.

There were days, early on, when I was so confused and overwhelmed that I would misunderstand the teacher's directions--and show up underprepared the next day. I constantly had to fight the urge to tell my teachers that I was smarter than I appeared to be. And in the late afternoons, all I wanted to do was put my head down on the desk and let the teacher's words just wash over me.

Whenever we did assignments with our seat mates, the chemistry major would point out my mistakes and ask incredulously, "You still don't know how to do that?" That was demoralizing, but it reminded me that when I was teaching, I might have no idea of the dynamics among students. I switched seats and began having a better time.

The hours I spent with my classmates, going over flashcards together or studying for exams, gave me a new perspective on their experiences. I discovered how little many of them connected to their professors and how alienating college life could seem to them--no matter how smart and interesting I found them.

It was a quiet class. Because I identified with the teacher, I raised my hand whenever I could, to fill the silence that all teachers dread. Although I was wrong much of the time, I did find myself improving. Gradually I stopped feeling like the worst student in the class. I went to office hours, made flashcards, memorized the 96 possible case endings for regular nouns and adjectives. I spent Saturdays back at home, taking my kids for ice cream and engaging in epic Nerf-gun battles, then left the house by midday on Sunday to go back to Charlottesville to study some more.

Later in the summer, during the optional 7:30 a.m. translation hour, we worked our way through some samples of my grandparents' Comintern personnel files. It was thrilling to feel that--with a great deal of hand-holding--I could read them.

For our final oral exam, I picked a 12-line poem by Osip Mandelstam to recite. I spent three hours memorizing it, practiced it out loud while walking to the exam room, and then, after three words, found my mind going blank. At that point, all I could do was laugh--and then stumble my way through the rest of the poem. As a teacher, I would have assumed that a student behaving as I did simply hadn't bothered to learn her poem.

Although I never had a day in intensive Russian when I felt like a shining success, I was able to translate IS lines from a Chekhov story on my final exam. I delivered an extremely abridged version of a talk I had given at Syracuse University about my grandfather--in Russian, complete with a joke in the final line. Most of all, I experienced firsthand the disorientation and panic of a freshman--as well as moments of intellectual excitement.

Whatever happens, I will never look the same way at a student with her head down on the desk. I've been there.

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By **LAURA BROWDER**

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