Commitment and Community in Liberal Education: Reflections on the Roles of Students and Educators – Leuphana University – November 28th 2018.

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Thank you so much for welcoming me into your academic community. It is wonderful being here, in this magnificent building and with so many people who have physically come here to talk about education. As I reflect upon my good fortune, I have to consider the question why we still do education this way, in physical, face-to-face communities. After all, doing it this way is very expensive; the building cannot have been cheap, but more importantly, having so many people living and working together is a huge investment of resources. It is not obvious what value it adds. After all, the lectures are better on YouTube, the books we use are mostly from American publishers, and so one could imagine a system of education where students study from home, perhaps getting feedback from artificial intelligence chatbots, and do government qualification exams, in which how you prepare is your business, but when you pass you get a degree. This might be just as effective as a traditional university education, at least in terms of transferring knowledge and skills, and so much cheaper.

However, university education is not only about knowledge and skills, but also about something else: commitment. By commitment, I mean an understanding of what you as an individual feel is valuable and important, what ways of looking at the world you find helpful, and what you want to do with your time on this earth. It is about affirmative acts of choice and orientation in a relative world, through which individuals define themselves and on the basis of which they act in the world.

The concept of commitment is was introduced by a landmark study undertaken at a liberal arts institution in the 1960’s by William Perry. Perry was a guidance councilor and education researcher, who interviewed students at four points in their education, once every year. He asked them about their understanding of what they were doing at university and why it mattered, and observed that there was a clear development in how they understood the point of their education. Students went through three phases: authority, relativism and finally commitment. I would like to share with you some of the things students said during those interviews. All quotes are taken from his initial study.

In phase one, that of authority, students reported that they believed there was truth in the world, and the goal of university education was to learn that truth from experts who understood it. One student said:

When I went to my first lecture, what the man said was just like God's word, you know. I believed everything he said, because he was a professor, and he's a Harvard professor, and this was, this was a respected position.

Hence students assumed that they should simply follow the instructions, and that this would lead them to success. As another student observed:

Well the only thing I could say to a prospective student is just say, "If you come here and do everything you're supposed to do, you’ll be alright, "that's just about all.

Similarly, students felt that the most important thing they were getting from their education was the facts. A student claimed:

A certain amount of theory is good but it should not be dominant in a course. I mean theory might be convenient for them, but it's nonetheless –the facts are what's there. And I think that should be, that should be the main thing.

However, students soon figured out that they did not discover one truth at the university. Initially some students explained this by assuming that perhaps their university was withholding the truth for pedagogical reasons. Others though that perhaps the teaching assistants or the assistant professors with whom they were interacting didn’t know the truth, but that the full professors surely did.

Nevertheless, eventually most students came to the conclusion that the reason why they had not grasped the truth was that there actually is no truth, merely opinion. This is the phase of relativism. Some students came to the conclusion that the point of education is simply to learn how to sound persuasive and talk glibly about whatever subject. One student claimed:

I mean if you read them [critics], that's the great thing about a book like Moby Dick. [Laughs] Nobody understands it.

Others simply got confused. A student remarked about the core courses he was taking:

They're supposed to teach you to arrive at more logical conclusions and look at things in a more scientific manner. Actually what you get out of that course is you, you get an idea that science is a terrifically confused thing in which nobody knows what's coming of anyway.

Some students experienced this phase as deeply disturbing and disorienting. Another student observed:

You know, in the past months, it's been a matter of having really reduced to the level where I really wasn’t sure there was anything in particular to follow. You do begin to wonder on what basis you'd judge any decision at all, 'cause there really isn't-ah .. too much of an absolute you can rely on. There are a lot of levels that you can tear it apart on, or you can base an ethical system that presupposes that there are men who know or you can get one that doesn't presuppose that anything exists ... and try and figure out on what principles you're going to decide any issue. Well, it's just that right now I'm not sure how to make any decision at all. When you're here and are having the issues sort of thrust in your face at times ..that is, just seeing the thinking of these men who have pushed their thought to the absolute limit to try and find out what was their personal salvation, and just seeing how that fell short of an all- encompassing answer for everyone. That those ideas really are individualized.

However, relativism too proved unsatisfactory to most students, and they eventually understood that they would have to make choices, argue for positions, not as absolute truth, but as a personally held conviction among many other possibilities. Students spoke about this phase of commitment with great eloquence:

There are so many values you can't possibly line up all of them. Maybe what you do is pick out one, or two, or three, after a while. It's not a fast thing. It's slow. But you pick out something that you kind of like after a while, rather than trying to do what you see is being liked. I mean, you come here, and you get a total view of everything, and you see a whole lot of values, I mean, you're confronted with them. Every one of them is a good thing in its own way, and so you instinctively want to be at least a little bit aware and take part in all of them. But you can't. I mean, it's impossible just from a pure mechanical point of spending time. You kind of focus on the type of career you want and when you think about that, then if you're going to work toward it, it has its own imperatives. It means that you have to drop certain things and focus more on others. If you want to teach, that means you emphasize studies and drop clubs, and a certain amount of social life and some athletics. You just let these things become peripheral. (Pause) And you're sure about that.

Another student mused:

I don't brood. I think that's a waste of time (laughing), I mean I'd rather do something than just sit around and brood about it. I'm just about, sometimes you do hasty things .. it's a certain amount of relief to just do something. But now the only broodiness is sort of an inward broodiness about whether … whether I’m on the right track, the right field. There are all kinds of pulls, pressures and so forth … parents … this thing and that thing. But there comes a time when you just have to say, “Well … I’ve got a life to live … I want to live it this way. I welcome suggestions. I’ll listen to them. But when I make up my mind, it’s going to be me. I’ll take the consequences.

This development of commitment is a very important aspect of university education. We often speak about the importance of 21st century skills, but no skill will be as important in the future as commitment, for a range of reasons

We live in a complex world. That makes the problems we are facing complex too: they affect many different people and aspects of the world in different ways. This means that there will never be easy solutions, by which I mean solutions which makes things better in all respects. Rather, the choices we will face will be hard, in that they will make things better in some ways and worse in others. This means that choices need to be made and justified. Only those who understand their own values will be able to do so in a good way. Those who live in authority will not be able to make hard choices, as they are used to others telling them what to do. Those who live in relativism cannot make choices at all. That is why commitment is so important for solving future problems.

Commitment is also important for democratic reasons. After all, democracy is about people coming together to make choices, explore different political issues, and decide collectively what to do. This requires, on the one hand, an understanding of one’s own position and values, but also, on the other hand, openness to different possibilities. Those who live in authority cannot participate in democratic deliberations. They are food for ideologues and authoritarians. Those who live in relativism are likely to become disengaged and apathetic. But those who have found their commitments can enter into a reasoned debate about what should be done and come to joint answers to political questions.

Lastly, commitment is crucial for a good life. We live in an age of great mental stress: many people are deeply unhappy. Those who live in authority might, if you will excuse the pop-psychology, be subject to stress and burn-out, as they spend their lives trying to live to other people’s expectations, and can never find true fulfilment. Those who live in relativism may become depressed. But those who know what they want to do with their lives and what they think is important can make good choices about their future, because they have criteria for doing so. And when things go badly, as they sometimes do, their commitment can help them pull themselves together, and carry on.

Of course, commitment isn’t something one can teach over the internet. It can only be developed in the context of a small, academic community, like this one. To see this, let’s explore the two steps on the way to commitment. We must first get students from authority to relativism, and then from relativism to commitment. And this has clear implications for how students and teachers should approach their roles.

Being in authority is, in many ways, a pleasant state. When people come to university, their high school teachers and communities have given them a single model of the world. Giving that up is painful. Nevertheless, it must be broken down. To do so, students should go out of their comfort zones. The best way of doing that is to get to know other people, people from different backgrounds and cultures. Nothing makes you understand that there are many ways of looking at the world than meeting people with other worldviews. So don’t just hang out with people like you. And also be daring in your education. Many have associated liberal education with freedom of choice. While that is important, do not use it to only study the things you already know you are interested in. Study many different disciplines. For every discipline is a way of looking at the world. After all discipline and authority are closely connected words. If you study only one discipline, that will be your worldview. But if you study many different disciplines, you will see the contradictions and conflicts. Most importantly, don’t fear disorientation. I know it is scary, but it is how you grow. Much has been said about this building, about how it is confusing and warps your perspective. I think that is a feature, not a bug, at least from an educational perspective.

And teachers, helping students find their commitment also has implications for how you should behave. First of all, do not present yourself as an authority. We are all humans, and while some of us are further along the path, our paths are different and hard to compare. So do not be afraid to admit your ignorance, that there are things you do not know. Your goal, certainly in this phase, is to teach students the limitations of their initial views. That can best be done by asking questions that students cannot answer based on their models or showing how their models lead to contradictions. In other words, teach in a Socratic way. And, thirdly, disagree with your colleagues in public. Team teaching is a wonderful thing, especially if it reveals disagreements between teachers that are explored in an intellectually honest fashion. These show students: “Person X is a professor and says A, person Y is a professor and says not A. How is this possible?” That question is the beginning of the end of authority.

I understand that this is a radical understanding of what a teacher is supposed to do. As teachers we have worked hard to become experts and are used to being authorities. But if all you have to give is your authority and expertise, you can be replaced and you will be replaced.

However, confusing students is the easy part. The hard part is to get from relativism to commitment, to get them to make choices and decide what matters among the many possibilities. That can only be done through experimentation and reflection. You do something, and you ask yourself if it feels right. If so, you ask yourself why it does and what it says about you. You ask yourself what you think you might also find agreeable, and you check your hypotheses about yourself, by making further choices. And so you gradually get there. So, dare to act. Dare to ignore the things that don’t seem to matter to you. And, in your academic work, dare to take a stand. Don’t ask what the truth is, ask what you think, or better yet, ask what you would do if you had to make a choice. This is always a leap of faith, but it is the only way. As one of Perry’s students said:

You just have to jump into it, that's all, before, before it can have any effect on you. And the farther in you force yourself to get in the first place, the more possibilities there are, the more ideas and concepts there are that can impinge on you and so the more likely you are to get involved in it. Actually, you have to make some kind of an assumption in the first place that it's worthwhile to get into it, and that you're capable of doing something once you get into it.

And teachers, you too have a role in helping students find commitment. First of all, do not judge students. Don’t tell them they are wrong, but ask them why they say what they say. It might make sense to them, and your job is to give them the words. So help them express their thoughts, also in exams, and judge them not for the content of those thought, but for how they got there, for how seriously they have sought commitment. Secondly, show your own commitment, and be a good example. Tell students how you became the person you are, and how you considered various alternatives to get where you are. Dare to share, because the only gift worth giving is a part of yourself. And lastly, let students be teachers as well. After all, the best definition of a teacher is a student of students. So ask for their opinions, in class, but also let them tell you about what matters to them, whether it be in music, art food or sports. Because that validates that what matters to them is worth sharing too, and it might not be so crazy after all.

All of this can only happen in a community, a place where people meet, in expected ways and in unexpected ways, Only there can commitment be found. That may seem like a paradox. Why is it that you can only find out what you believe by interacting with other people? But guess what, education is full of paradoxes. You can only get good by making mistakes. You cannot know where you are going without getting lost. And, most importantly, as Hegel pointed out long ago, you can only find yourself in the other.

Thank you very much.