EDITORIAL

Claiming an Education

by Lynne Wanyeki

Only two more weeks of classes before exams begin. In the past week or so, I think the realization of this fact has slowly begun to imbed itself in the minds of myself and the people around me. We've made frenzied visits to the library, after which we return empty-handed and slightly more panicked, cursing the lack of books, research materials, carrels, whatever. Of course, we've completely ignored the fact that had we made those visits earlier in the term, we might just have secured those books, research materials, carrels, whatever. We've made heavy-hearted, slow-footed treks to our various professors and supervisors, pleading for just one week's more leeway on a particular paper's deadline, just one more chance to make up for a bad midterm. It's my bet that class attendance will improve miraculously in these last two weeks, as we clutch at straws and think illogically that we can absorb a whole term's work (or at the very least, upgrade our marks) by attending six classes. If only, if only, if only - the pathetic cry of those of us who have suddenly realized that the term is nearly over and we haven't learnt anything yet. The only thing that consoles us is that this appears to be a somewhat communal cry - we are not alone in our misery.

But we do not speak of this misery. We complain about how little time we have, how unyielding certain professors are, or conversely, acclaim the leniency of other professors. We brag about our A's and defiantly mock our F's, as though we really don't care. We groan about having to do papers on anything from Sappho to nuclear fusion, but don't tell of what that really means. It is the superficials that we discuss.

What I mean is that the actual content of our individual studies is rarely, if ever, discussed outside the classroom. A couple of cases in point. A friend just received his doctorate in chemistry this week. I know this, but I'd be hard pressed to tell of what his actual subject matter was. A couple of weeks ago, another person I know was doing a paper on the Maasai, a nation of people in my own country. I knew this, but I don't know what he ultimately wrote, let alone why he was writing on a such a topic - seemingly so removed from the Fredericton context. My own brother is in chemical engineering. I couldn't define chemical engineering if I tried.

It's like there is a tacit agreement to keep silent, even among friends, about things that we presumably care about or at least evince a slight amount of interest in (why else are we studying whatever it is that we are) outside the classroom. For a lot of us, considerable amounts of time are spent outside the classroom. And so, academics become a backdrop to our existence, a gentle background hum to the exuberant noise of whatever else we do with our lives - until such times as now, when the hum becomes dissonant and accusing, intensified by the fact that it has been ignored for so long and has only so much longer to go.

Educators speak of consciously recognizing that we are here to claim an education, as opposed to believing that we are here to receive an education. To claim: to demand as rightfully belonging to one. To receive: to get, to be given. In the context of education, the latter implies passivity, as well as a certain sense of lassitude. For it goes without saying that we are less likely to be concerned with the quality of something that is seen as being extraneous to ourselves and requiring no effort to achieve than we are with that of something we see as being innately ours yet as requiring some assertion on our part to achieve.

It is my grossly unsubstantiated observation that the only students who appear to be consistently and actively claiming their education at UNB are mature students, graduate students and international students. What conclusions can be drawn from this, I'm not quite sure. That increased age does indeed imply increased maturity (or at the very least, intensified focus). That people who return to school after several years off are genuinely interested in learning for learning's sake, rather than in learning as being the means to an end, or in learning as being a pleasant but irrelevant interval on our way to deciding what we intend to do in the so-called real world. That in-depth research is, contrary to popular belief, actually stimulating. That higher financial investment lessens the likelihood of squandering that investment ... Who knows for sure? Certainly, it is something the rest of us should think about before we throw ourselves headlong into another term.

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