

Design Matters

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Introduction

Having spent most of my life in educational institutions, whose purpose is to expand human possibilities, I have thought a lot about the vast divide between intentions and outcomes. And that divide, for me, has come to focus in large measure on how deaf, dumb, and blind we are to the importance of the design of things in determining the extent to which human energy serves to support or thwart human aspirations.

Unless the structures within which we work—those silent dimensions of our world that in fact determine the limits of what is possible—are aligned with the purposes they are meant to serve, it matters not that we start with gifted people who want to do wonderful things. And that art of extending the realm of the possible by aligning purposes and resources—means and ends—is the art of design. A few examples will, hopefully, suggest its range.

About 15 years ago, Bennington College, having gone through the excruciating and exhilarating process of redesigning itself, had to successfully communicate its animating ideas to prospective students. That is difficult enough under any circumstances. The additional problem in this instance was that we did not have time for the media, word of mouth, and the usual promotional materials to do their work; those strategies take years. So began a process we all know well, in which the objectives and constraints generate the ideas, which in turn generate new possibilities and new constraints, which in turn—an ongoing iterative process of thinking/making.

We finally decided to try to embed the experience of what it means to be at Bennington in the very admissions process itself. We thought we had a shot at doing this because at the center of a Bennington education is the idea of the conversation. Conversation is both a powerful way to educate and an equally powerful way to shape that otherwise largely mindless and hysterical college admissions process. But to initiate a genuine dialogue, we had to figure out how to get prospective students to tell us about themselves. Admissions materials typically go in exactly the reverse direction: colleges recruit students by telling them about themselves. So there were no models and no easy answers.

The Challenge ultimately was to create an empty space—one that would invite prospective applicants to provide the content. We were acutely aware of the risks; prospective applicants would be getting boxloads of promotional material from colleges and

universities that required nothing more than returning a card to continue the process. Would anyone even take the time and energy to accept our invitation? Fortunately for Bennington, they did and with an explosive energy.

For many people, this kind of challenge is the beginning and end of design, if they bother to think about design at all. In truth it only begins to capture the extent of design in human affairs. A very different example of the interaction between making and thinking, so fundamental to design, is in Plato's Republic, when Socrates decides that the best way to discover the meaning of justice is to first build a city in speech so as to be able to see justice. This is most certainly a majestic version of prototyping, but it is prototyping nonetheless.

An especially momentous example of the power of design at work occurred in the aftermath of the American Revolution. In the course of the fight against the English, it had become evident that the Articles of Confederation were woefully inadequate in the ways in which they distributed power and authority. So the leaders of the Revolution designed an organization of people and power that would make and sustain a nation where the dynamic between order and freedom were in optimal alignment. In this remarkable moment, a nation was created by an act of design. The question of whether to have a king is, for example, a design question.

Designing Right Relationship of Education and Democracy

My guess is that if we are to address effectively the recent unraveling of this democracy, we need to once again start by redesigning the structures that define it—the media, the justice system, the executive and the legislative bodies—so as to realign these structures with their purposes. We are not going to get very far until we realize that if you fail to get the design right, it does not much matter what else you do; energy expended in the wrong direction is simply not going to get you where you want to go.

Much as I thought I appreciated the omnipresence and importance of design, new dimensions of its value emerged for me when I engaged the challenge of trying to reanimate liberal arts education and reconnect education with its obligations to the well-being of a democracy. At that point I began to take in the ethos of design—its very powerful and profound relationship to the possibility of a robust ideal of citizenship and a revitalized version of the liberal arts. One needs to start this journey by confronting the condition of liberal arts education in this country.

In truth the liberal arts no longer exist. We have professionalized and fragmented what passes for a liberal arts curriculum to the point where it simply cannot provide the breadth of application nor heightened capacity for civic engagement that is the signature of the liberal arts.

During the past century, the expert has dethroned the educated generalist to become the sole model of intellectual

accomplishment. While expertise has had its moments, the price of its dominance is enormous. Subject matters of study are broken up into smaller and smaller pieces, with increasing emphasis on the technical and the obscure.

The progression of today's student is to jettison every interest except one and within that one to continually narrow the focus. Narrowing the perspective within an increasingly fragmented world generates a model of intellectual accomplishment that is, at best, learning more and more about less and less; more often than not, it means learning less and less about less and less.

Lest you think this is an overstatement, here are the beginnings of the ABCs of anthropology: Applied Anthropology; Archaeological Anthropology; Anthropology of Religion; Biological or Physical Anthropology; Cultural Anthropology; Development Anthropology; Dental Anthropology; Economic Anthropology; Educational Anthropology; Ethnography; Ethnohistory; and so on.

As one ascends the educational ladder, values other than technical competence are viewed with increasing suspicion. Indeed, neutrality about substantive values is seen as a condition of academic integrity. This aversion to social values may seem at odds with the explosion of community service programs. But despite the attention paid to service, these efforts remain emphatically extracurricular and have had virtually no effect on the curriculum itself. As a consequence of this design, civic-mindedness is seen as residing outside the realm of what purports to be serious thinking and adult purposes—more a matter of heart than of mind; a choice, often short-term, rather than a lifelong obligation.

This mix—oversimplification of civic engagement, idealization of the expert, fragmentation of knowledge, emphasis on technical mastery, neutrality as a condition of academic integrity—is deadly when it comes to pursuing the vital connections between the public good and education, between intellectual integrity and human freedom, and between thought and action. The very idea of the educated generalist disappears—along with the maximum development of our fundamental human capacities to reason, to imagine, to communicate, to understand, to act about things that are of shared human concern. Instead, we have armies of self-perpetuating secular priesthoods, members of whom are answerable only to themselves, talk only to themselves, and have the single objective of furthering their increasingly self-enclosed, self-referential discipline. Breadth has become equivalent to the shallow and depth to the recondite; neither liberal education nor citizenship can survive under these conditions.

Given the collapse of liberal learning in the bastions of education presumably committed to its ideals, it is no surprise that the purposes of education generally have narrowed drastically, and connections between the public good and education have all but disappeared. Questions such as "What kind of a world are we

making?” “What kind should we be making?” and “What kind can we be making?” move off the table, beyond our awareness. Education may be at the top of the list in the public’s mind when it comes to influencing access to wealth; it is not even on the list when it comes to having any responsibility for the health of this democracy. The result: education is increasingly flat and irrelevant while the deterioration of the quality of our public life continues at its breathtaking pace.

The endless stream of reports over the past 50 years about the failures of our educational system is eloquent testimony to the decline of our public education, once a model for the world. Basic skills and a bare minimum of cultural literacy elude vast numbers of our students, and that includes large numbers of college graduates. And despite having a research establishment that is the envy of the world, more than half of the American public demonizes evolution—and don’t press your luck about how much those who embrace it actually understand it.

Enormity of the Challenge

The massive failures in education are by no means the only arena where we see a remarkable deterioration in our public life. Whether it be ever-escalating threats to the environment, growing inequities in the distribution of wealth, lack of a sane health policy or a sustainable policy with respect to the uses of energy, or the disintegration of our infrastructure, we are in terrible trouble.

The sensationalism of the media—the other major educational institution in this democracy—continues unabated, at a devastating cost to the quality of our public life. And during the past decade, we witnessed an assault on the defining principles of this democracy that is probably unparalleled in our history. Nothing was exempt: the separation of powers, civil liberties, the rule of law, the relationship of church and state, accompanied by a squandering of the nation’s material wealth that defies credulity.

During this past decade we have witnessed a harrowing predilection for the uses of force and an equal disdain for alternative forms of influence. At the same time, all of our firepower was impotent when it came to halting, or even stemming, the slaughter in Rwanda, Darfur, and Myanmar.

Incredibly, this nation, with all its material, intellectual, and spiritual resources seems helpless to reverse or even to stem this tide. We, the people, appear to have become inured to our own irrelevance when it comes to doing anything significant about anything that matters concerning our public life. We are witnessing the simple truth: It is most unlikely that there can be a viable democracy made up of experts, zealots, politicians (however gifted), and spectators.

Given the enormity, complexity, and urgency of the challenges facing this nation and the world, the price of inaction is higher than ever. Education, despite everything, remains our greatest hope. It is,

after all, the institution that is uniquely defined by its capacity and its obligation to make us and the world better. And there are good reasons why people persist in believing in its unique promise. The great irony is that education, so drenched in values—most assuredly so in the history of this nation—has become so empty-handed and empty-headed.

Role of Rhetoric and Design in Public Action-Oriented Curriculum

As president of a leading liberal arts college famous for its innovative history, I realized the time for excuses was long past. So the conversation began at Bennington as we recognized that if we are serious about regaining the integrity of liberal education, basic assumptions needed to be radically rethought, starting with our priorities. Enhancing the public good needs to resume its position as a primary objective; the accomplishment of civic virtue needs to be tied to the uses of intellect and imagination at their most challenging.

When the design emerged, it was surprisingly simple and straightforward. The idea was to make the political and social challenges themselves—from health and education to the uses of force—the organizers of the curriculum into which flow the traditional arts and sciences. They would assume the commanding role of traditional disciplines, providing structures that connect rather than divide and that expand horizons rather than limit them. Mutually dependent circles replace isolating triangles. Their impermanence and intrinsically contestable character are seen as virtues rather than as limitations.

The point is not to treat these challenges as topics of study but as frameworks of action. The aim is to figure out what it will take to actually do something that makes a significant and sustainable difference. Throughout, a central objective is to make thought and action reciprocal: thought driven by action, action informed by thought.

A new liberal arts that could support the intellectual and ethical demands of this action-oriented curriculum, concerned with very high-stakes matters, began to emerge. In particular and most prominently: rhetoric, the art of organizing the world of words to have maximum effect; design, the art of organizing the world of things. In addition to their deep understanding of the continuum of thought and action, and their orientation to an intrinsically open-ended, ambiguous, and changing world where subject matters are discovered not handed down, and where the importance of evidence assumes the dimensions of an ethos; rhetoric and design are deeply attuned to the inevitability and the desirability of multiple options. These are critical and hard fought values and capacities—both intellectual and ethical—albeit astonishingly underappreciated at this moment in history. And we have never had greater need of them.

The most important discovery we made in our focus on public action was to appreciate that the hard choices are not between good and evil but between competing goods. This discovery is transforming; it undercuts self-righteousness, radically alters the tone and character of controversy, and enriches dramatically the possibilities for finding common ground. Ideology, zealotry, and unsubstantiated opinion simply won't do. This is a landscape readers know well. You also know that human beings made the mess that surrounds us, which means we also can unmake it. And we need to be reminded of this capacity and this possibility over and over and over again. It would also help for us to remember that it takes as much energy and as many resources, if not more, to do things that are mindless, unproductive, and deadening as it takes to do things that are generative, liberating, and exhilarating.