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Note to instructors: Don't tone it down

As the Epstein controversy began to unfold many issues came to light, but my biggest concern was that instructors would tone down their teaching to avoid unnecessary problems.

Make a statement, be heard...

you for your hard work and dedication in giving us what we want—a more diverse education.

I am inspired by Jeff Knorr; for his energy in Drama, "To be or not to be." I am amazed by Loren Ford's ability to pull us out of our behavioral slump. I admire Kelly Brennan for his ability to



Salena De La Cruz
Opinion Editor

This is a note to instructors, *Don't Do It!* I know things may seem a little strained and stressed on campus, but really there are thousands of us here who enjoy your techniques, your skills, and even your offensiveness. I have been at this school for a little over a year and I have never been more challenged.

Though I commend Joshua Alexander for his ability to step forward because he felt offended by the material in class, I want people to know his opinion and concerns are not those of everybody on campus. He felt the material was offensive and he had every right as a student to come forward with those concerns because as a student he has a right to feel comfortable in class.

However, there is also the right of the instructors; the right to teach, the right to be opinionated, and the right to make learning fun. Instructors, I applaud

grab attention in class. Linda Vogt, I hold you in high regard for putting up with the *Print* staff during our most conflicting discussions. But most of all I have the utmost respect for Dr. Donald Epstein for keeping me enthralled during History of Western Civilization class. He may be retiring, but he will never be *FORGOTTEN*.

So, what I'm trying to tell instructors is that I appreciate everything you've done in teaching me that there is a more varied way to learn; that Cleopatra was a bitch; that 'I have no feelings' is bullshit; that my delivery of speech is as important as the speech.

I am leaving you with a note, *Don't tone it down!* By doing that you will be toning down our ability to learn. Challenge the campus, enthrall us, and immerse us in learning—that's what you are great at. I commend you, I thank you, and I appreciate you.

The death of meaning: the power of the word

The "Epstein Controversy" has been, for lack of a better word, resolved, and a look at the issues this dispute encompassed is in order. I believe one key element in all this clamor is consis-

they not?

A closer look reveals a different condition. Dr. Epstein is a master of words, and whether his expressed views are "acceptable" or not,



Joel P. Shempert
Contributing Writer

Altar of an Unknown God

tently overlooked: the importance of the meaning of words.

Words are central to this debate. As St. James states, "If anyone does not stumble in word, he is a perfect man."

I have witnessed, during my five years and counting at Clackamas, a frequent glossing over of word meaning in what I can only regard as an avoidance of thought. Many readers do not think, do not analyze, do not ponder—rather, they react. And this pattern holds predictably true in the conflict between Joshua Alexander and Donald Epstein.

Now, on the face of it, it may seem Dr. Epstein is the one who should take care with words; after all, his ill-advised and impolitic words led to his downfall, did

they are at least clear. Epstein has not been forced to retract, change, or excuse his

statements. Even his vaunted "letter of apology" to Mr. Alexander simply states that his comments were misunderstood.

French theologian Jacques Ellul charges in his book *The Humiliation of the Word* that "if a person is not behind his word, it is mere noise. In the Bible the word is an integral part of a person. It is true if the person is true." By separation—the word from the person, meaning from the word—we have, argues Ellul, lost the ability to proclaim and recognize truth.

Some examples from the recent debate may be edifying. Clackamas instructor Kate Gray affirmed in an *Oregonian* article, "I think there is a whole level of awareness that's been raised, and I think that communication

Letter to the Editor... Class is an arranged marriage

A class is an arranged marriage. Someone with a degree (more or less) and thirty someones without (more or less) are stuck in a relationship for at least a quarter. If teacher and student are lucky, their styles will fit, and the marriage is compatible. If they're not, you hear something like the following:

Student (among his peers): That Ms. Whozit is an arrogant jerk.

Teacher (among her peers): I've got this one student who refuses to respond.

In other words, each judges the other harshly because the styles of each are not compatible. The student feels he loses because his goals won't allow him to get a divorce; the teacher feels she loses because she knows how just a few unresponsive students can muck up an entire class. And they're both right; they do both lose.

Don Epstein's style clearly offends a great many. Just as clearly, many students admire him. People like Angie Daschel and Jeremy VanKeuran were, it seems, the lucky ones—compatible. People like Joshua Alexander weren't. But in her defense of Epstein, Daschel fails to realize that a teaching style that's compatible with her learning style, that makes *her* think, is precisely what keeps many others *from* being able to think.

Do teachers have to be controversial and outspoken in order to do their jobs—to make students think? Of course not; there are other methods. Epstein has created for himself a teaching style that works—for some. It also turns off

plenty. That's the gamble he takes.

I prefer this course of action: maintain "fervor and enthusiasm," as Daschel put it, without alienating *any* of the people I want to reach with my fervor and enthusiasm. That's hard work. Occasionally I'm tempted to say something like, "If you don't see the importance of William Blake's condemnation of Lockean epistemology, you've got the brains of a toad!" But I don't say that. I censor myself, I deny myself my own freedom of speech because my goal is not merely to express my fervor and enthusiasm, but also to communicate. Merely spouting my opinions does not enhance communication, especially when I have a certain amount of institutionalized power (i.e., I give out the grades). If a student proposes an unjustifiable interpretation of Blake, I could flip her off, but I'd be far more effective if I pointed to the passages in Blake's works which contradict the student's view.

Epstein's defenders are focusing on freedom of speech and his enthusiasm for his subject. Those are important points, but there are other issues. Enthusiasm for one's subject and enthusiasm for teaching—for reaching people, for being as effective as one possibly can—are two different things. And wise people know when spouting off is appropriate and when self-censorship is appropriate, as measured by the goal they're after—or by the goal other people are paying them to achieve.

James Bryant-Trerise
English Instructor

lines are open now." A bitter irony, since Epstein's retirement represents the *closing* of a communication line. The speaker and the word are sundered, creating a dichotomy between statement and action.

Salena De La Cruz, opinion editor, has cast this issue in her column as a conflict of "academic freedom vs. prejudiced opinion." However, as I have often pointed out, these are not diametric opposites in any sense. In fact, academic freedom *encompasses* the right to give a prejudiced opinion. The question is rather like asking, "is it black or is it wet?" The word is now severed from meaning.

How unfortunate, then, that these careless words have come to represent this controversy! How tragic that through the sawing of empty verbiage and repeated phrases, we have broken the spirit of a brilliant and passionate man! And how woeful that through the fostering of tolerance we have closed the door

for a dissenting voice!

An understanding of Dr. Epstein's initial statement may be facilitated through analogy. If an instructor were to tell me, "You're better off dead than to be a Christian," I would be amiss to react in outrage. The statement could mean, "Christians are better off dead," which the Apostle Paul himself would affirm: "absent from the body, present with the Lord." Or in a historical context, i.e. that in certain historical peri-

ods Christians were subject to torture and death, could be implied. Even if it meant "Christianity is a fate worse than death," my response would be to challenge such an assertion—not to silence the speaker. I would rather open a debate than close it.

The kernel of this position is a moral one: words matter—so use them carefully, use them wisely, and, when there is no other just course, don't use them at all. The word is a primal force in human existence, and by its use, men rise and men fall. Thus, James warns, "see how a great a forest a little fire kindles!" Words *can* hurt—so let us not wield our weapons so rashly. *I show you a more excellent way.*

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rashly.*

Joel P.
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