DECONSTRUCTING PRETENSE: THE IRRELEVANT CURRICULUM

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[What should we be teaching in the new millenium? Are the old books (or books themselves) obsolete in 2001? In the late 1980s Malaspina College hosted several papers on curriculum development. Professor Kim Blank, English Department, University of Victoria, argued that universities and colleges were hopelessly lost in the past, teaching materials that were largely irrelevant in the postmodern world. Old notions of objectivity and of truth were outdated. The marginal is where the action is. He stated: "Much of the academic material that constitutes the educational system as it exists today in the Western world is the result of a series of pronouncements of the rich over the poor, of the few over the many, of the enlightened over the dim, of the divinely ordained over the misinformed masses, and of the politically empowered over the disenfranchised populace." Blank presented a "pomo" position [radical skepticism] which prompted Malaspina's Bob Lane to reply in the next session of the series. It is good to note that these were lectures, written to be read to an audience of peers, and then written up for publication.]

Today I'm going to talk about doom. Today I'm going to talk about D.E.W.M. Today I'm going to talk about tedium. Today I'm going to talk about tedium.

If those sentences sound repetitive let me assure you that they are not. If they sound ambiguous let me disambiguate them for you. Today I am going to talk about doom. "Doom" is "a sentence, a judgement, a condemnation." Kim Blank judged the curriculum, condemned it as oppressive, and sentenced it to the punishment of displacement by the marginal. If only we can displace Milton with some Bobby McFerrin (instead of "Paradise Lost", "Get Happy") all will be well in the halls of academe. Or, if we spend less time on Shakespeare and more time on Simon we will be less oppressive and our students will be better off. Teach the popular not the classic is the call of the wild. Shed the heavy mantel of the dead past and revel in the present and the
And why not since as Blank says of the curriculum "It has no external justification." It does seem to follow that if there is no external justification or standard by which to measure the curriculum then indeed anything goes. And if anything goes then why not study "trash" novels, pornographic films, and "Three's Company" instead of the difficult works that are to be found on most university curricula. After all the popular is more fun, more easily digested, and more, well,.....more popular.

Secondly, I am going to talk about D.E.W.M. That is an acronym for Dead European White Males. The arguments about curriculum in the states right now usually have to do with the attempts by special interest groups to have some special materials on the reading lists of the liberal arts courses. Black groups want African writers, Hispanic groups want Hispanic writers, women's groups want women writers, lesbian groups want lesbian writers, survivalist groups want survivalist writers, born again Christian groups want born again writers, and the National Rifle Association wants the care and feeding of the hand gun as an integral part of the curriculum starting at grade one. And, of course, if Kim Blank is right, and there is no external standard to employ in making curriculum decisions, then it is simply a matter of power and she who has the power selects the texts.

The most important argument that has come out of the debate in places like Stanford and Berkeley has been this: no book should be required reading for students just because it was written by a D.E.W.M. Being dead and white, European and male is not a sufficient reason singly or conjoined to justify your work being read and studied as required material. Others may have made significant contributions to the history of ideas and should not be excluded on the grounds that they are not D.E.W.M.s. I think that is exactly right. If works are being chosen on those kinds of grounds then they should not be. And it follows from this that books should not be chosen just because they are written by live, non-European, non-white, females. These factors of age, race, sex, and place of origin are not relevant when selecting works to be studied by students in required courses. Racism, sexism, ageism, and placism are not morally defensible and must be discontinued especially in universities, which as
institutions with the responsibility for leadership, cannot and should not be involved in immoral acts.

Next, I want to talk about Te Deum. This is, of course, an old Christian hymn which I refer to simply as a way of bringing to the discussion the matter of God and whether she is still alive. But more importantly, I want to consider whether the existence of god is a necessary condition for there being external standards in things like morality and excellence. Dostoevsky suggests in The Brothers Karamazov that since God is dead everything is permitted. And if Ivan is right in this assertion then it does seem that standards of excellence and of morality do indeed disappear and one is left with some floating, flexible, situational ethics to apply in any of the human endeavors that depend upon judgement and decision. Alas, if there is no way of making value judgements at all then everything is a matter of taste and Three's Company has every right to displace Two Gentleman of Verona in the curriculum.

Finally, I want to talk about tedium. "Tedium is the condition or quality of being tiresome, wearisome, or monotonous." I find it tedious to be told that education is oppressive. I believe just the opposite to be true. Education is liberating. Education is liberating not oppressive.

Tedium is also what I do not want the audience to feel today and to protect you from that I will be fairly brief in developing the arguments that support my main claims.

To return now to the "doom" part of the paper: I will argue that the oppressive, prejudiced, and "darwinistic" curriculum that Kim Blank describes in his paper is a red herring since it does not exist in North America now, and never has. From the beginning of the development of the community college, for example, the thrust has been toward providing educational opportunities for the mature high school dropout (like me), and for the citizen who never completed all of the necessary prerequisites to move directly to the university. It was also set up to offer an opportunity to women, who for whatever reasons, had been left out of the post-secondary education dream. It had from the start an open door (though now we are beginning to close that door) and a welcome for anyone who could do the work required. The whole idea of the community college is to provide educational opportunities for citizens who are not rich kids or the parents of rich kids, but who nevertheless know the
value of education. Natives and visible minorities were also
target groups that could in many situations benefit from the
community college and its comprehensive offerings in
communities where the student could continue to live at
home while taking the courses or program that she thought
was of benefit to her. Malaspina College is a place for
second chances, a place for individual attention, a place for
its students which is certainly not marginal, but is a helpful
half-way house between high school and university or
between unemployment and employment.

We do not have the same kind of streaming in North
America that existed and to some extent exists in Great
Britain today. I know that the systems are too different to
compare directly and that is why I charge Kim Blank with
the fallacy of red herring and could also probably make the
charge of faulty analogy stick. If we stick to our curriculum
then we can see rather quickly that the "central, universal,
and classical" curriculum that he sets up in order
deconstruct is neither as central nor as universal nor as
classical as it must be in order for his deconstruction
program to have something to deconstruct. I can give you
some quick and easy examples: when I first came to
Malaspina College when it first opened one of my jobs was
to serve as the Coordinator of English and one of the main
tasks was to articulate the English courses with the
universities. Now I remember as I am sure others do that
we were looked at as indeed being marginal. The universities
at first thought we were some second class institutions that
would go away in no time if they simply ignored us. Well we
didn't go away, and in fact we had more influence on their
curriculum than they on ours. We taught Canadian
Literature before the University of Victoria did! Maybe then
and even now they thought of themselves as a British
university; that might explain some of the descriptions of
curricula in Dr. Blank's paper, I don't know. More recently
philosophy departments in the province have responded to
expressed societal needs by the developing and teaching of
practical ethics courses in such fields as medicine, business,
policing, and the environment. Look in a college or
university calendar; you will find all sorts of philosophy
offerings today that were not there just ten years ago. Now,
if we were indeed driven by the conservative urges posited
by Kim Blank could these changes have occurred?

Let me get to the claim that there can be no external
standard by which to judge the curriculum. That claim I will
argue is just false. There can be and is a standard to be employed and that standard is excellence. The reason we continue to teach Plato, DesCartes, and Kant is because no one has ever surpassed them in the work they did. If you really want to know about I-self then you must read DesCartes. If you want to know the source of the radical skepticism that is contemporary literary criticism you have to read DesCartes Meditations. If you want to understand what a deontological moral system might look like or what grounds individual autonomy then read Kant. Yes, they are both dead, European, white and male. But it's their work, their philosophy we study and learn from, and the rest is truly irrelevant.

Let's look for a moment at what we do when we do science or art. What we do is:

(1) select certain features from the physical world based upon complex considerations of beliefs, function, and reality; (2) make guesses about the way the world works, and put these guesses in the form of hypotheses, paintings, or stories; (3) these guesses are improved upon, amended, corrected, or thrown away. "Guesses" is a word I borrow here from Karl Popper. Popper uses the word to talk about scientific theories or knowledge claims that are to be tested against the world to determine if they can be falsified. I believe that works of art are similar claims. They are hypotheses or guesses about the way the world is, and are constantly being checked against reality for accuracy, functionality, scope, purpose, etc.

"At the leading edge of experience in philosophy, science and feeling there is inevitably a groping for language to translate the insecure novelty of noticing and understanding into a precision of meaning and imagery." So wrote physicist Frank Oppenheimer in the introduction to a series of readings at The Exploratorium on "The Language of Poetry and Science." Poetry and science? Not so strange when you consider that Niels Bohr himself once wrote: "When it comes to atoms, language can be used only as in poetry. The poet, too, is not nearly so concerned with describing facts as with creating images." (1)

It is a current theory in the humanities that subjectivity of vision is the source of knowledge and that scripts, novels, poems and the like are self-contained creations, spun out of the autonomous human consciousness. This formalist view
separates the literary work from objective reality, science, and the world of practical, utilitarian communication and defines it as an autonomous, self-sufficient "world" or law unto itself, independent of the external world. This view seems designed to reconcile science and literature—but not by rehabilitating the truth claims of literature, but by undermining those of science. Instead of saying something like: "Literature and science are one in that both give us objective knowledge about the world," we say, "Literature and science are one, in that both are essentially fictions by which we entertain ourselves; the objectivity of science is itself a fiction, a myth, a model."

I believe that literature and science are fundamentally the same, not because each is a detached balloon of coherence, but because each makes claims or guesses about the world which are either true or false. In short, I want to argue against the position expressed by Oscar Wilde and reiterated by Northrup Frye, Susan Sontag, Jonathan Culler, Kim Blank and others. Wilde writes: "art finds her own perfection within, and not outside of, herself. She is not to be judged by any external standards of resemblance. She is a veil rather than a mirror. Art never expresses anything but itself." The subjectivist argument gets started on an ad-hominem base: it carves up the world in such a way that no one would want to be associated with the one side. Realistic and objective ways of thinking about language and thought, we are told, lead to amoral science, positivism, mechanism, venal commercial calculation, stifling respectability, manipulative propaganda, regimentation and limited wisdom. This radical skepticism has its own privileged pairings: creation\representation, text as invitation\text as determinate object, voyages into the unseen\boundaries and constraints, non-rational\rational, constructing\recording. Robert Scholes summarizes this subjectivist position as follows: "Once we knew that literature was about life and criticism was about fiction--and everything was simple. Now we know that fiction is about other fiction, is criticism in fact, or metaphor. And we know Criticism has taken the very idea of "aboutness" away from us. It has taught us that language is tautological, if it is not nonsense, and to the extent that it is about anything it is about itself."

These "fictions" are no longer about anything Scholes argues here, except maybe they are about themselves. Well, if they are about themselves then they are about something and therefore no one has taken the idea of aboutness away
from us. Further, one has the notion that he intends the sentences in his paper to express something, to make claims about life, even that we cannot make claims in language about life. But isn't that a claim? in language? about life?

The subjectivist seems to believe that persons are somehow demeaned if they imitate nature or take their cues from outside their own minds. The subjectivist denies realism and common sense on the grounds that they are restrictive, limiting, conservative, and support the status quo. Yet the very act of denying all naive realisms presupposes an objective standpoint. Such denials can only be stated in language, and language is an incorrigible realist. The word "fiction" functions only against something which is real. Just as counterfeit money presupposes genuine money so fiction presupposes fact. How could you tell an imaginary world if you saw it except by checking it against the real world? As Gerald Graff puts it in Literature Against Itself:

The recognition that our concepts are constructions of language systems...or of psychological or social processes, tells us nothing about their relation or lack of relation to reality.

Evaluation, interpretation, mimesis, excellence, rationality itself; all of these are under attack these days. In part the groundwork of this attack comes out of philosophical skepticism which attempts to build a theory of knowledge on the claim that nothing can be known. In the resulting subjectivist world of phenomenology those things which can be known are supposed to be our own precepts, or our own feelings. If only we introspect long enough or with the help of our therapists seek the invisible we will have a better sense of I-self. You can see straightaway that if the skeptic claims that nothing can be known then she can not even get her theory of knowledge started since, by her own claim, she can not know that nothing can be known! I claim against the skeptic that we can know all kinds of things about the world, ourselves, and about all sorts of objective conditions or states of being. Knowledge of this sort, public, verifiable, accessible, is a necessary condition for interpretation and evaluation. Value depends upon understanding; it is not something of a different logical category that is added on to a set of facts. The facts of a situation or a work of art do not march by our consciousness followed by a valuation any more than the platoons and companies march by followed
by the regiment. There can be no description of experience without some conceptualization, interpretation, and commentary. To the extent that works of art or works of science are descriptions of experience (or guesses at that description) they too depend upon conceptualization, interpretation, commentary, and evaluation. The only real formalism is silence.

"An interpretation, such as the various interpretations of quantum theory, is in no sense a deduction from experimental facts or from the mathematics of a theory. Rather it is a proposal of what the theory might mean in a physical and intuitively comprehensive sense. Thus every interpretation brings into the theory something which is not in the observations and equations themselves. This additional material comes from a very broad area which extends beyond what is normally taken to be science and includes philosophy and aesthetic sensibilities." (2)

Any curriculum must follow from these considerations, and be modeled on a philosophical notion of what knowledge is and how we obtain it. It does not follow from the many interpretations of a work of art or a work of science that all of the interpretations are equal- this is one place where equality is not the primary principle. Getting it right is what counts and that is exactly what we should teach in all of our schools- getting it right.

Since we cannot possibly provide the requisite knowledge for "getting it right" in all areas, that is, since we are not gods, we are forced to ask the most fundamental of all curriculum questions: What kind of knowledge is most worthwhile for our students? Given the kinds of problems that we face today with an environment that can not continue to support our nonsense, with a world shrinking in size while growing in real terms a larger and larger gap between the rich and the poor, we need to consider with care what best prepares our students to cope and to survive in this world. One approach to this large problem is to follow the suggestion in a part of Professor Blank's paper and teach our students to think critically.

Another way of putting this basic curriculum question is "what kinds of knowledge and understanding are likely to
have the most universal value?" When the question is put this way, notice, it is not a question about transfer-of-training effects, which is a psychological question, but it is a question about which kinds of knowledge we consider to have the most value. Will it be, for example, how to repair one's automobile or the study of history? Will it be public speaking or literature? These are the sorts of questions that must be faced for education in general and a fortiori for critical thinking in general.

It seems to me when we consider all of these points there is no other plausible candidate for our curriculum besides a broad liberal education. No other curriculum can provide quite the same breadth of understanding into the human condition and the problems which perennially face it. The disciplines which make up a liberal education (e.g. those in the arts, the sciences, the humanities) are not separate from, nor alien to, the everyday problems requiring critical thought, but rather they are the fundamental constituents of such problems. To attempt to think rationally at all is to employ the various forms of rational discourse which are the disciplines. For some reason there has come to be a widely held belief that standard disciplinary knowledge is somehow technical, esoteric, arcane, abstract or primarily of mere academic interest. This view fails to recognize that the disciplines had their origins in the human condition and are substantively about the human condition. Their raison d'être is to provide insight and understanding to the problems faced by humanity. If the disciplines are believed to consist in merely esoteric or academic knowledge, then this says more about the poor way this knowledge is perhaps often taught, but this should not confuse us about the basic purpose and power of the disciplines. Despite rhetoric to the contrary, the disciplines do not exist for their own sake. Rather they enable rational discourse about the problems which confront us. It is the job of educators to convey this power and purpose of the disciplines because they are the basic ingredients of rationality itself.

I am not claiming that typical, everyday problems of the sort we are interested in will always, or indeed ever, fall neatly into one domain or the other. The typical problem is multifaceted and multi-dimensional, therefore several types of knowledge and understanding will be needed for most problems. I am simply claiming that because the disciplines provide knowledge and understanding which goes "beyond the present and the particular" (to use Charles Bailey's
felicitous phrase) they provide the best set of knowledge and skills for coping with problems affecting society. Another point to be made here is that liberal education does not consist merely in absorbing a lot of different types of information, but its major characteristic is that it enables one to understand and appreciate both the strengths and weaknesses, and the power and limitations of the various forms of thought which make up our thinking. That is, the liberally educated student should understand the epistemic status of different types of knowledge claims within the different forms of knowledge. Liberal education is not, of course, the passive acquisition of different types of information, but rather it is being able to enter the various forms of rational discourse as an autonomous thinker. The liberally educated person must understand the different processes of reasoning every bit as much as the products of that reasoning. Moreover, such a person is not someone who merely possesses arcane knowledge in a half a dozen specialty areas, but rather they possess a broad cognitive perspective which enables them to see significance in the most mundane events.

I want to end today by saying that in my own case education was liberating and never oppressive. It released me from the back breaking work of the farm laborer or the construction laborer, although maybe not in time, and it has brought me gifts and excitement. I have never gotten over the joy of being paid to read books and talk about them!

I have studied in many disciplines and will offer a private report of what it is that we are supposed to be teaching: from literature we learn point of view and how to imagine being in another's shoes, from mathematics we learn order and the beauty of coherence, and from philosophy we learn humility, or the awareness of limits - we do not know everything.

(1) SYMPATHETIC VIBRATIONS: REFLECTIONS ON PHYSICS AS A WAY OF LIFE, K.C. Cole, p.154. [Back to Text]

(2) SCIENCE, ORDER, AND CREATIVITY, David Bohm and F. David Peat, p.101. [Back to Text]