theories and methodologies

Learning from *Wikipedia*

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> The jobs of the future require deep understanding of the technologies changing our workplace and our society. That understanding requires experimental and experiential training and the kind of grounded academic thinking that lets big ideas soar. The programs, the faculty, and the universities that understand that challenge will lead us all. (Davidson 132)

FOR CATHY N. DAVIDSON, UNIVERSITY EDUCATION IS EQUIVALENT TO JOB PREPARATION, WHICH IS NOT TO SAY THAT SHE IS TALKING ABOUT vocational training in the usual sense—the training, say, of medical technicians or park rangers, computer programmers or hotel personnel. On the contrary, her "new education" is designed as broadly as possible to be a replacement of the old liberal arts paradigm. The soaring cost of college education, she argues, will not decrease until public officials can be convinced that four (or even two) years of "university" training "can provide exactly the analytical and cross-cutting interdisciplinary thinking and communication skills that are most in demand in a complex workplace" (185). Goodbye, accordingly, to the traditional curriculum that has been in force for over a hundred years, goodbye to "passive, hierarchical models of teaching and learning" (103), to individual majors (and minors) like English, history, economics, or chemistry, with their lecture courses and discussion sessions, their final exams and pop quizzes, and welcome to the new world of "student-centered," "project-based" "learning," to the classroom "where students learn how to learn" (263).

Throughout her discussion—and Davidson is especially interested in and eloquent about the role of the community college in moving young people from lower- to middle-class status—there is one nagging question that is never addressed: Why do people need to go to college at all? Why couldn't the group "projects" described throughout this book be practiced in high school or even in middle school? Santa Monica College, for example, is judged to have been the "ideal college" for Davidson's niece "to hone her dream career to be a fine jewelry designer and to found her own business" (53). Given the many Web sites now devoted to jewelry making, why couldn't

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the metallurgy and design skills involved be taught to a sixteen-year-old?

Davidson would respond—and she has much statistical evidence on her side—that new technology has upped the ante, that in the digital age "higher" education is now essential for everyone. But even if we grant her this premise, the examples of the new education she provides are not encouraging.

Consider Davidson's account of a seminar she gave at Duke University called Future Ed. The *wrong* technique, she discovered, was to stand in front of the class and ask students specific factual questions—in this case, "Who invented the printing press?"—questions that demand an immediate response—in this case, "Gutenberg." A much better exercise, it turned out, was to allow the students to use any devices they brought to class so that they could note down whatever "information seems relevant" (111). Here is the outcome of that experiment:

> "So, did Gutenberg invent the printing press?" I ask after the minute-and-a-half burst of energetic, engaged research and dialogue.
>
> Everyone laughs. Over the next ten minutes, they fill me in on what they've learned. They found that Bi Sheng developed the basics of movable type in A.D. 1040, during the Song Dynasty, using porcelain tablets that could be rearranged to produce and then reproduce over a hundred thousand Chinese characters. This technology was exported to Korea, where, later in 1377, metallic typefaces were invented and used to publish the *Jikji*, the world's oldest extant books printed with movable type. (111–12)

And so on. The reader won't be surprised to learn that the information gleaned above—even the very wording—comes straight out of *Wikipedia*. Davidson's students evidently "learned" from *Wikipedia* that there was much "non-Western innovation" before the Gutenberg press came into the picture (112).

My first reaction is that the "experiment" itself seems forced. As someone who attended two liberal arts colleges; has taught at private universities, state universities, and a church-related one; and has often been assigned to observe teaching done by TAs and junior faculty members, I can testify that I have never heard any instructor in any college classroom (or even a high school one) ask such a factual question. If the class discussion is on the history of the book, students will be prompted to consider the cultural and aesthetic differences brought on by Gutenberg. If the course in question is dealing with the Reformation, one could discuss how the early printing press functioned in the political and religious spheres. But in my experience even the most fledgling instructor, far from quizzing undergraduates on names and dates, understands that the purpose of a given lecture or class discussion is to provide not information but knowledge, judgment, and critical thinking.

Anyone, it is true, can now look up any fact (e.g., What was the date of the Battle of Verdun? Who was Jimmy Carter's vice president?), and it is a wonderful thing that one can do this quickly and efficiently. I myself use tools like *Google* and *Wikipedia* all the time, but let's remember that these are merely tools and have nothing to do with the real issues of education. Facts without context are merely facts, forgotten as quickly as they are learned. How long, for that matter, will Davidson's students remember when metallic typefaces were invented in Korea?

Consider a second Davidson example of the new education. In the Department of Women's and Gender Studies at the University of California, Berkeley, the professor teaching LGBT 146: Cultural Representations of Sexuality evidently has her students "conduct original archival and ethnographic research." Whereas formerly they wrote up their findings in research papers, "now they use their results to identify and correct weak, erroneous, or missing Wikipedia articles on major lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) scholars, theorists and performance

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artists" (95). The students are able to locate queer "luminaries" whose entries in *Wikipedia* are either missing or incommensurate with their importance and then to "correct" the encyclopedia (96).

It is ironic that whereas in example 1 students resort to *Wikipedia* to correct what is presumably limited, Western-based information, in example 2 it is *Wikipedia* itself they correct. And since the anonymous authors of *Wikipedia* entries are no doubt themselves fairly recent college graduates, the whole exercise would seem to be one of futility. Who, moreover, is to judge the importance of this or that "queer luminary"? And furthermore: Since Davidson wants to eliminate specific course disciplines, why is gender studies exempt?

At Arizona State University (ASU)—Davidson's prime example of the progressive university—a university that "long ago left behind a narrow-minded 'skills' approach to higher education in favor of student-centered learning"—Sha Xin Wei, dean of the new School for Arts, Media and Engineering, is replacing conventional course material with the synthesis (his word) of different approaches. A group might, for example, focus on the question, "What will life be like in Phoenix when there is no water?" (142). To which Yogi Berra might have quipped, "In that case there is no life, so not to worry!" But the dean's synthesis evidently brings together "problem solvers" from a variety of disciplines—engineering, art, math, sociology, philosophy—to tackle the problem of a hypothetical waterless world.

Do we really want, say, a sophomore studying creative writing to advise us on the water problem or to describe its possible consequences? If there is no such thing as individual expertise, what can a group of students hope to accomplish in this arena? I suppose the engineers do the real planning and then the creative writing students produce short stories with titles like "The Day the Water Stopped." This, mind you, is supposed to prepare them for the postcollege workplace. Indeed, Davidson's projected outcome sounds positively utopian:

> What do ASU students do when they graduate? They find not jobs but careers. Their range of talents makes them highly sought after throughout the for-profit and nonprofit employment sectors. In fact, they are often so versatile and multitalented, with such a keen and far-ranging perspective, that the first employer to snap them up is Arizona State University, which hires back its own graduates as educational innovators. . . . A generation ago, the plum jobs (at the university and in the community) would have gone to graduates from elite universities on the coasts or to ASU's chief sports and education rival, the University of Arizona. (151)

This glowing account sounds almost parodic—a scenario out of Swift or Aldous Huxley. Davidson doesn't name a single job for which the projects described have provided preparation; one could be cynical and say the graduates have accepted jobs as "educational innovators" at their alma mater because they don't know how to do anything else. And what happens if they don't want to become educational innovators and instead want to be lawyers, physicians, speech therapists, park rangers, travel agents, or foreign-service officers? When do they acquire the specific skills—for example, command of a second language—necessary for such jobs?

Davidson reports that ASU's president, Michael Crow, is planning to open a humanities research lab, where humanists can work with mathematicians, engineers, and scientists to design bold new collaborative programs of study. But what happens in the next generation, when there are no more separate fields like mathematics or anthropology or art history but only those already bold "synthetic" thinkers practicing their "iterative thinking" (152)? Then what?

One looks in vain for specifics relating to such questions. It is clear, however, that the

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humanities, especially history, get the shortest shrift in this pedagogical manifesto written, ironically enough, by a noted humanist, herself the author of many excellent studies in early American literature. Indeed, our own field of study—language and literature—is barely mentioned in Davidson's book. The only reference to literary study I was able to find in *The New Education* is the following:

> At Duke University, a new program called Bass Connections replaces the scattered general education requirements with a coherent focus on a complex problem that spans five broad thematic areas: brain and society; information, society and culture; global health; education and human development; and energy. For a project in global health disparities, a student may take a literature course, but instead of reading *The Canterbury Tales* (standard fare in general literature courses), she'll read Boccaccio's *Decameron*, a hundred bawdy tales exchanged in the fourteenth century by young men and women who secluded themselves in a Florentine villa to escape the physical and emotional ravages of the Black Death. Or they'll read Daniel Defoe's *Journal of the Plague Year* (1665) or Albert Camus's existential *The Plague* . . . or Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*. . . . From these diverse historical and international literary depictions of disease, students come to learn about the enduring superstitions, mythologies, and cultural practices embedded within our understanding of contagion and contamination. They begin to understand such recurring impediments to medical care delivery as resistance to vaccination and antibiotics as well as larger social issues such as xenophobia. (154)

This passage is puzzling on many counts. First, the "new" program is really quite old—progressive schools have organized human knowledge under rubrics like "society and culture" or "brain and society" for decades, and the categories chosen have little to do with the postindustrial information age, being, as they are, so broad as to be useless. Second, I find it difficult to believe that an educator trained as a professor of American literature could attribute such a reductively instrumental value to a field of study that is deeply important in its own right. To take Plato's famous example, it is like reading the *Iliad* to learn about shipbuilding. The *Decameron* is a classic example of how narrative works, and the first thing I would teach students about Boccaccio and the other writers is that mimesis, or representation, is a very complex affair and that a piece of writing can never duplicate real life. But, literary value aside, notice that—and this is my chief objection—the program in question, far from being "student-centered" and far from allowing undergraduates to develop their own perspectives, imposes a foregone conclusion on the treatment of disease. Instead of focusing, say, on the transformation of society effected by specific medical discoveries or on the phenomenology of a disorder, such as Proust's treatment of asthma, Davidson's choice of books is designed to produce a particular critique, culminating in an awareness of the "impediments to medical care delivery" and the "xenophobia" that exist in our society.

If I were an administrator asked to evaluate the department of comparative literature based on this particular example, I would urge cutbacks if not elimination. Surely there are easier and sounder ways to discuss healthcare delivery than to rely on Defoe or Gabriel García Márquez. And if the theory, history, and practice of literature is not itself a field of study, why hire ostensible experts with PhDs to teach it?

A related question: What do the examples I've discussed so far have to do with the community college phenomenon discussed so thoroughly in chapter 2, "College for Everyone"? I applaud Davidson's plea for the holistic treatment of the students who attend community college with great difficulty; she urges such practical aids as "Metro cards. Cohorts. Inclusion. Bridge loans. Advising the

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whole person" (73). But that whole person is also training for a specific career, and it is not clear to me how Davidson's student-centered learning relates broad interdisciplinary training to vocational training.

I recently had a routine echocardiogram, and the technician told me that the training for this particular highly skilled job took two years. MRI training is similarly difficult, and even programs that teach medical billing can require up to two years of community college course work. Health care, I read recently in *The Wall Street Journal*, is now the fastest-growing major at universities across the United States (Korn and Tam). And no wonder, because there are so many challenging jobs involved, so much to do. Then, too, there are now new popular majors like national security. The big question for educators, then, is how to combine the very technical training involved in training health-care personnel today with the general education sufficient to produce good citizenship.

Nowhere in her book does Davidson raise the issue of citizenship, of how to function politically in "a world in flux." Do those "broad thematic areas" like "brain and society" or "information" teach the student the fundamentals of American government vis-à-vis other governments around the world? Do they take up the history of democratic institutions, the relation of parliamentary democracy to the American model, the rationale for the separation of powers, and so on? American government used to be the subject of high school civics courses, but these have largely fallen by the wayside, and, as we learned in the last presidential election, when most voters were told Bernie Sanders was a socialist, they had no idea what that meant. Something about government interference, or big government, but what precisely? One can, of course, look up the term *socialism* in *Wikipedia*, but the encyclopedia account would hardly explain to the student how socialisms have and have not worked in practice.

An understanding of the rudiments of politics, moreover, obviously requires some historical training. Before we throw out all those obsolete history courses, we had better ask ourselves how we can understand Vladimir Putin's authoritarian rule in Russia without having studied the October Revolution, whose centenary is currently being observed, and the French Revolution before that, and the relation of the West to czarist Russia.

The question of politics leads to the larger issue of the relation of college training to the actual world students live in. Yes, the digital revolution creates new educational demands, but what about job distribution? Davidson has nothing to say about potential government jobs, much less the military, and indeed few professors today know undergraduates who plan to go into the civil service, the foreign service, or the armed forces. Who, after all, aspires to get a position at the Justice Department when lawyers can make so much more money in the corporate world? But then, who is it that does hold those jobs in the Department of Agriculture or Commerce? In the post-Watergate age, when "government" has increasingly been discredited and the absence of a military draft means that few people really care how much longer "we" will be in Afghanistan, we are having trouble coping with the reality that Alexis de Tocqueville recognized almost two hundred years ago: democracy can only work when there is an informed electorate. When the electorate has no idea of alternative political systems and their pros and cons, when it ignores the history of its own institutions, when *Twitter* replaces any sort of considered argument, it is hardly surprising that Donald Trump can be elected president of the United States of America.

It is the disconnect between university curricula and the civic and political life of America today that strikes me as the most pressing problem for educators. The use of electronic devices in the classroom, the advantages and disadvantages of MOOCs

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(massive open online courses), the addition or subtraction of this or that traditional academic discipline—all these can be debated. But the real issue—for the university as well as for the community college—is how to combine the teaching of skills (according to recent congressional reports, there are currently six million unfilled jobs for skilled workers [Gillespie]!) with as strong a liberal arts background as possible. Meanwhile, the contempt for humanistic learning—especially for history (and its affiliate, geography), whether of political systems or of literary forms—is destroying not only intellectual life but citizenship itself.

At Georgetown University's Red House—an educational planning center Davidson especially admires—a recent annual leadership conference included "eight student leaders [who] are on the payroll and work as peer mentors and connectors with students, faculty, community members, and advisers" (Davidson 228). The buzz is palpable. "Everywhere around," writes Davidson, "are mind maps, white boards covered with arrows and circles and boxes, and multicolored sticky notes with words like *iterate* and *remix* and *re-bundle*. Over the mantel, a large sign urges: *Yes, a University Can Reinvent Itself!* Nearby, pinned to the wall, a T-shirt enjoins, *Create the Future*" (228). Yes, and while you're at it, Make America Great Again!

Last year it cost almost $70,000 to attend Georgetown University. Pass those sticky notes, please.

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