Checkers and Chess: What's in a Game?
The Transition from High School to College

Checkers and Chess is an analogy for the "game" I have observed being played by first year students and their professors. My thesis is straightforward: students come from high school prepared to play a good game of checkers and their professors expect them to be playing a decent game of chess.

The reason for the misconception is in some ways obvious; both games are played on the same board. However, the pieces, the moves, and the rules are different. A professor makes a move and the students look on in disbelief. The students make a countermove and the look of disbelief is returned. The classic example of this mismatch of views comes with the first round of exams freshman year. The students exit their tests confident that they knew everything. They had studied with the methods that had proved successful in high school--they even surprised themselves by studying two days before the test instead of the usual night before. However, the look on their faces is shock when they get back their tests with failing grades because they missed the point (actually, they missed a lot of points). The professors are, in turn, swamped with complaints and often the first test is dropped if the students show improvement. Neither player fully understands that the other is not playing the same game, yet it is essential for the students to learn explicitly the distinctions between the two games.

The main distinctions between high school and college fall into four categories:

(a) The student body is different.
(b) The requirements are different.
(c) The classes are organized differently.
(d) The teachers are different.

First, the student body is different. Most college-bound students are coming from the top ranks of their high school classes. That means that in college, everybody is from the top of their high school class. Students can no longer evaluate themselves by comparison to poorer students; they must evaluate themselves by comparison to good students.

Second, the requirements are different. The requirements are harder: there are longer reading assignments; students have to go to lecture and read the text to understand the material; problems don't always have clear cut solutions; students have to write about ideas rather than feelings; tests demand detailed recall instead of recognition and may not have explicit objectives; there are fewer tests so larger segments of material must be remembered for longer periods of time.

In a survey of incoming freshman, we asked students about their confidence in being able to accomplish a variety of academic tasks. Students reported having confidence that they could produce good answers to assignments such as "For History 207, you have just read a chapter describing the events leading up to the Civil War. Make a diagram of the events which depict cause and effect relationships." They seem to feel that since they were admitted to college, they are capable of doing college work--and that they will be told explicitly how to go about performing new tasks.

But this is not the case, especially in a competitive school where students are expected to do more of the work on their own and are expected to do it faster. Students themselves do not always possess adequate study skills or self-motivation; the survey reveals that many students reply "Often" to "I fall asleep when I'm reading or studying" and "Always" to "I am forced to study very much before a test or before an assignment is due." Often a student's initial reaction to academic frustration is a sense of inadequacy -- "Maybe they made a mistake when they admitted me." Or the new demands may seem arbitrary, unreasonable, or mean-spirited because the purpose is not clear. The students have to
learn new standards and expectations. They have to learn what is necessary for them personally to succeed in their chosen field.

Third, the class organization is different. The classes range in size from 40 to 400. There is less direct contact with the instructor to get information informally and fewer opportunities to show the teacher that you know something. The classes meet less frequently so the segments of material are larger. More of the work is done independently, and students are expected to make connections between class examples and out-of-class homework problems or readings. There are fewer reminders about tests and due dates for assignments, so students have to organize their own reminder system and orchestrate their own time.

Fourth, the teachers are different. Teachers in college have different responsibilities than high school teachers; students and teaching are not their only focus. Professors are therefore not as easily accessible; they have office hours and appointments.

The behavior of college teachers also differs from what students have come to expect. Professors are using a framework from their discipline to organize the information they present, and this is often not clear to the students. For example, in psychology, the professor is not Dr. Phil using a fifty minute session to talk about popular psychology and personal problems; he or she is using a formal scientific paradigm for the study of human behavior. Students may find classroom presentations boring or find the material incomprehensible because they cannot tune in or relate to the paradigm in use.

Students will need to retool their strategies (and learn some new ones) to meet new college requirements. For example, they will have to learn how to really read. They will no longer be able to get information just from lectures, from talking to other students, or from skimming books and guessing. They will need to learn systematic decoding strategies.

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