

Student Name

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Read No Evil: Learning to Think on My Own

During an episode of the popular TV series *Seinfeld*, Elaine is set up on a date with a man named Mike (“Andrea Doria”). As she waits for him in the restaurant, a waiter informs her that a Mike has called saying that he has been stabbed by an ex-girlfriend and forced to cancel. When the date gets rescheduled, another ex-girlfriend passes by their table and throws a glass of wine in his face. Alarmed, Elaine sets out to find out why all of his exes hate him from the friend that sets them up. She learns that Mike is a “bad break-upper”; when breaking up with a woman, he says “the mean things you don’t mean but he means them.” In order to save herself from the verbal abuse, Elaine decides to end their relationship first. When she does, he scoffs and says “Fine, big-head,” as he rises from his seat. “What?” she questions. Mike explains that her head is too big for her body. As he walks out the door, Elaine laughs it off and shouts, “That’s the best you’ve got!?” The next day, while riding in a cab, the driver asks Elaine to slide down because he cannot see through the rear view mirror with her head in the way. Sometime later, Elaine is walking through the park when a bird flies into her head and falls to the ground. A man sitting on bench nearby comments, “He flew right into your head. Like he couldn’t avoid it.” Elaine, disgusted by her big head, is wearing a scarf over her head in the next scene.

While the absurdity of *Seinfeld* prevents me from taking anything the show portrays too seriously, Elaine’s situation brings out a very good point: our opinions of the people around us, or even our opinions of ourselves, are heavily impacted by the opinions of others—even though

they are exactly that—opinions. Opinions may hold zero merit or be ridiculously untrue, but somehow they manage to work their way into our brains. I believe this function is shown best by children. In school, one child will label another as “weird,” and suddenly every student will share the opinion of the child being “weird.” The child herself might begin to believe she *is* a weirdo, regardless of how strange she actually is. However, this function is not at all limited to children; adults are just as guilty of believing absurd things, regardless of whether there is any proof relating to the subject. Ratemyprofessors.com, a site that allows students to “rate” professors, as well as post comments about professors to be read by anyone who visits the site, could be considered an absurd thing in which people blindly place their faith. The situation on Seinfeld makes us laugh, for the idea that Elaine believes the words of ticked-off-Mike is ridiculous. Yet, when we visit ratemyprofessors.com, we willingly read the comments and view the ratings—including the “Hot” rating. Students are rating professors in alarming numbers. According to the site itself, almost seven million students have rated over one million professors (“About Us”). Ratemyprofessors.com passes off pure opinions, banter, or even disparagement as legitimate information on which to base our course selections, giving college students a less mature, less responsible reputation.

Last fall I visited ratemyprofessors.com, and I am honestly unsure why. The only professor I remember looking up was one whose class I was already enrolled in, and from whom my sister had taken the same class a couple of semesters before. This professor, Dr. Randall Parish, was already held fairly high in my sister’s opinion, and I trust her opinion much more than the anonymous ones I might read on ratemyprofessors.com. Still, I perused. Several of the comments on the site were complaints about a research paper that Dr. Parish requires each semester. One comment painted Dr. Parish as “the cutest teacher ever” while the one just below

said he was “the sweetest teacher ever” and ended with a “how cute” (“Randall Parish”). As for comments that informed me of his actual teaching abilities or classroom behavior, I remember only one. This infamous comment described him as someone who “would ‘welcome’ ideas, but blow you off the minute you asked for help.” The commenter continued on to say how unhelpful Dr. Parish was, and ended with a warning not to take his class “unless you want to be criticized in front of your peers.” My sister had never mentioned this unsavory characteristic; nevertheless, I mentally prepared myself to be criticized if ever I spoke up in class.

Forming my personal opinion of Dr. Parish did not take long. He was precise in everything he expected from his students, and what he expected was, in every respect, reasonable. His quizzes and tests were open-book, and most of the material on them came straight from homework that he went over in class. The worst thing I experienced in his class was occasional boredom from lectures that did not particularly interest me. Still, Dr. Parish made an effort to keep students alert by calling on them. He was also well informed about his lecture topics. His knowledge was deep, and his ability to share that knowledge with his students made him an excellent professor. He is, in fact, one of the nicest people I have ever met, and I cannot imagine him ever criticizing a student in a disrespectful way. When a student was called on and answered incorrectly, Dr. Parish would call on another student to find the correct answer. His manner in doing so was not overly nice but almost a gesture of disappointment as the student had obviously not read the assigned material and was not prepared for class. But Dr. Parish never outwardly *said* that the student should have known the answer, nor did he *voice* any disappointment. There was nothing in his behavior that could have been taken as criticism.

Though I enjoyed Dr. Parish’s class and respected him as a teacher, I could never forget the haunting words I had read about him on ratemyprofessors.com. For fear of being criticized or

blown off, I rarely asked questions, nor did I speak up in general. Every time I was called on, I would have a mental heart attack; no one likes being criticized. I vividly remember several instances where poorly informed students would raise a question of a ridiculous nature. (I am convinced there will always be one or two such instances in every class I will ever take.) Dr. Parish would do what I believe was his best to explain the answer without ridiculing the misinformed student. During these times, my mind would race back to the words I had seen on the website: “Criticized in front of your peers.” I began to wonder if he *was* criticizing and I simply failed to see it. But no, the question had been ridiculous, and he had answered it kindly. This phenomenon is actually discussed in one of my favorite books, *Immortality*, by Milan Kundera. The character Bernard is given a diploma that reads “Bernard Bertrand is hereby declared a Complete Ass,” as an intended joke. Bernard, however, is very troubled by the event and confides this horrible occasion to his friend Paul. Though sympathetic, Paul realizes that “in his heart he would never again think of him as Bernard but only as a complete ass.” This mental shift is quite similar to the feelings I experienced in Dr. Parish’s class. Though he was an excellent teacher, I was never able to get past seeing him as someone who was criticizing and would “blow you off the minute you asked for help.” I let the opinion of some unknown student shape the opinion I myself formed of the mysterious Dr. Parish. Who was this anonymous commenter anyway? Perhaps the student was merely misinformed and genuinely felt ridiculed by the professor’s correction. Or perhaps the student was someone who received a poor grade for not completing the work and took her frustration out in the safe space of Ratemyprofessors.com.

Ratemyprofessors.com seems to be more of a step back in the world of college education than anything else. This “rating” system is almost some sort of popularity contest more than anything that one should take seriously. I would be willing to argue that those who actually use

ratemyprofessors.com, both by commenting and by reading said comments, see it as more of some sort of forum to cuss, swear, and say all the horrible things they would love to say to a professor's face would their grades or dignity not be placed in jeopardy from doing so. It is a place to make themselves feel good, almost as if slandering a professor online could make up for a poor grade they received. If it serves only as another blog or Facebook device to say, or scream, whatever foul things they desire, such a website is not conducive to learning, which *should* be the focus of college. Not only does it create situations like my own, where one's opinion is tarnished by a source whose reliability is so much in question, but it also undermines the maturity that colleges and universities claim to help students develop. College students are generally perceived as adults, in stark contrast to the status of these same kids in high school, sometimes only months before. Such websites makes college seem like a less mature place, as if students do not respect, nor take seriously, their professors. In the end, the popularity of this site insinuates that students do not take college as a whole very seriously. This mindset is shown by the majority students on the less prestigious college campuses and by some students on the more prestigious ones. My closest friends share my respect and love for both education and knowledge. We are disgusted, or at best amused, by the attitudes of others in our classes. The general attitude about anything pertaining to school work is negative. From complaints about papers to professors to simply having to sit in classroom, I hear it all. In fact, while writing this paper, I was distracted by a loud group of students making comments such as "Yes, I read the book, first book I've read all semester!" I am shocked, thrilled as well, when I hear someone discuss a class in a positive way, or scarcer yet, someone tell about how much she enjoys a class or assignment. All of this negativity begs the question of why these people are in college in the

first place. Why do these students who obviously hate classes, and all that is associated with them, go to college to begin with?

In his book *What's College For? The Struggle to Define American Higher Education*, Zachary Karabell argues that the main motivation for adolescents to go to college is the money. People without college degrees generally have worse jobs—worse jobs that pay less: “They go because they know that without the degree their [. . .] life chances will be severely restricted.” Where students once pursued higher education because they respected knowledge, they now “increasingly see the diploma as a credential that will lead to a better job” (Karabell). This perspective explains perfectly the attitudes of most college students by whom I am surrounded. Viewing education as an honor is becoming less and less prevalent. In a survey conducted among college students, those who saw education as very important fell six percent in only two years (Yankelovich). When students are not interested in learning, but only in completing college so they can get on with their lives, “education is, in effect, dumbed down” (Karabell). The deterioration of education is tragic, and some might be beginning to realize the problem. According to John Flower, in his book *Downstairs, Upstairs*, “There is a growing awareness [. . .] that something has been lost in the decline of academic standards.”

However, not everyone sees this website as a joke. Many people see the site as not only a great accomplishment technologically speaking but also tool for responsible action. Brenda Gourley in her article “Academics Must Expand Their Digital Knowledge to Become Better Teachers” refers to Ratemyprofessors.com as a place to “allow students to exercise their rights, if not their responsibilities.” Can the horrendous comments found all over Ratemyprofessors.com be praised? They are not so much students exercising a right to be heard as they are slanderous. I

am convinced that the students rating professors are not doing so to be responsible. Quite the opposite—the comments show a complete lack of responsibility.

Ratemyprofessors.com is a preposterous site. My sister said something very insightful about Ratemyprofessors.com when she learned the site was the subject of the paper I was writing. She told me that she used the site all the time and found it very helpful. I was just about to chastise her use of the site and explain its unreliability when she added, “The professors rated the worst are usually the best.” Such confidence, or rather, complete lack of confidence, in the site really shows what it is achieving. Just as the raters fail to take college education seriously, those who do take their education seriously fail to take Ratemyprofessors.com seriously. The idea of evaluating professors is not a bad one, but only when done in a respectable manner. When evaluating turns into “rating,” the nature of such a site is put into question. Bad things happen when we let untrue statements affect our opinions. In the end of the *Seinfeld* episode, Elaine stabs Mike in the forehead with a fork. Even though Elaine’s head is not disproportionate to her body, she allows the untrue words of someone make such a great impact on her that she stabs a guy! Hopefully comments on Ratemyprofessors.com would never have quite so dramatic an effect on someone, but still, they are not in the least constructive. Something not-constructive can usually be defined as *destructive*—and destruction is rarely a positive thing.

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