

WILLIAM A. REINSMITH

**The Forest, Not the Tree(s)****The Plight of  
the Generalist**

THE GREAT NATURALIST Edward O. Wilson's (1998) recent plea for the "consilience" of knowledge should strike a chord in the heart of every generalist. Invoking the unfinished agenda of the Enlightenment, Wilson has called for a rapprochement among the several branches of learning so that they can be viewed as interrelated and constituting a whole. He asks scholars to step back and see the forest instead of their small strand of trees. Such a summons may sound utopian in the light of the knowledge explosion of the twentieth century. Yet at the same time it is a plea for a kind of common sense in our endeavors.

The application to life in the university should be obvious.

The "disease" of specialization has long since infected every discipline of academia. Wilson notes acerbically its effect on scholarship and teaching when he points out that "the faculties of higher education around the world are a congeries of experts. To be an original scholar is to be a highly specialized world authority in a polyglot Calcutta of similarly focused world authorities" (1998, 41). To adapt an old truism, today's specialist is someone who knows more and more about less and less.

The continuing fragmentation, even within disciplines, has resulted in a situation where dialogue among disparate faculty is a rarity. In disciplines like philosophy, which ideally might create connections where specialties can cross-fertilize, experts often talk only to fellow experts about trivial points of analysis that remind one of nothing so much as medieval Scholasticism's reduction to questions like, how many angels can dance on the head of a pin? Discussion of the big questions that used to reach an educated public is a thing of the past.

**The generalist syndrome**

For the generalist, the true "forest gazer" who does not have a permanent home in any one strand of trees, the situation has become more difficult than ever. I, for one, have experienced an increasing difficulty in getting published over the years since the ideas that interest me are of a general nature and often overlap. They result in extended, reflective essays rather than the narrowly focused or statistical studies that dominate journals today. The scholarship behind them is broad, rather than deep. I confess to partial blame for this state

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of affairs. It seems that every time I set out to mine a particularly fertile area, the enticement of other growth around it proves irresistible and I find myself wandering here and there, fascinated by how many separate paths connect.

Perhaps all generalists in the academy suffer from a kind of intellectual disorder. Instead of picking out one little niche and remaining securely in it for the remainder of a career, we have the damnable penchant to wander about, to always be intrigued with the larger picture. What I call the “generalist syndrome” is certainly not a rewarding condition in today’s academic world.

One rarely becomes a generalist out of specific intent. More often, the mode is adopted due to a restless intellectual curiosity, which less flatteringly might be called a lack of mental discipline. This is something that has dogged

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me since my undergraduate days, when I had far more interest in reading widely than focusing intently in a single area. Reading was always the key: the marvel of a world within a book. Even when I did focus, that territory would sooner or later light up into a great

field, revealing patterns and cross-connections. Before long, I had before my eyes a multitudinous forest instead of the little grove given me to tend. I found myself inept at multiple choice and fill-in-the-blank questions. (I doubt if, even today, I would do any better at these exams than many of my own students.) Essay exams were more to my liking, but even here I tended to wander afield.

The truth is that once a person sets out on the journey of self-education in the liberal arts, conventional exams are merely an occupational hazard. Journal jottings and conversations with individuals of similar bent work much better. I studied simply to find out, to understand, to discover more aspects of the adventure taking place in the mind. Each book led down a trail to others. Eventually, an insatiable desire is born to read everything worthwhile—a thirst that matriculation through the halls of academia can fertilize but never encompass. But it was in those early days that the generalist was born. I constantly saw connections, interrelationships, veins on a map spread out everywhere. I saw the forest,

often missing the trees. And except for wanting to write lucidly, I was not interested in learning the “methodology” of a particular discipline. A habit of seeing was established that persisted straight through graduate school and into my teaching life.

### **Teaching as a generalist**

Fate also has played a part. I was hired to teach in a small college, a professional school, where humanities were considered “ancillary courses” taken (or endured) by students intently focused on pursuing a career in the health sciences. Intending only a brief stay while I worked on my doctoral degree (in English, but spanning philosophy and curriculum design), I eventually decided to remain there, largely because I couldn’t find any other position that offered such a broad spectrum of courses to teach. In the early years (the late 1970s), since the department was small and understaffed, I found myself teaching a variety of English courses. In time, the range expanded to include Introduction to Philosophy, Ethics/Bio-ethics, History and Philosophy of Education, Argument and Critical Thought, Philosophy of Science, and Intellectual Heritage. As any generalist teacher can verify, being stretched like this is never boring. But we often skate on thin ice, and much midnight oil is used up in preparing for the next day.

Also, I had taken up the challenge to move my students to see learning as I did. Many were tightly focused types, homing in on a career. I pushed them to expand their horizons and to explore their humanity, something students in liberal arts colleges perhaps do more naturally. I wanted history, philosophy, literature, education to come alive in them as they had in me. The reward in teaching relatively unlettered undergraduates is that almost everything is new to them; it can also be the bane. Robert Bartlett has recently complained of how uncaring students today are of the past: “They know nothing of Pericles and little of Churchill and so cannot compare the utterances of our democratic statesmen with those of the ancient Athenians or even of modern British leaders. Pyrrhic victories, Quixotic undertakings and Socratic irony are lost on them. . .” (2003, 35).

All true! But as a committed generalist, I have always wanted to change that. For example, in the Intellectual Heritage program

(a generalist's dream, if offered as an elective over two semesters) the trick was to get the class to see things not in dry isolation but, rather, suffused with richness, caught up in the whole pattern of movement that is a civilization's progress. The pursuit of the whole had made the learning of the particulars palpable for me, and I wanted it to be that way for my students.

I remembered that the famous personalities I encountered as an undergraduate were no longer remote once I saw them against the background of their times. They came alive then, rising almost viscerally in the space of an evening's narrative read. I wanted my students to taste the air of those Athenian evenings when Socrates engaged his young friends in conversation; to feel Augustine's natural despair writing in his last days as Roman civilization fell to pieces around his ears; to note the astonishing presence and heroism of Joan of Arc, the massive faith of Luther, the zealous waste of factional and religious wars, the sarcasm and outrage of Voltaire, the lucidity of Enlightenment thought, and the rise of science.

This is not to say I was always successful. Enthusiasm is certainly admirable, perhaps indispensable, in a teacher, but it does not automatically result in a rapt classroom. Sometimes my attempts were met with boredom; more often they were met with the distraction induced by the pressures of their technical curriculum. Many a late afternoon was spent with a colleague in the next office commiserating over the failure to move our students to care about these things the way we did.

Yet it was never a total loss. The supreme pleasure in teaching always remains the same: to see, even in one student's eyes, the flash of recognition, a mind coming alive, the emotions engaged, some small explosion taking place. To observe it in a group of students or even, however briefly, in an entire class can make one forget all the near misses. The same holds true if, during the course of a semester, just a few students stop up after class or come into the office to chat about something that was said or discussed. Occasionally, one or two will put their major on hold—damn the torpedoes!—to invest themselves right now, mentally and emotionally, as I did back then. Small droppings like these are nectar to the generalist teacher.

### **The generalist's place in the educational process**

From my own experience, I suggest the generalist's approach to teaching is similar to what Alfred North Whitehead long ago called the stage of *romance*. As he put it, "romantic emotion is essentially the excitement consequent on the transition from the bare facts to the first realizations of the import of their unexplored relationships" (1949, 29). In other words, it is about making connections. Often, this is as far as one gets with undergraduates; the next two stages, *precision* and *synthesis*, remain untouched. But creating that excitement, helping them to see the lay of the land, is an indispensable first step in learning. Unfortunately, however, it is the step ignored by too many teachers today who feel they must "get through the material."

To follow through on Whitehead's stages in the learning process, a course or sequence of courses in a given discipline can be set up so that the second stage, *precision*, involves the specialist. Here exactitude, focus, and analysis are central. But this crucial stage can bog down in isolated facts or ideas unless preceded by the romantic. To quote Whitehead again, "it is evident that a stage of precision is barren without a previous stage of romance. Unless there are facts which have already been vaguely apprehended in their broad generality, the previous analysis . . . is simply a series of meaningless statements about bare facts, produced artificially and without any relevance" (29).

Whitehead's third stage, *synthesis*, renders an integrated view of the forest. Given enough time in a course sequence for drawing things together, this stage allows students to comprehend what they have learned. "It is," Whitehead explains, "a return to romanticism with added advantage of classified ideas and relevant technique" (30). Here, too, the generalist can assist in the process of deepening students' understanding.

Overall, it is the generalist teacher who can make education truly interesting since he or she has the scope and breadth and, probably much more than the specialist, is aware of the rhythms of learning. It is frightening, as Bartlett points out, how many students today are bored by their education, even in their majors. Again and again in many schools, and certainly in mine, students drudge through their courses and memorize for tests, play the game of grades, with no active, enthusiastic involvement in their

learning. They merely wait for it to yield the rewards of graduation and employment. Yet long ago Whitehead admonished us to “banish the idea of a mythical, far off end of education. The pupil must be continually enjoying some fruition and starting fresh—if the teaching is stimulating in exact proportion to his success in satisfying the rhythmic cravings of his pupils” (30).

If anyone can make this happen for students, surely it is the generalist teacher who has the broadest vision of what a liberal education should be and who is best equipped to transfer that vision in an undergraduate classroom. For the generalist is more likely to reflect on the forms of pedagogy as a craft than the specialist who often comes to the university not only lacking classroom experience, but also with a main priority directed toward research and publication.

#### **Overall value of the generalist**

At my university, to take humanities courses is not the main reason the students are here. Humanistic education was not on their list of priorities when they applied for admission. Understandably, members of my department envy those science professors who work in depth with graduate students. It can be frustrating always to cast the net wide rather than going in deeply at any one place. Also, keeping up with class preparations and staying reasonably abreast of the literature, while at the same time trying to publish, can be draining; care must be taken not to burn out. And since there is little likelihood that undergraduates will trip us up, we must resist the temptation to cut corners. The generalist lives with these drawbacks and challenges.

Yet who better than the generalist to help students move out of their small world and encompass larger units of time; to help them make connections among the great names in philosophy, politics, history, religion, science, the arts; to catalyze them to enter into the

clash of ideas and personalities; to stretch them so that they see beyond the trees to the forest? Seen in this light, the generalist has something very valuable to offer today’s students—especially in professional schools, where they are locked so tightly into their majors. Students need to hear from a maverick who inhabits several domains, a jack/jane-of-all-trades (even if master of none). They need to be exposed to faculty who have a panoramic view of learning, who can pull the essential ideas from a range of disciplines together, who can, at least temporarily, push students out of their tiny niche and help them view the larger world of which their specialty is but a part. More than anything else, students need to see connections between different branches of learning. Who better than the resident generalist to open such a perspective for them?

Beyond the walls of academe, there may be vital application to the “real” world. As Edward O. Wilson points out, “most of the issues that vex humanity daily . . . can be solved only by integrating knowledge from the natural sciences with that of the social sciences and the humanities. Only fluency across the boundaries will provide a clear view of the world as it really is, not as it appears through the lens of ideology and religious dogma, or as a myopic response to immediate need” (62). Is anyone positioned better than the committed generalist to make a contribution to such an endeavor? □

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