



*WEDNESDAY COMMUNIQUÉ*

**September 9, 2015**

**Empathy (again):** My note last week on empathy generated much feedback and comments. It may be that the political, national, and global discourse and challenges have made my comments timelier, but some of you remarked that empathy should be practiced not just by teachers and faculty members, but also by staff and students. The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines empathy as “the feeling that you understand and share another person’s experiences and emotions; the ability to share someone else’s feelings.” To me, this is a precursor of the golden rule “do to others as you would have them do to you.” Empathy is a crucial form of perception or social cognition that informs our critical thinking, allowing us to consider and evaluate the circumstances of others and the context of their decisions and actions, prior to reacting and ascribing bad intentions.

**Managing Change:** I am certain of few things, but I am absolutely sure that no plan I will ever make will survive its first encounter with reality. The best-laid plans encounter the inevitability of change. Our challenge is not to protect against change, but to deal with its consequences, good and bad.

Even engineers must reckon with changing circumstance. In 1953, floods killed more than 1,800 people in Holland. The Dutch state ordered that flood defenses be made strong enough to resist a storm so severe that, according to computer projections, it would occur only once every 10,000 years. Recently, however, the Dutch have put a priority on methods “to enlarge defenses in a natural way.” The state is investing in a plan called “Room for the River,” which aims to ease flooding by giving waterways space to move and even overflow. After 600 years of building higher and higher dykes, they changed their approach to work more naturally with the rivers, in order to better deal with potential disasters.

Sometimes it is better to absorb the first shock of impeding change, in order to better respond to it, rather than to deny, ignore, or confront a challenge head on. For decades, if not centuries, most Americans have agreed that getting an education, particularly a college education, is a key to social progress and personal prosperity. But the particular benefits of education vary with changes in the economy and societal needs.

One argument for education emphasizes the benefits for society. The Puritans who established Harvard were concerned about a shortage of clergy. During the Progressive Era, John Dewey insisted that a proper education would make people better citizens. In the current atmosphere of economic insecurity, politicians and parents stress a second kind of argument for higher education: the economic return on investment of a college degree. According to one commentator, “No idea has had more influence on education policy than the notion that colleges teach their students specific, marketable skills, which they can use to get a good job. Economists refer to this as the ‘human capital’ theory of education, and for the past twenty or thirty years it has gone largely unchallenged.” A third argument has depicted higher education as a kind of filter or screening device, sorting individuals according to their aptitudes, and then conveying this information to businesses and other hiring institutions. By completing a four-year degree, students could presumably show potential employers that they had the brains and training to carry out assigned tasks.

Depending on which of the three arguments (or combination thereof) holds sway, plans for funding higher education and for choosing a particular major become vastly different. However, we cannot possibly predict what the future might hold. Change is guaranteed to be the only constant. Thus I am skeptical that putting all our faith in one specific model or strategy is a wise choice. This [article](#) shows why betting on specific, marketable skills (e.g. STEM) may not be the “safe” choice, as the “‘useless’ liberal arts degree has become Tech’s hottest ticket.”

**Measuring Learning:** In 2010, the Chronicle of Higher education started a [project on student learning](#). While I agree that measuring learning is difficult, I also believe that “the consequences of a higher-education system that refuses to consistently measure how much students learn,” will result in a situation in which “many of the most

intractable problems facing higher education today will go unsolved.” The Chronicle’s attempt resulted in a very useful collection of articles, found [here](#).

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