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Editorial Comments

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EDITORIAL COMMENTS

The essays presented in this special issue all address the general question of quality in education. Education has come to be valued almost solely on the basis of the outcomes of the experience, meaning that the close coupling of education and economic success, education and social status, or education and system economic efficiency and effectiveness are closely watched from both the public and private sectors. Yet there remain strong arguments for education as more than a mechanism for the production of human capital in service to the economy. Though these elements of the educational equation are important, they are not sufficient to account for the range of needs and possibilities education serves. It is in many ways a uniquely human enterprise that must be founded on the core elements of our humanity and is thus a complex, ethically charged, humanistic enterprise.

The first essay comes from Steve Culver, who is Associate Director of Academic Assessment at Virginia Tech. Steve has been involved in the modern assessment movement almost since its inception in the mid-1980s and uses the Commonwealth of Virginia in the U.S. as a model of the ways in which governments seek to engage policy and budget levers to shape the behavior and outcomes of public institutions of higher education. This history is important for understanding the continuing trajectory of issues related to quality and accountability in American public higher education, and the issues raised speak directly to the questions of purpose at the heart of any discussion of quality in higher education.

That general background sets the stage for the second essay, by Marc Cutright of the University of North Texas. Marc's work in East Africa reveals the contrasts and challenges faced by Anglophone African nations seeking to grow beyond the remnants of the British colonial system of higher education. These nations face a very different set of challenges and concerns than those that draw so much attention in the United States. In Uganda, it is a monumental challenge to develop the capacity to offer and sustain a meaningful higher education opportunity for the millions who need to gain the benefits of such experience. American higher education struggles with the meaning of success in a system characterized by access and scope unimaginable in many parts of the world, while Uganda wrestles with such concerns in a vastly different context. Still, parallels in concerns for quality, access, and service to the larger society are evident as U.S. developed models for higher learning, such as the concept of the work college, slowly take root in East Africa.

Our third essay was written as a personal, cross-cultural account by Laura Zucca-Scott of Blackburn College. Laura compares the humanistic tradition of Italian public education with the largely behaviorist tradition of education in the U.S. Her comparison and contrast of experiences in these two systems raise essential questions about the quality of education understood as an expression of its larger purpose – the individual, unique unfolding of the potential of each person. She champions the humanistic tradition in this essay as an essentially human and humane approach to truly meaningful education. She meets technical solutions to educational problems as they relate to concerns about quality and outcomes with thoughtful skepticism.

Fourth, Johanna Lasonen of the University of South Florida offers a further consideration of the humanistic tradition in her discussion of the experiences of music instructors in Finland. This qualitative review focuses on three gifted musicians who

are also college instructors. Their discussions of their experiences as musicians and teachers sustain and extend the themes presented in Laura Zucca-Scott's essay. Together, these essays lend detail and nuance to the argument that teaching is a fundamentally human activity that is probably more art than science and based on deep commitment to an ideal of purpose and meaning in human existence.

Growing from the same soil as these discussions is the fifth essay, which I have contributed. I have sought to begin to pull together a more general theoretical framework in which to consider the questions of purpose and quality as they pertain to colleges and universities. Much of the state and federal policy and action we observe in the U.S. today from the elementary to the undergraduate levels seems largely consistent with the theoretical framework for systems and lifeworlds posed by Jürgen Habermas. I argue that at its heart, education is rooted in interpersonal exchange that aims to help each person make meaning of the world. If this is true, then the technocratic solutions offered to concerns about quality and student outcomes are unlikely to result in better experience or education for most people. I admit that I was surprised to find myself turning to the ancient traditions of the academy as a community of learners to seek solid ground for the continuing evolution and improvement of higher education. I don't think I am a reactionary, but am convinced that the salvation of education lies in a focus on our common humanity and ethical commitments far more than on the production of quantitative indicators to tell us how many people passed a test of basic skills. I won't deny the value of tests and data of various kinds, but they are tools, and tools have limited effective applications and cannot substitute for caring, serious thinking, and commitment to our highest purposes. True and meaningful community is built by human beings in relation to each other, not by databases or cut scores. True education must be grounded in such community.

Teaching and learning occur all around us, and are experiences not unique to human beings. One can readily observe birds and mammals modeling behavior for their young and teaching them how to find food and generally manage in the larger world. Education, however, seems to me to be uniquely human, and we aspire to much more than showing our young how to eat, fly, or find shelter. We seek to build on the experience and learning of previous generations and pass on the accumulated experience and learning to build by a process of scaffolding or accretion. I have spent over three decades making a living in the field of education and during that time have taught at all levels from middle school to doctoral, have been engaged as a researcher, as an administrator, and generally trying to understand and build on that understanding. Learning is a natural part of the human experience, and as such is a fundamental birthright of all human beings. Teaching, when done with honest care, is a selfless act aimed at one of the highest of motivations – the well-being of other human beings. I hope each of these essays will provide food for thought in your own consideration of these critically important questions as we imagine the future of education in service to all the peoples of the world.

Jeff Aper