

Reimagining “Learning for Its Own Sake” in Liberal Education

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INTRODUCTION

William Stoner, the title character of John Williams’ novel *Stoner*, graduated from the University of Missouri with a Bachelor of Arts degree in 1914—a degree that his parents envisioned would be in agricultural studies, but was actually in English, as he fell in love with the subject while completing a general education requirement.¹ Stoner’s admission to college occurred during a broader wave of access to American higher education following the Morrill Act of 1890—still prioritizing white male students, though drawing from a range of social classes and expanding the scope of studies to reflect evolving interests and industries.² Rather than return to the family farm with newly-developed agricultural skills, he stayed to earn his master’s degree in English and teach at the university. Stoner deeply valued his liberal education, recalling the genuine excitement of engaging with ideas for the first time in his classes, when he would instantly “become someone other than who he had been.”³

Stoner’s story could be read as illustrating an enduring refrain of liberal education: *learning for its own sake*. It suggests that even an unsuspecting student has the chance to encounter literature, or another worthwhile subject, and discover its intrinsic value. Yet, his story also suggests that there is something special about how a student, with unique interests and motivations, relates to literature—indicating two differing interpretations of this familiar educational ideal. On the first reading, “learning for its own sake” focuses on the object of learning, the knowledge worth attaining. On the second, it centers on the special relation between that worthwhile object and the student. In favor of the second reading, I will develop an account of this special re-

lation: I will argue that this educational ideal is better understood as a *valuing activity*, wherein an agent develops an appreciative rapport with an object of agent-neutral value. As opposed to agent-relative value, agent-neutral value holds its worth regardless of any individual's relationship to it. The appreciation of such values constitutes the special relation between the student and the object of study, enabling the student to make progress with respect to their learning and personal values. With this emphasis on the relational nature of an intrinsically valuable learning experience, I will argue that the educational ideal should be restated as "*learning for the learner's sake.*"

My argument will proceed as follows. First, I will establish that within the tradition of liberal education, there is ambiguity in the meaning of "learning for its own sake." Given such ambiguity, I will show that some interpretations risk undermining students' motivations to learn, so a more robust conception is needed. Second, I will advance my reimagined account of "learning for the learner's sake" such that students come to appreciate their objects of study and are able to make valuational progress. In this section, I will highlight the potential dangers of identifying "agent-neutral values" in liberal education in light of its exclusionary history, indicating how this reimagined educational ideal might provide new guidance for liberal educators. Finally, I will conclude with two implications for liberal education if we adopt "learning for the learner's sake": first, it occurs in the full context of students' lives, diminishing the boundaries between formal schooling and the world; and second, it demands change in curricular content and representation, so as to create more opportunities for valuing activities among the great diversity of students getting a liberal education.

DISENTANGLING MEANINGS OF "LEARNING FOR ITS OWN SAKE"

The long history of liberal education is one of shifting and competing ideals. Bruce Kimball traces these disputes through the evolution of two dominant views of liberal education.⁴ The *artes liberales* ideal is rooted in Latin and Greek antiquity and prescribes a classical curriculum for "the

study of language and letters” to educate the virtuous elites of society.⁵ The “liberal-free” ideal reflects a twentieth-century shift toward an education that “frees the mind,” enabling citizens to think critically and openly—and even formulate reasonable but opposing perspectives.⁶ Aspects of both views are often conflated in contemporary understandings of liberal education, creating internal contradictions within educational missions. This is further evident in the various meanings of the “liberal arts.” As Harry Brighouse writes, the term can refer to a type of institution, a course of study, or a set of educational aims.⁷

Yet, liberal education has also consistently promised a distinct learning experience, one that is valuable not only for its extrinsic ends—such as a prestigious degree, a good job and professional network, or a deeper sense of civic responsibility and leadership—but also for its intrinsic ones. The National Humanities Medalist and esteemed tutor at St. John’s College, Annapolis, Eva Brann writes, “Our students may become economically productive, civically responsible, personally fulfilled, and all the other good things the catalogs suggest, but the first and last unabashed answer to the question ‘Why engage in liberal learning?’ is ‘To learn something worth knowing, for its own sake.’”⁸ A liberal education proudly affords the experience of *learning for its own sake*—but what does that involve?

As Brann writes, it is learning about “something worth knowing,” but she goes on to say, too, that she wants her students to “study for the love of it.”⁹ No doubt, both sentiments resonate with educators who encourage them; however, they are distinct, where the former focuses on *knowledge* and the latter focuses on the student’s *relation* to it. Let us consider the implications of each interpretation. In the former case, learning takes its object, knowledge, to be valuable in itself. This justifies the pursuit of knowledge as its own end. Within this framing, appeals to “something worth knowing” may call to mind some of the seemingly transcendent texts of humanity: the epic poetry of Homer, the illuminating essays of Toni Morrison, the troubled fiction of Virginia Woolf—all of which have extraordinary intellectual and aesthetic value, even as there exists a wide and disputed range of opin-

ions about them in Western thought. But this interpretation risks discounting students' motivations to learn in at least two ways. First, students might have no desire to engage with texts that do not reflect their personal or cultural histories, and even less desire when such texts are unaccompanied by others that extend beyond the Western canon. Although "something worth knowing" could capture an ever-expansive range of content, those who determine what counts as worthwhile may, even unintentionally, uphold the paternalism within the *artes liberales* ideal at the expense of students who have no connection to a curriculum deemed to be valuable by their schools.

Second, even if students do not feel alienated by the content of their learning, they could be drawn explicitly to the *perceived* value of "something worth knowing" in order to advance their own intellectual or social status—an extrinsic motivation that already undermines the promise of "learning for its own sake." This is a reasonable risk within the competitive climate of American education, where the prize for attaining such knowledge can involve leveraging it for future opportunities. The pursuit of "something worth knowing" then, is compatible with forms of learning that disregard the expressed intrinsically-motivated aims of "learning for its own sake." On its own, it is not sufficient for sustaining this ideal within liberal education, especially on behalf of the great diversity of students with unique backgrounds, beliefs, and interests. This interpretation thus risks falling short of the ideal, either by failing to motivate the student at all, or by motivating the student perversely.

Let us then turn to the latter case, the relation between the student and the object of learning, illustrated through the educational vignette of William Stoner. At the University of Missouri, Stoner studied literature "for the love of it," which is evident in memorable moments of his learning:

As his mind engaged itself with its subject, as it grappled with the power of literature he studied and tried to understand its nature, he was aware of a constant change within himself; and as he was aware of that, he moved outward from himself into the world which contained him, so that he knew that the poem of Milton's

that he read or the essay of Bacon’s or the drama of Ben Jonson’s changed the world which was its subject...¹⁰

Stoner’s rich relationship with literature indicates that there is more to his learning than the pursuit of “something worth knowing.” In these moments, he was engaged in an activity worthwhile in itself, opening his mind beyond its originally imagined possibilities. It is this special relation between the student and the object of learning that has remained underdetermined in the conception of “learning for its own sake”—and on these grounds, I aim to reimagine this familiar ideal to better account for what makes this experience educationally valuable for the student. I will show that “something worth knowing” has value for a student’s education insofar as the student relates meaningfully to it.

REIMAGINING TOWARD “LEARNING FOR THE LEARNER’S SAKE”

This reimagining will begin with an account of valuing, which is more robust than merely believing something to be valuable. Then, I will show that such valuing in liberal learning takes the form of what Stephen Darwall calls a valuing activity, through which the agent develops an appreciative rapport with agent-neutral values.¹¹ As opposed to an agent-relative value, an agent-neutral value holds its worth regardless of any individual’s relationship to it, and the appreciation of such values constitutes the special relation between the student and the object of study. This calls for the restatement of the ideal as “learning for the learner’s sake.” Even more, such a valuing activity is the site of change—and not merely change in attitudes about literature or even learning, but in the very values that guide one’s life. The student can undergo what Agnes Callard calls valuational progress, shifting the orientation of one’s values toward worthwhile objects over time.¹²

To begin, there are core conditions for valuing: first, it must be cognitive, such that the person believes that the object is good; second, it must be affective, such that the person holds an “emotional sensitivity in relation to the object”; third, it must be motivational, such that the person has a

“disposition to see the object as giving rise to practical reasons”; and fourth, it must be reflexive, such that a person tends to experience these three other components in different combinations at different times.¹³ Taken together, this creates a value-nexus that differs from a simple desire, belief, or feeling, because it is more closely associated with a person’s sense of self. This is not to say that every instance of valuing is deeply transformative or defining in a person’s life, but simply that the encounter aligns with one’s values, whether antecedent or emergent. At its best, liberal learning enables this kind of valuing, where a student engages meaningfully with an object of learning—believing that it is good, feeling that it is worthwhile, and being motivated to study it.

With an understanding of valuing, we can consider how liberal learning takes the form of a *valuing activity*, through which one develops an “appreciative rapport” with agent-neutral values.¹⁴ By Darwall’s account, a valuing activity is not simply an expression of excellence in a given craft or skill; it involves a particular kind of valuing by the agent: appreciating what makes doing it, engaging meaningfully with agent-neutral values, worthwhile. Such values—including aesthetic beauty or knowledge and understanding—can be appreciated by any agent, meaning that no particular agent’s judgement would diminish their value. “Something worth knowing” in literature, science, and other subjects is often an agent-neutral value worth pursuing in liberal education. Across the variety of disciplines and programs, a student has many opportunities to encounter agent-neutral values.

However, the mere encountering of these values does not ensure their appreciation. To develop an appreciative rapport is to cultivate a special relation between the student and the object of learning. This relation requires the student’s direct engagement with knowledge, as well as a correct belief about the value of such knowledge. Put differently, this relation arises when the student learns the profound good of the object of their learning *and* develops a corresponding value judgement of the worthy object. Thus, an appreciative rapport cannot be realized solely through a student’s proximity to or even encounter with agent-neutral values. Rather, the student is actively

involved in the valuing activity, relating meaningfully to “something worth knowing” on their own terms, driven at least in part by their motivating interests. The valuing activity central to liberal education, then, is better stated as *“learning for the learner’s sake.”*

“Learning for the learner’s sake” demands more than appeals to the intrinsic value of knowledge to justify worthwhile learning experiences—specifically, it requires the student’s appreciation for that valuable knowledge. If liberal education teaches students to cherish agent-neutral values without considering students’ motivating interests, it risks dispassionately imposing its traditional contents on young minds and swiftly becoming illiberal.¹⁵ The very idea of agent-neutral values might suggest that there is a class of universally valuable objects that determine the content of liberal education. Concerns over universality have long been of scholarly interest, particularly in feminist epistemology and critical race theory, because it has the effect of systematically privileging that which has been historically valued as universally good.¹⁶ While agent-neutral values like “knowledge and understanding” are useful abstractions for imagining valuing activities, their instantiations tend to correspond with interests of the elite class—interests that often depart from those of students, especially students who are not well represented in, and often directly excluded from, these activities. My critique here is not meant to fully collapse the possibility of universal goods, but rather to caution that the naming of such goods can have dangerously uneven effects on students. This danger is all the more significant in liberal education, where contemporary meanings of “learning for its own sake” were idealized within the formation of a traditionally Western curriculum.¹⁷ Liberal educators can protect against the exclusionary effects of these universalizing claims by striving to uphold “learning for the learner’s sake” in their classrooms.

This reimagined educational ideal thus aims to preserve the greatest offerings of liberal education while preventing it from resting on a history of exclusion. “Learning for the learner’s sake” means that students have agency in determining the value of their learning, for a valuing activity requires that such value is registered by the student. These moments of profound learn-

ing, whether they are fleeting or part of a lifelong project, can have the effect of shaping and reshaping one's values, of making an education as well as a life personally meaningful. The abstract and impersonal pursuit of "something worth knowing" might foreclose these possibilities for many students who unfairly struggle to cultivate an appreciative rapport with their objects of study. The more demanding educational ideal of "learning for the learner's sake" centers students' values so that they are empowered to grow and change—to undergo what Callard calls valuational progress.

Callard is interested in how people act as agents of their own valuational progress, where the change is considered to be positive and reflective of personal betterment. She writes, "One way to change in value is to consolidate a value-nexus one already has by honoring the entailments of one's current values; another way is to acquire some whole novel nexus of value. In short, one can both change *from* or *on the basis* of value, and *toward* or *in order to acquire* value."¹⁸ The former is self-cultivation, where a pre-existing value informs the decision to rationally pursue change in oneself. For example, someone may revise their belief about their political other because they hold the value that a healthy democracy depends on disparate political and intellectual views. The latter is Callard's idea of aspiration, where the aspirant "sets out to acquire new beliefs, desires, emotions, and so on, for their own sakes, that is, for the sake of the value that is comprised of those attitudes, whereas the self-cultivator sets out to acquire them because she sees them as serving her antecedently fixed valuational condition."¹⁹ In Callard's view, the most powerful example of an aspirant is the liberal arts student, who enters college without a clear sense of the values that will come to define her education. Such a student expends "considerable resources stretching herself hopefully toward something she grasps only through a glass darkly, all too aware of the danger that she may be left empty-handed."²⁰ She engages in an educational process that she can only define *while* or even *after* she navigates it. This does not mean that she cannot articulate any of its ends, or even the general objectives of her education, but it does mean that the value of "learning for the learner's sake" cannot be fully realized until it has been

experienced.

While I am compelled by the distinction that Callard puts forward, I am skeptical that aspirational endeavors are always different from self-cultivating endeavors in liberal education. This is because there are cases in which the deepening or extending of one’s existing values and the acquisition or learning of new values are not perfectly co-extensive. Consider, for example, a white high school student who values American history. She appreciates a historical lens as a way of making sense of the modern world, even the nature of her public school in a wealthy suburb. However, when she takes an African American history elective, she learns that many of her conceptions of American history have been narrowly focused on a white, Protestant narrative, and she begins to think differently about the ways in which race has related to societal structures over time, including the neighborhood and school segregation she notices in her own town. Her learning experience deepens her value of history, even though *history* as a discipline and approach to inquiry has become far more complicated, even false as a mode of erasure for certain communities. In this way, the deepening of her value also challenges her to pursue a new, more intersectional value—and her starting point as a general history-lover is obscured by a stark change in the very meaning of loving history. Thus, the distinction between self-cultivation and aspiration blurs as she must simultaneously invoke an existing value in order to revise it toward a new one. Determining the starting point of valuational progress, especially in the context of education, does not seem possible or worthwhile to the extent that it is prized in Callard’s view. “Learning for the learner’s sake” *could* involve an aspirational change in values, but I view it as more inclusive of other forms of value cultivation.

“Learning for the learner’s sake,” then, has an aspirational quality captured in Callard’s theory. It is an activity determined by how a student relates to the object of learning—and through this relation is able to cultivate personal values. An appreciative rapport might manifest differently over time, toward new objects of value, or toward the same objects in new ways. And the more often these opportunities are made available to students

in their learning, the more often liberal education is fulfilling its promise. I have thus argued to reimagine “learning for its own sake” toward a more student-centered conception that, I believe, is truer to educators’ invocations of these beloved words. It is now important to consider how this reimagined approach could be applied to make a difference in the experience of a liberal education.

ENACTING “LEARNING FOR THE LEARNER’S SAKE” IN LIBERAL EDUCATION

As Callard writes in her book on aspiration, “grasping new values is work” that is exceedingly hard, vulnerable, and rewarding, as the process is neither passive nor superficial.²¹ The enactment of a valuing activity in liberal education is demanding of both educators and students. To ground “learning for the learner’s sake,” then, I will provide two recommendations for how this conception could inform educational practices, first considering the contexts in which we understand liberal education, and then the specific contents that constitute it.

First, it is critical to bring liberal education *into* the complex context of the world, rather than envisioning it as a transcendent retreat away from it. The challenges that students face do not occur in isolation, but in the full context of their lives. This valuing activity cannot take place independent of life’s many priorities, including attention to other intrinsically valuable goods, such as family, personal safety, and long-term security. In such cases, the pursuit of education corresponds with the protection or advancement of these intrinsic goods, but the balancing of various goods does not foreclose the possibility of “learning for the learner’s sake.”

Consider two educational trajectories in which non-academic considerations become academically relevant. In the first scenario, a student from a rural household is the first in his family to go to an elite university. His parents are worried about his moving across the country and entering a notably different political space from his hometown. He loves International Relations and is eager to learn among his equally enthusiastic classmates, but upon

arriving, he spends a lot of time communicating with his family and fielding their fears about his new environment. He is motivated to maintain strong bonds with his family and considers how the IR major might create additional distance from them if he were to travel professionally. For this reason, he considers other majors that would also be rewarding and provide more flexibility for connecting with his home, and he discovers political science as a viable alternative. Still able to engage meaningfully with the subject, the student chooses a path forward without a conclusive sense of his future, but with confidence that he will still live according to his values after thoughtfully weighing the multiple motivations relevant to his education.

In the second scenario, a student enrolls at a predominantly white institution with the intent to double-major in creative writing and business. She quickly becomes involved in the Black Student Union and cultivates a passion for activism that exposes racial injustices within her institution and advocates for specific protections of vulnerable populations. While still engaged in her studies, she notices that her community activism is *informing* her orientation to learning, such as in the content and cadence of her poetry and the critiques she offers of business models and practices. Her studies are enriched by the Black Student Union’s community and initiatives, and she is at once motivated by these community values and her interests in creative expression and business development—interests that are significantly deepened by her values outside of the classroom.

In both cases, the students were able to realize “learning for the learner’s sake” not in spite of, but *because* of, the complexities surrounding their educations. These examples might provide insight into how educators can frame conversations around the literal and figurative boundaries of their classrooms, inviting students to contextualize their experiences in discussions and written assignments. Even with rigorous standards, learning as part of valuational progress need not fit exactly within traditional academic parameters. As many students observe in their schooling, their extra-curricular and co-curricular activities can foster valuing activities that are constitutive of their liberal education.

Second, and relatedly, it is important to interrogate the accepted content of liberal education. Just as William Stoner was a new entrant to university life, college student demographics—particularly in categories of race, geography, and age—are predicted to continue changing over the next generation, further broadening the range of interested minds whose experiences are worthy of curricular representation.²² Given the evolving and mixed values that guide students' lives, educators can be continually creative in their understanding of what counts as liberal learning. Even disciplinary boundaries are fungible and subject to change. The emergence of such fields as feminist studies, cultural and ethnic studies, and other disciplinary hybrids are the product of evolving scholarly, political, and moral interests, and while the debates about what "counts" as academic are quite alive, the push for academic changes comes from the students and scholars who are challenging the standards of what is worthwhile to learn.²³

These evolutionary changes reflect the multiplicity of possibilities that liberal education affords its students. Stoner stumbled upon English literature through a general education requirement, just as the students depicted here were granted choices outside of their originally imagined interests. Their roles as valuing agents must be met with conditions of possibility that enable them to exercise their agency toward fulfilling learning experiences. As bell hooks argues, the classroom is meant to be a space of radical possibility.²⁴ Such possibilities could be extensions of existing interests as well as new or unexpected ones: they may appeal to students' *occurrent* interests, or their immediate expressed curiosities, or their *dispositional* interests, which might not be readily apparent until there is an opportunity for deeper exploration.²⁵ Even more, a chance encounter with an idea, a mode of inquiry, or a mentor, may introduce a radically new possibility that otherwise would not have arisen in the student's mind.

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3 Williams, *Stoner*, 26.

4 Bruce A. Kimball, *Orators & Philosophers: A History of the Idea of Liberal Education, Expanded Edition* (New York: College Entrance Examination Board, 1995).

5 Kimball, *Orators & Philosophers*, 218.

6 Kimball, *Orators & Philosophers*, 214; Hoyt H. Hudson, *Educating Liberally* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1945); Michael Oakeshott, *The Voice of Liberal Learning* (Hartford: Yale University Press, 1989); Anthony O’Hear, *Education, Society, and Human Nature: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Education* (Abingdon: Routledge, 1981).

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9 Brann, “The American College,” 157.

10 Williams, *Stoner*, 26-27.

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18 Callard, "Liberal Education," 4.

19 Callard, "Liberal Education," 9.

20 Callard, "Liberal Education," 15.

21 Agnes Callard, *Aspiration: The Agency of Becoming* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).

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24 hooks, *Teaching to Transgress*.

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