

The Invisible Student

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He showed up three weeks before the course ended. His large body stumbled into the back row of the auditorium, desperately trying to be inconspicuous, to be not there. He fumbled uncertainly with his books as other, younger, students entered noisily in small groups to find their habitual seats. The lecture began, and soon assumed its usual flow of theory, examples and questions. From time to time, puzzled looks or small eddies of confusion were resolved by whispered discussion while the lecture continued. When one of these local disturbances built to a question, the instructor interrupted the flow to direct attention to the point raised, cleared up the problem, and deftly slid the class back into the dynamics of the mathematics lecture.

No one paid attention to the newcomer; no one seemed to know him. He sat uncomfortably at the back as events washed over him. At the end of the class the instructor caught him before he left the room and asked if he was new to the course. The student responded that he had been registered in the course since January but had not come to class; that he was in his final year in the Mechanical Engineering program; that he was taking the course for the fourth time. It was the one remaining first-year course that could prevent his graduation. The instructor, who had been teaching for some years, felt no surprise at the information. He encouraged the student to come and seek help, so that he might finally pass.

The student dropped by the instructor's office several times over the next few weeks, each time with some desultory questions. They told the instructor that the student had been trying to study, but also that his grasp of the concepts was ragged at best. The instructor did what he could to knit some ideas together, darning key concepts to fringes of understanding uncovered during these meetings. Privately he wondered how the patches could possibly hold.

When the exam came and the marking had been completed, the student had failed once again. The instructor re-read the exam to see if there was any way to give a passing mark, but to do so would have been unfair to the other students. He felt he had no choice but to submit a failing grade.

The events of the term had given way to summer activity when the instructor received a phone call. It was the student. He called from Ottawa, his home town, to ask whether it would be possible to go over his exam. An appointment was made for a morning of the following week.

It was hot on the appointed day. The exam paper was ready, placed on a corner of the instructor's desk. He had gone over it once more to remind himself of his reasons for giving a failing mark. Now that he had to face the student he felt uneasy.

When the knock on the door indicated the student's arrival, the instructor felt a surge of anxiety. He had barely registered the fact that the student, in suit and tie, looked even more uncomfortable than he felt himself, when a second person entered the room – an older man, dressed in a business suit. 'His lawyer', thought the instructor. His panic was only slightly diminished when the visitor was introduced as the student's father.

The instructor pushed back his anxiety, and invited the student to pull up a chair to the side of the desk where both could read the exam paper. The father settled in a corner facing the desk and his son.

The exam paper was opened. The instructor felt the weight of the paper, the hopelessness of the scribbled writing, the frantic erasures, the cruelly red annotations, the student's discomfort at wearing jacket and tie. In a steady voice he reviewed what was asked in the question, and what the student had written in answer; what was to the point and what had not been understood; why that mark was given. As the process unfolded, question after question, the instructor sensed the father's growing annoyance - the sighs and the shuffling. The father had mentioned that he was a Queen's graduate; that he owned an engineering business which his son would be taking over. He probably donated money to the university, had connections with the Dean. The instructor wondered where he and his colleagues had failed this student. His mind hurried along two tracks at once: the marks on the exam and the father's restlessness. The instructor pressed the side of his leg against the cool metal of the desk as he continued.

Eventually, when the instructor and the student reached the last few questions on the exam, and the father's restlessness had grown into obvious anger, it dawned on the instructor that the father's anger was directed, not at him, nor at the university, but at his son. As the young man acknowledged the fairness of the mark, the father growled that this would not happen again. Before the father left the office, his son's heavy footsteps already receding in the hallway, he turned and shook the instructor's hand.