Excerpts from “Claiming an Education” by Adrienne Rich (1977)

The first thing I want to say to you who are students is that you cannot afford to think of yourselves as being here to receive an education; you will do much better to think of yourselves as being here to claim one. One of the dictionary definitions of the verb “to claim” is: to take as the rightful owner; to assert in the face of possible contradiction. “To receive” is to come into possession of; to act as receptacle or container for; to accept as authoritative or true. The difference is that between acting and being acted-upon…

This is the experience of taking responsibility toward yourselves. Our upbringing… has so often told us that this should come second to our relationship and responsibilities to other people…

Responsibility to yourself means refusing to let others do your thinking, talking and naming for you; it means learning to respect and use your own brains and instincts, hence grappling with hard work. It means that you do not treat your body as a commodity with which to purchase superficial intimacy or economic security; for our bodies and minds are inseparable in this life, and when we allow our bodies to be treated as objects, our minds are in mortal danger. It means insisting that those to whom you give your friendship and love are able to respect your mind…

Responsibility to yourself means that you don’t fall for shallow and easy solutions—predigested books and ideas, weekend encounters guaranteed to change your life, taking “gut” courses instead of ones you know will challenge you, bluffing at school and life instead of doing solid work… It means that you refuse to sell your talents and aspirations short, simply to avoid conflict and confrontation. And this, in turn means resisting the forces in society which say that you should be nice, play safe, have low professional expectations, drown in love and forget about work, live through others, and stay in the places assigned to us. It means that we insist on a life of meaningful work, insist that work be as meaningful as love and friendship in our lives. It means, therefore the courage to be different; not be continuously available to others—parents, friends, roommates, teachers, spouses and children—that they respect our sense of purpose and our integrity as persons… The difference between a life lived actively, and a life of passive drifting and dispersal of energies is an immense difference. Once we begin to feel committed to our lives, responsible to ourselves, we can never again be satisfied with the old, passive ways.

I have said that the contract on the student’s part involves that you demand to be taken seriously so that you can go on taking yourself seriously. This means seeking out criticism, recognizing that the most affirming thing that anyone can do for you is to demand that you push yourself further, show you the range of what you can do… It means assuming your share of responsibility for what happens in the classroom, because that affects the quality of your daily life here. It means that the students sees herself engaged with her teachers in an active, ongoing struggle for real education.