

Educating For Justice

James F. Slevin
Georgetown University

I should begin by confessing a few psychological disorders. I am more concerned about injustice than justice. More than that, because I am interested in injustice, I sometimes worry that people interested in justice are trying to change the subject—trying to distract me. My paranoia is pervasive. I worry that these same people want to talk about diversity because they don't want to talk about racism; they want to talk about multiculturalism because they want to avoid talking about colonialism and neo-colonialism; they want to talk about the cultivation of private virtue because they don't want to think about systemic oppression.

I am interested in supporting efforts to develop causal explanations of injustices, explanations that are historically related to the creation and re-creation of the university in the post-colonial context. Such a university would be compatible with the kind of pedagogy Freire suggests, which presupposes and requires a fundamental undoing of currently hegemonic notions of learning as acquisition. In that regard, and in what follows, I assume that students like faculty are engaged in intellectual work in a variety of contexts and that what is commonly called learning is better understood as the production of new knowledge in the context of desire.

Our session's title poses this question: How does liberal education accomplish the development of just members of society? As I began to write my paper, I discovered with not a little anxiety that the first two sessions posed the following questions:

- *Is developing just members of society the job of higher education?*
- *Can we educate for justice in a pluralistic society?*

I am not sure what would have become of our session if the answer to both questions by all panelists had proven to be **no**. That is, where would we be now—or more specifically, can you imagine our embarrassment—if the first panel had universally agreed that indeed it is *not* the job of higher education to develop just members of society? What would we do now if the second panel had forcefully argued that we *cannot* educate for justice in a pluralistic society?

So, not wanting to be caught off guard, I prepared 27 papers, allowing for every possible permutation in the answers provided by the panels that preceded this one: “we should but we can't”; “we can but we shouldn't”; “we should and thank the Lord we can”; “we shouldn't and, here the Lord is being unusually cooperative, we cannot.” It is very clear that I should be reading version #17, the one that presumes that by and large probably most of higher education *should* and *can* or at least *could* do the job of developing just members, turning my attention now to how. But alas that particular paper appears to be missing—I believe it and indeed 25 other papers were stolen by some Santa Barbaran (or Santa Barbarian), obviously someone who had not gone on to higher education and so

who clearly could not be expected to possess any understanding of justice. So, unfortunately, I must resort to reading the only version he (or she) thought not worth taking.

About 20 years ago, a university president posed these questions:

There are two aspects to every university. The first and most evident is that it has to do with culture, with knowledge, the use of the intellect. The second, not so evident, is that it must be concerned with the social reality—precisely because a university is inescapably a social force: it must transform and enlighten the society in which it lives. But how does it do that? How does a university transform the social reality of which it is a part?

At the end of my talk, I will return to these questions and consider the answers he offered. But to begin I would like to suggest some of the ways my own university has tried to respond to questions like these.

Georgetown University defines itself as “a Catholic and Jesuit, student-centered research university” and in its mission statement emphasizes its “commitment to justice and the common good” through educating students “to be responsible and active participants in civic life, and to live generously in service to others.” This purpose—taken from our university mission statement—conceptualizes the university’s work for justice as one carried out by its graduates who will have come, while matriculating, into possession of a particular virtue. In this way of understanding, universities educate for justice by inculcating the habit of justice in students and then releasing them into adult society to behave justly and to require of others, or at least recommend to others, that they also behave justly. I am happy to say that this sometimes happens. But I am uneasy when universities focus, sometimes even limit, their obligations to justice in this way.

I want to suggest that the “educating for justice” that universities and colleges undertake goes beyond and in fact may not necessarily have all that much to do with “the cultivation of justice in our students.” That is, a college or university may not be centrally concerned or even competent *to be concerned* with helping students develop this or any other of the four cardinal virtues, however desirable it might be that students have them.

I teach at a university in which the graduating class of 1968 (as I write this, they are about to hold their thirty-fifth-year reunion) had to take four philosophy courses, at least two of them directly concerned with ethics; they had to take at least as many theology courses very centrally concerned with questions of good and evil; and they had to take a bunch of English and other humanities courses that were often equally concerned with these very things. And they had to go to church every week.

And Georgetown, that year, still managed to produce Bill Clinton.

There are reasons—having to do with understanding or clarifying structural explanations of systemic injustice—that make me think Georgetown did a pretty good job with Bill, but I am not sure we can or want to take credit for the state of his virtue. We *can* take

credit, at least in part, for his mind and its cultivation, and that seems to me where colleges and universities need to put their focus.

That is, we need to focus on what a college or university *itself* does—not through its graduates *later*, but in its capacity as a college or university *here and now*—to define its *education*, its teaching and research, with respect to the issue of social justice. So my own title tweaks our conference title, “Educating for *Justice*,” by shifting the frame of reference, re-seeing what might be called foreground and background. In the conference title, what is taken as background is education; what is in the foreground, what is at issue, is educating *for social justice*. But what happens if we take justice as background, and ask, or rather foreground, what are the various ways human beings act for it. What all do we do for justice? Marching for it; politicking for it; undertaking for it various kinds of social activism, locally and nationally and internationally. In the context of that variety of things people do *for* justice, what does it mean to *educate* for it? How might universities themselves, not in the effects they have upon students but in their effects upon the social order—work for social justice? What works for justice do universities perform *as universities*? How are students able to participate in that work *as students*?

The Center for Social Justice at Georgetown, particularly in its work for pedagogical and research initiatives, is exploring ways of establishing a pervasive commitment to justice issues within the university’s research and teaching here and now—here in the District of Columbia, and now in the intellectual histories of our disciplinary and interdisciplinary courses and scholarship. How do scholars *as scholars*, teachers *as teachers*, and students *as students* participate in education’s work for justice?¹ Reviewing the faculty’s research and teaching, we have learned that as many as 25 percent of our 650 faculty members have teaching interests, and 15 percent have research interests in justice issues. For faculty who teach on justice issues, 45 percent are in the humanities, 37 percent are in the social sciences, 10 percent are in business, and 9 percent are in the natural sciences. While slightly fewer faculty are engaged in research on justice than teach about justice, the distribution of disciplines in which they are located is quite similar to that found for teaching about justice. The humanities are most prominent, followed by social science, natural science and business.

These figures reflect, in my judgment, a fairly substantial integration of justice into the fabric of the university’s intellectual work; but my main point is to stress that it is that *intellectual* work itself that remains central. A college or university is a place where people create and share knowledge and see if it’s true (Slevin). The central feature of the university—that which is more important than all the others—is the critical examination of the adequacy and relevance of knowledge created, received, and exchanged. Education understood in this way certainly has important *consequences*, and they are fundamental: that students know that and how knowledge is produced and participate in that process; that they know that and how truth claims are testable and contestable, and participate in that process; that they experience not only being shaped by others but

¹ For more detailed information, see “The Justice Mission at Georgetown University” on our website: <http://socialjustice.georgetown.edu/teaching/justice/index.html>

shaping others in a process of critical inquiry and critical exchange. *These consequences* are the social responsibility and contribution of higher education.

Because the work and so the identity of a university or college are research and teaching, the question of justice has to be understood in relation to that work. Justice issues are important primarily to the degree that they make research and teaching more engaging, motivating, complex, truthful, etc. The knowledge produced and critiqued in research and teaching is the real issue. Let me give just two examples.

The first comes from my own field of English. Justice issues—in debates about canon formation, in theoretical arguments about aesthetic values, in causal explanations of textual production, features, and effects—have been for at least thirty years central to the discipline of literary and cultural studies. They are central not because we want to make students more just (which is certainly a consequence we would desire), but because we want to understand things in more complex ways and with greater clarity. It is precisely in our concern with justice that the inadequacies of received forms of literary analysis became clarified, compelling more thoroughgoing interdisciplinary projects that have in turn redefined the discipline.

Other examples abound. Justice issues in nursing and medicine have led these disciplines to incorporate serious inquiry into the nature and structural characteristics of health care (as a system marked by unequal access and as a process marked by failures of understanding that are almost equally systemic, as my colleague Deborah Tannen has demonstrated). For health care students, not later but right now, the most rigorous instruction in these principles is critical if they are to understand not just what they are getting themselves into but what they are doing as students, what it means to study nursing and medicine as disciplines of thought and practice.

To see issues of justice as inhabiting higher education in this way will assume that education is the intellectual work of engaged interrogation. It is that even when, as is often the case, there is no concern whatsoever with social justice. A college or university exists to engage, both internally and externally, in an interrogation of practices, meanings, and states of affairs. Research and teaching arise from various disciplinary, interdisciplinary, and multi-disciplinary forms of critical inquiry, with particular attention to the generation and examination of truth claims. In short, education is a labor—in which all in the university or college participate as colleagues—to produce new knowledge, modify inadequate analyses and explanations, correct error, expose mystification, and challenge lies. Education *is* that work. Within these overarching purposes, clarifying systems of injustice and imagining alternative systems constitute what education does for justice.

Imagine what that kind of education for justice might be like. Imagine for a moment that a number of faculty and administrators, including the president, decide that their university will devote itself to producing knowledge that analyzes the causes and conditions of oppression and inequality, and in doing so support the achievement of social justice for all citizens. The goal would be to create through rigorous inquiry an

understanding of the intersecting historical realities of colonialism, racism, sexism, and other forms of oppression. Imagine that these faculty and administrators consider this purpose not as *a* (as in *just one*) desirable effect, but as the single, organizing goal of the institution. That is, this purpose would govern the work of the university and shape the projects of faculty and students so that all research and teaching would be geared toward the study of culture and society with the aim of advancing social justice. The knowledge sought would be the understanding of systemic political, cultural, economic, and social injustice, the structural causes of it, the ways in which its nature and causes are distorted, and the possibilities for genuine, structural social change.

In the context of this imaginary scenario, I wish to conclude by returning to the questions with which I began—questions posed, as I mentioned, by a university president, one who in fact paid a rather serious price for asking things like that. The question was this: How does a university transform the social reality of which it is a part? The president who posed my opening questions was Ignacio Ellacuria, S.J., and he was president (or rector) of the University of Central America in El Salvador (Burke). Without knowing it, you may already know of him. In November of 1989, he and five of his university colleagues (including the university vice-rector, the director of religious education, a professor of ethics) and two of their co-workers were assassinated by a Salvadoran death squad. We tend to think of these martyrs only as social and political activists, but they were first and foremost university educators, scholars, and teachers—which made them all the more dangerous. They were social activists *as* scholars and *as* teachers. We should make no mistake about it: those who oppressed their country were terrified by them. It is testimony to just how routine US education has become that we can hardly think of it as dangerous, as terrifying anybody, and we certainly would find it hard to imagine dying for it. These Salvadoran scholars and teachers were martyred primarily because they stood for the truth, and we may at least remember them as epitomizing the possibility that discovering and telling that truth is what education can most powerfully do for justice.

Works Cited

Burke, Kevin. *The Ground Beneath the Cross: The Theology of Ignacio Ellacuría*. Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2000.

<http://www.scu.edu/Jesuits/ellacuria.html>.

Slevin, James. "Preserving Critical Facilities." *Liberal Education* 86 (2000): 20-27.

Slevin, James. "Keeping the University Occupied and Out of Trouble." *Profession* (2002): 63-71.

Tannen, Deborah. *Talking from 9 to 5*. New York: W. Morrow, 1994.