

Innovation at a Liberal Arts Institution

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Rather than write abstractly about what I think teaching innovation is, I'd like, in this post, to suggest a direction that teaching innovation might take at a liberal arts institution like Bates.

I teach in the philosophy department. Every one of our majors, I presume, is sooner or later posed the question: "What are you going to do with that?" Now, my sense is that our students have a high-minded answer at the ready: Their liberal arts education in general, and their philosophical training in particular, prepares them not for any particular vocation, but to live the life of a thoughtful person. It's an inspiring answer. But here's my fear: Our students graduate into a world that doesn't support, in any meaningful way, a life of the mind.

Here's an analogy: You grow up playing a sport. School, throughout your life, gives you the institutional structure within which to participate in your sport. Then you graduate from college and you want sports to continue to be part of your life. What then? Well, you join a club, a fitness center, or the YMCA. You sign up for lessons, teach classes, or coach children. You make use of public parks, courts, and recreation equipment. Or, at the very least, you watch your sport on television alongside others who are also fans and who understand the sport too. Even if your life isn't dominated by your sport, there are ways to make it meaningfully part of your life, because society has adopted the practices and maintained the institutions that make it possible to do so.

My worry is that there is no comparable thing that we can say about philosophy (and many other disciplines). Students spend years training to think like a philosopher and to engage in thoughtful philosophical conversation, only to graduate into a world without the kinds of institutions and practices that support such thought and conversation. This is where I see a place for some innovation in our teaching. As we design our courses and our curricula, it might be nice to think about ways in which we can help create the kinds of institutions and practices outside of academia that would make the world more hospitable to a liberally educated person.

I don't mean anything too grand by this. Let me just give you a single example of something I've done while at Bates. My short term course in the spring of 2014 was called Teaching Philosophy. In the course, six of our majors designed a philosophy mini-course for juniors and seniors at Lewiston High School, which they went on to teach themselves. Pedagogically, it forced our students to think in a new way about what they'd learned in the philosophy department. But more broadly, it was a chance for our students to go into the community, talk with young people about philosophy, and interact with teachers and administrators from the local high school about a subject that they love. If programs like this became the norm, then students who graduated with a degree in philosophy would have one kind of answer that they could give when asking themselves how they might continue to do philosophy after college. That is, they might be able to get

together with other former philosophy students, and maybe team up with people who are currently in college, and then go participate in a high school or a middle school program designed to expose young people to philosophy. It would be a chance to interact with others who share an interest in philosophy. It would be a chance to share one's interest with those who don't yet have it.

I intend this just as a small example—one way that reaching out into the community could shape the world outside of Bates in such a way as to make it more ready for the liberally educated persons that emerge from our institution. If we're looking to innovate, and looking for direction as we innovate, this kind of thing strikes me as being worthy.