

Powers of the Mind: The Reinvention of Liberal Learning in America

By Donald Levine.

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1. *Where do you place yourself in the debate about higher education? To whom in particular are you responding in your book?*

Point of departure for the book was the public's response to Allan Bloom's best-seller, *The Closing of the American Mind*. That was 1987. (Yes, my book was close to twenty years in the making.) Overjoyed at the time that the reading public appeared to be paying so much attention - at last - to questions of collegiate learning, I was dismayed to learn that such attention was being drowned out by the ideological overtones that the book aroused. *Closing* became the opening shot in what became known as the Culture Wars: the endless back and forth about whether or not non-whites, non-Westerners, and women were receiving enough consideration on prescribed reading lists and curricular offerings. Although the political dimension of curriculum can not be ignored, the monopolization of attention by those politicized issues left little room for what I would call genuinely *educational* issues.

Beyond that, I was even more irritated that Bloom's book came to be viewed, by friends and opponents alike, as a defense of the educational program of the so-called Hutchins College at Chicago. That prodded me to set the matter straight by telling the story as I knew it from the inside over a lifetime here, as student and teacher, and from a searching look at rarely known archival materials.

I was also intensely irritated as well by the intervention of my good and highly respected colleague, Martha Nussbaum, in our local disputes over curriculum touched off by the Sonnenschein presidency, when she decried any kind of core curriculum. Ironically, Martha's own fine book, *Cultivating Humanity*, went on precisely to prescribe her own vision of a core curriculum! The argument of *Powers* as it evolved found a way to make a place for her vision and any other.

Beyond those central concerns, I suppose my book is also aimed at countering those who presume to discourse about "teaching" by confining it to faddish concerns about teaching technologies. Here as elsewhere, the modern valuation of techniques and means over ends is galling. Similarly, there has recently been an upsurge of interest in examining the outcomes of educational programs - and that is swell - but again, what outcomes are all about and why they are important gets short shrift. We need, I felt, a more capacious sense of outcomes and, even more, a way to engage in discourse about those questions. If anything, I see my book as a forthright effort to rekindle conversations about such important questions.

My book begins with an overview of millennia of cultural developments with attention to perennial reinventions of the theory and practice of liberal education. Its emphasis, however, is on developments since the early nineteenth century, developments in which, amazingly, only in the US has there been continuous and radical experimentation. This was facilitated by the fact that the US educational system was not hidebound by the same conventional constraints that governed education in Europe, so American educators were freer to experiment with both the forms and content of liberal learning.

3. *What do you mean when you say that the purpose of liberal education is to develop the "powers of the mind"? What is the nature of these powers--and what end do they serve?*

That's not quite what I say. I say there are several warranted approaches to reinventing liberal education in our time. Teaching "powers" is just one of the four principles around which a liberal curriculum can be organized, the principle that focuses on capacities of *knowing*; the others include the character of the *learner*, the world that is *knowable*, and the heritage of human *knowledge*. Notably, Chicago experimented with all four, but it has developed the teaching of powers most extensively. The bulk of my book concerns the brilliant innovations in the teaching of powers that were pursued at Chicago, my own experiments in attempting new ways of such teaching, and a framework for future developments in which the principle of powers is central. By powers I mean what historically were referred to as disciplines, that is, trained capacities of the mind, in contrast to the modern custom of thinking of disciplines in terms of subject matters. To my mind it's time for a fresh look at the kinds of powers we need to cultivate. My book lists eight powers of the mind. The first four are the "powers of prehension"—audiovisual powers, kinesthetic powers, understanding verbal texts, and understanding worlds. The other four are "powers of expression"—forming a reflexive liberal self, inventing statements, problems, and actions; integrating knowledge; and powers of communication. Pointedly, I liken the distinction between prehension and expression to the somatic thought processes of inhaling and exhaling. There is not enough space to discuss my preference for the principle of powers, save to note that this is the principle developed so intensively in the Chicago tradition where I was formed and in which I have spent my professional life.

4. *You devote significant space in your book to the development of the University of Chicago's college curriculum, and particularly to Joseph Schwab's vision of the College. What is important about Schwab, and why is he so often bypassed in discussions of the U of C in favor of more famous men like Harper, Hutchins, and McKeon?*

Schwab never commanded the institutional position of those giants. He needs someone to bring out his importance, as do the editors of the collection on Schwab, Ian Westbury and Neil L. Wilkof, whom I quote in the epigraph to the chapter about him:

books will play an important part in the rediscovery of the meaning of these notions. He articulates a way of thinking that which lets us see more clearly than does the way of any other contemporary thinker what thought about education *might* be and how it *might* be possible to give visions meaning. The burden of his work is an invitation to the reader to participate in the search that he ventured.

In some ways I consider the Schwab chapter to be the high point of the book.

5. What is the University of Chicago's contribution to the reinvention of liberal education?

Enormous, simply enormous. And it has been appreciated deeply for a long time by serious educators around the world. Here is what I say about the Chicago contribution in the Prologue:

At the University of Chicago, from time to time, a combination of special institutional structures (faculty charged with undergraduate teaching, college deans with their own budgets, the mechanism of the staff-taught course), exceptional presidential leadership and rhetoric (Burton, Hutchins, Levy), and traditions of intense faculty concern with education (Wilkins, McKeon, Faust, Coulter, Schwab, Redfield, Axelrod, McNeill, Riesman, Sally, Cochrane) have imbued the institution with a supply of brains and energy sufficient to generate excellent educational thought and practice. Before it disappears, this work needs to be recorded and reconsidered. Whatever its local difficulties of circumstance—and they have been recurrent and often severe—the University of Chicago has long been distinguished by a relatively clear sense of its academic mission. This helps account for its longstanding reputation as “a teacher of teachers.” In the current shortage of moral and intellectual resources for energizing higher education, Chicago’s experience may be seen as exemplary in two senses - as a source of inspirational educational ideas and, no less important, as a model of ways in which local institutional traditions can be drawn on to inspire educational practice.

This is why I have struggled so hard - by editing two series of issues of what we called the *College Faculty Newsletter*; by issuing various public statements; by organizing a yearlong symposium on The Idea of the University (<http://iotu.uchicago.edu/>); and now through this book - to stem what I consider the decline and fall of serious sustained attention to the issues involved in liberal learning at the University. To my mind, that decline is a national tragedy.

thinking across disciplines, and do you think the college has lost anything by eliminating it?

You refer, I believe, to the course initially known as Observation, Interpretation, and Integration. It was an amazing course. I tried to resurrect it for a while in the 1970s, and Professors Herman Sinaiko and the late Wayne Booth offered a version of it in the Big Problems program. One of the eight general powers that I advocate in my book tries to re-evoke its goal, the power of integrating knowledge.

7. In your book, you describe a small number of classes you have taught that reflect your ideas for a liberal education. "Conflict Theory and Aikido" is one of these courses, unusual both for the material covered and for the methods of instruction. What prompted this unique structure? How would you expand this to other, more 'traditional' classes?

The most distinctive feature of that course is the requirement that 50 percent of the required work takes the form of practice in the gym on the mat.

The idea for it came out of a Report of one of the eleven Task Forces that worked for a year under the rubric of what we called "Project 1984: Design Issues," when teams of faculty, joined by a few staff and students, systematically investigated a wide range of features of the undergraduate experience. One task force, chaired by Prof. John MacAloon, recommended the use of "gym" classes in conjunction with academic subjects.

That was a revolutionary idea then and it remains pretty revolutionary today. Just in the past couple years, that course has finally inspired the creation of comparable courses in a number of schools, including Lehigh University, Furman, and Williams College. *Powers of the Mind* champions such an approach to liberal learning. The mind is actually embodied, after all. Or, to quote Joe Schwab: "the effect of a curriculum whose end was training of the intellect pure and simple would be a crippled intellect."

8. Can you recall an experience during your undergraduate career at the University of Chicago that exemplified liberal education for you?

Here's one that comes to mind - in a class taught by Joe Schwab. We were reading a selection by John Dewey on the methodology of science, and Schwab saunters into class, looks around, and fires one off at my friend Freddy Wranovic. "Mr. Wranovic," he yells, "tell us about Dewey's views about love." From then on, it was nonstop intellectual excitement for fifty minutes.

Here's another: when a science teacher led us in analyzing an experiment to figure out for ourselves the importance of making a distinction between necessary causality and sufficient causality, without even giving us the words we might use to represent them.