A Job Is Like a Fish

“I was on my own path, my own journey, an American journey where I could think for myself, decide for myself, define happiness for myself. That’s what we do in this country. That’s the American Dream.”

—Paul Ryan, vice-presidential nominee
Speech at the Republican National Convention
August 29, 2012

Politics aside, I have something in common with Congressman Ryan: I believe in the goal of a self-directed life. I believe that this is a fundamental human capacity and desire. Ryan and I apparently agree that people can, through effort and opportunity, make something of themselves.

I suspect Ryan would also agree with me that that our society should foster this capacity, because more self-direction is good for both individuals and societies. He may even agree with me that this is exactly the central role of education: fostering the human capacity for thoughtful self-direction.

Education intended to achieve this goal is known as “liberal education.” Ryan’s own first-rate liberal education presumably had a role in fostering his capacity for independent thinking.1 And though it might be politically unwise for Ryan to use the L-word in a positive light today, the phrase has nothing to do with political ideology. Rather, it describes the kind of education designed to develop a citizen (a free person, more or less) in classical antiquity—as opposed to the vocational training that might have been provided to a slave. The word liberal here signifies that such education is necessary to liberty.

No reader of EDUCAUSE Review needs a primer on the upheavals that threaten higher education today: student debt, unemployed graduates, cumbersome government regulations, disruptive innovations like MOOCs—the list goes on. It often feels as if the sky is falling, and we ask: what can we do to save our colleges and universities? That’s a reasonable question, but I’d rather ask it differently. Given the present climate, how can we use our institutions to best serve society?

Give someone a fish, and you feed them for a day. Teach someone to fish, and you feed them for as long as there are fish around. Once upon a time, knowing how to fish or farm might have set someone up for life. The Industrial Revolution and urbanization changed that by creating a market for skilled labor, where “knowing how to fish” meant having job skills that provided similar security in the new economy. Factory, mill, and office workers could “fish” for themselves, and only a small fraction of society needed the capacities nurtured at elite colleges.

Now, rapid change and global competition have changed job-specific skills from a lifelong to a short-term solution. What will it mean, in the future, to “know how to fish”? What will it take to thrive in times of rapid change, and how can we equip students to succeed in an economy that we cannot yet understand? I am skeptical about the staying power of an education focused purely on being able to quickly land a job. This is not to downplay the importance of a job but, rather, to note that these days, landing a job is more like landing a fish than it is like learning how to fish. One job—or one skill set—will not feed someone for life.

The middle class is eroding, and in the United States the working class is faring even worse. As more people are cast adrift from reasonably predictable economic futures, the capacities of mind that they will need to prosper are exactly those that we have historically considered the prerogative of just a few. They will need to work with ambiguity, complexity, difference, and change. They will need habits of inquiry and reflection. Most important, they will need a facility for lifelong learning. In short, they will need exactly those capacities that we seek to develop through a liberal education.2

It may seem that the sky is falling on higher education. Yet in spite of all the headlines and the battle lines, in spite of MOOCs and badges and the many other products of this tumultuous time, the most important question we should ask about the future of higher education is not whether it is free or expensive, online or face-to-face, for-profit or not, done in small or large classes, uses accredited or experimental approaches. Each of these models has merit, and many will have places in the future ecosystem of higher education. The critical question concerns the role of education that merely imparts the skills necessary to land a fish/job, versus education that also develops the capacities of mind necessary to support the lifelong mastery of fishing—economically, culturally, politically—in changing seas.

How do we serve the multitudes with the kind of education that was once reserved for the elite? How do we bring liberal education to learners whose lives and responsibilities preclude a massive investment of time and treasure? As technologists in higher education, we are key players: technology represents...
our best hope to remove the barriers of exclusivity, residency, and dollars.

The revolution of the interactive web was enabled by technology. The societal meaning of this revolution is still manifesting. When the mist clears, I hope we will find that it has little to do with “big data” and everything to do with individual empowerment. Details will vary, but we can identify principles to consider as we select, deploy, promote, and teach technologies. Here is my current list of principles:

■ **Choose empowerment over control.** Tasked with limiting costs and increasing scale, we are often tempted to focus on efficiency and standardization. But learning—particularly learning that leads to the development of higher-order skills like critical thinking—is a personal and messy business that suffers in a box. To help learners in what Randy Bass calls the “post-course era,” we need to choose technologies that focus on learning, rather than on teaching and management.

■ **Be open.** Open source, open standards, and open educational resources have advantages that are reasonably translatable to the bottom line, but openness can mean much more. Consider analytics. Conceived as “big data,” analytics can give an institution the tools to predict and improve student success. This is good. But why shouldn’t the learner own the analytics—or at the very least have access to them? Analytics, reconceived as personal data, could give learners the tools to predict or improve success by themselves. Is education something we do to students, or is it something we help students do for themselves?

■ **Enable connections.** Part of the magic of a great teacher is nurturing engagement. Technology can help or hinder. Today, even two courses taken concurrently in the same department may be experienced by a learner as being in very separate technological silos. That’s a far cry from helping students connect their learning experiences to the rest of their world. Much value occurs in building connections between courses and between courses and the rest of life.

■ **Promote reflection.** Lifelong learning is not just a capacity; it is a habit. A learning environment that supports and promotes reflection can help learners develop capacities that go far beyond content mastery. Darren Cambridge, writing about e-portfolios, noted that we have a choice to use them in ways that are sustaining or disruptive. I’m voting for disruptive.

■ **Make it safe to fail.** Humans learn very effectively through experimentation. Want to promote the use of a technology? Make playing around with the technology simple and safe. Even better, make it fun.

■ **Support rich and meaningful collaboration.** It is the age of the team—of collaboration and co-creation. United we stand! (Divided is how we are graded.) Tools that support rich and free-flowing collaboration, that are available on demand through self-service, and that are free from control bring into the academy communication and collaboration patterns that are already valued in the social network and the workplace.

These principles are not easy to enact. They do not come with guarantees. If some of them look like lessons from our rapidly proliferating competitors, that is no coincidence. Environmental threats are challenging us to rethink old habits, to let go and leap forward. Something is falling on us, but I don’t think it’s the sky. I think it is the frail, makeshift wall of a lean-to in which we have huddled for too long. We can see the sky of our future through the cracks, and it is beautiful. So grab a chunk of the revolution and help reveal some more sky. It is time to let go of some practices that are already doomed by changes in technology and the marketplace, to venture out of our meager shelter and serve far more people, far better than we ever could before. It is time to lead.

**Notes**

1. Ryan’s alma mater, Miami University of Ohio, placed great emphasis on liberal education during the time when he attended and still does today. See “Liberal Education at Miami,” http://www.miami.muohio.edu/liberal-ed/.

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