

Taking Student Learning Seriously: Rethinking the University of the Future*

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Many colleges and universities speak of the importance of student learning. Recruiting brochures highlight, through the use of photos of smiling students and stories that capture their empowering experiences, the institution's dedication to the enrichment of student learning. Indeed, quite a few invest substantial resources in programs designed to achieve that end. But for all that effort, most institutions do not take student learning seriously. They treat student learning, like so many other issues, as one more item to add to the list of issues to be addressed by the institution. They adopt what Parker Palmer calls the "add a course" strategy in addressing the issues that face them. Need to address the issue of diversity? Add a course in diversity studies. Need to address the issue of student learning, in particular that of new students? Add a freshman seminar, perhaps a freshmen academic assistance program with its own dedicated staff, or if you really want to be seen as innovative, a learning community or two.

The result of this process of adding on is that student experiences are increasingly segmented into smaller and smaller pieces; their relationships with faculty, staff, and each other becoming more narrow and specialized; their learning further partitioned into smaller disconnected segments. Therefore while it is true that learning programs abound on our campuses, most institutions have not taken student learning seriously. They have done little to change the essential character of college, little to alter the prevailing character of student educational experience, and therefore little to address the deeper roots of student learning or the lack thereof. As a result, most efforts to enhance student learning have done little to improve student learning.

What would it mean for a university to take student learning seriously? How would university actions change if it took that goal as the centerpiece of its reform efforts? Among other things, a university would stop tinkering at the margins of institutional life and make enhancing student learning the linchpin about which it organizes its activities. It would move beyond the provision of add-on services and establish those conditions at the center of university life that promote the education of all students. To be serious about student learning, a university would recognize that the roots of student learning lie not only in its students, their

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attributes and the situations they face, but also in the very character of the educational settings, now assumed to be natural to higher education, in which it asks students to learn. As opposed to student attributes that, at least at entry, are largely beyond university control, the conditions in which a university asks students to learn are not.¹ They are the reflection of past decisions and can be changed, that is the university is serious in its pursuit of student learning.

Before I speak of these conditions, I need to spend a minute or two describing what I mean by learning. To many, perhaps too many faculty, the process of learning is understood as something akin to filling an empty container with new knowledge or at least the knowledge that the faculty deem important. The faculty provide knowledge, the students receive it. We know or at least have a deeper appreciation for a much more complex picture of learning that as David Ausubel first pointed out in his 1968 textbook *Educational Psychology: A Cognitive View*, has as much to do with what the learner already knows and believes, that is what is inside the container, than it does what is to be put in (Ausubel, 1968). It follows that to think seriously about how we might promote student learning, we have to take seriously what learners already know and believe. In other words, to take *student learning* seriously, we must first take *student learners* seriously.

To do so we have to make public what is inside the container. That is we have to make public what students already know and believe. This is what Lee Shulman meant when he argued that “learning is least useful when it is private and hidden” and “most powerful when it becomes public and communal” (Shulman, 1999). For our discussion this afternoon, it follows that our pursuit of student learning requires us to consider how the educational environments or conditions we construct engage students in ways which bring to the fore their understanding and actively engage them in a communal discourse of what they already know.

Let me add that I do not for a moment believe that such communal discourse among students does not already occur. Of course it does. It takes place in residence halls, along walkways, in cafeteria and coffee shops, and in many other places where students meet, even in fraternities and sororities. But rarely does it occur in an intentional way that is part and parcel of the student educational experience and reflective of institutional pedagogical and curricular decisions about how to organize the conditions for student learning.

¹ I should observe here that it is all too easy to dismiss this issue as one that is primarily a matter of student interests and attributes or of the difficult environments they encounter. On all too many campuses one hears faculty talk about the students lack of interest, their lack of skills, etc. Rarely does one hear faculty talk about the stultifying educational conditions in which they place students or of the skills the faculty bring to help students learn. In the language of the 60’s we hear too much of what we called “blaming the victim.”

Nor do I believe that it is enough to construct what is often referred to as student centered conversations without structure or subject. Such conversations sometimes tend toward mindless relativism...one truth for you, another for you, and never mind the difference. This is not the sort of communal conversations that Kenneth Bruffee had in mind when he said the “we construct knowledge ... by negotiating with one another in communities of knowledgeable peers” (Bruffee, 1995, p.9).

Along the same vein, I do not believe that faculty must vacate the field of such conversations or that such conversations need be devoid of theory and values. We have to find a middle ground between student and faculty knowledge, between theory and practice, and do so, as Peter Senge argues in his book *The Fifth Discipline*, in ways that enable us to understand how our values, beliefs, and actions are part and parcel of the world about us and help create the problems we experience (Senge, 1990). In other words, the learning I have in mind and the conditions that help promote that learning are those that enable students to continually discover, through communal conversations with other students and faculty, how they create, together and individually, their reality. And how they can change it.

Conditions for Student Learning

So what do we know from research about the conditions or if you will environments that promote student learning? And what does this view of learning suggest about how we would act to promote the type of learning to which we aspire?

As to the conditions that promote student learning, research point to five. First, high expectations are a condition for student learning. Conversely, expecting little is a prescription for the absence of effort and subsequent learning. As someone once noted “no one rises to low expectations.” Yet this is apparently the norm for higher education. The just released results of the National Survey of Student Engagement reported that “only about 13% of full-time students spent more than 25 hours a week preparing for class, the approximate number that faculty members say is needed to do well in college. More than two-fifths (41%) spent 10 or fewer hours a week.” (NSSE, 2003).

Expectations are expressed in a variety of ways. In classrooms they are expressed in the level of intellectual work expected of students and in the degree to which students see learning in classroom as challenging. At the same time, expectations may vary for differing students. These may be expressed in the labels used to describe particular groups of students, as for instance contained in the term “remedial,” or more subtly, but no less effectively, in the way differing students are treated as sometimes happens among faculty and students of

different gender or ethnicity. However expressed, research is clear that students quickly pick up expectations and are influenced by the degree to which those expectations validate their presence on campus.

Second, support is a condition that promotes student learning. Research points to two types of support that promote learning, namely academic and social support. Unfortunately, more than a few students enter the university insufficiently prepared for the rigors of university study. For them, as well as for others, the availability of academic support, for instance in the form of academic assistance courses, tutoring, study groups, and academic support programs such as supplemental instruction, is an important condition for their continuation in the university. So also is the availability of social support in the form of counseling, mentoring, and ethnic student centers. Such centers provide a supportive safe haven for students who might otherwise find themselves out of place in a setting where they are a distinct minority. For new students, these centers can serve as secure, knowable ports of entry that enable students to safely navigate the unfamiliar terrain of the university.

Third, feedback is a condition for student learning. Students are more likely to succeed in settings that assess their skills, monitor their progress, and provide frequent feedback about their learning as they are trying to learn. Immediate and continuous feedback about student progress seems to be key as it allows institutions to intervene and provide support when necessary and enables students to adjust their learning as they learn (see Angelo and Cross, 1994).

Fourth, involvement is a condition for student learning. Educational theorists such as Alexander Astin (1993) and myself (Tinto, 1993) have long pointed to the importance of academic and social integration or what is more correctly referred to as involvement or engagement to student learning. The more students are academically and socially involved, the more likely are they to learn and in turn persist and graduate. A wide range of studies in a variety of settings and for a range of students have confirmed that the more frequently students engage with faculty, staff, and their peers, the more likely, other things being equally, that they will persist and graduate. Simply put involvement matters. And nowhere does it matter more than during the critical first year of college when both developmental and social issues conspire to constrain student learning.²

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² This does not mean that most students are not already involved. Many are involved with their peers in a variety of activities, especially those that are social in nature. But infrequently are they involved in intentional educational activities whose intent it is to produce learning. The question is then is not whether students are involved, but with whom, about what, and in what settings they are involved.

infrequently are students involved in intentional educational activities whose intent it is to produce learning. The question is not whether students are involved, but involved with whom, about what, and in what settings and, I might add, what meanings they take away from that involvement.

Finally, relevance is a condition for learning. Learning, deep learning as contrasted with surface learning, arises when the student engages knowledge in ways that they perceive as meaningful. This is the case because of the way problems or issues that are seen as meaningful, actively engage students in ways which bring to the fore their current understanding and forces them to reflect upon how their understanding can be applied to resolve that problem or issue.

Unfortunately, the educational experiences of most university students are not involving, not seen as meaningful, and rarely informed by frequent feedback about their learning. Learning is still very much a spectator sport in which faculty talk dominates and where few students actively participate. Most students, especially during their first year, experience learning as isolated learners whose learning is disconnected from that of others. Just as important, students typically take courses as detached, individual units, one course separated from another in both content and peer group, one set of understandings unrelated in any intentional fashion to the content learned in other courses. Courses have little academic or social coherence; offer little in the way of relevance to today's students. It is little wonder that students seem so uninvolved in learning. Their learning experiences are not very involving, do little to evoke serious communal conversations about what they are learning.

What should institutions do? How should they reorganize the environments in which they ask students to learn, especially during the critical first year of college? More specifically, what should an elite university such as The University of Southern California do as it moves forward?

To answer that question, I want to first draw on a recent address by Andrew Abbott to the University of Chicago College Class of 2006, a group of students not unlike students here. In that address, Abbott argues that the very fact that students are able to gain entry to an elite university is sufficient to explain their predictable success in adult life. In a very real sense, it does not matter, he argues, how well one does in such a university, other than graduate. Except for the understandable variation in adult earnings between majors such as Business and let's say English, most of the variation between people in adult attainments is explained by individual attributes, talents, and the like, and college of graduation; not what they did in college. Much to the students' delight he then suggests they forgot about grades and not worry

about whether their actions in college will shape their future attainments.³ Rather they should focus on being educated. The point of education in elite universities like The University of Chicago and the University of Southern California is education. To use his words, “the reason for getting an education here – or anywhere else – is that it is better in and of itself... It is better because it is better.” (Abbott, 2003).

What sort of education does Abbott have in mind? Among other things, it is the acquiring of the habit of finding many and diverse meanings and ways of making meaning of any events or phenomena we examine. This should not be confused with the acquisition of different paradigms, schema, disciplines and so on. Rather it is the habit of the mind of looking for new meanings and questioning old ones and being open to the possibility of yet undiscovered meanings. It is the habit of the mind that asks what role one plays in the construction of meanings and how those meanings may change.

Where am I going with this? What I want to argue is that such education requires that we construct settings that actively involve students in ways that brings to the fore their current understandings and call upon them to constantly negotiate those understandings with others, faculty, staff, and student peers; settings in which students have to consider and reconsider how they create, together and individually, their reality. And how they can change it.

Let me suggest then that an elite university such as the University of Southern California should begin by making interdisciplinary learning communities and the collaborative and/or problem-based pedagogy that underlies them the hallmark of student educational experience, especially during the critical first-year of college.⁴ Furthermore let me suggest that these be connected not only to your residential settings (living learning communities) but also to your service learning initiatives.

Here I am not referring to the so-called “learning communities” that many institutions adopt that are little more than forms of co-registration that are added-on to the curriculum. As someone once observed, co-registration does not a learning community make. Rather I refer to those types of learning communities, whose curricular structure and pedagogical practices establish the very conditions to which we have already alluded, namely those that enable students to frame meaningful academic as well as social connections between what otherwise would be discrete intellectual and social experiences and engage in communal

³ It should be observed that graduating in major does not ensure that one works in that field in which one majored. If past evidence is any guide to the future, then it is likely that no more than half of them will work in the careers for which their majors prepared them.

⁴ Here I make the distinction between the more highly structured cooperative learning model and the collaborative learning model that providestudents more say in the manner in which the group does its work.

interdisciplinary, multi-voiced conversations with faculty and their peers about what is known⁵. Let me add that in a racially and ethnically diverse student population like yours - one that I have learned is more diverse than that at UC-Berkeley - the learning communities I have in mind also enable, indeed require, students to engage in communal conversations with students whose life experiences are varied and reflective of diverse ethnic, racial, social, and sexual backgrounds.

When connected to service learning, such learning communities also enable students to consider, in ways textbooks cannot, how their actions help construct their reality and how they might change it. Least we forget the purpose of service learning is not so much service as it is service in the pursuit deeper learning. Regretfully, such learning is undermined when service learning, like other initiatives, is implemented as an add-on to, rather than integral part of, the curriculum.

Learning communities of the sort I have in mind, like those my staff and I at Syracuse University studied several years ago as part of a Federally funded research center and are again studying with a generous grant from the Lumina Foundation for Education, yield important educational benefits. Let me very briefly share with you some of the data from our study. First, we measured student perceptions of intellectual gain and what is referred to as Quality of Student Effort. It is a composite measure that assesses student effort (time-on-task) on a range of behaviors each of which is predictive of learning and persistence. In the chart, which compares the average scores of students in the innovative programs and in the traditional comparison settings, you can see that students in these innovative classroom settings were more involved on all measures of student effort and saw themselves as having made greater intellectual gain.

<u>Effort Score**</u>	<u>Program</u>	<u>Comparison</u>
Course Effort	3.05*	2.46
Library Usage	2.15*	1.94
Faculty Contact	2.25*	1.99
Student Contact	3.12*	2.85
Writing Effort	2.81*	2.65
Perceived Gain	2.68*	2.46

* Indicates a significant difference between groups at the .05 level.

** Scores on a four-point scale from 1(low) to 4 (high)

⁵ To learn more about learning communities, the interested reader should visit the website of the National Learning Communities Project at <http://learningcommons.evergreen.edu>.

Clearly students in learning communities were more involved and were so in a variety of ways. It is significant that student involvement in learning extended beyond the classroom into the corridors and walkways of the campuses we studied. In the following quote, a student expresses his understanding of how his involvement with his peers within the classroom enhances his learning, even after class.

“You know the more I talk to other people about the class stuff, the homework, the tests, the more I’m actually learning...and the more I learn not only about other people, but also the subject because my brain is getting more, because I am getting more involved with other students in the class ...I’m getting more involved with the class even after class.”

More to the point of our present discussion, we heard this theme expressed here by a student who found herself in a very diverse learning community:

“I think more people should be educated in this form of education... We learn not only how to interact with ourselves, but with other people of different races, different sizes, different colors, different everything...I mean it just makes it better...not only do you learn more, you learn better.”

Another student in the same setting put it this way:

“So you are constantly having to think, re-think, and even re-re-think what’s going on in light of all the feedback you’re getting from all these different points of view. What it does is lead you to understand things in ways you cannot in a typical class.”

It is sad I think that colleges and universities are one of the last institutions where Americans can experience intercultural life. In a society based on the ideals of democratic pluralism but limited by its failure to realize them, the absence of any sustained and meaningful conversations with other cultures and belief systems places a particular responsibility on American higher education to promote such conversations. But increasing access of diverse peoples is not enough if by our unwillingness to be intentional and educative that access simply serves to reproduce the cultural and racial segmentation and isolation that we see in our broader society.

Though far from ideal for our purposes here, these quotes begin to capture the nature of student experience in collaboratively taught, interdisciplinary learning communities, in particular those that are diverse in student composition.

Parenthetically, it is a quality of student experience that we are seeing again in our current study of learning communities for academically under prepared students.

The Challenge of Learning Communities

Such collaborative, problem-based, learning environments are not easily wrought. Their construction poses a series of challenges to universities and to the faculty in those universities. Not the least of these have to do with the faculty's willingness and capacity to develop such settings for their students. Among other things, collaboratively taught learning communities require of faculty skills in curriculum and pedagogy that are not typically part of the faculty skill base. It is ironic that in all of education, from kindergarten to the university, only faculty in higher education are, as a matter of practice, not trained in teaching pedagogies, not trained in assessment of learning strategies, and not knowledgeable of theories of student learning, student development, and the impact of cultures and contexts on learning styles. No wonder we are referred to as "higher education" faculty.

At the same time, collaborative learning pedagogies require faculty to de-center themselves in the student learning process; to move to a position of facilitators of student learning where they no longer have to feel obligated to carry the burden of student learning entirely on their shoulders. But it does not require faculty to vacate the ground of communal discourse. Instead it calls upon them to "bring students into a community of learning around the subject itself" (Palmer, 1997). I refer you here to Parker Palmer's *The Courage to Teach: Exploring the Inner Landscape of Teacher's Life*, (1998), Finkel and Monk's "Teachers and Learning Groups: Dissolution of the Atlas Complex" (1983), and Barr and Tagg's "Moving from Teaching to Learning: A New Paradigm for Undergraduate Education" (1995).

Of course it can also be said that university reward systems, especially but not only in the elite research universities, are not particularly conducive to the sort of investment of time and energy that such teaching requires of faculty. Nor do the disciplines or should I say knowledge fiefdoms in which faculty are housed seem to reward faculty for the types of cross discipline/field that such curricular structures call for. One might say that the decks are stacked against the construction of such learning environments.

But here again is where being serious matters. I do not mean to underestimate the challenges involved. But just imagine what a powerful statement the University of Southern California could make in the marketplace of ideas if it took student learning

so seriously that it required new faculty, who were not already so trained, to be trained during their first year in pedagogy, curriculum, and assessment, and be made knowledgeable of student learning and development theories. Just imagine what a powerful statement the University of Southern California could make if it made interdisciplinary learning communities and the collaborative pedagogy that underlie them the hallmark of the first year experience and provided the resources and incentives to make it real. Just imagine what a powerful statement the University of California could make if it established an innovative first year college whose curriculum, pedagogy, and structure were designed expressly to promote student learning.

Concluding Thoughts

Let me conclude with several thoughts. First, regarding distance learning and the emergence of a global network society. There is little doubt that we are rapidly moving toward a future where conversations between diverse peoples and belief systems are commonplace. We will have, if we do not already have, immediate access to information of all sorts from all corners and crevices of the world and from a wide range of belief systems. The possibilities for learning are immense. But so are the dangers. Like the ERIC database, we run the risk of being overwhelmed with so much information of so variable quality that meaningful shared communal discourse is constrained, not advanced. All our citizens, but especially those who are likely to occupy positions of influence, must acquire the habits of mind, the intellectual capacity to sift and discern, to weigh and consider, re-consider and even re-re-consider what meaning one should draw from the forthcoming deluge of voices. In the same way, the technology of the blackboard led teachers to turn their backs on their students, so to do I fear that the technology of distance learning in a global network society could lead us to turn our backs on meaningful cross-cultural conversations.

I do not mean, however, to dismiss or underestimate the potential of distance learning in a global network society. But potential does not reality make. Rather I worry about our willingness to invest the resources needed to build the sorts of collaborative learning communities at a distance and on-line that our students' education require. This is not merely a matter of technology, but of our willingness to have our pedagogy and curriculum drive our technology, not the other way around. Put another way, instant messaging and chat rooms a learning community do not make.

But no distance learning is more powerful than learning at a distance; that is to say in a setting different from that with which one is familiar. As an ex-Peace Corps volunteer and an

observer of student experiences in study abroad programs, I can attest to the power of those programs. I am not referring, however, to living in a residence hall in an English speaking country, but to programs where students are required to learn in countries with different languages, if not religious and cultural beliefs; of having them confront, perhaps for the first time, the sometimes uncomfortable feeling of being the “other.” If the University of Southern California wants to take the lead in the global network society, it is important that its students step outside the network in the same way that so many foreign students do when they leave their cultures to come to the University of Southern California.

Finally, I want to close by arguing that when students engage in collaborative learning in diverse settings, in learning communities that are interdisciplinary in nature and whose knowledge base spans racial, cultural, and political boundaries, and in service learning that is community-based, they are engaging in a deeply democratic education. When students come to understand in ways that lectures cannot convey that there are multiple meanings to every issue and that their reality is, in part, of their doing and can be changed – they are in fact engaging in a educative process that is essentially moral and civic. It is an education process that is better because it is better.

Thank you

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