

Where is the space for education?

More than just a degree.

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Why do we have to do these projects? It's not your job to make sure all these students are learning, and I don't see why I have to do this your way, said the student. The professor thought a moment – was this a rhetorical question so the student could complain out loud or did the student really want to know? Was there a need for the professor to repeat (again) the reasoning behind having measurable criteria for coursework, defend the job of a teacher, or simply cut the conversation off during class time? This interaction between teacher and student could be a result of a number of factors – it may even be a simple question of discipline or classroom management. With a room full of adult college students, however, there is potentially more at stake, given that roles for higher education “performers” have become convoluted in various ways. Is it possible that both stakeholders are learners in this situation? What is the balance of power here and what precipitated this conversation in the first place?

Questions such as these are on the minds of many educators as they attempt to understand students' current attitudes and behavior. In a recent issue of *College Teaching*, Stephen Lippmann, Ronald E. Bulanda & Theodore C. Wagenaar wonder how the issue of “student entitlement,” for example, relates to the delivery and nature of course content. And in a treatise on the “consumerist academy,” Jordan Titus muses on the context of student entitlement as students consider education a “right,” but without

“obligations” on their part. In addition, many students consider good instruction synonymous with being entertained and having a “comfortable,” non-stressful workload. How does this attitude on the part of students place additional pressure on professors? Do professors now need to enter into the world of entertainment, seeking to dazzle students into paying attention, rather than engaging them for the purpose of knowledge-seeking and critical thinking?

Many competing factors are now affecting how students think about higher education. One primary factor is the use of a business model for education – highlighting profit, patents, commercial investments, and the use of market competition, for example – appears to have become commonplace. Boards of education and university presidents now include a high number of business executives and corporate employees. This model has had some negative effects on traditional institutions of teaching and learning in higher education – including disintegration of tenured positions, over-emphasis on efficiency and standardization, and the marketing of education as a commodity to “student-consumers” who view a *degree*, not an *education*, as the goal. Other factors affecting students’ attitudes and expectations in school include the changing uses of technology for teaching and learning, budget cuts, suppressed enrollments, the increasingly fast-paced flow of information and a sense that planning for a particular career may be an outdated notion. So what, then, is the place of education today?

At a recent education symposium, Martha Kanter, the Undersecretary of Education, offered an answer to this question. She invoked the phrase “cradle to career”

no fewer than ten times in a 40-minute speech to describe the purpose of education in the US; i.e, education as pathway to a job. But is engagement in (and for) employment the right place for education?

A mechanic must know and understand engines in order to repair them, so manipulating and operationalizing facts for purposes of work and economic gain is a laudable goal of education. And frankly, most of us just want the car fixed when we take it to the mechanic. But shouldn't the mechanic also be equipped to consider the consequences of motor travel on the environment, how those consequences impact the global economy (and his or her role in it), and what possibilities await the next iteration of the "engine"? Is it necessary that the mechanic think in these higher order ways as your car is repaired? No. But should we limit the mechanic to only be able to think in prescriptive, discipline-specific ways? Also, no. We believe that higher order engagement, critical reflection, and the ability to view experiences from a variety of perspectives must remain the hallmark of the purpose of education. It is not enough to get a job because you know how to fix the engine; one must consider the micro and macro contexts within which the engine exists, that is, the *space* it occupies.

What sort of education can produce this sort of mechanic? Insight comes from Jerry Farber, who presents a model of episodic learning – the contextualized (in intellectual and physical space), present, deep, robust, and substantive experience of learning communally and specifically. It is this sort of engagement in discourse, within a context, face-to-face, interpreting the intentionality of speakers, and the purposefulness of

the constructive and collective learning activities, that drives our purpose for education. This episodic learning is necessary in that it mirrors the larger social/cultural world of shared collective/public experiences (learning in a classroom, standing in line at the grocery store, attending a concert, driving on the freeway). To learn, or to become educated, then, involves the ability to critically reflect and deconstruct those experiences, not simply to have them. Education provides the opportunity to engage in the world, not simply to exist in it in predetermined ways.

But even as Farber's insights at least partly illuminate the pathway to a higher-order education, as assistant professors at a large California public university, we find that it is not always easy to follow it and deliver this sort of higher-order education to our students. Three historic factors seem to be operating against us (and *for* Undersecretary Kanter's decontextualized, "just-fix-the-engine" model). Briefly, these factors are:

1. *The large pool of "millennial students" still present in the university system.* Our campus has its share of students who seem to have been raised by the hovering, overly protective "helicopter parents" described in a recent Bottom Line by Deborah Hirsch and Ellen Goldberger. Such students are often ill-prepared to meet faculty expectations for promptness, attendance, handing in work on time, etc. Their presence routinely forces us to choose between actually flunking large numbers of students or being "sympathetic" to them – but in ways that contribute to grade inflation and erode the integrity of the educational process. The right choice is not always the easiest to make, particularly for faculty in departments that are starved for majors, or who feel overly dependent on

positive student evaluations for promotion and tenure.

2. *The economic crisis.* During any recession, students and taxpayers alike tend to adopt more conservative and pragmatic views toward the purpose of higher education. At such times the slogan “cradle-to-career” strikes many as a sensible educational philosophy. Faculty who promote the idea of learning for any other purpose appear out-of-touch, elitist, or both.

3. *The long-term evolution of higher education itself* may be the most significant factor working “against” a rich version of education. Over the past millennium, education has become ever-more accessible, flexible, and embedded in everyday life in society. Institutions of higher education in the West were born in the medieval cloister, where they were removed from the visible, practical needs of feudal society. They progressively integrated with the world around them architecturally and academically. In the US, two key evolutionary moments along the way include the 1862 Morrill Act, which established land grant colleges focused on the pragmatic needs of the industrializing nation, and the 1944 GI Bill which enabled vastly greater numbers of Americans to enroll in them. Today, a boom of technologically-sophisticated, Internet-based courses offered by both traditional and for-profit universities continues this democratizing trend. They deliver precisely-measured quantities of education to students whenever and wherever desired. On one level this is obviously a good thing. Yet there are negative consequences to education’s descent from on high, its acquiring the ethos of a purchasable, user-friendly, globalized commodity. A majority of high-school graduates now take getting a B.A. for

granted, which speaks to its reduced grandeur. In this context, striving to uphold a lofty vision of the enterprise seems anachronistic, and (to administrators) a bad business model.

Given these three factors, we are faced with the option of swimming *with* the current by making education pragmatic, sleek, and consumer-friendly, or *against* it by sticking to principles that broaden, rather than narrow, the intellectual and cultural space in which students can function. While we are not advocating for a return to the ivory tower, we are advocating for the preservation of the formerly understood purpose of a higher education - as transformative and as a road to enlightenment. We advocate for guiding students to become critical thinkers while they navigate the technology-focused, fastpaced, budget-driven higher education environment in which they find themselves operating. In this manner, students can certainly gain their pragmatic, sleek, and supposedly consumer-friendly (work oriented?) goals, but do so in thoughtful, reflective, enlightened, higher order ways. We understand that this present environment appears to be accepted as the norm; although this environment was not “created” by the students presently navigating it, they certainly know no other perspective. We believe that we must present students with an alternate perspective on what they understand an *education* to be. Even in the current corporate state business model, and high tech world of today’s higher education, we advocate for a conscious investment in thinking that is precipitated by the goal of lifelong learning, not simply education as a pathway to a career, or education as a checklist of degree requirements.

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