
COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICES AND WAYS OF KNOWING: RECLAIMING *BILDUNG* IN UNIVERSITY EDUCATION

Aaron Stoller
Doctoral Student, ASPECT Program, Virginia Tech
astoller@vt.edu

In “On the Idea of a University,” Dr. Pitt makes the case that the American research university is in danger. Research universities across the U.S., he argues, are in serious risk of losing their unique and varied cultures, impacting their ability to create, preserve and transmit knowledge.

Dr. Pitt is quite right that universities are fundamentally about creating, preserving and transmitting knowledge. While I agree with his assessment that the research university is in a moment of transition, I am not yet convinced that we find ourselves in a forced choice: either move forward into homogeneity, or work to reclaim the university of the past, as traditionally conceived. Instead, I believe American education is in a liminal space, which may yet yield a future more promising than, if not distinct from, its past.

Dr. Pitt points to four foundational problems, all of which place culpability for the present situation squarely on the backs of faculty as “guardians of knowledge” at their respective universities and in the public-at-large. The solution, it would seem, begins and ends with practical action by faculty who must better understand the gravitas of their role. Yet, I think the problem lies deeper than any one constituent at the university, and instead reaches into the very intellectual and cultural foundation on which our universities are built: our understanding of knowledge.

The American research university is grounded in a type of post-Kantian epistemology which views knowledge as an abstract, cognitive product, giving little regard to its personal or pragmatic impact. Knowledge, here, is understood much like Kant articulated in his *Critiques of Pure Reason* and *Practical Reason*, which at once

¹³ Benjamin, *Illuminations*, 257.

separate and reduce modes of knowing, so that only knowledge which is empirical, predictable and repeatable is considered valid. As John Dewey argued, there are a number of epistemologies emanating out of this general tendency which:

...differ enormously from one another. Their quarrels with one another fill the air. The din thus created makes us deaf to the way in which they say one thing in common...They all hold that the operation of inquiry excludes any element of practical activity that enters into the construction of the object known....The common essence of all these theories, in short, is that what is known is antecedent to the mental act of observation and inquiry, and is totally unaffected by these acts; otherwise it would not be fixed and unchangeable.¹⁴

This common tendency separates not only knowledge from its context, but also the knower from the known. At its best, knowledge of this sort is designed only, as Dr. Pitt writes, “(for) publishing (in) an esoteric article designed for an audience of five.” At its worst, it turns education into a type of ideology or marketplace product.

While it might be argued, to the contrary, that there is no single guiding epistemological framework for universities – that epistemologies vary widely by discipline and, in fact, by faculty member – the proof, as they say, is in the pudding: in the standards, the curricula, the assessment tools and, most importantly, the pedagogies through which teaching and learning occur. In other words, while it might be argued that post-Enlightenment, post-Kantian, and post-Positivist epistemologies are increasingly relics of a theoretical past, I would be inclined to agree only if I were conducting a discursive examination of theoretical journals over the last forty years. Yet if we take a pragmatic turn, examining our communities of practice instead of the terrain of our discourse, the point is more difficult to argue. This is increasingly the case as

¹⁴ John Dewey, “The Quest for Certainty: A Study of the Relation of Knowledge and Action,” in *John Dewey: The later works, 1925-1953: Vol. 4.*, ed. J.A. Boydston (Carbondale & Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 2008), 18-19.

universities become centered around concepts like “institutional effectiveness,” “accountability to constituents” and “educational quality.”¹⁵ In other words, it is one thing to teach a course on the Postmodern, yet it is quite another let postmodern epistemology guide one’s practice by, perhaps, abandoning grades for student performance.

If our universities are to thrive in the manner Dr. Pitt suggests, I believe we must abandon this epistemological tendency toward hyper-rationalism, and ground our educational communities of practice, instead, on the German notion of *Bildung*.

Bildung is more complex and inclusive than what is traditionally considered *education* in the United States. Without space enough to give full treatment to the idea, we might say that *Bildung* is “an ongoing process of both personal and cultural maturation. A harmonization of the individual’s mind and heart and a unification of society evidence this maturation. Harmonization of the self is achieved through a wide variety of experiences that challenge the individual’s accepted beliefs....”¹⁶ *Bildung* stands at the intersection of teaching and learning, the cultivation of the individual, as well as the process of knowledge preservation, transmission and creation. *Bildung* disrupts our Kantian instinct to view knowledge as an object in a menagerie, which is to be preserved and guarded. Instead, it begins with the idea that knowledge is intrinsically tied to and generated out of unique human experiences and contexts, and ends in knowledge as a communally constructed, freely available practice.

While the goal of knowledge in the Kantian sense is self-reliance, in *Bildung* the cultivation of knowledge has no goal outside itself, but its goal is simply the process of more knowledge generation, more education. Knowledge transforms the individual and the larger community in an ongoing, ever-present dialogical motion. As a result, in

¹⁵ Commission on Colleges of the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools, *Resource Manual For The Principles of Accreditation: Foundations for Quality Enhancement* (Decatur, Georgia, 2005), 2.

¹⁶ James A. Good and Jim Garrison, “Traces of Hegelian *Bildung* in Dewey’s Philosophy,” in *John Dewey and Continental Philosophy*, ed. Paul Fairfield (Carbondale & Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press), 53.

Bildung, knowledge does not free the individual from the world, but opens the individual to the world, as they understand their interdependence with it. Further, as Good and Garrison argued:

...the *Bildung* tradition rejects the pre-Kantian metaphysics of being for a metaphysics of experience that disdains speculation about timeless realities. Learning requires a passionate search for continual growth tempered by reason that is developed through intense study of one's cultural history. Fulfillment comes through practical activity that promotes the development of one's talents and abilities as well as the development of one's society. Rather than acceptance of the sociopolitical status quo, *Bildung* requires the ability to engage in immanent critique of one's society, challenging it to actualize its own highest ideals.¹⁷

In other words, the educated person realizes not only the inseparability of the knower and the known, but also the inseparability of the knower to the community. In this model, as Henry Giroux wrote:

[p]edagogy must always be contextually defined, allowing it to respond specifically to the conditions, formations, and problems that arise in various sites in which education takes place. Rather than treating pedagogy as a commodity, progressive educators need to engage their teaching as a theoretical resource that is both shaped by and responds to the very problems that arise in the in-between space/places/contexts that connect classrooms with the experiences of everyday life. Under such circumstances, educators can both address the meaning and purpose that schools might play in their relationship to the demands of the broader

¹⁷ Good and Garrison, "Traces," 53-54.

society while simultaneously being sensitive to the distinctive nature of the issues educators address within the shifting contexts in which they interact with a diverse body of students, texts, and institutional formations.¹⁸

Further, while each individual horizon of understanding is unique, it is also limited, requiring a rich and diverse community for expansion and revision.

It is this last point which is particularly important in relationship to our universities and colleges. If knowledge is bound up in communities, then it is best generated from unique and varied cultures, as Dr. Pitt rightly argues.

Yet, there is a shadow side to this claim, which – if taken seriously – requires a radical reconstruction of the education system, as it stands today. That shadow side is simply this: if knowledge is communal, then it should not and cannot be arbitrated by one, distinct stakeholder – be that an individual, or a discipline - in that community. In other words, while we might agree that faculty play a fundamental role in the catalyzation of knowledge, they must be seen as only one node in a larger ecosystem involved in the preservation, transmission and creation of knowledge.

Instead, I would propose that we must enter into university education with the assumption that each member of the community – faculty, student, staff, administrator, community partner, parent, alumnus, and disciplinary body – has a unique contribution to make to the bodies of knowledge, which are so vital to both the university and the community-at-large which it serves. Reciprocally, this notion carries with it a deep responsibility by all members to participate cooperatively, inclusively and creatively in the act of knowledge creation, preservation and transmission.

Dr. Pitt's call to reclaim the idea of a university is quite right, yet it demands a radical rethinking of the intellectual and cultural foundations on which our universities are built. The concept of *Bildung* is a powerful tool to get us started both

¹⁸ Henry Giroux, "Critical Pedagogy and the Postmodern/Modern Divide: Towards a Pedagogy of Democratization," *Teacher Education Quarterly*, Winter (2004), 37.

epistemologically and pedagogically. When knowledge cannot be separated from the people who create knowledge, then education becomes at once radically student-focused, problem-driven, and interdisciplinary. Further, we can see how problems and solutions require and, in fact, *demand* unique communities engaged across standpoints and disciplines in the common task of knowledge preservation, transmission and creation.