1977

Commentary On - "The Exploratory Year: A New Approach to the Four Year Experience at Whittier College"

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I read with interest Michael McBride’s article on the exploratory year at Whittier College. While I am sure that Whittier is satisfied with it and that it contains a number of innovative ideas, such as the “initial module” in various disciplines, I want to speak to the three assumptions upon which Professor McBride and his colleagues rejected any common interdisciplinary general education course for Whittier. I do so because the assumptions are so widely held and because Professor McBride states them so succinctly. I also speak to them as an admitted partisan of a common transdisciplinary general education core course (“Learner’s Viewpoint,” Perspectives, v. 7, no. 2, Fall 1975).

1) students cannot learn all there is to know;

I should have thought that this was beyond argument. No sensible instructor expects this either in disciplinary or in general education. I will admit, however, that there are a number of senseless instructors.

2) faculty, especially with the knowledge explosion of the twentieth century, cannot determine which “package” of knowledge is essential to the educated person;

This is utter nonsense! If we proceeded on this assumption in disciplinary education, all instruction would cease, except for those so foolish as to think that they can ever know, let alone convey to students, all the knowledge of a discipline. Every discipline must choose the “package” of knowledge which will make the educated disciplinary specialist.

I will grant that it is more difficult to determine the essentials for a generally-educated person. However, because a thing is difficult is no reason to shrink from it, if you believe it to be valuable. Here is the real crux of the matter: our specialization-mad society simply does not really value general education.
Specialists pay lip service to the concept, because that is expected, but actually they despise it. They think general education is for dilettantes and "fuzzy-minded liberals." It isn't solid, like knowing all the Ordovician fossils, or the "inner reality" of Hemingway's *Old Man and the Sea*.

When you ask a group of faculty members, all of whom have been hired for their credentials as good representatives of some specialty, to design a general education program, you are almost always going to get something which breaks right back into disciplinary specialization. The only way to avoid this is for a college administration to find people who are willing and able to teach interdisciplinarily. Unquestionably these will be few in a world which disvalues them, but they can be found if there is a will to look for them.

After the pariahs who can teach interdisciplinarily, or, better, transdisciplinarily, have been identified, the administration must then put them in a department and a curriculum all their own. They must be made "specialists in general education." This is a paradox, admittedly, but the most important things seem to be paradoxes, and people have learned to admire them and even to respect the mystery which surrounds them. The disciplinary specialists will still hate general educationists, as they will call them, but if they are seen to be specialists in general education the disciplinary specialists will give them a grudging acceptance. After all, if there is one thing disciplinary specialists understand it is disciplinary specialization, no matter what it is in. Of course, the administration must make the program small at first, in order not to upset the specialists too much.

3) students face an increasingly complex world in which they will need to make important decisions about themselves and their future goals;

The increasing complexity of the world is all the more reason for a common transdisciplinary "package." Of course, people have always needed something to help them put the world together. The only question has been and is whether that something will be knowledgeable, kind and integrated or the opposite.

In diametric contrast to specialist education, general education should teach broad concepts. The inane drive to learn "all there is to know" is brought over from specialist education, where people are lured into thinking they can really know all there is to know about something if only they restrict their interests sufficiently. General education should try to teach the most important concepts about everything which is considered of real significance. This sounds like "all there is to know" until you remember that it is only the most important concepts of the most important topics you should be dealing with. The most important concepts implies the broadest generalizations, and when you are dealing with the broadest generalizations you take a topic from the top down, from the broadest generalization to the next less broad, etc., as time allows.

Time, however, will not allow even many broad generalizations to be explored, although you may assign a lot of credit hours to a transdisciplinary course, if you resist the virtually irresistible temptation to deluge students with too much detail. Detail is for specialists — it is their life and their love, but it is the death of general education. It is specialist detail which bores the general education students and/or presents them with technical material they can't understand.

A number of specific examples need to be used to illustrate the broad generalizations, and to give something concrete and, hopefully, interesting. However, general education students don't need to know the details of the Westward Movement in order to understand its meaning for contemporary
American civilization, or the dynasties of China in order to understand the
essence of Asian civilization, or the floor, door and window of a photon in order
to be able to grasp the idea that energy and mass are somehow convertible one
to another. General education students need to know principally that a thing
exists — if they are interested to know how and why, they should be encour­
gaged to take the disciplinary courses which will explain to them how and why.

If it seems too great a task for learned faculty to “integrate” disciplinary
knowledge, then I don’t know how ordinary undergraduates are supposed to
do it after four years of exposure only to certain disciplines. And they certainly
will not be the best prepared they can be to make important decisions about
themselves unless they have the quintessence of knowledge their civilization
can give them. It is important to remember that, especially in this interdepen­
dent world, in order to make the really important decisions which will affect not
only them but others people need knowledge in breadth much more than they
need knowledge in depth in one field. Therefore, it seems to me that the prime
aim of general education should be to get people out of themselves, to learn
about other things and other people. The entire remainder of their college
career is available for specialization.

As for the idea of teaching students “how to think,” I believe that is excellent,
but I hardly think much time need be spent on the fundamental procedure.
Broadly speaking there are two fundamental approaches human beings take
toward gaining knowledge. One is the scientific method; all the others may be
grouped into a class called “non-scientific methods.” The scientific method
requires a rigorous effort to verify speculations; the non-scientific methods do
not.

It is of some value and interest to general education students to have a very
general idea of how some disciplines speculate and verify (or just speculate),
but again this kind of knowledge in detail is of most interest to those who are
going to enter the discipline, and it will be of interest only to those very few who
are going to do research in that discipline. What is valuable to most students in
both disciplinary and interdisciplinary studies is knowledge (yes, “content!”)
with which to operate in making decisions.

The idea that students will have the time, incentive or energy in a
specialization-mad world to explore widely in other fields after graduation is
simply not realistic. What they need is knowledge of a series of broad concepts,
in the perhaps vain but not quite so unrealistic hope that after graduation they
might keep slightly in contact with a few dimensions of the world outside their
own jobs and families, through such things as the newspaper, the network
news and, once in a while, a public television program and a book.

If they have retained something of the broad concepts they have learned in a
core course, graduates might be sensitive to the changing of some of these
concepts as time passes, or to the working out, or not working out, of these
concepts in life. That is all we can reasonably hope for. One of the things any
good general education course should teach is that the ordinary individual,
even the ordinary college graduate, will be forced into a narrow rut in order to
make a living. That is why if college students are ever going to understand
anything outside themselves they must be exposed to it while they are still in
college. Once they get out (and even before, of course) everything will conspire
to force them into a specialist shell and keep them there at least until retirement.

In regard to the eternal question of “content” in general education courses,
which we brushed by a little while ago, please do not let me hear, but I know I
will, the unbelievable argument that there is no sense giving content in general education courses because in five years many of the concepts we are working with today will be outmoded. Again, if this line of argument were followed in the disciplines as it is recommended for general education, most instruction in the modern world would cease.

I would not deny that there are dangers in interdisciplinary instruction, as there are in disciplinary instruction. The danger in disciplinary instruction is that it may become too serious, too traditional and too microscopic. The danger in interdisciplinary instruction is that, if it is not properly done, it may become nebulous, unbalanced and not serious enough. In experimenting with new techniques interdisciplinary education must at all costs avoid the image of being "easy," disorganized or trivial.

Finally, lest I seem too hard on specialists, let me say that "some of my best friends are specialists!" I would never deny that the specialist has a fundamental part to play in the knowledge game. Generalists would have nothing to generalize about if they were not furnished by specialists with the knowledge that can only be gained through intensive study in a narrow field. The problem is that higher education today is almost totally dominated by specialists. Even most college general education programs are designed by calling together a committee of disciplinary specialists and saying to them, "Now design some interdisciplinary stuff." The rate of recidivism in these committees is as high as that of convicted criminals, and, to mix metaphors, Congress sees no logrolling greater than the recommendations of such committees, which usually come out with pork barrel legislation designed to give each discipline a potentially equal chance at the student pie.

With its idea of "areas of contrast" Whittier College is at least innovative in its disciplinary politics. The common device is "distribution requirements," which give the appearance of breadth while retaining the same old narrow depth. The result is spotty education, not general education, with both student and faculty cooperating to maintain their pristine ignorance of any field they haven't already studied, think they won't like, or are convinced, in their ignorance, they'll never need to know anything about. This is the normal outcome of specialist domination of academia, and it is well past time that a real balance is struck, that specialists are removed from control of the general education programs, and that people who have the talent for generalist education are, first, valued, because that is the primary need and the primary lack in academia and elsewhere today, and, second, that they are given control over the design and administration of the general education program.

Eugene Wine