

Interdisciplinary Exchange Enriches Knowledge

Goldwin Emerson, gandjemerson@rogers.com

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A few weeks ago a good friend of mine died after six months of suffering from cancer. My friend taught at Western University during much of the same period of time as I did. His name was Donald Santor. Although our two offices at Western's Faculty of Education were physically far apart it was our custom to meet with each other for at least 5 minutes daily and quite often for much longer. Our conversations frequently started with a few comments about current news events. For example, we talked about climate change, the latest political announcements, the shortage of affordable housing, or perhaps an issue concerning a current ethical matter.

Professor Donald Santor was quite knowledgeable about his own discipline. I considered him to be an expert on Canadian history, including Canada's participation in both World War I and World War II. He had published numerous books on how history should be taught and understood by high school teachers and their students. Donald Santor also specialized in instructing upcoming teachers how to understand comparative religions and how religion could be taught to broaden and inform one's views on current Canadian issues.

My own academic discipline centred on educational philosophy which examined what purpose was served by tax-supported schools as opposed to private schools. In this study it became apparent that private schools were designed for a broad range of differing goals. For example, they could be designed for character building, for religious inculcation, job training, cultural development, and so forth. But even equally true was the fact that in public tax-supported schools there was also quite a broad range of goals to which these schools could direct their efforts.

I came to the conclusion that my daily conversations with Professor Santor were helpful to me in understanding Canadian history, and Don's knowledge about teaching practices gave me a better insight into the work I was doing at the Faculty of Education. At Western University there are many experts in many areas of knowledge. It could be a benefit if university professors would freely interact with their fellow professors in sharing more widely the work in which Western professors were involved.

The idea of a successful university ought to encourage as many interchanges of knowledge as possible. Philosophers should talk to social scientists, mathematicians

should confer with musicians, artists should talk to psychologists, historians should interchange their ideas with biochemists, and so on. To some extent this interchange of knowledge is already possible. Professors do share their expertise by publishing their work. But publishing the work professors are involved in may sometimes be a more private matter than it ought to be. In the best universities a more open sharing of knowledge can be a benefit to the whole university community.

Of course, my idea is not new. In 1852, Cardinal John Henry Newman wrote *The Idea of a University*. For Newman a good university should have as its purpose “the communication and circulation of thought.” Newman also believed that the ideal university when dealing with controversial topics should be free from interference from the church, which in his case included the Roman Catholic Church. Newman promoted the concept of looking at world problems using an interdisciplinary approach. He believed that a good university could offer the best solutions when many areas of knowledge were applied to solving complex problems. For example, when science, economics, the arts, religion, and mathematics worked in co-operation rather than in competition, knowledge would progress more rapidly, and universities would be one of the best places for successful results.

In the early 1900s the educator, psychologist, philosopher, and prolific writer, John Dewey, presented an interdisciplinary approach similar to that of Cardinal Newman. Dewey promoted the idea that cooperation among various disciplines should begin much earlier in elementary and secondary schools. In 1900 Dewey wrote *The Child and the Curriculum* and in 1902 *The School and Society*. In 1915 he wrote *Schools of Tomorrow*, and in 1916 he wrote *Democracy and Education: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Education*. Each publication promoted an interdisciplinary approach.

Good universities work best when professors from various departments take time to talk to their colleagues. I am personally grateful that my colleague, Donald Santor, followed this practice.