
Discipline in Dialogue

Short articles are invited for the Discipline in Dialogue section of ARC, addressing issues of method and theory in the academic study of religion, pedagogical reflections, state-of-the-art reviews of the discipline or its sub-disciplines, and responses and rejoinders. This new section is intended to offer a forum for stimulating discussion and debate.

Re-visioning Intellectual Asceticism: Scholarship, Pedagogy and the Recovery of Collegiality*

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Exploring the world “between” academic research and pedagogical practice at the university level continues to engender a particular genre of literature for those either in religious studies or other branches of the humanities. Such literature compels us to take seriously the content and context of education, our purposes for educating, and new methods of education. At issue is not the content quality of each class, though professors often struggle to balance the dictates of the academic subject’s “canon” over against the commodity-driven marketplace of student expectations (Williams 2000). Academics struggle with the ethos, the forms of life, the *habitus* of academic preparation that actu-

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ally creates a disposition making daily university life difficult for professors and students. Many faculty members reside in the final vestiges of an Enlightenment project of intellectual asceticism and argument, which influence their pedagogy and associations.

In a post-modern world the academic must become discerning in how his or her training may anticipate a disconnected antagonistic asceticism that impedes transforming students at crucial points in their own journey. The practicing academic must also be intentional in reviving a sense of collegiality anchored not only in professional courtesy, but in an intellectual community committed to friendship. Critically discerning the potential pathology of doctoral study while creatively calling for a new form of collegiality shaped by the virtue of friendship frames this project. The article proceeds to explore the problem of poor pedagogy shaped by the compelling ascetic image of doctoral studies and by the fragmentation of university life. It concludes advocating a collegiality that is both academically sound and philosophically grounded friendship.

Defining Doctoral Studies: An intellectual, argumentative, hermitage

Academic scholars themselves have challenged the wisdom of universities staffed predominantly with Ph.D professors. Stephen Webb's (2000) honest accounting of his lack of educational training reflects the discomfort many new professors feel entering the classroom. Parker Palmer (1998) also charts the interior life of the teacher in seeking to become an authentic educator. Page Smith's (1990) blistering assessment is probably the most volatile and compelling challenge. His accounting of many American universities' predilection toward the "name-brand" recognition of privileged doctoral programs shakes the hallowedness of many a doctoral diploma. Smith also challenges the intellectual fundamentalism that can barrier aspiring candidates whose conclusions vary from their doctoral committee's assumptions. His critiques of dull attempts to turn humanities doctoral programs into respectable intellectual products modeled after the natural sciences and his recounting the shared pain associated with various points on the

doctoral journey raise a number of academic eyebrows. Smith offers intriguing yet anecdotal evidence to support his claims. Smith does not, however, draw together the larger infrastructure of the doctoral practice and ongoing pedagogy in systematic fashion.

While the educational environment might not be as austere as Smith portrays, it is possible that various practices shaping the pursuit of academic scholarship, coupled with the fragmentation of university life, influence the overall pedagogical practices of a Ph.D professor. Faculty often experience a disjointed angst when attempting to balance research passions (or pressures), university expectations, and classroom interaction. Traditional undergraduate students experience a different form of angst but one remarkably similar due to the fragmentation of university life. The remedy for both may reside in an understanding of their mutual journeys.

Rather than attempting to map the furthest reaches of education and academia, I prefer to work through an image, an icon, or representative description: the intellectual, argumentative hermit. This image, a heuristic device, is somewhat limited in its “idealistic” form; though others argue that the image of the monk represents a number of approaches to life (Pannikar 1982). Undoubtedly there will be readers that take exception with some aspects of the eremitic image of the Ph.D pursuit. Any attempt to describe all who journey the doctoral road describes no one passage in particular. At best the presentation is a model for comparison with personal experience.

To summarize the Ph.D journey, the prospective candidate is a solitary character engaged in a rigorous ascetical practice of prehending (grasping) and defending the “truth” primarily through the form of argumentation. *Acesis*, disciplined training, is the heart of the monastic tradition and the doctoral journey (Chadwick 1968, 9-33; Cox 1983, 65-7; Gribomont 1988; Leclercq 1988; UNC Writing Center 1998). Drawing from the deeper heritage of Cathedral and monastery schools, as much as the encyclopedic universities of Italy, Germany and France, the asceticism of doctoral training is deeply reminiscent of early monastic movements. The actual experience of dissertation research and writing resembles the deepest monastic heritage of those desert fathers who went to the desert to “battle” the devil and later anchorite monks

whose cells were often attached to local cathedrals (Bouyer 1963; Chadwick 1968, 9-33). Many doctoral candidates, and their families, can attest to the rigors of academic life. Hard choices are made between academic demands, work and family life. Institutions seek to provide monetary support through scholarships and teaching assistance to mitigate the stress of this rite of passage, but often the challenges to survive lie within a gestalt of intellectual, emotional, relational and financial survival skills. Those who negotiate the financial and interpersonal struggles may also feel isolated in academia. The quest includes battles with metaphoric “demons” and the temptation of *acedia*, the devil of the noonday sun, which saps intellectual vigor (Steindl-Rast 1995, 76-85). More than one doctoral candidate, locked in a study carol of a research library, feels the eremitic dislocation of the hermit in the veritable “forest” of academic research. This quest has a deep history, and often a deep sense of fulfillment when ascetical struggles result in personal transformation. The objective of each pursuit, monk and scholar, are noble yet different. The broader intellectual shifts from Enlightenment to post-modernist understandings of knowledge do threaten this goal for the scholar.

While the monastic pursuit is for a vision of God, the modern academic seeks and ultimately prehends Truth. Academic research discovers or creates new knowledge by design. Modernism offers truth in discrete yet universal units available by apprehension via experimental research or comprehension via speculative reason (Kolb 1984). The Enlightenment’s legacy includes an understanding that individuals, through careful, analytic research and classification, can possess encapsulated knowledge (Grenz 1996, 2-5, 57-81). The modern academic quest results not in a Holy Grail but in the personal discovery of at least one aspect of truth that no one previously “possessed.” Solace for years of disciplined study resides in the sure knowledge that the newly bestowed doctor possesses something distinct, “new,” and uniquely their own.

Scholars not only prehend this new knowledge, they must also defend it. Academic writing is a particular discourse that requires a form of argumentation that not only informs but also persuades. The analytic process establishing claims, backing, qualifications, and warrants

are a part of the discourse of the dissertation (Murphy 1994). This measured use of reason to explore and defend the assumptions underlying the research is the heart of the philosophical task that marks a Ph.D (Rosenburg 1996). The process, an education in itself, often dwarfs other educational methods in its rigor. Even doctoral programs that foster holistic approaches to epistemology, critiquing an exclusively linear-discursive view of educating, risk perpetuating the very modes of thinking they critique in the doctoral process. The culmination of the process is the dissertation “defense” where student and faculty engage in a final exercise of inquiry, clarification and challenge. The end of the quest is the bestowal of the doctoral degree as the dissertation advanced knowledge in the field.

Postmodernism alters this quest. Scholars, faced with a deconstructed notion of universal knowledge, discover the inescapable conclusion that any attempt to possess truth is fleeting at best (Cahoone 1996; Grenz 1996). Knowledge becomes subjective, particular, and deeply contextual. Candidates wishing to possess a total understanding of any one subject (no matter how narrowly defined) discover a methodological impasse. While the textbook best represents modern knowledge, the internet website now symbolizes a postmodern understanding of knowledge, where each piece of information “links” to an infinite array of resources. The idea of a personal possession of ultimate truth is no longer tenable for many research scholars. While doctoral students always live with a certain amount of humility, the recognition that the “grail” as “myth” is still disconcerting. Argumentation, originally used for the sharpening of intellect in the pursuit of truth, can turn into an advanced form of sophistry where argument is reduced to gamesmanship since no real “truth” is attainable. With no sense of final destination, academic scholars often resemble Philip Rief’s (1963) description of Sigmund Freud’s analytic quest, a form of perpetual self-discipline without fulfillment (22-23). There is little respite on the journey.

The image of the intellectual ascetic may be appropriate for the quest for doctoral accomplishment but it leaves faculty ill prepared for classroom life. The sense of isolation and fragmentation that results from the postmodern world of scholarship perpetuates asceticism

fraught with limitations. These limitations are magnified by the needs of many students as well.

University life and student isolation

Students also find the academic journey arduous and dangerous for their own self-images. Researchers have documented the intellectual passage of students in the university (Perry 1968, Parks 1986). Most students go through a process where their original assumptions are challenged when they first enter the academic world. The students then travel through a time of searching until emerging with a renewed perspective and intellectual commitment that carries them into their adult lives.

A crucial time occurs early when students, confronted by varied perspectives, often jettison their cherished commitments for an unqualified relativism that is very early in the authentic journey for truth and commitment. This position, while rejecting any assumed singular position, is primarily a defensive yet superficial reaction. Any real commitment to pursue new ideas is deferred by eliminating all options. Unlike a postmodern perspective where multiple positions are acknowledged yet not all validated, this perspective (a “fundamentalist” relativism) validates all positions by default while refusing to investigate any position. The authentic quest has not yet begun since the student has not learned the art of discernment.

While accepted as part of the intellectual journey, Sharon Parks has noted that students are deeply influenced at this time by the relationships they form and the quality of community they are involved in (1986, 78-96). The relational challenges include their emerging self-image and the “fragile” independence they are developing. Students are open to authority figures who model a brand of interdependence that encourages student expression yet provides a level of accountability. In addition, students seek a community of like-minded contemporaries that provide a network of support and solidarity. If all elements are in place there is the possibility of movement from an unqualified relativism to an honest search for intellectual and emotional integrity.

What is problematic is that few students enjoy these types of mentoring relationships and community associations that foster intellectual and emotional growth. Already the postmodern intellectual ethos allows for unreflective pluralism even if most authentic postmodern positions call for “particular” convictions if not universal stances. Students also struggle to find competent mentors since media personalities and consumer commodity messages often shape their early adolescent lives. Community is possible but rarely in the classroom. Often students must discover community “in the seams” of university life: through dormitories, student activities and social endeavours. Often these forms of community life are as destructive as supportive in the forms of lifestyle they promote (Willimon and Naylor 1995). While these forms of “community building” are traditional, the fragmented lives of students forced to work and/or commute to the university often mitigate against non-formal processes.

Academic attempts to associate community and classroom are usually postponed until students share the same major and required upper-division classes. The “rule” of class schedules, fragmented into discrete units of time across several months, acknowledges a particular “liturgy” that actually may resemble the production line of a factory than a communal learning community. Students often adjust gradually in upper-division classes but may not associate their community of friends with the actual academic practices in the classrooms. With the fragmentation that occurs within the class and the larger university life, students desperately need faculty who intentionally create supportive mentoring relationships and communal learning patterns in order to mature to the point that they are able to make committed decisions that are intellectually and emotionally whole. The problem for student and teacher alike is that the “monastic,” argumentative training of many faculty leave them equally ill-prepared to empower students in their learning and growth at these crucial times.

Ill-prepared pedagogy

Professors who complete the doctoral journey often find themselves ill equipped for general university life. The levels of isolation endemic in

university structures often impede interaction in the day-to-day contact with students, faculty collaboration, and educational dialogue in the classroom. Ascetical practices implied in a research model accentuate a withdrawal from personal engagement in all three areas. The solitary sense of the journey risks a loss of any sense of community intellectual life. Students often struggle to locate faculty who must balance university expectations (committee meetings, publication pressures, administrative responsibilities assessed as “course overloads,” etc.) with an implicit desire to “get away” to do continued research. Faculty offices risk becoming private hermitages, guarded by secretaries and appointment forms. In reality this risk is rare. Too often many faculty feel besieged by student and administrative interruptions, the perpetual image of the intellectual ascetic magnifies these moments.

When research is perceived as individual praxis, the sense of isolation is magnified even among faculty in the same department; particularly when dialogue is always couched in an expectancy of argumentation and “defense.” One suspects that a preoccupation with university politics among faculty often comes from a reluctance to share in the free exchange of ideas. In a world where argumentation is not for clarity but sophistry, those most passionate about knowledge are also most reluctant to “test” new thoughts.

Educational theorists often assert that intellectual ascetics can find themselves out of step with the regular engagement of classroom teaching due either to their Enlightenment understanding of truth or to their notion of argumentative asceticism. Barabara Cherem (1990) has noted that academic teaching often takes one of two forms. One approach is primarily lecture with fairly fixed content and delivery. In this approach knowledge is “delivered” in prescribed doses and returned through standardized tests. For intellectual ascetics who have dedicated so much time to possessing truth, this is a “safe” form of teaching since this approach allows them to pass along the fruits of their own hard searching in an economical fashion. Knowledge in this model is understood primarily as a form of propositional truth to be “possessed” (as the scholar possesses his or her own “new” truth) and stored for later use.

While the lecture is seen as a fairly standard form of educational delivery, there can be negative consequences if the intellectual ascetic is not discerning about his or her own power in the classroom or about a prevalent consumer mindset among some students. In harsh settings this form of “banking” education through controlled delivery is associated with controlling students by seeing them as “objects” that can only receive data rather than “subjects” that can create new knowledge (Freire 1993). Often scholars do not intend to use this method for control, though there is a subtle tendency to assume a patronizing if not patriarchal attitude toward students who have not given themselves to the same ascetical drive as the professor (Weiler 1988, 1-25).

Even with a cautious understanding of power, compartmentalized knowledge and delivery can have equally negative consequences with benevolent professors working with students when both are embedded in a consumer culture. Well-meaning “exchanges” of information, even if designed to save the student the same arduous journey, are reduced to commodity transactions where students are seen as (and perceive themselves to be) “consumers” of knowledge. In an attempt to provide the “truth” Ph.D scholars often diminish the very desire of the student to pursue new learning. In a postmodern context, where “truth” and “commodity” are exchanged, teacher and student alike are cheated. Scholars feel like academic dispensing units and students are trivialized as voyeurs of knowledge.

Cherem’s second model of education includes an “adversarial-doubting” approach where the argumentative mode dominates the classroom. Students are questioned in either-or terms and subsequent answers must be defended. This approach could be seen as a preliminary introduction into philosophical asceticism. Scholars may teach philosophy in a number of ways; but challenging of assumptions intertwine with almost all approaches in the philosopher’s mind (Kaschhoff 1998). When done well, students begin to understand how this ascetical task influences both research and argumentation. Done poorly, this approach can resemble a type of intellectual deconstruction. Since Ph.D professors have often mastered this form of argumentation, it is easy for students to model themselves after their prospective mentors. Students learn too well to challenge and defend

assumptions, however, they may not be prepared to offer new thoughts or ideas that might contribute to the overall educational task. If students, like their professors, understand their efforts as primarily an individual task, the competitiveness of argumentation may lead to a form of gamesmanship, blocking community associations.

The intent of faculty and students in higher education may be to grow and change through learning. As noted, however, there are real challenges endemic in the implicit pedagogy of the professor, personal struggles of the students, and fragmentation of the university life, that hinder learning. Defensively recognizing the potential limitations often inherent in faculty training, student needs, and university life is an important first step to avoiding personal angst and pedagogical problems. Proactively creating a new ethos of learning, one with roots in asceticism and scholarship, may be equally beneficial.

An alternative approach: collegiality

Discerning potential limitations is one instructive approach to avoiding some of the problems that emerge not only in teaching method but in challenging the presuppositions of any interaction (or lack thereof) between faculty and students. A second approach, already implicit in university life but often overlooked, may also be beneficial to the isolated student and intellectual ascetic. This approach is to reframe university life as a collegial activity between faculty and within the classroom.

Collegiality is not only an academic expression but also one associated with a number of partnerships fixed on a certain purpose, including ecclesial gatherings (*Oxford English Dictionary*). In dealing with monastic imagery the embrace of collegiality is clearly a cenobitic or community-based asceticism much more closely aligned to classical learning and scholarship (Leclerq 1988, 120-23). Academic leaders are noting the importance of this rediscovered practice for academic research, university advancement and classroom teaching. The philosophical or religious source of this communal image of intellectual asceticism is best understood not in shared interests, but also in the virtue of friendship.

For a number of years the emphasis on collegiality has gradually diminished in university life. The fragmentation of personal and administrative schedules of faculty, administrators and students, the interpersonal strife of faculty relations, and the increasing use of adjunct faculty often impede the forms of communal associations envisioned in a true “college” of learning (Romano 2000). Even community college teachers, where teaching is often emphasized over research and publication, struggle with maintaining collegial relationships (Outcault 2000). Often the problem is related to administrative issues, including the perceived purpose of the university. Academic deans must maintain a view of education as a social investment rather than a commodity for consumer use (Harrison and Brodeth 2000).

Leaders in higher academics are re-discovering the benefits of a truly collegial atmosphere. A “culture” of collegiality assists professors at multiple levels of learning and teaching. Educational research by Pew Charitable trusts reveal that collegial participation in program assessment is crucial if any real change is to occur in university processes (Wergin 1999). One important qualification is that collegiality might not be neatly separated into a discrete category of faculty assessment, like scholarship, teaching and service. Any attempt to legislate through faculty evaluation may create a “chilling effect” on the faculty (Anonymous 1999). Collegiality as the framework by which evaluation is done, however, has proven quite beneficial for institution and professor alike. Collegiality has influenced a shift away from consumer driven academic leadership, focusing on the shared experiences of learning within the academy rather than on content (and personnel) “commodity” driven education. It has also encouraged international conversations as far as Australia and Palestinian universities (Harrison and Brodeth).

Collegiality might also be understood as an educational strategy in the classroom. Collegiality as a collaborative approach begins prior to the university life including secondary school education in the United States and England (Busher and Blease 2000). An American secondary education program called “Connections” demonstrates how ninth-grade teachers and students modeled this approach with all the possibilities and problems that occur in community building and collabora-

tive learning (Dorsch 1998). Collegial learning takes careful maintenance but represents a model of post-modern education already evident in many classrooms which take more interest in contextualizing student experience and working collaboratively (Haushildt and Wesson 1999). Students entering the university setting may be more expecting of community associations and mentors than previous generations. This will be quite helpful at the crucial times of intellectual and emotional transitions.

Ultimately there must be an enduring metaphor to support the intellectual ascetic's move from eremitic to cenobitic (collegial) scholarly practice. A narrative that encourages both habit and disposition in pursuing this image must balance any educational external benefits of collegial living. Perhaps the best narrative theme would be that of friendship. Friendship often characterizes the nature of community life either philosophically or religiously. Friendship also points to a monastic vision that describes certain implicit aspects of the ascetic journey and holds monastics together through informal fellowship or "networks of the heart" (Veilleux 1982).

Paul Wadell (1989) offers a helpful framework as he traces the importance of friendship for the moral life. Examining the work of Aristotle, Aelred of Rievaulx, Aquinas, Barth and others, Wadell understands that the pursuit for the total wholeness of the "good life" (*eudaimonia*) as virtuous living is deeply related to the quality of friendships a person has (1989, 4-26). The moral life is more than abstract decision making but giving oneself totally to a virtuous pursuit of the best life possible. Summarizing Aristotle, Wadell concludes that moral living at its best is framed and nurtured by a community of friends who seek the same good (1989, 27-69).

If friendship is essential for the pursuit of the good, it is also vital in pursuing the True (or the beautiful). Re-framing Wadell's moral description, the academic pursuit could be understood not only as prehending the Truth but also being "grasped" by it, so that knowledge holds an equal claim on the scholar (Palmer 1998). In a postmodern setting, truth would not be understood as abstract possessions but the embodiment of life, often contextual, but always "true." The virtue of academics would also be reliant upon a community of friendships, par-

ticularly “friendships of character.” Wadell writes, “friendships of character are the deepest and most permanent because they are constituted by an agreement on the good and a similarity in virtue” (1989, 52). Collegial relationships, at their best, would also be framed in the common agreement for the search of truth. While there are different types of friendship there may also be different levels of collegiality (Waddell 1989 46-65). Students could also be a part of academic collegial relations as they both “befriend” each other and faculty alike. The ensuing constellation of communal friendships (the college) provides a deeper understanding of the virtue of cenobitic living for intellectual ascetics and students alike. Pedagogy framed in this ethos would be more discerning. Faculty would take care to make sure that their teaching and student learning are both shaped by a common pursuit of “truth” as an embodied reality (Palmer 1998, 115-62). David Burrell (2000) expresses this pursuit succinctly.

Friends embarked on an intellectual journey can transform a debate into a discussion, because their care for one another is shaped by their attentiveness to the search they share for truth. Once again, friendship requires not agreement but devotion to an ideal—the good—which lures us on together (Burrell 2000, 87).

The idea of a community of academic friends, faculty and student, collectively searching to both behold the truth and to be held by the truth provides a powerful narrative that reinforces the benefit of collegiality.

Conclusion

There is no doubt that the end of the Enlightenment has brought a new set of tensions and possibilities. The tensions are revealed in the dissolution of a particular ethos for scholarly study, in the reality of the fragmentation of institutional life, and in the struggle of students in the face of poor pedagogy. The possibilities, however, are equally promising as a new narrative emerges for academic life. This new narrative need not demean the asceticism of academia, the rigorous training to pursue—prehend—the truth (and be held by the truth). The new narrative, anchored in collegiality, re-frames the asceticism in

community, where student and teacher mutually benefit through friendships of character. Whether this new narrative will prevail remains uncertain, but the possibility exist for those willing to embrace it.

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