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Obstacles to Restoring Character Education

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"Some people never learn anything because they understand everything too soon."

Alexander Pope

The focus of this conference on cultivating virtues with interdisciplinary approaches evokes horticultural images of raising diverse crops in a new and complicated environment. Schooling is also frequently regarded as a cultivating event in which adults planfully bring the young to a level of maturity that includes their ability to have knowledge in a range of academic disciplines. But educators must depart from this limited horticultural imagery when their obligations expand and deepen to also include enabling the young grow and conduct themselves in morally virtuous ways. As educators endeavor to fulfill that wider and deeper obligation they need to survey the territory identifying obstacles that may limit their possible successes. And they need to devise plans for overcoming any obstacles.

This paper addresses three dangers across both higher and lower education for educators who seek to re-arrange the current status quo in order to plant seeds of virtue and moral complexity. Three clear danger areas are: 1) the forbidding mountains of the academic disciplines, 2) the arid lifeless deserts of standardized testing, 3) the confusing forest of virtue-moral-ethical-character values education programs.

I. The Forbidding Mountains of Academic Disciplines

It is nearly impossible to think about life in the 21st century and identify one problem that is exclusively a science problem, a mathematics problem, or a history problem. And it is equally impossible to conjure a problem that is devoid of moral issues. Evidently we have come to believe that after we structure the education of the young so heavily on four basic subject areas (science, history, mathematics and language/literature) that somehow the magical alchemy of the school's Commencement Address will enable the graduates on their own to instantly integrate basic insights from diverse academic disciplines in ways that lead to good, moral solutions for complex, real-life problems. To believe that it would mean that one has never been fully awake at, or focused on, a Commencement Address. And it would mean one had never experienced ceaseless information-saturated, bloodless, academic, discipline-centric teaching. Kenneth Boulding, a world-class economist, often remarked that one of the hazards of understanding economics is that doing so results in "one feeling compelled to teach it to someone." He had in mind of course, teaching as transmitting to the innocents a set of comparatively microscopic insights in one field of one the social sciences within the larger domain of history and the social sciences which themselves are each part of a sprawling organizational academic structure that also features mathematics, the sciences, and the humanities, among others.

But the problem is a great deal more complicated, severe, and rooted than Boulding's gleeful compulsion to pass on and, perhaps even embalm, highly detailed disciplinary information. How did the academic disciplines come to have such a commanding influence over the structure of higher and lower education? As a quick case study please consider Brown University, a fine American institution established in 1764. The original charter clarified that the goal was to benefit society and form "the rising generation to virtue, knowledge, and literature, thus preserving in the community a succession of men of usefulness and reputation." (200th Anniversary Celebration of Brown University- 1964, p.7.) May the 51% of our species excluded from this plan, please forgive or forbear the otherwise comparatively well-intentioned gentlemen from 250 years ago. Along the way "usefulness and reputation" at Brown University came to be subordinated by a drive for "new knowledge regardless of where it leads us" and by "the values and preferences of each faculty."

There has been generally reasonable regard for the reputational dignity and integrity of higher education faculty members, but these have gradually become more like pleasing, incidental university by-products than being a fundamental “charter-worthy” principle. Gradually higher education established that usefulness would mean the production of more new knowledge primarily through research, broadly defined, across all disciplines. The broad 1764 conception of “usefulness” disintegrated into the harsh “publish or perish” doctrine. The result has been the expansion of new knowledge cascading across higher and lower education. At both those levels the formal and informal curriculum spoke more and more of the mastery of information. Those who worked on the “caring-for-one’s reputation” goals of education, higher and lower, began to lose influence and disappear.

Years later the Dean of Brown University spoke of two further developments emerging from the knowledge and information explosion across our culture:

- 1) the time that the young spend in schooling has been steadily lengthened
- 2) teaching in each academic disciplines became more information–centric.

As Dean Morse explained it, the universities are being fragmented and the comprehensive interdisciplinary requirements of an undergraduate degree dissolved into fact-based preparation for graduate study. He argued that the acceleration of knowledge has reached a critical point with clear positive advantages in terms of new discoveries across all fields, but with severe inattention to any possible deleterious effects. Today we can understand well how the deleterious impact is especially grave because Dean Morse raised these concerns 50 years ago. No one can possibly imagine that the deleterious effects of so heavily emphasizing new knowledge and facts have abated over the last half-century. For example, in current parlance we hear constantly about the primacy of “data-driven decisions.” Again, Dean Morse’s wisdom clarifies, “Our troubles come not from specialization (which is essential), but from excessive pre-occupation with specialization.” ((200th anniversary Celebration of Brown University – 1964, p. 23-26.) As a further example, the curriculum in higher education now rarely includes formal attention to virtue education. If the current generation of teachers in lower education emerge from higher education that has steadily eroded interest in things such as virtues, ethics, and “principle-driven decisions,” then we cannot really expect them to devote curricular time in schools to virtue education.

Is there a way out of this deterioration? In Ortega y Gasset’s “Barbarism of Specialization” he warns of specialists who “know” very well a tiny portion of the universe, but in accomplishing that they develop a learned “petulance” preventing them from connecting their accomplishments with the accomplishments of even nearby subject-matter specialists. (Ortega y Gasset, P. 78.) The resulting academic fortress mentality must be penetrated. All who have seen the wisdom in Coleridge’s “willing suspension of disbelief” as the power of letting new artistic insights and experiences wash over us before we invoke our rational responses now must turn to a corollary. Educators at all levels must recognize how we would be well-advised to “suspend our belief” in the contemporary construct of the academic disciplines. Each of the long-standing traditional academic disciplines is actually more dynamic than commonly conceived today. One part of the solution would be to re-capture for all the disciplines the vitality and lively intellectual tensions too-often obscured by heavily emphasizing the search for new knowledge.

As an example, consider history as an academic discipline. It is usually one of the favored few disciplines that is inflicted on students from primary through undergraduate schooling. If we regard the disciplines as lively organisms that grow, change, and even cross-breed instead of seeing them as mausoleums of approved information, then we will open students, teachers, pedagogy, and the curriculum to levels of energy too often stifled by a belief that “students must

master the information first before they can think about it.” If historians and history teachers believe the fundamental definition is Otto von Ranke’s “the past as it actually happened,” then their teaching and the scholarship will become a fact-based chronicle. May we turn to the poets who are renowned for vivid images and economy of words. William Blake’s observation helps us see the hazards of stony disciplines and fact-centric schooling. He tersely noted, “Expect poison from standing water.”

If we stir into von Ranke’s basic idea Collingwood’s claim that history is neither “made nor written without love and hate,” then everything changes. His important idea means that studying the past becomes more authentic, more complex, and more human. If further we recognize Croce’s definition of history as “contemporary comment about the past,” then the teaching, learning, pedagogy, and scholarship in this broad term history is once more transformed substantially. In a healthy history curriculum each of those ideas is recognized and understood. Studying, creating, and writing history are ultimately moral actions. Neither historians, nor teachers nor students can make up events that did not happen. And they cannot ignore things that did happen. These historians’ reflections are far too seldom explained to students. If we fail to give students practice in figuring out what the past means for their lives today, then history becomes an easily ignorable mausoleum and an excellent opportunity to contribute to their moral understanding is missed. Each of the disciplines includes such opportunities within the disciplines, across the disciplines, and beyond the disciplines.

Both higher and lower educational leaders need to consider carefully how the advice from Alfred North Whitehead can help them elevate each academic discipline beyond being kingdoms either at war or indifferently co-existing in nearly all curriculum structures. In his clear-eyed 1928 essay “Universities and Their Functions” Whitehead explained,

“The justification for a university is that it preserves the connection between knowledge and the zest for life by uniting the young and the old in the imaginative consideration of learning...Fools act on imagination without knowledge; pedants act on knowledge without imagination. The task of a university is to weld together imagination and experience.”

(Whitehead, p. 94.)

The vital task that Whitehead clarifies is by no means limited to the supposed apex of schooling, the universities. Educators at every level and in every academic discipline need to master those welding skills. But even if students and teachers at all levels learn how to overcome the obstacles Whitehead identified as “pedantry” and Gasset identified as “petulance,” they would still need to turn attention to what the 1764 Brown University charter endeavored to produce, a succession of graduates who are useful and have reputations for integrity. Interdisciplinary is better than warring fiefdoms, but it is not enough.

The Gold Standard for overcoming the stultifyingly narrow academic disciplines involves both recapturing their dynamism and moving well beyond small-bore interdisciplinary improvements such as bio-chemistry or economic history. Education at all levels must include respect for meta-disciplinary issues in learning, even in learning a specific subject area. These issues involve emotional, spiritual, and virtue-ethical dimensions of each object being examined through scientific, mathematical, aesthetic, or historical lenses. To somehow exclude those dimensions at every turn may have advantages at times in analyzing or discovering new knowledge, but to never involve such matters results in segmented and sterilized analytic results and can quickly make new knowledge inert.

II. The Arid, Lifeless Deserts of Standardized Testing

Authentic and enduring education reform is often cursed by the public's infatuation with fads and slogans. The problem is never more evident than it is on matters of testing. Far too frequently conversations about schooling turn to the supposed "results" of schooling. As those conversations deteriorate very important ideas are conflated – terms such as accountability, assessment, academic rigor, standardized testing, and classroom tests. To understand how virtuous educators can successfully participate in and even guide such conversations each of these concepts as well as their attendant images and connotations must be disentangled.

No one is really arguing that schools should not be held accountable. But defining what accountable means for large institutions like banks, hospitals, corporations and schools is far more complex and consequential than simplistic measures often relied on. Similarly, no one really contests that schools should be responsible for a level of academic rigor. Again, we want banks to attend to fiduciary rigor; hospitals to medical rigor. To understand the steady chants about academic rigor in context imagine how other parts of a school's responsibility could sound quite unfamiliar. Do we ever speak about social rigor, ethical rigor, well-being rigor, emotional rigor, aesthetic rigor, and civic rigor as important school standards and goals? Each of these are also responsibilities that educators must discharge. And there are ways to assess the educators' impact on students regarding these. Instead we expend enormous amounts of energy and resources on standardized testing without pausing enough to inspect whether test results actually represent of academic rigor.

Tests are part of a much larger concept of assessment. And students as well as schools have conducted successful diverse assessments that are not standardized, high-stakes test. Consider this question on a standardized, high-stakes test:

The best method to ensure that traffic will run efficiently is:

- A. installing traffic lights
- B. repairing roads
- C. closing side streets to traffic
- D. posting speed limits

The "correct" answer is A. But a case could easily be made for B, C, or D. For example interstate highways have no traffic lights and no side streets, yet traffic moves efficiently.

It remains unknown whether the test-designer was held accountable, received an F for an ambiguous question, was fired, or was put on probation. The test designer's name was not on the test, but the student's name and the school was on the answer sheet. They each suffered from a rush to false accountability or what Whitehead called the "fallacy of misplaced concreteness." The excessive emphasis on high-stakes, standardized testing conspires with false academic rigor. In the end this false rigor replaces a more careful, thorough, and authentic assessment because it is simply too convenient, inexpensive, profitable for some, as well as being too blithely regarded as objective.

Looking at the supposed objectivity of standardized testing more closely we see that only the scoring process is actually objective – and that is conducted by a computer. But every other step in the process involved considerable subjectivity – the overall design and architecture of the test; each term, process, or fact that is included as well as excluded item-by-item; the exact wording; the "correct" answer; and the use of the results for students, teachers, schools, and communities.

In the highly influential American SAT Examination (Note that SAT is not an acronym; the three letters represent nothing.) a score difference of 144 points out of a total of 1600 is required before one can say one student's score is significantly higher than another. Yet schools and colleges speak regularly of how their graduating or entering classes improved test scores, even if it is only a 20 point increase.

Linda Darling-Hammond captures this problem quite elegantly:

“Recognizing a correct answer out of a predetermined list of responses is fundamentally different from the act of reading, writing, or speaking, or reasoning, or dancing or anything else that human beings do in the real world” (Darling Hammond)

There are valuable ways to better link the broad and worthy concept of assessment to the students' lives after schooling. The emphasis on the “recognizing a correct answer from a predetermined list” in order to assure putative objectivity is a fool's errand. All those errant errands have harmfully squeezed out of the curriculum – the arts, civics, history, and virtue education among other important learning activities. These have each been derailed not because they are deemed unimportant, but because they are deemed immeasurable. Students and society have paid a steep price for this reliance on one narrow component of assessment about one or two narrow elements of a student's school and life experience.

The frustration mounts as the youth are criticized for many other failings in citizenship, in morals, in the arts, when in fact it has been made absolutely clear that the academic tests count the most by far. The failures caused by “teaching to the test” is a slogan often asserted by critics of testing and they make complete sense if the tests are so narrow. But “teaching to the test” would not be so bad if we enlarge the kinds of tests, or more properly, enlarge the kinds of assessments. Standardized test data are one source of information. Thorough evaluations of how successful a complete school system has been would also include careful qualitative and longitudinal assessments looking at the long-range impact of a curriculum. If schools were also to highly and equally regard as valuable assessment information things such as student portfolios (of work compiled over a semester or a year) or student performance/presentations about results of large, lengthy study projects, then a sensible balance could be restored to the curriculum. When those portfolios and presentations are regarded as one kind of test among others, we can then begin to understand that these phrases all would seem sensible - “preparing budgets to the test,” “planning learning activities to the test,” “selecting teachers to the test,” and even the educational Holy Grail spoken by one student, “learning from my performance.” If projects, presentations, performances, and portfolios are established as important assessments, then the door is re-opened for serious integration of virtue education into the curriculum. If we can begin to expand and blur the borders of academic disciplines as well as enlarge the kinds of assessments, then students will be able to tackle projects and problems with a normal consideration of the complex morals and virtues at issue in the problems and the solutions.

III. The Confusing Forests of Virtue-Moral-Ethical Character-Values Education

Returning to the details of the 1764 Brown University Charter once more we see that virtues were regarded as valuable not only to the individual, but also to the larger community, “Whereas institutions of liberal education are highly beneficial to society by forming the rising generation to virtue, knowledge, and useful literature...” The emphasis on virtue, character, and moral education was regular and widespread in higher and lower education through the 18th and 19th centuries. Many factors have conspired to erode that emphasis. We have discussed here only two of those

factors that became nearly ossified obstacles to achieving those laudable 18th and 19th century educational goals - the steady academic movement toward knowledge-based dominated scholarly disciplines and the narrowing of higher and lower curricula into easily testable mastery of that academically produced knowledge. The result has been a regrettable setting aside of broader goals of including virtuous wisdom as a goal.

In Bertrand Russell's "Knowledge and Wisdom" he describes four elements that comprise wisdom – intellect, comprehensiveness, vision, and feeling. Wisdom depends on one being well-informed not only in particulars, but also in the broader context of particular knowledge and devoid of both Whitehead's "pedantry and y Gassett's "petulance." Beyond that wisdom requires a vision into eventual, possible positive and negative outcomes of a choice. This engages both one's imagination and thoughtful, thorough deliberation with others. Importantly too Russell emphasizes the feeling and caring component of good and wise judgement. As such he serves a precursor to what today we call social-emotional intelligence, which is vital to comprehensive understanding of virtuous actions. (Russell, p.453.)

There have been many diverse efforts to restore what in 1764 was regarded as virtue education when it was seen as entirely normal and acceptable. The term came from an institutional charter. Such documents rarely can be seen as ground-breaking. They nearly always are consolidating and advancing agreeable ideas present in that culture. The massive presence today of the power of both the academic disciplines and standardized testing in schools have in effect made those two forces into the contemporary equivalent of a charter. Those two forces constantly and powerfully shape the public mind. But for analyzing the third obstacle to virtue education we need to think in terms of a different metaphor, the confusing forest of reform movements. Frequently as mounting concerns about any status quo (political, economic, artistic, etc.) burst into more sharply pointed reform efforts, the reform activities diversify and shift from modest reforms to more radical challenges. Frequently, the status quo is comfortable with that kind of splintering because the status quo can parry with considerable ease several separate reform initiatives. Sometimes the differences across reform groups are not much more than matters of nomenclature. But in other instances the reform efforts differ considerably or are in direct contradiction with each other. When a small group believes it has found or invented the legendary Reform Silver Bullet its zeal usually prevents useful collaborations. Currently, educators who share three concerns:

- 1) over-emphasis on the academic disciplines
- 2) over-emphasis on standardized testing
- 3) inclination and ability to restore virtue education

must try to create a unifying theme across the various subsets of virtue education. Without that unified theme and the authentic "joining of forces" this important reform will remain at best a loose federation of local success stories and with limited impact on the vast deleterious effects of the academic disciplines narrowly conceived and standardized testing lavishly conducted. As we have seen neither of those academic disciplines and testing have to be so narrow. Similarly, the efforts to establish virtue education as a core educational goal does not have to be so splintered. Just as real life is not captured in a compilation of academic disciplines, whether one believes there are 4 or 94 academic disciplines (see the list of programs for many universities), the goal of securing sound virtue education to be featured in basic schooling cannot be achieved with only a list of diverse and locally successful ideas. The choice is familiar: to create a unified irresistible reform or conduct a powerful revolution in the contemporary conceptions of schooling advancing ideas coming from several directions. Remaining splintered and narrowly focused means they can be easily castigated as a fad or a fling. In light of the massive status quo commanding education, a

status quo featuring tradition, powerful academic disciplines, and an abiding faith in accuracy of standardized testing – those seeking to restore virtue education to a rightfully prominent place in the curriculum would see likelier success in choosing a more unified and comprehensive reform language.

Despite the power of the status quo, education is nearly always regarded as being in some form of a crisis. Recently, enough concerns have been raised about excessive narrowing of schooling that the virtue reform movement would be well-advised to fuse those concerns with the other efforts to reform education, especially if the imagination is to actually re-formulate education. Among several good reformulation ideas, virtue education stands to lose out unless it is able to present itself as a coherent movement and it integrates with other good reformulation efforts with which it has much more in common. For nearly three decades the nomenclature surrounding character education has been wide-ranging and shifting. Those resisting more curriculum time and energy on virtue education (or any of the several other versions) have been able to deflect the efforts as local, small-caliber, and at time, at odds with other virtue education programs. A review of the strengths and limitations of the more notable programs can help sculpt a more comprehensive concept for the next phase of education reform.

The values-clarification movement as far back as the 1970's did re-open the matter of schools needing to equip students for value-based decisions. It was accepted by many as a welcome relief to a total academic, objective curriculum that regarded values as the responsibility entirely for parents and churches. It tried to focus on the "process of valuing" and not on the "content of an individual's values." The movement faltered due to its insufficient response to challenges about its apparent authenticating of all values and about the artificiality of the value dilemmas they used to open discussions with students.

Much of the movement to restore virtues and morals to the school curriculum emerged locally as instilling good morals in students, particularly at a very young age. The specific morals selected for these various school inculcation activities were quite reasonable and widely agreeable – for instance, honesty, kindness, respect, and responsibility. However, beyond having students recognize and recall the importance of each virtue, too many of these projects did not help students understand either how each of these morals or virtues play out in complex real-life situations. Students were not helped to figure out what to do when two morals are in conflict such as honesty and kindness competing in many familiar situations or having to "choose between the lesser of two evils."

Efforts to create ethics education programs confronted some of the same obstacles as moral inculcation efforts. Ethics was generally more academic and less didactic. But, it too had limited connections to real-life issues and it frequently disappeared into other innovations such as humanities education and civics education programs.

Laurence Kohlberg's widely known Cognitive Moral Development Project directly challenged the values clarification movement as relativistic and replaced it with a developmental jurisprudential model. This reform coordinated the levels of moral decision-making with the student's stages of intellectual development. The pinnacle of moral decision-making was justice based on universal values. One of the unsolved difficulties involved the degree to which the Kohlberg model resembled the values-clarification movement in that the dilemmas students studied were not nuanced, complex situations. They were starchy and artificial with simplistic or obvious choices. They both veered away from complexity. Students easily know what they should do in simple situations. Decision-making skills are of clear value, but a much richer and more intricate goal is guiding students so they consistently exercise good judgment. Guidance is needed for the good judgment required in complex, nuanced situations. Those complex situations are not evident in

much of the cognitive moral development model. Kohlberg's hierarchical structure and levels of moral behavior also were completely and imprudently independent of diverse cultural value systems.

While respecting many earlier and diverse moral education programs, four kinds of broader programs that have emerged in the last decade that offer the best opportunity for a unified school reform. They also would move the entire virtues education effort forward and link it more effectively with other significant reforms such as – teaching for understanding; curriculum by backward design; problem solving education; 21st century skills; and rebalancing knowledge, wisdom, and critical thinking. These wide-ranging reforms are each far from separate discrete ideas. The borders are blurry and they each have much in common. Importantly, they all, like virtue education, depart from the information-saturated, test-centric model currently so dominant.

The most promising terms under which these diverse ideas can be productively unified would center on virtues, character, and good judgment. In the final analysis the best results for graduates of both lower and higher education would be their forming a “rising generation” of virtue and high character just as was intended in the 1764 Brown University charter. But the sense of virtue must be more broadly understood to be better than a collection of individual virtues. And high character must extend to include consistent good judgment seasoned with Bertrand Russell's sense of wisdom.

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