

Civic Engagement and Social Responsibility: Renewing Public
Consciousness in a Privatized World. AAC&U, Atlanta, Ga.:

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First, I think it is helpful to recognize, and remember, that it is actually a kind of historical aberration that it is not obvious that both knowledge and education are socially, morally, and politically engaged – and are so intrinsically, not just additively.

After all, as John Dewey said, theories, philosophies, literature, sciences, arts all arise in response to the deep and challenging issues of their times, just as individual thinking is awakened by the encountering of something that captures our attention – by problems, not just in the sense of troubles but as something that knocks us out of auto-pilot and back into real converse with the world and other people.

Even in the narrowest version of the dominant canon of Western civilization, the story is usually begun with figures such as Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle, right? Well, Socrates, as we know, hung out in the marketplace, the *agora*, talking with all sorts of

people about what they thought they already knew in order to open them up to reconsideration – to critical thinking, as we might say. Why do that? Because, he thought, there is no better life than an examined one – a life of critical thinking undertaken for the sake of ongoing rethinking and fresh learning: lifelong learning, again as we might say today.

Socrates was put to death for his troubles; then, as now, even if “critical thinking” and “lifelong learning” and “the examined life” seem almost like clichés no one would argue with, a genuine practice of their virtues is a threat to the thoughtless, to established orders, to conventionality and to those who want from us mere obedience. But Socrates, like thinkers, artists, prophets and leaders in all cultures and times, called us to such a practice, and that is why we remember him.

I repeat: we are not discovering something new; we are not without models; we are not being far-out radicals of any stripe: we are trying to live up to a call that has over and over again been made, and suppressed, and too often repressed.

My point, of course, is that the great works, the enduring works that are still taught – and those that weren’t taught for too long but

should have been,— are not in-house, technical, narrow works that are disengaged from the basic questions of their times and places. Quite the contrary.

Why else have books been burned, scholars driven into exile, poets silenced, philosophers excommunicated, scientists forced to recant, schools been closed to all but the few – or so determinedly opened to more of us? Why else does Wal-Mart today tell publishers it won't sell some books, which is leading some publishers to stop publishing those books of which Wal-Mart disapproves? Would we have such histories, and goings-on today, if knowledge really were unengaged and neutral?

Nevertheless, those who do not want knowledge, teaching and learning to be openly engaged with what matters most in our lives, in and for our worlds, like to present themselves as the defenders of “the tradition.”

They are defenders of a tradition, yes – but it is the tradition of resistance to most of the great works that have actually endured.

It is actually also a tradition of resistance to, and devaluation of, what we mean by “general education,” is it not?

Academic fields in modern times in the U.S. have turned inward and become more like guilds, with fairly standardized “training” and quite highly prescribed steps to be taken by those who would join the guild. This has led to our present split between majors and general education – and to the notion that only in the major is learning pursued “in depth” and “seriously.”

But general education is where we focus on the learning we think everyone should have, the base we need for lifelong learning – which is to say, learning that continues to engage individuals, and to do so in their communities and their work in the world, their citizenship and activism and other amateur learning, which is to say, that which is done for the love of it.

How odd that this should be devalued in favor of training for professionals, academic and otherwise. Disciplines and general education, professional and serious amateur should be in relation to each other, each challenging the other to go deeper and reach farther and wider in their differing ways. They shouldn’t be in competition. But who gets hired or promoted or tenured on the basis of their work on general education? The system we have is

stacked against engaged learning of the most enduring and cross-cultural sort, I fear.

With the modern – not “traditional” -- severing of theory and practice, of knowing and doing, of learning and living and being, engaged scholarship has too often become a business of experts foraying out to tell non-experts what to do and how to do it – or of students having adventures off campus that are good for them, but are not fully integrated into all their learning, as that learning is not challenged by their experiences.

I don't think that's genuinely engaged at all; it's too one-sided, whether it be in the expert advice mode, or the doing good, charity mode. In a sense it carries the model of a school room, or a religious institution, out into the public arena, and that is not appropriate to democratic relations, dividing people into the knowers and the ignorant, the do-gooders and the recipient of favors as it does. These have their places, but they aren't the sole or, to my mind, the truly educational experiences – the kind of experiences that have through the ages and in all cultures and communities led to scholarship and art that don't just define themselves in terms of their past treasures, but that renew identities and cultures and polities.

So why are we having to rediscover, re-create, and defend an education that knows itself truly to matter today?

Some thoughts:

Because there is today as always pressure to conform, to educate people to fit in and do well without asking too many questions about whether doing well is also doing good;

Because professionalized academic disciplines have not actually been preparing faculty and researchers to engage with communities beyond our guilds except as imported experts – and experts, in this construction, require knowledge, not experience. No wonder we have difficulty knowing how to integrate “experiential” with “book learning.”

Because too much of what we learned during our own “training” was itself exclusive, and, in leaving out the diversities of humankind, also left out the activities that the less powerful and privileged were assigned – which included the actual make-it-work work of homes, communities, organizations of many sorts.

We don't have a deep tradition of knowledge about all that because people other than the few privileged people did it, so, even today when finally there is a great deal more available to be learned from, we aren't yet as knowledgeable as we should be.

And, perhaps most consciously, we are exceedingly anxious about, as well as unprepared for, the obvious reality that, when we readmit engaged learning as central to what liberal education – in general AND in majors – really means, we're going to have to be ready to provide readings and resources for our students that speak to their experiences and – more unnerving – we're going to have to evaluate them, to make those scary, indeterminate judgments that aren't just measurements by standardized scales.

We not only don't know how to do that, we think it is wrong to do it. Making moral and political judgments threatens, we have been taught, fairness, open-mindedness, free inquiry. It threatens dogmatism, sectarianism – name it. And all that, we rightly agree, is not our business as educators.

But the practice of making moral and political judgments does not require that everyone come to the same conclusion, one that can be

marked right or wrong, ideologically pure or impure. On the contrary.

Like good scientific lab work, or engineering, or becoming a writer or a philosopher or an anthropologist, or a literary critic, or an ethicist, or a sculptor, moral and political judgment requires practice, models, examples – and they also require a rich sense of the very large and diverse literature on these crucial topics.

These arts and their virtues, like all others, entail knowledge, then, and practice, and they can be evaluated as to their achievement, their more specific excellence or virtue.

For example, someone with moral and political judgment is capable of relating principles to particulars, to individuals, without violating what is different between principle and particular. She is able to sort out what is and is not of moral and political relevance in complex situations. He is able to imagine, and empathetically to comprehend, differing meanings and consequences that are at issue. She has an informed sense of what justice, and mercy, may require in differing contexts and situations, and can take those situations into account. He can listen well; speak persuasively; and work with differing others to come to the best possible judgment,

perhaps one she might otherwise not have thought of. These are difficult arts, but no more so than other arts of discernment, of comprehension, of choice; they can be learned, practiced, reflected on, and developed in an ongoing way that is neither rigid nor indecisive.

As to fears of politicizing education: If we are charged with politicizing and moralizing what should be disinterested, objective and neutral because we undertake to reflect with and inform our students about responsible actions both individual and public, then, it seems to me the proper response is not, Oh, no, we don't do *that*. It should be, yes, we do engage with those most important of all issues because we're educators and education matters. We do it so that people will not be graduated who are no more able to make responsible choices and take responsibility for their actions than when they came to us.

And no, we don't indoctrinate by teaching only one moral code or one political position. Why would we do that? We don't teach only one historical view, any one history, any one school of literature, any one school of science, any one philosophy. On the contrary: we practice the public arts of listening to differing voices and positions; taking the risk of speaking when we will be

disagreed with; seeking shareable grounds; finding ways to deal well with real disagreements – we do that in all that we teach, and we do it also with traditions and differing cultures’ and times’ moral and political thinking and actions.

If we do it well, people will differ more than when they came to us, not less; they’ll just do so more thoughtfully and more effectively – and as part of ongoing learning and change that will last a lifetime.

We are helped in taking up this difficult but crucial challenge by the development of the new academy over the last 30 or so years in response to the great movements of our times – the environmental and social and political justice movements that have challenged and enriched scholarship and teaching as well as our shared public life and aspirations to democracy.

We have, in fact, been in the middle of a renaissance during these years, an explosion of new and rediscovered knowledge that breaches all kinds of established boundaries from the disciplinary to the economic and political and cultural and moral and religious, as well as geographic and national.

We are now under pressure to undo that renaissance, to impose standardized measures and stop expanding and crossing so many boundaries, making such efforts to be more inclusive and engaged.

All this is being imposed on us supposedly to increase accountability, and to undo wrongheaded politicization.

But to what and whom are we being held accountable? Not to a long tradition of works and figures very few of which were vetted by measurable outcomes, by which they would most likely have failed. Not to all the works that that tradition itself suppressed because they were of, by, and/or for people and peoples defined as inferior and insignificant. Not to the individual uniqueness of each of our students, and her or his special promise. Not to the multiple cultures and communities that offer their own rich traditions, ways of thinking and making art and making lives and that can only yet again be judged lesser if dominant culture-imposed measures are re-imposed.

And most assuredly standardized measures do not make us accountable to a public realm in which there is freedom to express differing views, think and believe differently, and do so protected by an equality that precisely does not require us to be all the same

in order to have and use our rights. To be accountable in ways that work against all that is not to be held responsible; on the contrary, it is to take responsibility away from teachers and learners and hand it over to those who want standardized results by which to sort out who wins on their terms, and who loses.

As for the claim that the new academy has wrongly politicized the academy, again, quite the contrary. Returning public life and concerns to education, thereby strengthening the possibility of responsible activism, engagement and citizenship in a would-be democracy, is not “politicizing” it as that term is now used. It is precisely not imposing any one ideology.

The new academy itself, with all its new fields and ways of teaching and learning, developed because excluding the majority of the US population, and most of the world, is hardly a neutral thing to do: it perpetuates a moral and political hierarchy.

What is hitting us now is a political agenda of privatization that undoes the steps we’ve taken toward inclusive freedom of inquiry premised on the democratic ideal of an active, informed, participating citizenry.

One example among too many: (I read here from an email – planners of a panel session at a national panel on suicide were told that support from the Department of Education would be pulled if the title of that panel was not changed. Why? Because it made it evident that the session dealt with suicide among lesbians, gays, bisexuals and transgender people. The panel planners who sent the email around noted that this, of course, indicated just why their panel was essential.)

As for privatization: it means removing the rights of the people to free inquiry, to research committed to the public good, to support by government which can, most assuredly go wrong, but as long as it exists as a representative rule by law, also permits us to influence and change it.

Those who are funded by such private sources are not freer than those who are funded by a government (at least a government that is not controlled by private money). When Novartis, a Swiss pharmaceutical and plant genetic engineering company, gave massive funding to a whole department at the University of California/Berkeley, it got ownership rights to one third of all research from that department – whether or not it directly funded that research. It also got 2 out of 5 seats on the university body

that decides what will and what will not be researched. And private companies that fund research have a track record of discouraging or forbidding publication of findings; after all, they don't want their competitors to get what they paid for and plan to profit from. This affects what is studied, and it affects the quality of research.

There are more and less good research/corporate partnerships, of course, and some few have yielded money to universities that use it for very good purposes. My point is that there are also risks, and that whatever else we think of it, it does not automatically mean that universities have more freedom, do better research, or are less "politicized" – unless you think that it is not political to give power over research and campuses to for-profit concerns, and is political to support them as essential to the public good.

Finally, let me give an example of a way to engage students and research with the public good that is not just tacked on. The University of North Carolina at Charlotte has a Center for Applied and Professional Ethics. It grew out of efforts by faculty members to move into fields such as medical and business ethics in response to the university's commitment to serve its region and state. It has had effects on undergraduate as well as developing graduate

studies, bringing undergraduate majors into conversation with a program that stresses engagement with pressing ethical issues in various areas that affect many of us.

Another source of this shifting toward a reclaiming of philosophy as a field that should be of interest to all students seeking to lead an examined, morally and politically responsible, engaged life was the department's important participation in general education. Having more students who hadn't the foggiest what the field of philosophy was about, and thought of it, if at all, as something strange and other worldly and abstruse, led good teachers to work hard to involve those students with the hard, significant questions, from which philosophy has always sprung when it renews itself yet again.

This is not an add-on, either in its placements of students off campus where they encounter real-life problems and hard questions they then discuss on campus, in courses, or in its location in the curriculum. It balances professional specialization with the interests and needs of the world in which all professions are practiced, and in so doing it also brings philosophy back to life, in many senses.

With such integrated general education, majors, experiential and reflective programs, the academy then becomes neither strictly public nor strictly private. It becomes a time and place and occasion to experience, to learn, and to reflect on all of life in a richly diverse community that values and questions the past as well as many traditions and ways of knowing.

And this, I think, is what an engaged liberal education should be – the responsible, responsive provision of a place, a time, and diverse thinkers come together to develop knowledge, capacities and virtues that inform lives in which all will be needed, all should be recognized, and all may contribute. If we don't practice such lives together as we reflect and learn, we are not preparing for a world that badly needs the intellectual, moral and political engagement of each and every one of us.