

1974

## A Continuing Litany: They Aren't Dumb, They're Different

Ken Byerly  
*Western Michigan University*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/perspectives>



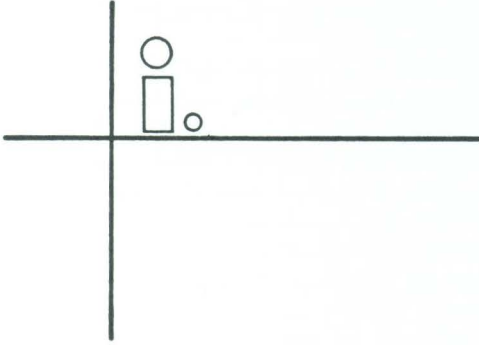
Part of the Higher Education Commons, and the Liberal Studies Commons

### Recommended Citation

Byerly, Ken (1974) "A Continuing Litany: They Aren't Dumb, They're Different," *Perspectives (1969-1979)*: Vol. 6 : No. 2 , Article 2.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/perspectives/vol6/iss2/2>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Western Michigan University at ScholarWorks at WMU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Perspectives (1969-1979) by an authorized editor of ScholarWorks at WMU. For more information, please contact [wmu-scholarworks@wmich.edu](mailto:wmu-scholarworks@wmich.edu).



# A Continuing Litany: They Aren't Dumb, They're Different

By KEN BYERLY  
Western Michigan University

*Beyond the Open Door: New Students in Higher Education.* K. Patricia Cross. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1971. xviii plus 200 pages. LC 77-170212.

*Alternatives to the Traditional: How Professors Teach and How Students Learn.* Ohmer Milton. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1973. xiv plus 156 pages. LC 72-83961.

Both of these books, contributions to "The Jossey-Bass Series in Higher Education," offer readable summaries and interpretations of a wide range of research on who is going to college these days and how and what they are taught. You probably will not learn anything new if you have been teaching at a school trying to take on all students who wish to come, but if you are in that endless hallway and office dialogue on "what are we doing here?" you will find comfort in these books. It is not just in your head. Students *are* different today. "I just can't get away in class with what I did ten years ago" is accurate even if it is often the wail of a faculty person who finds it unacceptable.

I know a person in the social science who "left teaching" and went "into administration" because his students were irreverent about his alleged irrelevance. They walked out early on his lectures after having arrived late. They probably acted like New Students even if they did not come from the bottom third of academic achievers. They preferred TV to reading, working with tools to reading statistical studies, and

they had a more pragmatic, personal and immediate concern than running the gamut of his course of study.

Is this reason to get angry? The aristocrats, those faculty who see the university in terms of wealth and social status, probably don't have to worry about it. Their admissions office takes care of it. Even the elected "ghetto types" lust after their teacher's blessing. It is the "meritocrats" who get angry. Their heavenly dream of "good" students with scholastic ability and willingness to study hard is being undercut. Now is this because the students are lazy and/or stupid? Or are they just different? The egalitarian era of higher education which is upon us probably means we are seeing students we have never seen before. They aren't dumb. They are different. So argues Cross.

The New Students, by definition, have had a lifetime of training in academic-failure experiences on meritocratic grounds. Their interests and motivation are different from the top and middle thirds of their public school peer group. Cross uses four major research projects attempted between 1960 and 1969 to draw out the picture. And the consequence is a continuation of an old, perpetual and haunting litany of the campus.

FROM THE PRESENT SYSTEM, DELIVER US  
NOT DESTRUCTION, BUT CREATIVE CHANGE,  
HELP US  
SINCE WHOM WE SHALL TEACH IS DECIDED  
WHAT AND HOW SHALL WE TEACH THEM?  
FROM THE DEGREES OF IRRELEVANT  
MERITOCRATS, DELIVER US  
TO NEW WAYS OF CERTIFICATION, MOVE US  
HELP US TO HELP THEM CHANGE THEIR  
ATTITUDES  
HELP US BUILD IN SOME SUCCESS EXPERIENCES

Milton picks up the chant. The meritocratic (traditional) methods do not work well, if we reflect on what he means by learning. Surely many students will be *for* our authority and *for* us to tell them the way it is. But what do you do with a very common experience of realizing most students learn by themselves, on their own, just as well as those students sitting in your classroom going through your prescribed paces? I believe this even though I don't always find it comfortable. The implication is that we should give up our surveillance and broadcaster roles as faculty and take on one of a manager or senior colleague or something like that with our students.

However it is said, better classroom teaching, important as it is, is not the issue. What and how people learn is. And this is where Milton helps least. His contribution to the litany is uncertain certainty. He is right.

LEARNING IS INDIVIDUAL

LEARNING IS INTERNAL

LEARNING IS PERSONAL

HELP US TO REALIZE WE CAN'T LEARN  
FOR EACH OTHER

But he is so general and his survey of what is happening in learning research, testing and grading procedures, alternative education, and interdisciplinary efforts is so general that it does not help much. He does elaborate the dilemma.

I work in a university where a great number of faculty, administrators and students were offered the chance to innovate a major part of the student learning experience on interdisciplinary terms. Alternatives to the traditional were innumerable and open to us. What did we do? We talked about classrooms and courses! Maybe we are not different. We are just dumb.

And yet I know more than a dozen people, at least, who are beyond the open door and into the alternatives—right here where I work. They act out the litany more than they recite it. The accurate summaries and reflections of these books wouldn't move them to do what they do. That sort of movement is more of a personal risk, a decision to sojourn as a stranger in a land of aristocrats and meritocrats. That is the best way the idea and shape of the university can be tested while the larger and more expensive research efforts into higher education are attempted and completed or dropped—if they are attempted at all.

