Preparing Liberally Educated Teachers

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This essay is an attempt to articulate what it means to prepare liberally educated teachers, to consider some of the challenges therein, and to consider some of the opportunities we have in a liberal arts college to address such challenges.

One of the challenges of course, to be acknowledged up front, is the perception that the goals of a liberal education and the goals of a professional education for K-12 teaching candidates are in tension, if not incompatible. In other words, that “liberally educated teachers” may be oxymoronic. This is a perception often shared both by those whose primary concern is the liberal arts, or liberal education; and those whose primary concern is professional education. Relative to most, I happen to emphasize the compatibility of purpose between liberal and professional education, as I shall elaborate below. At the same time, my primary goal in the essay is not to argue that liberal arts institutions ought to be sponsoring programs in teacher education. I start with the premise that such education is already occurring in liberal arts colleges. And granted that there are (at the very least) pragmatic reasons for perpetuating the current arrangement, I wish to reflect on present conditions and how we might work within such conditions most effectively.

I write from the perspective of a recent arrival to a liberal arts campus, as one shaped by my undergraduate experience in a similar small liberal arts college, and as one who chose my present position in part because the institution was expressly committed to offering a liberal arts education. My experience teaching at a state university the five years previous and my interaction with colleagues shaped by different educational environments has convinced me all the more of the value of a liberal arts education, and the privilege it is to participate in an educational community such as this one at Westmont College.

I write also from the perspective of a member of the Department of Education, committed to offering selected students an explicitly professional education. As such, I have a particular and obvious stake in the issues at hand. At the same time, I do not see the professional preparation of teachers as the exclusive concern of any one department. Consider for the moment that, for students leaving institutions such as ours with a teaching credential, at least seventy-five percent of their coursework is taken from faculty outside the Department of Education. For better or worse, the teachers we send out from liberal arts colleges to K-12 schools are shaped predominately by faculty in the traditional academic disciplines.

One more preliminary comment is in order. Westmont is not just any liberal arts institution, but a Christian liberal arts college, and Christian in the Evangelical tradition. Most of its students and faculty, including students preparing to teach in K-12 schools and faculty most directly responsible for their professional preparation, have chosen to participate in the community at least partly on that basis. My immediate concern, however, is the liberal arts context. I do not anticipate advancing any major line of argument that would not be equally applicable to liberal arts institutions outside of a particular faith tradition. This is not to minimize the importance and implications of faith for teacher education, for the liberal arts, or for institutions such as Westmont, but simply to suggest that these are subjects for another essay.
Two Underlying Assumptions

I have chosen as my title “Preparing Liberally Educated Teachers.” Before attempting to define what that might look like, or considering obstacles to this goal and means for addressing these, I should acknowledge two key assumptions behind the title. First, I take it as axiomatic that candidates for the teaching profession should receive as liberal an education as possible. Such a position grows out of a belief, to begin with, in the intrinsic value of a liberal education for all, irrespective of vocational direction. Candidates for teaching, as candidates for other professions, deserve an education that addresses their lives as a whole, and not merely their occupation. Candidates for teaching deserve a liberal education, moreover, because in a society such as our own, we hope these same candidates will be extending through their calling the foundations of a liberal education, in turn, to their students. Teachers who have benefited from a liberal education themselves and have incarnated its aims are clearly in a better position to prepare others for, and to offer to others themselves, such an education. Finally and pragmatically, a liberally educated teacher is more likely to survive and thrive in the K-12 classroom. A teacher who has integrated into his or her professional life habits associated with the liberal arts – habits (among others) of adapting to new conditions, of rational analysis and problem-solving, of responding to a diverse, cosmopolitan world – is better equipped for the complexities and unpredictability of ever-dynamic classrooms than is one simply trained to perform a set of static, scripted routines.

A second key assumption underlying the essay, foreshadowed in the paragraph above, is that the profession of K-12 teaching stands in unique relation to the liberal arts college. A liberal arts college attempting to maintain its distinctive identity might well struggle to justify offering professional programs in law, medicine, or business, however “liberal” such courses of professional preparation were conceived. A department of teacher education, on the other hand, is potentially engaged in an enterprise congruent with or largely overlapping the work of the college as a whole. Candidates for K-12 teaching are preparing to go out and do, at a different life stage, much of what their faculty mentors and models are doing for 18-22 year-olds. Ideally, at least, liberal arts faculty are reflecting on issues of curriculum, assessment, and developmentally appropriate pedagogy, in addition to the pursuit of traditional scholarly questions. Again ideally at least, candidates for K-12 teaching are, in reciprocal fashion, pursuing knowledge and wisdom, in addition to more conventional questions of curriculum and instruction. While over the course of the past century the professions of teacher and professor have increasingly been perceived as separate, the two still have overlapping concerns, and both might be healthier professions today if the distinction were downplayed. That a liberal arts faculty might be self-consciously offering a professional education to K-12 teaching candidates is thus no more a violation of its mission than a similar commitment to offering the initial stages of preparation for a scholarly career in a particular academic discipline.

Characteristics of a Liberally Educated Teacher

What might it mean to prepare liberally educated candidates for teaching? For starters, it would imply nothing less than what we imagine when we talk about being liberally educated period. A liberally educated teacher would have the broad range of critical and appreciative faculties we normally identify as components of a liberal education. Somewhat more specifically, a liberal professional education for teachers might include (among many other possibilities) a particularly well-developed sense of the following: (1) an understanding of his or
her professional freedom, including the constraints on that freedom he or she has incurred in pursuing his or her vocation. A liberally educated teacher has overcome his or her educational provincialism, and is aware of a range of alternative ends and alternative means for their attainment. That is, he or she is not bound to perpetuate unconsciously the education he or she has received at the K-12 level. He or she has developed the disposition to exercise in the professional sphere his or her intellectual and professional freedom, and thus can serve as a model of liberty for others; (2) an understanding of the nature of knowledge. A liberally educated teacher does not merely, as is so often said, possess knowledge, but, as suggested in the King James sense of knowing, is in a more intimate relationship therewith. A liberally educated teacher knows the tentativeness of knowledge, as well as its certainties. A liberally educated teacher has wrestled with epistemological questions, understands something of the social construction of knowledge, and has considered how knowledge is constructed at the individual level, within him- or herself. In the jargon of the sociological and educational worlds, a liberally educated teacher has developed both an understanding of the politics of knowledge and a high degree of metacognitive awareness; and (3) an understanding of the intrinsic value of education in the teacher candidate’s own life. A liberally educated teacher has internalized the rhetoric of the liberal arts, has translated educational theory into educational autobiography, and has a clear personal sense of purpose accordingly in extending education to others.

**Obstacles to a Liberal Professional Education**

If we have established that a commitment to the professional education of teachers is not incompatible with the larger mission of a liberal arts college, and have at least begun to consider what the outcomes of such a commitment might be, what are the obstacles to offering candidates for K-12 teaching a liberal professional education? From my experience in a liberal arts college thus far, it seems that the challenges are not unlike those encountered elsewhere. The following four, by no means an exhaustive listing, come quickly to mind.

Perhaps the most difficult obstacle is a set of expectations about the nature of professional preparation that students bring with them to the program. James, a student at my former institution, expressed the sentiment notably. I recall I had just completed what I thought was one of my more successful lectures to an introductory class on contemporary educational issues. Our mutual reflection on “Americanization in Historical Perspective” was intended to serve as background for subsequent discussion of contemporary policies and instructional strategies pertinent to diversity. While the class as a whole had seemed content to consider Noah Webster’s cultural nationalism and Israel Zangwill’s melting pot, James, a recent transfer student, complained afterwards he didn’t see the point. When he’d attended culinary school to become a restaurant manager, he explained, they got right down to business. They’d worked on menu planning and which pots and pans were essential equipment for this or that operation. He’d expected, accordingly, that his preparation to become a teacher would follow a similar course. More and more, whether at a public university or private liberal arts college, I have come to recognize that this is the mindset many candidates for K-12 teaching bring with them. To the extent that they expect such training it is difficult for them to appropriate the opportunities available for a more liberal education.

A second obstacle, closely related to the first, is a set of expectations about teaching itself. Students – among others – too often imagine their future work in what might be referred to as fast-food terms. It is a conception of the teacher’s role educational philosopher Israel Scheffler described some years ago as that of “a minor technician within an industrial process, the overall
goals [for whom are]...set in advance in terms of national needs, the curriculum materials prepackaged by the disciplinary experts, the methods developed by educational engineers – and the teacher’s job...just to supervise the last operational stage, the methodical insertion of ordered facts into the students’ mind” (Brown). Teaching candidates who hold such a limited view of the profession, and who imagine such a limited degree of professional freedom, will see little need for a liberal, or liberating education. They may, in fact, see such an education as counterproductive.

A third obstacle to offering a professional education that is also liberal, especially in the state of California, is the tightly constrained higher education curriculum. State-approved programs leading to teacher certification are subject to highly specific codes governing the topics that must be addressed by teaching candidates. To some extent this is a problem elsewhere in the nation, but California is at the extreme end of the range with respect to prescriptivity in general and content specificity in particular. Depending on the candidate’s academic preparation at the point of entry into college and depending on the time frame in which he or she decides to complete requirements, there may be absolutely no room for coursework beyond what is required. This is an obstacle to liberal education in that it does not allow teaching candidates in-depth exposure to some of the most potentially liberating coursework in history, philosophy, and anthropology – in general, and as these disciplines are applied to education in specially designed courses. Perhaps even more serious, however, is the damage wrought to the candidate’s sense of educational and professional agency. It is more difficult for the teaching candidate to accept ownership of, and actively embrace, a program imposed on him or her by others. And to the extent that the structure of the program itself sends students important messages about the nature of education, it is all the more difficult in this case for teaching candidates to internalize a sense of what liberal education is all about.

Fourth, and closely related to the point above, is the relatively strict separation in California-approved programs of coursework in “content” from coursework in “professional preparation.” Unlike most other states, the standard pattern here is for teaching candidates to earn a highly prescribed degree in the liberal arts before beginning a separate, but likewise highly prescribed, program leading to a teaching credential. Those planning to teach at the elementary level thus major in “Liberal Studies,” and those at the secondary level, the field in which they hope to teach. This arrangement on the surface appears to protect the integrity of the candidate’s “liberal” education from the seemingly utilitarian demands of the work in “teacher prep;” and in turn appears to protect the integrity of teacher preparation from the apparently arbitrary claims of competing departments and disciplines. In practice, however, candidates do not appear to perceive their Liberal Studies major, or comparable “waiver” (subject-area) majors, as liberal or liberating. To the extent that students recognize such coursework as a part of their professional education at all, rather than an initial barrier thereto, they see it in instrumental terms, as designed to assist them in accumulating specific information and skills they can pass on to others. Thus the usual comments about seeing no need for algebra or ancient history – I only need what’s in the grade one curriculum. The knowledge gained is valued and perceived as something apart from themselves as persons, and applicable chiefly within the limits of the vocational sphere. The separation is a problem, moreover, to the degree that it suggests that the ensuing professional coursework is not liberal. As historian Merle Borrowman put it:

The separation of liberal from professional education too often implies that professional education is merely technical.... Educational theory must be perceived as continuous
with other aspects of social theory…. [T]he criteria of effective education must be seen as inseparable from the criteria of effective social and personal living, and…the techniques for inquiring into educational problems must be recognized as of the same nature as those used in other kinds of inquiry.

Insisting, as does the state of California, on a wall of separation between liberal and professional, too easily results in the illiberalizing of the latter.

Addressing the Obstacles

Clearly it is more difficult to address some of these obstacles than others. As long as Westmont College is based in the state of California, and until the state legislature decrees otherwise, there is little we can do about prescriptivity, specificity of required content, or the high degree of separation between coursework designated “content” and that designated “professional. Little we can do, that is, even if we were to establish wide agreement that the aforementioned do in fact interfere with our ability to offer a liberal education. Nor can we entirely control popular conceptions of the teacher’s role – both descriptive and normative – that reduce K-12 teaching to handing out educational hamburgers. Nor can we entirely control the kinds of expectations regarding professional education that candidates for teaching bring with them to campus.

I think we are in a position, however, as a liberal arts institution to do a better job of offering a liberal education to our candidates for teaching. And while there may need to be changes both within the Department of Education and the college as a whole, my comments are directed primarily toward the latter. To the extent that we succeed in the process, incidentally, we may impact more than teaching candidates alone, improving everyone’s chances for partaking of a liberal education.

There are three broad areas in which I would hope to see some continuing, collective reflection as a college and as a faculty, in particular. The first is our identity as teachers. Our catalog states that the primary emphasis here at Westmont is on teaching, and such an emphasis is clearly expressed – enforced, even – in our criteria for promotion and tenure. We offer public recognition for outstanding teaching. I wonder, though, if we are as intentional as we could be in presenting ourselves to students as teachers. I wonder if we could do more, campus-wide, to discuss publicly and across departmental lines the issues we are currently thinking through as teachers, and find ways to invite interested students to participate in such discussion. I wonder if, in our classes, we could find ways to make our work as teachers more transparent to students, to help them to recognize the choices we are making. Choices with respect to curriculum, pedagogy, assessment, and even classroom management – including the beliefs and values underlying such choices. I wonder if we could share with students more consistently and more deeply our pilgrimages as teachers. Particularly when working with groups of Liberal Studies students, I wonder if we could emphasize more the similarity of our own current roles with their future responsibilities.

Second, in our pursuit of a liberal professional education, I wonder if we might do more to build reflection on educational processes and educational institutions into our teaching and scholarly work in our respective disciplines. Education is obviously one part of the social and cultural world that we are here to reflect on, but I wonder if it has received due consideration in the way we have traditionally approached coursework in history – or government, sociology, economics – to limit ourselves for the moment to the social sciences. Education is potentially a
major theme in literature, particularly in biographical and autobiographical narratives; in the study of philosophy, religion, communications, and even aspects of the arts. Certainly my own thinking about education has been influenced as much by the writings of Wendell Berry or the popular writings of C. S. Lewis, for example – included in the college curriculum if at all, in the English or religion curriculum – as by most of the writers we think of as educators. It may not even be a case of failing to consider educational issues, so much as failing to name them as such, to ourselves and to our students, when they do arise. We may be so afraid of calls to justify our work on utilitarian grounds that we fail to acknowledge when our disciplinary work, by its nature or scope, does in fact address and apply to the world outside, including the world of K-12 education.

Finally, in the interest of offering candidates for teaching a more liberal education, I wonder if we might do more as a college to help students understand more clearly the nature of the education we are here to offer them. Students are more likely to respond to our invitation to pursue a liberal education if we make it a bit clearer what it is we are inviting them into. What the party, if you will, is all about. We do a great deal to promote our institution as a whole, and to promote our individual departments, but I wonder if we do enough with our students to promote the overall kind of education we hope to offer them. There are implications here (for starters) for how we advise candidates for teaching. We need to ask ourselves regularly to what extent we are offering candidates a vision of teaching as a liberal profession. Ask ourselves to what extent we are helping them to see how all components of their college education contribute to preparing them for the future, vocationally and otherwise. But clearly changes in advising are not enough. Are there ways to be more intentional about helping students understand the rationale for General Education requirements? Can we do more in First Year Programs to communicate our collective philosophy of education (to the extent that such exists), to involve students in our own institutional wrestling over these issues, and assist them in formulating their own philosophy of education?

Clearly we cannot invite students into a vision, or even a discussion, we have not ourselves entered into. This Institute and this summer workshop are steps in the right direction. Ultimately, my hope is that we can do more to involve our students – future teachers and non-teachers alike – in the kind of discussion we have been privileged to have this past week together.
Works Cited


Scheffler, Israel. "University Scholarship and the Education of Teachers." *Teachers College Record* 70 (October 1968).