

CONVOCATION, AUGUST 31, 2006:

THE AIMS OF EDUCATION: Learning to Think Multiperspectively

Although the 2006 – 2007 academic year has begun (with orientation and the first few days of classes), this is my first opportunity to welcome you officially. For me, convocation is the OFFICIAL start of an academic year – a time for us to reflect collectively on what we seek to accomplish in the coming months.

The idea of a speech on the Aims of Education is based on a many decade-old tradition at the University of Chicago where a person from the faculty is selected each year (it is a huge honor) to speak to the incoming first year students about what they should expect from their undergraduate education. It is a moment at the start of the academic year that lets these students ponder why exactly they are gathered there in Chicago together – a time to reflect on the road ahead of them. (In an interesting twist, four years later, these same students attend a speech entitled the Remains of Education – thus the Aims and Remains of Education are the bookends of the University of Chicago undergraduate experience.) As you know from Orientation and our new tradition there, I like the idea of bookends – and we now have our own SVC bookends ceremony.

As important as incoming students are – and they are important – I think an opening address should reach a wider audience: first year students, returning students, faculty and staff. In other words, it is wise for all of us to reflect on exactly what we are all doing here together each academic year in Bennington, Vermont and at Southern Vermont College.

So, I hope my remarks provide us with an opportunity to reflect – at least for a bit – on the aims of education. And I hope that in the coming years, this address can be delivered by others within the community – deans and faculty – who can share with all of us their visions of education. It would be an honor to have them speak.

There is obviously no ONE aim of education. There are many aims of education and today, I want to focus on one. (At the Inauguration on November 18th (where I hope you will all join me), I will address another aim of education. Today, I want to focus on the aim of education to provide us with the capacity to think multiperspectively.

I can hear the groans already: What exactly is she saying? What is it she is talking about? And couldn't she have picked a word a wee bit less cumbersome and esoteric than multiperspectival? She sure sounds like a law professor gone awry.

But, just stay with me for a moment.

For some people, education is about learning facts and information. Don't get me wrong. I am not denegrating facts and information; both are important. For example, it is useful to know that we live in the Northern Hemisphere, that we have a tri-partite government that establishes, or tries to establish, a balance of power. For those in the medical field, it is useful to learn the names of the bones and muscles in the body and the processes by which our hearts keep pumping and our lungs keep expanding and contracting. Sports

writers need to learn the rules of the game – it is hard to write about basketball if you do not know how many players should be on the court at one time.

But, if knowledge acquisition in this narrow sense were all that education was about, those with the biggest and best memories would be the most successful among us.

The winners of Jeopardy and Trivial Pursuit and spelling bees would become our leaders and most prized problem solvers. Those who know the capitals of the 50 states would meet with success. Surely we know that memorization of the multiplication tables (while necessary) is not the kind of knowledge that enables us to understand calculus, let alone theoretical math. Law students who only memorized the cases read over a semester are always stunned when they do not do well on the exam; they had, after all, memorized the assigned material.

It's hard to pooh-pooh fact acquisition in a world of education that rewards spitting back data. For many students (at both the high school and college levels), real learning is reduced to giving a professor back what he or she gave to them. Exams can be a regurgitation exercise – simply an opportunity to toss back what one has learned. On this theory, the one with the most facts wins.

But, for me, fact and information acquisition are not the end-game. For me, the key is what one does with the facts and information one acquires. This is where multi-perspectivity comes in. The idea here is that there are lots of ways to think about facts and information. And, if we only look at things mono- dimensionally, we are missing something. It is only when we see things from multiple perspectives that we can truly understand the world around us and think thoughtfully and well about the future.

Let me give you some concrete examples of mono-dimensional thinking. It occurs everywhere and at every level. A child cannot understand why their parent makes them call home if they are going to be late. For the child, calling home at midnight seems juvenile. Obviously, a parent wants a child to call in for any number of reasons, not the least of which is to reassure themselves that the child is safe. Children usually do not look at a situation like this from a parent's perspective, and conversely, a parent often does not look at something from the child's perspective. Each think mono-perspectively.

Consider another example – think about the older person who keeps repeating the same story to their adult child. From the listener's perspective, listening to the same story over and over and over again is aggravating. It is enough to drive one crazy. "Stop," the listener says, "I have heard that story fifty times already." From their perspective, once (or twice) is enough. From the senior's perspective, that story may be repeated not because of the story itself but because of the values that undergird that story – an observation made very poignantly by David Solie in his excellent book about how to communicate effectively with seniors.

Another way of expressing this is that by thinking and proceeding mono-dimensionally, one is ignoring or disregarding the views of others. The truth is that what one person sees is not necessarily what others see – in identical situations. By assuming that one's own

perspective is the only one out there, one fails to recognize other existing and possibly equally valuable perspectives.

Let me give you an example – one with which those of you studying and teaching criminal justice will be very familiar. If five different people witness an accident and then recount what happened, their stories are not always in sync. Perhaps some of this is a product of prevarication – but assume no one is lying. They just see the same situation differently.

There are books and movies and television programs that demonstrate this very point. I am grateful to SVC Reference Librarian Jeanne Bogino for helping me find these references. Let me name a few. The most famous example is *Rashomon* – the Japanese movie that depicts the rape of a woman from four different viewpoints – making us repeatedly ask the question: What really happened?

The importance of *Rashomon* is that each person actually believes his or her version of the truth.

Some of you may have seen the television series *Boomtown* (which aired in 2002 –2003) where crimes were viewed from different perspectives – those of the police, witnesses, media, rescue squads, victims. There have been episodes of *CSI* and *Star Trek* that use the *Rashomon* technique.

Examples in literature abound – the same story is told and retold from different perspectives. A marriage or family that is falling apart looks different to different of the family members. Consider William Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying* and Vermont Author Chris Bohjalian's *Trans-Sister Radio*.

These examples all make the same point: We all do not see things identically.

I WANT TO HAND OUT SOMETHING FOR YOU TO LOOK AT. [INSERT DUCK RABBIT HERE]

Take this drawing and tell me what you see. (There is one on the front of the page and one on the back.) The original line drawing of the duckrabbit was completed in the late 1800's by Joseph Jastrow. I assume some of you can see the rabbit. Some of you can see the duck. The same is true for the image on the reverse side of the page. If you squint, you can see the duck (more easily than the rabbit – which is sitting in something of an odd position).

Now, these drawing are about multiple perspectives – what one sees depends on how one is looking at it. There are plenty of other art examples of this – the Escher stairwells where one cannot tell if they are moving up or down.

There is one example in my office – which I invite you to see after this lecture. It is a work by an artist named Jaacov Agam, and the picture looks quite different depending on one's perspective. From one side, there are geometric figures of many colors; from another perspective there is black and white and color all commingled; from still another

perspective, there is no color – only black and white shapes. So, if you sit in my office chair, you see no color. His work is known as polymorphic – which is the ability of one thing to exist in several form – a single painting that presents at least three compositions within it – right side image, left side image and center image.

How is that possible that a single work of art appears different depending on where in a room one is standing? The truth is that what one sees is not fixed in time or space – it changes based on one’s perspective.

One of the important aims of education is to teach us to see from multiple perspectives – to recognize that there are often different ways to look at things. Real problems are rarely simple and even more rarely do they lend themselves to a single solution.

Education’s job is to give students the tools to see and solve problems and issues multiperspectively --- from many different dimensions. Education’s job is to give us the tools to see educative equivalent of the duck and the rabbit.

We need to come to terms with the fact that our own perspective is shaped by our age and race and culture and religion and gender and ethnicity. Given this, it is no wonder that we all do not see the world or events within it the same way.

Education is, then a way of expanding vision – of ceasing to be parochial. One does not literally have to move to broaden one’s horizon (although that helps). One can be in Vermont – in a small wonderful beautiful town like Bennington – and see from many many vistas. Stated differently, our capacity to think expansively is not keyed to our physical locale – it is keyed, instead, to our mental locale. This is an important realization for us at SVC. It is easy to slide into believing that because we are in living and learning a small place that we need to think small and see things provincially.

Education’s aim, to paraphrase one of the University of Chicago professors, is to enable students to traverse space by bringing more meanings into play and by creating a dialogue of complexity. Thinking from multiple perspectives has the power to transform a person’s immediate world and to move them beyond it. Another way of saying this is: The aim of education is to eliminate being provincial -- to enable students to expand beyond themselves.

I do not want to stop with that observation alone.

I want you to look with me at Jaslow’s drawing again and ask yourself the following question: can I see the duck and the rabbit at one and the same time? In other words, can you overcome what is known as rival form ambiguity – two separate images that compete with each other? If you look hard and concentrate, there will be a moment – a split second – in which you can actually process – see – both the duck and the rabbit at once. Take a moment and try it. That is the “duckrabbit” moment.

When you do that – in that one quick moment where you see both images – you have literally experienced an example of one of the most important aims of education. It is not just to see that there are multiple perspectives – although that is certainly important. It is

the capacity – the ability – to see those multiple perspectives all at once.

Our world is complex. Our problems are complex. Our ability to think through solutions at the personal, local, national and international levels, requires that we see and understand multiple perspectives. But, it actually requires more than that – it requires thinkers like those who can see the duckrabbit – it requires people who can shift perspectives while holding all available perspectives open and available. Education aims to make us see from multiple perspectives and to hold those perspectives in our mind as we wrestle with life’s complexities.

The poet Emily Dickinson wrote in a poem titled Wider than the Sky:

The Brain—is wider than the Sky—
For—put them side by side—
The one the other will contain
With ease—and You—beside—

The Brain is deeper than the sea—
For—hold them—Blue to Blue—
The one the other will absorb—
As Sponges—Buckets—do—

Dickinson’s poem speaks to our capacity to absorb, to perceive and to experience. She was, in a sense, writing about what I see as one of the aims of education. At least one major aim of education is to expand the brain – to recognize its power and potential – to see its depth and breadth. Her poem is about seeing all there is to see. Her poem is about thinking from multiple perspectives.

As we start this year, I hope we will all be able to develop our capacity to think from multiple perspectives, to see and respect the views of others, to open our minds to seeing more than one perspective at the same time. If we do that, we will enrich ourselves and our community. We will be able to be and become the much needed leaders today and tomorrow.

So, with that, I invite you to break bread with me as we welcome in the 2006 -- 2007 academic year and the many opportunities it brings for us to grow together.

Thank-you.