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# Street Rigor: Community Learning in the Liberal Arts

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# Street Rigor: Community Learning in the Liberal Arts

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Note: This essay was originally written for an online collection of articles on liberal arts in urban contexts, but it has not been formally published. The beginning and ending discuss community learning as a specific pedagogic approach in a liberal arts context. I've revised it for our retreat not to advocate for community learning (though I do regard CL as a Good Thing), but rather to air the speculations about the nature of the liberal arts -- inspired by Hannah Arendt and John Dewey -- that arise in the latter part of the paper, beginning in section III (p. 6). In my opinion, much of the public discussion of higher education (for example, in Arum and Roksa's *Academically Adrift*) is distorted by a commodification of knowledge, where knowledge is regarded as a Thing that can be transferred from teacher to student (the "banking model" criticized by Paolo Freire), and where community is construed as a sort of container in which students and faculty are housed. The alternative Deweyan view focuses on the activities of discovery, learning, and common purpose which are shared by all participants in college life.

## I.

I knew there was no way I could anticipate this correctly, so I didn't. I just went in. I knew that I had no idea of what was going on in there, so I tried not to worry and just went in with the most open mind I could find. Even though I had been trying to prepare my mind for this, I was still surprised. I was surprised that so many people were happy to be there, I was surprised that so many people spent their entire day just walking around, I was surprised by how the whole system worked out. I also knew that I was going to be shocked, and that was one of the main reasons that I wanted to do this. No one can tell me that this is not a learning experience. How often does someone get to experience this?

"This" is the day room of a locked ward at an in-patient psychiatric hospital in Hartford, Connecticut, and the writer is a college sophomore whom I'll call Sean. His journal entry follows his first day on the ward. For the next seven days, he'll spend at least two hours a day in the day room, the cafeteria, and the caged patio that is the entire public world of two dozen "high functioning" patients – people whose struggles with manic depression, schizophrenia, anorexia, and drug abuse have made them dangerous to themselves or others. He is there to assist the staff in small ways, but mainly to interact with patients, as a visitor who may lighten the long hospital days. He is also there as a student in a philosophy course entitled "Concepts of Madness," taking his turn at the hospital as will all the other students in the course. When he isn't on the ward, he's reading *Phaedrus*, *King Lear*, *Don Quixote*, and other classic visions of madness.

The course is one of fifteen or so service learning courses offered in a typical semester at Trinity College in Hartford, under a program known as the Community Learning

Initiative (CLI). Although CLI is dedicated to fostering service learning across the curriculum, its founders in 1994 found “service” to connote a one-way relationship between students and their community partners; by choosing “community learning” instead, Trinity sought to emphasize the collaborative relationship between town and gown. A variety of collaborations have resulted. While Sean is visiting hospital patients, other students will be at work in other community contexts, engaged in a wide range of activities – teaching, researching, writing, or just plain sweating – all linked back to their coursework. Their work will be academically linked to specific disciplines that span the liberal arts curriculum. Outside of their normal class meeting hours, their work will be concretely grounded at any of about sixty community sites, and affect the lives of thousands, both directly – through tutoring, mentoring, rehabilitation, personal assistance, and other direct interactions – and indirectly – through “action research” developing data, transcripts, models, research reports, citizen or client educational materials, and other information needed by many different community groups. For each community learning course there is a specific project, serving two simultaneous goals: Enlarging understanding and learning of course materials, at the same time as providing a benefit for one or more community partners.

The breadth and number of these engagements is particularly striking when one considers Trinity’s size. With a student body of around 2,000, and a faculty of under 200, Trinity has nonetheless developed hundreds distinct community learning courses since the founding of the Community Learning Initiative. Every major and program at the College except one has contributed at least one course. Its organic, grass-roots expansion among faculty and students, community learning has grown quietly into a movement engaging a large proportion of students and faculty, with corresponding presence in many areas of the curriculum. With comparatively little fanfare, Trinity has become a national leader in the extent and diversity of its curricular community engagements.

For each course, for each student, and for each community partner, there is a distinct story, and the stories at Trinity are inspiring, as are the stories of service learning in many other settings in this country and abroad. But in the present essay I will not be adding to the portfolio of success stories. Instead, I would like to ask a philosophical question. In this essay, I would like to ask of all these service learning engagements, *why?* Why should community learning be a part of a liberal arts curriculum?

Over several years of listening to faculty involved in Community Learning, I’ve heard dozens of answers to the why-question. Most of these answers are convincing; Community Learning is valuable in many ways, and these virtues are common to service learning in a wide variety of higher education settings. But on reflection, being good in many ways does not always add up to a single clear rationale. Multifarious goodness can motivate a rich array of projects, but does not lead naturally to an obvious common *identity* in all the curricular settings in a college or university. Broadband virtue also encourages an odd complacency in rationale. Since service learning is so clearly good in so many ways, one might feel little need to look too deeply into its ethical and pedagogical foundations. In the first stages of a movement like community learning here, and service learning nationally, the cornucopia of value is welcome. But with its success demonstrated, a moment of truth arrives when the experiment is complete, and the next

stage begins. Community service learning has a track record, but does it have a future? Its future at Trinity and in American higher education is now a matter of a choice. It implicates the curriculum and thus the institutional identity of any college or university in which it is taken seriously. The choice will be one of commitment, marking the transition from community learning as what the faculty of a college happen to do to community learning as what the college *is*. For higher education, such choices may be definitive of the life and prospects of the liberal arts college as a distinctively American institution. It is essential, therefore, not just to know that community learning is good, but to know why.



## II.

Why then is community learning good? It may be helpful to begin with an overview of the demonstrated successes and diverse rationales of service learning. These will provide a first step toward resolving multifarious goods into a single vision.

Three main rationales recur in discussions of community service learning, both at Trinity and around the nation:

First, there is Sean's rationale, expressed in his apprehensive journal entry: "No one can tell me that this is not a learning experience." A fundamental reason to pursue community learning is that it *enhances learning*. This motivation drives all the community learning projects at Trinity, and explains their diversity – each project is tailored to the content of its affiliated course. In a community learning project, a student learns to apply concepts and skills from the course in the service of particular community needs, while observing how issues raised by the course manifest themselves (or not) in community contexts. The overall success of community learning in meeting this goal is clearly reflected in several years of surveys, encompassing more than a thousand students in community learning courses. (These have been collected and analyzed by the Office of Institutional Research and the Community Learning Initiative, respectively.) Surveyed at the end of each community learning course, overall 94% of students agree that community learning fieldwork enhances understanding of course topics, and 95% agree that their courses should continue to incorporate community learning.

More than seventy professors at Trinity out of a faculty of around 200 have taught one or more community learning courses. This extraordinary commitment suggests that the "learning rationale" is prominent for them as well. Community learning professors describe the effect of community engagement on learning as a sort of intellectual afterburner. Already successful courses seem to bump up in intensity when students are also learning in the community. Perhaps this also explains the continuity of faculty involvement in community learning -- nearly 90% of the faculty who teach one community learning course will go on to teach another. At Trinity, faculty who make that first anxious and effortful foray into community learning almost always do it again, and again. Most community learning courses stay that way, and many professors go on to develop more than one community learning course.

Second, there is the rationale that community learning *promotes democratic values*. This broad virtue encompasses several specific goods:

- Students become better citizens: Community encounters make vivid and concrete the injustices that threaten American democracy. This awareness carries forward to inform students' lives, as voters (minimally) all the way up to determining careers in social service. Alexander Astin expresses this rationale succinctly:

If we want our students to acquire the democratic virtues of honesty, tolerance, empathy, generosity, teamwork, and social responsibility, we have to demonstrate those qualities not only in our individual professorial conduct, but also in our institutional policies and practices. (Alexander Astin, "The Cause of Citizenship," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, Oct. 6, 1995, B1.)

- Community partners gain more access to opportunities and resources: In many ways, the material resources of a college or university enhance the available opportunities for the surrounding community. One conduit and liaison of this modest redistribution of opportunity is the student body. They generally exemplify the American path to economic security, and with good will they can convey some of their knowledge, effort, and attitude to community partners. For example, at Trinity our students' work as tutors and mentors is an intangible but possibly significant contribution to learning in Hartford area children.

Third, and related to the civic virtue rationale, is the rationale that community learning is *ethically obligatory*. Like many other colleges, Trinity concentrates material wealth to be sure, but it also concentrates and enlarges knowledge. If knowledge is seen as "intellectual capital," i.e. something good in itself and good to have more of, then one can argue directly that knowledge should be distributed as broadly as possible. Ira Harkavy forcefully argues that

For college and universities to fulfill their potential and really contribute to a democratic ... revolution means that they have to do things very differently than they do now. A change in "doing" will require, in the first instance, a recognition by higher eds that, *as they now function*, they are a major part of the problem, not a significant part of the solution. To become a part of the solution, in turn, will require full-hearted, full-minded devotion to becoming socially responsible, civic universities...("Higher Education, Citizen Responsibility, and Democratic Purposes," talk given at Trinity, March 1997.)

Knowledge has the very nice property that it is enlarged by giving it away. As a person teaches, or perhaps researches on behalf of a community group, everybody learns more. Harkavy adds to this win-win redistribution the obligation to use knowledge to address social problems. Learning merges with working for democratic values.

Learning plus promotion of citizenship plus doing the right thing: what's not to like? All the community learning courses I know contribute to all three values. But supplying

these rationales does not finish the why-questioning. The three converge in practice – so far – but they do not converge in meaning, and in the direction of energy the relative importance of one compared to the others could lead to very different outcomes.

One way to see the difference of direction entailed by the differing rationales is to consider the contexts in higher education overall in which service learning has flourished.

- In social science disciplines, including urban studies, urban planning, sociology, economics, and others.
- In pre-professional training for service professions, like nursing, social work, etc.
- In service-oriented institutions, e.g. religiously affiliated schools or schools with strong histories of social engagement.

In these three contexts we see a fit with each of the three rationales:

- In the context of social sciences, service facilitates learning. It provides a socially useful field for applied research.
- In the context of training for service professions, service is learning but also reinforces the particular vocation of each profession. At the most general level, service professions promote the general welfare, and thus add to learning a special commitment to civic engagement.
- In the context of service-oriented institutions, service is seen directly and sometimes exclusively as the duty of all members of the institution. Here, the fitting rationale is that of ethical obligation.

Overall, then, I suggest that the three broad rationales for community learning are optimally suited for sustaining community learning in their corresponding niches. *But none of these specific contexts is coextensive with the liberal arts overall.* At Trinity, there is no particular niche for community learning – community engagement encompasses every corner of the curriculum. Perhaps this diversity reflects the mix of rationales. But it may also suggest that the why-question, as it arises in the Liberal Arts, requires an additional answer, an answer that may lie behind the motives already mentioned. The diversity and breadth of community learning at Trinity further suggests that the foundational rationale may implicate the special ideals of the liberal arts.

At this point the inquiry leads directly to the specific aims characteristically assigned to the liberal arts. Trinity’s own mission statement is an apt (and not unusual) declaration. It sets out three goals for a Trinity education:

To foster critical thinking,  
free the mind of parochialism and prejudice,  
and prepare students to lead examined lives that are personally satisfying,  
civically responsible, and socially useful.

So, if the mission statement is our guide, we discover at the heart of the liberal arts another instance of multifarious goodness. The mission seems to reduce to two broad categories of goal, the “thinking goals” (critical thinking, overcoming parochialism and prejudice), and the “living goals” (personal satisfaction, civic and social usefulness). So

at the core of the College mission is a double vision, an ideal of cognitive virtue and one of civic virtue. Both virtues are very good! But, just as in the rationales for community learning, they do not resolve into a single image of the liberal arts. By varying the relative emphasis, one could build several different curricula in the service of this broadly stated mission. If different parts of the curriculum seem to serve different virtues, the stage is set for curricular confusion, or worse. Should the cognitive virtues be assigned priority, and the civic virtues merely assumed to follow, an institution will slowly withdraw to an ivory (or ivy) tower. On the other hand, should the civic be assigned priority, and the cognitive merely assumed to follow, to many it will seem as if the traditional higher education function of acquiring knowledge has been slighted. The either/or is certainly a false dichotomy, but the virtues are nonetheless different. Until the logical, conceptual, and practical relationships between the virtues are understood, a college engaged in service learning may experience a confusion of identity – perhaps invisible in the practical, day-to-day life of the institution, but nonetheless unresolved at its institutional heart. And in the absence of that institutional identity, community learning will find no help from the liberal arts in its own search for identity.

The first foray into the foundations of community learning outlined a rationale encompassing learning, social justice, and personal ethics. Both cognitive and civic virtues are addressed in these rationales, but with a discernible tilt toward the civic. Clearly community learning course projects serve civic ends, both directly and indirectly (through the adjustment of students’ attitudes and aspirations). But what is their relationship to the cognitive virtues? This next iteration of the why-question entails more digging, this time excavating the deeper common foundations shared by community learning and the liberal arts themselves.



### III.

Early in *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, Hannah Arendt describes the effect of listening at length to her subject, Adolf Eichmann. According to Arendt, Eichmann “repeated word for word the same stock phrases and self-invented clichés (when he did succeed in constructing a sentence of his own, he repeated it until it became a cliché) each time he referred to an event or incidence of importance to him.” Arendt continues:

The longer one listened to him, the more obvious it became that his inability to speak was closely connected with an inability to *think*, namely, to think from the standpoint of somebody else. No communication was possible with him, not because he lied but because he was surrounded by the most reliable of all safeguards against the words and the presence of others, and hence against reality as such. (p. 49)

Arendt’s observation of “an inability to *think*, namely, to think from the standpoint of somebody else” suggests a hypothesis that I have always found intriguing: *Thinking*, according to this conjecture, *is thinking from the standpoint of somebody else*. This is the

single hypothesis, which, if true, will support the distinctive ideals of the liberal arts and ultimately community learning.

But it will take some explaining to rally around the equation of thinking and adopting standpoints. One could argue away from Eichmann, whose thought and life expressed (as Arendt describes) both banality and evil – a life at the polar opposite to the life imagined in the Trinity mission statement. Instead, I propose to examine, provisionally and in outline, the positive picture of effective thinking implicit in Arendt’s analysis. The positive picture links thought, communication, and reality, and the linkage is not found only in Arendt. It also appears throughout the tradition of American pragmatism, and especially in the philosophy of John Dewey. With Dewey’s help, I think the connections implicit in the Arendt passage can be brought forward.

To begin, what is thinking? Fifty years of cognitive science have converged with pragmatist philosophy in support of the following: *Thinking is more like casting a net than like shooting an arrow.* Thinking as target shooting is enshrined in the ideals of logic and proof, and the corresponding deductive process where a precise statement to be proved (the target) is confronted with an equally precise quiver of premises, which, via the linear process of logical thought, ultimately nail the bull’s eye. Proof is indeed like this, but thinking rarely is. Dewey observes that deductive thought is almost never the actual path to a conclusion. Instead, proof is backfill, added as necessary afterthought to sustain a conclusion that had already arrived by other means. More recent discussions of rationality support Dewey’s position. Consider a potential maxim of rationality, “You should believe all the logical consequences of your beliefs.” As Christopher Cherniak and others have shown, this ideal of rationality is simply impossible because the logical consequences of even a very small set of beliefs are infinite. The problem works in reverse: any target (proposition to be tested) can be confronted by an infinite set of possible premises. In short, thinking is not archery because the main activity of thinking consists of finding and choosing targets, and finding “arrows” capable of hitting them. Useful targets and appropriate arrows are both infinite in number.

But thinking is not passive receptivity or random impulse either. Thinking is purposive activity, and it is continuously selective of new goals and new means (in thought and action) to achieve them. In this respect it is more like casting a net. It is an intentional action involving repeated canvassing of a particular region of “mental space” in search both useful means and appropriate ends. In net fishing, one will pull in many different kinds of things, trash along with fish, but not everything – the net is simultaneously broad and selective. You may be casting for something specific, but if one is looking for dinner, the exact menu is “catch as catch can.” If the net is coming up empty of bass but full of trout, the means will hopefully suggest one main course rather than another. Casting a net is a process that is simultaneously a means to an end, but a process in which the end is continually under adjustment in light of the effect of the means.

The continual mutual interaction of means and ends was a central concern of Dewey, and throughout his life he attacked the artificial dualism of means and ends in each of its many manifestations. He found this dichotomy making mayhem of world pictures in most of western philosophy and religion, and also stultifying many institutions and social



practices in America. In all these contexts, wherever either a means or an end was extracted from a process and set up as a static idol, there's trouble. We might say that Dewey opposed capital letters – whether at the front of capital-T Truth, capital-K Knowledge, Heaven, the Good, America, Values, God, Whatever. His works are full of examples of both the conceptual and practical disintegration of the means-ends process. In *Experience and Nature* (1925), to give just one example, he speaks of a familiar form of alienation:

It is often said that a laborer's toil is the means of his livelihood, although except in the most tenuous and arbitrary way it bears no relationship to his real living. Even his wage is hardly an end or consequence of his labor. He might – and frequently does – equally well or ill – perform any one of a hundred other tasks as a condition of receiving payment. (p. 366)

Dewey is no less expansive at the opposite pole of the human condition, the desired state where means and ends coincide, where our actions are both means to ends, and – at the same time – fulfillments in themselves, and our ends are further activities, rather than static achievements or passive emotional states. In reading Dewey, it is striking how many different aspects of life and society emerge in their ideal form as soon as means and ends are reunited. I'll mention three main ideals: First, *art*. Dewey defines art in terms of

...the relation of means and consequence, process and product, the instrumental and the consummatory. Any activity that is simultaneously both, rather than in alternation and displacement, is art. (*Experience and Nature*, p. 361)

Meanwhile, a society organized around this unity finds its best expression as *democracy*.

Democracy is the faith that the process of experience is more important than any special result attained, so that special results achieved are of ultimate value only as they are used to enrich and order the ongoing process. (“Creative Democracy – the Task Before Us” (1939).)

And *consciousness*.

The distinguishing feature of conscious experience, of what for short is often called “consciousness,” is that in it, the instrumental and the final, meanings that are signs and clues and meanings that are immediately possessed, suffered, and enjoyed, come together in one. (*Experience and Nature*, p. 359)

Presented in isolation, these three statements resemble the mystic's request of the hot dog vendor: “Make me one with everything.” But in Dewey there is nothing transcendental or mystical about life, which is pursued wholly in the natural world. By many paths Dewey attempts to show how these ideals eventually emerge from nature, carried by the vehicles of evolution (first), and later, communication and culture.

Following this side-trip into Deweyan dynamism, the process of thinking can emerge more clearly in its *active* meaning. That meaning, I suggest, is approximately captured in a word: *Discovery*. The action of discovery encompasses the intentional orientation toward determining the meaning of the new, and the continual reorientation consequent on uncovering meanings that have never yet been examined. It is guided by motivating questions, but these questions are implicit in the process of discovery itself – it is questioning made into an act. It points toward ends, aims, or goals, but the moment of discovery is also the fulfillment of the process itself. Discovery is itself an adventure, pursued for its own sake *and* for the ends and applications that follow.

Discovery occurs in a context characterized by two very basic conditions, both stressed by Dewey. The first condition is the condition of need, lack, choice, problem, or desire. In short, the activity is motivated; something is happening that reveals an uncertainty that must be resolved. And so the net is cast. The second condition is that the process is inevitably social. The activity of search and discovery necessarily implicates other people and a social organization. In some cases the social dimension is apparent in the activity itself: If I need to know who has my keys, or how we can best get to Finland, or what a Fourier transform is, I'll ask. Perhaps I'll ask my question indirectly, by consulting a book, but that is no less a transaction between myself and an author. Even in the romantic image of the solitary quester, the social fabric is everywhere. Isolated Einstein achieves his solitude through a negotiation that secures the necessary conditions for his solitude – food, clothing, shelter, books, etc. All those negotiations are social. Without them, our life would indeed be nasty, brutish, and short.

In short, Dewey regards humans as beings with needs, whose needs are met in part epistemically – by finding things out; and he regards human needs as being met almost exclusively through transactions with other humans. He suggests that these conditions are fundamental and indisputable facts, and I can see no way to dispute either point. That really is the way things are.

Once that is granted, thinking emerges as intrinsically social, and the activity of discovery as well. Newton said that if he had seen farther than others, it was because he was standing on the shoulders of giants. This is true of even the smallest discoveries, and to stand on the shoulders of those who will help us see, we almost always have to negotiate conditions for the transaction: under what conditions will you lend me the boost I need? Thus we complete the other side of Arendt's equation: to think is to think from the standpoint of someone else. My socially-mediated discoveries are often fragments of the world-as-you-see-it. Even my solo discoveries depend on a background of social conduct in which I must continually judge and predict the conduct of many other people. If I am thinking, I am weighing all these channels of information, working out for myself who and what to believe, what steps are feasible to take and how to take them. This too will be a "ground level" condition of human existence.

This in turn implicates communication at the core of human life, a point also stressed by Dewey. Indeed, for him, language and communication *precede* mind. It also implies that much of communication occurs in a framework of *cooperation*. If I reflect on the conditions most favorable to all the discoveries that I require to grow and prosper, I will

realize that I will do best if I can also accommodate those same needs in others. In this way a fundamental cognitive activity implicates a fundamental ethics. It is not only good to be good, but it is *smart* to be good.

“Standpoint thinking” supports several broad frameworks in ethics, and it may be helpful to outline some examples. Consider first the “Golden Rule.” The Christian version is the familiar “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.” Its Jewish counterpart, formulated by Hillel, is “Do not do unto others what you would not want done unto you.” The first version favors charity, the second respect. But both rest on the imaginative projection of one’s own interests onto the viewpoint of someone else. In the history of modern philosophy, two main schools of ethics elaborate these two versions of the Golden Rule. Utilitarianism argues that the good is that which promotes the greatest happiness for the greatest number of people. Deontological ethics, exemplified by Kant, defines an ethical act as one that can be universalized -- translated into a rule of conduct that applies not just to oneself in this one instance but to everyone in every comparable situation. In each, doing the right thing necessarily implicates adopting the viewpoints of others. Both direct us to cast that net as broadly as possible.

In this brief presentation, however, these various ethical directives do not suggest an intrinsic psychological motivation to make the imaginative effort required to determine one’s own ethical acts. This motive is found in the Deweyan dynamic of discovery, and its ground level implication of social cooperation in the service of a fundamental cognitive goal. Dewey’s surprising alignment of art, democracy, and consciousness is thereby illuminated as more than just the resolution of an alienation of means and ends. It is also an expression of an ethical life. It is an examined life that stands a good chance of being “personally satisfying, civically responsible, and socially useful.”



#### IV.

Once *thinking* has been reconstrued in its organic connection to the social world, the relationship of cognitive and civic virtue emerges. If we keep Deweyan standpoint thinking in mind, cognitive virtue can be the seed from which civic virtue stems. Thus, behind the Trinity mission statement stands a simple directive: Think. This imperative (again, in its pragmatic understanding) can distinguish the special educational mission of the liberal arts. If thinking is like casting a net, the unique goal of the liberal arts is to fashion the broadest, most inclusive net.

If standpoint thinking is the single focus of the curriculum, then the *best* curriculum will be one in which the skills and attitudes that constitute standpoint thinking are best promoted. Enter community learning! The single reliable effect of community learning is to expand the perspectives from which students see their world. This occurs across every type of community learning engagement, for the simple reason that every engagement creates a relationship between students and community partners. But the relationship forms with unique parameters, each of which enhances its power as an engine of thought and discovery. It is, first, goal-directed. Each student and her

community partner(s) are together not just to pass the time, but to collaborate toward some purpose. This establishes and enhances the basic pragmatic impulse toward discovery, namely, the imperative to address a need, problem, or desire. Second, these relationships often form across gulfs of class, culture, age, educational background, and ability. They enable students to adopt perspectives that are very different from their own, and this breadth enlarges their abilities at standpoint thinking in every other situation. And it is clear that these relationships would rarely occur and even more rarely flourish without the purposive structure created by the community learning course.

The journals completed by my students in “Concepts of Madness” illustrate over and over the immediate cognitive impact of their encounters at the Institute of Living. (Journals were only the first phase of three stages of reflection and integration of course content and field experience.) In setting up the journal part of the larger project, I asked students merely to reflect on their experience at the end of each day on the ward. These reflections were ungraded, and reviewed by me and by the head administrative nurse of the unit each day. Our close monitoring of their experiences was partly to keep track of the students’ wellbeing, since they were soloing in a very difficult milieu, but also to provide the administrator with reports on the unit as a community from a viewpoint that she could not easily obtain for herself. Coming from college students and their stereotypical self-absorption, I expected these journals to be highly focused on the students’ own emotions, but they were not. Across the board, the journal entries were about patients, and in almost every case, entries were devoted to telling the patients’ stories: what led to their hospitalization, what they were experiencing at the Institute, what they believed about the world. The situation produced these manifold expressions of alternate standpoints spontaneously, with no particular direction from me. I feel confident that many of their encounters will constitute lifetime memories, and as such their meaning will continue to ramify for years.

In the short run, my students also spontaneously drew some other conclusions that are typical of community learning encounters. After the third day, Sean writes about leaving the ward for the parking lot and the drive home:

I wondered why I was out here getting into my “Grand Cherokee” and they were stuck in there with half an hour each day that they could walk around outside, supervised of course. I kept wondering what it was like inside James’ [a patient’s] head. This feeling I had never felt.

Sean is casting his net broadly. In addition, he realizes something that I have heard many times in student accounts of community learning: This could be me. Many of our students enter Trinity with relatively little personal experience of hardship, and it is tempting for them to experience their material and social comfort as an entitlement. Interestingly, Sean zeroes in on that most conspicuous symbol of class, the SUV, and reconstrues it not as something taken for granted as inevitably and permanently his, but instead as a contingent prop. Why should the Cherokee and the life it represents be Sean’s life? He is thinking spontaneously about the causal conditions that set his life path and the radically different life path followed by James. Those questions will resurface in his oral report relating the day room experience to the current reading for the

course. The oral reports throughout the course reflected an entirely new way of reading the literary classics of madness. Without going into these rereadings, I will simply observe that they were critical. As another student wrote at the end of her journal:

I think that the point of going to the Institute and writing this journal was to compare the first hand experience that I gained to the reading we have been doing. ... I guess I realized that there aren't really textbook definitions of mental illness; everyone has their own demons inside their head. While the patients at the Institute can be grouped together because they have mental illness, that is as far as the generalizing can go. The reading on madness that we have done does not come close to the experience at the Institute in terms of understanding mental illness and gaining real life experience in that area.

Sean concludes his journal much as he opened it, with unanswered questions:

I don't know how this will change my life, but now I have truly seen a different aspect.

Sean's emotions throughout the week have been strong, as are those of most students during their weeks on the wards. But as I hope his journal makes apparent, his principal response to the experience is intellectual, and among his intellectual responses almost all of them are either direct reports of aspects of the day room refracted through the viewpoints of patients, or his own discussion of those viewpoints and their implications. Sean's intellectual responses were the theme and variations of all of the students in the course. Sitting with James and the other patients, Sean is far from the library, lectures, and class discussion; far from his books and computer; far from the Gothic arches of the Trinity Campus. But his intense learning is right at the heart of the Liberal Arts.



## V.

One sign of a great philosopher, in my opinion, is that after reading him or her the ideas presented seem both radically original and completely obvious. Reading Dewey is like this with respect to almost every topic he discussed. The specific ideas from Dewey presented here include several observations about thinking: that it is motivated by a need to find something out (i.e., that it is a process of discovery); that it continually implicates means and ends in a single process; that it occurs in an inescapably social context; that its success depends on implicit and explicit cooperation between the thinker and other people. Just to state these ideas is already almost to belabor them. As my teenage daughter might put it, "well, *duh*."

Arendt's equation of thinking and thinking from the standpoint of others unites the Deweyan premises in one conclusion. And I hope the examples of student perceptions of community learning establish that it is an *excellent* means of promoting *thinking*. It creates the situations in which the best thinking develops spontaneously. Accordingly, an

excellent liberal arts curriculum will be one that promotes community learning. In promoting thinking in this way, it will also be promoting the civic virtues as well.

In this essay, I've made a case for something broader, namely, the identification of community learning as a core element of a college curriculum, and accordingly as part of the core of the distinct institutional identity of a Liberal Arts college. At a liberal arts college, this goes beyond reworking the institutional infrastructure, essential as that is. It involves articulating and debating the issues raised here and many other questions lurking among the assumptions, structures, and real processes that both enable and restrict student learning. This process of articulation and discussion should have a Deweyan dynamic as well (doesn't everything?). We speak approvingly of "communities of learning," but apart from imagining theme dorms and required courses we don't say too much about what a community really is. Dewey's own definition is worth contemplating:

Wherever there is conjoint activity whose consequences are appreciated as good by all singular persons who take part in it, and where the realization of the good is such as to effect an energetic desire and effort to sustain it in being just because it is a good shared by all, there is in so far a community. ("Search for the Great Community," from *The Public and Its Problems* (1927).)

The good that defines a community must be shared by all. So it must be known to all, and embraced with "energetic desire." Talk – conversation, discussion, debate, dialectic and discovery – is not just an incidental effect of collecting people in a preexisting box called "the community." Rather it is collaboration explicitly directed toward discovering the good that itself creates the *possibility* of community. And once that good is shared, the conjoint activity directed at the shared good will create in *actuality* a community.

In a recent philosophy seminar, we devoted class time to a discussion of the Trinity Curriculum, understood broadly as the totality of student undergraduate experience. I pressed them to describe the pinnacles of their undergraduate experience, those moments where the several compartments of their diffuse lives all came together in a single full experience. Eventually the idea of "magical conversation" came up, dialogues that break out from the daily schedule and seem to reveal the infinite possibilities of thought and life – the dinner that lasts all evening, the midnight debate in the dorm hall, the discussion under the stars on a warm evening in May. Later I asked them to put in writing what they had said about what makes those conversations wonderful for them. I'd like to close this essay with one student's response. In this essay I've suggested that community learning provides the insightful discoveries essential for the creation of real intellectual community. This student describes the magic without reference to any curriculum. Nonetheless, in the moment described I think the potential of the liberal arts is realized. Our task, then, is to transform education into something more like this:

In a magical conversation, one both accepts another's experience, and shares his own, thus connecting the two. Two people become intertwined in a moment by which complex exchanges occur simultaneously. Each half sees out upon the world through another's eyes. Ultimately, he sees his own experience as seen by another.