Differences of Opinion

To a whole generation of students, there is no such thing as a wrong answer.

By Marlene Zuk

"Is this one right?" The student points to a line on a test paper and peers anxiously at me.

The exam is two days away, and I have given the class a version from a previous year so that the students can see what kinds of questions to expect.

"No," I say gently, "that's not right," and proceed to explain what is wrong with the answer she wrote.

Questions 2, 3, 4 and 5 suffer the same fate, but No. 6 is, in fact, correct, and I tell her so.

She beams. "Oh, great, I feel better. I'm really getting it!"

That the course — animal behavior — is one in which quantitative reasoning is important only makes her unfounded optimism more alarming.

Her reaction is not unusual. In the face of all evidence to the contrary, my students exhibit an unswerving confidence in their own abilities.

They earnestly assure me that despite test scores in the single digits and an inability to answer questions posed by their teaching assistant, they *really* know the material.

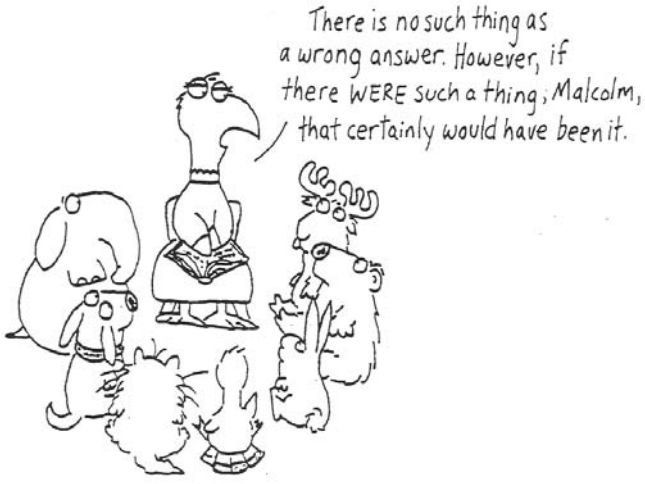
"It just doesn't show in my grades."

The implied fault, no doubt, is mine, for giving such unfair and inappropriate exams, but it is never clear just why they do think they understand the material.

They readily confess to me that they have not consulted the text and do not remember my lecture. They have nothing to say about the concepts we've covered.

Yet somehow, a kernel of faith stays resolutely sheltered in each undergraduate bosom — they believe honestly and with conviction that they get it, and therefore deserve a high grade.

Don't get me wrong. I hardly expect all students to understand the material immediately, or even ever, and I also realize that my teaching could be confusing or badly organized. Wrong answers are part of the game.



Turkeys in Teaching

What I find troubling is the lack of concern about their ignorance or poor performance, the epidemic of what a colleague of mine calls unwarranted self-regard.

On that same practice test, another student came to me with a problem she had tried to solve: it required comparing two lines on a graph, each of which represented the number of eggs laid by a different group of individuals (female blackbirds nesting in male territories either with or without additional females).

The question asked where a point on one of the lines satisfied a particular condition, and only one answer was correct.

The student for some reason had redrawn the lines, as if rewriting the birds' reproductive history, with the two lines suddenly veering off into a fantasy of communal egg-laying. It was as if she had taken a graph of the exports of China and France and merged them into a new country with a single product.

Once again, I explained how to answer the question, and once again the student was pleased. The error was just a trivial difference of opinion. "Yeah, I get it," she said. " I was just thinking of it differently." You say tom*ay*to, I say tom*ah*to.

No, I wanted to say, you weren't thinking of it differently, you had it completely wrong; you didn't understand it at all.

But like her many compatriots, she was unlikely to acknowledge that, or admit to a mistake. Students have always deluded themselves, of course, and hope has always sprung eternal, or at least until final grades appear.

And at least some in my classes really do eventually master the material. But confident placidity in the face of error seems to be on the rise.

Maybe it's all that self-esteem this generation of students was inculcated with as youngsters, or maybe it's the emphasis on respecting everyone else's opinion, to the point where no answer, even a mathematical one, can be truly wrong because that might offend the one who gave it.

These explanations all seem too facile as I gaze into their smiling faces and feel like an academic Cassandra, predicting doom and disaster where they see only cheer.

As graduation nears, I wonder whether they will become surgeons happily removing the wrong organs or just sales clerks unconcernedly giving incorrect change.

Be worried, I want to tell them. Then I realize they don't know the meaning of the word.

(Adapted with permission from the* Los Angeles Times, *May 24, 2005. Dr. Zuk is a biology professor at the University of California, Riverside.)