

Identity, Learning, and the Liberal Arts
American Association of Colleges and Universities
Educating Intentional Learners
Philadelphia, PA
November, 2004

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Learning does not make one learned: there are
those who have knowledge and those who have understanding.
The first requires memory, the second philosophy.

Alexander Dumas
The Count of Monte Cristo

We have agreed that no one curricular outline of liberal studies can fit the contours of the diverse educational landscape universities and colleges present or the diverse claims we put upon liberal studies. But we are quick to agree that somehow a liberal education leads to meaningfulness in the lives of our students. Ranging from Bloom's *Closing of the American Mind* (1987) to Nussbaum's *Cultivating Humanity* (1997) and across political, ethnic, and critical spectrums, we claim that if students study in the liberal art they will be challenged to engage issues of social justice, race and gender, patriotism and civic responsibilities, and that these will be woven into the fabric of their daily lives. We claim that through liberal studies students will learn to think critically about their own views, the opinions they read and hear, and that through their courses in liberal studies they will cultivate humanistic values, a better understanding of themselves within the diversity of the global community, and develop a more empathetic consideration about their relationship with others. We claim that through liberal studies students will learn to test their points of view against the thinking of others, and develop a readiness to think about their live in the light of the texts we teach. We argue that liberal studies will inform their ethical, moral, and intellectual development while instilling the habits of life-long learning. Or so we hope.

But the same can be said for other venues of campus that lay a claim on ethical, moral, and character development. For instance, those in student affairs claim that we can instill in students a sense of their moral and civic responsibilities through service-learning. But many have not been satisfied that our current approaches to service-learning engage students in ways that clearly impacts their "civic development." (see Colby and Ehrlich, *Educating Citizens: Preparing America's Undergraduates for Lives of Moral and Civic Responsibility*). We are struggling with this issue on several levels that parallel our struggles with the claims made for liberal education. Our anecdotal sense says that students benefit from service-learning because the immediate short-term group dynamics students experience through service learning matches our expectations and we are quick to claim that service-learning leads to meaningfulness in their lives. But

we simply are not sure that there is long-term civic developmental impact. While we have maintained a faith in the transformative nature that service-learning can have on our students, that faith is challenged when we cannot say for certain that there is a relationship between the relevance we perceive in what we teach and the lives our students lead, or that our students understand and appreciate the historical and cultural values which underlie civic engagement.

Moreover, the claims we make for liberal studies and student development co-curricular activities such as service-learning are rather large and difficult, if not impossible, to assess. How can we assert that any course in the liberal studies fosters the ethical, moral, personal, and intellectual development of our students when we are hard pressed simply to assess whether liberal studies does enhance critical thinking and communication skills in a manner any different than any other course on campus? We are on shaky ground if we believe that simply having our students survey the liberal arts landscape through distribution requirements opens them to the “habits of the heart” we feel characterizes liberal studies. How can we claim that we nurture these values through service-learning linked to liberal studies courses when, as Colby and Ehrlich point out that those students who seek out these activities need them least while most students never engage these activities (*Chronicle of Higher Education*, 3/26/03).

While we have maintained a faith in the transformative nature of the liberal arts and activities such as service learning, that faith is challenged when we cannot say for certain that we are sure there is a relationship between the relevance we perceive in what we teach and the lives our students lead. Our anecdotal sense leads us to argue that liberal education in fact does meet these claims, does in fact affect our students’ cognitive and affective development, in large part because we reflect on how our own liberal education has affected ours. But what our anecdotal sense also tells us is that this simply many not be the case with our students.

Can we claim that what we do enhances how students consider the relationship among life-goals, the purpose of higher education, self-understanding and self-acceptance, and the development of decision-making skills? If we are to ground the claims we make about the role liberal studies plays in our students’ ethical and character development, then we are speaking about developmental tasks. We may be compelled to look in a different direction. One such direction could very well rest in our ability to create a conversational relationship between what we claim to do in liberal studies and the parameters of student development, which outlines the course of our students’ ethical, intellectual, and personal development.

While those in liberal studies and student development theorists rarely “talk with each other,” what this conversation will illustrate the remarkable commonality both share. Through this conversation we will discover the tacit congruity between study in the

liberal arts and student development theory. By bringing together seemingly different seminal thinkers (T.S. Kuhn, William Perry) we will see that the claims we make for liberal education in affecting students' ethical and character development are the same claims made by student development

theorists. What will become evident is that those on the liberal studies side lack the "developmental underpinnings" outlined by student development theory, while those student development theorists lack the liberal studies content that help student develop intellectual and narrative imaginations. Bring both together and explicating their congruity, we ground our anecdotal sense that liberal studies can be transformative.

Once given this context, we have a more constructive perspective to consider the role liberal studies can play in the ethical and character development of our students. First, we will see, in a concrete way, that the skills of academic inquiry overlap the skills of student development. Second, we will see how liberal studies can prove to be the vehicle driving how students engage in their own personal development and how liberal studies can speak to their lives educationally and personally. Third, we will see how liberal studies can inform the co-curricular side of campus, providing a rationale for those in liberal studies to work collaboratively with student affairs to integrate liberal learning across campus in areas ranging from service learning to developing living/learning centers in residence life.

Identity, Learning, and the Liberal Arts

First, we can outline the basic claims made for liberal studies and the inherent problem with those claims. Next we can illustrate that these claims rests on developing a conversation between those in liberal studies and those in student development by demonstrating that this very conversation was proposed by William Perry, a seminal thinker in student development, but never outlined.

We will outline one such conversation by bringing together to seemingly different seminal thinkers – T.S. Kuhn and William Perry. By explicating the congruency between Kuhn's *Structure of Scientific Revolutions* and Perry's *Forms of Intellectual and Ethical Development in the College Years*, we will see that skills for study in the liberal arts are the same skills which underlie personal development.

We will see that what those in liberal studies lack in grounding their claims are the developmental underpinnings, while student development theorists lack the liberal studies content that help students develop intellectual and narrative imaginations.

Next we will incorporate Louise Rosenblatt's *Literature as Exploration*. Working from the C.S. Pierce, Rosenblatt demonstrates that literature permits something resembling "ideal experimentation," a process of imaginative trial and error, trying out

different modes of behavior and working out their probable effects. When the situation arises in actual life, we are better prepared to act successfully. Without much of an “analogic leap” we will extend this metaphor across the Liberal Arts disciplines, service-learning, and other co-curricular experiences.

Finally, we will look at one pedagogic strategy for pulling these different facets together is to “design” liberal studies course through Problem-Based Learning. By pedagogically grounding Liberal Studies courses, service-learning, and other co-curricular activities in Problem-Based Learning we can set the stage to work towards 5 outcomes:

- a. set the ground for Liberal Studies as the Imaginative Experiment;
- b. model for students how to “learn as we learn;”
- c. illustrate that the skills for academic inquiry are the are the skills for personal development;
- d. drive intellectual and personal “transitions” by using PBL to design “interactions” and open-endedness that “engineer” anomalies, mistakes, and misinterpretation in ways that foster and encourage “personal paradigm” shift;
- e. design learning interactions that push students to compare their thinking with the thinking of others.

In doing so, we develop a pedagogic model grounding our claims for the role of liberal studies in the undergraduate experience; a model that can be a vehicle driving students to construct and reconstruct their “personal paradigms,” and a model illustrating how liberal studies does speak to students daily lives. Finally, this model provides a rationale from which we can begin to work collaboratively with student affairs, integrating liberal studies across campus, into different aspects of campus life creating living/learning environments.

excerpted from:

Identity, Learning, and the Liberal Arts
Ned Scott Laff
(forthcoming from Jossey-Bass)

Such concepts as motivation, structure, assimilation, accommodation, and “stages” are tools of analytic description only. So too is our developmental scheme itself. Our task is primarily analytic, and our standards logical; the students’ task is primarily synthetic, its standards aesthetic. For example, in their address to incongruities, the students regularly transcend a mere effort to reduce all of them to pat logic...Ultimately, then,our scheme chronicles the course of an aesthetic yearning to apprehend a certain kind of truth: the truth of the limits of man’s certainty. Persistence in this yearning is, if you will, an act of love – and humor.

William Perry
*Forms of Intellectual and Ethical
Development in the College Years* (p. 56)

Development is rooted in the transitions between stages and grounded in “a continuing interplay of thought and experience”

Carole Gilligan
In a Different Voice (1982, p. 156)

Perry notes that developmental transition has many of the characteristics of the evolution of scientific theory outlined by T.S. Kuhn (1970) in his *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*:

Strangely enough, we have found no explicit description of this kind of *transformation* as a phenomena in personal development. As a strategy of growth it would seem to deserve a prominent place, not only in a theory of cognitive development, but also in consideration of the formation of identity.

William Perry
*Forms of Intellectual and Ethical
Development in the College Years* (pp. 109-110)

Perry's "Forms" of Intellectual and Ethical Development

Forms of Expectancies: These are relatively stable assumptions and expectations a person holds at any given time by which s/he construes and makes sense of experiences. They provide a coherent view of the world as long as we can assimilate our interactions in the world within a given form.

Open-Endedness: Interaction, the diversity of real world experience raises problems with the fit between a "form of expectancy" and experience. Forms are open-ended because the "form-experience" fit is not static and fixed.

Mistakes and Misinterpretations: Mistakes and misinterpretation arise because a "form" does not account for new, different, or unexpected experiences. These mistakes raise uncertainties and begin to challenge the reliability of the "form."

Crisis: When mistakes reach a certain level we are challenged to consider that our assumptions and expectancies which underlie our "forms," or pattern of beliefs, may not be giving us a good working sense of "how things are." These mistakes jolt our picture of the world and raise questions about whether our "form of expectancies" is adequate to help us develop a good working "world view."

Reorganization and Reconstruction: Crisis leads us to challenge "how we have been looking at things," and to consider either reorganizing our "form of expectancies" to accommodate for the "mistakes" or to construct a new "form" which will take into consideration the old form but also provide us with a "change in world view," allowing us to reinterpret our interactions, resolve the problem with the "form-experience fit," and provide a better way or perceiving and acting in the world.

Note: this is an on-going process

- Equilibration: This represents the structural organization of our thinking. Through this organization we both impose meaning on our experiences and make sense of what we experience.
- Developmental Sequencing: In an educational model of moral development this represents the preferred order for presenting educational experiences which foster growth.
- Interactionism: (Open-Endedness) This is the active attempt to make sense of the experiences which result from our interacting in the world. These interactions often lead to experience which call into question our assumptions and the ways “we think about things.”
- Disequilibration: Interactionism can lead to a crisis, an imbalance which calls into question the assumptions that underlie the “structural organization” of our thinking.
- Equilibration: The imbalance creates “conflict induced reorganization” of our thinking. It challenges us to change our assumptions, and restructure our thinking to provide us with better ways of both imposing meaning and making sense of our experiences.

Note: this is an on-going process

Kuhn’s Structure of Scientific Revolutions

- Paradigm: An accepted pattern of theoretical and methodological beliefs

which affect how we see, interpret, and evaluate. A paradigm helps us make sense of things and solve problems because they appear to be revealing of the nature of things. A paradigm helps us explore and interpret new experiences.

- Open-Endedness: Paradigms extend the scope of our understanding, but they also bring up problems and facts which the paradigm can neither solve or explain.
- Anomalies: New and unsuspected phenomena are anomalies. They appear only against the background of the paradigm because it is the paradigm's context which provides the sense that "nature" has somehow violated the paradigm-induced expectations which govern normal "science."
- Crisis: When significant anomalies develop they point out the failure of the normal problem-solving activities of the paradigm. Anomalies challenge standard beliefs and challenge the generalizations of the paradigm.
- Restructuring or:
New Paradigm
Development: Faced with a breakdown, "science" seeks a transition to a new paradigm, a restructuring which changes some of the generalizations, methods, and applications. "Science" can also discard the paradigm and create a new paradigm by keeping those "beliefs" which work and replacing other beliefs with new ones. This "paradigm shift" affect changes in world view, lets us see "old" terms, concepts, things, and events in different relationships to each other, and re-educates our ways of perceiving and acting in the world.

Note: this is an ongoing activity

Academic Inquiry as Personal Development

Academic Inquiry:
Theory Building

Personal Development:
Student Development Theory

Kuhn	Perry	Kohlberg
Paradigm	Form of Expectancy	Equilibration
Open-Endedness	Open-Endedness	Interaction
Anomalies	Mistakes	Conflicts
Crisis	Crisis	Disequilibration
Restructure or Create New Paradigm	Reorganization or Create New Form	Conflict-induced Reorganization
Growth in Knowledge Growth	Personal Growth	Personal

...The difference defines a liberal education – not as an idea, but as an actuality in real people.

The difference is surely or simply the “content” of so many courses in Chemistry or History...The anti-intellectual cannot be passed off as one who refuses to think. Many think dangerously well. Similarly, the liberally educated man cannot be caricatured as one who sees too many sides of a subject that he cannot act....

We have come to believe from all these hours of listening that the anti-intellectual, be he in or out of college, is definable not as “against thinking,” but against thinking about one particular thing: thought. Most particularly his *own* thought.

In contrast, the liberally educated man, be he a graduate of college or not, is one who has learned to think about even his own thoughts, to examine the way he orders data and the assumptions he is making and to compare these with other thoughts that other men might have. If he has gone the whole way...he has realized that he thinks this way not because his teachers ask him to but because this is how the world “really is,” this is man’s pre-relation to the universe. From this position he can take responsibility for his own stand and negotiate – with respect—with other men.

William Perry
Forms of Intellectual and Ethical Development in College Years
(1970, pp. 39-40)

Is not the capacity for imagination – the ability to picture oneself in a variety of situations and to envisage alternative modes of behavior and their consequences – the things that give the wise man his advantage? C. S. Pierce, in stressing the values of “ideal experimentation” (*Collected Papers Vol. 3* paragraph 527), was referring to the same

thing. In imagination we rehearse various possibilities of action in a given situation. We go through a process of imaginative trial and error, trying out different modes of behavior and working out their probable effects. When the situation arises in actual life, we are better prepared to act successfully.

Literature permits something resembling ideal experimentation because it offers such a wide range of vicarious experiences. We can live different lives; we can anticipate future periods in or own life; we can participate in different social setting; we can try out solutions to personal problems. We are able to apprehend the practical and emotional results, the reactions of others, the social praise or blame that may flow from such conduct; we find some of these temperamentally more satisfactory than others. Literature may thus offer us a means of carrying on some trail-and-error experimentation.....

Louise Rosenblatt
Literature as Exploration (1995, p. 190)

Without much of an “analogic leap” we can extend this metaphor across the Liberal Arts disciplines, service-learning, and other co-curricular experiences.

Liberal Studies courses, service-learning, and other co-curricular activities by design grounded in Problem-Based Learning sets the stage to minimally work towards 5 outcomes:

- f. set the ground for Liberal Studies as the Imaginative Experiment;
- g. model for students how to “learn as we learn;”
- h. illustrate that the skills for academic inquiry are the are the skills for personal development;
- i. drive intellectual and personal “transitions” by using PBL to design “interactions” and open-endedness that “engineer” anomalies, mistakes, and misinterpretation in ways that foster and encourage “personal paradigm” shift;
- j. design learning interactions that push students to compare their thinking with the thinking of others.