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Liberal Philosophy, Free Discussion, and Individualized Learning at Lawrence

Convocation: President Jill Beck, September, 2006

Introduction

I begin my remarks today by referring back to my presentation on individualized instruction at my first Lawrence convocation in 2004. Since that time, we have made steady progress in understanding the many ways that close interactive teaching and learning relationships between faculty and students define both liberal education and the pedagogical traditions of Lawrence. It has become clear that many of us at Lawrence believe individualized learning is a cornerstone of liberal education.

I will speak today about John Stuart Mill's great work of liberal philosophy, *On Liberty*, which Professor Chaney tells me, was on the Freshman Studies reading list for many years. While Mill's thesis is that free discussion is a necessary social and political practice in a free democratic society, without which informed opinions and social conscience cannot fully develop, he specifically advocated for free discussion as central to intellectual development. Free discussion, of course, is more possible in the small seminars and tutorials that characterize learning at Lawrence, than it ever could be in large lecture classes. From Mill's autobiography I will report how his own education commenced in a tutorial relationship with his father James Mill. I will close with a look back at three highlights of free and informed expression at Lawrence last year, and then with a look ahead to the theme of this coming year. Beginning this month and continuing

through the Spring, we will enjoy presentations and discussions by distinguished visitors, and by our own professors and students, concerning the importance of the individualized learning traditions at Lawrence and Oxford Universities that may represent the epitome of what is meant by the liberal arts.

Liberal Philosophy: The Individual Right to Free Discussion

What do we mean when we say Lawrence is a liberal arts college? We all know the things with which liberal arts education is generally associated--learning to read closely and analytically in a variety of subjects; small classes; creative and critical thinking; the frequent practice of writing; study abroad and other cultural experiences--but these do not address the question, what are the principles of liberal education?

Liberal principles of education, like liberal political beliefs, resulted from a series of social revolutions including the Italian Renaissance, the Enlightenment, the French and American Revolutions, and the emphasis on the individual in the German Romantic and other Romantic movements. These social, political, and artistic revolutions led to a decrease in the absolute power of monarchical and religious institutions, and an increasing emphasis on the individual, who was said by Jefferson to have a set of inalienable rights, among them "liberty."

In the political sphere, these revolutions led to more open political discourse and a greater role for social discussion and debate. One-party or monarchical rule gave way to competing political parties, and hence more public consideration of opposing positions and arguments of pros and cons. Dissent became a characteristic of political discussions.

Some hundred years after the American Revolution, education started to catch up with liberal political philosophy and went through a social revolution of its own. As a result, social structures began to change in universities. In some institutions of higher learning, the distance began to break down between professors and students. This was certainly true at Lawrence University, founded in 1847. Lawrence was established from the start for both women and men, and for both immigrant and indigenous peoples. These idealistic principles of equality appear to have greatly influenced Lawrence's teaching philosophy, which prominently features more equality than is typical in higher education between professors and students. This tendency to equality of course serves to stimulate and sustain the free discussion that Mill found so indispensable to intellectual development.

From the Renaissance to the late 19th century, therefore, education changed enormously, from being a top-down transmission of received knowledge, primarily theological, to the student-centered revolution that brought us the tutorial at Oxford and at the developing liberal arts environment of Lawrence. What happened pedagogically, step by step, was a changeover from requirements based uniquely on lectures and oral examinations, to requirements based on free discourse during seminars and tutorials, and the frequent composition of papers, culminating in a written exam or performed project. These new methods of education were designed to provide expanded and transformed opportunities and means of individualized learning, and represented a change from one-size-fits-all dogma.

But just as importantly, the new social arrangement was characterized by much greater freedom for the student as an individual to speak his or her mind. (You have to

understand that this was something new!) Students could agree or disagree with a professor's claims of knowledge. But students were obliged to obey the rules of evidence and argument. These rules, and not those of the divine rights of kings or the infallible knowledge of religious leaders, were now academic law. Just as dissent had come to be part of political discussion and expression, dissent came to be used in free discussion to resolve the truth of intellectual ideas.

As John Stuart Mill observed in 1859, there had been a change in the standards by which knowledge was created and judged.

Mill's Liberal Philosophy of Free Discussion

According to Mill, liberal philosophy is most concerned with defining the rights of the individual to free speech. In Mill's framework, the word *liberal* means free from restraint in speech or action. Reading *On Liberty* reveals that Mill was referring to free speech as both public political speech and free discussion with others about ideas in private settings. For Mill, free speech is paramount in order for individuals to demonstrate their power of self-development in terms of understanding their own opinions and the claims of others to truth. For Mill, knowledge was fallible, meaning that it could be overturned through new evidence or argument. This is important because if one acts on the basis of what is assumed to be knowledge, one may be wrong and therefore act wrongly and possibly mislead or even harm others or oneself.

Only through discussion can we have our views challenged or refuted. Mill, who is the father of "utilitarian philosophy," argues that free speech should be used to test one's received truths. He recognized that people tend to hold the ideas of those around

them, meaning their reference groups, such as social groups. He also noted that once we have an opinion or truth claim, we tend to hold it preciously, even zealously. Mill advocated forcefully for people to use free speech to communicate their ideas to others. Why? Because only through discussion can people know whether their knowledge is fallible, in error.

According to Mill, there are three important reasons to use free discussion in determining the truth of our claims to knowledge.

First, our opinions and claims to truth may be false. By listening to opposing opinions and claims we may become persuaded of their truth (23). Through free discussion we may understand why we are wrong about something. Mill himself goes considerably beyond hearing “what can be said on the contrary side” (23). His definition of free discussion involves full arguments between opposing views, demanding intellectual investment and the sharpening of the powers of both reasoning and expression in order to communicate and learn effectively.

There is a second reason for using free speech to explore the truth of our claims to knowledge. You may be right. But you may not know fully why you are right.

Mill argues that although one’s opinion or claim to truth may be true, one may not know fully why something is true. But in free discussion one may learn “the grounds of one’s own opinions” (35). Mill emphatically denies that anyone can be taught the grounds of their own opinions. He says that would be mere parroting or memorizing someone else’s reasoning. Citizens of a fully functioning democracy need to derive their own opinions and determine the positions on which they would be moved to action. This freedom of thought requires freedom of discussion, which different approaches to

education either foster (as in liberal learning), or restrict (as in instruction based only on lectures and memorization).

Mill wrote, “He who knows only his own side of the case, knows little of that. His reasons may be good, and no one may have been able to refute them. But if he is equally unable to refute the reasons on the opposite side; if he does not so much as know what they are, he has no ground for preferring either opinion” (36).

Further, Mill stated that it is not “enough to hear the arguments of adversaries from our own teachers, presented as they state them, and accompanied by what they offer as refutations” (36). Students must be able to hear the opposing arguments “from persons who actually believe them; who defend them in earnest, and do their very utmost for them” (36). This is a powerful argument for representing all points of view on a liberal campus, and of the absolute necessity for tolerance of dissenting opinions. Knowledge must be powerfully determined through the articulation of argument, critical analysis of the reasoning used, and counter arguing, in order to fine-tune our personal positions with the care that our roles in society deserve.

There is one further reason offered by Mill for developing our knowledge through free discussion, and this is the possibility that both you and the person you are in discussion with are right, but in complementary ways. Mill wrote, “When the conflicting doctrines, instead of one being true and the other false, share the truth between them; and the nonconforming opinion is needed to supply the remainder of the truth,” (45), then both--or several--minds are required to find the full truth.

Mill likens truth-making to a kind of face-to-face combat: “Truth, in the great practical concerns of life, is so much a question of the reconciling and combining of

opposites, that very few have minds sufficiently capacious and impartial to make the adjustment . . . it has to be made by the rough process of a struggle between combatants fighting under hostile banners” (47). In other words, we learn valuable lessons from each other. In an atmosphere of free speech and inquiry, hearing from people on opposite sides of an issue is necessary if we are to bring all of the important aspects of an argument into focus.

Therefore, whether in correcting our fallible knowledge, knowing the grounds for our truthful claims, or combining and integrating the knowledge of others into our own, we need exchange with others using free discussion. This is our liberal education project at Lawrence:

- to support the growth of individual development through the use of free discussion in our teaching and learning, and
- to contribute our individual viewpoints to shared discourse on matters of meaning and importance, in an atmosphere of respect for others and for the value of reason.

The Tutorial Education of John Stuart Mill by His Father, James Mill

How did Mill arrive at free discussion as the cornerstone of education? We cannot definitively trace Mill’s philosophy to his exceptional education under the tutelage of his father, but each of us can make up his or her own mind on cause and effect in this case. John Stuart Mill reports that he was already learning Greek by the age of 3. He was taught by his father, James Mill, a distinguished historian educated at the University of Edinburgh. Do not think that learning Greek at age 3 was because J. S. Mill was a

child prodigy, or that this type of education could not have been undertaken by other pupils. Mill provides numerous self-deprecating assessments of his deficiencies in his ability to learn rapidly or deeply. James Mill began his instruction by writing Greek words on cards with their English equivalent as children are frequently instructed in language. Grammar did not come until later, when the boy was perhaps 6-7 years old, and Mill recalls his first book as Aesop's *Fables*, in Greek of course. At that age he read the historian, Herodotus, and such philosophers as Isocrates, and the first six Dialogues of Plato.

In Chapter 1 of John Stuart Mill's *Autobiography* he sets the scene for us: "I went through the whole process of preparing my Greek lessons in the same room and at the same table at which [my father] was writing: and as in those days Greek and English lexicons were not [there], . . . I was forced to have recourse to him for the meaning of every word which I did not know" (3).

Father and son also engaged in dialogue while walking on Newington Green before breakfast. "In these walks I always accompanied him, and with my earliest recollection of green fields and wild flowers, is mingled that of the account I gave him daily of what I had read the day before" (3).

The young Mill reports that his father did make him read books, however, in which he might not have had much interest in reading himself. (Let Lawrence students take heed of this wise practice.)

A third aspect of his education was that the young man was asked by his father to teach Latin to his younger sister. This was evidence of an enlightened strategy for acquiring the ability to teach oneself, for no method is more effective for learning than in

teaching others; and, for its time, an enlightened attitude to the education of women.

James Mill was truly an exceptional educator. From age 8-12, John Stuart Mill read a great range of books in Latin by Virgil, Livy, Ovid, and Cicero. He was also reading Homer's *Iliad* by then and had begun Aristotle's *Rhetoric* and *Logic*. It was here in the *Logic* that Mill acquired his faith in hearing the reasoning of antagonists so as to "become capable of disentangling the intricacies of confused and self-contradictory thought . . ." (*Autobiography*, 7). But Mill the younger credited Plato's *Dialogues* for providing the argumentative structure that he was to use in his praise of free discussion in *On Liberty*.

Mill wrote, "The Socratic method, of which the Platonic dialogues are the chief example, is unsurpassed as a discipline for correcting the errors, and clearing up the confusions [that may beset] a man of vague generalities who is constrained to express his meaning to himself in definite terms, or to confess that he does not know what he is talking about . . ." (7).

Finally, John Stuart Mill shared one additional principle about his father's tutorial approach: James Mill never told his son how to read Greek or Latin, nor did he permit anything the boy learned to be a mere exercise of memory (10). "He strove to make the understanding not only go along with every step of the teaching, but, if possible, precede it. Anything which could be found out by thinking, I never was told, until I exhausted my efforts to find it out for myself" (10).

This then is the story of John Stuart Mill's tutorial education. It is not a leap I think from considering his individualized learning as a splendid example of this form of education, to seeing it as the generative experience that may have inspired and informed the writing of *On Liberty*.

Individualized Learning at Lawrence

Learning at Lawrence follows many of the precepts of Mill's philosophy, including emphasis on free discussion, and providing environments in which inquiry is foremost and where students learn by doing, reading, applying theories, and practicing new techniques, as opposed to memorizing information only in preparation for test-taking. Lawrence does not prioritize received knowledge as much as constructed knowledge, gained through free and engaged participation in the ongoing pursuit of clearer understanding.

Examples always speak louder than words, so at this time I would like to share with you three examples of outstanding student work from last year, mentored by faculty from our conservatory of music and our department of biology.

The purpose of tutorials is not to instruct or convey information so much as to induce students to consider ways to evaluate evidence and make connections among diverse pieces of evidence. This purpose was central last year in the field work undertaken by Professor Jodi Sedlock with her students. [*Start slides 1 - 9*] Professor Sedlock (in the middle in the slide), a biologist with a second undergraduate degree in Fine Arts, has always hoped that she would be able to find a way to apply her arts background to her conservation work. Through a fellowship from the AsiaNetwork foundation, she brought Lawrence students with her to the Philippines to participate in a survey of the bat community within Mount Isarog Natural Park. The students not only learned to work with the bats, they also learned, as Jodi says, "what it means to be a poor Filipino whose life depends on exploiting the very resources that we [were] working to protect." After the fieldwork was completed, she stayed on with two Lawrentians to

work with the Camerines Sur State Agricultural College to assist with developing educational materials. She observes that, “Art is a wonderful tool for communicating conservation science to people whose every action directly affects the land and its inhabitants. . . . [W]e produced an educational poster in the local language that explained very simply the value of bats and what farmers can do to ensure their survival. This poster and an associated brochure have been distributed to villages around the park and to elementary schools.”

The alternation of teacher and student roles in learning allows the student to learn if his claims are wrong, one of Mill’s benefits of free discussion. Peer learning is another benefit of environments that foster exchange and that encourage collaborative effort in order collectively to accumulate greater truth and clearer understanding. Professor Bart De Stasio’s field work with his students in aquatic biology, and Professor Beth De Stasio’s small-group tutorial on cancer research, both achieved these goals.

[Start Slides 10 – 16] The Cancer Biology tutorial was designed to promote an understanding of “the molecular origins of cancer, [and] the methods used to diagnose and treat cancers of various types and stages” and to “build a large-scale model of the pathways of cancer induction.” The tutorial aimed “[t]o improve students’ ability[ies] to read, discuss, and evaluate primary literature in molecular and cell biology [and] [t]o allow students to gain an understanding of the long-term scientific enterprise including approaches, methods, interpretations, and the sociology of science” (Professor Beth De Stasio Course Description).

“Students in aquatic biology courses with Bart De Stasio begin their learning process by participating in field sampling excursions to lakes and rivers around

Wisconsin. As seen in the photographs, [Bart's] students have been examining changes in food web interactions in Lake Winnebago following invasion by zebra mussels, as well as performing ecological monitoring of aquatic invasive species in the lower Fox River This latter project is part of the state[']s effort to reopen the lock and dam navigational system on the Fox River.”

Professor De Stasio's words: “Learning to function as part of a team is important, and often necessary, when large projects are attempted or where conditions might become hazardous. However, this type of collective learning also provides important individual skills needed to tackle, effectively, more independent work. Students progressively increase their abilities and confidence to tackle independent research in biology courses, with many conducting senior projects” (Bart De Stasio, *edited* personal correspondence).

The final example is a work of music composition by student David Werfelmann, which demonstrates freely and highly developed expression through music writing and performance. David's faculty mentors on this project were Joanne Metcalf, Fred Sturm, and David Becker, with the assistance of David Berk.

Professor Joanne Metcalf states: “Serving as a mentor for *The Black Pirate* [project] alongside my colleagues Fred Sturm and David Becker was especially rewarding because it showed what the combined powers of cooperation and mutual respect can achieve. . . . [David] wanted to achieve the very best, most professional result possible, and I was glad to push him toward it . . . I think that the project not only showed David what he was capable of doing, I think it showed us all (faculty, staff, students) what is possible through trust and cooperation.”

What you are about to see and hear is a 4 minute excerpt from an original film score that is roughly 12 minutes in length, written by David Werfelmann (Class of 2006) for an existing silent movie, *The Black Pirate*, and performed by 52 musicians from the Lawrence conservatory.

[Play the Werfelmann selection for 4 minutes]

Conclusion

It is clear that the goals of liberal education are deeply embedded and superbly represented in the nature of learning at Lawrence. I congratulate the members of the faculty for your part in sustaining Lawrence's tradition of liberal excellence, and look forward to celebrating the accomplishments of you and your students across all disciplines in the coming year.

Looking ahead to the coming year, I will refer one more time to John Stuart Mill's connection of free discussion with intellectual development. It seems to me and to Provost David Burrows that there is no more basic social context for conducting constructive debates, on a high intellectual plane, as the conversations that can take place between a student and a faculty member, and among students and among faculty. Therefore, in the coming year we look forward to a theme year on individualized learning featuring invited addresses, plenary sessions, panels and a joint conference with Oxford University next Spring. During the year, we will be exploring ways we can support effective individualized learning, sharing ideas, best practices and innovations. Faculty Associate to the President Beth De Stasio will be helping organize presentations and debates devoted to determining the value of individualized learning, the essence of the

various forms of individualized learning, and some of the important challenges of individualized learning programs. We look forward to your participation in these discussions and the viewpoints you will bring to bear upon them.

One final note: we may ask ourselves “Why?” To what end, with what outcomes in sight, with what aspirations do we seek to nurture an environment of liberal learning and free discussion at Lawrence? In Provost Burrows’ words, it is “to help each student develop as an individual with the cognitive abilities, sense of self, and commitment to ethical and effective action that form the basis of a life of fulfillment and excellence.”

I’d like to highlight his phrase “commitment to ethical and effective action.” Hedonism is not the desired result of individual development. Demonstrations of egoism are not the goal of free discussions. Rather, liberal learning is invested with the aspiration to place individuals within a social context, each exercising self-development in order to bring more insight and benefit to the shared human condition. To affirm that purpose, I will end with a quotation from John Stuart Mill:

It is not by wearing down into uniformity all that is individual in themselves, but by cultivating it and calling it forth, within the limits imposed by the rights and interests of others, that human beings become a noble and beautiful object of contemplation....In proportion to the development of his individuality, each person becomes more valuable to himself, and is therefore capable of being more valuable to others (*On Liberty*, 62-63).

I wish you all an active, engaged, intellectually challenging, artistically ambitious year of teaching and learning at Lawrence.