
Response to Presidential Address

WE ARE THE BRIDGE

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In responding to Rosalie Romano's thoughtful, earnest address, I would be remiss if I failed to acknowledge, with admiration, her call for dissolving barriers and building bridges for conversation among unlikely groups so that action toward social justice can occur. Equally laudable, Romano's impulse toward negating economic disparities and business/market intrusions into school settings deserves validation. Historically, U.S. schools have served as contested sites for competing social ideas, and they have been looked to as locations for resolving pressing social problems. It seems, however, that Romano is saying, "but the efforts toward social justice and human flourishing have not proven sufficient for the myriad of current pressing problems"; so, she calls attention to the Milau Viaduct, an impossible-seeming construction that became a reality, as a way of urging educators and other community leaders also to span chasms of equally impossible divides in order to bring about social justice in their multiple communities. Basically, Romano calls for action.

Perhaps it will be permissible to explore the bridge metaphor a bit before using it to respond to Romano's call to activism. Bridges connect, and as Richard Quantz points out in his essay "The Puzzlemasters," physical bridges can be constructed by using good engineering technique exclusively; but, as he further notes, more than technical problem solving *should* be employed in building a bridge.¹ That is, there are existential and value dimensions to the building of a bridge: Do the communities want to be connected? If the right of imminent domain is used, who gains, who loses? How will the connected groups change as a result of having access to the bridge? Who will have access to the bridge? How will the bridge be cared for? Many other such questions could be asked, with the answers being negotiated through reason, emotion, and conversation, but not through technique. In the same way, building coalitions for social justice depends on more than removing barriers that separate groups. The truly difficult work rests with the contextual problems.

Now, let us think in terms of the road on which the vehicles travel across the connecting bridge. The journey or "on the road" metaphor is an old (well-traveled) one; but, nonetheless, it still seems to serve a function for considering means and ends. Roads have literally scarred the landscape and altered communities while at the same time collapsing the distance between two points. Interstate highways have changed the way groups live and interact. And the types of vehicles, drivers, and passengers in the vehicles are a disparate lot. In postmodern times, travelers report not even being certain of the destination; some say the compass is lost, with no end in sight. Therefore, building bridges

and being on the road serve as effective metaphors for considering how to forge connections among now-separated groups, where these same problems exist.

Often social activists seek to connect disparate voices and diverse communities, but it could be that some individuals and communities will never locate the common ground needed to form functioning collectives. In those cases, an agreement respectfully (hopefully) to disagree perhaps can be negotiated, but nothing more. In some cases, however, it may be that agendas and values are so different that nothing exists from which a connection can be negotiated. On what basis is that determination made and, then, what can be done? Is it possible to coexist in serious disagreement? This conversation requires further attention, but this response is too short to engage it. However, educational philosophers need to ensure that the questions are discussed and that the conversation continues.

I would like now to use the bridge metaphor to respond to Romano's call to activism and to her use of Martha Nussbaum's ideas relating to cultivating humanity and responding to social inequalities. If university professors are following the passion of their vocation, I would argue that they are doing the work, they are building the bridge and doing the work of cultivating humanity. As a group, university professors are activists, if they choose to be. It is not that they should *refrain* from participating in local settings in activist ways or that they *must* engage in community activism in order to be working for social justice. Professors can be activists in their own university settings. Here is what I mean: The key to bringing about meaningful, purposeful action for the benefit of the human community has a great deal to do with what occurs in classrooms. Change or action does not lie in education per se but in the types of human beings who emerge from schools: human beings who will not tolerate the types of inequalities brought forward in Romano's address. When university professors realize that their true vocation² is one of struggle, the struggle to help students learn how to reason well about important ideas and urgent questions, while at the same time engaging their hearts as well as their minds, then the true work occurs toward social justice.

The struggle lies in attempting to understand diverse viewpoints and unresolved tensions and in allowing students to both observe and participate in that task. Leading discussions proves daunting as professors remember not to camp so tightly in their own personal politics and beliefs that open-ended dialogue with students sputters or dies, while at the same time nudging poor reasoning and biased perspectives so that thinking can become inclusive and non-parochial. Classroom conversations require that professors stress not only the development of intellect but also the development of humanness as problems, ideas, and groups are examined.³

To enable such development, students should be brought to the realization that thought and feeling are not polar opposites, but rather they work in concert. Susanne Langer's work provides a philosophic grounding for this

notion when she claims that all thought originates with feeling and that thinking occurs in various forms of which language is but one and perhaps the most complicated.⁴ Language holds power, and students should be encouraged to understand how it works. Emotions are also powerful and their interconnectedness with thought deserves recognition; otherwise, a vital part of the thinking process is missing, perhaps the part that spurs one to put thought into action.⁵ David Hansen, professor of philosophy and education at Teachers College, Columbia University, describes the situation well.

Contemporary humanity is indeed drowning in facts and information. Ideas, by contrast, are rarer, and they are more difficult to recognize...Ideas emerge through individual attempts to articulate in a sustained fashion a thought, a feeling, a hunch, an interpretation, a response.⁶

Hansen goes on to connect ideas with action when he states that “ideas are essential for intelligent and humane action.”⁷ Professors find their agency and help their students to do so, as well, when they learn how to teach so that ideas come into being and are analyzed. Parker Palmer describes this type of teaching and learning as “bringing to life things that the students had never heard of, offering them an encounter with otherness that brings the students to life as well.”⁸ That activity builds a bridge, a bridge between ideas not yet known and the knowers.

Therefore, I find hope in the work that we university professors do, the work that prepares students to be individuals who have deliberative skills and who know how to make choices based upon knowing what matters and why. In the process, students learn to recognize ideas and gain competence in knowing how to analyze competing “goods.” Of course, my remarks constitute a rosy read of the picture. Teaching does not always succeed in encouraging that type of knowing for every student; in fact, some faculty members do not even think that such instruction is their purpose. But many do and work at it. Could there be a better way to be political and to change the anti-intellectual atmosphere and dogmatic climate that we now live in than to engage in the “conversation, with all its tensions” in our classrooms daily? If a sufficient number of students were to become excited about learning and living examined lives that honor their connection to others, then perhaps a tipping point could be reached in the general population where inhuman acts and bigotry would not be tolerated.

Teaching is not a neutral act. The seeds for social justice can reside in teaching; therefore, university professors cannot be dogmatic in their efforts or connected to chosen groups only. The teaching and learning process, when left open and engaging, offers possibilities and reasoning strategies to students, encouraging them to stretch and grow but not offering preprogrammed answers. John Dewey, I think, intended such an open “end” as he described the means, the process of learning, as active and engaged, with the ends not always known but a part of the process.⁹ Maxine Greene, through her visions of the

power of imagination to yield insights and possibilities, also views learning in the open-ended sense. Greene describes teaching as activism when she comments, in an interview, about her work with students: “I want young people...to identify themselves by means of significant projects...It seems important, as I have said too often, that the projects are most meaningful when they involve others, when they touch on others’ lives.”¹⁰ The bridge here seems to be built between the lived reality of individuals and the open-ended future of possibilities.

Additionally, by listening to diverse perspectives and ideas that perhaps run counter to their own, teachers provide a space where students may learn to tolerate discomfiting perspectives, uncertainty, and ambiguity: elements not now a common part of youthful thinking. Most of all, professors, who most often are not like their students, must not become discouraged: these are young people whose current popular culture, including talk radio, is being pushed against when professors question biased notions and nudge faulty reasoning, pointing out unsupported conclusions. In this slow process, professors are doing the work; they are activists. As Palmer reminds educators:

An authentic movement is not a play for power—it is teaching and learning writ large. Now the world becomes our classroom, and the potential to teach and learn is found everywhere. We need only be in the world as our true selves, with open hearts and minds.¹¹

Even with thinking, caring groups of citizens, though, can community be formed in postmodern times? John Churchill, Secretary of Phi Beta Kappa, identifies three salient features of post-modernity: relativism, skepticism, and nihilism. These elements are all usually perceived as being hostile to community. Yet, as Churchill suggests: “The immediate contemporary challenge is to find a way in which people who differ in the central presuppositional structures of their worlds can coexist and possibly even cooperate.”¹² Finding the ground for cooperation, then, becomes the problem. Even though postmodernism appears to have discounted metanarratives, perhaps that move was hasty! Metanarratives’ structure, status, and importance should be reexamined and rethought. Ordinary narratives are crucial to individuals’ and communities’ abilities to articulate their thinking, and they provide a means for those outside of a community to understand the differences between or among communities. Stories provide ways to show how others are different and yet same. Sometimes, the understanding of a concept, connection, or injustice can be grasped only through narrative. Greene’s work constantly reminds us of the crucial role narrative plays in coming to know. Perhaps metanarratives serve this same function on a larger scale, especially as differing groups attempt to understand other groups’ beliefs and values.

This idea fits well with Churchill’s idea that, “We in the postmodern condition can live in community—if at all—only by joining in commitment to share the search, to allow to our disparate projects the possibility that they

might intersect.”¹³ One vital way that such a search occurs in cooperation with others is through the examination of separate groups’ metanarratives—metanarratives that are not unassailable but that are fair objects of the conversation. In the end, perhaps our starting point is a reminder of what Churchill means when he claims that “Communities are human social groups united not by mutual assistance in reaching predetermined aims but by mutual assistance in trying to identify and shape the aims toward which we will aspire and work.”¹⁴ A study of a group’s dominant metanarrative(s) may enable the identification of its cherished aims and identifiers. Otherwise, groups continue to offend one another, unintentionally, because they do not understand deep-seated perspectives, or they fail to reach working agreements because they simply do not recognize the grounding of others’ perspectives.

Action and power lie in the conversation, in sharing the road over the bridge, in making new roads; basically, in doing our work as university professors. No quick fixes or corporate solutions exist. The road to forming communities of shared interests and perhaps to practicing social justice is rocky, hilly, and pot-holed from the many disagreements and wrong-minded actions pursued in the past and currently, but the bridge that leads to possible solutions rests on our backs as teachers who interact and learn with our students.

Courageous philosophers, such as Dewey and Greene, have expended many words reminding teachers to keep the learning process open and to live life fully awake so that students can come to realize what it means to be human and humane. They have been joined more recently by the voices of Nussbaum and Nel Noddings, among others, who remind us that through understanding, compassion, and care, we can also learn how to humanely define ourselves as human beings, individually and as a collective. These are the ideas that Romano no doubt had in mind as she called for accomplishing impossible feats so that our children and youth will grow up with an attitude that promotes the flourishing of humankind.

NOTES

1. Richard A. Quantz, “The Puzzlemasters: Performing the Mundane, Searching for Intellect, and Living in the Belly of the Corporation,” *The Review of Education, Pedagogy, and Cultural Studies* 25 (2003): 95–137.
2. I am using vocation in the sense that Parker Palmer, among other scholars, uses the term, as a calling with special responsibilities.
3. Many scholars write on the importance of this type of teaching. For example, see the work of Maxine Greene, Nel Noddings, William Ayers, Palmer, and Elliot Eisner.
4. Susanne K. Langer, *Philosophy in a New Key* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1942).

5. See the work of Martha Nussbaum, particularly *Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of Emotions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).
 6. David T. Hansen, ed., *Ethical Visions of Education: Philosophies in Practice* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2007), 3.
 7. Ibid.
 8. Parker Palmer, *The Courage to Teach* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1998), 120.
 9. Dewey's ideas about the open-ended nature of teaching and learning are related well to his concept of society in his "Education and Social Change," in *Notable Selections in Education*, ed. Fred Schultz (New Haven: McGraw-Hill, 1998), 329–37.
 10. Quoted in William C. Ayers and Janet L. Miller, eds., *A Light in Dark Times: Maxine Greene and the Unfinished Conversation* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1997), 41.
 11. Palmer, *Courage to Teach*, 183.
 12. John Churchill, "Is Postmodern Community Possible?" *Liberal Education* 83, no. 1 (1997), 25.
 13. Ibid., 27.
 14. Ibid., 27.
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