

Guiding the Outliers



Send him mail.



“Insight for the Young and Unrestrained” is an original weekly column appearing every Thursday at Everything-Voluntary.com, by Gregory V. Diehl. Gregory is a writer, musician, educator, and coach for young people at EnabledYouth.com. Archived columns can be found here. IYU-only RSS feed available here.

Spiderman’s superhero mantra that *“with great power comes great responsibility”* sounds trite and irrelevant to mild-mannered human beings like you and me, but it isn’t. Every society on earth functions under some form of hierarchical structure, and the closer to the top you are the more power you have over your fellow man. Whether the people in the positions of highest authority achieved their status through delusions of noble birth and supernatural intervention, violent conquest, or legitimate leadership ability is irrelevant. For most people, the temptation of suddenly ruling over the lives of others is too much. How can you know your true character until you’ve been placed in such a position?

Of course, hierarchies of authority don’t just exist as deities, political figures, police officers, and religious figureheads. We all defer to someone for many of the choices affecting our lives. Most of the time, the authority we give up is voluntary, like when choosing to work as part of a company and taking orders from someone higher up. Every time we hire a specialist to solve a problem we cannot do on our own, we defer to their authority on the subject and trust their judgment. Although, sometimes authority is taken from us without consent by bullies, criminals, and anyone who makes choices for us without asking permission.

Children, by nature of their initial physical and intellectual feebleness, are always under the authority of others in society. Anyone who produces an offspring or enters a line of work involving children will find themselves holding great power. Sadly, many are not ready to wield this power. They become short-tempered and begin to act childish themselves when they can’t effectively control a group. Teachers are among the greatest offenders, as we’ve all seen adults, who should not even be given domain over a single child, attempting to chaotically enforce law and order over groups of many.

Attempting to teach in groups can be difficult. It requires a totally different approach and dynamic than individual instruction. Large groups, like more than 30 students at a time, are

a totally different experience than the personalized interaction that happens when working with only one or a few learners. Due to time constraints and the respective mental differences among all the students participating, one has to streamline whatever is being explained into an extremely generic presentation that will, hopefully, reach some of the people paying attention.

However, anytime I instruct a larger group of individuals, I find that there are always a few who stick out from the group for one reason or another. They think differently, or react with a different level of enthusiasm toward the material being presented. They might come into the class with an innately superior grasp of the material, or they just pick up what I am trying to say much faster. If I were a simple-minded and traditional teacher, these outliers would serve as a diversion for the rest of the class. They'd be problematic because I would have to devote time I didn't have toward implementing a different approach specifically for them - an approach that would be lost on the remaining majority of the class. Traditional teachers ignore the specialness of these statistical anomalies, and treat them like one of the crowd. This is a massive disservice to these unique students, and, in the long run, it debilitates what they might contribute to civilization.

I've learned to take a more progressive approach to this intellectual imbalance. I don't cast out the outliers, nor encourage them to become more like the group for simplicity's sake. I make leaders out of them. I capitalize on their superiority by showcasing them to the rest of the class as shining examples of what they should strive toward. I develop the day's lesson around these very students, based on what I think they can handle and in turn convey to the rest of the class. Instead of keeping them on the outside, I make them the center of attention in the hopes that everyone else will begin to see them as the new standard and start to change themselves and their conceptions of "normal." I'm seldom disappointed in the effectiveness of this method of determining the focus of education.

These outliers and anomalies are everywhere in society. As culture has progressed, these uncommon men and women have become more accepted and celebrated for the new standards they introduce into the old mold of the world. Those born as anomalies are still frequently encouraged to abandon their unusual traits and become more like the statistical average. Commoners fear what they do not understand or cannot themselves accomplish, and so uncommoners are made to conform. To reverse this trend, the figureheads given authority over the developing children of the world will have to instill a superior level of confidence in the outliers from the onset of their traits. This is the responsibility that authority brings: the power to shape the structure of the human world.

In the long run, I hope the mainstream mentalities of the world can work to become more like the outsiders and weirdos who look at things a little differently. I know this can only happen when we've changed the fundamental structure of education to celebrate the individual instead of asking him to conform to general standards. But for now, people in

positions of authority can make the choice to devote the necessary time and effort toward the outliers that will help them capitalize on their uniqueness, and resist the social pull toward averageness.