

Bad timing for professor receipt flap

2013,01,20 2012 by Daniel J. Bauer

As I tap out this first sentence, my head is aching, my eyes are sore, and my back hurts. I describe a condition common these days to thousands of educators all over the country. We in the teaching profession are in the waning hours of the semester, and everybody wants something from us, and they all want it at the same time, and, actually, it was all promised and due a week or more ago.

I am however reviewing our recent upsetting newspaper headlines about the 12 (and, in time, quite possibly more) local professors. You know who I mean, these colleagues of mine who are boiling away like red-faced lobsters in a cauldron of controversy because of apparent dishonest receipts they've submitted for the use of academic research funds.

Professor Joe Hung published a thoughtful column on that topic on this page last week, colorfully entitled "Another 'Accountgate' in the making" (CP 1-14-13, p 4). He connected the dots which in recent years have linked a spate of politicians to charges of account abuse of one sort or the other. That list of course includes currently imprisoned (and ill) former President Chen Shui-bian, as well as current President Ma Ying-jeou (later found innocent of wrong-doing.) My friend the good professor says that some 300 professors and assistants are currently "under criminal investigation" for these receipt problems. He also reminds us that "over a thousand [Taiwan] government officials who were senior enough to be entitled to [certain types of] expense accounts" have been drawn into similar charges since 2007.

Younger readers may need help with "Accountgate." This is a toying with the term "Watergate," which refers to a Washington, D.C. high rise at which a bungled burglary unearthed the scandal that brought down former U.S. President Richard Nixon half a lifetime ago.

The physical discomfort to which I alluded at the top of these words may be symbolic. With professors under suspicion and questions of academic integrity and reputation tossed free to the wind, like many teachers, I am hurting right now. I suppose that to some extent I am in sympathy with an ailing

institution with which I identify. After all, the story of education in today's Taiwan is assuredly a complicated and occasionally painful story. I do wish sometimes it were a softer and prettier story.

I marvel how a circle of events sometimes may whirl around in thin air and all of a sudden coalesce. Is the whirling too fast for comfort, or is it the time of the semester and we're all just a bit tuckered out?

Is that the cause of my headache, my sore eyes and the rest?

There are these professors in trouble here at home, this troubling local history of ambiguity and ethically sensitive wonderment about documents in the hands of trusted officials, about false signings and shaky claims to public money.

Elsewhere, there is the sickening Lance Armstrong — Oprah Winfrey show that just happened, practically an international event, for pity's sake. And far beyond the show business and big bucks and mutual massaging of images and careers this pair has just pulled off, there is this question of honesty, yes, honesty and integrity.

Last night I had to call two of my students aside and talk with them about plagiarism they had committed in recent weeks in four page papers they submitted for a literature course.

The one student emailed within hours of our conversation, contrite, sorrowful, begging forgiveness, saying she sees right from wrong now. The other has remained silent. For reasons unknown to me, she prefers not to pass judgment on herself.

Sooner or later, however, we all must pass judgment on ourselves. Whether we win elections and lead the populace or whether we do research and teach. Our young friends need models to look up to. Honesty and integrity are only abstract words without living proof that these values exist and are worth defending.

I still treasure after many years a question at the end of an A-mei song: "Is anybody listening?"

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