

RESPECT – SHOULD IT BE TAUGHT AT THE UNIVERSITY?

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Abstract

Unlike most of my recent writing, unlike most of my writing in general, this is not an academic paper, or research paper, but an essay – the etymological meaning of the word – an attempt to understand, if possible, what prompts respectful behavior, so necessary in both our personal and professional lives, when we should start teaching it, and, no less importantly, who should be responsible for this sort of teaching. Generated by recent changes in the department, and institution, that I have been with for the last 18 years, the essay does not aim to set any rules of academic conduct, or solve any problems, but merely raise some questions, pretty much rhetorically.

Keywords: respect, tolerance, education, responsibility

What do we respect?

The first question addressed by the present essay is ‘WHAT do we respect?’. The answers that may come to mind, in an instant, vary widely according to a lot of factors, generally cultural, or culturally determined: who we are, culturally speaking, the education we (have) received, the immediate surroundings that model, that shape us, be them institutional culture, colleagues, family or friends and also the pressure they put on us to *do the right thing*. What this *right thing* might mean is a different question, differently, subjectively answered across borders, across cultures.

Story 1 – Do we respect the outfit?

First day of the academic year: I decided to wear a smart outfit, different from my usual blue jeans and sweaters, as I knew I would meet most of my colleagues and superiors in a department meeting. To my surprise, I was saluted with reverence by all the people who knew me and who crossed my path down the corridors that day, but also, surprisingly, by a lot of people who did not know me, but who could associate my smart image with their visual representation of the concept of “teacher”, or “professor”.

If true, this seems to contradict the old Romanian saying “Nu haina îl face pe om”. Actually, I tend to agree that nowadays, bombarded by so much advertising and surrounded and tempted by so many famous brands, not to say subject to the influence and pressure of our families and friends, we are inclined to give more and more weight to the wrapping, to the outfit, to FORM rather than content.

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Conclusion 1

Hence, my first provisional conclusion: many of us respect people's looks, rather than their *content*, before we get to know anything about their qualities, or *quality*. And even if, generally speaking, this may not be true, the opposite, unfortunately, is more and more so.

Story 2 – Do we respect old age?

My first five-or-so years as a young teacher in ASE: usual story, regularly repeated while waiting for one of the two elevators in our faculty's building. I am constantly, relentlessly scolded by more experienced professors that I am not supposed to be there, waiting for the elevator, as it is meant to be used by professors. I inferred that, in these gentlemen's opinion, "professors" probably meant something very different from me: older, possibly male, certainly not wearing jeans. But mainly older. I got this part a few years later, when, still a woman, and still preferring jeans, I was politely invited to the elevator, in my quality of a professor. I can't claim that I was not sorry to recognize the fact that, despite its perks, maturity better described me, on my way to respected old age.

This is as well culturally determined, and my story could have been different on another continent, or in another country, as there are, as we all know, as Hofstede taught us decades ago, cultures where young people are valorized and preferred, for their pristine mindsets, and for their adaptability and eagerness to learn. Not to say that one can't observe these qualities in somebody more mature, but generally speaking, again, youthfulness is associated with lack of experience and a better capacity to learn and be shaped by one's work or personal environment.

Conclusion 2

So, my second provisional conclusion would be that, at least we, Romanians, tend to respect old age, and quite often be disrespectful to and even prejudiced against the youth. This is not to say that the opposite is justifiable. It is virtually impossible to develop, to grow, to be internationally recognized, if we do not value experience, if old/young age is discriminated against.

Story 3 – Do we respect gender?

Slight change of environment, this is the story of saluting neighbors in the countryside. As a family always genuinely passionate about the values related to and advantages of living in the countryside, my family have oscillated between Bucharest and its suburbs for the last 14 years. I couldn't help noticing, and, after so many years, drawing some sort of conclusion, that our male neighbors would only salute my husband, never even answered my "hellos" or "good afternoons", as if I had been invisible. It took a while to remember my great-grandmother's stories and realize – I don't say accept, as I still don't accept it, and I still struggle to get answers to my "good afternoons" – that, in rural Romania, women *are* invisible for, especially older, men.

Conclusion 3

Third conclusion: Romanian society seems to remain a very patriarchal one to this day, and not saluting women in the countryside is a symptom of this type of attitude, or not necessarily a complete lack of respect for women, but certainly of a more respectful attitude to men, that persists mainly in the older population.

Story 4 – Do we respect the job?

Another interesting story, and a recurrent one, is the story of the reactions of my new acquaintances and friends-to-be when they discover that I am a teacher, actually a professor (although not yet a professor in the sense of the academic rank). Quite often over the last ten or more years I lost contacts and people who could have become my friends, as they were put off by my job. Not in the sense that they did not like or appreciate it, but because they were paralyzed by the importance of sitting next to, or talking to a professor. To me personally, that has always represented a minus, because, when too much respect blocks connections and friendship, I tend to consider it a minus.

Conclusion 4

So, do we respect the job? Most probably so. Of course, it's another culturally determined answer, but, as Romanians, we all remember how our parents and families have always tried to steer us away from

the passions and interests we had when we were children, if they were not to lead our way to “respectable” jobs, such as that of a doctor, maybe surgeon, or teacher/professor, or lawyer, or architect. Who has ever been stimulated, or at least supported, to become a farmer, or a cook, a shop assistant, or a seamstress?

Story 5 – Do we respect connections?

As a very sociable person, it wasn't long before I got acquainted with a lot of my colleagues, not only in my department, but also in other departments and faculties. Opportunities to meet people are countless in a university: conferences, exams organized by the Academy, lunchtime at the cafeteria, not to mention breaks themselves. Nothing seems unusual to me to this day when one gets to meet, and know, peers. However, one day, maybe 10 years ago, while literally crossing the two-kilometer campus with a colleague my age, I met at least ten colleagues from other departments that I happened to know and whom, of course, I saluted. Except wonder, I could see respect in the eyes of my department colleague who couldn't refrain from asking me if I really knew everybody in the Academy.

Conclusion 5

Hence, another conclusion: we do respect connections, what we perceive as well-connected people. Something must be special about them if they know everybody else. And, why not, conferences and papers have recently been written about the importance of soft skills and emotional intelligence in our personal, but especially professional lives (cf. Heckman and Kautz, or Robles, on Soft Skills, but also Matthews, Roberts and Zeidner, or Mayer, Salovey and Caruso, or Schutte *et al* on the importance of EI).

Story 6 – Do we respect education itself?

This time, I do not have a story of my own, but I can clearly identify a sense of importance, or respect, in those who get a diploma, a BA/BS at least, not to mention an MA/MS degree or a PhD. And it is not only Romanians who want and respect diplomas; it is international recruiters and employers who ask for the same thing. People with a diploma, who graduated from a University of any sort, will have better chances for employment and for better-paid jobs. Despite that, this trend is opposed to another one, of American origin, and we know that more and more Romanians argue that the educational system has constantly deteriorated and that a self-made man can prove superior to one college graduate any time.

Conclusion 6

Do we respect education itself? Hard to tell, but a lot of Romanians still valorize education, as our parents and grandparents did: “Ai carte, ai parte”.

If most Romanians respect, as they might, gender, age, certain professions, connections, or diplomas, and sometimes even more trivial things such as one's outfit or the brands that we ostentatiously exhibit is one thing. What we should respect, on the other hand, is a different question, and although it is not the purpose of this essay to establish a new set of values or amend the currently accepted ones, I cannot refrain from rhetorically asking if our current set of values is what it should be.

When should we teach respect and whose job is it?

Respectful people, such as the Asians, The Chinese, notoriously the Japanese, have always been admired, even in less respectful cultures. It is a commonly accepted fact that we need respect in our lives and, since it is not inborn, it must be taught. Hence, the second question raised in this essay: WHEN is it advisable to teach people to be respectful? And, deriving from it, a third one: WHO should be responsible for this?

A lot of Romanians would probably answer that it is best to educate children when they are very young, as we attach value to “cei 7 ani de acasă”. Respect for older people, for one's family, for education itself, for school and teachers have all been taught in and by Romanian families for

centuries, although there is a growing trend among young families to let their children develop more or less by themselves, with little alteration or few amendments from their family. Old people consider that a mistake, and the result – rude, uneducated children, and later, people, from a moral, or ethical point of view. Younger parents consider this the best, the only way possible – not to spoil your children’s creativity and ingenuity. There are PROs and CONs for both sides, and the history of psychology alone would be able to provide a lot of each.

A second answer would be: if children are too young to perceive principles and correction properly, constructively, then the next stage in a man’s psychological development is the most appropriate. So, people are best educated when young, in school, by teachers, in a joint effort with children’s families. However, we tend to take credit as a family, for our children’s development, and blame the school, and implicitly, the teachers, for their mistakes and failures.

Finally, my personal, firm belief is that we should be open to education for all our lives. And when it comes to emotional intelligence and soft skills, even more so. It follows that it is not only our family’s or our teachers’ responsibility to educate us, it is our own.

Instead of conclusions. Respect vs. tolerance

It is my firm belief that, since we live in a changing world, more and more demanding in terms of human relations, a world in which our partners are different, our teachers are different, our students are different from us, we need to be, more than ever, open to change, open-minded, responsible towards our own lives and others’, in one word, *respectful*. I deliberately avoid the word *tolerant*, since it is so charged with a negative connotation. White, male, mature/experienced, well-connected, well-educated is not necessarily superior. Merely different. If nobody teaches us so, it is our job and our responsibility to teach ourselves to be respectful, not superiorly tolerant. Without respect for each other, for all our differences in terms of education, age, gender or race, the future will be anything but bright.

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