

The Bennington Curriculum: A New Liberal Arts

Speech by
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Much of what you have seen this weekend celebrates Bennington's remarkable history and its very lively present. My job is to talk with you tonight about its future—about a new initiative that we think is worthy of this moment.

About a month ago I went to a Monet exhibit at the Clark Art Institute in Williamstown, Massachusetts. It was of relatively unknown works—many of them lacking in that feel of familiarity one associates with an artist who has such a distinctive signature in our imaginations. So I was prepared to be surprised. But nothing could have prepared me for the moments of transfixing delight that I experienced.

I knew in a day or so I was going to begin teaching a new kind of course called a *design lab*. The subject of the lab is *Rethinking Education* and it has emerged out of work that is currently going on in planning Bennington's next new adventure. I knew we and our students would be focused laser-like on the huge question of what it will take to do something about the abysmal condition of education in this country. I knew that everything we did would be honing in on that daunting challenge—anything that did not take us closer to that objective would have to be put aside.

And I imagined, as I stood steeped in the pleasure of Monet, that maybe the course should start by visiting the Clark to remind us that however vast, grand, all-consuming the territory was that the class was about to enter, it could not contain the dimensions of a fully lived life. No single perspective, however majestic, can contain them. The wonder of some things is their astonishing singularity, their power in themselves to capture and enthrall us.

Tonight I am attempting a rough approximation of such a visit.¹ By talking with you in the midst of these images behind me, I hope to insure that you know when I speak about the extent of the unmet challenges and betrayals of higher education, the magnitude of the deterioration of our public life, the ambition of Bennington's new objectives—that big as this canvas is, it is not the all of it.

So what was I going to do in that classroom and what made me think that it made sense to be teaching a course, predominantly for freshmen, with the explicit, unqualified object of effecting national policy in education?

To answer that question we need to start with the world the course is addressing. It's in terrible trouble and that trouble is everywhere, whether we are talking about poverty, the environment, the use of force, health, governance, or education.

- **At a time when the wealth of the world is expanding dramatically, human suffering, because of horrendous poverty, expands at a similar, maybe greater pace.**
- **For decades we have known that our escalating consumption of energy is unsustainable.** And over the last twenty years we have been warned that industrialization and population pressures on the environment

¹ You will need to imagine flanking me as I speak two works by Monet: a hauntingly beautiful portrait of a woman and an elegant pastel landscape.

are likely to upset the ecological balances of the planet in potentially catastrophic ways. Yet the U.S. is particularly negligent in developing comprehensive strategies in response.

- **At a time when an unparalleled opportunity to influence the planet resides in what is arguably its oldest living democracy, we have seen a predilection for the use of force that is harrowing,** only to be matched by an equivalent distaste for alternative, non-violent modes of intervening on the world's stage. At the same time all of that firepower appears impotent to halt the slaughter going on in Darfur and Myanmar. The role, it would seem, for the sane and the decent is to watch.
- **Our capacity to improve the quality and the duration of human lives has increased significantly through advances in the health sciences during the last century. Nonetheless the tide of unnecessary death and unspeakable suffering continues to rise** because of our abject failure to distribute adequate medical care. And we in the United States know that this phenomenon is not limited to countries that are poor. Here, too, we still await a policy that might take on the most egregious dimensions of this untenable situation.
- **On issues of governance, one scarcely knows where to begin.** Until recently it was reasonable to presume that the greatest challenges to securing human freedom and dignity existed in the authoritarian states and in the emerging democracies. Not so any longer. Unimaginable as it may have been less than ten short years ago, the greatest assault on fundamental democratic institutions has occurred in the world's most mature democracy—the separation of powers, respect for civil liberties, the rule of law, the separation of church and state, the role of the media. And how do we estimate its cost both to this country and the world for which we once served as a model? And who would have imagined that it could occur so blatantly, so thoroughly, so rapidly with scarcely a bump in the road?
- **To turn to the subject of the design lab I am teaching—education—here again the United States served as a model to the world with its public school system. Here, too, our position has radically altered.** Despite having a research

establishment that is the envy of the world, more than half of the American public does not believe in evolution. And a good deal fewer than that understand it. Mastery of basic skills and a bare minimum of cultural literacy elude vast numbers of our students. Schools are often experienced as cold, grim, and lifeless places. In addition to blighted lives, the vital connection between education, democracy, and a vibrant citizenship—once the bedrock of public education in this country—has atrophied, making the perpetuation of that democracy increasingly precarious.

One might imagine that in such a time the public would be galvanized. Not so—beyond elections there is close to zero evidence of participation in public life, and we rank 114th in the world in our level of participation in elections. In Hannah Arendt's eloquent and succinct words: Citizenship is "the lost treasure" of American political life.

We—all of us—increasingly talk as if voting were an accomplishment and the upper limit of our public responsibilities. It is difficult to imagine that this was once a country that understood government to be of the people, by the people, and for the people. The call to greatness in Adlai Stevenson's invocation: "As citizens of this democracy you are the rulers and the ruled, the law givers and the law abiding, the beginning and the end" has been reduced to the idea of citizen as taxpayer. And as Daniel Kemmis, the former mayor of Missoula, Montana, reminds us: "Taxpayers bear a dual relationship to government, neither half of which has anything at all to do with democracy... people who call themselves taxpayers have long since stopped even imagining themselves...governing."

If citizenship is mentioned at all, it is almost certain to be about rights, accompanied by an almost perfect silence with respect to personal, civic, and collective responsibilities. And it is rights understood as uncompromising, adversarial, isolating, litigious. They are to be guarded jealously against the other who might insufficiently appreciate them—pushing away from the idea and ideal of the citizen as one who embraces collaboration in a shared identity with others that transcends differences.

Insofar as citizenship is taught in elementary and secondary schools, the student's relationship to government is reduced to that of being a passive spectator,

learning the workings of its machinery. The only activity called for is somehow to remember how government works, for reasons that do not include using it oneself or otherwise influencing it. At best one learns how to keep score.

This is a devastating loss when we consider that educational institutions are uniquely capable of providing an especially fertile soil for the growing of citizens. Civic consciousness and behavior are formed at the intersection of study and engagement—reflection and action—and in public settings where difference and conflict are plentiful and treated as assets, instead of liabilities.

We do no better in colleges and universities when it comes to nurturing the habits and values of an active citizenry. For the last century there has been a growing emphasis on technical virtuosity characterized by its incomprehensibility beyond a select few; a drastic limiting of the idea of truth (if it has any currency at all) to mere technical competence; and an assumption that the expert is the one and only model of intellectual accomplishment.

Values are further diminished by religiously avoiding any criteria that would make it possible to distinguish between the relative values of the subject matters we teach. Meanwhile the number of subjects taught only gets larger and larger and larger as their domains of inquiry typically get smaller and smaller. Every subject is equal, nothing is more important than anything else.

In short, the trajectories of specialization, an emphasis on technical mastery, neutrality as a condition of intellectual integrity, leave us unable and disinclined to take on the real world obligations of citizenship. Such obligations are much too open-ended, contentious, messy, value-laden, and dependent on capacities radically different from those of a narrowly conceived and technical expertise. The challenges of citizenship are not akin to those of choosing a major nor are they compatible with a view of life in which the highest activity is pursuing research in one's area of specialization.

The aversion within the academy to tackling such problems, no matter how pressing, can scarcely be exaggerated. Even when the very foundations on which we exist are under direct and blatant attack, the silence is deafening. When faith is presented as a legitimate ground for establishing empirical truths, we are seeing more than an assault on evolution, or even on the whole of science. The rule of reason

itself—even more fundamental, the very idea of the secular—are the real objects of attack.

The place of religion is not what is at risk in this country. What is threatened is whether there is any room for the secular. We are told that schools should teach creationism, but I have not heard anyone argue that the synagogues, churches, mosques, and tabernacles should be teaching the second law of thermodynamics or the Federalist Papers. In fact, the area being squeezed is the legitimate range of the secular. It doesn't get any more hazardous than that: The very DNA of public non-sectarian education is the rule of reason and the undiluted authority of the secular.

Nonetheless, beyond some efforts by scientists to push back on the anti-evolution front, there is little or no reaction. This seemingly impenetrable detachment is buttressed by the silo mentality endemic to contemporary academic life. An oft heard response to the suggestion that business as usual might not do under these circumstances is: "Well, I'm not a biologist so it's not for me to say."

The veritable explosion of community service programs in high schools and colleges might suggest a very different picture than what I am painting. But wonderful and important as service is, surprisingly, it often limits the realm of civic action rather than extends it.

Situations are typically sought where there is clear agreement about purposes such as teaching literacy, or working in soup kitchens, or building homes in Costa Rica or New Orleans. The choice of what to do in the world, itself, is experienced as fundamentally unproblematic. This uncompromising nature of purposes tends to make politics—by its need to compromise at every level, including purposes—seem corrupt, distasteful. Meanwhile opportunities to explore the policies that cause the unacceptable rates of illiteracy, the desperate levels of poverty, and the grave injustices in the distribution of resources remain largely overlooked.

This stopping short of engaging policy issues would be less likely were these experiences deeply connected to what is going on inside the classroom, but they are pointedly not. Community service programs remain emphatically extracurricular and, despite all the fuss made about them, they have had no impact on what goes on within the curriculum. The reason given is that the arena of civic activism is not intellectually rigorous enough to enter the curriculum. Moreover, one is told, even if it were, there is no

space; as it is, there is barely enough time to cover the fundamentals of one's field. In effect, the refusal or failure to integrate service into the curriculum locates civic mindedness outside the realm of what purports to be serious thinking and the real business of an education.

It is ironic, to put it politely, that students are expected to integrate these two dimensions—their intellectual accomplishments in class and their acts of civic virtue outside of class—while their teachers have, on the contrary, institutionalized their separation.

Meanwhile the messy world of politics remains inadequately explored—with its inevitable clashes of interests and perspectives, its need for values that can prevail in a world where goods compete and compromise is an achievement, a world where trade-offs replace the world of yes or no, up or down, good or bad.

Which brings us to the matter of values, the bedrock of it all—the severance of thought and action; the relentless focus on private goods; the atrophy of anything resembling the public good; the disconnect between virtue and intellect. Being kind, generous, decent, survive for sure; but the world of public virtue is a very different terrain where certainty is never self-evident, where thinking is no less essential than feeling, where differences of perspective and interest are inevitable and healthy.

Many of us appreciate that seeing choices in terms of axes of evil has its limitations; but so do axes of good—the presumption that there are positions of self-evident virtue, beyond doubt or legitimate criticism. I am not suggesting that we abandon the good, or the true for that matter. I am talking about a world where those commitments must exist simultaneously with an appreciation that in any situation of importance there is going to be more than one good and they are likely to be in competition.

I am talking about a world where there are no perfect solutions, where the goods are multiple and truth is contingent, not absolute; where what is needed is the capacity to distinguish the better from the worse, the more likely to succeed from the less likely; a world deeply committed to principles but no less deeply committed to the pragmatic; a world equally at odds with fanaticism and relativism. It is a world that we have largely lost.

In its place and all too often we have the fanatic, the partisan, the pious, and the relative. Saints and sinners, patriots and traitors, Republicans and

Democrats, the hypocrisies and sanctimony of family values vying with an empty-headed tolerance where the ultimate and only good is that you can say whatever you want to say and so can I.

To make matters worse, money has become the measure of all things. Its invasion of politics is well documented. Its invasion of education is no less pervasive although less documented. There is no dearth of calls for the reform of education and, while citizenship may sometimes be mentioned in a knee-jerk sort of way at the outset, rest assured you will not hear it mentioned again. On the other hand, you will look long and hard to find appeals that use any *other* rationale for change than money—whether it is the language of national competitiveness, or individual earning power.

While college preparedness is the new salvation, it is overwhelmingly valued for its access to a credential that improves your job prospects. The idea of student as customer is every bit a match for what it says about values as the idea of citizen as taxpayer. And make no mistake: Careerism is as rampant in our elite liberal arts colleges as anywhere else. Money has its value for sure—as Bennington's president, I'd be the last person to deny that—but it cannot be the measure of all things. It is a very thin reed for a great civilization and a catastrophe for a democratic one.

Not surprisingly, this dearth of values and disinclination for the political manifests itself most dramatically in a startling deterioration of our political intelligence and the equally startling effectiveness of the assault on the political values that are the mainstay of a free society. Strangely, evident as that dumbing down of the American public is, and increasingly serious its consequences, scarcely anyone makes the connection between what is happening to the political fabric of the country and what is going on in our education system.

This failure to connect the dots is most evident in our colleges and universities, which, after all, have the resources, financial and intellectual, to engage the problem and do something. They are also the institutions which have educated not only those who have engineered the dumbing down, but a good number of those of us who now submit to their machinations.

This is not some kind of plot by the higher education establishment. And none of it denies the magnitude of the formidable resources of the American

university and college—the sheer volume of brain-power, and the depth of resources available for its use. In this sense we are most deservedly the envy of the world. Moreover, many in higher education—faculty, administrators, students, trustees—are increasingly despairing of the state of the world and desperately seeking ways to overcome this disconnect between the world and the academy.

Nor does any of this change the unparalleled potential of the schools, colleges, and universities to be the crucible in which civic virtue can be learned and public problems of great urgency and importance can be addressed. Nonetheless, whatever efforts are going on in this direction are at the moment fragmentary and remain at the margins. The stranglehold of the disciplines with all of their deeply entrenched habits and interests remains intact, overshadowing and constraining all such efforts.

If we are going to get the kinds of transformations of priorities, the redirection of energies that are called for, it is going to take an idea—an idea that can generate unparalleled levels of collaboration between faculty across all divides; new models of the relationship between teacher and student; ways to develop an ongoing and deepening dynamic between the world inside the classroom and the world outside. It will take an idea that gives us the wherewithal to return values to the center of the seats of learning without submitting to ideology, partisanship, or zealotry. We think we may just have such an idea.

In its essentials the idea is very simple. To address the disconnect between the urgency of these unmet challenges and the absence of our response, we plan to use the challenges themselves to inform, enlarge, and intensify a Bennington education. That is, we intend to turn the full force of the intellectual and imaginative power, passion, and boldness of our students, faculty, and staff on developing strategies for acting on pressing public needs of self-evident urgency, complexity, and importance. The emphasis on action is very carefully considered; our goal is not to study poverty, the failures of education, the abuses of force, but to do something about them.

Several labs, like the one I am currently teaching called *Rethinking Education*, are currently being offered as prototypes: one in conflict resolution and the uses of force, and another on the environment. More will be added next year providing a much richer menu of options. As of the fall of 2008, students

will be expected to engage in the work of these labs from the beginning of their education through its completion.

They are called laboratories to underscore the quintessentially open-ended, collaborative character of this work. This is not first and foremost a matter of pedagogical preference, but one of necessity. In the contentious, messy, contingent, constantly changing world of the practical, unlike that of the theoretical, no one is an expert and, while there are those with a vast range of experience, no one has the answers. What you are capable of figuring out as you go—your ability to learn, to adjust, as events unfold—is a good deal more important than what you think you already know.

When the object is deciding on the most effective course of action, the act of leadership is to expand the input of others rather than to contain it. It is extremely likely that the more diverse the perspectives brought to bear, the better the outcome, provided those participating are working within the framework of carefully designed and focused deliberation. This means that in contrast to the accustomed model of the expert atop a human pyramid consisting of the more and less non-expert, the field becomes more akin to the easy rolls of the natural landscape.

Discussion in the form of deliberation replaces the lecture as a prominent teaching mode—deliberation understood as talk that is shaped by the need to act rather than talk that is shaped by a faculty member's syllabus. While the classroom is the ideal place in which deliberation can occur, it will take gifted leadership, committed students, and time. It also requires having a high-stakes agenda that is capable of being shared by all. Essential to the idea of deliberation is the responsibility every participant assumes to further the enterprise as a whole. The need to know acquires a special urgency and intensity that is shared by everyone at the table. Ideology, on the other hand, may well be important to learn about at any given moment, but it is a luxury one can ill afford when choosing the most effective course of action is the measure of success and failure.

In addition to Bennington's faculty and students, visiting academics and practitioners from outside the College, including business and political leaders, journalists, and social activists, will be participants in these labs. The labs in essence become organizing centers of an activity that extends throughout the College and beyond. These labs will be offered throughout

the four years of a student's education, assuring that individual programs allow for the pursuit of increasingly ambitious and demanding policy objectives.

The labs are not only designed to benefit especially from the participation of people outside the College; they also provide a framework that allows students and faculty to take maximum advantage of such visitors.

We anticipate that as the initiative develops, the reach of the College will extend further and further as more and more people come to Bennington from around the world and students increasingly use the world to extend their reach. Bennington becomes the center of an education—its cerebral cortex, as it were—but its campus in effect extends far beyond.

In addition to the labs, an important part of the new curriculum will be courses that teach capacities one needs to master in order to contend effectively with the demands of political action regardless of its particular focus. Improvisation, collaboration, and mediation join the ranks of reading, writing, and mathematics as fundamental. Learning how to listen assumes an importance that is on a par with learning how to talk.

And just as new arts enter the curriculum, the old stand-bys are transformed. The objective of learning how to make informed choices vis a vis public policy creates an opportunity for faculty to re-think what we teach and how we teach math, science, and technology. What are the things in fact that one really needs to know in this famous triumvirate that change the odds when evaluating policy alternatives and generating new options. We often proceed as if we know the answers to these answers; we don't.

It is in fact the questions *Why Math? What Math?* that are the subject of another lab going on now at Bennington in response to this new initiative. It asks flat out—are there things in mathematics that are so important that everyone should know them and, if so, what are they? Thirty freshmen signed up for this course, more than half of whom loathe math. We can assume their reason is its promise to take up the challenge that they have been beaten over the head with all their lives, and to take it up without any preconceptions.

Making the world a better place is, in addition, likely to provide a good deal more compelling reason for the armies of reluctant students to take on the challenge of exploring the worlds of mathematics, science, and technology than the one we typically in-

voke—enabling America to regain its competitive edge.

In a similar vein: When you need to make sense of the multi-layered and seemingly infinite complexities of these issues, and then have to figure out how and where to intervene, research assumes a vitality and urgency radically different from the skills and frame of mind associated with writing long papers about ready-made topics in a tightly prescribed format.

When a primary objective is, in short, educating students to act effectively in the world, it means thinking freshly about what is most fundamental. It means crossing the divides that have shaped curricular thinking for centuries. It means visual and performing artists, scientists, writers, and social scientists joining forces in designing and teaching what are, in effect, a new liberal arts.

And if we are to capture and institutionalize the multi-dimensionality of this project—its variety, energy, innovative spirit—it is likely that the traditional format of the fourteen-week class can no longer serve as the default option. Instead of the grid with its blocks of times and spaces, imagine something more akin to a medieval fair—lots going on, in a variety of formats, and all of it tempting.

You might well be wondering: Why the emphasis on addressing the public's work at national and global levels? Isn't this unnecessarily and overly ambitious; mightn't we stay at the local level? Aren't we pressing credulity to the breaking point? I hope not because there are several important reasons for this decision.

The very complexities and multi-dimensions of dealing with the quality of public life on a large scale is what makes it possible to generate a sustained and cumulative course of study that requires intellectual competences every bit as deep and thoroughgoing as those demanded from the traditional academic disciplines. And we are seeking, rather than avoiding, challenges that have the scale, the importance, the values, worthy of shaping a life as well as an education.

Equally important, drawing boundaries that would limit the public realms of the exercise of civic responsibility is to fatally undermine the democratic idea of citizenship. The responsibilities of a citizen to the public of which he or she is a member are, in a word, boundless. Citizenship is not a world where one doesn't do windows. How one exercises those responsibilities is of course always an issue.

Finally think of what it would mean if we, the intellectual centers of this nation, draw back from addressing certain areas because of their complexity.

Or to put it positively: In addition to the education these issues provide to students when embedded in the curriculum, there is, in the other direction, the added opportunity to inform public policy with the maximum possible degree of thought and imagination.

I can promise you that in the education lab, reading Whitehead's *Aims of Education* will be more important than all the studies and reports we examine, however essential they may be. Reading Whitehead means thinking about fundamental questions—and it is those questions that enable us to consider more radical, penetrating possibilities. In a world of better and worse, what you have to choose between is as important as your capacity to make the best choice possible. In such a world the values of human intelligence are never more urgent, their absence never more tragic.

While much of this initiative will be newly created, much of it will emerge from what is already here. One of Bennington's signature innovations was the invention of a term of study that takes place every year off campus—Field Work Term—whether in a job, an internship, a research opportunity, and whether five minutes away or across the globe. Important as it is and has always been, the impact of this new initiative will elevate its importance even more.

Reasons for seeking a dynamic relationship between the world inside the classrooms, workshops, and labs at Bennington and the world outside increase astronomically. Field Work Term is the perfect vehicle. Amidst the flood of ideas this initiative has generated, one is to make it possible for every student, regardless of personal financial circumstances, to spend at least one Field Work Term abroad.

The Isabelle Kaplan Center for Languages and Cultures is another example. Its demonstrated capacity to attract students to the study of languages in the absence of any language requirement has been one of the great success stories of Bennington's recent history. As in the case of Field Work Term, the Center assumes an even more central role in the mission of the College. How we address the importance of fluency in languages other than English is no small challenge, requiring a rich collaboration between Center faculty and their colleagues outside the Center.

Beyond these particulars there is of course what Bennington does in its entirety—most notably its formidable achievement in enabling students to dis-

cover and pursue their individual intellectual and imaginative identities, passions, obsessions, dreams. This of course will continue. For Bennington, passionate dedication to the maximum possible development of the individual talent is its life blood. So much the better. For the challenge of an education committed to an ideal of citizenship depends on the power it has to achieve a community of purpose amidst people whose differences are as alive as those things they share.

And it works both ways; it is certain that each student's choices of where and how to focus their energies, in any aspect of their lives, will acquire added complexity, urgency, and conviction when the stakes have been raised. My guess is that every educational institution will find its way of achieving the mix of public and private, individual and community. There is little doubt about how Bennington will do it. Both dimensions, insofar as they are separable, in fact, will be addressed as if nothing else in the world mattered.

In encountering this ceaseless dialogue between the pulls of public responsibilities and those of private ambitions and aspirations, each student will be challenged to discover in his or her own fashion, what it means—and what it takes—to live a good as well as a successful life.

Daring and grandiose for sure, but that is the fate of this College. Seventy-five years ago it burst on the scene promising to bring a new vitality, a capacity for innovation, a daring, and an unspeakable confidence in human possibilities—what Howard Nemerov, a long-time member of the Bennington faculty, called “dreaming Joseph.” And Bennington delivered on that promise. Its most famous innovation—treating the arts and artists as equal partners in a liberal education, brought a new intensity to that education and embodied and emblazoned the idea of the teacher-practitioner into the fabric of the College.

Given Bennington's very visible and dramatic history in the arts, it might seem at first blush that this is a strange place to take on the challenges of renewing a vital and vibrant idea of citizenship with its inevitable emphasis on the political. But that is to miss the point. First of all, it is past time for the artists to take their seat at the table when policy is being crafted, rather than serving afterwards as cheerleader or pallbearer. Secondly, Bennington is designed to move in the direction where things need to be done, where the stakes are high, where its flexibility, its

unusual diversity of faculty resources (as rich in the arts as in the traditional academic disciplines) combined with its small size, and its fascination with what matters, are the drivers.

This is not to deny for a moment the enormity of the challenge. To quote Ellen Lagemann, former Dean of the Harvard School of Education: “Given how difficult it is merely to change a college curriculum, which relative to changing the balance among the purposes of higher education, is barely tinkering at the margins, it is hard even to imagine how one might go about the kind of truly radical change that

would be necessary if liberal education were to be reconceived as a means to promote problem-centered ways of thinking and to better combine those with discipline-based styles of thought.”

Recently I was talking with Bill Rawn, the architect and former trustee of Bennington, about this new initiative. He said, “Bennington is right where it belongs. Fifteen years from now everyone is going to be doing this.”

So, mark your calendars, check your watches, and fasten your seat belts.