Ostrom and Liberal Education: The College Classroom as Knowledge Commons

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1. Introduction

The reach and depth of student learning is an increasingly pressing issue in U.S. higher education (Bok 2006). In Academically Adrift: Limited Learning on College Campuses, Richard Arum and Josipa Roksa (2011: 36) report that nearly half of their 2300-student sample showed no significant gains in critical thinking, complex reasoning, and writing skills during the first two years of college. Their results corroborate similar findings within specific disciplines, for example in economics (Walstad and Algood 1999, Hansen, Salemi, and Siegfried 2002, Salemi and Siegfried 1999).

While casual explanations of these trends point to distracted faculty or unmotivated students, Arum and Roksa point to evolved cultural norms that shape teacher and student expectations and behaviors. In their view, learning resources are chronically untapped due to the prevalence of what higher education scholar George Kuh describes as a “disengagement compact” between teachers and students (Kuh 2003: 28).

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There seems to be a breakdown of shared responsibility for learning – on the part of faculty members who allow students to get by with far less than maximum effort, and on the part of students who are not taking full advantage of the resources institutions provide.

Physics educator Carl Wieman adds an epistemic thread to the Kuh/Arum/Roksa diagnosis, focusing on the gap between good intentions and bad results. Wieman claims that the majority of physics educators evince a “sincere desire to have their students learn physics and appreciate its usefulness and inherent intellectual beauty” (Wieman 2007). Yet limited learning persists. Why? Wieman points to the “curse of knowledge”: the fact that “when you know something, it is extremely difficult to think about it from the perspective of someone who does not know it” (ibid.). In the case of physics education, Wieman argues, “well intentioned physicists are achieving poor educational results because the ‘curse of knowledge’ makes it very difficult for them to understand how physics is best learned by a novice student, or to accurately evaluate that learning.” Hence, Wieman concludes, “it is dangerous, and often profoundly incorrect, to think about student learning based on what appears best to faculty members, as opposed to what has been verified with students” (ibid.).

In this paper, I employ Elinor Ostrom’s unique perspective on common resource governance to shed fresh light on the “limited learning” problem, building upon the historical-institutional-epistemic insights of Wieman, Kuh, Arum, Roksa, et al. Though Ostrom has never, to my knowledge, extended her analysis to teaching and learning per se, I believe the college classroom (the space of learning, broadly defined) is aptly described as a common pool resource (CPR), i.e., a knowledge commons. My motivating premise is that while many college educators subscribe to this “commons” perspective in principle, they unwittingly undermine its integrity – and students’ learning – by habitually enacting the practices and assumptions of “expert-centered” education – or by imagining that the alternative to expert-centeredness is a student-centeredness that in many instances is equally corrosive of learning.

Professor Ostrom’s work, along with an extensive body of educational literature (Campbell and Smith 1997, Finkel 2000, Tagg 2003, and many others), gives rise to an alternative view in which teachers and students can be understood as cooperating, not as expert and novice, and not as equal partners either, but as co-occupants and co-explorers of a polycentric knowledge commons – a shared space
of knowing. To reveal the distinctive insights of an Ostrom-based approach, I will draw jointly from Ostrom’s work and from the rich perspective of my favorite former Beloiter, Parker J. Palmer, whose spectacular book, *The Courage to Teach* (Palmer 1998), literally changed by life when I stumbled upon it twelve years ago. Lastly, I will illustrate the value of an Ostrom view of the college classroom as knowledge commons by reflecting briefly on the U.S. tradition of academic freedom as an evolving dialogue on the rights and duties of instructors and students within the shared space of inquiry. The historical-institutional complexity of this ongoing process of “getting the institutions right” suggests the salience of Ostrom’s approach – indeed, it suggests the superiority of a “knowledge commons” view of the college classroom over the “marketplace of ideas” conception that has undergirded legal definitions and defenses of academic freedom since the early 20th century (U.S. Supreme Court 1919, 1967).

2. The Expert-Centered Classroom

When I think of an expert-centered learning space, I think of Captain Georg Von Trapp and his children in *The Sound of Music* (2000 [1965]). Before Maria arrives on the scene, the Captain holds his children and their ideas at arm’s length. The family is organized as a monocentric platoon, governed by the Captain and his whistle. This enduring image of the Captain and his children maps closely onto Palmer’s depiction of the expert-centered classroom (Palmer 1998), shown in Figure 1. In this model of education, teacher and students are cast as expert and amateur, respectively. The knowledge conveyed from teacher to student consists mostly of pre-digested arguments and conclusions from other experts. As the unidirectional arrows suggest, students are assumed to possess no knowledge worthy of sharing. The teaching process is conceived as a one-way flow of information, from teacher to student (ibid.).

To see what is missing from this picture, consider these statements from two educational philosophers, American John Dewey and Hungarian Laszlo Versényi:

No thought, no idea, can possibly be conveyed as an idea from one person to another. When it is told, it is, to the one to whom it was told, another given fact, not an idea. The communication may stimulate the other person to realize the question for himself and to think out a like idea, or it may smother his intellectual interest and suppress his dawning effort at thought. But what he directly gets cannot be an idea. Only by
wrestling with the conditions of the problem at first hand, seeking and finding his own way out, does he think (Dewey 1916: 159).

Real education aims at imparting knowledge rather than opinion ... [K]nowledge cannot be handed over ready-made but has to be appropriated by the knower ... [and] that appropriation is only possible through one’s own search ... [T]o make a man aware of his ignorance is to start a man on the search for knowledge (Versényi 1963: 117).

Dewey’s point (standing on the shoulders of Socrates, Augustine, and other giants of liberal education) is that direct instruction is fruitless. Like all forms of help, teaching works indirectly, by helping people (students) to help themselves (Ellerman 2005). Versényi states it plainly: knowledge is ownership. To know something is to make it your own – to incorporate it into your web of prior knowledge.

If, as I believe, Dewey, Versényi, and the larger Socratic tradition are right about the fundamental nature of knowledge and learning, then we can identify two glaring absences in the ‘expert-centered’ model:
(1) Knowledge production: No knowledge is *produced* in the expert-centered classroom. Teachers are authorized to deliver knowledge, and students to receive it, but the knowledge itself originates upstream. Neither teacher nor student is regarded as a knowledge producer.

(2) Learning community: There is no *mutual* (two-way) learning in the expert-centered classroom, neither among students nor between students and teacher. As Palmer puts it, “Teachers and students gather in the same room at the same time not to experience community but simply to keep the teacher from having to say things more than once” (Palmer 1998: 116). The expert-centered space is devoid of learning *community*.

The expert-centered vision thus suppresses the epistemic and sociological foundations of liberal education—education geared to the development of students’ intellectual autonomy.

To forestall misunderstanding, I am not proposing the elimination of all lectures, the disavowal of teachers’ subject expertise, or that classrooms become shrines to students’ pre-existing knowledge and ignorance. Nor am I advocating a “touchy feely” learning process (Colander 2004). My point is to suggest that the roots the limited learning problems we observe across disciplines and institutions today may lie partially in our tacit conceptions of knowledge, teaching, and learning themselves, and to ask: How might we recast the expert-centered picture, to recognize the communal and individual aspects of knowledge production that are essential to liberal learning?

Likewise, the “autonomy” I associate with liberal education is not about self-sufficiency but intellectual self-possession—the willingness and ability to assume responsibility for one’s own thinking. The process of becoming a self-possessed thinker is classically described by William Perry’s nine-step ladder of intellectual and ethical development, in which the highest rungs involve taking responsibility for what we think and who we are—the ability to “take responsibility for one’s own stand and negotiate—with respect—with [others]” (Perry 1970: 39-40).

The most compelling justifications for the expert-centered approach focus on its efficiency: the ratio of educational benefit to cost. However, if we take seriously the idea that “no thought, no idea, can possibly be conveyed as an idea from one person to another” and that “knowledge cannot be handed over ready-made but has to be appropriated by the knower,” then we must recognize (apropos of *Academically Adrift*, et al.) that the efficiency of top-down education may prove illusory if it does not enable students to appropriate ideas for themselves.
So how else might we envision and enact the college classroom to address the problem of limited learning? In the case of the Von Trapps, Maria’s loving and courageous interventions transformed the family into a polycentric learning community. Their transformation was in part the result of Maria’s passionate pedagogy—beginning with those unforgettable picnic scenes in the Alps, where the children confess, “We don’t know any songs.” The impact of Maria’s teaching was then magnified and multiplied, as music itself became a living, integrative force within the family. As Maria became embedded in each of their lives, and vice versa, each of the Von Trapps (including the Captain) discovered his or her own musical voice, and music becomes their shared space of learning, trusting, playing, and ultimately escaping the Nazi occupation.

I have loved this film since I first saw it at age three, and have come to love it even more in my professorial life—as an unusually vivid account of the nature and power of liberal education. The conceptual architecture of the Von Trapp’s polycentric learning community is well described by Palmer’s notion of the subject-centered classroom (Palmer 1998: 103-104; see Figure 2). Palmer describes this vision of the learning process as subject-centered because the focal point is not the teacher-expert but the living “subject”: the archetypal phenomena or enduring questions that animate each learning community. The two-way arrows linking the knowers to the known reflect Palmer’s emphasis on the symbiotic relationship between the living subject and the community that seeks to know it. Learners impart their perceptions and classifications onto the subject; the subject, in turn, emits feedback to the investigators. Equally significant, Palmer classifies both teachers and students as “knowers.” He does not assume that students and teachers possess equal knowledge or authority; yet he places them in parallel positions as “knowers” vis-à-vis the subject matter.

Ostrom’s CPR perspective affirms and extends Palmer’s view of a polycentric learning community in several significant ways. First, Ostrom would classify teachers and students as joint appropriators of a common pool resource (Ostrom 1990, 2005). Second, she would highlight the two related yet distinct common pool resources that exist in academic learning communities: the space of inquiry and the subject itself. The former flows directly from Ostrom’s understanding of competitive markets and other spaces of voluntary cooperation as common pool resources, as in her well-known claim that “[a] competitive market—the
epitome of private institutions—is itself a public good” (1990: 15). Third, Ostrom would assign to teachers two essential tasks: (a) to give students “epistemic standing” in the learning community by bringing the subject to life and introducing students to the rights and responsibilities of membership in the knowledge commons, and (b) apropos of her abiding emphasis on trust (Ostrom 2009), to establish rules and norms that reduce the affective transaction costs of participating in the public life of the learning community and thereby increase students’ willingness to risk “exposing [their] ignorance, challenging [other people’s] facts or interpretations, and [making themselves] vulnerable to the scrutiny of others” (Palmer 1990: 15). Lastly, Ostrom would remind us that in the perennial quest for better methods of CPR governance, there are “no panaceas” (Ostrom 2009). In the present context, this means she would counsel against a search for pedagogical formulas or “best practices” to which all educators should aspire.

Figure 2: The Subject-Centered Classroom (Palmer 1998, 100)
4. Comparing the Two Models

In addition to the visible differences (monocentric vs. polycentric, expert- vs. subject-centered), the most salient contrasts between “platoon” and “commons” approaches to the college classroom are:

(1) Epistemology

Where and by whom is knowledge produced? Is knowledge produced only by professional researchers upstream from the classroom, or do classroom amateurs (including teachers) also engage in forms of intellectual production that count as knowledge?

(2) Pedagogy

What does it mean to teach? Is teaching fundamentally an act of instruction or delivery (imparting knowledge)? Or is it better described as epistemic system design—the attempt to craft or cultivate decentralized learning processes that yield (for each learner and for the class as a whole) “a kind of ‘intelligence’ that is far greater than the sum of its parts” (Lavoie 1995: 125)?

A growing body of education literature across numerous disciplines suggests that a well-governed knowledge commons generates more learning, in general, than an expert-centered classroom (Campbell and Smith 1997, Finkel 2000, Tagg 2003, Wieman and Perkins 2005, Calder 2006, Wieman 2007, Mazur 2009, Hanford 2011, de Vise 2012). The Ostrom framework lends social-scientific depth to this literature by illuminating the unique advantages and difficulties of a classroom knowledge commons. In particular, Ostrom’s approach underscores the delicate dialectic of liberty and community. As reflected in her “design principles” for “robust, long-enduring, common-pool resource institutions” (1990: 90-102), Ostrom is keenly aware that effective CPR governance requires negotiation of a sustainable balance between individual freedom and accountability, on one hand, and communal norms of reciprocity and trust, on the other. In Palmerian terms, a generative learning community must be “hospitable but charged”: hospitable in ways that inspire trust and respect (for self, others, and subject) and charged by the presence a living subject that sparks one’s desire to know, by the assignment of academic freedoms and duties to all members of the learning community, and by a steady flow of feedback from other learners (including the teacher) and from the subject matter itself.
5. Academic Freedom

Ostrom’s CPR framework offers a final lesson that is deeply relevant to the college classroom, namely: the idea that common pool resource management is a complex historical process that unfolds over time and across multiple scales of social organization. As a case in point, the U.S. tradition of academic freedom represents an outstanding example of a governance system “arranged in a nested, polycentric system from small to very large” (Ostrom 2011: 371) which has emerged and evolved over the past hundred years to define, protect, and manage the common pool resources of college faculty members and students (AAUP 1915, 1940, 1967, 1987, 2007; AAC&U 2006). Indeed, though I cannot pursue the argument here, I believe an Ostrom-based concept of the college classroom as knowledge commons could provide a more robust foundation for academic freedom than the notion of the classroom as a “marketplace of ideas” (U.S. Supreme Court 1919, 1967).

The “knowledge commons” view of the college classroom was largely understood by John Dewey and others who began to articulate the rights and responsibilities of academic freedom for university teachers and students in the early 20th century. Dewey placed particular emphasis on the notion of the college, or indeed any school, as “a form of community life” (Dewey 1929: 293) —a view he contrasts to the expert-centered view of schools, e.g., arguing that the “neglect of the idea of the school as a form of social life” gives rise to educational philosophies and practices wherein “far too much of the stimulus and control proceeds from the teacher” (ibid.).

Ostrom’s work foregrounds the complex ecology of CPR governance. With regard to academic freedom, her approach would be alert to the vulnerability of the classroom knowledge commons to imbalances in the academic property rights asserted by teachers or students, e.g., professors who construe academic freedom one-sidedly as a doctrine of professorial private property, or student rights advocates who contend that students should not be forced to learn anything that violates their religious, political, or ethical preferences. At the same time, Ostrom would urge us to take the long view when assessing these periodic imbalances. The classroom commons is continually evolving, she would remind us, in response to various pressures within and beyond the academy—all part of the “difficult, time-consuming, conflict-invoking process” of “getting the institutions right” (Ostrom 1990: 14). Our challenge as teachers and academic citizens is to
join in the ongoing renegotiation of the rules (formal and informal) that define “academic freedom,” seeking to ensure that they enable rather than disable the possibilities for liberal education.

6. If Learning is Knowledge Production, Teaching Can’t Be Mere Distribution

To say that the college classroom is a knowledge commons might sound like “mere pedagogy”; but really it is much more. It is an invitation to step back and reassess the way we think about and organize our colleges and universities.

The expert-centered model is part of a larger set of assumptions about knowledge in which scholarship is defined as the production of new knowledge while teaching is defined as the retail distribution of existing knowledge—an epistemically sterile process wherein no new knowledge is produced. This research/teaching hierarchy is strongly articulated to PhD students and in the job market, where a serious commitment to teaching is tantamount to settling for second best (Walstad and Allgood 2005).

In an Ostrom/Palmer model, however, learning is production: the production of new knowledge by students and teachers as they appropriate new ideas. The learning-centered classroom, like the commercial marketplace, is not merely a site for the retail distribution; it is a locus of individual and collaborative discovery.

If colleges and universities are to serve as catalysts for the wealth and well-being of nations (and indeed to fulfill their own stated missions), then they (we) should return the classroom knowledge commons to its proper place at the center of our academic enterprise.
References


