

Seeing the Connectedness of Things

Organizing the curriculum around shared experiences can help students understand they are members of the human community.

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In his book, *The Mountain People*, anthropologist Colin Turnbull describes a once-thriving North African tribal community in which, through adversity, relationships have broken down. Common values have deteriorated; traditions have lost their evocative power. The social cement holding the tribe together—its heritage, values, and mutual relationships—has crumbled. The result, says Turnbull, is the breakdown of community.

On a different scale, such a decline threatens our society. Today's young people have grown up in a fractured, atomized world in which the call for individual gratification booms forth on every side while social claims are weak. Students are educationally more competitive, geared toward training for jobs, and more committed to getting higher grades. They are optimistic about their own futures, believing they will

get good jobs, good money, and good things, but they are pessimistic about the future of the nation and the world. Consequently, students are more committed to their personal futures than to the future we face together.

Sadly, most schools exacerbate this tendency toward self-preoccupation and social isolation. Electives, with their emphasis on individual interests, continue to increase while general education is in shambles. Among educators there is no agreement about the purposes of schooling; we are more confident about the length of education than we are about its substance.

As a global society, we simply cannot afford a generation that fails to see or care about connections. To deny our relationship with one another and with our common home, Earth, is to deny the realities of existence. Clearly, the time has come for educators to focus on the aims of common learning.

To reaffirm general education in no way diminishes the significance of diversity in education. The uniqueness of

each individual is a fact to be cherished, not deplored. To recognize that this nation is not one culture but many; to defend the rights of minorities; to preserve the right to dissent, even to disobey, are to acknowledge the essentials of a free society. Schools must respond to the special needs of students.

But while affirming diversity, the school curriculum also must acknowledge the claims of the larger society that give meaning to students' lives. General education is not a sentimental tradition; our future well-being, and perhaps even our survival, may depend on students' understanding the reality of interdependence.

Therefore, the mission of general education is to help students understand that they are not only autonomous individuals, but also members of a human community to which they are accountable. In calling for a reaffirmation of general education, the aim is to help restore the balance. By focusing on those experiences that knit isolated individuals into a community, general education can have a central purpose of its own.

Which human experiences should be the focus of a common curriculum for the schools? Obviously, many different lists could be drawn up. For purposes of discussion, I suggest six themes that may provide an appropriate structure for the nation's schools.

Shared Use of Symbols

Use of symbols separates human beings from all other forms of life. Language gives individuals their identities, makes transition possible, and binds society together. All students, from the first years of formal schooling, should learn not only to read and write, but to read with understanding, write with clarity, and listen and speak effectively. In addition, they should become proficient in the use of numbers, which constitute an essential and universally accepted symbol system, too. Mastery of these skills is the foundation of common learning. Without them, the goals of general education will be fatally undermined.

But developing language skills, as important as this may be, is not enough. Students should also come to understand why and how language has evolved, how messages reveal the values of a culture, how words and thoughts interact, and how feelings and ideas are conveyed through literature.

Students should explore, as well, how we communicate nonverbally through music, dance, and the visual

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arts. They should understand how these forms of expression permit us to convey subtle meanings, express intense emotions; and how, uniquely, nonverbal symbols can stir a deep response in others.

The impact of mass communication should also be examined. In the United States, children watch television 6,000 hours before they spend a single hour in the classroom. Students urgently need what might be called "tube literacy," to help them see how visual and auditory signals reinforce each other, how ideas can be distorted, how thoughts and feelings can be subliminally conveyed, and how the accuracy and reliability of messages can be tested.

The language of computers merits study, too. Every generally-educated student should learn about this pervasive signal system that increasingly controls our day-to-day transactions.

The goals just proposed are ambitious but essential if students are to survive in a world where symbols hold the community together.

Shared Membership in Groups and Institutions

Institutions are a fact of life. They touch almost every aspect of our being—economic, educational, familial, political, and religious. Because we pass so much of our lives in institutions, the general education curriculum should look at their origin; how they evolve, grow strong, become oppressive or weak, and sometimes die. It should examine, as well, how institutions work, explore the interaction between institutions and individuals, and show how such interaction both facilitates and complicates our existence.

In addition to this broad-gauge approach, I suggest a more inductive study, one that looks more penetratingly at a single institution—the Peace Corps, the AFL-CIO, the American Rifle Association, the city council—or one related, perhaps, to a student's special field of interest. How did the institution begin? What were its initial purposes? What new missions has it assumed? To whom is it accountable? Is the institution still vital, or is it being maintained because of ceremony and tradition?

The goal should be to help students see that everyone shares membership in the "common institutions" of our culture—those social structures that shape our lives, impose obligations, restrict choices, and provide services that we could not obtain in isolation.

Shared Producing and Consuming

Students should understand that everyone produces and that, through this process, we are dependent on each other. This is an essential part of common learning.

General education should explore the significance of work, a form of both consumption and production, in the lives of individuals and examine how work patterns reflect the values and shape the social climate of a culture. Such a curriculum would ask: What have been the historical, philosophical, religious, and social attitudes toward work around the world? How are notions about work related to social status and human dignity? What determines the different status and rewards we grant to different forms of work? Why is some work highly rewarded and other work relatively unrewarded? In addition,

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tion, general education should help students discover that work, at its very best, can be life-fulfilling. As Eugene Delacroix wrote, through work "We seek not only to produce but to give value to time."

This is not to suggest that the nation's schools become vocational institutions. But production and consumption are central to our common experience. They are the ways we define ourselves. Their study can be a legitimate, demanding part of general education.

Shared Relationship with Nature

All life forms on our planet are inextricably interlocked and no education is complete without an understanding of the ordered, interdependent nature of the universe. General education should introduce students, not just to the "facts" of science—the basic concepts, theories, and relationships—but to the methodology of science, too. All students should come to understand how science is a process of trial and error;

how, through observation and testing, theories are defined, sometimes discarded, and often give rise to other theories. Students should learn about the applications of science and see how scientific discoveries have led to a flood of inventions and new technologies that bring with them both benefits and risks.

Finally, there is the matter of science and citizenship. If students are intelligently to evaluate the pros and cons of nuclear power, space exploration, food additives, and pollution standards, they must become more knowledgeable about underlying facts and principles behind the headlines.

Becoming a responsible human being in the last quarter of the 20th century means learning about the great power of science, its pervasive influence in all aspects of our lives, and our own shared relationship with nature. This is an essential part of common learning.

Shared Sense of Time

An understanding of our shared heritage—past and future—should be expected of all students. General education should focus on the seminal ideas and events that have decisively shaped the course of history. More than a collection of facts, this approach would emphasize the convergence of social, religious, political, economic, and intellectual forces in the study of a few carefully chosen themes. Students should learn that the chronic of humanity is by no means a swift and straight march in the direction of progress. It is an endlessly varied struggle to resolve tensions over freedom and authority, conformity and rebellion, war and peace, rights and responsibilities, equality and exploitation. At bottom, an inquiry into the roots of our civilization should be seen as a study of continuity and change, with leaps forward and spills backward.

It is not enough for students to be told that events have taken place; ideas have been expressed, and societies have risen, flourished, and declined. The approach we envision would emphasize the *interrelationship* between ideas and culture. It would explore, not just governments and leaders, but "ordinary" people, not just politics and diplomacy, but also literature, and religion, and the family.

The fundamental question must be: What has the past to do with us? How does it shape our world today? In looking to the past, we gain a new perspective on the present.

In addition to this look backward, common learning must also gaze forward. General education should help all students understand how past visions of the future have shaped the course of history. They should be asked to think about the "options for the future" we confront today. Above all, students should begin to understand that much of what we call "the future" has, in fact, been predetermined by political, economic, social, and scientific decisions of the past.

The kind of air we breathe, the way we travel, the nature of the social order, patterns of global relationships, the jobs we can and cannot choose: these matters and most others are not totally open to chance. Decisions of the past have shaped *our* world, and tomorrow's world is being shaped today. Exploring our shared sense of time is a central part of common learning.

Shared Values and Beliefs

A study of the personal and social significance of shared values should be the capstone to common learning. Through

general education, all students examine the distinctions we make between beliefs and "facts," and how values are formed, transmitted, and revised. They should examine, too, the values currently held in our society, looking at the ways such values are socially enforced, and how societies react to unpopular beliefs. General education should introduce all students to the powerful role political ideologies, and particularly religion, have played in shaping, throughout history, the convictions of individuals and societies.

Each student should be able to identify the premises inherent in his or her own beliefs, learn how to make responsible decisions, and engage in a frank and searching discussion of some of the ethical and moral choices that confront us all. Such a study relates directly to the general education themes we have just discussed. In every one of these shared experiences, moral and ethical choices must be made. How, for example, can messages be conveyed honestly and effectively? How can institutions serve the needs of both the individual and the group? On what basis is a voca-

tion selected or rejected? Where can the line be drawn between conservation and exploitation of natural resources. These are the sorts of consequential ethical and moral issues that a common learning curriculum must confront.

In the end, we must recognize that general education is not a single set of courses. It is a program with a clear objective, one that can be achieved in a variety of ways. And while there may be great flexibility in the process, it is the clarity of purpose that is crucial.

Nearly 40 years ago in *Liberal Education*, Mark Van Doren wrote:

The connectedness of things is what the educator contemplates to the limit of his capacity. No human capacity is great enough to permit a vision of the world as simple, but if the educator does not aim at the vision no one else will and the consequences are dire when no one else does. . . . The student who can begin early in life to think of things as connected, even if he revises his view with every succeeding year, has begun the life of learning.

Seeing "the connectedness of things" is the goal of common learning. ■

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