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Revisited: the University and the Concerned Citizen

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I offer my remarks in a spirit of gratitude, first for my invitation to speak with you today, and next, for the life of Yehuda Elkana. It is difficult to me to accept that this is the 10th anniversary of his death. However, I am glad that I am to talk about a curriculum for the interdisciplinary training of “concerned citizens.” Scholars have a primary responsibility for this curriculum, and must hold that responsibility fast. I have a vivid memory of Yehuda in a conversation. He is holding a sheaf of papers and saying emphatically, “It is the curriculum. It is the curriculum.”

I will focus on three questions. First, what is a curriculum? Next, what is a responsibility that concerned scholars---as creators and guardians of the curriculum---must currently assume? Third and finally, what are some examples of syllabi from my own professional career that might be of use today? Forgive me if I am too U.S. centric.

Fortunately, scholars have two comprehensive texts about the university and the concerned citizen. One is co-authored by Yehuda Elkana, *The University of the Twenty-First Century* (2016); the other, more focused on the United States, is by Ronald J. Daniels, the president of Johns Hopkins University, *What Universities Owe Democracy*, a vision the teaching of “purposeful pluralism.” (2021).¹

These texts are accessible at a volatile and inflamed moment. COVID still rages. Because of older political and economic conditions, the precarities of migration, immigration, and exile are common. Indeed, I have argued for several years that scholars in comparatively comfortable situations are at “moral risk” if they do not aid “scholars at risk” who are in danger in their home countries or in exile.² The dogs of war are on short leashes as Russian forces encircle Ukraine. Beyond this moment, the computerized dogs of cyberwar are in perpetual if largely invisible action. Authoritarian governments are increasingly in power, often lashed together in networks of common interest. I remind us of the televised picture of the leaders of Russia and China, lounging in a comfy box but standing when protocol required it, at the kitschy opening ceremony of the 2022 Olympic Games. Independent media and universities are in peril, if not dismantled, in both authoritarian and good-enough democratic

¹ Elkana, Yehuda and Hannes Klöpffer, ed. by Marvin Lazerson. *The University in the Twenty-First Century: Teaching the New Enlightenment in the Digital Age*. Budapest and New York: Central European Press, 2016, pp. 284. Ronald J. Daniels, with Grant Shreve and Phillip Spector. *What Universities Owe Democracy*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2021, pp. 322.

² Full disclosure: I am involved in the non-profit organization, Scholars at Risk, a network of organizations with offices at New York University in the United States and Maynooth University in Ireland.

countries. Of course, rigorous inquiries have never been loved. Plato and his heirs in his Academy could tell us that. So could Peter Abelard, as he was forced to burn his “heretical” book.

In my own country, the United States, the putative “shining city on the hill,” we have a growing acceptance of political violence and self-proclaimed militias, our Proud Boys and Oath Keepers. They proclaim a muscular devotion to freedom, but their presence is part of a conservative spectrum that is censorious and, at best, disdainful of liberalism. People on this spectrum in the United States are responsible for a pustular rash of suppression of books, especially if they have to do with race, sexualities, and, in some localities, the Holocaust. In such a moment, a scholar’s responsibility for the modern university as an institution of inquiry---as well as for the schools, libraries, associations, and individuals who support this institution----is as strong as I can imagine.

But what is a curriculum? Obviously, as many have argued, a university as an institution should both act on a set of values and offer a rich set of opportunities for students to engage in civic education within the classroom and outside, projects often called the co-curriculum or the paracurriculum. The curriculum itself is the totality of the courses of study a college or university offers, be those courses in the liberal arts or professional schools. A syllabus is the far more specific outline of a particular class. To offer a metaphor: the curriculum is a language, a syllabus is sentence using the elements of that language. Each syllabus can build in projects and activities that provide intersections of a text or a lab with conditions outside those special spaces. Student tutoring in homeless shelters is one example.

A curriculum should provoke thinking about thinking and non-thinking, about reason-abilities and irrationalities. As Elkana and Klöpffer write, “Our task is to see to it that students, the citizens of tomorrow, have a basic understanding not only of the cumbersome process of governance in a democratic society but also a cognitive awareness to judge or interpret information, arguments, and claims.” (p. 74) The exercise of thinking about thinking should be done with psychological acuity. John Dewey’s Democracy and Education of 1916 is the text of an intellectual great-grandfather of Elkana, Klöpffer, and Daniels, but he is a benevolent, generative ancestral ghost. As such, Dewey is asking what *attitudes* “are central in effective intellectual ways of dealing with subject matter. Among the most important are directness, open-mindedness, single-mindedness (or whole heartedness), and responsibility.” [204] Then, he writes tartly, “Open-mindedness is not the same as empty-mindedness.” [207]

My own thinking about an interdisciplinary curriculum that concerned scholars should/would/could design arises from my experience in the studies of women, gender, and sexualities. It was my practical training in the four elements of what such interdisciplinary activities demand: 1) They need, if financially possible, to be designed and taught by a team. Scholars and teachers have to know something, really know some things. But nobody can know everything any more. Knowledge is both too broad and too deep. In general, then, the interdisciplinary must be intracellular among cells of scholars.³ 2) These activities should represent fresh thinking and new ideas. At the same time, no curriculum is built *ex nihilo*. When I taught the first course on women and literature at Barnard College in the early 1970s, I was in debt to patterns, both old and emerging, of thinking about culture. Beware, I have often said, of the fallacy of misplaced originality. 3) Both teachers and students must feel that the stakes in learning are big and real. The questions of the nature of a student’s life, other lives, and even life itself must be in the classroom. In my experience, it is harder to make these questions palpable in remote and asynchronous learning than in an in-person classroom, but the effort to ask them must always be made. 4) Fourth and finally, a scholar must expect resistance in various forms from students, other

³ I am often astonished, as I am now, at how much I can sound like John Henry Cardinal Newman on the curriculum.

scholars, a home institution, and the community surrounding it. Streams of new curricula flow over jagged rocks, circulate through tangled weeds, and meet dams that would block fresh waters.

The study of women, gender, and sexualities is still an intellectual imperative that has profound resonances in contemporary lives. Governments and citizens both fear and welcome its disruptive narratives and messages. Given our moment, I have still another imperative: many scholars and students ironically lack an understanding of colleges and universities themselves, and, as a result, lack the ability to fight for them and their values. Like democracies themselves, colleges and universities are flawed, but indispensable; imperfect, but necessary. People may work in colleges and universities, in better or worse conditions. Adjuncts and contingent faculty know bad conditions. People may study in universities, in better or worse conditions. Courageous students in Belarus know very bad conditions. However, often, our shared educational environments are only superficially or narrowly understood. How, then, can they be defended deeply and spaciously? With wit and truthfulness? And if universities cannot be defended from the inside, how can they help to form concerned citizens?

I have long argued, in vain, for a course called “General Education for Graduate Education.” Here first-year graduate students, on the master’s or doctoral level, would take a year-long course about the history, nature, and contemporary situations of the higher education institutions in which they are seeking knowledge and a professional credential. However, a significant project for the concerned scholar would go far beyond a single course. It would bring about the far greater integration of the humanities and the professional schools. Here I echo Elkana. The humanities provide history, philosophy and ethics, aesthetics, the study of interpretative methods that Elkana and Klöpper call for, and the probability of cultivating empathy. The professional schools provide a grounding in the various sets of practices necessary for human sustainability.

To a degree, but only to a very minor degree, the humanities are already in the professional schools. Administrators and faculty sympathetic to the humanities are also there.⁴ On the basis of my experience and a bibliography I commissioned in 2000, I suggest that the Medical Humanities are the best established, with their attention to history, ethics, and “narrative medicine.” Humanities are also present in law schools in such fields as law and philosophy, legal ethics, and law and literature. Business schools take up ethical issues. In all, my beloved William Shakespeare is ubiquitous.⁵

I have now amassed three experiences in teaching the humanities in a professional school. The longest is at the New York University Law School where I team teach with Stephen Gillers, a professor there. I have found it a very happy and often exhilarating collaboration. He loves literature; I love law. I know a bit more about literature; fortunately, he knows a lot more about law. Each fall, we have done our seminar. We have 20 to 24 LLM and JD students. We read a book a week (a novel, a play, a book of non-fiction). The students write at least seven 1,000 word essays over the course of the semester. Because the course is an elective, and because students must win in bidding competitions to be in it and other electives, students want to be there. What a relief that is. Many say they want to recapture pleasures of reading. Professor Gillers argues persuasively that reading literature makes better lawyers--for example, they are better users of language, and lawyers must read well, write well, speak well, and

⁴ The relations of the humanities and the professional schools depends, of course, on national structures of higher education.

⁵ The bibliography was for a workshop I organized with James Fraser on the humanities and the professional schools at New York University, which occurred on October 22, 2020. The bibliography is available, as a living document, on the website of the NYU Center for the Humanities.

listen well. I argue that literature crucially represents the law in action and the feelings about the law. So do music and other arts. Though students get some flak from other students that Torts or Contracts is “real law” in comparison to law and literature, we march forward, starting with Sophocles, Antigone, and go on from there. This year our texts have tended to focus on courtrooms, and we will end in a Michigan courtroom with the sentencing of the serial sexual predator Dr. Lawrence G. Nassar.⁶

The second course was a graduate course in the Steinhardt School of Culture, Education, and Human Development, “Higher Education and the Engaged Imagination.” The premise of the course was that the cultural representations of higher education are enormously influential in shaping the consciousness of individuals and larger social groups about higher education. How could one care about education without being concerned about those cultural representations?

Before the course was approved, I had a surprising experience in the school’s curriculum committee. Some members suggested that asking a class to read a whole novel was too much. What about excerpts? I said that to ask me to teach excerpts from a novel was like asking a musicologist to teach an excerpt from a Beethoven quartet. Excerpts were a non-starter. I am relieved to say that the course was nevertheless approved.

Enrolling both master’s and doctoral students, the course consisted primarily of globally-inflected literary texts, though we started with the very American F. Scott Fitzgerald, THIS SIDE OF PARADISE. In addition, the students were to write about representations of higher education in movies and TV. Indeed, together we watched that wonderful Marx Brothers romp through higher education, HORSEFEATHERS. Though the course seemed to be successful, it was suspended because of the need to enroll graduate students in larger, more professional courses. In brief, the flaws I was seeking to ameliorate proved stronger than my aspirations.

The third course was also in Steinhardt, an undergraduate core curriculum course under the rubric of “Texts and Ideas.” The great subject of the course was the university, and in Fall 2020, the name was “The University As It Was, As It Is, As It Should and Should Not Be.” My hope was to introduce students to diverse texts and ideas, and to stimulate a commitment to democratic education. The students were almost exclusively from the Steinhardt School, which has a wide array of programs and majors. The students come from every Steinhardt class and major (for example, Applied Psychology, Music Business, Studio Art), which takes some management.

The course had historical range and global reach. I began with selections from Confucius (learning for the virtuous man), Plato (the Myth of the Cave), and Aristotle (his theory of the liberal arts). They were to show that passion for, need for, and dedication to learning is deep, deep in human history. We read excerpts. Yes, I confess, excerpts. I mourned the loss of depth, but my curricular choice was for breadth. I was also convinced that this course might be the only place where a student would read Kant, and an excerpt from The Contest of the Faculties about the organization of knowledge and academic freedom was better than no Kant at all. The texts were very multidisciplinary. Indeed, I explicitly asked what a reader can get from one genre than he/she/they cannot get from others? What IS the particularity of this legal document called a university charter?

The overarching themes were “Continuities, Changes, and Conflicts” in the local, national, and global ideas of the university. Among the dominant changes were in patterns of inclusion and exclusion. Who was permitted to be a part of a university? And what ideas? How did the excluded become

⁶ For several years, at the NYU Portal campus in Abu Dhabi, I taught, alone, an undergraduate version of this course called “Law and Literature” as part of the NYUAD core curriculum.

included? How did these changes happen? What, for example, was the importance of the formation of the Medieval university and its transmission to the “New World”? The emergence of the German research university? The rise after 1945 of the “American model”? Symbolically, the class ended with the autobiography of the crucial Afro-American historian, John Hope Franklin, [A Mirror to America](#), about racial segregation, in universities and elsewhere, and the deployment of his formidable will and scholarship to fight it.

The course taught me, before and during Covid, about a new generation of students. They mostly accept diversity, but may not always want to talk about it in a larger group. They are aware of climate change. They are wedded and welded to their screens. I permitted laptops and/or mobiles, because I wanted the students consult St. Google where relevant. An example: I would ask them to look up the dates of modern technologies---railroads, elevators (especially relevant when we had a classroom on an 8th floor), typewriters, the machine gun, computers, the I-phone. But the dependence on screens affects, not only social relations, but ways of reading and writing. Of course, as I could tear my hair out over their papers, they could look askance at my computer skills.

I dream hazily about another interdisciplinary course: on the literacies that shape and indeed control our moment. One section would be on what I call “keyboard literacies,” reading and writing. The second section would be on “pictorial literacy,” picture-making, be it a single still or, to be old-fashioned, moving pictures. The third section would be on “sound literacies,” how we speak, make noise, sing or create musics, and how we listen. The fourth would be “electronic literacies,” the social media. This would include an analysis of the triple nature of the social media: they connect people; they control people both through algorithms and Alexa; ⁷ and, unless squashed, they are platforms for resistance to control. .

Two final sections would be connected. One would be on “mind-shaping literacies,” the languages that seek to persuade people to buy something, or to vote for a particular candidate, or to believe in a particular person or set of truths, be the “truth” that a certain soap makes you cleaner and more fragrant than any another soap, or be the “truth” that one religion makes you cleaner and more spiritually fragrant than any other religion. Building on this would be a final section on the literacies of movement (alone or in groups), its control, and surveillance. A question for all six courses would be: who is literate, who is not, and who has power in a particular literacy. Possessing literacy or being dispossessed of that same literacy functions to maintain inequalities. With courage, people, if dispossessed of one literacy, use another in the struggle against an often savage inequality. I think, for example, of the history of enslavement in the United States.

All scholars can dream of new curricula and syllabi. We should. Let me end as I began with a double-headed message: I am so grateful to have been invited to be among you to talk about curricula. I am also passionate in the urgency of my plea for concerned scholars to defend the university and values, as CEU has done, and I am so respectful of those, again like CEU, who offer such defenses at their peril.

⁷ Alexa, a digital creature, is an in-house mechanism on some systems that surveys and promises to gratify domestic wants and needs. I first met her in a living room overlooking the Hudson River in New York when my host said casually, “Alexa, play us Ella Fitzgerald.” The sounds of that superb singer then filled the room.