

Title: Suppressing Curiosity: How GPAs, Forced Memorization, and Mandatory Exams May Undermine Open Inquiry

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Transcript

Dylan Selterman

In some sense, I was told by virtually all of the adults of my life growing up that school was good for my mind, that it would make me a better thinker, and now I have come to believe the exact opposite is true. Schools increase closed-minded thinking, ideological prejudice, confirmation bias.

Zach Rausch

That's Dylan Selterman. Today, we explore the possibility that the crisis of the lack of free inquiry and viewpoint diversity on many campuses is not due to a malfunction of higher education, but a direct product of the University system itself. I'm Zach Rausch. This is Heterodox Out Loud. Our guest today is Dylan Selterman, Social-Personality Psychologist and an Associate Teaching Professor at Johns Hopkins University. He writes a blog for Psychology Today called "The Resistance Hypothesis" and hosts a podcast with his colleague Manuel Galvin called "A Bit More Complicated." He's a supporter of democratic schooling and wide-ranging educational reform. He argues that without major structural changes, higher education will continue struggling in promoting the values that Heterodox Academy upholds: open inquiry, viewpoint, diversity, and constructive disagreement. Before we chat, let's listen to Dylan's blog post that he wrote in 2018 on our website. It's called: "Curiosity is One Key to Heterodoxy. Forced Memorization is Not." Read by Richard Davies.

The full blog post can be found on our website here: [Curiosity is One Key to Heterodoxy. Forced Memorization is Not](#)

Zach Rausch

Now, my discussion with Dylan. Dylan, thank you for coming onto Heterodox Out Loud. I'm really happy to get to talk to you.

Dylan Selterman

Thanks for having me.

Zach Rausch

Can you tell me a little bit about your story, your academic story, and how you became interested in some of the topics that you were writing about?

Dylan Selterman

Well, I'll start off by saying that I don't have personal experience with alternative schools or alternative education. I have only experience with mainstream schools, which feel kind of miserable to me. And looking back, I think of myself as a pretty naive student who basically believed in the general goodness of school, despite the fact that I felt it was a source of suffering. And I believed, then, I believed one day in the future it would all make sense, like I would wake up one day in my 20s or 30s with a moment of clarity, "Ah, so that's why they forced me to memorize the quadratic formula!" But of course, that day never came, and it never will. And my interest in alternatives started when I read critiques of mainstream education from fields like psychology, which is my field, along with sociology and anthropology. A few books stand out. "Free to Learn" by Peter Gray, "Schools on Trial" by Nikhil Goyal. I mentioned both of those in my blog post, and "I Love Learning; I Hate School" by Susan Blum is another good one. Those are folks who are suggesting alternative approaches to education, which I think we should all take seriously.

Zach Rausch

What's the connection between your interest in alternative schools and how did that tie you to Heterodox Academy?

Dylan Selterman

Yeah, I became interested in HxA when I saw leaders in my field taking up the cause. I've been inspired by folks like Jon Haidt, Chris Martin, Musa al-Gharbi, Deb Mashek, and many others. I think freedom of inquiry and intellectual diversity are the cornerstones of any progressive, egalitarian, enlightened society. Those should be the values of the Academy, in my view. It is a strange moment we're in now where ideas like free speech and diversity of thought are being more aligned with the right-wing of the American culture war. These are Liberal values, and I feel strongly that we need to

stand up for them, and I love the programming that HxA does. I like what you're doing with the conferences, the blog, this podcast, I think these conversations are so important to have.

Zach Rausch

Give us the rundown of your argument for alternative schools, and why it really helps promote the values that HxA espouses.

Dylan Selterman

I apologize in advance if I seem a little overly emotional about this topic. I have a lot of feelings about it. Anger in particular. I feel like, in some sense, I was told by virtually all of the adults in my life growing up that school was good for my mind, that it would make me a better thinker. And now I have come to believe the exact opposite is true. I think schools increase closed-minded thinking, ideological prejudice, confirmation bias, and now in 2022, I think on an ethical level, we ought to be focusing on education reform, because I think we're really failing our students and doing a major disservice in mainstream schooling. I desperately want this to change. School ideally is a place where community members can come together to practice self-governance, to create constitutions of knowledge and discourse, to borrow the phrase from Jonathan Rauch. All of this in a way that parallels the type of broader society that we're striving to create where we're all treated as equals and have the same basic rights. Right now, in mainstream schools, students don't have the same rights as faculty, staff, and administration. And I think that is deplorable. When there is this hierarchical, authoritarian relationship where the students have little, if any, control over what information they're being given and what goes into their minds, I think that is detrimental to all of the goals that HxA is striving for.

Zach Rausch

But within higher ed, tell me, what is the ideal vision that you see of how institutions should be structured in a way that would fulfill these democratic values?

Dylan Selterman

Well, the ideal for me would be something that captures our democratic values. And I think for some folks, they hear the message of reform and they think, "Oh, well, this means we're going to get rid of exams, we're going to get rid of grades, we're going to completely top down reform the whole of the

structure." So you can still have quizzes or grades. But the real benefit would be for the students to have those things in order for them to accomplish their learning goals. I'm not opposed to those things. The problem I see is that students don't want to do those things now. The average student who is enrolled in higher ed does not want to take exams, and in some cases, they don't want to go to class, they don't want to receive grades. And this is not healthy. This is not good for learning. It's kind of like if you go to the doctor and the doctor says you're unhealthy, you need to make lifestyle changes. If your response is, "No, I don't want to," that makes no sense. What we need to remember is that the desire to learn and grow and explore.

This is a very instinctual biological process that's part of a healthy human mind. We're born with it. You don't need to force people to learn things any more than you need to force them to eat or drink or sleep or have sex. And so we have this natural urge through curiosity and open mindedness, which I think is just as strong as those other drive states. So that I think should be the central premise for school. If I want to learn about a topic or if I want to learn a skill, I value critical feedback from instructors. I value their expertise, I value their guidance. That should be, I think, our working model for all levels of education.

Zach Rausch

At Heterodox Academy, we conduct what we call the Campus Expression Survey, and we just launched it actually yesterday. And for listeners that would be March 1. And one of the findings that we've been showing, and there have been some other reports from other organizations, is that, within the past 5-10 years, we've seen a large spike in self-censorship among students, really a rising crisis in free inquiry and viewpoint diversity. Reading your piece, it sounds like this is a deep systemic issue that maybe has always been a problem in higher ed.

Dylan Selterman

Yeah, thanks. This is a great question, and I certainly don't mean to dismiss the results of those survey findings. I think those are very valuable in terms of helping to diagnose and come up with solutions to this problem. I think this is probably, though, one of the areas where I diverge a bit from this line of thinking that we're dealing with a new problem. I'm not convinced, because I think in some sense, maybe the problem was manifesting differently. And, in general, I think in society we have pretty short memories. We're living in a time where people are maybe over-exaggerating the problems we face now relative to the ones we've faced in recent history. Not too long ago, I remember what it was like to be a student in high school in the 90s and then in College in the early

2000s, and there were rules about what ideas were off limits, and the divisions were mainly about culture war stuff. I remember what it was like to see extreme professional consequences for taboo expressions. And I don't think that our social life in America today is really fundamentally different than it was 15 or 20 years ago.

This was at the height of the War on Terror. And while this was happening, students and faculty were walking on eggshells. We were walking on eggshells then, and we're walking on eggshells now. We want to fit in. We're human. We don't want to upset other people, but I think we also want to explore and better understand our world. So, there's an inherent tension in that. And maybe this tension manifests a bit differently now compared to a few decades ago, but I think it's always been with us to some extent.

Zach Rausch

Right. And I do think that probably social media has also changed the dynamics. But I think you are talking about also another deeper issue, and I'd like you to talk a little more about how the structure of institutions themselves are leading to close-mindedness.

Dylan Selterman

Well, I think there's high stakes. When students are told by their teachers and administrators that we are scrutinizing all of your work, we're evaluating the things that you say, and we're keeping score, and any failures will go on your record. And there could be really extreme consequences for you in the future based on your performance here, now, in the classroom or on your exams. You're creating an environment that I think is not only bad for mental health, but bad for people to think creatively, to think critically, to challenge what they're told, to not necessarily be afraid to make mistakes. And what you're hinting at in terms of how things operate on social media, it's kind of the same thing. You maybe write something a bit awkwardly and then a bunch of people pounce on you. That happens in school, too. You screw up an exam and all of a sudden you're feeling like, "Well, am I going to pass this semester? Am I going to get the job that I want? Am I going to lose my scholarship?" And there is no room for humanness.

Zach Rausch

So for people listening to this podcast, maybe they agree with you, maybe they don't, but regardless, what advice would you give to professors to encourage more curiosity in the classroom and to make this a reality within the institutions that we're working in?

Dylan Selterman

There's no reason we can't create an ideal or optimal model for learning in every College or University. I'm still an optimist. And so my best advice would be to really try to infuse everything that you're doing with democratic processes, encourage folks to serve on campus committees or campus governance. And if you're listening, I encourage you personally to serve in some capacity yourself. And please don't tell me that you don't have time. All of us need to be active citizens in our communities, and that includes our campus communities.

Zach Rausch

And what about to students who are listening?

Dylan Selterman

Same thing. Get active, get involved. Know who your campus reps are, you elected them! Go and talk to the people whose job it is to represent your concerns and your values and share with them what's on your mind.

Zach Rausch

And before we head off, anything that we didn't talk about that you want to make sure our listeners take away from your piece and from your ideas?

Dylan Selterman

The first thing that I would say here is to really consider students' mental health, because I think that school really makes students feel miserable. And if you want to know really what is the evidence that schools, the system we're talking about, what is the evidence that that's really hurting viewpoint diversity or intellectual humility or any of those values that HxA is trying to embody? Look at the mental health data. Students are really intensely suffering and it's not just because of the time that we're in or because of Instagram. It's because they list school as one of their top stressors and there's actually data showing that students are more likely to attempt suicide when school is in

session relative to winter, spring or summer break. All of these variables that we're talking about, whether it's success in learning and education, viewpoint diversity, intellectual humility, democracy, happiness, all of those things go hand in hand. If your students are miserable then you probably won't be able to teach them much of anything. Remember that evolution has, to some extent, solved already the problems that we're trying to solve now. Evolution has given us this incredible, wonderful gift of curiosity.

Cherish it, feed your brain what it needs. Study what you love.

Zach Rausch

Dylan Selterman on Heterodox Out Loud. If you enjoyed this episode, subscribe and listen to more thought-provoking takes from our blog authors. For more on the state of free inquiry on college campuses, check out our just-released [2021 Campus Expression Survey](#) on our website at heterodoxacademy.org. Thanks to Davies Content for producing this show and to Kara Boyer on our communication team. I'm Zach Rausch. Until next time.