Chapter XIX

“To Be in Occasional Touch”: Goddard College’s Progressive Principles and Distributed Learning

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ABSTRACT

The challenges for Goddard College posed by 21st Century information technologies are their incorporation into, and reflection of, the foundational principles of the College’s low residency delivery model. This learning model is complex; the many aspects of this complexity forces the College (and other progressive institutions) to insist on a values base that helps determine attitudes to and uses of technology. If administrative staff and faculty have a deep commitment to those values, when done well, information technology can enhance the progressive model.

INTRODUCTION

This chapter offers a brief case study of a small, rural college with a long-term commitment to progressive principles: Goddard College in Plainfield, Vermont. As it happens, the story of Goddard’s seven-decade commitment to apply progressive principles to post-secondary education intersects with new modes of educational delivery and emerging information technologies. The study of what has happened in Plainfield, Vermont (and globally in Goddard’s spread-out student and faculty population) may provide lessons for how technology can aid in distributing learning across distances.

The current age of information technology has revolutionized the way institutions of higher education operate. Contrary to the notions of some,
Goddard College does not engage in “distance learning,” in the sense of offering online courses which have been structured to facilitate use of the machinery through which they are disseminated. Goddard strives to remain true to progressive education as an ideal while availing itself of the vast resources as made available by technological advances. Hence, Goddard College is driven by ideas, not technology. The difference is vast.

Our case here is to examine, in an exploratory and illustrative manner, how that vast difference is manifest in Goddard’s use of information technology. Before we examine that, a brief review of progressive principles is useful.

**WHAT ARE PROGRESSIVE PRINCIPLES?**

There is a huge literature delineating progressivism as a philosophy and its application to education; a full review of that literature is beyond the scope of this brief case study. Goddard consciously adopted these progressive principles in its 1938 inception, and continues to espouse them in its community standards and educational practices.

Like many other paradigmatic societal shifts, the progressive education movement experienced its share of fits and starts from the mid-1800s through the mid-1900s. Proponents of progressive education were rethinking American notions of public education in an era dominated by a state-sponsored philosophy designed to promote an unquestioning conformity by the masses rather than to stimulate critical thinking skills. Dewey and other progressive education theorists sought to broaden education’s reach into the social and political fabric of society. Progressivists sought to encourage wider political, cultural, and social participation in governance and gave primacy to the individual’s lived experiences as necessary enrichments to the educational process (Bode, 1938; Dewey, 1997a; 1997b; 2006; Westbrook, 1991).

Various perspectives on progressive education were developed by theorists, including Booker T. Washington’s methods employed at Tuskegee Institute some thirty years earlier than Dewey’s writings. Although Washington’s experiment at the Tuskegee Normal and Industrial Institute goes largely uncited by historians as one of the earliest examples of progressive education in action, his curriculum combined academic theory classes – geometry, mathematics, science – with carpentry and electrical skills in a hands-on building construction project (Generals, 2000). The Tuskegee experiment illustrates how the tenets common to virtually all Progressivists included experiential learning, the development of problem solving skills, an eclectic approach to curriculum development, the development of critical thinking skills, the promotion of democratic participation, and social responsibility, among others.

Dewey’s specific approach, often referred to as instrumentalism, had its origins in the pragmatist school of educational theory. Instrumentalism posits that humans use truth as an instrument to solve problems. This viewpoint renders culture, experience, and vocation, among other human phenomena, as the “truths” of each individual. In fact, Dewey argues that both progressive and traditional education are inadequate unless they respect experience, regardless of the source (Dewey, 1997ab).

Much denigrated during the McCarthy era, progressive education ideals enjoyed a resurgence in the late 1950s and early 1960s. John Dewey’s principles of curriculum development became the basis for numerous iterations of student-centered private and public schools. Goddard is a college started on Dewey and other progressive theorists’ educational principles. This makes Goddard unusual in the landscape of North American education: progressive principles applied to K-12 are much more common, and more highly articulated, than those in post-secondary schools.
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