This chapter argues that liberal learning can be transformative and foster students’ intellectual and ethical development only if we consider its development underpinnings and pedagogic strategies that illustrate that the skills of academic inquiry are the skills of personal development.

Setting the Stage for Identity, Learning, and the Liberal Arts

Ned Scott Laff

We debate continually about liberal education and the nature of liberal learning. We argue over the nature of the curriculum: Should it be grounded in the “canon?” Should it be inclusive? Should it be some mixture of both? Or should we change our focus altogether, not concentrating on specific courses but on learning outcomes that would characterize a liberally educated person? But then, we debate what learning outcomes would characterize a liberally educated person: Should outcomes focus on how students examine multiple interpretive possibilities? Or on how students understand how our sense of human values and justice are influenced by culture, historical events, and social forces? Or on how students acquire a technical and critical vocabulary to assess aesthetic influences? Or how students identify the critical questions of truth, morality, or social justice and are able to examine them from a philosophic or theological perspective? This line of inquiry leads to yet more questions: Which are the critical questions students should engage? Which narrative gives us our sense of culture and social forces? Which vocabulary should we choose? All that we seem to agree on is that no one curricular outline or proposal of liberal education can fit the contours of the diverse educational landscapes that colleges and universities present.

We also debate about the claims we make for liberal education. We claim that if our students engage liberal studies they will be challenged to engage issues of social justice, race and gender, and civic responsibilities. We claim that through their courses in liberal studies students will cultivate humanistic values, understand themselves better within the diversity of the
global community, and develop a more empathetic consideration of their relationships with others. Fundamentally, we claim that through liberal studies students will learn to think about their lives in light of the texts we teach. And we claim that in doing so, liberal studies will inform our students’ ethical, moral, and intellectual development, inspire a penchant for civic engagement, and instill in our students the habits of lifelong learning. Or so we hope.

While we have maintained a faith in the transformative nature of the liberal arts, that faith is challenged when we cannot say for certain that we are sure there is a relationship between the relevance we perceive in what we teach and the lives our students lead. Our intuitive sense based on anecdotal information leads us to argue that liberal education in fact does meet these claims, does in fact affect our students’ cognitive and affective development, in large part because we reflect on how our own experiences with liberal education have affected our own lives. But we must be careful about our intuition. It can lead us to a false consensus. What may be the case for us simply may not be the case for our students. We may be right to be suspect of the claims we make about liberal studies. Consider two recent arguments debating the role of liberal studies: Martha Nussbaum’s *Cultivating Humanity* (1997) and Jerry Graff’s *Clueless in Academe* (2003), discussed below.

**A Classical Defense of the “New” Liberal Studies**

In *Cultivating Humanity* (1997), Nussbaum argues that the postmodern liberal-studies landscape is rooted in the classical Socratic enterprise. She maintains that it is from the Stoics and their applications of Socratic principles in designing educational institutions that “we derive our modern conception of liberal education” (p. 28). Nussbaum claims that our belief that liberal education challenges “the mind to take charge of its own thought” is Socratic in origin (p. 28). She identifies four claims about the Socratic basis of liberal education that characterize our views: it should be a part of every individual’s self-realization; it should be suited to students’ circumstances and context; it should be pluralistic, concerned with a variety of norms and traditions; and it should ensure that books do not become authorities but are themselves both examples of what “excellent thinking is like” and subject to critical inquiry (pp. 30–34).

With this as her contextual background, Nussbaum argues forcefully that the postmodern landscape of liberal studies is simply the latest iteration of the Socratic enterprise. Challenging critics such as Allan Bloom, Nussbaum claims that critical scrutiny of our cultural traditions and literary canon does not lead to cultural relativism, but rather leads to what can be defended rationally. For Nussbaum, the key to the postmodern liberal studies curriculum rests in the Socratic ideal of “living the examined life.” Global studies, she asserts, finds its roots in Diogenes’s self-description as a “citizen of the world” and “his image of the kosmopolites, or world citizen”
Cultural and literary studies find their roots in Marcus Aurelius’s insistence that we develop in ourselves “a capacity for sympathetic imagination that will enable us to comprehend the motives and choices of people different from ourselves” (p. 85). Gender studies, based in Foucault’s claim of sexuality as a social construct, is engaged, according to Nussbaum, in studying “the history and variety of human sexuality” (p. 225) and is linked to Socrates and his goal of living the examined life. Thus, the postmodern landscape is simply the next culturally progressive step in a tradition of liberal learning laid down from Socrates to Plato and Aristotle and actualized by Seneca and the Stoics.

As students take courses in what Nussbaum coins the “‘New’ Liberal Education,” they will become inclined to “question, probe, and inquire” (p. 147). As important, students will be given a general preparation for citizenship locally, nationally, and globally. This, for Nussbaum, is a critical outcome. The New Liberal Education—at once Socratic and postmodern—cultivates our humanity by encouraging our students to understand their traditions and history, respect and appreciate the traditions and histories of others, and learn to move from the differences to a more pluralistic and mutual understanding. This lays the groundwork for what Nussbaum calls a “democratic culture that is truly deliberative and reflective, rather than simply a collision of unexamined preferences” (p. 294). Students will become characterized as liberal learners, she asserts, because from their course work they will take on the habits of critical self-examination; they will be liberated from habits of thinking and blindly accepting customs, traditions, and ideas without critically examining them; and they will empathize with others. By infusing the Socratic enterprise into the postmodern liberal-education landscape, Nussbaum believes, we establish a norm for our students’ liberal learning and their citizenship.

Liberal Studies as Argument

Jerry Graff takes a different approach to the role liberal studies can play in students’ lives in *Clueless in Academe* (2003). As Graff sees it, becoming liberally educated “has more to do with thinking and talking about subjects or texts in analytic ways than the subjects or text you study” (p. 222). Liberal learning is not grounded in any particular set of books or any particular curriculum. It can come from how we talk about our favorite sports team, the movies we like, or popular magazines and novels we read. Graff is convinced that liberal learning is rooted more in how much we are absorbed by what we read and that that absorption is more important than what we read. Perhaps most important is Graff’s contention that liberal learning is evidenced by how we are able to talk about our absorptions. Liberal learning, then, is about how we are introduced to, engage with, and integrate into our lives what Graff calls the “culture of argument” (p. 23). It is this culture that characterizes what we in the academy do and what liberal learning is. For
Graff, argumentation is central to the academic enterprise and the liberal learning endeavor.

As Graff defines it, the culture of argument is about the “productive disagreements” that characterize how we work (p. 83). Graff contends that as we engage in conversation with other thinkers about ideas, theories, and interpretive analyses, we are forced to explicate our own thinking and assumptions and to look at subtexts and underlying meanings. Leaning on Robert Scholes (1985), Graff claims that through argumentative conversation of views and counterviews we learn “textual power,” that is, how to move from simple perceptions about plots, events, and things (for example, that the film *Saving Private Ryan* is about soldiers in the throes of war) to reflective thematic observations (*Saving Private Ryan* provides a backdrop to explore human frailties, our selfishness, and doubt in moments of choice when we are asked to make personal sacrifices for comrades) (Graff, 2003, p. 181). Because these conversations are both comparative and synthetic, we generate from them new ideas, interpretive strategies, and theories. But liberal learning involves not simply how we read texts in class, but also how we read the underlying “cultural texts.” We can turn to any subject around us (for example, Fox News, charity bracelets, or corporate logos) to see that textual power is also about how we perceive themes and values that are implied rather than stated in these cultural texts. But as important, says Graff, textual power is also about how we think about our relationship to these cultural texts. This, for Graff, is the liberal learning experience.

What makes Graff’s discussion interesting is his claim that students are already unknowing neophytes in the culture of argument. As Graff is keen to point out, when students argue about the merits of their favorite team, hip-hop artists, or whether *Harry Potter* is better than *Lord of the Rings*, “they make claims, counterclaims, and value judgments” (p. 155). They use “rival texts, rival interpretations, and evaluations of texts and rival theories” on why they believe what they do (p. 220). What they often miss, according to Graff, is that their “street conversations” are the makings of the conversations that characterize the intellectual parlor room of academia (p. 158). They miss this because we keep the centrality of argument hidden from them. Graff argues we should pedagogically model how we converse with the critical controversies that make up the conversations in our disciplines, how we judge them, evaluate them, use them as interpretive tools, and synthesize our own positions using them. In doing so, we would introduce students to the vocabularies and the interpretive, evaluative, and rhetorical strategies that characterize the academic enterprise.

At the same time we would sharpen their personal critical lenses, their insights, and their abilities to express themselves cogently. These are the skills of textual power. By engaging students in learning how to use these skills, we open them to a more enhanced learning experience that ranges from the classroom to the workplace, from conversations with their
friends to the exercise of democratic citizenship (p. 86). Through this, Graff contends, students discover their hidden intellectualism and the grounding for their liberal learning.

**Interpreting Our Consensus of Belief**

As should be apparent, I choose Nussbaum and Graff deliberately because each represents a different facet of the debate: Nussbaum arguing about the curriculum that makes up liberal studies and the claims we make for it, and Graff arguing about how we sharpen the claims we make about the skills from liberal studies that our students acquire. Both make claims about the transformative nature of liberal studies, and both ring similar to other debates we have heard before. Like others, both genuinely believe that if they can conjure their configuration by the right kind of incantation it will capture the force and purpose of liberal education and in so doing the minds, hearts, and dispositions of our students. But like others, except for their anecdotal arguments, which are quite appealing, they leave us suspicious. Like others, they are victims of the same flaw—this worked for us. If we can just lay out the steps to follow, our students, following those steps, will take on the habits of the heart that characterize the outcomes of liberal learning.

But our students are not us, and this is a rather critical point. The Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) confirms this insight. Carole Geary Schneider (2004), in reporting on focus groups AAC&U commissioned of college-bound high school seniors and college juniors and seniors conducted by Peter D. Hart Research Associates, notes an intriguing similarity. Students regard as important learning outcomes from liberal learning that stress one’s ability to succeed on one’s own, time-management, strong work habits, self-discipline, and teamwork. Their least-valued outcomes are values, principles, and ethics; tolerance and respect for different cultural backgrounds; expanded cultural and global awareness and sensitivity; and civic responsibility. Schneider points out that, despite our best intentions, we are not succeeding in helping our students become liberally educated.

Our problem in trying to develop an intentional approach to liberal learning may rest in our debates about the curriculum, the canon, and what we characterize as liberal learning. From Boyer to Bloom, from Hirsch to Bennett, we find ourselves transfixed looking for curricular models and identifying the learning outcomes associated with those models that will help us devise the liberal education experience we consider appropriate. We feel that if somehow we can prescribe whatever it is one has to know, then we can guide students’ learning so that they act as members of the liberally educated community. This puts us at risk of falling into a formalism that may very well work against us. To appreciate this situation we need only take a hint from Clifford Geertz’s work, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (1973).
In critiquing ethnography, Geertz argued that a fault lay in the belief that an ethnographer could derive laws that would explain the behavior of people within a culture. As Geertz pointed out, the belief that we could derive the laws of a culture would lead us to believe as well that we could write out “systematical rules . . . which, if followed, would make it possible . . . to operate, to pass . . . for a native” (p. 11). But as Geertz pointed out, the questions then arise as to which analysis reflects what a people really think and whether any analyses may only be clever, logical imitations that fail to grasp the “imaginative universe” within which the acts and behaviors of a people take on “semiotic significance” (p. 11). Instead, Geertz argued, ethnographers should try to interpret and understand how a people structure meaning in order to grasp their cultural semantics.

There is a rough parallel here to our debates about liberal education. We seem to believe that if we can outline systematic curricular rules, these rules should make it possible, if followed, for anyone to pass as a member of the educational community. But this raises the question of whether any particular proposal reflects the educational enterprise. It also raises the question of whether students following these rules engage in learning experiences that affect their intellectual and personal growth or merely simulate and parody what our curricula call for. As Schneider’s AAC&U study seems to indicate, it may unfortunately be the latter.

**From Debate to Conversation**

Lest it appear that I am simply a skeptic of liberal education, I mention here that I, too, have faith that liberal learning can be transformative. But that faith is challenged when we cannot say for certain that there is a relationship between what we perceive in what we teach and the lives our students lead. Debate about the nature of liberal studies curriculum may not be what we need.

Let us suppose for a moment that we can intentionally devise a liberal education experience that seduces our students into a dialogue with important questions of common concern (Bloom, 1987); that leads them to live responsible lives; challenges them to take ethical responsibility for their ideas and actions and to explore the relationship among their learning, their citizenship, and service; and that helps students realize the importance of understanding that we live within historical, cultural, global, and pluralistic contexts. Let us also agree with the AAC&U’s Statement on Liberal Learning (1998) that such learning is not confined to particular fields of study. What matters is that liberal learning has “substantial content, rigorous methodology, and an active engagement with the societal, ethical, and practical implications of our learning” (n.p.).

The claims we make for liberal learning are claims about how it transforms our personal lives and our personal development. What we have found compelling in liberal learning is that it has helped us fundamentally
to think about our identity, our personal growth, and our lives. We have found that liberal learning lets us deal with the unending negotiation and renegotiation of the meaning of experiences to ourselves.

What makes this argument intriguing is that Carol Gilligan (1981), a development theorist, has noted that personal development is similarly rooted in “a continuing interplay of thought and experience” (p. 156). In other words, Gilligan is suggesting that our reflections on our engagement with liberal learning and our reflections on our personal development may have structurally functional similarities. Development revolves around how we learn to think; how we learn to ask questions; and how we come up with solutions, whether it be to the neatly formulated problems of the classroom or the logically messy problems of real life. This is no less true for our students. And this is where we may be compelled to turn to find a way to ground our anecdotal claims about liberal learning.

Those in liberal studies and student development theorists rarely talk with each other. However, such a conversation would illustrate a remarkable commonality that both share. Consider William Perry* (1970), one of the seminal thinkers in student development theory. As Perry has argued, how students meet the challenges they encounter in their academic work, co-curricular activities, and social life are tied to the ways they perceive their world, understand it, and generate values. The confrontation with the pluralism of values becomes inescapable and one of the purposes of the college experience is to present students with the questions we have continually raised for ourselves and which we have spent our history, according to Perry, “trying to resolve, rephrase, and learn to live with” (p. 33). For Perry, college affords students the opportunity to learn to question their own lines of reasoning to the challenges each faces in their own particular ways, and to test their assumptions and their reasoning against the reasoning of others. This, for Perry, is the characteristic of a liberally educated individual—a personal commitment to resist leading an unexamined life.

Perry suggests that the skills of academic inquiry and personal development overlap and reveal a common pattern: “Students’ restructuring in their view of the world is characteristic of the evolution of scientific theory (Kuhn, 1970). Strangely enough, we have found no explicit description of this kind of transformation as a phenomenon in human personal development. As a strategy of growth it would deserve a prominent place, not only in a theory of cognitive development but also in consideration of emotional maturation and the formation of identity” (p. 110).

To appreciate what Perry is claiming, we need only compare the basic concepts from developmental theory—those of Perry himself—and T.S. Kuhn’s thoughts in The Structure of Scientific Revolutions (1970), a work that has proved seminal across the liberal arts disciplines. We would find the structural similarities to be striking. In fact, we would discover, as Perry hinted, that the processes are the same.
The Perry-Kuhn Conversation

Perry’s concern is to describe and understand the “evolution in students’ interpretation of their lives” that consists of their progression through “certain forms [or structures] in which the students construe their experience” (Perry, 1970, p. 1). By “forms” or “structures,” Perry means the relatively stable relations of “assumptions and expectations a person holds at any given time” by which she or he construes experience (p. 42). Development theorists are used to discussing the characteristic attribute of their forms, such as dualism, relativism, and so on. But it is important for us to also consider that these forms function as personal theories. This specificity becomes more explicit with the help of Kuhn.

Perry’s forms satisfy the same criteria Kuhn (1970) uses to describe paradigms. A paradigm is an accepted pattern of methodological beliefs that affect how we see, interpret, and evaluate experience and how we articulate and solve problems. Paradigms help us make sense of experience because they appear to reveal the nature of things; they allow us to predict in an attempt to bring our assumptions and expectations closer to the nature of things; and they let us further articulate our understanding by helping us explore and interpret new experience.

Kuhn is quick to point out, however, that paradigms are open-ended, leaving problems to be solved and many facts and events we confront through the paradigm unexplained. Normally, work through the paradigm is cumulative, extending the scope and precision of our understanding by assimilating the solutions, problems, and new data into the parameters of the paradigm and, at the same time, adjusting the paradigm to account for things that do not quite fit. Research under the paradigm is a “particularly effective way of inducing paradigm change” (Kuhn, 1970, p. 52). Paradigm-based research is interactive and repeatedly brings up new and unsuspected phenomena—anomalies—that cannot be assimilated into the paradigm. Anomalies appear only against the background provided by the paradigm’s context, which provides us a sense that “nature has somehow violated the paradigm-induced expectations that govern normal science” (pp. 52–53). The perception of anomalies leads to a “crisis,” a failure of the normal problem-solving activities of the paradigm.

These points of crisis are critical because they open up the difficulties in the paradigm-nature fit. Kuhn explains that crises challenge previously held standard beliefs and procedures along with stereotypes; they call into question the paradigm’s explicit and fundamental generalizations. Faced with a breakdown, normal science seeks a transition to a new paradigm, a reconstruction that changes some of the field’s generalizations, methods, and applications by discarding some previously standard practices and replacing them with others. These revolutionary paradigm shifts, in turn, affect changes in worldview. Through the new paradigm we see old terms, concepts, and events in different relationship to one another. The shift
opens up a wider range of phenomena, providing greater precision for explanation and providing better ways of perceiving and acting in the world.

The course of normal science is an interpretive enterprise articulated through paradigms. And normal science leads to acceptance of paradigms, the recognition of anomalies, and to crises. The successive transition from one paradigm to another, as Kuhn argues, is the normal developmental pattern. And transition is driven by scientific method.

**Kuhn’s Structure of Scientific Revolutions.** The following is my outline of Kuhn’s scheme.

**Paradigm:** An accepted pattern of theoretical and methodological beliefs that affect how we see, interpret, and evaluate; how we make sense of things and solve problems; and how we explore and interpret new experiences.

**Open-Endedness:** Paradigms extend the scope of our understanding, but they also bring up problems and facts that the paradigm can neither solve nor explain.

**Anomalies:** New and unsuspected phenomena are anomalies. They appear only against the background of the paradigm, which provided the context that “nature” has somehow violated the paradigm-induced expectations.

**Crisis:** When significant anomalies develop they point out the failure of the normal problem-solving activities of the paradigm, challenging the beliefs and generalizations of the paradigm.

**Restructuring or New Paradigm Development:** Faced with a breakdown, “science” seeks a transition to a new paradigm, a restructuring that changes some of the generalizations, methods, and applications. This “paradigm shift” affects changes in worldview, lets us see old terms, concepts, things, and events in different relationships to each other, and re-educates our ways of perceiving and acting in the world.

Note: This is an ongoing activity.

We can infer from Kuhn that Perry’s “forms of expectancies” (p. 42) are personal paradigms and that Perry is also trying to provide a sense of the dynamics of personal paradigm shift, left largely inferential behind the static descriptions of developmental positions. Meaning emerges as we interact through our personal paradigms with the diversity of real-world experiences. Our forms of expectancies extend through our thoughts, feelings, actions, and interactions—they are our personal methodologies. They help us discover and expand our world by letting us meet the challenges of diversity with a minimum of incongruity. They provide us with a coherent view of the world as long as we can assimilate the consequences of our interactions by means of selection, simplification, and sometimes slanted interpretation.

Our forms (personal paradigms) are also open-ended because we find they do not always work. They cause us to misinterpret and to make mistakes.
These mistakes raise incongruities and uncertainties between the personal paradigm-experience fit, which challenge us to come to grips with the limits of our personal paradigms. In turn, we are challenged to consider whether the assumptions underlying our personal paradigm-induced expectations give us a good working sense of how things are.

These incongruities are anomalies, and they jolt our picture of the world. Their build-up leads to crisis and impels us to challenge, reorganize, and sometimes dissolve established beliefs. Crisis leads us to challenge stereotypic thinking and unexamined commitments. Crisis demands new decisions and requires reconstruction of the old paradigmatic structure to resolve the crises and to help us reinterpret our interactions. The transitional process by which we create new forms of expectancy leads to a revolutionary shift in our personal paradigms and better ways of perceiving and acting in the world.

**Perry’s “Forms” of Intellectual and Ethical Development.** Here is my outline of Perry’s concept of “forms.”

**Forms of Expectancies:** These are relatively stable assumptions and expectations a person holds at any given time by which she or he construes and makes sense of experiences, providing a coherent view of the world.

**Open-Endedness:** Interaction, the diversity of real-world experience, raises problems with the fit between a “form of expectancy” and experience.

**Mistakes and Misinterpretations:** Mistakes arise because a form does not account for new, different, or unexpected experiences, challenging the reliability of the form.

**Crisis:** When mistakes reach a certain level we are challenged to consider that our assumptions and the expectancies that underlie our forms may not be giving us a good working sense of how things are, jolting our picture of the world and raising questions about whether our form is adequate.

**Reorganization and Reconstruction:** Crisis leads us to reconstruct our form to take into consideration the old form and accommodate for the mistakes. This changes our worldview, allowing us to reinterpret our interactions, resolve the problem with the form-experience fit, and provide a better way of perceiving and acting in the world.

Note: This is an on-going process.

**The Skills of Liberal Learning as the Skills of Personal Development**

Granted, I have abbreviated much. But enough is outlined to suggest that Kuhn and Perry are talking about the same things—the pattern of revolutionary restructuring in the ways we view and interact in the world. For Kuhn, the emphasis is on the paradigms underlying fields of study;
for Perry, the emphasis is on students, the evolution of their personal paradigms, and how they create personal meaning.

**Academic Inquiry as Personal Development.** The following schematic comparison illustrates the Perry-Kuhn convergence.

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<th>Personal Development:</th>
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<td>Theory Building (Kuhn)</td>
<td>Student Development Theory (Perry)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Paradigm</td>
<td>Form of Expectancy</td>
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<td>Open-Endedness</td>
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<td>Anomalies</td>
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<td>Reorganization or Create New Form</td>
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<td>Growth in Knowledge</td>
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The same process of transition seems to underlie both. As Perry notes, “Students conceptualize more frequently in periods of . . . confrontation with incongruity, and when a new higher order concept has proved itself generally viable, it tends to embed itself into the new perception of ‘how things are’ until dislodged by some fresh incongruity” (p. 93).

Developmental transitions may very well be based in what we might readily describe as the personal research activities from which all paradigms are created. The transitional process underlying developmental theory is common to liberal learning. These skills of personal research—raising questions, seeking alternative views, discovering, interpreting, hypothesizing, and evaluating—are productive critical thinking skills which, perhaps not so surprisingly, are the skills we talk of in liberal learning. This congruence provides us with a ground to claim that the skills of academic inquiry are the skills of personal development.

Part of our solution, then, in helping students feel the immediacy of the relationship between their liberal education experiences and their lives is helping them experience in real ways that the problems they are assigned and work through in their classes are like other problems they face daily. This is no less than helping students demonstrate for themselves how to perceive the analogy between how we think in class and how “we understand experience metaphorically when we use the gestalt from one domain of experience to give us insight into another domain” (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980, p. 230). The Perry-Kuhn conversation contextualizes our claims that liberal education is transformative and provides a ground for general problem solving. The conversation gives us grounds to argue that liberal education is no less than helping students master the critical skills for their own personal paradigmatic shifts and development.
The Imaginative Experiment

The context of the Perry-Kuhn conversation, then, provides us insight into how liberal studies can catalyze our students’ evolution in the way they interpret their world and themselves within it. The underlying common thread in this conversation is how we make sense of our interaction with the incongruities of experience. For Kuhn it is our search for understanding phenomena and events; for Perry it is in understanding ourselves as we interact within the world we live in. What drives both is how we use the parameters of liberal learning—both content and skills—to make sense of our contextual encounters.

On one level, the Perry-Kuhn context speaks to the claims made by Jerry Graff that I have outlined above. The distinction between the skills of academic inquiry and the skills we use every day to make sense of things may not be great, if different at all. Consider, for example, basic rhetorical modes such as comparison and contrast, description, evaluation, or definition. Rhetorical modes are not simply compositional strategies. We use these rhetorical strategies in everyday conversation, and we also use them to make sense of things—our likes and dislikes, what we value, and how we explain the ideas and things that are important to us and shape who we are. They are part and parcel of our educational and personal critical thinking skills. What liberal learning affords is an opportunity to pull out these tacit skills and focus on how we understand them and how we use them. In a very real sense, through liberal learning, as Graff argues, when we “let students in on the secret that intellectual writing and discussions are extensions of their normal conversational practices” we can begin to help students put the skills of liberal learning into conversation with their lives (Graff, 2003, p. 58). The same is true for other critical thinking skills embedded across liberal education disciplines.

On another level, Perry talks about nothing less than students assuming responsibility to examine their “personal commitments in a relative world” (p. 34). As Perry puts it, what is required for students, and us, to assume this responsibility is a “capacity for detachment” (p. 35). We must be able to stand back from our lives, have a good look at ourselves as we interact, critically examine our interactions, and then go back into our lives with a new sense of our own personal responsibilities to make meaningful sense these interactions. Perry argues that this act of standing back “is forced” in liberal education “by the impact of pluralism of values and points of view” (p. 35). This argument rings to the claims made by Martha Nussbaum. Perry explicates the developmental underpinnings that can justify Nussbaum’s argument that the Socratic enterprise grounds the new liberal education. Like Perry, Nussbaum argues that we do not “cultivate our own humanity” without critically examining our own traditions within a pluralistic context” (Nussbaum, 1997, p. 295). Making the Socratic argument of the new liberal education part of
our students’ lives, as Nussbaum sees it, challenges both those who argue against simply acculturating our students into the conventions and traditions of Western culture and those who argue about the threat that our students will become uncritical moral relativists. Students will be challenged to rethink their own views and take ownership of their choices, beliefs, and values.

The Perry-Kuhn conversation gives warrant to our claims that the process and content of liberal studies can challenge our students’ understanding of the world they believe they know, charge students’ intellectual and narrative imaginations, and provide a virtual context for them to interact with experiences they normally may never have within a developmental context. It gives us warrant to believe that liberal education can be transformative because our students encounter incongruities of experience that liberal studies afford, creating “mistakes,” “anomalies,” and “crises” that catalyze the nature of liberal learning and personal development. In other words, these skills of academic inquiry as skills of personal development lay bare that intellectual and personal development are part and parcel of the same meaning-making process; they sit on the same continuum. What is intriguing is that we do recognize in this that the fundamentals of academic inquiry, whether we call it “scientific method” or simply “scholarly research,” work across the continuum. Louise Rosenblatt (1995) has argued this point in Literature as Exploration. Liberal education, characterized by the Kuhn-Perry conversation, sets the ground for what Rosenblatt has called the “imaginative experimentation” (p. 190) that can drive students’ developmental encounters.

Rosenblatt believes that the “vicarious experiences” afforded by literature in fact lead to an “enlargement” of students’ overall life experiences (p. 190). As Rosenblatt argues, “the ability to picture oneself in a variety of situations and to envisage alternative modes of behavior and their consequences” are the things that characterize the wisdom gained from literary studies (p. 190). For Rosenblatt, the reader’s life situations are not unique or significantly different from those in the stories and poetry they read, and so their life experiences provide at least minimal parallels to understanding and empathizing with the others they meet through their reading—adolescents struggling to achieve a new sense of themselves; couples living through the fuzzy and oftentimes confusing dynamics of relationships; men and women trying to find meaning, recognition, and belief in an indifferent world; the ongoing struggle with sexual identity, racial equality and dignity, and gender roles. These and much more provide a means for readers to vicariously experience another’s life, another’s emotions, and try these out against the context of their own life. Rosenblatt argues that these vicarious experiences let students experience problems apart from themselves and help them “to think and feel more clearly about them” (p. 191). This is no less than Perry’s “capacity for detachment” (p. 35).
Liberal Learning and the Narrative Imagination

Rosenblatt takes this thinking a few steps further. By charging students’ narrative imaginations, we provide them the opportunity to “go through a process of imaginative trial and error, trying out different modes of behavior and working our their probable effects” (p. 190). For Rosenblatt, this is imaginative experimenting: “We can live different types of lives; we can anticipate future periods in our own life; we can participate in different social settings; we can try out solutions to personal problems. We are able to apprehend the practical and emotional results, the reactions of others, the social praise or blame that may flow from such conduct” (p. 190).

Rosenblatt’s point here is grounded in our common belief that we develop a better understanding of our world and ourselves within it by looking at and reflecting on the personal and social expressions and attitudes of others. Literature provides an imaginative experimental context in which students encounter open-endedness, mistakes, crisis, and rethinking within the plots they engage and the characters they encounter. And this, Rosenblatt argues, can lead to personal growth. The skills of literary study that provide students the tools to evaluate the works they read and their reading responses to them also provide students with the skills they need to reflect upon their “reading responses” to their own interactions within the communities they live in and the realities we construct socially.

Literary study is but one area within the liberal arts landscape for imaginative experimenting with the behaviors, social attitudes, concepts of standards and ideals, and social relationships reflective of the cultural heterogeneity in which we live. It does not take much of an analogic leap to see how we can extend Rosenblatt’s idea of the imaginative experiment across liberal studies. Each discipline within the liberal arts, in its own way, puts in front of students problems and situations that, to play off Rosenblatt, provide an imaginative experimental encounter that holds the potential to challenge how students understand the meaning they create of their interactive experiences. By playing off Rosenblatt’s cue, students can “experience” the needs and problems of different social groups; “experience” the workings of political and social actions and theories of those removed from their daily lives; or “try on” alternative philosophies, patterns of behavior, or spiritual beliefs. This imaginative experimenting brings together the different ways disciplines solve problems and reflect. This process holds promise to help students experience the personal values embedded when their personal paradigms are challenged through liberal learning. And this makes all the more sense within the context of the Perry-Kuhn conversation.

From Composite View to a Pedagogical Direction

We now have many of the pieces to sketch a composite of sorts from which we can pragmatically argue and ground our anecdotal sense that liberal learning can be transformative. We can now argue that the skills of academic
inquiry that students learn and use that underlie liberal study are similar to, if not the same as, the skills they use for their personal intellectual and ethical development. The areas of study that make up liberal learning, we can argue metaphorically, provide and expand students’ interactive encounters with the communities they live in locally, nationally, and globally. We can argue that how liberal learning helps students understand the ways we socially construct meaning is similar to, if not the same as, the ways students learn to understand how they construct their personal meanings and their personal paradigms. Finally, we can argue that students’ interactive experiences with liberal studies, like their daily interactive experiences, lend themselves to open-endedness that can catalyze development by providing them the opportunity to exercise their contextual and critical thinking skills to understand their interactions with new contexts, examine how those new contexts can challenge their ways of understanding, and develop the skills to re-contextualize their personal paradigms. The Perry-Kuhn conversation reveals these striking congruencies.

It would seem, then, that if we want to claim that our students do realize liberal learning experiences in our programs, these attributes would be embedded within other learning outcomes we outline for our courses and other learning experiences on campus. This claim raises a number of critical points: Can we glean from this composite a pedagogical direction that we might explore that could help us incorporate these attributes as part and parcel of our students’ liberal learning experiences? Could we ensure that this pedagogical direction would not compromise course content and coverage or other more standard learning outcomes we outline for our students? Would such a pedagogical direction mean that we would have to make significant changes in what we do in our classes or could such a pedagogical direction be easily incorporated into our existing classroom strategies and techniques? Finally, could we find a pedagogical direction that could fit equally well in classroom settings and co-curricular settings? Again, we can find the clues in the Perry-Kuhn conversation, and again, we will find the congruence in thinking about these points to be striking.

Perry, as I have mentioned, believes that the liberal learning experience, because it presents a “pluralism of values and points of view,” is especially conducive to foster students’ ethical and moral development and their abilities to make personal commitments in a relative world (p. 35). For Perry, the impact of liberal learning on students can be significant if it is “intentional on the part of individual professors” (p. 35). This impact comes from interacting with the diversity of the educational environment. It could come from a student’s interacting through liberal learning that presents views that students have not engaged. It could come from the “clash” of different faculty in different courses who are sure that each teaches the “truth.” But as Perry argues, the impact is most effective when it is deliberate: “When a teacher asks his students to read conflicting authorities and then asks them to assess the nature and meaning of the conflict, he is in a strong position to assist them to go beyond simple diversity into the disciplines of relativity of
thought through which specific instances of diversity can be productively exploited. He can teach relation, the relativism, of one system of thought to another. In short, he can teach disciplined independence of mind” (p. 35). This is teaching controversy and conflict by intent, and for Perry, it marks the character of good teaching.

If this rings familiar to us, it should. Jerry Graff (1992) has argued a similar point but with a different emphasis. In Beyond the Culture Wars, Graff contended that we should make productive use of the conflicts in our fields. We should teach them. His point is that by doing so we would introduce students to the nature of our academic culture and to how we do our work and how we create our fields of study. Graff believes that in presenting our debates to students we help them realize that we construct knowledge. By demonstrating, for example, different critical perspectives and ideological positions on the same topic, book, or event, we can engage students in one of the more provocative questions that underlies our work—"How do we know?" Using the debates in our field, we can challenge students to look at how different positions make different claims and bring up different interpretations of the same material. They will be challenged by the conversations to examine how different positions make their case and we can use this process to help students develop their own interpretations by helping them understand that their thinking always takes place within the contrasting context of a dialogue. Like Perry, Graff argues for teaching conflict by intent, but his purpose is that doing so will introduce students to the nature of university learning.

**Liberal Learning as Problem-Based**

Teaching conflict by intent still leaves us with the question of how to teach conflict by design. Neither Perry nor Graff provides a scheme—they merely point us in the direction of one. The common elements for both are how we intentionally create open-endedness for students; how we make use of the continuing interplay between our thinking and our interacting with the logical fuzziness inherent in liberal learning and our daily encounters; and how we provide our students with the challenge of posing questions, thinking about solutions, and thinking about how their solutions stack up in conversation with others. We recognize these elements as part of the benchmarks of problem-based learning, and it is here that we may find a pedagogical direction. This should not surprise us.

Kurt Burch’s outline of problem-based learning (2001) provides a good sense of why this approach lends itself to teaching conflict by design and fostering personal development. As Burch notes, because students interact with each other and with the course material, they engage in “a shared enterprise of learning-by-discovery” where they discover as much about themselves as they do about the topics they study (p. 194). Problem-based learning challenges students with responsibility to decide collaboratively how to solve the
problems that are posed to them. It does so, according to Burch, because a well-devised problem “transports students from the classroom to tangible, real-world situations” (p. 194). One of the central principles, according to Burch, is that problems are open-ended. “Well-devised problems provide insufficient information for immediate solution” (p. 194). In other words, well-devised problems are ill-structured and logically fuzzy. These ill-structured problems challenge students to think about how what they know can be used to work through the problem, to think about what they do not understand about the problem and what they do not know, and to think about the assumptions they carry with them that can color the way they may read and misread the problem. Well-devised problems challenge students’ paradigms of knowing and provide a two-fold experience: that of seeing that we are constantly rethinking how we know things and the actual experience of rethinking how we know. It is easy to imagine how a problem-based approach fits with the logical fuzziness inherent in liberal learning across the curriculum and in the diversity of students’ encounters on campus.

There is a second important principle: students work in groups to discuss the problem. A problem-oriented approach is collaborative. It lends itself to how we want to devise learning groups within our classes, learning communities, first-year interest groups, and co-curricular engagements. It can lend itself to how we use Blackboard technology, or the like, to create problem-driven chat rooms and threaded discussions. Burch (2001) notes that part of the learning that takes place through a problem-based approach is that students must learn to coordinate their efforts, cooperate to reach a collective goal, and collaborate in presenting what they find (p. 195). In this, students mirror Graff’s conversations. Through dialogue, students are challenged to look at how their interpretation of the problem differs from that of their peers, and they are challenged to look at how the assumptions that make up their personal paradigms influence their interpretation of the problem. In this way, they experience how our problem solving takes place within the context of a dialogue, leading to how we construct and reconstruct what we know. More interesting, through the collaborative conversations students experience what Perry defines as being liberally educated—learning how to think about their own thinking, to examine the ways they order and interpret information, and learning to examine assumptions and to compare these assumptions with the thinking of others (Perry, 1970, p. 39).

Problem-based learning provides the scheme to design student encounters with incongruity, open-endedness, mistakes, crisis, and rethinking, either in the classroom or in co-curricular activities. It provides a scheme to design the conversational encounters in which students will have to look at how they think in relation to others. Our task in teaching is to guide students in using the research and critical thinking skills of academic inquiry to think out the problems, think about the mistakes that inevitably arise from their encounter with the incongruities and logical fuzziness inherent in the problems, leading them to learn how to learn. As Burch is quick to
point out, through “the process, students develop new social and cognitive skills, responsibilities, and understandings” (pp. 194–195). A problem-based learning approach is the last piece to synthesizing this composite.

**Conclusion**

Admittedly, I have paid short shrift to how we actually can use a problem-based learning approach in a classroom or other learning encounters that students engage in. I have left this to my colleagues who have contributed to this volume. Each speaks to a core area of students’ liberal learning experiences and co-curricular experiences in service learning and residential living-learning centers. Each, in one iteration or another, leans on different aspects of the Perry-Kuhn conversation. And each illustrates that by simply recasting some of the questions we ask of our students and the context within which we ask those questions, we affect, sometimes significantly, the ways students interact with their educational environment and the immediacy of how their liberal learning speaks to their lives. What they demonstrate is the ease with which we can incorporate this composite into our day-to-day pedagogic strategies and any of our campus interactions with students. My intent here is to focus on outlining a conceptual underpinning for our claims that liberal learning can be an interactive, transformative experience for students.

If we believe that liberal learning can be transformative it is because there is reason lurking in our intuition that encourages us. What we find in the Perry-Kuhn conversation is a confluence of our anecdotal suspicions, our common sense, and our theoretical perspective. This synthesizing of what we already know and the grounding that comes from this conversation holds promise to help us, as Perry would have it, intentionally design open-ended encounters with learning. Perry has argued that as we introduce students to open-endedness we provide them the means “to orient themselves in the world through an understanding of acts of knowing and valuing that is more than intellectual and philosophical. It is a moral endeavor in the most personal sense” (1970, p. 54). There is more to liberal learning, as Perry alludes, than content mastery. When students encounter the incongruities inherent in liberal learning through the ill-structured problems that we design, they are faced with challenges to their attitudes, beliefs, and values. These problems hold the potential to take students to the edge where the familiar and the unusual meet.

In this intersection, students can experience liberal learning speaking to their lives. They can experience colleges and universities as learning resources, assemblages of people, books, laboratories, and an environment of things, ideas, passions, and ideals to be orchestrated by them to challenge and help them rethink their personal commitments to education and their capacity for human experience.
Note

*I have chosen William Perry because his work has been seminal to the field and his model echoes through the works of other scholars and studies. As important, his work seems to hold across gender and ethnic boundaries. For example, Carol Gilligan (1982) points out that the difference between men and women is not in how Perry's model outlines developmental transition, but that men and women move through what could be called different types of socially influenced personal paradigms (p. 165).

References


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