Review Essay
Reflections on Scholarship and Teaching in the Humanities

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Learning in the Plural: Essays on the Humanities and Public Life

David D. Cooper
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David Cooper's Learning in the Plural is a collection of essays written over a twenty-year period, from 1993 to 2013. Each essay makes an argument, and Cooper expresses strong opinions—and yet, he inhabits the essayist tradition of Montaigne, often mulling over and complicating a topic rather than wrapping it up. The essays are, as Cooper writes, “excursions in active and improvisational thinking in which the questions I raise and the uncertainties I probe are more important than answers arrived at or ground defended” (p. xx). The central question, the concern that keeps circling back in Cooper's thinking over the years, is one familiar to service-learning educators: how does our work as academics intersect with our responsibilities as members of a community? More specifically, how can teaching and scholarship in the humanities contribute to the ongoing struggle to sustain an active participatory democracy?

Cooper is an integrative thinker, sometimes ascending to high altitudes for a broad view of American life and sometimes dropping down for a closer view of particular communities, classrooms, or individuals. Nevertheless, Learning in the Plural reads as a unified whole. Its basic structure is chronological—the essays are arranged in order of their publication dates—and a thematic trajectory emerges as Cooper's ideas evolve. What remains constant is his commitment to moral wholeness, for students and for himself: What shifts is Cooper's relationship to his professional milieu as he rejects the ethos of over-professionalized, exclusionary academic culture to embrace teaching and learning in active partnership with others—other teachers, community partners, and students.

Recurring Themes
Students' Moral Development

The first essay in the collection, “Believing in Difference: The Ethics of Civic Literacy,” sets out Cooper's principal concern. College students, he suggests, suffer from a “moral self-enclosure” that disables them from appreciating human diversity and engaging in the struggle for full equality for all Americans. He quotes Benjamin DeMott: “…[T]he first step toward achieving the spirit of liberty is the development of a capacity to believe in difference and to register it, to imagine one’s way deeply into the moment-to-moment feelings and attitudes of people placed differently from oneself” (p. 2). Trapped in the pervasive ideology of individualism, students see themselves as autonomous units, competing with others for jobs, money, and short-term gratification, attending college with the single goal of landing good-paying jobs. No matter how many courses they take to meet Gen Ed diversity requirements, they are unable to imagine their way into the feelings of others because they lack a genuine sense of connection to a larger community. Cooper acknowledges that his generalization does not apply to all students, and he stresses that “students are not to blame for the crisis of self-enclosure. They are its victims” (p. 10). But, sounding a note that can be heard throughout the first half of the book, he laments students' self-absorption and careerism.

The alternative to moral self-enclosure is idealism, a hopeful vision of a more just society in the future and a personal commitment to making it real. Drawing on the work of Erik Erikson, Robert Coles, Lawrence Kohlberg, and Carol Gilligan, Cooper explains the role of idealism in moral development. It is, he writes, “a crucial component in a young person’s necessary, natural, and humane conflict with the status quo …central to identity formation and indispensable to negotiating succeeding stages of the life cycle” (pp. 6-7). Of the goals a university might aspire to, he suggests, none is more important than...
students’ moral maturation, which entails recognizing their own power and responsibility to make the world a better place.

**The Crises of the Humanities**

Cooper’s hopes for students’ moral development are embedded in his understanding of what a liberal education can and should be. His ideal of liberal education, complex and carefully considered, is articulated in the 1998 essay “The Four Seasons of Liberal Learning”:

A liberal arts education concerns more the context of a learning experience than the content of a curriculum…A liberal education trains and shapes an individual’s attitude toward learning itself. A liberal education prepares one to grapple with the crises of distraction and disinterest that become the real adversaries of adult life and citizenship in a consumer society and an information age. The liberal arts disciplines teach self-education and establish patterns of lifelong learning… A liberal education teaches us how to dig out what we need to know, and how to assess what’s worth knowing, from the blizzard of irrelevant trivia and disinformation that constantly surround us. A liberal education teaches us to think for ourselves, independent of the opinions of others, yet at the same time squaring our own needs and aims in the world with the aspirations of others.” (pp. 65-66)

To achieve this ideal, we look especially to the humanities. For the most part, Cooper asserts, they fail—and they fail because humanities scholars have lost their way.

The humanities have been in crisis for more than forty years. The earmarks of crisis are well documented. Of foundation grants awarded, less than 2% go to projects in the humanities. The percentage of undergraduates who major in English, foreign languages, history, or philosophy has declined from a 1967 high of 17.2% of all graduates to today’s paltry 6.9% (American Academy of Arts and Sciences, 2014). While young scholars continue to earn PhDs in these fields, they graduate to face a dismal job market, especially if they hope to join the professoriate. Focusing for a moment on English—Cooper’s field and my own, and in many ways the humanities’ canary in the coal mine—the most compelling evidence of crisis is the ever-growing reliance on contingent faculty. Of lower-division literature courses, approximately 40% are taught by contingent faculty; of composition courses, the portion climbs to 70%. (2007 ADE Ad Hoc Committee on Staffing, 2008). Whatever their qualifications, contingent faculty typically teach for substandard salaries, without benefits, and without security of employment. To my mind, the declining number of majors, the oversupply of graduate degrees, and exploitative labor practices constitute the core crises of the humanities; the labor practices, in particular, indicate a betrayal of ethical principles one might expect a liberal education to instill.

The most autobiographical of Cooper’s essays, “Bus Rides and Forks in the Road: The Making of a Public Scholar,” begins with his memory of “finishing graduate work during the job market freeze-out in the late 1970s” when, to gain any academic employment, he “cobbled together” three part-time teaching jobs (p. 83). He understands the perils of employment off the tenure track. But except for some remarks on his own case, the material crisis of the humanities has scant presence in Cooper’s reflections on the profession. Instead, Cooper turns his attention to a crisis in postmodern humanities scholarship.

Cooper’s critique of postmodern theory is probably the most controversial argument in the book. Oddly, the volume’s editors have included a foreword by Julie Ellison, who distances herself from Cooper’s position, treating it as something of a curiosity or the “cranky” complaint of an old-timer. But it deserves to be taken seriously. Cooper argues that if students, and the general public, dismiss the humanities, it is not (or not only) because humanities courses look like a detour on the path to employment. Rather, it is because humanities scholars have made themselves irrelevant to the public world. Of the ideas associated with postmodernism, Cooper focuses on three: moral relativism, which unsets the ground on which idealism stands; distrust of any principle or language extant in our social world because principles and language are corrupted by; and unavoidably implicit in, current power relationships; and the notion, at the heart of cultural studies, that a key purpose of scholarship is to analyze artifacts of the culture to show how they reflect and perpetuate hegemonic value systems including racism, sexism, class bias, and consumerism.

Cooper’s objections to this line of thought echo those of Richard Rorty; in particular, he cites Rorty’s 1991 article, “Intellectuals in Politics.” Rorty’s thesis is that among postmodern intellectuals, cultural criticism substitutes for real political action. Intellectuals crank up the critique machine, and then their work is done; they “no longer hope to do what they once hoped to do: use the mechanisms of democratic government to help prevent the rich from ripping off the poor, the strong from trampling on the weak” (p. 490). Worse, Rorty suggests, postmodern professors teach their students the habit of inaction:

The more these thinkers tell their students that the root cause of the suffering they see around them is “Western technological thinking” or “phallogocentrism” or “liberal individualism” rather than old-fashioned greed and selfishness,
the more likely those students are to think that by detecting sexism in a soap opera ... they are striking a blow for human freedom. (p. 490)

Rorty sees students limiting their “political” activity to the tiny world of academic politics, developing strong opinions about the content of the college curriculum but having little to say about poverty, violence, or injustice.

Cooper worries that students are disinclined to take any action at all. They may, as Rorty suggests, be satisfied with spotting hegemonic discourses. Or, taught to be skeptical of all language, they may be unwilling even to take a stand. In the book’s final essay, written in 2013, Cooper summarizes his concern for the influence of postmodern theory on instruction in the humanities:

Our students, to be sure, can benefit greatly from the political perspectives and critical insights introduced by contemporary cultural studies. Students need to know, for example, how to see through glib ideologies that cloak the trappings of abusive power and the maintenance of the political status quo. The problem, however, is that students might be overwhelmed by the ubiquitous metaphor of hegemony and led to the unfortunate conclusion that powerlessness is either inevitable or, worse, virtuous or that individual efficacy and agency are nothing more than socially constructed ideas used to enforce a discredited ideology. (p. 160)

The challenge before our students, he stresses, is not just to recognize oppressive discourse but to clarify their own convictions, to claim agency, to challenge injustice through collective action. “This calls on us to shift the ethical center of gravity in our teaching and scholarship from ‘The Other’ to one another” (p. 161; emphasis in original).

The Importance of Teaching

When Cooper describes himself as being out of step with prevailing intellectual currents, he is referring mostly to his dispute with those tenets of postmodern thought that he sees as disempowering. But he is also at odds with the academy’s reward system. He makes the familiar observation that postmodern theorists write in dense, difficult language (“theoretical mumbo jumbo”) accessible only to others with similar academic backgrounds. And this is all they need to do as long as their chief pursuit is publication in academic journals. Cooper is troubled by the “academic professionalism” that “regards us, and, by extension, trains us to regard ourselves” in terms of such a narrow mission (p. 75). He is, in short, out of step with a profession that values highly specialized scholarship over teaching. Cooper cares more for “the great gift of guiding others that leads to self-completion” (p. 76).

One of the pleasures of reading Learning in the Plural is the opportunity to see how Cooper’s philosophical commitments—to finding personal fulfillment in work; to supporting students’ moral development; to bringing academic work into the service of the public—take shape on the ground, in programs, and classes. With his colleagues at Michigan State University (MSU), Cooper has been a leader in demonstrating how the field of English, particularly writing and rhetoric, can fruitfully engage in public activity. In a 1998 essay, “Reading, Writing, and Reflection,” he makes a case for reflective thinking as “the very ground from which knowledge and belief spring” (p. 40). This essay appeared in two landmark service-learning resources: Academic Service-Learning: A Pedagogy of Action and Reflection, edited by Rhoads and Howard, and The Campus Compact Toolkit. Aimed at service-learning educators, it explains Dewey’s theory of reflection, illustrates reflective thinking in action in one student’s critical incident journal, shows how the student’s teacher steered him toward deeper, more critical thinking, and recommends best practices in designing reflective activities.

Ten years later, “Four Seasons of Deliberative Learning” documents a remarkable array of curricular innovations blending community-based work with instruction in writing and rhetoric. In the late 1990s, MSU integrated service-learning into first-year composition courses, following the Stanford model of placing student writers in community-based organizations. The program at MSU flourished: by 2008, Public Life in America enrolled almost 300 students per year (p. 124). Soon afterwards, influenced by his participation in a Kettering Foundation work group studying public deliberation, Cooper designed courses to teach non-adversarial rhetorical strategies, promoting dialogue rather than win-or-lose debate. In a course positioned as a gateway to the writing major, students both studied and practiced public deliberation; in a senior-level seminar, students organized, facilitated, and reflected on deliberative discussions of contested issues. Cooper’s descriptions of these courses are detailed enough to guide teachers with similar objectives, and the essay ends with notes directing the reader to a comprehensive curriculum-development manual for service-learning writing courses and to the website of the National Issues Forum, which posts a wealth of materials about public deliberation.

Shifting Perspectives

In the opening paragraph of “Four Seasons,” Cooper writes:
This essay is partly a description of some of the techniques I tried out...partly a lab report on the outcomes of the experiments I conducted, and partly a travelogue about the highs and lows of the journey—the exhilarating discoveries I made, the company I kept, as well as the wrong turns I took and jams I got into. (p. 123)

The essay is, in other words, a reflection on Cooper’s experiences. Like other reflections, it marks an advance in the writer’s thinking. In the later essays, *Learning in the Plural* takes on a more positive, hopeful tone—a result, it seems, of Cooper’s absorption in curricular and pedagogical work, his enthusiasm for dialogic deliberation, and his shifting professional allegiances as he identifies less with humanities scholars wrangling over critical theory and more with service-learning educators.

*From “What’s the Matter with Kids Today?” to “The Kids are All Right”*

The shift is most evident when Cooper writes about his students. Several of the early essays lament the apathy, cynicism, and “moral self-enclosure” of students in the 1980s and 90s. Cooper recalls the college years of his own generation, when students thought they (we) could make a difference and when we did, in fact, end a war and participate in transformative social movements. Not surprisingly, the contrast takes on a dispirited tone. However, Cooper gives serious attention to the argument, made in *The New Student Politics: The Wingspread Statement on Civic Engagement* (Long, 2001), that students disillusioned with conventional political institutions are not necessarily disengaged but have chosen, through community service, a different sort of political action. Cooper concludes that students’ attitudes continue to be characterized by “cynicism, skepticism, pessimism, and an outright rejection of politics-as-usual” (p. 108). But it doesn’t follow that students are “civically disengaged or ethically disoriented” (p. 108). There is room for hope, and Cooper identifies specific steps teachers can take to strengthen the bridge from community service to conventional political action.

Most service-learning teachers, I suspect, have seen the power of action to dispel despair. Few teaching activities are as satisfying as facilitating a successful service-learning project in which students make a genuine contribution to the community, meet inspiring role models in community partners, gain a real-world critical perspective on course readings, and achieve a sense of their own agency. This kind of teaching engenders faith in students and the confidence to engage in democratic pedagogy. Speaking specifically of his experience with deliberative pedagogy, Cooper writes:

I no longer considered myself a “teacher” in the conventional sense...Rather, I became an architect of my students’ learning experiences or maybe a midwife of their practices of becoming better writers and active citizens—or, perhaps more to the point, something like a forum moderator. In a public forum, successful deliberation is often inversely related to the visibility and presence—indeed, the knowledge and issue expertise—of the moderator. The same applies to a teacher in a deliberative classroom: you spend a great deal of creative intellectual energy listening to students and learning to get out of their way so they can take ownership of the subject...(pp. 129-30)

Cooper’s continuing worries about students in general are balanced by his visible respect for the students in his classes.

*Is There Hope for the Humanities?*

Cooper is admirably forthcoming in describing his professional renewal as a service-learning teacher and scholar:

At the risk of overstatement, I have to say that community-responsive teaching initiatives and my gradual retooling as a public scholar made me whole...[They] put Humpty Dumpty back together again by converging the separate pathways of scholarship, teaching, and professional service into the thoroughfare of an integrated professional and personal life. (p. 96)

But the questions he raises are broader than that, extending beyond his own case to the future of his discipline. In 2002, he wrote that his new professional direction restored his hope that the humanities could play a public role, “a means of inviting citizens to be interpreters of their own lives while bringing critical resources like analysis, reflection, deliberation, and ethical action to bear on social and cultural renewal” (p. 96).

In the collection’s final essay, dated 2013, he is not so sure. The essay’s title asks the key question: “Can Civic Engagement Rescue the Humanities?” Elsewhere, Cooper reframes the question a bit: “Have core humanities disciplines...earned a legitimate place at the institutional table where civic engagement and social responsibility are subjects of so much spirited conversation” (pp. 152-53)? He answers with a “reluctant no” and a “qualified yes.”

Cooper’s work is provocative. His questions have prompted me to consider my own answers, shaped by my own position, values, and beliefs. While I, too, would ultimately answer both no and yes, I would want to begin by disaggregating “the humanities.” Some of the humanities disciplines—academic philosophy, literary theory—may always be content to
operate at stratospheric levels of abstraction, producing “hyperspecialized scholarship … unintelligible to a literate public” (p. 161). They may not be entitled to, or much interested in, a place at the table where we discuss the application of knowledge to the public good. Other disciplines—writing, rhetoric, the arts—have been, and will probably continue to be, more amenable to public, progressive action. If we focus on those areas of the humanities with the most promise for civic engagement, it becomes easy to imagine productive partnerships between the academy and the community—all the easier to imagine when pioneers like David Cooper have given us models.

Regrettably, these disciplines are highly vulnerable to the material pressures that beset higher education: the decline in state funding, the corporatization of the administrative structure, and the concomitant casualization of the academic workforce. Today, the toughest question is whether the faculty, more than half of whom now work in contingent positions, will have the stability and the resources to realize the potential of engaged teaching and scholarship.

Nevertheless, there is reason to hope that the humanities—or at least some of what we include in that category—can indeed establish their value in producing useful knowledge. As Cooper acknowledges in his final essay, even cultural studies, the variety of scholarship he finds most disengaged and disappointing, is not, theoretically, necessarily disengaged. Granted, a politicized critique of cultural life—of art, literature, technology, popular culture—certainly may substitute for genuine political action, and the idea of a hegemonic ideology continually reinforcing the status quo certainly may lead to a sense of powerlessness. But it doesn’t have to. The tools of critical analysis are powerful. And, as composition scholar Peter Elbow has observed, “life is long and college is short.” If the ideal of integrating analysis and relevant action in a single course is not met, students may still wield the tools of cultural analysis in other settings, throughout their lives, when their sense of justice moves them to action.

The Power of Personal Narrative

Recalling his participation in public deliberations, Cooper writes, “I am always amazed at how powerful personal stories can be” (p. 144). Learning in the Plural can’t be described as a personal story; nobody would mistake the book for a memoir. But it taps into the power of the personal, the power of narrative to recreate experiences for the reader and to raise questions about the implications of events. He shares narratives that he has found thought-provoking—a scene from A Raisin in the Sun, snatches of dialogue from a television program here and a film there. And he tells stories about his bus rides across Providence, Rhode Island when he taught at three schools serving students of different social classes; the students on his campus who built a shantytown to highlight racism and homelessness, quickly followed by an anti-shantytown protesting liberal activism; classroom exchanges as he and his students discussed poems or articles they’d read together.

Throughout his journey as a scholar and educator, Cooper reflects on his experience: he works with students and colleagues, he witnesses events on campus and in the wider world, and he holds these experiences up to the light of his knowledge and values to see what he can learn. His contribution in Learning in the Plural is to bring readers along on the journey.

References


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