

H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Peter Sacks. *Generation X Goes to College: An Eye-Opening Account of Teaching In Postmodern America*. Chicago: Open Court, 1996. xiv + 208 pp. \$15.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8126-9314-0.

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The first half of *Generation X Goes to College* is a narrative of Sacks' metamorphosis from an upwardly mobile, newspaper journalist to a frustrated, "hand-holding," writing instructor at a local college. As a college instructor, I thoroughly enjoyed reading the narrative of Sacks' frustrations with students who sit back and ask to be amused. The point of Sacks' stories is that the quality of higher education is declining. In addition Sacks exposes the tenure system at his particular school, which is too dependent on students' evaluations. (The chair of Sacks' tenure committee told him to take an acting class to get better evaluations!)

The second half of the book is less amusing. There Sacks discusses various forces, particularly postmodernism, which are working against higher education. At first, Sacks convinced me that postmodernism was not the real issue. This was contrary to his intent. As I read, the real problem seemed to be the students' immaturity and poor motivation. Then I hit on another idea; perhaps postmodernism is just immaturity writ large across our culture. As I thought about Sacks' rather loose definition of postmodernism, I began to see the issues in a new light. Sacks explains that postmodernism is a rejection of traditional authorities, of clear rational thinking, and of objective standards. This is also a good definition of immaturity.

Sacks overlooks an important distinction. In the 70s, many eighteen-year-olds were also immature and poorly prepared. However, those students could be induced to correct their weaknesses. They had some sense that objective standards of writing, thinking, and behavior ex-

isted. Today, young people and their parents often reject rationality and objective standards. Thus, students are no longer ashamed of their lack of preparation, their rudeness, and their disregard for learning. It is this boldness which irritates Sacks. Thus, I came to tentatively agree with Sacks. Perhaps today's freshmen are less prepared and more immature. However, the really significant change has been the social approval/support now given to such students by our postmodern culture.

Sacks' book is helpful because it calls attention to pressures which are reducing the quality of today's college education. Students come to college with poor skills and poor attitudes. Instructors are pressured from students to be amusing and to give inflated grades. Administrators are pressured to admit as many students as possible and to retain those students in order to maintain the budget. Sacks' suggestions to solve these problems are rather vague and threadbare.

Overall, I do not think that today's freshmen are radically different from the ones in the 70s (as Sacks assumes). The problem is not Generation X. The problem is that our whole culture is moving away from those values which, traditionally, have been at the core of higher education.

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