Talking Back: Disappointment in Bellah's Limited Vision for Higher Education

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Disappointment in Bellah’s limited vision for higher education

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For those of us who have been involved with civic education over the years, Robert Bellah’s call for higher education to embrace the goal of educating for justice and the common good was an encouraging, if not familiar, refrain. Indeed, the goals of civic education are similar to those who educate for justice-character formation, development of a sense of civic responsibility, critically examining one’s place in society and the world, and acting on one’s beliefs. Yet, we all realize that we must struggle to accomplish these goals within a more pervasive model of college that emphasizes the instrumental nature of undergraduate education. The unfortunate reality is that although the goals of civic education and educating for justice have increased in popularity in recent years they nonetheless continue to occupy a fugitive status within the academy.

In my own discipline, political science, civic education is similarly undervalued. But our particular department has broken from the prevailing norms of our discipline and has embraced civic education and teaching for justice as its primary mission. My marginalized position as a civic educator is always driven home to me during admissions recruitment sessions. It never fails that after giving an unprompted presentation about the intricacies of character formation, the importance of developing a sense of justice, and acting on one’s beliefs, I am brought to earth by the inevitable question from a high school senior, "what kind of jobs do political science majors get?" Thus, it was with my idealism still intact but tempered by the reality of the prevailing paradigm of "education for jobs" that I was both encouraged and disappointed with Bellah’s position, encouraged by the optimism that higher education can serve the needs of justice and pursue the common good, but disappointed because of Bellah’s rather limited vision for higher education.

It is not enough to call for a reinvigoration of the Classical canon even if we should inject it with a heavy dose of critical thinking and, although his argument for character formation and an action orientation toward social problems are appropriate, Bellah fails to fully comprehend the context in which those educational efforts take place. Certainly education for justice must be concerned with character, but unless an educational environment exists where one can act in a responsible manner, curricular attempts to form character will be perceived as hypocritical by the very students we hope to reach.

Education scholars have long ago discovered that the "hidden
Curriculum' that exists in elementary and secondary schools can often undermine the stated goals of the formal curriculum when they are contradictory. Note, for example, that while privacy rights are thought to be fundamental for democracy, a high school principal allowed gun-wielding police to conduct an early-morning raid on his school in Goose Creek, South Carolina, and, with the use of drug-sniffing dogs search students for illegal drugs. The real message sent to those students is that privacy is not, in fact, important. Unfortunately, a similar hidden curriculum exists in higher education.

**The hidden curriculum undermines our ability to teach for justice**

If we are asking that our students become virtuous, care for others, and even fight for justice can we, at the same time, structure our classes in such a way that dehumanizes students, disempowers them, and ignores their interests in favor of ours? If we are asking our students to develop a sense of responsibility for those less well-off, are we acting within our own educational institutions to create policies that are fair and just? If we are encouraging our students to become engaged as citizens and speak out on policy issues, are we providing public spaces in our classrooms and on our campuses where students may develop democratic skills of listening, deliberating, and making judgments? If we are building the values of democracy in our students, are we organizing our own education environments in a similar fashion?

Obviously, by my asking such questions I am also suggesting that the hidden curriculum at most colleges and universities serves to undermine rather than support our ability to educate for justice and the common good. Students are seldom given opportunities to make meaningful judgments about issues of importance to them either in the classroom or in the dorms.

None of this should be surprising given that, as Jacob correctly points out, we have embraced a model of higher education that says that its major purposes is job preparation and advancement. Ironically, however, this model has been accepted not just by students, but it has also been enthusiastically embraced by faculty, who see their own colleges and universities as places to advance their own professional interests while ignoring their professional responsibilities to fight for justice within their own institutions. Given by a desire to be recognized within one's own discipline, faculty have little or no interest in college governance, let alone issues of justice that directly affect them. For example, the use of adjunct faculty who work at a fraction of what a full-time faculty member receives, usually without benefits, should be a primary concern for all faculty throughout academia. It is through the direct exploitation of adjunct faculty that full-time faculty enjoy the salaries that they receive. Yet, on almost all college campuses faculty are silent about this obvious injustice. The persistence of such an injustice as well as others makes efforts to teach students about justice difficult, if not appearing to be hypocritical.

Certainly even operating within the constraints of the present-day model of education and the manner in which most classes and colleges are organized, there are still some advances that can be made in the direction of teaching for justice. But the real implications of what civic educators have learned leads to the conclusion that, to be effective at educating for the common good, the college itself must be transformed into a common good.

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