Conversations on Jesuit Higher Education

Volume 36 Article 18

10-1-2010

Forming a Life of the Mind for Practice: Teaching Practical Reasoning

William M. Sullivan

Follow this and additional works at: http://epublications.marquette.edu/conversations

Recommended Citation

Sullivan, William M. (2009) "Forming a Life of the Mind for Practice: Teaching Practical Reasoning," *Conversations on Jesuit Higher Education*: Vol. 36, Article 18.

Available at: http://epublications.marquette.edu/conversations/vol36/iss1/18

FORMING A LIFE OF THE MIND FOR PRACTICE: TEACHING PRACTICAL REASONING

William M. Sullivan

he central educational practices of today's universities and colleges typically direct students' attention to mastering procedures for describing particular events and objects in terms of general concepts. That is, they teach analytical reasoning. Since all fields, including the health professions, do their their actual occupational training in settings of practice, the social function of the university is not nearly as "practical" as often imagined. In large part, the university is a culture-shaping institution. It inculcates a respect for, if not a full competence in, analytical thinking and its products, especially the sciences and technology. It is this culture-shaping role that makes university education increasingly the entry ticket to economic and social participation not only in the United States, Europe, and Japan, but throughout the developing world.

At the same time, the relation of this training to students' struggles for meaning and orientation in the world, as well as ethical judgment, is all too rarely given curricular attention or pedagogical emphasis. A recast liberal education, however, must go beyond the purely analytical to provide students with experience and guidance in using such analytical tools to engage in encounters with questions of meaning and deliberation about action. It will, I believe, become centered upon teaching the art of practical reasoning—the art of placing analytical concepts into a mutually illuminating relation with sources of meaning and responsibility in the world of practice.

The teaching of practical reasoning enables students to learn explicitly how to move between the distanced, external stance of analytical thinking—the "third person" point of view typical of most academic thinking—and the "first and second person" points of view that are internal to acting with others in a situation. Practical reasoning is this back-and-forth between general knowledge, and analytical thinking, and the challenges and responsibilities that come with particular situations. It means an ongoing process of reflection whose end is the formation of habits of critical judgment for action.

The pedagogical vehicles for teaching this movement between viewpoints are varied: the case study; literary exploration of character and response to challenge; the simulation; participation and reflection upon actual involvements in the world. But their common feature is recognition that in practical reasoning it is always the involved stance, the point of view internal to purposeful human activity that provides the ground and the goal of critical, analytical reasoning. This perspective opens reasoning—and the reasoners—to connection with experiences and perspectives that include but transcend the distanced, external viewpoint of analysis.

William Sullivan is senior scholar at the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, Stanford, CA