

## ON BALANCE

## The Marriage of Liberal Arts Departments and Schools of Education

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*by Sidney Trubowitz*

There is a growing momentum in academia for liberal arts departments to become involved with schools of education in the preparation of teachers and efforts to improve schools. This drive has been accelerated by reports indicating substandard performance by students in all areas but particularly in mathematics and science. It is reinforced when we find that school systems lack full complements of certified teachers in these areas. There is general agreement that cooperation between the different academic communities would be helpful. However, if such efforts are to be productive, universities implementing such partnerships should be aware of the problems that will inevitably occur.

A major difficulty comes from the stereotypical view that each group has of the other. For example, liberal arts professors accuse education faculty of ignoring content and focusing on ideas like critical thinking and hands-on learning. E. D. Hirsch capsulizes the criticism when he says, “[O]ne cannot think critically without knowledge of facts, and many aspects of reading don’t lend themselves to hands-on learning especially after first grade” (*New York Times*, Op Ed. page, November 4, 1999). Education faculty counter by pointing to the inanity of teaching isolated facts and refer to the classic first chapter of Charles Dickens’s *Hard Times* and Mr. Gradgrind’s pronouncements:

*Now, what I want is, Facts. Teach these boys and girls nothing but Facts. Facts alone are wanted in life. Plant nothing else, and root out everything else. You can only form the minds of reasoning animals upon Facts: nothing else will ever be of any service to them.*

So long as each group maintains a rigid perception of the other’s view and fails to see that process and facts are not separate domains but rather exist in mutual support, difficulties in collaboration will prevail. For example, professors of education may define research differently than liberal arts professors. Their educational research may result from exten-

sive observation in classrooms, exploring such ideas as children's use of metaphor, their responses to different kinds of questions, and their use of materials. Many liberal arts professors, on the other hand, view research as involving experimentation, the establishment of control groups, and other elements of what might be accomplished in a laboratory setting.

Difficulties emerge also from opposite ideas regarding what represents rigorous scholarship. Some liberal arts professors value only publications replete with scholarly references and even go so far as to deprecate material written in plain language. Case studies, analyses of experience, and reports of action research are regarded less than highly. This attitude, joined by a questioning of the appropriateness of professional-preparation units on a university campus, can lead to the idea that education faculty are "soft" in their thinking. The result is that in initial contacts, some professors of education find themselves in the position of having to prove themselves.

Although schools of education may occupy the bottom rung of the prestige ladder, it is not unusual for other forms of hierarchical thinking to be the case on college campuses: science professors look down on social science faculty, physics professors deem themselves superior to chemistry instructors, and so the pecking order operates. If individuals and groups are to work with each other in a collaborative fashion, attitudes generated by this kind of thinking need to change.

Other problems arise when there is no shared view on how to develop curriculum. For some the task of curriculum implementation is simple. Find a textbook or curriculum bulletin, order materials, and provide the teacher with a guide about what to say or do. This lack of awareness of what constitutes meaningful curriculum development is illustrated by the comment of a well-meaning professor who told a group of teachers that when they didn't know something, he'd be willing to fill in the gaps in their grasp of information. It was his belief that children's learning comes simply from mastery of content.

We have seen over and over how, after a brief flurry of enthusiasm, curricula developed by eminent professors join a long list of discarded innovations. A vivid example is the New Math. Authorities in the field believed that instruction would improve if teachers simply learned and applied particular techniques. Little consideration was given to the inevitable wide range of teacher reaction; the problems faced by parents in dealing with the New Math; the effects of administrative behavior on teacher relationships; and the innumerable other ways in which the school's social system would be impacted. If liberal arts academicians and education professors are to work together on teacher preparation and school improvement, there needs to develop some commonality of view about how to effect change.

Connected to this problem is the fact that many professors lack familiarity with schools. They talk glibly about developing programs and materials that can be transported from school to school like a vaccine to cure or prevent illness. They do not understand that each school is different and that prescribed, mechanical approaches unmodified by knowledge of a school's culture, personnel, student body, and community are unlikely to be productive. The problem of unfamiliarity with schools is compounded when professors from varied disciplines assume they have sufficient knowledge of educational institutions since as students they all have had twelve years of schooling.

Narrowness of experience sometimes leads to a superficial understanding of school operation. In our own effort to establish a campus school at Queens College, some professors mouthed phrases without pausing to give them meaning. For example, one stated, echoing the feelings of others, "The principal runs the school." There was no discussion of what it means to be principal of a campus school; what is the role of college faculty, teaching staff, and parents in decision-making; or how decisions are to be made. On another occasion glib approval was given to the idea of parental involvement without stopping to discuss what in real terms was meant by the phrase. In still another instance professors stressed the need for a literacy committee to establish a curriculum appropriate for the pre-kindergarten and kindergarten classes, the grades with which our campus school was beginning. The only stated goal for such a committee was to identify a program, a textbook to teach literacy, or both. Again there was no sharing of ideas regarding the meaning of literacy, no exploration of how published materials support its development, and no consideration given to what constitutes a broad-based approach to the development of literacy. Attempts to raise questions were dismissed with the retort that the school needed to have a curriculum, as though a body of printed material separate from a discussion of implementation would suffice. Lack of mutual understanding led to a surface approach to the development of sound educational practice.

Another source of misunderstanding comes from different views of how children learn. Lecturing is the most common method of instruction on the university level. By telling, some professors presume that absorption will take place. They anticipate that students come with a readiness to learn and that pupil interest and involvement matches their own; thus, they tend to see students as vessels to fill with knowledge rather than as active participants in learning. The problems for children in profiting from this approach become even more pronounced with younger children, for whom play is the important work and for whom hands-on experience is the way to learning.

Despite predictable problems, cooperation and collaboration between liberal arts departments and schools of education can result in great benefit to schools. But in addition to recognizing the inevitability of problems, there should be an identification of appropriate roles for individuals and representatives of different disciplines. For example, what is the appropriate role for a Ph.D. in chemistry or mathematics in working with kindergarten children? How can the resources represented in the different disciplines be integrated into programs for teacher preparation, curriculum development, and school improvement? What needs to be considered in selecting professors to work in schools: familiarity with student socio-economic class background; comfort level with age group; knowledge of school culture?

There should also be ongoing assessment of the collaborative process, not only as it relates to how professors from different specialties interact but as to how university personnel from varied disciplines work with public school faculty. It is not surprising that people coming from a range of backgrounds will bring different perceptions to projects on which they may be working together. This situation calls upon the participants to develop sensitivity to the point of view of others.

We cannot bridge the gap between liberal arts departments and schools of education by talk alone. Years of separate thinking will not yield to an exchange of words. At Queens College a few professors have hurdled departmental barriers to co-teach courses. In one case, a professor of education and a member of the history department agreed to collaborate on teaching a course about using literature to teach history. Their planning together, their reading the same books from the class bibliography on literature for adolescents, and their joint visits to schools allowed them to learn about each other's worlds. The two professors maintained an ongoing dialogue and illustrated their cooperative approach by regularly exchanging views as part of class discussions. In the course, students learned about history and also how to think like historians. The two professors began to share a common language and to develop a better understanding of how to bring history to children.

If professors from liberal arts departments and schools of education are to become productive partners in attempts to improve education, they need to move past negative perceptions of each other, to open themselves to different ideas, to go beyond jargon, to find opportunities to co-teach courses, and together to increase their familiarity with schools and how children learn.

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