The Pleasure of Product and Process: Poetry and Philosophy—A Few Things We Learned

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When we began to plan an integrative course, one of the few notions that we agreed upon was that the poet and the philosopher share a passion for inquiry. Both begin somewhere in the search for truth to explore how life reveals its meaning. The poet does this through an exploration of the concrete details of daily existence, wooing with words the insights that poetic process discovers and expresses. The poet discovers meaning in tactile and palpable experience, and expresses it in language graced artfully by images, metaphor, and forms. The poet sees and expresses the inherent value and beauty in the things of our sensed world. Frost calls the result, when it's right, "a momentary stay against confusion" (Frost, "The Figure a Poem Makes" 125-128). The philosopher pursues with words, but also with ideas and logical thought, the insights that dialectic process uncovers and expresses.

The philosopher discovers (or at least tries to discover) meaning and truth beyond the fleeting, tactile, raw elements of sensuous experience, in order to express it in language made clear and explicit by the forms, propositions, and universal content of such ideals as value and beauty in

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their primary nature as objectively real, not merely in their secondary representation as things of our sensed world. Plato calls the result, when it's right, "wisdom" (*The Republic*, Book V).

John Dixon probably wasn't the first to observe that language is at the center of all learning activity, all discovery. In the strictest sense, all of us, whether we are teaching history, math, literature, poetry, or philosophy, are teachers of language. As we explore our individual disciplines with our students, we attempt to nurture our students in our area of specialization, often in the manner of a parent or coach urging the individual to say it, to rethink it, to rewrite it one more time. It doesn't matter what the subject or discipline may be; anything that we introduce to our students that is new material involves the instructor and learner in a nurturing process. The parent, professor, or coach reviews the learner's effort and says, "Look, you're fine here in this description, movement, or historical association, sketch, theorem, or argument, but there in the follow-up, follow-through, just try this, or maybe you can move just a bit more that way. . . want to try?" While the student engages in the process, the instructor may intervene as audience, confidant, coach, or whatever is required by the nature of the project undertaken. When the instructor thus intervenes at timely places in the process, discovery becomes possible. The "what if," thoughtfully explored, stimulates discovery, growth, and personal satisfaction. Teaching a learner the fine points in a discipline can be a gentle art when the instructor looks on sympathetically while a task or assignment is being drafted.

The importance of this concept was noted by Dixon in his report on the landmark study, the Anglo-American Conference on the Teaching of English (Dartmouth Seminar):

> If I can work with students sharing the responsibility for planning our joint enterprise [Dixon notes] . . . the transactions they get involved in will offer them new opportunities to master a wide range of participant roles. Then there should be room for me to act as a sympathetic and

> critical audience, as the need arises. This means thinking again about the best ways of broadening and generalizing the insights . . . .

This process approach requires that instructors and learners engage in the process as participants, not merely as passive observers.

When we designed our integrative course for students at Plymouth State College, we were at the same time exploring some of the integrative possibilities in our own disciplines of philosophy and the art of poetry. The course that eventually emerged we titled, "Philosophy and Poetry: In Search of the Universal." In that course, along with "content" in philosophy and poetry—which we took to include literature, music, art, nature, and (boldly) opera—we believed an important and integral feature of the course should be an emphasis on process. That belief was rooted in part in our urge to engage in some of the fun of learning along with whatever students we could lure to the course. It was a concept, a pedagogical common ground, that we discovered, and which we hoped could be shared as a guiding approach to our own respective academic responsibilities and interests. We knew, of course, that the focus on process had already had a revolutionary impact on the participants in the Dartmouth Seminar and had influenced English studies and classroom practices increasingly over these past two decades. Research studies, along with the Seminar, had challenged successfully the long-held belief that what we ought do as instructors is to pass on an inherited body of knowledge—a package or corpus—intact to our students. Thus, as Dixon reported,

> It [was] for this reason that the . . . [Dartmouth] Seminar moved from an attempt to define what English is—a question that throws the emphasis on . . . skills, and proficiencies, set books, and the heritage—to a definition by process, a description of the activities we engage in through language. (7)

Still, there were crucial issues that we needed to confront and resolve.

For almost two decades, during visiting poets' workshops, at readings, in the College Union coffee shop, in corridors, in our offices, and over Harp's lager during our annual two weeks of summer in New Hampshire's mountain country, we had carried on a collegial debate concerning poetry and philosophy, education and life. Without ever a thought that we might someday teach in the same classroom, we played verbal thrust and parry: "The universe is only perceived and understood through its expression of the concrete"; "Nonsense, the concrete is but a temporary scaffolding, a shaky and tentative starting point, from which if we persist we may eventually, by abstraction, arrive at a true understanding of the universe."

Philosophers' big chunks of thought don't fit into lyric poems. While it's true that philosophers sometimes articulate world scale notions surprisingly convincingly, as an English instructor, I find the vagueness unsettling. At times I have followed along carefully for a while and have become charmed by an overwhelmingly exciting abstraction. That abstract always turned out to be one that not only became ultimately ambivalent (predictably) but also an idea that appeared to have no referent—no dirt under the fingernails, no cat fur on the lip, no orange peels on the wood stove. So, not only did I end up confused concerning where the philosopher's logic had taken me, I couldn't any longer find the beginning: no burnt-orange-peel-cat-fur-nails-to-clip-clean stuff. Another world of thought, not mine.

But the fairness, decency, persistence, learned, and good-natured character of my colleague's side of the matter—the philosopher's side—calmed my reluctance to hear, and encouraged my willingness to explore with him, our different approaches to the "what if?" of our perspectives. We explored, appraised, and brought together a wide variety of material for the course. Along with that, we devised pedagogical strategies based on assumptions that we came to agree upon. The first and most important of these was that all members of the class would engage extensively in languaging—in speaking, listening, writing, and reading—with as much regularity and as much challenge and fun as we could draw out of the material and our own passion for our disciplines,

and from the design of the course itself. Our next belief was that, just as people learn to appreciate music in a special, heightened manner when they study music theory and practice a musical instrument at the same time, so also the same might be true in other areas of esthetic and intellectual endeavor. In other words, we hoped that through the same underlying principle—by writing as well as reading poetry and philosophy—our students might experience a similar personal and educational growth.

We, therefore, developed and implemented course strategies and activities that served to engage, induce exploration, and generate lively discussion about the students' responses to their original poetry, to paintings, and musical compositions, as well as their critical responses to essays in philosophy. We believed that reading and discussion, appreciation and reflection should be followed by active engagement in the actual process of writing poems, expressing philosophical ideas, and assessing philosophical arguments. We hoped that having the students combine musical and artistic composition with other forms of expression might lead them to create personally meaningful statements reflecting mood, attitudes, values, and ideas in poetry and philosophy in a culminating group presentation.

To avoid a haphazard or potentially confusing jumble of poetry and philosophic pieces, we chose an array of materials that would reflect a cycle of specific lifethemes. The idea was to explore themes that universally characterize actual human experience, themes which have perennially found expression in poetry and philosophy, music and art. Our syllabus for the course therefore focused on youth, love, ambition, conflict, war, death, time, change, and the future. In the context of these themes, we asked them to reflect on their daily challenges, their responses to assignments, musings, reflections on their feelings, on cultural field trips we took, and on our classroom activities. They were asked to keep their thoughts in journals. While many other activities which we used could be described here, the use of student journals and their potential validity in any course across the curriculum will best serve to illustrate our finding. Some of

the most rewarding insights we gained concerning the manner in which some of the students experienced our activities evolved from their journal entries.

One example that illustrates a developing integrative sensitivity is an entry from the journal of Ed Bunnell following our reading and discussion of selections from Toffler's *Future Shock.* In his entry, Ed expresses his grasp of the concepts of accelerated time and the pressure of high velocity change in modern culture:

> Time is so mysterious, we waste it as much as, if not more than, we value it. My typical day starts at 5:30 a.m.
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> > Baseball practice, shower, classes, lunchtime, meeting important people [friends, getting to be like family!], studying, research in the library, projects . . . on it goes and all the while I try to please the most important person in my life, Beth. She understands, but still fumes if I'm not with her. Dinner at 5:00, study, more baseball practice, and then to my job 9:00 to midnight. Lucky to be in bed by 1:00 a.m.—which means five hours sleep, tops!
>
> This life has taught me a lot in a very short time! To wit:
>
> 1. Time is money or something of equivalent value—maybe grades, or something even more valuable, like time with Beth. . .
> 2. You'd be amazed what a well-rested body can do for you!
> 3. Wasting time—at least a little each day—is probably a very healthy thing to do.
> 4. Music has a powerful role in my life. I don't know what I'd do if I became deaf. Music in the background, it's like a security blanket. But now that I think about it, any sound

should be treasured. . . .

Ed's stocktaking in his journal entry may appear typical. It may not be. The dimension that we found pleasing was Ed's heightened awareness of the value of time in his life. Another member of the class, David Krause, waxes philosophical as he records his perception of both time and change as he recalls an item from his high school yearbook:

> The Zen notion of the whirlwind (stay at the center and grasp for such of the truth as is visible) seems, more and more, a bit of wisdom that transcends time. But I think of *Future Shock:* information anxiety, the high-speed, watch-distorting jet set, all of modern society and its flurry, whirl, and stress. It demands a response: either ride the crest of its chaotic spiraling turbulence, or... try for the center. I'm reminded of something I wrote for my high school yearbook,
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> > It has been hypothesized that a genius is one with the ability to step out of the universe, stand back and observe.... We watched and laughed at what we saw. That fine line between genius and insanity? They say two minds sharing the same illusion is proof of reality.
>
> I no longer wish for the ability to step out. I think I would now sooner wish for the position at the center.

We were delighted by the reflective mood that discussing Toffler had evoked, but we were especially pleased that for Dave, the reflections resulted in a synthesis and personal growth.

One of the women in the class, Kim Kamieniecki, encouraged along with the rest of the class to attend a Woody Herman concert that had come to our campus, later wrote this entry in her journal:

> Wow! What a day. Just came home from the "Woody Herman's Young Thundering Heard" concert. Spectacular! Throughout the whole concert my toes were tapping, my hands were clapping, and I couldn't stop smiling. "Apple Honey" and the "Brothers Four" were my favorite pieces along with "Samba's Song." These songs gave off so much energy, I could have run ten miles after the show.
>
> Being a disk jockey and a great listener of current and past rock 'n' roll, I thought I was satisfied with my musical experience. But after attending this invigorating ensemble, I feel much more fulfilled. In fact, in my lifetime I had heard a very limited amount of jazz.
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> At the conclusion of the concert the conductor said, "I hope we inspired all the young musicians out there and satisfied all the fans." Well, the only problem I have with that is that I am neither a musician nor a fan—just simply an individual who was touched and inspired through this one concert. It was an experience I will never forget and I plan on attending many more jazz concerts. As a matter of fact, I also plan on doing a little research on jazz and thereby starting a jazz show on our station, WPCR.

We were as excited to see Kim broadening her musical tastes as she apparently was in hearing the Herman Band. Jeff LaBombard's journal observations provide one further illustration of a heightened awareness that integrates some poetic and philosophic insights at a personal level:

> Wednesday's are particularly busy. Four classes and other time constraints. Difficult to relax, stress level up—I find the need for exercise,

> some sort of stress relief. As my knowledge and desire to learn grow, time available for action awareness (exercise) decreases. I work out now in the early morning, so my time for sleep has been cut. Yet, I haven't felt any ill effects—so far I feel strangely at one with myself. Awesome. And I'm not really dissatisfied with my busy schedule. I enjoy it; if I start to dislike it, then it will be time to decide what to leave out. [But in the meantime, who's afraid of Prufrock??]

We found that the journal, as a pedagogical tool, provided the students with an excellent medium for private, reflective thought. In their journal writing, they integrated their experiences and the content of the course with much greater personal understanding and sensitivity. Even in those instances in which the poetry (e.g., Eliot's "Prufrock") and philosophy (e.g., Bacon's "Novum Organum") seemed difficult or complex in the classroom, students made remarkable discoveries when reflecting with their pens in their journals. Perhaps the journal writing was experienced as a private time for thought, but the students were made aware from the beginning that they would be sharing those private reflections with all of us.

Such private time for thinking, and the need to express those thoughts to our class as an audience, motivated their care in jotting down their personal responses to our discussions of assigned readings and class activities. The private writing activity, audience-oriented in this way, engendered, it appears, a significant synthesis. We are encouraged—no, convinced—that such results are possible in any writing across the curriculum effort. The content of any curricular offering may be treated as a process of discovery when students are asked to engage in the writing process regularly. Reading, analysis, discussion can be accompanied by disciplined thought and reflections on content through imaginatively designed writing tasks of all kinds.

Still another assumption that we held was that presentation of poems,

essays, musical or artistic compositions, or other creations the students might produce—either individually or through group effort—should develop and be understood as integral to their search for the meaningful, the valuable, and if possible, the universal in human experience. This last assumption also focused heavily on the "doing" as well as the "done." Our emphasis attempted to balance engagement in process with appreciation of the product. Experiencing the process of creation was at least as important as viewing, reading, and analyzing classics.

The aim was to motivate and challenge the abilities of our students to integrate their own knowledge and humanity with an awareness of standards established by significant classical, modern, and contemporary works. As an explicit goal, this was embodied in the design of a culminating semester project. The students were to work with one another in groups engaging in a process aimed toward completion of an integrative multimedia presentation. There were four groups of 4-5 students each, and in each group, individual creativity had to be incorporated by negotiation into the final presentation. All members of the group took part in its performance, which was videotaped and subsequently critiqued. We were very pleased with the results, so we not only videotaped their work, but documented it in a class "yearbook." This effort contributed considerably toward development of an *esprit de corps* that greatly enhanced the students' course experiences. The four group projects that evolved were:

> *Nature and the Cycle of Love*, a sensitive treatment of the beauty of Nature's seasons and their analogy to the beauty and sadness of the many kinds of human love;
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> *Change: The 50's and 60's*, an insightful review of the values, feelings and philosophies of youth in two critical decades past;
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> *The Demise of Intellect*, an incisive satire of the rise of commercialism, selfishness, purposelessness,

and decline of educational and intellectual standards; and

Ireland: Love and War, a striking contrast between idyllic Ireland, its poetical wordview and lust for life juxtaposed against the stark reality of its internal strife and bloody internecine war.

The first of these projects was produced on location at a beautiful old horse farm in the foothills of the White Mountains. We had been concerned about the feasibility of this project—particularly logistics and the problem of having it videotaped. It turned out, to our relief and pleasure, to be quite successful. The other three projects were produced and videotaped in the College TV studio. An authentic Irish Stew was served by the last group as the finishing touch to their project. The work on student productions enhanced the feeling of community among the students and ourselves that had been building throughout the semester. They had worked with one another, and we with them as "coaches" and guides. As a community of learners, we all participated in various discussions, periods of musical appreciation, poetry readings, philosophical discussions, and field trips. One after another, the groups startled us with the amount of content they had integrated creatively and effectively in their final projects.

In the last session of the course, we viewed, analyzed, and discussed the videotapes of the group projects. The rewards of hearing and participating in the sometimes thoughtful, sometimes boisterous, often joyfully receptive session, were enormous. At the end of that session, each student received a copy of the class "memory" book which, in yearbook style, highlighted all the main activities, assignments, and student achievements of the semester. This included pictures, drawings, journal entries, essays, and poems—material either produced by the students themselves or favorites for one reason or another chosen from the "masters." The classbook even managed, with the help of digitized computer images, to include reproductions of some scenes from the videotaped student productions and thus served as documentary testimony of our learning

process. This, then, was the nature and shade of our experiment in integrative education.

The Dean's Office as well as the General Education Program at Plymouth State College, of which our integrative course was a part, had stressed the importance of assessment. It was our feeling, however, that traditional methods of testing and grading were inappropriate for the course as we had designed it, and for the goals which we had set for it. Nonetheless, we knew that a valid measure of student success, as well as a measure of success or failure of the course objectives, particularly its integrative validity, was necessary. To accommodate that requirement, we designed a special "final exam." The questions in the exam engaged class members in a process of self-evaluation both as individuals and in terms of their group contributions. In addition, the final contained questions on course evaluation. Each student was given the dreaded take-home final. Eleven essay questions asked about the course: its design, content, activities and assignments. These included questions about the strengths and weaknesses of the course as an integrative educational experience.

Although we cannot provide a completely quantified characterization, we were pleased with the outcome of our assessment effort. The students were as candid in their suggestions for improvement of the course as they were generous in their enthusiasm and praise for it.

In response to asking how the student's understanding of the two disciplines had developed, one student wrote:

> In both. . . I have gained new insights. . . It has made me appreciate art more. . . e.g., the Poetics [of Aristotle] gave me insight into how they [the arts] are philosophical in their own way.

while another said:

> . . . my understanding of both has expanded. You

> can't put a philosopher and a poet together without having some kind of an argument.

Regarding the semester group project:

> I believe the projects . . . contributed greatly to [our] understanding of the integration of philosophy and poetry. However, next time there needs to be more definition of what you expect. Overall the projects encouraged people to be creative in their approaches to express their philosophies and beliefs. . . . there was a lot of work involved but it was also a lot of fun.

> . . . the idea of a group leader should be enforced, . . . making that person specifically responsible to the professor with weekly updates. This would stop some people from slipping through the cracks and not contributing.

> It was helpful to have [the professors'] input and recommendations in putting together the projects; [their coaching] helped us develop our projects much more fully.

And, regarding the question what relationship do you perceive between philosophy and poetry, these responses stood out:

> As the [visiting] poet, Greg Delanty, said, "Philosophy is like the sea and poetry a fish." I think that is a good characterization. Catching fish gives one a specific look or feel into philosophy. . . . Our project tried to capture this same essence by tying nature (philosophy, the sea) and man (poetry, the fish) one with the other.

Finally, to a summary question regarding the classroom environment and the lecture/activity/discussion format:

> I can't think of anything that would improve this . . . It was the best course I have ever taken. The classroom environment was wonderful, the music was great, the cookies [and coffee] were great, though you need something for non-coffee drinkers. Meeting once a week was a great idea, and I liked that . . . format . . . I loved this course.

The students' responses evidenced a solid endorsement of the integrative concept, and of the value of concentrating on their creative and critical processes of thought and communication. Many of the students remarked that they enjoyed the course more than any they had taken, and they felt that what they had learned was valuable to them in their own lives because it had been presented from an integrative perspective. We were delighted by a letter about the course that one of the students later wrote to the president of our college, and which she subsequently shared with us. In it, the student sums up her feelings:

> This course . . . has cultured me in a way that I can understand these two aspects [philosophy and poetry] together. . . . I had never had the opportunity to go [to the Boston Museum of Fine Arts] . . . I have since then visited the museum two more times. If we hadn't gone in this class, I probably would never have made it there. . . . Overall . . . I have never had a class that has broadened my views on several topics such as Poetry and Philosophy . . . has."

Our experience with this course confirms our original conjectures that 1) involving students in the processes that characterize the disciplines enhances their comprehension and interpretations of complex and intel-

lectual challenging contexts; and 2) that writing and reading, listening and speaking, imagining and interpreting are at the core of all disciplines. Learning and communication are indeed such that the processes themselves are crucial pedagogically. Too often students are expected to memorize or mimic, rather than engage in—think *in* and *about* the subject matter of their courses. Any course, therefore, can be vitalized in its form and content by following an integrative strategy that emphasizes the priority of process and the centrality of language.

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