

EILEEN KOGL CAMFIELD

The Need for (Em)powerful Teaching

EACH YEAR, the University of the Pacific, where I teach, participates in the Cooperative Institutional Research Program Freshman Survey. One item on the survey asks students to identify their “reasons for going to college”: nine reasons are listed, students rank “all that apply,” and the results reflect the percentages identifying each reason as “very important.” In 2005, the year we created our current freshman seminar sequence, our students’ top three reasons for going to college were “to get a better job” (78 percent), “to get training for a specific career” (75 percent), and “to be able to make more money” (70 percent). Fifth on the list was “to gain a general education and appreciation of ideas” (61 percent); seventh was “to become a more cultured person” (42 percent). Contrast this with the four clusters of essential learning outcomes identified by the Association of American Colleges and Universities (2008): knowledge of human cultures and the physical and natural world, intellectual and practical skills, personal and social responsibility, and integrative and applied learning.

How do we, as college educators, reconcile these seemingly different goals? On the one hand, we might appeal to a business model and simply give the “customers”—our students—what they say they want. But on the other hand, most professors realize that we have an obligation to augment our students’ goals and to tell them what their careerist emphasis lacks. And *tell* we do, often through freshman seminars. Indeed, the University of the Pacific has an excellent required, first-semester freshman seminar that confronts students with the question, what is a good society? Students are instantly transported into the world of liberal education while honing their critical-thinking skills through interdisciplinary reading, discussion, and writing. And for most students, the seminar successfully creates an abstract intellectual challenge; for only a few, however, is it transformative.

I suggest that we need to do more than tell students how to expand upon their careerist reasons for going to college; we also need to help them *feel* the value of that expansion. I recognize that this is part of the motivation for proposed structural changes to undergraduate education, such as integrated learning models, but those structural solutions must also support carefully constructed content that fosters both emotional engagement and intellectual development. In my experience, positive feelings—curiosity, empathy, security—are the keys that unlock the intellect for many students.

EILEEN KOGL CAMFIELD is a visiting lecturer at the University of the Pacific.

College educators need to recognize emotion as a part of knowing



University of the Pacific

Discussions of strategies for increasing access to higher education for disadvantaged students tend largely to focus—correctly—on socioeconomic factors. Yet by focusing on the ways we differ, we neglect the core unifying principle of our humanity: our feelings. “Emotion,” as Dacher Keltner explains (2009, ix), “is the source of a meaningful life.” And in terms of access to a meaningful life, *most* students are disadvantaged. I could point to the media and materialism, to latchkey kids and drug use, to overcrowded and underfunded public schools, or to standardized testing and apathetic parents; but, for college professors, one source of the problem hits much closer to home: our own banishment of emotion from the realm of the intellect.

In *How We Think*, John Dewey reminded us that “human beings are not normally divided into two parts, the one emotional, the other coldly intellectual” (1986, 321). But somehow “doing school” has become narrowed to the absorption of facts and, if we’re lucky, the critical (but strictly rational) examination of ideas. Is it any wonder, then, that our students’ reasons for going to college have contracted to the narrowly quantifiable as well? All too often, we give them no alternatives—particularly for first-generation students, who may be less familiar with the cultural traditions of liberal education. Dewey went on to say that “unless there is a fusion of the intellectual and the emotional, . . . problems and questions, which are the only true instigators



of reflective activity, will be more or less externally imposed and only half-heartedly felt and dealt with." College educators need to recognize emotion as a part of knowing.

The Pursuit of Happiness

For the past three years, I have had the tremendous privilege of designing and teaching a course that accomplishes just this type of fusion. For our second-semester freshman seminar courses, Pacific professors are asked to draw upon and expand a theme from the fall course, *What Is a Good Society?* I was particularly struck by the fact that after students in our fall course read the Declaration of Independence and encounter the unalienable right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness,

they turn to a chapter on politics, law, and citizenship that interrogates questions of personal liberty but avoids any explicit discussion of happiness. This is hardly surprising. Culturally, we tend to dismiss happiness as too subjective and relativistic for serious study, believing that abstract but easily measured notions of justice are the more legitimate purview of college courses. However, in my course, called simply the Pursuit of Happiness, we investigate this right to happiness. Our study is intellectually rigorous and, because it requires personal engagement, profoundly transformative.

In the course, we discuss ideas and read widely from ancient and current history, psychology, economics, and literature. Additionally, the students construct a three-part self-analysis project. First, they keep a personal journal for thirty days to document the physical (e.g., how much sleep they get), social (e.g., how much time they spend connecting with other people), and spiritual (e.g., what they are grateful for) components of their sense of well-being. Then, they graph and report their data, looking for trends and interrelationships. Finally, they create individual "future happiness plans" by analyzing their data from the points of view of four of our authors. After completing this assignment, they embark on a final project that bridges the gap between personal happiness and public policy. Students work in research groups either to explore an aspect of society they feel is causing widespread unhappiness and create a plan for correcting the problem, or to identify a positive source of well-being and create a plan to maximize the good.

I know there are those who might dismiss a class on happiness as lightweight or "touchy-feely." However, I assure you that not only do my students work, but they work in dimensions many of them have never explored before. They become aware—some for the first time—of what it *means* to be human. Nothing has made me more aware of and sympathetic to our shared human experience than reading my students' journals. These journals reveal all—from the specific difficulties of abuse, anger, abortion, alcohol use, choosing a major, career angst, conflict with parents, death, sexuality, and stress, to the more abstract questions of purpose, true friendship, love, and meaning. The students are deeply connected

with what they are studying. Moreover, their subsequent life plans are relevant, real, and lasting. Over the three years I have taught this course, my students have made significant changes in their lives. Some have changed majors (e.g., from pre-med to English) or career paths (e.g., from pharmacist to special education teacher); others have slowed down the pace of their accelerated programs in order simply to savor the college experience. Some have made more private changes—from deciding to break up (or get together) with a romantic interest, to learning how to challenge an internalized hypercritical parental voice, to seeking psychological counseling. Others have affirmed, and therefore come truly to own, decisions they had already made. Ultimately, the class has been both an intellectual journey and a process of personal meaning-making—learner-centered education at its very best.

Teaching the Pursuit of Happiness course has been one of the most rewarding experiences of my twenty-year career. And judging from the unprecedented number of thank-you cards I receive from students at the end of each semester, the gratification is reciprocal. For example, a thank-you card from an honors student in an accelerated science-based program speaks to the ways she had engaged with the course content, although she still leaned on my authorization to validate her choice: “This class has changed my life. I really appreciate all you have done for me, and I am grateful I was mentored by you. You have taught me so many skills for me to succeed in life, and I thank you for this. In fact, I am ‘slowing down’ in school and studying abroad just so I can be happy and relaxed.” For me, the greater pleasure came nearly two years later, when I

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received a second card from her overseas posting in Seville. That card showed not only that she had followed through on her resolution, but also that the course had empowered her to develop an experience she could own. She had found her own voice, and

she used it to express both her observations and feelings with confidence and clarity. Her closing words were: “I wouldn’t trade this experience for anything.”

How can we, as educators, best facilitate real and lasting learning? William Perry described the need for students to make their own meaning, their need for “powerful learning” (Moore 2009). In response, I propose that educators should recognize the related need for *empowerful teaching*—teaching that blends empathy and intellectual engagement, that empowers students to find rich, diverse, and personally meaningful answers to the question, why did you go to college? □

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