

# **Cliques and Society: New Experiences outside our Comfort Zones**

*By Tom Hetrick*

I am in a clique. I love school. I wake up early every morning and look forward to going to school. My classes are boring. But I work in the LLRC. We all work in the LLRC. It's quite comforting, actually. Because I work with my friends, and my friends are the people I work with, the world doesn't seem so scary. I see them at the lab. I see them when I'm walking to and from my classes. A lot of them are in my classes. It makes the world seem smaller. It gives YSU a friendly face. I know that when I walk into school, I will see them. I fear nothing. My friends have my back. I can remember how things were before. I shudder. It's much better now. I work in the LLRC. They know my name.

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Last January, I walked into my first class at YSU. It was an 8:00am Economics class in DeBartolo Hall. I was almost late. I couldn't find the classroom. When I finally found it and walked inside, I saw 40 unfriendly faces looking up at me. Every single one of them was staring at me. They were looking at my clothes. Why did I wear that hoodie? They were looking at my backpack. Why did I bring that old thing? I should have gotten a new one. But where? Where do the cool kids get their backpacks? I have no idea, but I have to find out. Right after school. I'll have to ask someone where I can get a cool backpack. Oh, no! I don't see a seat. There's so many people in this class. There's a seat. Oh, that one's taken. I just walked all the way over here when there was no seat. They must think I'm so dumb. I just want to walk out of the room and never

come back. Maybe I can drop the class and take it next semester. Anyways, I'm sure I won't like it. I hate college.

This past January, I walked into my first class of the semester. It was a 9:00am Spanish translation class in DeBartolo Hall. I saw Mateo. What's up Mateo? ¿Cómo estás? Hey Karen! How was your break? That's cool! Mine? It was awesome! I went to Queens and spent 2 weeks with an Ecuadorian family. I had a great time! And my Spanish got so much better. Jackie, weren't you supposed to go to Costa Rica? How did you like it? Great! I'll have to see your pictures. Is this everybody? Wow, only 5 people! This is going to be a cool class. Dr. Becerra is a great professor. I love college.

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Anyone could see that Spring Semester '06 started off much better than Spring Semester '05. I felt completely alone that first day of Economics. Actually, I didn't ever make a single friend in that class. I felt isolated that whole semester. Fortunately, I liked all my classes; my professors were very interesting and caring. Somehow I managed to make it through my first semester at YSU. However, this semester is much easier than that first one—not in an academic sense, but rather a social one. I am friends with people in all of my classes. Since I am in all upper-division classes, I know just about everyone by name. Either I've had classes with them before, or I know them from my campus job.

My campus job. My job was really my salvation. I work in the LLRC, which is the Foreign Language Lab. It is a computer lab where students come in to practice their pronunciation and listening skills in a foreign language. They also come in for tests and tutoring. Probably half of all the foreign language majors at YSU work at least a few hours in the lab. If they don't work there, they come in to work on homework, or just to

chat. Although only two people work in the lab at one time, on any given day there could be as many as 12 of us in there. We talk about our classes, our travel plans, where we've been recently, and which professors we like or don't like. We speak in German, Italian, French, Spanish, Hebrew, Arabic, English, or whatever language we're learning at the time. We teach each other things in different languages. I'm learning German. I'm teaching Nicole Spanish. Andrea explains Latin grammar to me. Ed talks about Romanian music. Karen sends messages in Arabic to people while they're working on the computer. We know all the professors that teach foreign languages. They know us by name. They come to us and ask our opinions, to get a student's perspective. It's a really great place to work. I would definitely say that we are a clique. We hang out together at school. We get together outside of school. We have common interests. We stick together.

You may be wondering what all this has to do with a song analysis. Well, my rambling does have a point. The song we chose to present was *Grade 9* by the Barenaked Ladies. In this song, the singer has experiences very similar to my first semester when he steps into his high school for the first time. On his first day, he 'lost his lunch and broke his glasses' (2). It seemed like everything was going wrong for me too. He feels self-conscious about his "blue and red Adidas bag and ... humongous binder" (7). I felt lame because my backpack was at least 8 years old. He's trying not to look like a "minor niner" (8). I was sure everyone could tell that I was a freshman. He tried out "for the football team to prove that [he's] a man" (9). I was worried people would think I was gay for taking literature classes. Just like he didn't "tell them that [he liked] Duran Duran" (10), I said that I had to take them for my major. I wouldn't have dreamed of

telling someone that they were my favorite classes. They would have made fun of me so much. He said: “This is me in grade nine, baby, this is me in grade nine” (11). That was me as a freshman. That was me as a freshman.

The song doesn't say how the rest of high school went for him. He probably got over his awkwardness and found some friends with common interests. They probably stuck together throughout the next four years, and this would have made his high school experience at least bearable, and maybe even enjoyable. I'm sure he experienced a high school rejection event, but he had his friends to fall back on. His clique.

This is what happened to me. My first semester was a little rough. I didn't make many friends at all. I ended up changing my major. But after I started working in the lab and I began to see the same faces in my classes, I started to make friends. I could talk to them about our classes, professors and assignments. We talked about interesting things we were reading on our own. When we fail a test, get yelled at by a professor, or are not told that we have to take an extra class, we can complain to each other. It's actually a great arrangement. Our clique.

As I've been writing this strange essay, I've thought deeply about cliques and their place in school and society as a whole. As usual, I haven't come up with any conclusive answers. But I did discover a lot about myself and how the clique I am part of has dramatically affected my university experience. I feel much more a part of the university now. I didn't always feel that way. I look forward to coming to school everyday, maybe not to sit through my classes, but just to see everyone. The professors see us as hard-working, studious kids, and they often give us extra assignments to challenge us. In a strange way, being part of this clique has made YSU seem smaller to

me. When I first arrived, I felt alone in this huge place. But now I see people I know all over campus, and now I walk through campus with confidence. I don't care if I'm wearing the same old hoodie that I've already worn three times this week. I don't care if my backpack is old and ugly. If people make fun of me for liking literature, I don't care. Maybe this is part of growing up. I may have come to feel this way regardless of whether or not I was part of a clique. I may never know. However, I feel that being part of this clique has made my university experience much more memorable. I will have things to remember and people to catch up with my whole life.

I can also see how cliques could be damaging. For students who are outside the group, or those who have fallen out of favor with the majority, cliques can be hell. Cliques can also be centered on negative behaviors. Some may foment a culture of drugs, alcohol, or vandalism. Teachers could also aggravate problems between cliques by favoring one over another. This may be hard not to do for teachers, especially if one group is interested in learning and the other is not.

Some might scoff at the idea of cliques existing at the university level. They may say that cliques end after graduation from high school. However, I would disagree. I think that our entire society is structured around cliques. We have religious cliques, business cliques, artist cliques, education cliques, and so many more. They are our comfort zone. For a lot of us, we don't like to step outside of that zone into something new. We are afraid of having experiences like the 9<sup>th</sup> grader in the song. We are afraid of going in different directions.

This can also be tied into multicultural education. In many ways we are in a comfort zone and many people, including educators, feel uncomfortable reaching out to

people of other races, nationalities, and cultures. And when we do, it is too often because we are trying to accept them into our own group. It would be good if we could just accept others for who they are, instead of trying to get them to behave like us.

After reflecting on the broader implications of cliques in society, maybe I have become too comfortable in my clique. Maybe I would develop a more rounded personality if I were to become closer friends with students majoring in business, music, or nursing. And maybe it's not a good thing that YSU seems so small to me. I think it seems small because I focus on our own little world. I tend to shut out the rest of the campus. This is something that many of us do in the much larger context of society. We feel comfortable in our cultural, religious, family, and work cliques, and we tend to shut out the rest of the world. It's really not a small world after all. There are a lot of issues that we cannot shut out. Not thinking about them will not make them go away.

So how have I benefited from analyzing this song? Well, I have thought deeply about my own experience with school cliques. I thought about the role of teachers in cliques, whether or not they should get involved. It also made me reflect on cliques in our society as a whole. I began to see why it would be unwise to become so involved in a clique that shuts out others. I think that it is time for all of us to go back to Grade 9. After the initial adjustment, which may at times be rough, we can have some very rewarding experiences. But just because we've found a comfortable place, doesn't mean we should stay put. In new places we can have new experiences, without forgetting the old ones. And after all, that's what education is all about—new experiences.