

CHANGE

COMMUNITY, CONFLICT, AND WAYS OF KNOWING

WAYS TO DEEPEN OUR EDUCATIONAL AGENDA

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Twelve years ago, my own yearning for community in education led me out of the mainstream of higher education to a small place called Pendle Hill, a 55-year-old Quaker living/learning community near Philadelphia. It is a place where everyone—from teachers to cooks to administrators—receives the same base salary as a witness to community. At Pendle Hill, rigorous study of philosophy, nonviolent social change, and other subjects, goes right alongside washing the dishes each day, making decisions by consensus, and taking care of each other, as well as reaching out to the world.

Out of that long, intense experience, what might I share that would somehow be hopeful and encouraging? I learned, of course, that community is vital and important, but it is also terribly difficult work for which we are not well prepared; at least I was not. I learned that the degree to which a person yearns for community is directly related to the dimming of memory of his or her last experience of it.

I came up with my own definition of community after a year at Pendle Hill: Community is that place where the person you least want to live with always lives. At the end of my second year, I came up with a corollary. When that person moves away, someone else arises immediately to take his or her place.

But the question I want to address is this: How should we be thinking about the nature of community in the modern college and university? I think that question puts the issue where it belongs. We need a way of thinking about community in higher education that relates it to the central mission of the academy—the generation and transmission of knowledge. The way we think about community in settings of higher learning, in other words: must be different from the way we think about community in other settings, like the civil society, the neighborhood, the church, or the workplace. Within the academy, we need to think about community in ways that deepen the educational agenda.

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As I listen to the current conversation about the place of community in the academy, it seems to go something like this. First, there has been a collapse of civic virtue in the society around us, a collapse into expressive and competitive individualism, and a loss of integrated vision. This view was articulated for us most recently by the work of Robert Bellah and his colleagues in *Habits of the Heart*.

Second, the argument runs, higher education can and should respond to this collapse by becoming a model of community in at least two ways. One is to develop new- cooperative social forms for campus life (i.e., in dormitory classroom life, where habits can be formed). Second, higher education should reorganize curricula toward a more integrated vision of the world offer more interdisciplinary studies, and do more ethical and value-oriented work.

There is value in this line of argument, but I think much of it parallels the way we think about renewing the civil society itself, where we argue that we must build structures and teach the content of civic virtue to bind the community together. The argument is valuable, but it does not respond to the unique heart-and-core mission of higher education.

So I would like to press the question of community in education a step further. I want to go beyond altering the social forms of education, as valuable as that may be, go beyond altering the topical content of courses, as valuable as that may be, and try to reach into the underlying nature of our knowledge itself. I want to reach for the relation of community to the very mode of knowing dominant in the academy.

To put it in philosophical terms, I want to try to connect concepts of community to questions of epistemology, which I believe are the central questions for any institution engaged in a mission of knowing, teaching, and learning. How do we know? How do we learn? Under what conditions and with what validity?

I believe that it is here—at the epistemological core of our knowledge and our processes of knowing that our powers for forming or deforming human consciousness are to be found. I believe that it is here, in our modes of knowing, that we shape souls by the shape of our knowledge. It is here that the idea of community must ultimately take root and have impact if it is to reshape the doing of higher education.

My thesis is a very simple one: I do not believe that epistemology is a bloodless abstraction; the way we know has powerful implications for the way we live. I argue that every epistemology tends to become an ethic and that every way of knowing tends to become a way of living. I argue that the relation established between the knower and the known, between the student and the subject tends to become the relation of the living person to the world itself. I argue that every model of knowing contains its own moral trajectory, its own ethical direction and outcomes.

Let me try to demonstrate this thesis, this link between epistemology and life. The mode of knowing that dominates higher education I call objectivism. It has three traits with which we are all familiar.

The first of these traits is that the academy will be objective. This means that it holds everything it knows at arm's length. It distances the knower from the world for a very specific purpose; that is, to keep its knowledge from contamination by subjective prejudice and bias. But even as it does this distancing, it divorces that knowledge—a part of the world—from our personal life. It creates a world “out there” of which we are only spectators and in which we do not live. That is the first outcome of the objectivist way of knowing.

Secondly, objectivism is analytic. Once you have made something into an object (in my own discipline that something can be a person), you can then chop that object up into pieces to see what makes it tick. You can dissect it, you can cut it apart, you can analyze it, even unto death. And that is the second habit formed by the objectivist mode of knowing.

Third, this mode of knowing is experimental. And I mean this in a broad and metaphoric sense, not laboratory operations per se. I mean by experimental that we are now free with these dissected objects to move the pieces around to reshape the world in an image more pleasing to us, to see what would happen if we did. It is this “power over the world” motif that I am reaching for when I say “experimentalism” in the epistemology called objectivism.

Objective, analytic, experimental. Very quickly this seemingly bloodless epistemology, becomes an ethic, It is an ethic of competitive individualism, in the midst of a world fragmented and made exploitable by that very mode of knowing. The mode of knowing itself breeds intellectual habits, indeed spiritual instincts, that destroy community. We make objects of each other and the world to be manipulated for our own private ends.

Remember if you will those students in an earlier Carnegie study, Arthur Levine's *When Dreams and Heroes Died*. These were the students who thought, 80 to 90 percent of them, that the world was going to hell in a handbasket, that its future was dim and grim. But when asked about their own personal futures, 80 to 90 percent of them said, "Oh, no problem. It's rosy, I'm getting a good education, good grades, I'm going to a good school, I'm going to get a good job." A psychoanalyst looking at this data would say, "schizophrenia."

I want to argue that it's a *trained* schizophrenia: It is the way these students have been taught to look at reality through objectivist lenses. They have always been taught about a world out there somewhere apart from them, divorced from their personal lives; they never have been invited to intersect their autobiographies with the life story of the world. And so they can report on a world that is not the one in which they live, one they've been taught about from some objectivist's fantasy.

They have also been formed in the habit of experimental manipulation. These students believe they can take pieces of the world and carve out for themselves a niche of private sanity in the midst of public calamity. That is nothing more than the ethical outcome of the objectivism in which they have been formed or, deformed. It is a failure to recognize their own implication with society's fate.

I argue that the relation established between the knower and the known, between the student and the subject, tends to become the relation of the living person to world itself.

Objectivism is essentially anticomunal. As long as it remains the dominant epistemology in higher education. I think we will make little progress on communal agendas. I do not believe that any interdisciplinary combining of objectivist courses can overcome this kind of ethical impact: You can't put all the objectivism together and come up with something new. I don't believe that courses on ethics placed around the perimeters of this objectivism can in any way deflect its moral trajectory, because objectivism is not about neutral facts that can somehow be reshaped by add-on values—it is a kind of knowledge that has its own ethical and moral course.

My definition of community is simple, if partial: I understand community as a capacity for relatedness within individuals—relatedness not only to people but to events in history, to nature, to the world of ideas, and yes to things of the spirit. We talk a lot in higher education about the formation of inward capacities—the capacity to tolerate ambiguity, the capacity for critical thought. I want us to talk more about those ways of knowing that form an inward capacity for relatedness. Objectivism, when destroys this capacity must be countered if the academy is to make a contribution to the reweaving of community.

On the hopeful note, I believe there are promising movements towards community in the world of intellect today. They are found in the emergence of new epistemologies which emerge most often in fringe areas of the academy's work. The underlying theme in all of these "fringe" areas is the theme of the relatedness. Let me give examples.

First and most prominent is feminist thought. Feminist thought is not primarily about equal pay for equal work. It is not primarily about equal power and status for women. It is about those things, but it is primarily about another way of seeing and therefore another way of being in the world. It is about an alternative epistemology. It is vital for that reason.

I see an alternative epistemology evolving in black scholarship. If you read a book called *There is a River*, by Vincent Harding, you are reading another kind of history, history that refuses to allow you to divorce your own story from the story being told. It is history told with a passion that draws you in; it will not let you escape. It is factual, it is objective and it is passionate. It refuses to let you off the hook.

Knowing and learning are communal acts. They require a continual cycle of discussion, disagreement and consensus over what has been and what it all means.

Native American studies have much the same quality. Ecological studies are also giving rise to new epistemologies, as are the philosophies of the new physics; the work of people like David Bohm and the work of someone like geneticist Barbara McClintock. These latter have a “feeling for the organism.” In all of these places we are learning that the act of knowing itself if we understand it rightly, is a bond of community between us and that which we know. The act of knowing itself is a way of building and rebuilding community and it is this we must reach for in our education.

Throughout the literature in the fields I have mentioned, certain words keep popping up—words like organic, bodily, intuitive, reciprocal, passionate, interactive, and communal. These are words of epistemology, long before they are words of ethics, They are words about a way of knowing that then becomes a way of living.

What happens when higher education and its dominant epistemology are challenged by studies such as these, or by virtually any other problem? If the problem will not go away, the strategy is add-a-course. And so we add a course in black studies, or feminist thought, or Native American literature or in ethics or ecology to try somehow to bleed off the pressure that these new epistemologies put on objectivism.

The strategy misses the point. These studies are a challenge to an outmoded way of knowing, and to an ethic that is essentially destructive to community.

I want to make it clear that these new epistemologies do not aim at the overthrow of objectivity, analysis, and experimentation. Indeed, the feminist thinkers that I know use those very tools in their writing. But they want to put those tools within a context of affirming the communal nature of reality itself, the *relational* nature of reality. So in these studies, objectivists modes are used in creative tension with their relational counterparts. For example, the mode of objectivity is held in creative tension with another way of knowing, the way of intimacy, the way of personally implicating yourself with the subject. Virtually every great scholar finds this way of appropriating knowledge of living it and breathing it and bringing it so close to your heart that you and it are almost one. Objectivity and intimacy can go hand in hand; that’s what the new epistemologies are calling for.

Alongside analysis, the same principle holds. These new epistemologies juxtapose analysis with synthesis, integration, and the creative act. Alongside experimentation—that need we have to manipulate the pieces to see how things might go if it were otherwise—these scholars

cultivate the capacity appreciatively to receive the world as it is given as a gift, not as an exploitable playground for our minds.

These paired and paradoxical modes of knowing need to find a more secure and prominent place in higher education if we are to make our unique contribution to community. They help us uncover what Thomas Merton once called the “hidden wholeness” of things. They enhance community by enlarging our capacity for relatedness.

Let me push my argument further by saying that the job cannot be completed on the epistemological level alone. These insights must be carried over into our pedagogies as well. Community must become a central concept in ways we teach and learn.

Many communal experiments in pedagogy have been tried in the history of American higher education, and many have fallen by the wayside, And the reason, I think, is simple; The underlying mode of knowing remained the same. You cannot derive communal ways of teaching and learning from an essentially anticomunal mode of knowing. The pedagogy falls apart if the epistemology isn't there to support and sustain it.

The root fallacy in the pedagogy of most of our institutions is that the individual is the agent of knowing and therefore the focus for teaching and learning. We all know that if we draw the lines of instruction in most classrooms, they run singularly from teacher to each individual student. These lines are there for the convenience of the instructor, not for their corporate reality. They do not reveal a complex web of relationships between teacher and students and subject that would look like true community.

Given this focus on the individual in the classroom, competition between individuals for knowledge becomes inevitable. The competitive individualism of the classroom is not simply the function of a social ethic; it reflects a pedagogy that stresses the individual as the prime agent of knowing. But to say the obvious, knowing and learning are communal acts. They require many eyes and ears, many observations and experiences. They require a continual cycle of discussion, disagreement, and consensus over what has been seen and what it all means. This is the essence of the “community of scholars,” and it should be the essence of the classroom as well.

At the core of this communal way of knowing is a primary virtue, one too seldom named when we discuss community or set community against competition. This primary virtue is capacity for creative conflict. It troubles me when we frame the issue as community is competition, because too often we link competition with conflict, as if conflict were what needed to be eliminated. But there is no knowing without conflict.

Community in the classrooms is often advocated as an affective or emotional supplement to cognitive education; the debate often poses the “hard” virtues of community. My point is that there is very little conflict in American classrooms, and the reason is that the soft virtues of community are lacking there. Without the soft virtues of community, the hard virtues of cognitive teaching and learning will be absent as well. Our ability to confront each other critically and honestly over alleged facts, imputed meanings, or personal biases and prejudices—that is the ability impaired by the absence of community. The ethos of competitive individualism breeds silent, *sub rosa*, private combat for personal reward—it's all under the table, it never comes out in the open—that's what competitive individualism is all about. Competitive individualism squelches the kind of conflict I am trying to name. Conflict is open, public, and often very noisy. Competition is a secret, zero sum game played by individuals for private gain. *Communal conflict* is a public encounter in which the whole group can win by growing. Those of you who have participated in consensus decision making know something of what I mean.

A healthy community, while it may exclude this one-up, one-down thing called competition includes conflict at its very heart, checking and correcting and enlarging the knowledge of individuals by drawing on the knowledge of the group. Healthy conflicts in our classrooms is a simple emotion called fear. It is fear, that is in the hearts of teachers as well as students. It is fear of exposure, of appearing ignorant, of being ridiculed. And the only antidote to that fear is a hospitable environment created, for example, by a teacher who knows how to use every remark, no matter how mistaken or seemingly stupid, to upbuild both the individual and the group. When people in a classroom begin to learn that every attempt at truth, no matter how off the mark is a contribution to the larger search for corporate and consensus truth, they are soon emboldened and empowered to say what they need to say, to expose their ignorance, to do in short, those things without which learning can't happen.

Community is not opposed to conflict. On the contrary, community is precisely that place where an arena for creative conflict is protected by the compassionate fabric of human caring itself.

If you ask what holds community together, what makes this capacity for relatedness possible, the only honest answer I can give brings me to that dangerous realm called the spiritual. The only answer I can give is that what makes community possible is love.

I would like to think that love is not an entirely alien word in the academy today, because I know that in the great tradition of intellectual life it is not. It is a word very much at home in the academy. The kind of community I am calling for is a community that exists at the heart of knowing, of epistemology, of reaching and learning, of pedagogy; that kind of community depends centrally on two ancient and honorable kinds of love.

The first is love of learning itself. The simple ability to take sheer joy in having a new idea reaffirming or discarding an old one, connecting two or more notions that had hitherto seemed alien to each other, sheer joy in building images of reality with mere words that now suddenly seem more like mirrors of truth—this is love of learning.

And the second kind of love on which this community depends is love of learners, of those we see every day, who stumble and crumble, who wax hot and cold, who sometimes want truth and sometimes evade it at all costs, but who are in our care and who—for their sake, ours, and the world's—deserve all the love that the community of teaching and learning has to offer.

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