

MAKING A DIFFERENCE ● ideas for uni students

Do you want to help to make the world a better place? You can join the environmental, feminist, antiracist, peace or labour movements, among others. There are lots of groups and activities.

But what about attending university? If you care about the world's problems, what's the benefit of going to uni — and what are the risks?

If you're a social activist, you're in the minority. Most students seem to just want a degree to get a good job. Cynicism abounds. Meanwhile, academics are stressed and demoralised. Work pressures continue to increase. Uni administrations are ever more dominant, reducing what little academic democracy ever existed. There are increasing pressures to orient research and teaching to commercial ends.

Still, there are some pluses. Studying at uni is a time of wonderful freedom and opportunity. You can learn valuable skills, including thinking, writing, investigating and speaking, that activists desperately need. A bonus is that there are quite a few academics who care about social change.

But before you get carried away with excitement, it's wise to pay heed to the risks. Many a radical student has ended up, not many years later, as a voiceless conformist. Partly that's due to the pressure of getting a job or supporting a family, but there are academic dangers too.

Rules and resistance

The most deep-seated lesson taught to students is to follow instructions and play by the rules. Every time you do an assignment or prepare for an exam, you are learning not just the subject matter but also to accept an agenda set by the teacher. Sure, there's quite a bit of talk about rewarding creativity and independence, but that's mostly just wind. Ask about doing a different experiment, choosing a different essay topic or even just using a different referencing style. But don't hold your breath for encouragement. If you prefer to study things not on the exam, don't expect any rewards.

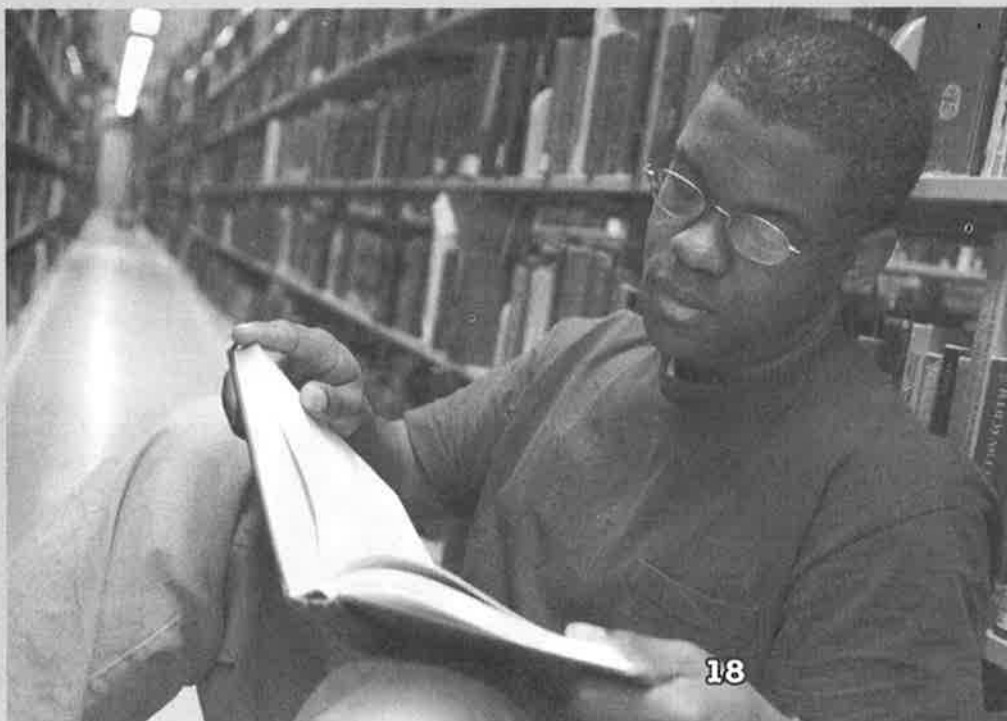
Jeff Schmidt in his provocative book *Disciplined Minds* says that in becoming a professional, the key thing to be learned is not the subject matter, but to internalize dominant values and ways of understanding the world. This is a process of "ideological discipline." If you're a good student, you will learn to be highly attuned to the expectations of your teachers. Instead of studying what you really think is important — including how to change the world — you'll think it's natural to study whatever is assigned. You'll develop what Schmidt calls "assignable curiosity."

To survive with your own curiosity intact, you need to supplement rule-following with resistance. Investigate topics that you care about even though there are no marks attached. Ask challenging questions in class (some teachers will appreciate it). Negotiate different assessment tasks. Set up study groups with like-minded students.

You don't need to resist everything or all the time. The key is to develop a capacity to determine your own rules and to pursue your own concerns. If you see how the rule-following game operates, you can better choose when and how to play.

Criticism and creativity

In all fields, you mainly learn the standard ideas. Critical thinking about core concepts is not a priority. But in many disciplines outside the sciences, one of the key skills to be learned is critique, namely how to go about questioning ideas. This is tremendously useful for social activists. Rather than just accepting standard ideas about ethnicity, gender or





event, running a committee meeting, creating an email network or designing a pressure group campaign. But these seldom have the same prestige as the thinking dimension. To really impress academics, you need to “reflect on” actions, namely think about and comment on them.

What’s called “reflective practice” is a great way to improve performance. The risk is that the status of

wealth, you can learn how to uncover hidden assumptions and value judgements. Activists need such skills since they often struggle against conventional views about society, economics or behaviour such as found in the media.

But there’s a risk. In focussing on critique, the creative side is neglected. Let’s say you propose an unconventional idea, for example random selection of politicians, workplace democracy or a psychology for cooperative economics. Do you expect encouragement for being original? Think again. The standard response is critique. Be prepared for a withering attack. It’s not just you! All new proposals — and their proponents — suffer the same treatment.

Lots of students, especially females, lose confidence as they go through uni. One major factor is the relentless criticism. Your mistakes are pointed out on essays and exams. Your comments in tutorials or lectures can be met with put-downs. This culture of criticism encourages conformity and passivity. To persist with unconventional ideas, you need to be thick-skinned.

So by all means learn how to do a good critique. But to keep a balance, practise skills in creative thinking. Look up books by Edward de Bono and, with friends out of class, have fun thinking “outside the box.” Think about social alternatives (get the magazine *Social Alternatives* too!). Look for the positives in new ideas and encourage those who present them. Those who want to help create a better world know that criticising is the easy part. Developing alternatives and ways to promote them is the hard part, and you won’t get much help with that at uni.

Thought and action

At uni, thinking is prized. Learning facts, reading books, discussing ideas, writing reports — these will serve you well.

Action is not so lauded. In some fields, you can learn skills such as teaching a class, organising a public

thinking can orient you to scholars and scholarship and lead you away from activists and activism. Publish a research paper in a scholarly journal? That’s tops. Participate in or organise an environmental campaign? That has no academic status. It might even be a negative.

So if you care about injustice in the world, by all means use all your intellectual skills. But don’t just seek to impress other intellectuals. Link up with activists.

Conclusion

There is no one best way to improve the world. Each person who cares can sort out a way to contribute, from supporting a devalued individual to joining a global protest.

To be a social activist, you don’t need to go to uni, but if you do, there are many useful skills to learn and opportunities to exercise them. But there are also subtle risks. To survive at uni, you have to learn to follow rules. The risk is that you become an unthinking rule-follower. At uni, you can learn how to undertake critiques. The risk is that you become an unthinking criticiser, never developing and promoting your own alternative vision for society. At uni, you develop your thinking capacities. You also need to develop your capacity for action. The longer you stay at uni, the greater the risks. So be prepared and have fun!

By Brian Martin

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