

## Leaving the Land of Digital Natives

Camilo Jiménez · Will H. Corral

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**Editor's Note:** *Camilo Jiménez taught writing and literature at the prestigious Universidad Javeriana in Columbia for nine years until his resignation in December 2011, for reasons explained in this article. Written for the Universidad Javeriana communications department and for Jiménez's blog—el ojo en la paja (the eye in the straw), <http://elojoenlapaja.blogspot.com/>—the piece elicited considerable response. On December 8, 2011, it was reprinted under the title “Camilo Jiménez, Journalist and Professor of Social Communication, Resigns His Position” in *El Tiempo*, Colombia's most widely-read newspaper, where it received many, many more responses.*

*The piece has been translated from the Spanish by Will H. Corral and Daphne Patai, professor of Brazilian literature and literary theory at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst. Prof. Corral also provides an introduction.*

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**Camilo Jiménez** is an independent editor and writer living in Bogota, Colombia; [camilojimenez@gmail.com](mailto:camilojimenez@gmail.com). He is an editor at the Universidad de Antioquia publishing house and at the Editorial Center of the Universidad del Rosario, and is former editor of *El Malpensante* and editor-in-chief of *Soho*. His articles have appeared in these and other publications.

**Will H. Corral** is the author of twelve books, the most recent of which are *Cartografía occidental de la novela* (Centro Cultural Benjamín Carrión, 2010) and *Bolaño traducido: nueva literatura mundial* (Ediciones Escalera, 2011). He received his Ph.D. from Columbia and has taught at Stanford and the University of Massachusetts, Amherst; [whc40@caa.columbia.edu](mailto:whc40@caa.columbia.edu).

## Rate My Students 2.0

**Will H. Corral**

There is no paucity of complaints these days by professors about their students, and vice versa. From the former's perspective, the problems include grade inflation, the death of literature and related subjects, "wiki knowledge," the prevalence of plagiarism, diminished levels of expectations and standards (even at the most selective institutions), poor pre-college training, and seemingly endless remedial courses at the college level. That's just for starters—and in the American system of higher education, which is the best in the world. In Latin America, where some universities were founded before most of the Ivies, university-level instruction has been more readily available because it is far less expensive than in the United States, although fewer secondary school graduates pursue higher education in those countries than in America.

If U.S. professors complain, they usually do so under their breath, among friends, and through their unions, but not to university administrators and hardly ever to the students themselves, lest the latter's sense of self-worth be offended, or their parents weigh in about why they're paying so much for mediocre instruction. This familiar condition makes Camilo Jiménez's resignation from teaching all the more interesting, and probably puzzling, to safely ensconced American academics who may be simply going through the motions until retirement. It is also revealing, since Jiménez was teaching at a prestigious university in Colombia, one of the Latin American countries that, according to most surveys, spends substantially on education.

As can be surmised from Jiménez's very public explanation for quitting, that cradle of privilege is actually mimicking the type of education that is increasingly common in the United States. The difference is that, far from complaining privately, Jiménez openly exposes the gravity of the situation, blames the system in which he worked, and prefers to get out with his dignity and rather reasonable expectations intact. And no doubt many of his colleagues whispered to him, "Thanks for saying what we all feel," before quickly retreating to the safety of their cowardice or cynicism.

In the United States we have been reading about student strikes in Chile (purportedly against the neo-liberal bent of the university) and recently in Spain, due to the cuts imposed by the conservative party in power. It would

seem that professors in those countries continue paying lip service to the evils of “the system” without taking it on as they could and should. But complaining about students publicly, or having the courage to quit? Never — or at least “not during the crisis.”

Actually, Jiménez is not alone among those who want to live at peace with their consciences. Almost fifteen years ago Rosario Martín Ruano published *A propósito de lo políticamente correcto* (Regarding political correctness), revealing the deleterious effects political correctness was already having on the study of the humanities and on students in the Spanish university system. Last year the Catalan scholar Jordi Llovet published *Adiós a la universidad: El eclipse de las Humanidades* (no translation needed), explaining the reasons for his early retirement from the University of Barcelona.

Much before Martha Nussbaum’s economic arguments about the worth of humanistic training and on the heels of Allan Bloom’s *The Closing of the American Mind*, the Spanish classicist and historian Carlos García Gual published *Sobre el descrédito de la literatura y otros avisos humanistas* (On literature’s disrepute and other humanistic warnings) in 1999, and thereafter many other essays on the damages inflicted by parroting the American way of teaching.

Even if America’s unfortunate emphasis on monolingual education were the reason for lack of knowledge of these works, experience suggests that bilingual education may not be the answer. Latin American universities do emphasize learning English, but, as Jimenez indicates, the results of that emphasis may be similar to the all-too familiar outcome of American training in bilingualism: there is still no evidence across the states that students who enroll in pre-college bilingual programs end up competent in more than one language when they come to college, and many in fact seem to have limited competence in any language.

The president of a state university I know of once naively suggested that the faculty senate avoid using frequently defamatory and libelous sites such as “Rate My Professors” as a basis for improving teaching. One of the few colleagues widely recognized as unaccomplished even by the meager standards of that school said that she had received glowing evaluations on such sites. The president congratulated her, at which point the faculty member retorted: “I wrote them myself!” For many years faculty in Hispanic universities have lectured, in the worst sense of the word, with hardly a peep from students. Jiménez’s published description of his attitude and devotion to his student-slackers

suggests that his teaching style may be more akin to what occurs in the American system. But as he shows, it's not working, and the lessons he has learned may be merely the start of other complaints about the American way of teaching as it takes hold in a globalized world.

The final irony, of course, is that in order to allow his students to understand his decision, Jiménez became Professor Twitter for a while, initially “blogging” his resolution. Otherwise, as his commentary makes clear, his “digital natives” (a term popularized in our country by Marc Prensky) would no doubt have skipped reading it in print!

## Resigned

### Camilo Jiménez

One paragraph without mistakes. It wasn't a matter of solving a riddle, composing a piece that could pass as literary, or of finding reasons with which to defend a slippery argument. No. It was a matter of condensing a longer text, that is, of writing a one-paragraph summary in which each phrase states something significant about the original text, in which the most basic rules of writing—spelling, syntax—would be observed. It was about following minimal norms: clarity, economy of expression, relevance. If the paragraph had rhythm and originality, better yet, but that wasn't a requirement. It was just composing a single paragraph-long summary without visible errors. And they weren't able to do it.

I'm not going to generalize. Three out of thirty got close; two more gave it their best. In four months, twenty-five students in their twenties could not summarize a work in one paragraph with proper accents, submit it on time, and use a limited number of words that varied from one exercise to another. They were Social Communication majors, sophomores through seniors, who had studied for twelve years in private schools. It's likely that between five and ten of them had been on exchanges abroad, that still others were acquainted with cultures different from their own through some family vacation. They are the children of executives in their forties and fifties, with good jobs and a college education. Many have graduate degrees. At home there was always a computer, and I bet that at least twenty of them have wideband, and that the TV at home is tuned to cable channels more often than to regular channels. They

preferred Australian Milo rather than Colombian drinks, ate more steak and salad than rice with eggs. You see what I mean.

Of course I have considered my doubts, my weaknesses. I'm not in tune with the present times. My classes don't use Power Point presentations or films; at most we watch one or two per semester. Perhaps it is no longer important to learn what a newspaper article is by reading newspaper articles, and instead I should project a presentation with capital letters telling them what a newspaper article is and how many parts it contains. Show them *In Cold Blood*, the movie, instead of having them read the book. Perhaps I should not have insisted so much on brevity, on directness and deadlines. I should not have asked them to write one hundred words but rather at least three pages, to be handed in on Monday, or Wednesday, and then we would move on.

Perhaps these limitations and hesitations explain my students' few and lukewarm questions this last semester, their silences, their absolute lack of curiosity and critical thinking, their sloppy paragraphs, full of errors and vagueness, uselessly awkward, with dangling and ruffled phrases. The hesitating and grey paragraphs that they submitted to me all semester long came from those weaknesses. It must sound as if I'm describing a group of zombies. Perhaps that is what they are. The paragraphs, I mean.

The course is called "Assessment of Non-Fiction Texts" and it is part of the program in Editorial and Multimedia Production in the Social Communication department of Colombia's Universidad Javeriana. In terms of readings, I always selected exemplary pieces in the best-known nonfiction genres: articles, profiles, essays, memoirs and testimonials. Starting with national and foreign classics, students composed pieces like those editors must write in their professional practice. First, a summary: all texts by editors are brief, or should be—back covers, catalog copy, book flaps, etc. Once most of the students were able to produce a pertinent and brief summary, we would go on to more complex writings: press notes and longer back covers, and we finished with an editorial report or book review.

At the core of the program was the writing of brief texts based on longer texts, as well as participation. I always insisted on class participation to encourage activities that seem to me to be getting rusty today: paying attention, elaborating reasons and arguments, listening to what each one says in a conversation.

With the other core concept, economy of language, I sought to show them the importance of treating prose with respect. If one has to synthesize a two-hundred page book into one hundred words, one must consider every word, every sentence, every turn of phrase. Ultimately, the written word will be these students' bread and butter when they become professionals, whether they work as editors of books, magazines, or web pages, or as journalists, teachers, or researchers.

Last semester's students, and the ones from the two or three previous semesters, never got beyond the summary. It wasn't always like this. Ever since I started college teaching, in 2002, students have had problems writing a well-done synthesis, and we would spend much time working on this. Still, we managed to progress. But starting three or four semesters ago, I have felt that there is more apathy and less curiosity. There are fewer personal projects among the students, less autonomy and skepticism, less irony and a critical spirit.

It may be that I didn't notice when my students' attention went from the meaningful to the trivial. It must be the state of Facebook, comments about "those extra pounds," the message on the Blackberry.

I have never been a fool, or bitter, or prudish: at the age of twenty I smoked marijuana like a Rastafarian and got drunk out of my mind with my buddies every chance I got. I ogled breasts and did things of which I'm not proud today. I spent a good deal, a great deal of time on that. But I also read.

I'm not sure, but in those days, I believe, it was important to argue, to speculate, to be left itching to seek out some useless piece of information later. That's what mattered: to search for something. I'm on the point of thinking that curiosity vanished from those twenty-something students of mine from the moment that Dr. Google began to answer everything immediately, right away.

It's naïve to blame television, the internet, Nintendo, smart phones. Or the schools that push bilingualism without transmitting a basic knowledge of the mother tongue. Nor can one blame the parents who wanted their children to be safely entertained at home. It's naïve to blame the "system." But something is happening in basic education, something is happening in the homes of those who are now about twenty or younger.

My nephew tells his mother, my sister, that he does read a lot—on the Internet. What one should ask is how one reads on the Internet. What I have noticed is that their reading is now done in the midst of the hum of windows open to chat rooms, while uploading a video from YouTube, following links.

These digital natives have lost the ability to concentrate, to be introspective, quiet. The ability to be alone. Questions and ideas are born in solitude, in silence. The digital natives don't know solitude or introspection. They have 302 followers on Twitter, 643 friends on Facebook.

I am leaving my teaching position because I can't communicate with the digital natives. I don't understand their new interests; I haven't found a way to show them what I consider essential in this beautiful craft of editing. Perhaps reading is now drifting out to the Internet sea to fish for fragments, quotes, and links. As a result, writing is changing into those loose and grey phrases, lifeless, always filled with errors. That's why the new paragraphs that are being written seem like zombies.

We shall see what happens within the next few years, when the twenty-somethings of today are thirty and may be working in publishing houses, portals, and magazines. For now, for me, the time to retire has come. While I continue with my other activities, I'm going to think further about this matter and consider it carefully.

I end this letter of resignation with a knot in my throat.

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