

TITLE: A Life of the Mind for Practice: Bridging Liberal and Professional Education
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AMERICAN HIGHER EDUCATION finds itself in the grip of two conflicts of purpose. One engulfs the professional schools. Recent scandals in once-trusted professions, for example in finance, law, and health care, have shaken public confidence in them, and many critics of the professions worry that these scandals have occurred at least in part because professional education has become detached from the public purposes that ought to be at its center. Some professional schools have attempted to address this concern by adding courses in professional ethics, but this is an incomplete answer to a more radical challenge: how to inculcate among future professionals the ability to approach new situations with a full appreciation of the standards of behavior expected of them.

Meanwhile, a second, less-visible conflict is emerging in the arts and sciences, where faculty members increasingly find themselves asked about the practical relevance of their teaching. Many respond by claiming that the arts and sciences cultivate critical thinking, an intellectual skill that is central to modern living, but this too is an incomplete answer to a more radical challenge. What college graduates need is not only the ability to stand back from experience in order to analyze it but also the capacity to engage experience meaningfully, using analytic tools, theory, and knowledge.

These two conflicts may seem at first to have little to do with one another. Indeed, teachers in the liberal arts may feel especially threatened by what they are apt to see as the practical bent of their counterparts in the professional fields. They fear that the public's demands for relevance will reduce liberal education to vocational training. Faculty in the professional schools, for their part, may feel caught between the demands for practical relevance and the need to emphasize the more "academic," purely theoretical facets of their work to preserve their fields' hard-won legitimacy in the university.

We propose a different approach. We believe that the professions and the liberal arts and sciences need one another to realize their deepest potential and to answer the public questions that currently challenge them. Underlying our proposal is a different understanding of the purposes of higher education than the one that lies behind the professional/liberal-arts split. Our approach

draws on a venerable tradition in Western thought that has receded from view in much of the academy: the exercise of practical reason.

Several years ago, a faculty seminar convened by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching addressed higher education's responsibility to prepare students for lives of engagement and responsibility by identifying best teaching practices across the professions and the disciplines. The seminar's guiding premise was that the perspectives of the professions and the liberal arts and sciences each have a fundamental role to play in any program of study aimed at developing students' practical-reasoning capacities.

The arts and sciences, at their best, help students understand social, cultural, political, and natural contexts. Toward this end, the disciplines have developed strong analytical strategies and bodies of knowledge that help students locate themselves within a larger intellectual, social, and political landscape. Within the arts and sciences, the humanities cultivate the appreciation of uncertainty, whereas the sciences develop students' ability to come to provisional conclusions about observable and measurable phenomena.

For their part, the best professional pedagogies develop the informed practical judgment that students will need in their careers by introducing them to the traditions of knowing and acting that distinguish their future professions. These pedagogies create bridges between theoretical knowledge and the demands of uncertain situations. The liberal arts and sciences excel at forming students' analytic and interpretive capacities, but for knowledge to become meaningful in professional education, it must result in action with, and often on behalf of, others.

These insights were developed in the Carnegie seminar through a dialogue about teaching that enabled faculty from across the professions and the arts and sciences to enter imaginatively into the responsibilities of their peers and thereby discover renewed possibilities for their own teaching practices. Key lessons of the seminar were that faculty in the liberal arts and the professional schools can make common cause out of developing students' informed practical reasoning and that collaboratively addressing these fundamental issues can produce an enriched and renewed

sense of faculty purpose.

The seminar has resulted in a book, *A New Agenda for Higher Education: A Life of the Mind for Practice*, which we draw upon here to explain how the values of the Carnegie seminar might be cultivated throughout the academy.

CRITICAL THINKING IN PRACTICE

The Carnegie Foundation convened the interdisciplinary “A Life of the Mind for Practice” seminar between September 2002 and December 2003 to inquire into how teaching for practical responsibility and judgment might become a unifying calling for educators in the contemporary academy. Fourteen teachers from across the professions and the liberal arts and sciences pursued this goal over the course of three convenings.

Seminar participants represented a wide range of disciplinary and professional perspectives. Some were teaching in professions with a strong humanistic heritage, such as teacher education, law, and the clergy; others were preparing students for professions that rely on science, including medicine and engineering; and still others were in the liberal arts and sciences, in fields including composition and rhetoric, religious studies, and human biology.

These professors were all concerned with preparing students to do good and responsible work in the world, so that the tools and values of their fields might illuminate action. They all believed that criticism and analysis must arise from commitment to the values and purposes of a field. They also tried to model and guide students in putting critical thinking to use, employing the disciplines to illuminate the world of experience and practice so that judgment grows more skillful while it becomes oriented toward its proper ends.

A few examples: One participant trained future engineers for the increasingly international engineering workplace, which will require them to work with other engineers who may understand their profession differently. Another faculty member, convinced that the lawyer-client relationship is the basis of all good lawyering, helped future lawyers understand how to interpret and meet the legitimate needs of clients. Still another participant provided students in his religious-studies class with ways to discover how different Biblical genres, poetic and narrative, can illuminate everyday experience. And one teacher-educator prepared future teachers to interpret the layers of political authority, educational history, and cultural values that shape all teaching situations.

From even this cursory survey, a common theme emerges. These professors were not only concerned with adding to their students’ perspectives, knowledge, and skills but also were

interested in giving them experience in making well-reasoned and defensible responses to complex and uncertain situations, under conditions that allow for experiment, criticism, debate, and reflection. In other words, they all hoped to foster practical judgment.

TEACHING FOR PRACTICAL JUDGMENT

Teaching for practical judgment has a venerable history in American higher education. Many of the modern disciplines began by aiming at public enlightenment and the enhancement of social decision-making. However, developing practical judgment is no longer valued as a goal in much of the modern academy. Instead, faculty members focused on the production of specialized disciplinary knowledge—the result of standing back and surveying the world critically—have for some time reaped the greatest academic rewards and reputation, especially in the most prestigious research institutions.

Of course such knowledge is indispensable to informed and reasoned action. One cannot be a good engineer without a deep understanding of the profession’s technical resources and practices. Similarly, a good lawyer must develop considerable skill in legal analysis and procedure—become expert at “thinking like a lawyer”—in order to serve clients and the public interest. But because it is fundamental to skillful practice in both private and public life, practical reason grounds the academy’s great achievement—critical rationality—in human purposes that are wider and deeper than criticism. Practical reasoning returns the thinker to the situation, the place, the here and now, in ways that often lie outside the realm of academic aspiration.

Good engineers and lawyers must respond to complex work situations; they must figure out what knowledge is most salient to meet the needs of clients and the public alike. They must decide how and when to put their knowledge to work. Technical and specialized knowledge can clarify issues involved in practical situations, but it cannot determine judgment or compel action. In countless everyday situations, professionals and citizens alike must take principled and reasoned risks on their own behalf and that of others. So we believe that higher education remains incomplete if it doesn’t supply students with some explicit education directed at the formation of judgment. This has always been the goal of practical reason.

CLARIFYING FACULTY PURPOSE

The contemporary academy does not provide its members with a common, broadly accessible language in which to discuss

teaching practical judgment. The seminar participants had found creative ways to teach practical judgment in their fields, sometimes against the grain of how those fields were typically conceived within academe. But as the Carnegie seminar began, we quickly discovered that the lack of a shared discourse was the core problem that stood in the way of learning from one another. We needed to develop it.

We did not understand all this at the beginning of the seminar. Our first convening proceeded in a typically “academic” fashion. We presented different theories of practical reasoning, drawing from the work of such philosophers as John Dewey and Aristotle. We then provided a case study of K-12 teaching for the participants to read and assess, in order to apply the theories that we had presented and then offer hypothetical advice.

This first approach failed, nor could it have produced the community of inquiry to which we aspired. Our colleagues were skeptical that the theories we had presented truly captured everything that was important about their teaching. Without intending to, we had reduced their lived practices to mere complications or variations of theory. The concept of practical reasoning alone could not serve as a foundation for our shared purposes, despite the best efforts and good faith of everyone involved.

We needed to find a new and better way to uncover the relevance and meaning of the concept of practical reasoning within each seminar member’s discipline. We would then be in a better position to discover both our disciplinary differences and our common commitments. We would also be in a better position to recognize and understand one another. But this required that we move beyond the academic tradition of critical argument; we needed to ground our understanding in the values underlying actual teaching practice.

Following the advice of the seminar participants, we asked them to imagine the demands their students will face as knowledge workers, as individuals seeking meaning and relationship, and as responsible citizens. We also asked them to reflect on the forms of reasoning required to meet these challenges. Next, we asked that they assess their own or a colleague’s syllabi to see how the courses prepared students to exercise that reasoning. They then began to reflect on the opportunities they offered students to practice thinking through problematic situations as engaged professionals or citizens.

Participants discussed these questions in pairs, which brought professional faculty together with those from the arts and sciences: a law professor worked with a teacher educator, a medical educator worked with a professor of English, and so forth. These

conversations provided an opportunity for each participant to enter imaginatively into the pedagogical world of another.

Why focus on course syllabi? We came to realize that good syllabi are narratives that guide students into the problems, forms of thinking, and value judgments that make up a discipline or profession. They also offer students a sequence of learning events that model responsible activity and growth in a field. Syllabi are powerful tools for reflecting with others on the purposes and practices that guide the art of teaching as well. Our partners uncovered the narrative structures of their syllabi through individual writing and conversation. We hoped that as the values and practices that guided their teaching became public, we would all discern the differences and analogies among the fields and the common purposes that unite the professions and the liberal arts and sciences.

The result was deep involvement with the art and aspirations of teaching and a broad sense of shared educational purpose. For example, one pairing brought together a teacher educator and an engineering educator. Both of their courses were intended to help students locate themselves within professional situations characterized by a wide variety of perspectives, such as the global engineering workplace or an American school district. Although the professional workplaces presumed by each course differed, these partners discovered that their practices were analogous. As was true for many of the participants, both faculty members wanted to foster their students’ capacities to interpret professional situations by placing them in more complex contexts.

Over the course of these collaborations, our colleagues came to view their own teaching anew through the examples offered by their fellows, and a common picture began to emerge. All of the courses aimed at the development of practical reason were motivated, in some measure, by four tightly interwoven concerns.

1. The first concern was helping students understand what it means to become a certain kind of person—an engineer, teacher, lawyer, doctor, or citizen. Each course prepares students to assume an identity in the world.

2. A second concern was helping students understand the contexts in which they will perform these new roles. Each course prepares students to assume a place within a wider community.

3. A third concern was aiding students’ understanding that their future work will take place not only with, but also on behalf of, others—clients, publics, and so forth. Thus each course prepares students to consider their responsibility to act for causes beyond themselves.

4. The final concern was that the courses introduce students to

the body of knowledge that will give them the deep understanding and technical skills they will need to undertake their new responsibilities.

Crucially, these courses provide students with opportunities to practice these insights, whether through writing, case- or problem-based learning, reflections on practice, or other methods. The topic of these courses is not critical thinking per se but how to respond to ever-changing situations in ways that are skilled, insightful, and defensible.

MAKING A PLACE IN THE ACADEMY FOR PRACTICAL REASON

How might teaching and faculty-development practices like these find a legitimate place within the contemporary academy? We hope that the Carnegie seminar can serve as an example for others to follow, taking into consideration the unique needs and values of different academic departments and institutions. But whether one is a faculty member, an administrative leader, a graduate student, or the director of a center of teaching and learning, there are a few challenges to keep in mind:

1. Building a community of faculty who inquire deeply into what teaching for practical judgment means for them is a developmental challenge that takes time and patience. Developing trust and forging new forms of discourse and conscience requires sustained, collaborative effort. If the aim is to enable faculty members to invest their energy productively so that their pedagogical work can become a meaningful and integrative focus in their already-busy lives, any effort to build on the example of the seminar must allow time for faculty to engage in sustained narrative engagement and dialogue.

2. This kind of faculty formation is an institutional challenge. Faculty must have a place to ask hard questions about the meaning of their calling as teachers. Many faculty members already worry about these issues, but they are dispersed across specialties and knowledge domains. They would benefit from having partners with whom to develop a broader perspective about the possibilities of their teaching and their own sense of academic purpose, but the institutional means for establishing such paths and partnerships often are not available.

3. Orienting faculty toward the teaching of practical reason is a dialogical challenge. Faculty members must have opportunities to enter imaginatively into each other's perspectives, ideally across fields, to discover common purposes that connect them. The transformative potential of such dialogue lies in fostering common pedagogical cause and discourse across the professions

and the disciplines. The mutual alienation and competition for resources that estranges these domains from one another prevents the recognition of common interests and the furthering of broader institutional change. Moreover, this estrangement obscures the deeper ways in which these domains might serve as resources and exemplars for one another. Rapprochement between the professions and the liberal arts and sciences promises more integrated scholarly and pedagogical lives for faculty—and more integrated processes of educational formation for students.

4. Finally, this kind of faculty formation is a contextual challenge. Faculty typically do not do this work to rethink the value of higher education in general. They do it on behalf of their own students and in local contexts, to give deeper expression to the values and purposes of their own institutions. This is why the Carnegie seminar is intended to serve not as a recipe but as an example that faculty can tailor to the distinctive values and missions of their own institutions.

In the end, the goal is to provide students with a high-quality education that is fully responsive to the challenges and demands of their future lives, as both citizens and professionals. In order to cultivate this responsiveness, the professional fields and the arts and sciences need one another. They cannot remain strangers or, worse, mutually suspicious of each other's aims. Properly understood, these domains are and should be allies in a common mission: the preparation of our students to undertake lives of mindful and responsible practice.

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