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EXPERIENTIAL EDUCATION FOR COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

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12 THE UNIVERSITY'S ROLE IN PROMOTING COMMUNITY SERVICE

Alec Dickson

During the years in which I have worked to involve students in service to the community, three questions have increasingly demanded answers. First, must service (helping others, responding to need—call it what one will) always be regarded as an activity in its own right, separate from work, distinct from study, capable only of being undertaken on completion of training or in spare time? Might it not be part of the educational process itself, an extra dimension of the syllabus, the social equivalent of apprenticeship in its most elemental form?

Second, must the individual acquisition of knowledge and personal advancement be so emphasized that schooling becomes a process of systematized selfishness? It may be inevitable that so much hinges on who gets the coveted places, the best grades, or the furthest opportunities; but it is a dubious proposition that what benefits a student's self-interest must benefit society. It is this aspect of education which can undermine a whole way of life in parts of the South Pacific, and elsewhere. Educators should surely be trying a little harder, if not to counteract this egocentric tendency, at least to provide certain antidotes—such as interweaving the curriculum with greater opportunities for students to apply their skills to community needs and institutionally, to use the old colloquialism, for gown to help town.

The third question centers around the interpretation of "resources." In Britain the University Grants Committee is concerned about the student "unit of resource," the amount of money deemed necessary to provide adequately for the education of a given number of students. But might not students themselves, in the here and now, even while they are still *in statu pupillari*, constitute units of resource capable of responding to the needs of society?

Despair, in a number of developing countries, at the reluctance or apparent inability of their institutions of higher education to respond to problems of cardinal significance, has led governments to set up a separate National Service Corps or similar body to address these problems. At older institutions in industrialized countries many academics argue vigorously that universities are essentially thought-organizations, not will-organizations, and are committed to detachment rather than action. In this context it is implied that student unions are no concern to the faculty or curriculum, but rather reflect how undergraduates choose to spend their leisure; it would not be totally unfair to say that many academics see helping as a hobby rather than as a central purpose of academe.

How, then, whether in Sierra Leone or Southampton, is it possible for the curriculum to relate to the needs of society? Not in one prescribed way, surely, but in an infinite variety of forms. It is not argued that all subjects lend themselves equally to these approaches: manifestly, they do not. Nor is it contended that relevance should at all times take priority over other factors; only that it deserves infinitely more attention than it has received so far. One theme is common to all the forms mentioned here: we do not have to choose in these instances between what is beneficial to the student and what is beneficial to the community. It is not a matter of either/or, but of both/and. With intelligence and imagination, models can be developed which serve both reciprocally. The following are several possible models, observed over a number of years in different countries.

MODEL I—THE HUMANE APPLICATION OF KNOWLEDGE

Model I is best described in the words of Herbert Thelen, Professor Emeritus of Education at the University of Chicago, as "the humane application of knowledge." Without any change in the curriculum, the students' learning is offered to those in need. The following examples best illustrate this particular model. Dr. Rosen, at Chelsea College, University of London, has involved his students of basic medical science in discouraging younger teenagers in the locality from the use of drugs. Perhaps because only five or six years separate their ages, the students eschew moral arguments but draw on their own knowledge of pharmacology to make clear the effect of narcotics on the human metabolism. At the London School of Economics, Michael Zander enables his law students to assist tenants in dispute with landlords when they are called to appear before rent tribunals, a practice that combines both study and service.

Udayana University in Bali involves its law students in assisting villagers in any negotiations with expatriates over the purchase of land. Students of fine arts, understandably and rightly the largest faculty in view of Bali's unique cultural heritage, develop new dance forms for villagers so that they

do not exhaust or prostitute their energies performing, say, the traditional harvest dance twice a day for the tourist circuit. While no model advocated in this chapter represents the totality of the curriculum, it should constantly be remembered that most students do not study subjects—they take courses, man-made and designed to provide a certain "mix." The opportunity to engage in the humane application of knowledge is one element with which to "lace" a syllabus, an element that can motivate the dullest as well as the most brilliant.

If philosophers and mathematicians feel disquieted by the naivete or simple practicality of these examples, let us recall two sayings of one who was both a mathematician and a philosopher. "Knowledge is for use," remarked Alfred Whitehead on one occasion; and he wrote at another time, "Our task is to keep unhappiness to a minimum."

MODEL II—WHERE ALL IS NOT TECHNICAL

Model II, perhaps a refined version or extension of Model I, confronts students with contemporary issues which appear at first glance to be essentially technological. On closer examination, however, they are seen to contain a social, human, or political element that cannot be ignored. The department of electrical engineering at the Imperial College of Science, London, puts problems of this kind to their students, in the conviction that outside the lecture room and the laboratory these elements are nearly always compounded. One such problem, a request from a London borough, was to find an efficient method of delivering hot meals to elderly people. Some of the questions which had to be answered were: how to keep food hot when a helper climbs four floors to a walk-up apartment to deliver meals; how to package food so that it can be easily transported but does not cut the hands of the kitchen staff and is easily opened by a ninety-year-old woman with rheumatism; and what is the optimal routing of vehicles, taking account of traffic lights and parking restrictions? Students had the capacity to tackle all of the technological problems. But, on accompanying the Meals on Wheels van, they discovered that, for an elderly person living alone, the warmth of the meal was secondary in importance to the warmth of the conversation which accompanied it. Here they had to reconcile scientific requirement with human needs.

Another real-life request was to examine the feasibility of employing, in electrical engineering manufacturing work, residents of the London borough of Camden who are chronically poor by virtue of social, physical, mental, or other disability. The paper on which the project was based, written by the director of social services for Camden, painted a moving picture of whole families living under conditions in which poverty becomes self-perpetuating. But equally moving were the summaries of the backgrounds of the students who were to tackle this project, combining as they

did not only high achievement in mathematics and physics but deep involvement, even at their young age, in work with the Scouts, their church, with handicapped children, or with adults in distress. To have required them to concentrate on a purely technological problem would have risked withering this other side of their personalities. Fortunately the department was not guilty of this neglect. The students were told that their report would be simultaneously a part of their degree studies at the university and a contribution to the solution of a poignant social problem.

Thus a curriculum that bridges the two cultures by enabling the student to relate the technical to the human in a real-life setting, before the conclusion of course work, may have much to commend it from society's point of view, as well as the academic. Additionally, awareness that their own lecturers may not know the answers to the problems (however much more experienced they may be in the methodology of arriving at solutions) can evoke a sense of partnership that is valuable in itself.

MODEL III—A PASTORAL ROLE FOR STUDENTS

Model III enables students to exercise a pastoral role in caring for others. At the University of Hacettepe, on the outskirts of Ankara, Turkey, each student registering for the medical school is assigned responsibility for the health of a Turkish family living in a slum area of the city. Throughout the years of study each student acts as "medical friend" of the family with, naturally, the backing and guidance of the faculty. When the students ultimately receive their degree, their knowledge of community medicine has not been learned exclusively from books or lectures: it has also been acquired first-hand. Moreover, the development of a sense of social responsibility towards the sick has not been left to chance: it has been built into the course of study from the very first day.

At one up-state campus of the State University of New York, young teenagers in trouble are being assigned by the State Division of Youth to the care of selected college students, as an alternative to their being sent to residential institutions. The student is expected to act as an advocate—"a person who will go to bat for someone who may never have had anyone to protect and fight for him"—and help the youngster through boyhood or adolescence by establishing a relationship of trust, friendship and understanding. This program is based on certain assumptions, namely:

1. There exist in colleges and universities vast and untapped institutional and student resources waiting to be used at the request of social service agencies.
2. Students can be identified who have the talent and organizational skill to implement programs that not only render service but challenge the existing efforts of the relevant government department.
3. An equal challenge exists for the institution of higher education itself as to its role within society and its definition of education.

While in Britain colleges and boarding schools have become increasingly self-conscious—and even embarrassed—at being reminded of the attention they once claimed to give to character training, faculties and universities in the United States are recognizing the value, if not the obligation on their part, to provide their students with some form of field experience to round out their academic study. How this fits into student courses and whether it can or should be included in the ultimate assessment of their university work is obviously open to discussion. But to assume responsibility for the immediate destiny of a youngster in need, to be aware that someone looks on you as a model, to be conscious that you are accountable to a state authority as well as just to yourself, contributes mightily to the student's maturing as a sentient human being. Recognition is long overdue in every educational institution that students are possessed of hearts as well as minds—and that human beings do not learn by head alone.

MODEL IV—THE TRANSMISSION OF UNDERSTANDING TO OTHERS

Model IV entails students transmitting their knowledge, in modified form, to others. To make the complex intelligible is an admirable way of reinforcing the student's own understanding of what has been learned, a task greatly needed throughout all parts of the world. At Strathclyde University in Glasgow, Scotland, students of architecture and planning help children at nearby junior schools to understand the difference between what is attractive and what is ugly in their surroundings, to see how buildings can embellish or desecrate a geographical setting, why Glasgow has come to look like it does, and even what they themselves might do to improve the appearance of their own neighborhood.

At Tirupati in Andhra Pradesh, India, a system of adoption is being initiated by which every child in Vemuru, situated in an interior region without a motorable road, will be adopted by a student in Sri Venkateswara University, who will be responsible for the education and all-round development of the youngster: the student, when graduated, will hand the child over to another incoming student.

At London University's Institute of Child Health, Dr. David Morley runs courses for postgraduate medical practitioners where, along with much else, they learn how they can use nine- or ten-year-olds as allies in remote rural areas of the Third World. By measuring round the upper arm of a younger brother or sister with a length of old X-ray film (the "Shakir strip"), these nine- or ten-year old boys or girls, even if totally illiterate and innumerate, can discover whether the younger child is malnourished. We hear much today about continuing education: what matters is that the educational process should be not only on-going but *on-giving*.

MODEL V—A NEW CONCEPT OF THE EXTRA-MURAL

Model V takes shape when a curriculum is designed for those who might otherwise never get to a university, those whose immense practical experience would thus be lost to society. Duke University in North Carolina is situated near one of the largest army bases, where thousands of medical corpsmen were trained for the war in Vietnam. Lacking the required academic background, they would have been inadmissible today for training as doctors. The university developed, therefore, a physician's assistant program to enable returned corpsmen to build on their vast expertise in dealing with the sick and wounded by upgrading their knowledge and skills so that they could make a significant contribution to community health care in the United States. Birkbeck College, London, and Ruskin College, Oxford—and now Britain's Open University—are examples of whole institutions designed for those who would otherwise probably never gain admission to a university.

Now that colleges in the United Kingdom are wondering whom they can attract when the number of "ordinary" undergraduates decreases in the 1990s, perhaps there will be more special courses and new curricula organized that are relevant to the needs of society. While they come outside the formal context of accepted university curricula, two further examples represent endeavors to bring into the college fold those who might not otherwise ever get there. For several years undergraduates at Balliol College, together with two or three lecturers, ran three-week courses at the end of the summer term for sixteen- to seventeen-year-olds specially chosen by local education authorities as showing some intellectual promise, yet who, on account of their socioeconomic background, would probably have never considered going to a university, least of all to Oxford. In these brief three weeks, undergraduates and lecturers strove to raise the aspirations of these boys and convince them that they could make it to a university. Deep was the bitterness of the undergraduates when the dons withdrew after a few years, on the grounds that it interfered with their vacation plans; and by their withdrawal they invalidated the continuation of this endeavor in the eyes of the local education authorities.

I remember students in northern Nigeria who, at the end of the civil war in 1970, offered to give up their own beds so that young Ibos from defeated Biafra could take their places again and make their institution once more a federal college. This is not the familiar concept of extra-mural studies; it is students going out and dragging those over the walls who might never have scaled them on their own.

MODEL VI—DESIGN FOR PROBLEM-SOLVING

Model VI concerns those courses which incorporate an element of design, a logical approach to problem solving in the interests of the community. Victor Papanek, author of *Design for the Real World*, has over many years encouraged his students to approach design as a means of relieving drudgery, avoiding danger, mitigating suffering, or assisting the survival of the poor. It could be a mechanism which enables the limbless to feed themselves; cooling devices, not dependent on electricity, to make life more tolerable in exceptionally hot climates; crates for the freightage of trucks to developing countries which, opened up, provide shelter for an impoverished family in a shanty town—at least more weatherproof than bits of corrugated iron and sacking.

When it was suggested some five years ago that they might design a solar heater for a self-help school in West Africa, students at Rolls Royce College, Bristol, England,—boisterous and sometimes truculent industrial apprentices—made it clear that they cared little for the problems of the Third World. Told by their supervisor, "There's the sun up there and the water down there—it's up to you," they moodily set about constructing a heater made out of wood, kitchen foil and copper piping. Then, returning from a lecture, they found that the sun's rays reflected off the foil had toasted the sandwiches which they had placed on the ground nearby, and had set fire to the wooden contraption itself. In a moment of time, their skeptical indifference changed to enthusiastic commitment. Scrapping their first design, they went on to construct an alternative mechanism—and raised enough money to send two of their number to the Mayflower School in Nigeria to install the heater and see that it actually worked. It is interesting that the initial attitude of the staff at Rolls Royce College had been that "this kind of enterprise did not belong to the curriculum and should be undertaken in the students' spare time."

MODEL VII—FROM "SANDWICH" COURSE TO SERVICE

Model VII is the "sandwich" course—where the period off-campus is not just fieldwork in its conventional form but entails students doing something of benefit to the community at the same time as learning from reality. Hundreds of courses now provide for students to put into practice what they have studied theoretically: the day is long past when the sandwich principle related primarily to engineering or other industrially oriented courses. At Brunel University, at Uxbridge, England, every single course is structured on the sandwich pattern, with students spending five months of each year in a field placement.

Many colleges require or encourage students to spend a term or a year

simultaneously learning the economic facts of life and earning their living. The result has been that thousands of students of management, applied economics, social studies, engineering, and technology, secure placements in well-established companies. But the projects which could most profit from students' intellectual scrutiny and personal service, and provide, reciprocally, a profoundly educative experience, are projects struggling to cope with such problems as battered wives, homeless men, newly arrived immigrants, unemployed youth, severely disabled people, the lonely and elderly, industrial dereliction, poor housing, and community stress. These projects, however, are rarely in a position to pay commercial salaries; thus both students and the community are deprived of what each could give to the other.

At the University of Bradford, England, committed by its charter to "the application of knowledge to human welfare," the students' manual suggests that they ask themselves, In what way has the academic study of the university enabled me to tackle the practical issues of the world? (Some might think that the question seems premature before registration, and too late after graduation.) More significantly and more refreshingly, in a study only just completed of "The Year Away" element in Bradford University's School of Interdisciplinary Human Studies, John Allcock robustly asserts that the real question to be asked should be, What can the student *give*? and argues that the purpose to be served by a year of extra-mural experience is service. "I would wish to say to students, 'your education is a preparation for service.'" Students, he asserts, *do* have skills which can be used for the benefit of others.

What marvelous opportunities are opened up by this sandwich concept, yet how prosaic and banal are most of the projects. Today the interdisciplinary approach is the "in" thing, but this supposes a mingling only of academic perspectives. How much more challenging are undertakings that call for a combination of intellectual understanding, physical stamina, and moral qualities or attitudes of mind. In most educational institutions care is taken to reserve intellectual understanding for the lecture room and physical stamina for the sports field, with moral qualities probably left out on their own. Real life does not make these nice distinctions. Implicit in the sandwich approach is the requirement that faculty members should have had comparable experiences themselves or be prepared to respond, alongside their students, to such experiences.

MODEL VIII—RESPONSE TO CRISIS

Model VIII—response to crisis—follows naturally from the previous paragraphs. When villages were razed to the ground by an earthquake some years ago at Koina in India, students at the Institute of Technology, Bombay, started at once to collect money for the destitute victims. But the

director pointed out that there was a contribution even more urgent that they alone could make: a design for quake-proof schools. Pooling their ideas, within twenty-four hours the students produced a flexible design, and local apprentices were mobilized to prefabricate parts. The director suggested to the students that they go to Koina to erect the construction themselves. Then he turned to the staff, asking whether they were content to sit back while their young people left to contend with this emergency on their own. So the staff labored beside the students on the earthquake site in a joint project that is still talked about. When it was all over, reflecting on what it meant to students and staff to feel that they were responding to genuine human needs, the director visited one government department after another in Bombay, asking what were their unsolved technical problems—so that the students and staff could tackle these tasks as an integral part of their training.

The value of emergencies is that they wrench us out of accepted modes of thought, reveal hidden resources in staff and students, unite teachers and taught in a common response to need, and pose dramatically the questions, "What are we studying and why?" As a friend remarked who had taken part in the freedom marches led by Martin Luther King, Jr., "In times of crisis the middle-aged are rejuvenated, the young are seen to be capable of carrying adult responsibilities, and the barriers between the generations dissolve." But this presupposes that institutions *want* to develop an extra dimension as resource centers of help to the neighborhood or nation, and *want* to regard their students as constituting a vital human resource.

MODEL IX—WHEN THE NEEDS OF SOCIETY DETERMINE THE CURRICULUM

Model IX accepts the needs of society as helping to determine the nature of the curriculum, indeed the nature of the university itself. From time to time the University of Toulouse in southwest France makes the resources of the campus, together with the energies of younger students, available to *le troisieme age*, the retired. Everything, from the academic facilities to membership of student clubs, is open to them. The object is not just that they should go through a certain experience which is complete in itself and then have done with it, as with conventional courses. Rather, it is that they should make use of the riches of the university so that these can be passed on to the outside community and be enjoyed for the remainder of their own lives. When they are following courses, in the welfare entitlements of the retired, for instance, they form small action groups with a view to sharing these benefits with other elderly people, thus improving the nature of the society in which they live.

But it is to India that one turns for the philosophy that underlies this model. Few have thought more deeply or based their thinking on harder

practical experience than Professor Mabud Hassan of Aligarh Muslim University, who not only coordinates the contribution to development of students from each of his own university's departments and colleges but also acts as an adviser to the all-India National Service Scheme. He feels that the changes endlessly pursued in the educational structure are seldom related to the developmental needs of the country. Making social service voluntary leaves the university's institutional stance and teaching approach untouched, he argues, and he urges that courses should be so designed that participation by students (and lecturers, too) in community action programs becomes an integral component of instruction itself. Then he declares:

The philosophy that should guide educational planners and national service functionaries is to restructure university courses around the problems of society. Thus each discipline (department of study) should plan its curriculum with a view to identify, from its special point of view, the social problems that clamour for solution, cultivate the requisite skills to attack these problems and, from these two bases enhance the frontiers of human knowledge. The second important step will be to effect coordination between the approaches of different disciplines since a good number of problems are likely to require simultaneous tackling by more than one academic discipline. (Hassan, 1973:5)

Later he reemphasizes the point:

It goes without saying that the task of the universities within the social segment selected by them will not be confined to mere 'studies'. The ideas and training in the classroom and laboratory must be applied and tested in the field. These operations will enable students to re-evaluate their learning experience while, at the same time, the community will benefit in the resolution of its problems. Study Service Scheme would thus be a dynamic programme of action, signifying at once a basic change in the character of education and an improvement of the social conditions. It is very important to keep this two-way benefit relationship in mind. (Hassan, 1973:9)

This last point is echoed by Dr. Puey Ungphakorn, one-time governor of the Bank of Thailand, for some years professor of economics and recently rector of Thammasat University in Bangkok. Having pioneered the involvement of his own students in service to rural areas he declares, "We have been taught that the primary duty of students is to study, in order to render service to society. But, in fact, service itself has become study par excellence, and the simple truth is that a circle exists—study for service for study."

CONCLUSION

Watching Solomon Islands students at the University of the South Pacific as they celebrated their national independence one July, one could not but be moved by the sincerity of their religious faith and the ecstacy of their

traditional dancing, neither seen as being in conflict with the other. What do their university courses do, one wonders, to nurture and deepen these two priceless inheritances? Is it only their critical faculty and career prospects that are being developed? What new capacity for creativity, what heightened concern will they take back to their community? These are the people whom E. F. Schumacher had in mind when he wrote:

One can be materially poor but conscious of a sense of inner worth and one's place in the cosmos. You are poor if you are useless, if what you uniquely have, no one wants. *Man is destroyed by the inner conviction of uselessness.* (Schumacher, 1973)

What is true of the Solomons is echoed in Sunderland in northeast England's worst area of unemployment, where a teenager now working in a program of ours burst out, "They're always telling us what it costs to get a barrel of oil out of the sea. But what did it cost to produce me—and haven't I more energy than any barrel of oil?" It is echoed in Auckland, New Zealand, where a friend, once a lecturer, is striving now on his own to wean students at the University's education department from dependence on questionnaires and computers in order to get Polynesian youngsters to dramatize their experience of life in the inner city and then present it back to their parents.

What has been called "the noble but chilling ideal of the academic mind, untouched by passion," will not greatly avail these students. They will need to know how to study problems with a view to overcoming them; how to surmount, in an original way, blockages which cannot be removed by conventional means; how to preserve dignity and hope, when the opposite seem justified; how to live intensely instead of at only twenty percent of their potential; how to combine the wisdom to know with the courage to act. These are the questions that Cardinal Newman would be asking of universities as we move into the 1990s. And he would be supported, I sense, by the great mentors of my student days—Gilbert Murray, William Temple, Alfred Zimmern and Richard Livingstone. They did not place loyalty to their subject above service to the community: they made the two complementary.