

An Interview with Professor Patrick Allitt: Who is the Professor and Who is the Student?

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Profile: Patrick Allitt is Cahoon Family Professor of American History. He was an undergraduate at Oxford in England, a graduate student at the University of California Berkeley, and held postdoctoral fellowships at Harvard Divinity School and Princeton University. At Emory since 1988, he teaches courses on American intellectual, environmental, and religious history, on Victorian Britain, and on the Great Books. Author of six books, he is also presenter of seven lecture series with “The Great Courses” (www.thegreatcourses.com), including “The Art of Teaching”.

Question 1: Professor Allitt, you have studied at Oxford (which specific college?) and of course in the United States. How would you describe the differences between the two systems?

Answer: My college at Oxford was Hertford. The greatest difference was that at Oxford, in the 1970s, every student specialized right from the start. Every class I did as an undergraduate was a history class, there were no breadth requirements, and I never heard any mention of the concept of the liberal arts. While I was studying history in this highly concentrated way, some of my contemporaries were studying law or medicine as undergraduates rather than taking the American approach of an undergraduate degree that leads to a subsequent course of study in law school or medical school.

The other great difference was the question of payment. Since 1945, the British government had taken the view that an educated population was a national asset, and that, therefore, the government should fund it. My tuition and nearly all my living expenses were paid for by government grants, while my family was required to contribute only very modestly. British students in those days almost never incurred debts for education. That’s no longer true: as a greater proportion of each age group goes to college now, they are expected to pay part of the cost, though the subsidies are still generous and the cost to students is still low by American standards.

Question 2: Let’s talk about the Great Books. In your mind, how important are they and how do we get students to actually read and study them?

Answer: Some books are better written than others, draw more readers’ attention, and continue to attract readers over the decades and centuries. They remain relevant and interesting even when the conditions in which they were written no longer exist. Achieving greatness is a highly democratic

process, a kind of multi-generational democracy, in which the dead as well as the living have votes. Sometimes a particular book or text is enshrined by institutions (e.g. churches and synagogues as places that preserve, and nurture an interest in the Bible). At other times, new generations of readers simply agree with their predecessors that a particular author has a brilliantly acute insight into the human condition and a delightful way of expressing it (e.g. Jane Austen or Tolstoy).

We get students to read great books by assigning them to our classes, in the original when possible or else in translation. We live in an era of superb but largely un-sung translators who have made available to us extremely high-quality versions of the best books from all over the world.

The great thing about reading the original texts is that it helps students discover why the authors undertook their projects, which other authors they were trying to refute, and what stylistic approaches they took. Even a very good summary by another author cannot easily convey these things.

Question 3: What, in your mind, is actually involved in the STUDY of the Great Books?

Answer: I find I have to encourage the students to distinguish between what they've *heard* a certain book says, and what it actually says. The fame of many great books goes before them, and students are sometimes overawed by it. I encourage them to treat whatever they read at face value, to try to get provisionally into the authors' shoes, but also to be willing to criticize. I think it's important to avoid implying that there are certain conclusions students *ought* to reach or certain opinions they *ought* to hold of any book. It's refreshing now and then to find a student unmoved by a book's reputation for greatness, and willing to make an argument about why the claim of greatness is unjustified.

I sometimes ask my great books class: Do you think the author knew he or she was writing a "great book" at the time? They realize that the answer is nearly always no—subsequent generations of readers have conferred greatness upon it, but never unanimously. Certain authors' ability to create controversy is one of the elements of greatness. Think of Freud, for example. He drew ardent admirers but equally ardent detractors. Readers have *argued* over his works for more than a century and their debate has itself become one of the characteristic features of modern society.

I try to make sure that students are able to recognize what was new or distinctive about a particular author's work at the time it was produced. Why were Adam Smith and Charles Darwin so impressive to their initial readers? This is particularly necessary with authors whose major insights have become so widely accepted that it's easy for students to overlook what was once their startlingly new insight.

Question 4: In the big scheme of things, how important would you say religious history is? And why would religious history be important in the current zeitgeist?

Answer: It's startling to discover how little religious history is known, even by people who are very religious. I often have students who have active religious lives and a seemingly profound faith but know nothing of the history of their own church, synagogue, temple, or mosque. Occasionally that can be a good thing, as it makes the perpetuation of inter-religious bigotry less likely. I've never come

across active anti-Catholicism, for example, even though it was a powerful force in America until the 1950s. More often, though, historical ignorance is a weakness because it inhibits an understanding of why the various religions are the way they are. It's especially important in our current situation to make sure students learn that Islam is not an ideology of destructive rage, and to teach them about the long history of the mutual persecution of Christians. It's also necessary, but very difficult, to put the great religious figures back into their historical context.

Question 5: I fear that "The Art of Teaching" is being replaced with "The Art of Being Online". What will be the impact of all these online classes and MOOC's?

Answer: Sometimes, remote access can be useful. I did a teaching seminar at a desert campus in Eastern Nevada recently. Teachers unable to get to it from distant branch campuses of the college were able to participate remotely on Skype, which was good. On the other hand, online classes are clearly much poorer than classes where teacher and students are physically together in the same room. It's hard and lonely being a student without the company of other students sharing the same intellectual problems and the same reading assignments. It needs iron self-discipline, of a kind most people lack.

That's why the dropout rate from MOOCs is extremely high. I think the vogue for them is already passing. My own university entered the field of remote teaching enthusiastically a few years ago but has now abandoned it. Traditional classrooms have plenty of life and vitality left in them and will survive.

Question 6: American intellectual history is certainly worthy of study—but in terms of direct employment—is there a connection?

Answer: There's no linear connection between learning American intellectual history and getting a decent job. Never mind: the whole point of the liberal arts is that they are meant to be enriching to the individual, enabling him or her to become a better and more self-aware citizen. You could take the view that they are defiantly impractical. Knowing America's distinctive intellectual characteristics, and realizing how different they are from the intellectual characteristics of other cultures, will be useful to students who later work in international fields, but that's not why we study them.

Question 7: "A Semester in a Typical American Classroom"—what is it like? Is there challenge, enjoyment, serious study or just jumping through the hoops?

Answer: It's incredibly enjoyable. I love nearly every aspect of teaching undergraduates. They are young, enthusiastic, impressionable, idealistic, and most haven't been beaten down or made cynical by hard encounters with adversity. They are good company, often eager to please and intellectually curious even when naïve. But yes, there's also plenty of challenge. Students need to understand that learning isn't fun, even though there's sometimes a kind of dry pleasure in the discipline. Teaching them to stick at it, to struggle with difficult concepts, not to procrastinate, not to be lazy, to speak well, to clarify

their ideas and use precise language: all these are the challenges of college teaching. I never feel that it's a matter of jumping through hoops. I also realized long ago that outcomes are always going to vary because some students are much more disciplined, dedicated, and talented than others, and because motivation differs so widely, even at a highly selective college like Emory.

Question 8: Let's discuss writing as an art form, writing as a communication form and writing as a fundamental, foundational skill. What have you found and what can be done or what needs to be done?

Answer: Writing well is extremely difficult, and the only way to master it is through constant practice. American students spend far too little time writing and too much time doing multiple-choice tests. Most don't like writing, partly because they don't do it often enough to feel at home with it. First and foremost it's a communication form. Students need to learn the rules, by rote if necessary, and to understand the importance of presenting error-free work. Only for a tiny minority of outstanding students can writing become an art form. I spend far more time encouraging them to write simple declarative sentences than urging them to be artistic.

Question 9: There is this phrase in America that teachers should be "guides on the side". Your book is "I'm the Teacher—You Are the Student". What messages do both of these statements send?

Answer: "Guide on the side" presupposes extremely highly motivated students. Such people do exist but they are not very common, and even then they need a lot of guidance when they are learning difficult work in an unfamiliar discipline. I am an active teacher, a dominant presence in my own classroom, and feel comfortable with that role, because my experience has shown me that I need to be active and assertive. Leaving students to discover everything for themselves means that many will only ever half-understand the material, or will fail to have important misconceptions corrected early on. The idea of the guide on the side is laudable in intention, but often a mistake in practice.

Question 10: Who is to blame for not giving students enough writing assignments in high school?

Answer: Whoever designs and enforces the curriculum. The makers of standardized tests are certainly partly to blame. From the grader's point of view, multiple choice is a blessing, because the grading can be done by machine. But from an educational point of view it is a curse, as it has taken away what used to be the routine of writing out every answer and learning to express fine shades of meaning.

Question 11: Are standardized tests taking time away from the time students would normally spend on writing, or are teachers reluctant to assign writing because they are poor writers themselves?

Answer: I think there is too much standardized testing in grade, middle, and high school, and that the tests have come to tyrannize students and teachers alike. I don't know enough schoolteachers to be able to generalize about their writing ability, but standards probably are not high. Certainly it's common here at Emory for seniors to graduate still unable to write clear, straightforward, and properly

punctuated prose.

Question 12: How can teachers be to blame for poor student reading and writing ability? They were once students themselves. And some teachers are not good writers themselves.

Answer: You seem to be answering question 11 yourself here! I suppose one problem is that America is ambitious about the idea that everyone should get a good education (hence the names of policies like “No Child Left Behind”). The reality is that, given a choice between doing the necessary hard work or enjoying life in the present, quite a lot of children are content to get left behind. Only later do they come to realize the disastrous consequences of that choice.

Question 13: Can poor or less rigorous teacher education programs also share the burden of poor student performance?

Answer: I expect so. The Education department at nearly every college is notoriously the weakest.

Question 14: How does a student (or a parent) go about finding a college with a strong commitment to writing? What are the important things to look for?

Answer: A few years ago my daughter was an applicant to college, and dozens of them sent her materials trying to tempt her to apply. I don’t think any of them even mentioned a commitment to writing. But it’s certainly true that at most colleges particular teachers have a reputation for being rigorous teachers of good writing. Motivated students need to use the local grapevine and websites like “RateMyProfessor.com” to find out who they are. The good writers at every college are self-selecting, and of course it depends partly on what major they choose. There’s certainly still plenty of good writing instruction out there.

Question 15: If you could make people do it, what would you do to change the problem of grade inflation?

Answer: Specify to faculty members that only a given percentage of the members of any class could be given an A, an A-, a B+, and so on. That would have the effect of making the students work harder as they pursued a scarce resource more energetically. I sometimes think about doing it, but it really needs to be done by an entire college. Otherwise the students who took my courses might end up feeling they had been penalized by comparison with students who got higher grades for less work from other, more lenient or non-curve-grading professors.

Question 16: How would this help students be better readers and writers? Or would it cause chaos in the academy?

Answer: It would not cause chaos, just an immense amount of grumbling. Yes, it might well improve standards overall. The best students would also have more of an opportunity to distinguish themselves

than they do at present, when grade inflation tends to immerse them in the great mass of grade-inflation beneficiaries.

Question 17: How do we get teachers to provide meaningful writing assignments?

Answer: Through strong leadership at the departmental level. Most academic departments have a tradition of professorial autonomy in the classroom, including the Emory history department where I work (no one has ever told me what to teach, how to teach, how to grade, how to make assignments, etc.). Authoritative leadership on matters like this could be given, especially if department chairmanships were held on a permanent rather than rotating basis, but these men and women would have to be strong personalities, willing to endure the resentment and irritation of their colleagues.

Question 18: When students participate in extracurricular activities, many times they do not have time to do much else. How can we expect these students to stay up later to read leisurely?

Answer: The students who read for pleasure are always going to be a minority, especially now that so many other forms of entertainment are available. Short of taking really drastic steps, such as the “no-computer semester”, in which big reading assignments were mandatory (and which the students would probably resent). I don’t think it can be done.

Question 19: Where do you see the biggest mistakes being made when it comes to being good writers?

Answer: The commonest mistake, I think, is made by teachers at the lower levels who want students to be *creative* in their writing, and who pay more attention to creativity than to the rules of clear exposition. Most writing in the world is not, and ought not to be, creative, but writing of every kind, even the most artistic, ought to be comprehensible.

Question 20: Do you think teachers should have to sit through a conference to better their own writing? Or how do we get teaching to teach writing?

Answer: Teachers are already overburdened with administrative tasks, low pay, poor working conditions, and meddlesome bureaucracies. I don’t think compelling them to attend writing conferences would help much. The only people who are ever going to write well are those who *want* to write well. Those who don’t particularly care are simply never going to invest enough time and energy in it.

Question 21: If students coming into college are “bad readers”, isn’t this more reflective of the teacher not taking the time, rather the student just being lazy? Or do you have another opinion on this topic?

Answer: You would need to take this question on a case-by-case basis. Some kids from privileged backgrounds have the opportunity but just never seize it—reading bores them, or they are restless, or they long to play sports and video games instead. On the other hand, kids from poor backgrounds and poor school districts probably never have the opportunity to see what a rich world books can offer them.

Schools could certainly put more reading into the curriculum, but I expect that would lead to criticism that other important matters were being neglected. Whatever the schools do, they are going to be vulnerable to criticism for not doing something else.

Question 22: What have we neglected to ask?

Answer: You have neglected to ask whether it's true that American education is in crisis. I think the answer is that American education is always in crisis, because articulate and influential Americans aim very high and are disappointed by the outcome. They hold the ideal of a well-educated population to be sacred, and they shrink from the idea that most people just don't like education and aren't interested in it. My own view is that the USA does a brilliant job with the students who actively seek education up to the highest levels, but only a very mediocre job with those, the majority, who don't particularly care. More coercive systems like the one in Japan, show that it's possible to get the second-tier students to work harder and learn more, but the psychological cost appears to be high.

Most societies, throughout most of world history, have taken the view that formal education should be confined only to a small elite. We've undertaken the daring project of attempting to educate *everyone* to a high level. We have shown that it is possible to accomplish near-universal literacy, but our experience also suggests that achieving anything more than functional literacy and numeracy for the whole population is a delusory goal.

Question 23: What are you currently working on?

Answer: I'm learning about the history of the British Empire in the Indian Ocean—Singapore, Malaya, Burma, India, Sri Lanka, and the Gulf states.

Note: Michael F. Shaughnessy is currently Professor of Special Education in the Department of Educational Studies. Shyanne Sansom and Bryan Barnes are currently graduate students in Special Education and Speech Language Pathology, respectively.