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PERCEPTIONS OF COLLEGE AND THE PURSUIT OF LIBERAL EDUCATION

Victor L. Worsfold

In their recent book, *Revolving College Doors*, Robert G. Cope and William Hannah have argued that "it is the fit between student and college that accounts for most of the transferring, stopping out and dropping out" amongst our present student body. This idea, when taken to be correct, gives the lie to what is usually averred to explain the rapidly increasing phenomenon of attrition amongst those wishing to attend college, namely, financial stringency. Cope and Hannah would have us believe that "lack of money is a socially acceptable reason to discontinue attending school regardless of actual financial position." Thus, explicating the lack of fit between students and their college and not the lack of dollars becomes the task of those of us who must care about the future of the society's institutions of higher learning.

In pursuing the task of explanation, I want to call attention to one aspect of this discordance not addressed by Cope and Hannah, which I believe has singular consequences for those involved in the teaching tasks of liberal education. I should like to consider the lack of fit between the perceptions of college held by college professors and the perceptions of college held by college students. It is because these two sets of perceptions clash, in my opinion, that I shall want to argue that the very justification for professors pursuing their teaching, namely, their being authorities on what they teach, is called into question. For teachers engaged in providing students with a liberal education I believe this challenge may affect the propagation of the very means whereby such an education can be gained.

But I anticipate too much of my argument. First, I want to sketch the particular, perhaps "peculiar" is a better description, situation from which my thinking is born. Secondly, I shall try to elucidate my sense that there is a clash in the way college is perceived by teachers and students by attempting to give an account of these perceptions from both sides. Then, I shall want to say why I think this clash is so significant to the tasks of teachers and, therefore, to the way in which the purpose of education is perceived both by those engaged in its process, and by society itself. And, finally, I shall
want to make some specific remarks about the importance of this disharmony in perceptions for the pursuit of liberal education itself.

I teach, and am an administrator, at The University of Texas at Dallas, which is an upper-level university. This means that we offer the last two years, only, of a normal four-year undergraduate program, together with a full range of graduate instruction. Thus we are placed in a relation of dependency to other institutions of higher learning for our undergraduate student body. In Dallas these institutions are community colleges, for, while we have many students who have chosen to transfer to the University from regular four-year institutions, over two-thirds of the undergraduate student body come as graduates of the seven local community colleges of the Dallas County Community College District.

As a result, it was my task as chief liaison officer for community college relations to begin to establish, through a joint effort with my community college colleagues, a program of study which complements and expands upon the programs already developed by the community college system. Because the Texas Legislature mandated us to do so, The University of Texas at Dallas responds to the needs of a student body whose average age is 29, whose place of residence is the greater Dallas area, and whose circumstances usually include holding a job and family responsibilities. Thus the faculty of the University has been asked to join the faculties of the community colleges in the development of curricula which combine liberal and practical studies in an educative way for students whose first priority is not "going to college." When we consider the faculties' aspirations for the effect of these courses, however, then the lack of their entrance in the students' lives inevitably raises mutual questions about the institution's purpose and its freedom to pursue this purpose.

Many of our students characterize college as something of a resource center whose facilities are expected to be responsive, accepting, and above all, nearby. Perhaps there is a historical explanation for these present-day underlying assumptions of the nature of colleges. In the fifties, if Richard Sames is correct, in their search for an identity distinct from that of established universities the newly founded community colleges adopted as their *raison d'etre* "teaching people what they wanted to know." By having their perceived needs met, particularly in the vocational-technical areas, students came to see these colleges as intellectual supermarkets. Now, however, because of their link to community colleges, many universities like The University of Texas at Dallas are bedevilled by the same consumeristic characterization so that students in both community colleges and universities have come to expect our institutions, like rather posh shops, to possess revolving doors through which they pass at their ease. Many, indeed as many as 30 to 40 percent, of our customers stop hardly long enough to buy our goodies, yet in light of their notion of a university, they develop conceptions of us and our work which are at best unflattering and at worst so false as to make us doubt the very validity of our enterprise.

For example, like the consumer who wishes to know the conditions under which he can buy his chosen product, many students want only to know the conditions under which they will pass. Gone for these students is the sense of tackling the amount of work a thorough intellectual investigation might require to them, or, even worse, giving of the best of which they are capable. There appears little sign amongst many of our students of the kind of self-motivation teachers might hope by their efforts to engender. Nor—and this may hurt yet more—is there much evidence of the kind of caring for subject-matter and pride in its mastery on the part of students which teachers have themselves acquired and, presumably, are most anxious to purvey. In fact, when students stop to consider these teachers, rather than perceiving them as the committed educators which professors take themselves to be, students tend to see them as hired hands, available to respond to
the students’ every need. Perhaps such a view is the result of many of our students’ previous method of education. For if they are the products of the inquiry method which is still so popular at the earlier and, in my view, most crucial, elementary and junior high-school levels of education, then they have learned to view teachers as equal participants in a dialogue evolving from the teachers’ responses to the students’ interests. Implied in this method of education are two ideas which could give rise to the kinds of perceptions of teachers which I aver college students come to hold.

First, there is the notion that students are as likely to be as productive of knowledge by their work as the teacher is; all the teacher possesses, in this view of educational method, are the resources, and perhaps competence, to set up a learning environment in which such knowledge can be generated. There is no sense that there might exist a body of knowledge of which the student is ignorant but which the teacher has mastered, and about which the teacher may be very enthusiastic. Indeed, it almost seems that for the teacher to apprise the students of the existence of such a body of knowledge amounts to an exercise of self-indulgence on the teacher’s part!

Secondly, there is embedded in this method of teaching, a conception of education as a process of shared experience between equal partners working together towards finding things out by following wherever their discussion leads them. The thinking of John Dewey is usually thought to lend credence to such a view, thinking about education which has as its focal point the idea that the process of education should be democratic—democracy being for Dewey “primarily a mode of associated living, of conjoint communicated experience.” The practice of education, therefore, must be patterned after this system of co-operation and common understanding. Whether this view adequately expalnates Dewey’s ideas cannot be dealt with here, although elsewhere I have tried to indicate it does not. What the view does connote, however, is a relativism with respect to what is worthwhile teaching. For there is no sense here of teachers as authorities on subject-matter worth inquiry into. As Mrs. Warnock says, when commenting on this view, “anything will do . . . provided only that the pupils are enthusiastic about it.” It is only a short step from learning that education is a kind of free enterprise amongst equals to coming to perceive those who are its main purveyors as servants to those to whom it is purveyed. In my opinion, there are few students who perceive their professors with the kind of professional respect they happily accord their doctors or even their bankers. Faculty have come to be one more facility the college has to offer. Familiarity can, after all, breed contempt.

Yet there will be some who will say I am overstating the case, noting my frequent use of “some” or “many” when referring to students. In response to those who would argue in this way, I would say that it is clearly not the case that all students perceive faculty as a facility, and certainly not the best amongst our students. But it must be remembered that the best are by definition a vast minority so that I believe I can persist in thinking that the attitude of students towards college which I sketch is, at least at my own university, a prevailing one.

But what of the professors’ perceptions of college? Can one detect a prevailing attitude amongst them? I believe that most professors accept college posts because they wish to be involved in the pursuit of their chosen field of study. For these men and women that pursuit is, at its best, an expression of themselves. Professors, I would argue, see their subject-matter as intrinsically worthwhile so that those who actively engage in research and teaching are engaged in enterprises which they view as good in themselves. Education, the voluntary initiation of students into the forms of knowledge by which they understand themselves and their predicament, that enterprise which gives college its purpose, needs no extrinsic justification for them, therefore. Professors do not view themselves as salesmen.
dispensing knowledge to those who feel they need it in order to get on in the world. Rather, many professors possess an idealized attitude towards college so that the institution for them is perceived as something of a sanctuary where they can pursue their work of learning and teaching in an atmosphere of mutual respect. And they have good reasons to hold fast to this perception. For without it I believe the avowed purpose of education may be radically changed, and the freedom to pursue that purpose may be placed in jeopardy.

The reluctance to treat any inquiry as educationally more worthwhile than another—a reluctance which the recent curricular reforms at Harvard University seem designed to combat—leads to education being justified less in terms of intellectual competence, the mastery of conditions embodied in the forms of knowledge by which we understand the world, and more in terms of social adjustment, personality development, and the ability to participate fully in social intercourse. This trend is supported by those for whom the purpose of education is purely subjective in nature so that it is "not what [the learner] discovers but the fact that he discovers it, not the self that he expresses but merely the act of self-expression,"10 as Brian Crittenden says, that justifies the pursuit of education. The major function of education, following from this last account of the process, can become its value as an instrument of socialization, that is, the adapting of an individual to the character of the society in which he or she lives. For the emphasis in this view is solely on the self that is emerging from the process of education, rather than on the mastery of standards immanent in the subject-matter which forms the self. As a result, the freedom of academics to pursue these standards themselves by scholarship and teaching may be curtailed. For if their task is to be defined by the values to which society desires its emerging individual members to adhere, then the liberty to explore the desirability of these values in general and their adoption in this society in particular may be compromised.

Academic freedom is a special right dependent upon the voluntary agreement of society to support the scholarly pursuit of the forms of knowledge by which we come to understand our human predicament. Without such an agreement there would be no right to academic freedom. If society were to decide that it valued socialization—or any other of the alternative characterizations of education presently in vogue, the satisfying of the child's felt needs or unfolding the child's potentialities, for example—then the notion of scholars pursuing knowledge for its own sake, unimpeded, and teaching the results of that scholarship to their students in an equally uncircumscribed fashion, would vanish. For professors to abandon this idealized perception of college as a sanctuary for the advancement of knowledge is for them to invite society in general to replace the intellectual values which their work proclaims with a conception of education more utilitarian in nature: precisely the kind of conception of education to which students' perceptions of college as supermarkets can lead. Ultimately, the consumeristic view of college reduces education to a process in which students take only what they perceive they need to survive in their society. Most students do not stop to consider the undesirability of mere survival as the justification for fulfilling the demands of the process, and therefore cannot appreciate the kind of vision of college which I believe many professors have and which provides the alternative justification for its rigors. A clash between the perceptions is inevitable. The problem is to understand the significance of the disharmony between them.

To me, the most important aspect of the clash of perceptions is its effect upon the quality of the interaction between professors and students. For in their effort to engage their students in the process of education, professors can frequently be thwarted by student demands, sometimes implicit, more often explicit, for a justification of the tasks they set, to such an extent that the very validity of the enterprise of educating is doubted.
When this level of doubt is raised, the professor's authority to pursue the demands of education becomes the central issue. Professors, if they are to retain students, must meet this challenge to their authority as educators.

A professor's authority is best understood as a duality. A professor is both "in authority" in his or her classroom and "an authority" on what he or she teaches. Professors are "in authority" because they are authorities and they are such because they have met the standards of mastery their disciplines dictate. It is these standards which constitute "the holy ground"—A. N. Whitehead's phrase—towards which students with their professors are supposedly groping. Thus, the educational relationship between professors and students is triangular (with the discipline at the apex) and it is this very triangularity which provides professors with a justification for why they do what they do with their students. Put more simply, it is because their relation to students is not a direct relation of power, but rather an indirect relation of authority, mediated by the dictates of the subject-matter which they profess, that professors have the right to make demands of students. It is their understanding of these dictates that makes their teaching of the subject-matter authoritative and grants them thereby their rights of demand. To challenge professorial authority to follow these dictates is to challenge the validity of the subject-matter at hand.

Making such a challenge, however, is, I suspect, what the egalitarian method of education, construed at its best, amounts to. It assumes that education has become a matter of those who have gained authority in their subject-matter holding sway over those who have not. It also assumes that the specialization which becoming an authority in a subject-matter necessitates leads not to an authoritative relation between professors and students but to an authoritarian one. Such a challenge to the authority of professors can lead not simply to the kind of questioning of what it is appropriate to teach in college, which was earlier discussed, but also to the more extreme position in which students are encouraged to doubt the professor's ability to defend an absolute standard of truth in the subject-matter at hand. For on the anti-authority argument professors have no more right to be heard than students and if they choose to use reason to establish their version of the truth "this reason is only one among a variety of possible weapons (the one preferred by the bourgeois academic) and no more absolutely to be preferred than any other." What began as a challenge to the professor's authority appears to have become a challenge to the pursuit of the rational, therefore.

Meeting such a challenge, in my view, amounts to more than merely pointing out the illogicality implicit in the anti-authoritarian's argument, namely, that he or she is proposing irrationality on rational grounds. Rather, meeting the challenge demands that those who doubt the validity of the exercise of the professor's authority come to understand how it is that the pursuit of the rational life is to be preferred to the pursuit of the irrational, that is, that they understand the value of liberal education. It is because so many students cannot perceive the intrinsic worthwhileness of such an education, I want to argue, that they cannot accept the dictates entailed by the pursuit of such an education, and embodied in the authority of those who have already achieved it.

Before the nature of these dictates is investigated, however, perhaps the effect of having to meet this kind of challenge on the professors' attitudes towards students might be mentioned. Clearly, to have to argue continuously in defense of pursuing their subjects robs professors of the status of patently worthwhile professionals. Furthermore, professors may be required to spend so much time persuading their students of the validity of undertaking to fulfill the demands of "the holy ground" that they and their students never reach the "holy ground" itself. I suspect, incidentally, that many of the goodhearted intentions of so-called radical educators are squandered on just such exercises. Most importantly, however, to be harassed by this kind of challenge on the
part of students inevitably produces in professors an attitude of resentment towards their charges. I should like to suggest that for professors to have their professional validity on trial will erode their sense that they are in a role relationship to their students—a role relationship which the demands of their subjects dictate, and which permits them to effect the critical processes of student evaluation necessary for the achievement of the students' education. It is this erosion which will ultimately cause the breakdown of the triangular relation of student and teacher to subject-matter. Instead of persevering in the role which their task requires, professors will, I fear, come to feel personal alienation first from their students and then from the very task itself. In the end, the unflagging challenge to a professor's authority will destroy the possibility of an educative experience for the students by defiling the professional educative energies of the professor.

Professors involved in the pursuit of liberal education are, as I have hinted already, peculiarly subject to this kind of alienation. Because their educational efforts are directed towards the development of capacities for disciplined critical inquiry and independent judgement in their students rather than towards making their charges adapt to the current social milieu, their work cannot be subjected to criticism on the grounds that it fails to mould students in prevailing societal patterns. Thus professors teaching the subject-matters of liberal education are frequently asked to provide justification for their work both by those who understand their task but question its worthwhileness, and, more likely, by those who are incredulous that their task cannot be justified on utilitarian grounds.

Such challenges to the authority of liberal studies professors, however, do not simply constitute threats to the pursuit of particular subject-matters. Rather, in my view, they are a direct challenge to the validity of education itself, or, more precisely, to being educated. To be educated is, surely, to have achieved the means to the literate life, that is, an understanding of the forms of knowledge by which each of us can act in the ways that are distinctively human—virtuously, imaginatively, and with a sense of the worthwhileness of the tasks we choose to undertake. I believe, like several other contemporary philosophers of education, that the pursuit of education, if the notion is construed in this way, needs no external justification. While it may be argued that the liberal education of all the citizens of a democracy is an ideal, I do not believe that this belief affects the intrinsic worthwhileness of the pursuit of education. Education's value needs no instrumental validation for justification; there can be no better reason for individuals to engage in its process than that mastery of the subject-matters by which the process is effected equips them to flourish as themselves.

Yet, generally in our society, literacy, the underpinning of the educated life, is not valued. There are no public prizes for elegance of style or clarity of thought. As a result, there is no real commitment to the skills necessary to produce literacy—reading, writing, nuance of vocabulary, syntactical correctness and, above all, style. One does not need reminding how the beautiful people of television and the politely pornographic glossies have eroded any sense that such skills are essential to self-expression. Fewer and fewer students, therefore, are willing to struggle to comprehend unfamiliar texts or master the means to do so. Rather, egged on by the success of their superstars, not to mention the pressures of their peer group, many, perhaps most, students prefer the instant gratification of attending a movie or watching television. Why? Because they are living in a society in which inarticulate orality as a means of self-expression has replaced literacy, and the student body's rejection of the demands of literacy is merely a measure of how ingrained that change has become.

Thomas Farrell, writing on the topic of literacy has said, "community colleges are faced with large numbers of students who have not interiorized literate modes of thought." So serious is this lack of literacy that Farrell can continue by averring that
teachers, who have interiorized these modes, may not understand how "unnatural" reading and writing are to their highly oral students. If Farrell is correct, and students are so lacking, then I suspect that I want to argue that in not possessing these modes of literacy what students really lack is the means to develop the kind of conceptualizing ability which the literate life demands. Indeed, perhaps it may be this lack which begins to explain why students endlessly argue about the demands teachers of literacy place on them: they cannot conceive of the worth of the exercise of acquiring the modes of literacy because they cannot conceive of the merit of literacy itself. Little wonder, then, that the authority of liberal studies professors is so under attack. There are, however, means to combat these attacks.

Despite the societal pressure not to, professors involved in liberal studies must be at pains to care and, perhaps more importantly, to be seen to care about the value of the literate life. For me this means that they must be willing to make their vision of such a life, shaped by the subject-matter, rather than the teaching methods necessary to encourage it, the center of their discussion with students. Walter Kaufman’s recent chastening analysis of the kind of limited mind so prevalent amongst academics notwithstanding, I believe that professors have aspirations for their subject-matters and possess the judgement necessary to decide what is worth pursuing. It is the assumptions underlying these aspirations, together with an understanding of why discipline is so crucial in coming to terms with the structures of the forms of knowledge liberal studies purveys, that professors in this area must share with their students. Too often, it seems, professors are bogged down in deciding which technique, with its accompanying gadgetry, will best produce a particular aspect of literacy; so that remedial reading and writing courses become a substitute for the direct inculcating of literate modes of thinking.

Kaufman has admirably demonstrated how vital the correct kind of textual reading is in the development of such thinking. "Dialectical reading"—reading which involves the comparative study of texts reflective of differing underlying world views, reading which is committed to an understanding of the texts, whether it is in agreement with our own point of view or not, reading which is, above all, considerate of the intellectual context within which the writer is working and so presenting in this particular text—is the major tool for the development in students of the kind of vision the literate life demands. Even if liberal studies professors only involve their students in debating the worthwhileness of pursuing the development of this vision, as distinct from giving in to the harassing challenge of why a particular demand is made and the professor’s right to make it, then they are far from doing a disservice to their subject-matter.

More positively, perhaps, professors must be willing to undertake whatever interdisciplinary study the theoretical and practical investigation of the problems at hand requires—no matter how unsettling this kind of study may be to those immersed in that particular specialization. Problems relating to real life (problems which seem to me so much a part of liberal studies) lend themselves naturally to this kind of integrated treatment. It is Kaufman, once more, who points out that, "As matters now stand, it has been said that in a modern urban hospital the only generalist is the patient. In the modern university the only generalist is the undergraduate." Surely the quality of life overall cannot but be enhanced by a change in this state of affairs. The development of the vision of those who pursue the literate life by interdisciplinary study will aid in this change. For this, surely, is the product of such study. Perhaps the virtues of classical humanism can be confidently affirmed once more, for it is the notion of the literate life as central to the development of the whole person which permeates that tradition.

To effect these measures, however, demands that professors shut off the continuous questioning of their authority. If it is a fact that colleges, both community and university,
stand at the interface between the orality of our present culture and the cultivation of literate patterns of thinking upon which traditional culture is based, then I think professors of liberal studies have a special responsibility for doing so in light of what such a challenge amounts to. Hopefully, students will end this questioning themselves as they become involved in the pursuit of the literate life which liberal studies purveys. For they will come to see the intrinsic value of such a life for themselves as they learn the self-criticism and creative judgement derived from the kind of reading the pursuit of literacy entails.

Professors must adopt teaching methods which foster involvement in the literate life—I believe the Socratic method, dedicated as it is to self-examination, best serves this critical creative purpose—but they may fail in their attempts to persuade their students of the intrinsic worth of the rigors of liberal studies. Some students may simply choose to be unpersuaded. For them, such a choice is the choice of illiteracy, a choice which, while I believe professors have an educational duty to explain the consequences of such a decision to their students, I think students have a right to make for themselves. If students understand that by deciding for illiteracy and thereby against the literate life, they are denying themselves the opportunity for self-knowledge and access to the normal means of comprehending their human predicament, then I suspect teachers must simply stand aside and allow them to effect their choice. I believe there is no alternative for professors, for I think that when students make such a decision there is no hope of ever changing their perceptions of the nature of college life, perceptions which give rise to this kind of choice and which, I fear, are very likely those with which I credited most students earlier in my discussion.

In conclusion, then, if asked to comment on what liberal studies professors must do in meeting the demands of their profession, I should say that what is needed is a reaffirmation of the values which first generated their commitment to college teaching. If community colleges and universities are to emerge as "egalitarian public utilities," characterized by a concern for each individual in the community in which they find themselves, a concern which the open admissions policies of so many of them appear to connote, then I think those who teach in them must be prepared not to defend these values but to allow them to stand for themselves as intrinsically worthy of pursuit. Liberal studies professors must lead this endeavor for it is they, first amongst all, who must remind society of the elegance of life to which the literate aspire.

NOTES

1 This paper is an expanded version of my paper entitled "Perceptions of College and the Pursuit of Literacy," presented to the College English Association at their Meeting in April 1978. The section on authority owes some of its ideas to the ideas I received in the discussion of this earlier version. In addition, the revised version of the paper was presented at the Association for General and Liberal Studies, Eighteenth Annual National Conference, October 1978.


3 Ibid., p. 3.

4 Ibid., p. 8.


6 Cope and Hannah, op. cit., p. 1.
7 Quoted by Mary Warnock in *Schools of Thought* (London: Faber and Faber, 1977), p. 65.
9 Warnock, op. cit., p. 70.
11 The following remarks draw upon the discussion of authority contained in R. S. Peters, *Ethics and Education* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1966), Chapter IX.
12 Warnock, op. cit., p. 75.
15 Ibid.
17 Ibid., p. 61 ff.
20 Same, op. cit., p. 358.