Kentucky Wesleyan College
Providing a different point of view on pertinent topics

Wesleyan Way PERSPECTIVES

January 2023

Please enjoy the reflections of Dr. James P. Cousins, our provost and vice president of academic affairs, on mental discipline in higher education.

Our students return to campus soon and classes begin on Jan. 17. We look forward to their arrival and the spring semester, a time of recognition and celebration of student achievements that culminates in commencement on May 6.

Mark your calendar, and plan to join us:

February 9

Presentation by Dr. David Head, University of Central Florida
"George Washington, Conspiracy Theorist: What the End of the Revolution Can Teach Our Fractured Nation"
More information to follow.

The Return of Mental Discipline

Of all the discredited theories in the history of education, the most useful might be the theory of “mental discipline,” the idea that difficult things were good because they were difficult. Learning required effort, which was good. Learning difficult things in especially difficult ways was even better. Why? Because the mind was like a muscle that could be stretched and strengthened to accommodate larger and larger loads. Focused concentration, memorization, deep reading of a complicated subject, and similarly arduous academic tasks, built mental power. The more rigorously trained, the more powerful the mind, and powerful minds could learn anything quickly.

There was a special need for mental discipline in the Early Republic. After all, education was the corrective antidote to a society rife with idle wickedness. Strict rules of thought and rigid principles of self-control were necessary to counteract corruptible behaviors. But the qualities of a disciplined mind extended beyond just virtue; those who possessed true discipline held a natural but cultivated bearing; those who lacked it would forever be locked in a sort of intellectual infancy, left socially awkward without proper deportment. Some extended this idea even further and rooted all psychiatric episodes—mania, melancholy, even suicide—in a lack of mental discipline. Uncontrolled imagination created a chain of “maniacal ideas,” fantasies, and fanaticisms. Psychiatric treatment focused on diverting those ideas and promoting as much mental discipline as possible.

Nineteenth-century American colleges and universities adopted mental discipline as a cornerstone educational goal. It was rare to find a college without a publicly announced commitment to mental discipline. At Brown University, students were compelled to fix their attentions excessively, but the results spoke for themselves. "We believe," Brown University president Francis Wayland bragged in 1830, "that we can mark visible improvement in intellectual power, and mental discipline . . . in every class under our charge." At the University of Vermont, students acquired a "thorough education" and were "kept for years under so high requisitions, so strenuously insisted upon." Mental discipline was instilled daily through rigorous examinations and by the maintenance of extraordinary academic standards. Similar boasts are found hundreds of times over and for schools of all types. At the Cleveland Institute, an all-female school established in the late 1850s, young women were guaranteed a "course of mental discipline equal to that afforded by the best female seminaries in our land." And through those methods, students would be fit for all the duties required of a "business life."

Classical languages were one of the most popular ways to elicit mental discipline. Translating Latin poetry, memorizing Latin vocabulary and Latin grammar all required deep focus. Years of that patient pursuit, done best in candle-lit quiet, built a powerful mind. But other subjects also contributed to mental discipline. Learning to write meant learning to memorize rules and conventions of great authors; learning rhetoric required more memorization, of rules, prosody, gesticulation, and the recitation of historical speeches. Mathematics, chronology (history), rhetoric, and all the natural and philosophical sciences were also effective aids to mental discipline when taught through these same methods. All of this built not only mental strength, but transferable mental acuity. "Long after the Latin and the Greek and the mathematics have been forgotten," one college advertisement from 1846 promised, "the mental discipline, the healthful intellectual tone, the habits of thought and investigation which he has acuired [sic] will remain evidence of the advantages of a liberal education." Of course, not all academic areas were of equal weight; most agreed that the “vulgar” or practical arts like navigation or accounting required only small amounts of mental energy and therefore contributed only small amounts of mental discipline.

Of course, the public wondered at the vocational value of all that memorization. Many didn’t understand or buy into the idea that intensive work in one area could be transferred to others.

Latin took the brunt of those criticisms. “Five or six years must be devoted to the study of dead languages,” one early 19th-century critic complained, “is a heavy tax on life. Does it appear to be a necessary tax?” Similar complaints were repeated hundreds of times throughout the 1800s. Many believed that a reliance on “mechanical memory” did real harm to a student’s budding faculties and future prospects. Those who learned only to memorize aphorisms, verses, and odes would never understand their true meaning. Furthermore, there was no evidence that Latin, or any core area of academic content, led to appreciable gains of knowledge-building in others. How could memorizing poetry help someone become an accountant? “The effect of this on the mind,” one angry mid-century parent complained, “is precisely that which studying books of dancing, fencing, or riding, would have on the body. By reading we might become very learned in the principles and rules of those sciences; but we could neither dance, nor fence, nor ride.” But colleges rarely offered defense, and the doctrine of mental discipline remained unaltered.

All this changed at the turn of the 20th century when a raft of American psychologists and educational theorists tested the core tenants of mental discipline. American philosopher William James was the first. Arguing that “native retentiveness,” that is, the inborn ability to hold on to memories, remained largely unchanged and unchangeable. The powers of memory ebbed and flowed throughout one’s lifetime, in times of good health and bad, but we can’t force our minds to become more retentive. Scores of experiments conducted over the next half-century confirmed James’ findings but educational leaders were slow to respond—inertia and tradition carried mental discipline into common schools, high schools, and colleges well into the 1940s; Latin remained a standard part of the American high school curriculum until 1945. But new educational theories, along with new forms of pedagogy, eventually took hold and the theory of mental discipline fell out of use by the 1950s.

Today, education is on an opposite trend line, and there’s a concerted effort to make learning less cumbersome and more enjoyable. The hope is to inspire greater levels of motivation and engagement. Action-oriented "gameified" experiences, where students are given quests and awarded for unlocking new levels, have attracted widespread public attention. When asked what he’d do to remake education, Elon Musk spoke for many when he said, “You want education to be as close to a video game as possible . . . [education] shouldn’t be like this huge chore.” There’s a logic here. Video games are everywhere, and young men in particular are more engrossed in gaming than ever; hijacking these systems for academic ends seems reasonable.

But education is synonymous with effort. When done correctly, it compels a confrontation between what’s easiest and what’s best. We can learn to make simple sense of complex things or discipline ourselves to plum their depths. The former avoids the “huge chores” of education, the latter seeks after unnecessary hardship, sometimes for the sake of itself. This requires concentration, focused energy, and yes, discipline won from years of its pursuit. Learning difficult things habituates a problem-solving process that asks us to learn from our learning, that is, to become better at recognizing our limitations and better at mitigating them. Intellectual self-confidence is the natural result, and yes, that confidence is transferable. Moreover, not every subject or lesson can offer the same entertainment value of a video game, and that's a good thing. We all have to learn to create interest from uninteresting things or find relevancy in the irrelevant. Practicing these skills will pay dividends throughout your life.

When done poorly and catering to our instinct for entertainment, education produces excellent consumers, but incapable producers. The avoidance of difficulty lends itself to more avoidance and the search for intellectual ease; the best solutions become the ones that come with the least amount of effort. This leads to reductivism, echo-chamber approaches to knowledge gathering and a general ignorance. Years spent in the pursuit of ease have a cumulative effect, numbing our senses and making any challenge, however small,

impossible.

The most effective educators are the least compromising; the best have the highest standards and hold students to them. That means pushing students out of their comfort, not catering to it. It's a time-tested system of accountability that long predates any educational theory, but a process that requires no small amount of courage. It's courageous to invest trust in the professors and to affirm that trust daily through the completion of rigorous exercises with indefinite ends. It's courageous to throw oneself into subjects where failure and discomfort are certain, and success is not guaranteed. A return to mental discipline reasserts the primacy of that discomfort and doesn't shirk from its implications. It acknowledges difficulty as the method and discipline as the means.

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