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Empathy and the Questioning Spirit in Liberal Education: Reports from the Field

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Current justifications of liberal education usually take one of two tacks: itemizing the applicable skills that students derive from a liberal education, or asserting that it is liberal education that society must look to for the capacity for community or citizenship. The former is an argument probably worth making because it appeals to the preoccupations of students, parents, and employers, but it is the second that reveals the relevance, for our time, of liberal education. Bruce Kimball argues that this latter focus on the virtues instilled by education de-emphasizes rational inquiry and the individual pursuit of truth in what he calls the “philosophical” tradition in liberal education and reasserts the “rhetorical” tradition, which with its sources in classical rhetoric and Christian humanism emphasizes the cultivation of the powers of persuasion and civic skills and virtues (6). This identification of two traditions in liberal education provides one context for understanding the academic preoccupations of recent decades: the possibly futile and potentially oppressive nature of rational inquiry; the challenges to values and beliefs posed by cultural, ethnic, and national identity; and the fact that the academy is now the most influential institutional conveyor of values.

From another perspective, it appears that this recent urgency to define and instill values through education challenges liberal education in both the rational, philosophical tradition and the rhetorical tradition: it challenges the philosophical tradition to reclaim the fundamental connection between truth and values, and it challenges the rhetorical to center its precepts in commonly accessible understanding. Like the latest generation in an ancestral home, in taking up the cause of liberal education we adapt to and renovate an earlier architecture to suit our needs and aspirations: preoccupied with the divisions and tensions among groups and individuals and doubting enlightenment models of rationality, we seek in liberal education the equilibrium between commitment and empathy on the one hand and the critical habit of mind on the other. William Cronon’s “Only Connect’: The Goals of a Liberal Education” is a recent, compelling statement of the characteristics of liberally educated people that joins intellectual acuity and general knowledge with such characteristics as humility, tolerance, and an ability to empower others: “Education for human freedom is also education for human community. The two cannot exist without each other. Each of the qualities I have described is a craft or a skill or a way of being in the world that frees us to act with greater knowledge or power. But each of these qualities also makes us ever more aware of the connections we have with other people and the rest of creation. . . .” (79). Parker Palmer, who delivered an influential address at the 1987 AAHE conference entitled

“Campus Values: From Competition and Individualism to Cooperation and Community,” and another at the 1999 conference of the same organization, “Education as Resistance: The Fate of Values in Hazardous Times,” is another eloquent voice urging that higher education renew its commitment to the cultivation of social and personal values. Although one persistent definition of a liberally educated citizenry has been the possession of the knowledge and critical skills to make good judgements in a democratic setting, Cronon, Parker, and others posit broad benefits of liberal education that encompass the heart and soul as well as the mind.

The many essays published in the *Forum for Honors* in the late eighties and nineties—when I edited this journal—span the theoretical and practical issues that confront honors educators in the liberal arts. Among these, a core of essays explore the equilibrium between values and rational understanding in an academic setting from the vantage of both theory and practice, exploring questions about the ultimate goals of learning (most famously engaged by Allan Bloom), teaching and learning—especially collaborative learning models grounded in theories of the social construction of knowledge, the relationship between epistemology and academic disciplines and community, the canon, the promise and threat of technology, and education’s contribution to democratic processes. Eva Brann has described much of the theorizing about liberal education as “flabby beyond bearing,” and she asserts that “liberal education has its concrete seat in institutional communities, and it is they, severally, who have to achieve a brisk, clear, persuasive language about themselves” (175). These authors, although they represent a variety of colleges and universities, constitute such a community, defined by high academic aspirations for students and a commitment to the connections between theory and educational practice, and among their diverse voices and subjects is a common drive to mediate between the claims of truths and the claims of commitments.

In “On Being a Partial Bloomer,” Jim Hill isolates the central theme of *The Closing of the American Mind*: “There are in each of us two fundamental needs, best expressed as polar opposites since they are often in conflict: the need to be rational versus the need to be passionately committed to something or other.” Hill observes that Bloom recognizes that, as “schools of thought,” these two impulses have given rise to an array of polarities: “detachment versus commitment, objectivity versus subjectivity, . . . individual rights versus the common good, liberal tolerance versus the sacred roots of the community” and so on. And he goes on to assert that Bloom attempts to mediate between a respect for “both the need to be rational and the need to belong” (22-23). Responding to Jim Hill, G. Hewett Joiner observes that Bloom’s adherence to Enlightenment rationality (as opposed to passionate commitment) is rather more dogmatic than Hill would have us believe (29). Nevertheless, the polarities that Hill identifies as emerging from the tension between these two “fundamental needs,” and Bloom’s perhaps debatable desire to find a resolution of these conflicts, can be seen as keys to the studies of teaching, learning, and theory in these pages of the *Forum*. The degree to which our knowledge is objective or contingent, the extent to which our ways of knowing carry values and have implications for our ability to sustain community, and the role of education in sustaining a democratic society are issues that underlie the ways in which we structure our classes and programs, imagine new ways to prepare our

students for their responsibilities as citizens and community members, and define our roles as educators.

It is important to note that members of NCHC and *Forum* contributors have made significant contributions to the national discussion of academic programs with theoretical underpinnings in the premise that knowledge is socially constructed and that learning takes place in knowledge communities. Specifically, Honors Semesters have been the occasion for the exploration of the theoretical issue of the social dimension of learning, and models for structuring classes and activities to exploit this connection. In a special issue of the *Forum* devoted to Honors Semesters, Bernice Braid, organizer and primary theoretician of Honors Semesters, describes their “underlying reflexivity”—students “come to see themselves, in some fashion, as another one of the texts-in-context that their program provokes them to examine” (15). Transported to locations where they confront their own preconceptions, students come to recognize the knowledge contexts from which they emerged and to which they contribute: “As Semesters participants confront themselves-as-viewers, and reread their own writing, in itself illustrative of just how movable a feast human interaction is, they inch toward seeing themselves as members of an interpretive community” (16). In the words of a Semesters participant, they undergo a “transformation from a group of scholars to a community of persons” (16).

From the perspective of theories of group development and models of experiential learning, Faith Gabelnick, coauthor *Learning Communities: Creating Connections Among Students* (1990), comes also to the conclusion that “a vibrant Honors Semester and any learning community honor those differences, those challenges, and help them to find a voice” (25). Yet the momentum of the Semesters, and the clear focus of Braid's analysis of the learning process for students who participate in them, is that this process of “decontextualizing and recontextualizing” in the end generates, within these small communities of learners, common meanings. In Braid's words, “Many eyes and ears sharing impressions can construct meaningful interpretations that are consensually acceptable” (17). In contrast to the “Blooming” polarities cited by Hill, Braid demonstrates that, through painstaking practice, examined subjectivities can lead to mutual understandings, integrating both experience and values.

In a passionate and sometimes recondite essay, *On the Image and Essence of Honors: Student, Professor, Program*, David Patterson focuses sharply on the definition of the individual student's learning, and seems when compared to Braid and others to occupy the opposite pole with respect to the definition of knowledge and learning. Defining education as “an embrace of the highest and dearest, not only in higher education but in life as well” (4), he clearly is an exemplar of the philosophical strain in liberal education. Inspired by Kierkegaard, Buber, and others, Patterson asserts that the essence of learning is, significantly, not simply the search for truth, but, in Kierkegaard's words, “being the truth” (6). This quest for truth is relational: “The urgency that characterizes the honors student's learning process arises from a quest not only to understand something about the world but about oneself in relation to the world. The truth of the world and the truth of the soul are of a piece; deciding something about art, history, or physics, we decide something about ourselves” (5).

Like Braid, Patterson sees education as a process of self-recognition and

becoming, of attaining value through knowledge. However, the context here is transcendent, and the ultimate goal is unabashedly spiritual rather than social. Citing Buber's identification of education as a surrender to the "primal potential might" of the child, Patterson asserts, "As an embrace of this 'primal potential might,' education is tied to the very foundations of meaning in human life. Its purpose lies not in getting more *out* of life but in imparting more *to* life; its object is not to acquire knowledge for its own sake but to engender a life examined and intensified by the light of knowledge" (8). Braid sees the process of the Honors Semester as an interaction of texts-in-progress, with increasingly subtle approximations of meaning embedded in community; for Patterson, the always yet-to-be-final process of defining the self in relation to knowledge points to an essential being that transcends the specifics of location and time. The courses and academic programs implied in these two perspectives are strikingly different. Braid assumes a group of students interacting with each other; Patterson a student and teacher in dialogue. But both bring subtlety to the dichotomy between openness and truth.

This dichotomy also shapes the arguments of the *Forum* authors who address the personal and social values which education serves. For example, William Daniel—invoking Alasdair McIntyre's description of the evolution of social virtues from social definition, through qualities that contribute to the good of a life, to incorporation within a social tradition—draws a connection between the structure of Honors Semesters and the virtues that they cultivate in participants. He observes that on college campuses and even in most honors programs where the creation of a community of scholars is a goal, "the primary orientation is on individual achievement in a competitive atmosphere. Thus the virtues that emerge are those based upon standards that emphasize comparative individual excellence within the peer group." But in Honors Semesters, "while individual talent is recognized by semester students, it is those shared experiences and tasks that provide definition and meaning to their efforts" (8). On the other hand, Ted Humphrey, in an essay entitled "Educating in and for Democracy," attempts more directly to mediate between the claims of the individual and the group in defining the goals of education. Indeed, he asserts that democracy is defined by a balance between "personal and collective completion." He argues that it is to our peril that in defining our values the metaphysical and moral are separated; on the contrary, values emerge through an interplay between the factual and conditional on the one hand, and the ideal on the other: "The concomitant goals of education must be diversity and harmony. Both are necessary conditions for being able to conduct and enjoy life. But they always exist only in dynamic tension. For diversity without harmony is cacophonous; and harmony without diversity is tuneless. If we fail to understand the necessary connection between each person's right to actualize her unique potential, and the foundation that social harmony provides for such pursuit, we will see diversity and harmony as conflicting" (11).

It is interesting, given the strong involvement of many honors faculty and programs in learning communities and collaborative learning models, that the *Forum* contributors who responded to the call for papers on "education and social equity" raise serious concerns about the values implicit in multiculturalism, a "philosophy" that ultimately places knowledge and meaning within the context of groups defined by circumstances of time and place. In their view, "multiculturalism" as it is popularly received is not sufficient to mediate between local identities and

fundamental human values. David Patterson, again citing Martin Buber, asserts that multiculturalism is fundamentally anti-communal. He observes that social equity is merely a transitional goal, but it should not be confused with true freedom; that a political or cultural group falls short of a “transcendent center” that is by definition beyond the interest of any individual group. He summarizes, “The uniqueness of the group as a group, on the other hand, undermines the singularity of the individual. . . . Rather than place its accent on the yet-to-be of what I might become, the politically correct curriculum derives its value from what has already been established, from what is given beforehand: race, gender, ethnic origin” (“Politically Correct” 22). Similarly, Hugh Mercer Curtler, who carefully distinguishes between the fact of cultural pluralism and multiculturalism as a formulation of cultural and social values, argues that multiculturalism separates cultures and people. He further argues that education should seek human freedom, not the freedom of individual groups, and that this freedom is attained through a recognition of commonality: “We can survive our current crisis only by recalling what the academy can do that no other social institution can do, and that is to free young minds from the captivity of impulse, passion, preoccupation with self, and ideological myopia” (7-8). Certainly the latter is the goal of most programs in the liberal arts; the controversy, however, revolves around the group as the locus for constructed meanings as opposed to the individual. As John Wilson points out in his *Forum* essay, “Loaded Canons: The Battle for Culture in the University,” the debate about multiculturalism is not about the “furniture of the mind” but about “the discipline of the mind”; it is a debate about truth versus openness and relativism (13). But he goes on to argue for a pluralism in curriculum that does not lose sight of the higher values of education: “In an age when many new students in college receive an almost exclusively technical or pre-professional education, multiculturalists and traditionalists may have much closer ties than they believe. Between them, we must find the future of culture, or face the threat of universities devoted to empty specialization and vocational training with no culture at all” (16).

In addition to the essays that address a variety of models of learning, and the values that are implicit in educational models, yet another group of *Forum* essays describe in concrete terms the ways in which an academic program can prepare students for citizenship. And, like the more theoretical essays that I have discussed, these articles strive for a complex understanding of the tension between the claims of the individual and the group. Responding to recent discussions of the “eclipse of community” and the roots for this eclipse in the objectivism and individualism of American education, Phyllis Betts and W. Richard Janikowski argue that, while they accept that “a strong concept of community depends on the legitimacy of subjective epistemology,” students must also be empowered to effect social change, and they are empowered by “mastery” of social issues, “agency”—knowledge of how change has been effected, and “vision”—an ethics based in “sustained discourse about the common good.” Betts and Janikowski, making a distinction between objectivism and “an objective state of mind,” conclude that “subjective understanding simply is not enough in the absence of more objective problem solving skills” (20). While these authors locate the attainment of genuine commitment in knowledge, Mary Stanley argues that it is only in a “living” setting that students can derive values from knowledge and experience. In an essay on a project at Syracuse University (Community Service in an Educational context), she observes that students

themselves “appear to have neither a committed belief in a priori truths nor in the extreme relativism of a full scale sociology of knowledge.” She asks, rhetorically, “What happens, then, if students are invited to return to the . . . living communities within which problems, hopes, and material nature invite or goad us to think?” She reports that, when students participate in seminars that immerse them in both the perspective of academic disciplines and the reality of decision-making in the local community, they learn not that theory and practice are separate, but that these are mutually influential in a dynamic process through time: “theory and practice are everywhere in a tangle; philosophy and literary theory invite us to decenter the narrator in all our stories and despair of any grand narrative to guide those who wish for a more universalistic text” (27). Stanley, like Braid, finds a center in participation in community itself.

These authors offer a map for the future of liberal education. In fact, they reflect two of the most compelling current prescriptions for higher education. One is posed by Bruce Kimball, who suggests that the pragmatic philosophical tradition provides a response to the widespread dissatisfaction with an assumed duality between fact and value, theory and practice (88). Specifically, he suggests that “certain themes of pragmatism are now resurgent: fallibilism or anti-essentialism; the equivalent status, if not identity, of value claims and knowledge claims; the view that inquiry is a continuing, self-corrective process common to all persons; and the idea that belief is dependent on the intersubjective warrant provided by a community of inquirers” (56). The other project for liberal education is advanced by Martha Nussbaum, who in *Cultivating Humanity: A Classical Defense of Reform in Liberal Education* argues that “Reason, in short, constructs the personality in a very deep way, shaping its motivations as well as its logic” (29). In this regard, it is important to observe that she offers in this important book both an elaboration of cosmopolitanism as the cultivation of an ability to recognize and identify with universal human traits and conditions, and a description of the incremental process of questioning and discovery in numerous college classes—what W.B. Carnochan, writing contra pragmatism in education, describes as “reason’s narrower capacity to make midcourse adjustments” (182). Understood with precision and implemented with care, both of these prescriptions are models that resist systematization: the cultivation of the empathic yet skeptical mind occurs through iterative processes that do not grasp prematurely at universals.

Recently, a third group of commentators, focused primarily on academic practice and clearly in the pragmatic tradition as described by Kimball, have synthesized what has seemed to be a ferment of innovation in higher education in recent decades. Robert Barr and John Tagg’s vision of the “learning paradigm,” Robert Angelo’s description and means of effecting a “campus as learning community,” and Dale Coye’s gathering of the late Ernest Boyer’s thoughts about human commonalities and the principles of a “strong campus community” almost self-evidently are contributions to the same discourse that has occupied the pages of the *Forum* in recent years. However, each of these essays goes further to recommend sweeping change in the structure and goals of education. Barr and Tagg advocate a restructuring of institutions of higher learning around student learning rather than teaching, with success measured not by academic credits and other functions of time, but by student success as ascertained by outcomes assessment. Barr and Tagg assume that classrooms structured around group efforts would be

essential in this new order (16-17). Angelo underscores the crucial role of learning communities in this “paradigm shift,” where competition would be de-emphasized, inquiry would be emphasized, and the well being of all and not the accomplishments of individuals would be the goal. He, too, sees assessment as a significant “lever” to move learning to the center of our work (3, 5). Coye, who addresses the need for a more focused liberal arts curriculum, connections between the classroom and the world beyond it, and campus community, summarizes, “A New American College. . . must be a place where responsibility and character are taken seriously. From freshman orientation to commencement day, the institution consciously strives to connect its members by stressing the importance of shared values” (25).

From the perspective of the *Forum* essays on questions of community and individuality, and on objectivism and its impact on social values, I find the almost automatic prescription of learning communities embedded in the academic—at times almost technocratic—schemes presented by Barr and Tagg, and Angelo, to be unsettling. Collaborative learning seems to have become a device, rather than a way of proceeding that raises in the classroom itself significant issues about how and what we know. While *Forum* authors, and Kimball and Nussbaum, offer perspectives on learning that recognize ambiguities and competing models, Barr and Tagg and Angelo are confident in their definitions of learning. For example, Barr and Tagg rely on Howard Gardner’s formulation: “a sufficient grasp of concepts, principles, or skills so that one can bring them to bear on new problems and situations, deciding in which ways one’s present competencies can suffice and in which ways one may require new skills or knowledge” (22). Several of the authors I have discussed would say that this begs a number of questions. Angelo, too, seems almost complacent in his acceptance of “research in psychology, cognitive science, and education” (5). Without rejecting what is to be learned from educational research, I believe that this summary is at the least narrow in its disciplinary range and probably not tentative enough in light of the serious and difficult questions that relate to the definition and goals of learning.

It is perhaps “corny” to conclude this article with reference to Dudley Wynn’s “Gerontian Speaks,” the first essay in the first *Forum* issue that I edited. Wynn, at least a generation older than the rest of the *Forum* contributors with whom I worked, rejected the systematizing or even rationalizing of educational practice. In 1989, I considered him a genuine but idiosyncratic voice, in that he did not value the careful planning and reporting that was the stock in trade of the rising generation of faculty and academic administrators. However, when I consider the terms of these more recent discussions of higher education and the way in which they both elaborate on the academic models and yet deny the questioning spirit of most of the essays that I have summarized, I am convinced of the value of what Wynn said. In an Emersonian vein, Wynn warns, “What we in the honors business have to watch out for is that we will be wooed as pillars of the system, and our function as critical evaluators of that system and of all values in general will be played down and even forgotten” (7). It seems to me that the questions that *Forum* authors and others have raised about community, knowledge, and education have become in the larger forum formulaic, bereft of their recognition of values maintained in a bewildering process of learning and understanding. Nevertheless, I remain confident of the subversive aspect of those who continue to think and write precisely and

passionately about education, and I believe that they can continue to question and bring new perspective to what seem to be received opinions about our work. In Dudley Wynn's words: "Studies, Programs, and systems will not and cannot go very far in easing our sense of the loss of community. Studies, programs, and systems will never provide the solutions to the paradoxical inner anxieties and uncertainties in our era of illusory material comfort and, for a relatively few at the top, increasing affluence" (5).

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