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# The Creative Abyss

## *Liberal Education and Diversity*

***One of the goals of liberal education is to create a critical and affirming environment that encourages both students and faculty to enter into a creative abyss that nurtures diversity, objectivity, change, and community. Achieving this goal can result in a transformed pedagogy. Three critical factors for student success are evident: identity, involvement, and a sense of belonging within the academic community.***

The path toward a multicultural campus that is based on a philosophy of community and unity rather than antipathy and hostility requires that students feel a sense of belonging and comfort. However, liberal education is an initially alienating experience for many students and is particularly painful for minority students. This sense of alienation leaves the students facing an abyss that separates the comforts of the past from the uncertainties of the future. In our experiences in a variety of educational settings, we have found that the abyss itself creates a set of conducive conditions that can lead not only to creativity, but to a greater sense of belonging as well as commitment to the institution. Therefore, the responsibility of the administrator seeking a multicultural campus and the challenge to faculty seeking to create a multicultural context in the classroom is to support, guide, and motivate students to create new meanings out of the varieties of exposure available to them through liberal education.

An example of this is seen in an interesting line in Gloria Naylor's novel, *The Women of Brewster Place*, which informs this essay. One of the children approaches his mother with the question: "Mama, Shakespeare's black?" to which the mother replies, "Not yet." What the mother was saying to her child was that when he got to know Shakespeare—infusing that work with the spirit and essence of his experience as an African-American male—Shakespeare would be what he created. This result would be much greater than what would be imposed on him or defined for him. It may be significantly different or perhaps strikingly similar to the Shakespeare created by his

peers. Regardless, it would be a dynamic, evolving concept that is a product of the creative abyss that stimulates intellectual and personal growth.

## A System of Constant Dynamism

So often in discussions about liberal education, whether we debate its goals and purposes, its meanings or its content, we approach the subject from the perspective of those who profess to "know," imposing our understanding upon those who purport to "want to know." We assume students come to us as empty vessels to a full fountain, and that they will leave with their heads filled with the essence of our wisdom that stems from our own liberal education. We often forget that there is a constant need for each generation to create a new concept of liberal education, to infuse it with the meanings and understandings of each era, and to use it as a guide to wrestle with broad questions of identity, citizenship, and humanity. Liberal education must be a system of constant dynamism.

Yet it seems that even those who best understand this process still strive to give some focus, direction, and closure to liberal education, for there is a "teleological bias" in the debate and discussion. It is seen in discussions of the general education core, when people develop various articulations of what every student should know. It is revealed as well in the statement that "A major ought to have a beginning, a middle, and an end—each contributing in a different but specific way to the overall aim of the major." The problem is that while a major may have an end point, and a general education core may have some formal closure, the essence of a good liberal education is that learning should have no end. Therefore, the key challenge *is not* to "connect" learning to either a discipline or to general education, nor articulate the content or parameters of what every student should know. Instead, the key challenge *is* to develop in our students an understanding of, and thirst for, constant learning. This can be done through an emphasis on pedagogy in addition to student involvement and ownership of the learning process that promotes a leap of faith into the creative abyss. This involvement is much more significant than an over-reliance on the content of any program of studies or pursuit of a major.

To understand this process, we might consider four values/perspectives that shape our discussion of liberal education coming from our experience in higher education. Inherent in each of these values is the assertion that a true liberal education should demonstrate the validity of the human experience.

1. *Diversity/Multiculturalism:* The dynamics of a changing American demography and the pull of shifting and shrinking global boundaries continue to force higher education to examine its commitment to diversity and multiculturalism. Ultimately, these latter factors must provide the framework for the educational experience. Such a framework will support the understanding that the existence of multiple cultures as well as multiple identities within the human community do not automatically lead to a sense of community,

cooperation, growth, and development. Instead, the dynamic process of coming together has the potential to be transcendent, becoming greater than the sum of its parts.

2. *Objectivity:* Some believe that an objective liberal education should be comprehensive and characterized by coherence; others state that it should promote the pursuit of truth in the framework of liberal education; others feel strongly that true liberal education lies somewhere between the two. We recognize that there is no value-free perspective. However, our goal is to avoid the inadvertent imposition of a particular set of values on students. Through objectivity, we seek to create an intuitive understanding of different patterns of values.
3. *Change as a constant:* A third perspective is the recognition of the constancy of change and its ability to demonstrate the limits of any fixed or immutable point of view. Not only is history continually evolving, but so is the scholarship and research that is vital to a liberal education. While this knowledge leads to an appreciation and understanding of different perspectives, it helps to develop a flexible perspective that is comfortable with the unknown realm of ambiguity. It is here that all creative possibilities of the future are nurtured.
4. *An organic community*: These previous perspectives build on one another to help us understand the fourth value—the importance of an evolving, organic community. When we refer to the term *organic*, we employ two standard dictionary definitions: "of living organisms" and "inherent or essential." In other words, community is an essential body of living organisms that is also constantly changing and evolving. In a recent unpublished report, George D. Kuh and Brenda M. Robinson argue, "It is natural to think about community in traditional terms—as places where people who look alike, have similar interests, backgrounds, and attitudes, and usually agree on matters; they see things pretty much the same way." Yet, as our population continues to change, this traditional perspective is no longer adequate. Instead, it must promote and protect diversity, objectivity, and change and not homogeneity. As a result, we have redefined community as a "common ground for uncommon people."

Each of these four perspectives provide a corrective balance to the Eurocentricity of education. Bruce Hare observes, "A rejection of the Eurocentric bias that has permeated the language and curriculum of the university is a necessary first step if all students are to gain a sense of their own centrality in the development of our world and national culture. The university is called upon to recognize as a celebrated truth, the multi-ethnic history and character of our society. It is further called upon to attune its language, curriculum, and philosophy to more closely adhere to the 'universal' mission of the university." Consequently, we assert that liberal education ultimately must call for the transcendence of conventional, biased, and politically fused language, curriculum, and structure in regards to race, ethnicity, class, and gender and begin to embrace a new ideology—one that is human and humane.

This approach not only becomes a healthy, fundamental critique of the current curriculum and liberal education, it fundamentally challenges our own sense of self as educators and our institutional identity. However, apart from the views of educators, scholars, and observers, there continues to be a missing component in the critique of liberal education. This component is the view of our students that is virtually absent from any discussion of their educational process. Here we refer not only to the personal perspective of students and their stories, but to good qualitative research, which helps us understand the goals, values, perspectives, and histories that students bring to our classrooms and how these evolve with time and individual understanding. If we include the perspectives our students bring to liberal education, the outcome must be a changing pedagogy in which the educators are also students.

## Challenging and Shaping Values

Our views have been shaped by the many students who have touched our lives—both intellectually and personally. There were Anglo students who thought they were liberal and supportive, who were placed in volunteer situations in low-income black communities, where their values were challenged. Some of them came back with even greater commitment to social justice and equality. One student, for example, upon his return addressed an assembly of his peers and told them that after his experiences in the South, the "whiteness [of the campus] hit me like a snowstorm." Others who were headed to medical school changed from intended specialties to community medicine or general practice. Still others could not handle the challenge to their values; they went into the communities as liberals and came out virulent racists. All of these changes were substantive—none of them were predictable in the classroom. Yet, all were responses of individuals who had their values challenged and examined as the result of an extraordinary learning experience.

The same is also true for African-American students. At a southern black college, we learned that many of our students were so fragile in their self-confidence that they could not cope with any challenge to certain values. Any discussion of social problems in the black community was met with strong objection, even though many of them came from the most adverse circumstances within their community. At one point a panel of black male faculty encountered a student protest when it sought to address the precarious situation of black males and strategies for redressing related problems. The protestors claimed that the panel was "creating the reality" rather than describing an existing reality.

This also became evident at a prestigious residential college, where some African-American students had such a strong sense of exclusion from so many college-supported activities that they asserted that student fees should be used to support a gospel choir and a student journal that categorically exclude whites from any participation. At the same time, blacks who chose not to participate in the gospel choir or "black" activities were immediately stigmatized by such labels as "incog-negro" and even more psychologically debilitating expressions. Divisions were made

between African- and Caribbean-born blacks and the American-born; in addition there were skin differentiations that created a caste system that was profound, confusing, and painful. Such instances make us aware that although a good education is necessary for freedom and liberation, it is far from sufficient.

A poignant example of another type of narrow perspective emerged in an African-American experience course with a heated debate about the legitimacy of different perspectives. It was at this time that a quiet, young man—a "white" male—revealed he was a descendant of a well-known and highly respected black intellectual. He had been at the college for almost four years "passing" because he chose not to say anything about his background. Therefore students as well as faculty assumed he was white. He had been excluded from places where he wanted to be and included in places where he did not want to be nor felt he belonged. His was a quiet, eloquent, and extraordinary challenge to the views of his classmates. The class was silenced beyond belief, for it was difficult to cope with the realization that what they "knew" with such certainty and immutability was without foundation.

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However, not all experiences have been so negative or devastating in their impact. This was exemplified by our experiences at a residential college in a public university. This was an environment where a critical mass of students and faculty from varying backgrounds allowed everyone to be included. Such inclusion meant that unique perspectives were taken into consideration; they were welcomed and affirmed. As a result, the students were receptive to intellectual exploration and criticism. In this environment, we found that students grew far beyond race, ethnicity, or ideology.

The best of liberal education flourished as students began to pursue intellectual areas that they wished to explore—simply because the students own unique perspectives were valued and supported by faculty and staff. In such a situation, their assets and strengths were maximized, while their deficits and weaknesses were minimized through a strong peer mentoring program. The most popular course for black and Hispanic students was a course on Greek, Shakespearean, and modern tragedy. Initially, the students approached the class with a sense of "this doesn't belong to me and I don't fit here." However, the faculty member helped them understand that very often the study of tragedy is the study of a society in which some people have become disaffected or alienated. Within that context, students began to see ways in which their experience could take on new meaning and give them new insight. Students moved beyond their own perspectives by using them as a foundation to critique and expand some of the most revered classical literature. However, the issue was not the revision of the canon or even the inclusion of the student's literary perspectives. Instead, the issue became the creative use of their own history and heritage in order to shape from the literary material a critical and affirming environment that would extend beyond the classroom. The unique understandings of the students informed the experience of the teacher which, in turn, transformed the pedagogy.

Throughout these transformations, three key factors for success became evident: identity, involvement, and a sense of belonging within the academic community. As we continue our efforts in a large, urban institution with a student body predominantly comprised of "new majority" students, these factors still hold true.

1. *Identity:* For most students, the roots of learning are located in the familiar. Students need to be able to move from the familiar to the new, but do so best when they possess initial comprehensions and understandings to support them until they acquire new tools to break away from the old frames of reference. For example, when we take students' everyday lives seriously and incorporate their concerns into curricular content, a blend of the familiar and the new occurs, which can be exciting for both the instructor and student. As one young woman stated:

> "I feel that I'll be pushed in this class, and I like it because I find out a lot about myself and the subject matter when I am challenged—I like learning about myself—it makes me stronger."

This approach provides students with a degree of comfort that fosters thinking and learning and then enables them to express what they have assimilated. What we find in many of our students are surprising levels of sensitivity and ability to deal with multiple complexities in their personal and academic lives. Some student expressions are jubilant, some are painful:

> "It is liberating to think about and to know how intelligent my people really are."

> "Of course my situation was nothing like the people you talked about...but I can relate to how laughter heals you and makes you stronger or at least appear stronger."

> "Your perspective...helped me to understand why my experiences are what they are. This class helped me to let go and express my views and opinions as _____, an African-American woman. From this class I have gained an understanding about others. My dealings with others has changed somewhat because I have decided to try an attitude adjustment when understanding others' differences. Instead of looking at what is wrong, I look at what is different and why."

> "I was really surprised to see that Dr. _____ shared some of the same views that I did. It was sort of an inspiration. I would've never imagined that a person of such high accomplishments could share the same views as I."

These student statements and the subsequent ones were drawn from essays that were written at the end of each class period. These essays provide the instructor(s) immediate feedback on pedagogy and content, as well as the psycho-social significance of the class to the students.

2. *Involvement:* After building a level of comfort and identity, we must move towards active involvement of the students in the learning process. As much as possible, we must engage the students in ongoing dialogue and the careful building of critical thought. We should not succumb to the easy path of playing to student desires for absolute clarity and concrete answers. We must help students become activists in the classroom and analytic observers in their own lives. They must be exposed early to differing points of view, different ways of mounting and analyzing evidence, and be required to constantly integrate and interpret what they are learning. They must be asked to develop arguments and take responsibility for them. Faculty must work closely with students and be willing—to cite a phrase often used by Langston Hughes in his *Simple Stories*—to "listen eloquently" to the emerging student voice. There must be room for spontaneous dialogue and encouragement of students to take risks. As students become more comfortable as risk takers, some assume the responsibility for supporting and nurturing the same growth in their peers, as is evident in this statement:

> "I did not want to mention this in class, but since _____ called me last night to ease his nervousness about the topic, I defended him like a mother bear. Funny thing, until recently I did not want to teach, but the desire is a fire in my bones."

For many students, finding their voice is critical. For so long they have assumed they have little to say in the academic environment. Only when students feel secure enough to want to express themselves, when they come to believe that they have something of importance to say, will they become actively involved in the educational process. As one young woman wrote:

> "This class was a valuable experience for me. I have never been in a situation such as this where my opinion really mattered. I feel like I have grown, and I have a broader perspective of other people.... Thank you for valuing my thoughts and wanting to hear what I had to say."

3. *Belonging:* It becomes clear that the curriculum is not the only means for students to identify with and become involved in their educational experience. A nonintimidating environment in the classroom is as important as an atmosphere of nonintimidation in the larger institution. For students, professors wield incredible power in determining the quality of the learning experience. Professors must show that they sincerely care about the students' learning. They can do so by memorizing student names **and their correct pronunciation**, through encouragement, positive feedback, and the inclusion of students in class discussions. Most important are faculty behavioral signals that indicate to students whether or not they belong or are welcome—in the tone of response to students questions, body language, or a willingness to listen to students' point of view. Alternatively, professors can never afford to be

indifferent to students. Indifference is quickly interpreted as "I don't belong.... I cannot make it here."

To achieve a sense of belonging, the students must identify with the curriculum, professors, and their peers; they must also develop a sense of comfort to promote them to become actively involved in their education. Once this occurs, students are ready to take that leap into the creative abyss of liberal education where new questions are asked, new connections are made, and commitment is instilled as illustrated by the following three students:

> "I want to know more about Native-American and Hispanic people in particular, because I want to know about the interconnectedness that exists."

> "This class has sparked a great internal debate within me. For a long time I tried to find my place in my history. Even though I have not found that spot, I have come one step closer with your help. I have committed myself to attempt to make a difference on this campus."

And finally, a student assumes the role and responsibility of educator:

> "I would appreciate future discussion on how *we* as educators can help the other students move past their fears that are the results of blind vision."

These students exemplify a degree of identity, involvement, and sense of belonging that not only permits them to take ownership of their own education, but supports and promotes the successful pursuit of learning for their peers as well. Thus, they become responsible citizens of the academic community.

This ownership becomes even more evident when placed in the larger context of the perspectives of diversity, objectivity, change, and community that we identified earlier. Students intuitively know that education is about values. To have a professor pretend that the classroom is value-neutral is to invite silent cynicism and disbelief. How a teacher relates to students—through personal presentation, the language, and examples one uses—almost always articulates a set of values, even if not overtly expressed. We are convinced that students respond more positively in class when the value issues are confronted and addressed.

Students grow in creative ways when they have an understanding of their personal values as well as a frame of reference that propels them toward the greater good of informed citizenship and humanity. This frame of reference can be one that promotes a multicultural campus community that is inspired by an open forum in which risk taking and debate is not only accepted but expected by its members. This is an ambiguous and uncertain undertaking, but when it functions well, students develop analytical skills that not only allow them to survive but excel in a changing world. Students enter the creative abyss and emerge with transformed identities, understandings, and humane goals.

## Meeting the Challenge

The question is how can we get greater numbers of students to become deeply involved in their education in this way; to become liberated from restricting cultural values, while at the same time moving to higher levels of "human community." This leap into the creative abyss can only happen in the best framework of liberal education; the kind of a liberal education that helped Septima Clark understand how to reach out to the most disenfranchised and humble of our society. This is what led Septima Clark to work so diligently with a seamstress named Rosa Parks to help her understand how she—a mere seamstress—had a role and responsibility for her own intellectual, political, and spiritual freedom. Septima Clark challenged Rosa Park's values and her sense of self in such a way that she chose to sit down when others insisted she stand up. In so doing, she helped initiate the revolution that brings us to this place and time.

In other words, students cannot do it alone nor in an intellectual vacuum. The context of liberal education must help both students and faculty to not only understand the experience of those who are excluded but also to allow them to enrich their own understandings of themselves. We refer to the kind of quest for knowledge and understanding that characterized the life of el-Hajj Malik el-Shabazz as stated in his *Autobiography of Malcolm X*, even though he never went beyond the eighth grade; the kind of liberal education which led Huey P. Newton to find the soil to nourish the seeds of his revolutionary ideas in the works of Plato, Aristotle, and Emile Durkheim as well as those of Karl Marx; the kind of education that gave Martin Luther King, Jr., the foundation for his letter from a Birmingham jail and the ability to use the intellectual foundations of his critics to refute their limiting perspectives, and the commitment to stand beyond it in light of his own personal danger; and simply, the kind of education that would lead a black woman to write a dissertation in classics about the crowd in Hellenic and Roman history.

It is within this context that we undertake the task of creating a meaningful liberal education through the redefinition and re-evaluation of values and perspectives by ***all*** members of the academic community. All of us must be willing to embrace the challenge of leaping into the creative abyss of uncertainty and change that contains a multitude of histories, heritages, and visions for the future. It is this leap that ultimately enables each of us to ask the question, "Mama, Shakespeare's black?" Once we are able to ask such questions, we will then be on the path to creative realization of liberal education.

### *Suggested Readings*

Newton, Huey P., with J. Herman Blake. *Revolutionary Suicide.* New York: Ballantine Books, 1973.

Saufley, Ronald W., et al. "The Struggles of Minority Students at Predominantly White Institutions." Edited by J. H. Cones III, et al. *Teaching Minority Students.* New Directions for Teaching and Learning16. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1983.