Intellectual Rationale: Toward Engaged Pedagogy (Reacting Consortium Staff)

In Our Underachieving Colleges (2006), Derek Bok argues that over the past half century colleges have wrongly equated educational reform with curricular reorganization, thereby “diverting attention once again from the more important question of how college students should be taught” (273n).

In addition to calling on faculty to embrace new modes of instruction, Bok focuses on the distribution system of general education, whose “drawbacks,” he concludes “seem so apparent that one must ask why the approach has survived at all, let alone become the dominant means of ensuring the desired breadth of study”(262). Almost nowhere, he adds, has this system proven successful. What is needed, Bok concludes, is a new approach to general education; and his book lays out the foundations for how faculty might think about devising such a curriculum.

This project seeks to explore how "Reacting" might be employed as an alternative approach to fulfill the broader objectives of a liberal arts education. The success of the “Reacting” pedagogy in engaging undergraduate students has been confirmed by faculty reports, student evaluations and formal double-blind assessment studies (Stroessner, 2009). The latter studies show that “Reacting” students, when compared with those enrolled in other general education courses, improved in certain salient categories associated with learning, including the development of an appreciation of multiple points of view on controversial topics and a belief in the malleability of human characteristics over time and across contexts. Speaking skills also improved substantially.

“Reacting” has also proven adaptable to various curricular contexts, including general education courses, departmental seminars, and discussion components of lecture courses. The most common institutional adoptions have been at honors colleges or first-year seminar programs, which offer their own curriculum. For faculty and administrators of such programs, a single “Reacting” course consisting of several games provides a distinctive experience that attracts students and generates publicity and visibility. Yet the decision as to which games are included is often made with little consideration of how the particular games fit into a larger general education curriculum. When “Reacting” is adopted by individual faculty, it typically serves as a history elective or a discussion component of a survey course.

In short, “Reacting” now functions either as a program enhancer or as an implement to promote historical engagement within particular courses; rarely does it address broad curricular requirements. This is partly due to the fact that, at present, only six “Reacting” games have been published. Three additional games are in production and another dozen are in the early stages of development. As more “Reacting” games become available, and as additional games are designed to encompass the sciences and humanities, it will be possible to devise a coherent “Reacting” curriculum. This would allow faculty and administrators to choose from among perhaps twenty to thirty games to create a coherent general education program that accords with specific curricular objectives.

But is the effort warranted? Will colleges and faculty likely embrace a “Reacting” curriculum consisting of five or six courses? We do know, as Bok observes repeatedly, that colleges and universities have effectively resisted nearly all curricular innovations that alter the allocation of resources and limit the freedom of senior faculty to teach whatever they wish. Widespread adoption of a radical new general education curriculum would constitute a revolution in higher education.

Yet there are reasons why a “Reacting” general education program could succeed at transforming higher education. Virtually no one offers a serious intellectual defense of the existing distribution system. Moreover, that approach is becoming increasingly problematic as more faculty teach their specialization and specializations become narrower. Twenty years ago, clusters of specialized courses could arguably constitute a coherent liberal arts program; it seems unlikely that such clumps of highly specialized courses could constitute a “general” education in the future.

Moreover, colleges are already expanding their “Reacting” offerings to fulfill broader curricular purposes: Most campuses that have adopted “Reacting” for a limited curricular purpose subsequently broaden the scope and mandate of the program. About a dozen colleges that once offered a single “Reacting” course now have created two- and even three-course sequences. Some schools that have adopted “Reacting” as a program for first-years are considering mounting other “Reacting” courses as junior electives or senior capstone courses. As soon as designers of Charles Darwin, teh Copley Medal, and the Rise of Naturalism game announced that they had a preliminary version available for testing, a half dozen faculty proposed to link it with the Trial of Galileo game. In short, the curricular possibilities of “Reacting” have been limited by the lack of games. As more games become available, faculty and administrators allot it additional curricular space.

Some colleges and universities adopt “Reacting” because of competitive pressures; these pressures will intensify in the future. College administrators are increasingly focusing on issues of recruitment and retention. Nearly everywhere “Reacting” has been adopted, it has been featured by admission departments. At Trinity and Smith Colleges, for example, applicants are routinely taken to observe “Reacting” classes. Although no one has done a study comparing the retention rates of “Reacting” and “non-Reacting” students, research shows that attendance powerfully correlates with retention; and virtually all faculty who have taught a “Reacting” class reports that they have never had such high attendance. As colleges and universities confront more pressure from the University of Phoenix, and from regional campus competitors, they will seek distinctive programs that encourage students to come to campus to learn—like “Reacting.”

The appeal of “Reacting” helps explain its rapid spread—from six colleges and universities in 2003 to over 150 at present—but there are limits. Although most students enjoy “Reacting,” none want to take more than a single “Reacting” course at a time. The pedagogy demands too much time and emotional energy. On this point there is no dispute whatsoever. “Reacting” will never supplant traditional pedagogies, nor should it.

Students report, on the contrary, that “Reacting” complements their “normal” courses, chiefly by offering an entirely different type of educational experience. “Reacting” is social, emotionally charged, student-led, and empathic in character. Yet “Reacting,” alone, would be insufficient. Students also need—and most of them want—to undertake work on their own; to consider ideas in a purely rational context; to listen to faculty whose lives have been spent mastering material, and to dissect and analyze. The existing department-focused curriculum succeeds quite well at providing these academic opportunities.

The most likely “fit” for “Reacting” within the undergraduate curriculum is general education. It may even become apparent that the goals of each department, which often are in tension with the purposes of general education, are best served by the parallel existence of “Reacting” general education courses. Departments can better focus on what they want to do, and what they do best, while “Reacting” focuses on providing the foundations for general education.