



## Resource Review

<b>Name of reviewer:</b>	Millard Parkinson
<b>Job title and department:</b>	Curriculum Resource Manager and Head of Media
<b>Institution:</b>	St Helens College

<b>Name of reviewed item:</b>	A New Agenda for Higher Education – Shaping a Life of the Mind for Practice
<b>Author(s) / Editor(s):</b>	William M. Sullivan and Matthew S. Rosin
<b>Publisher / distributor details:</b>	Jossey-Bass
<b>Publication / release date:</b>	2008
<b>ISBN number (if applicable):</b>	978-0-470-25757-9
<b>Price:</b>	£29.95

### Review:

The aim of this book is to bring together the two, sometimes opposing, elements of the American higher education system that combine to “enhance the possibilities of life for its students.” These two elements comprise those found mainly in what the authors describe as liberal arts and science subjects that seek to cultivate “a life of the mind – the intellectual dimensions of students’ lives such as problem-solving capacities and critical thinking.” This contrasts with practices found in professional schools which “have focused on providing the means whereby students might ‘make something of themselves’ by acquiring competence in specific skills valuable to others”. A concise intention is contained in the book’s conclusion:

the goal of this book is to chart a new path towards the renewal of a personal and institutional purpose in the contemporary academy. Having enshrined abstract argument and critical thinking at the centre of academic life, our academic institutions continue to look on the situated and the particular cases of the ‘fallenness’ of the practical. We are still disposed to view the world of practice as unredeemed by the sacred objects of universalized argument, to which we have been trained to devote our lives and our loyalties. We have forgotten the practical ground on which our academic institutions are built.

This book is the result of a study project conducted by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching that attempts to bring these two elements together. This study was originally set up by the co-author, Sullivan, together with Albert Jonsen, Gary Fenstermacher and Lee Schulman to engage with the questions raised by a critical examination of how effective their teaching had been and how it had impacted on their students. This is explained in Schulman and Fenstermacher’s introduction to the book as:

The supposed connection between the liberal arts and the professions has been vexing academics for many decades. Faculty members in arts, humanities and sciences frequently lament the lack of foundational knowledge on the part of those whose undergraduate education takes place predominantly in the professions. Faculty members in professional schools protest the lack of real-world studies in the liberal arts. On many campuses there is a virtual wall separating the schools. Even in those rare settings where rich, collaborative discussions take place between the liberal arts and the professions, it is a huge challenge to locate key ideas that provide a sense of cohesion and basis for mutual benefit between the two.

During the course of their early discussions they realised a need to collaborate with other colleagues in a range of subject areas and gathered fourteen partners to take part in the *Life of the Mind for Practice* project and to attend 3 seminars between September 2002 and December 2003. These were all experienced senior academics from across the USA engaged in teaching a range of subjects including law, teacher education, religious studies (Jewish and Christian) engineering, medicine, philosophy, human biology, English and rhetoric.

The book comprises two narrative threads. The first presents a new agenda for American higher education based on teaching for practical reasoning and responsible judgement. The second highlights an agenda for practical reasoning to be incorporated at faculty level and included across the whole range of provision within each faculty. The overall goal of the book is to “help our students meet the practical and professional challenges that await them with learned insight, technical know-how and discerning moral commitment”.

This would appear to be another investigation into the issues facing most higher education courses in Britain as well as the US and elsewhere. The issues of how to incorporate academic considerations and critical thinking into practical subjects; how to integrate theory and practice; how to include practical applications of academic disciplines; the increasing recognition and significance of practice-based research; how to ensure graduates have the required range of skills needed for employment and how to meet increasing demands from employers for employable graduates with relevant skills. These are important considerations for all teachers in higher and further education in their attempts to meet demands and targets for a highly skilled workforce and to produce ‘thinking practitioners’.

The strategy for this, as developed in the seminars, includes examinations of a number of case studies presented by each of the participants. These were examples of teaching and learning activities that they had introduced to the delivery of their own curriculum. This included a description of the activities and analysis of the students’ responses that were generally favourable. These activities are presented in such a way as to suggest that they are highly innovative and outside the usual practice in American higher education at this level. My impression is that most of these should be considered as quite normal practice and what should be reasonably expected in these subjects. For example, a course in medical ethics for second year medical students which includes examination of a case study around organ transplant and the ‘harvesting’ of paediatric organs. Should this be considered at the boundaries of the subject, as is suggested in the book, or as something that is fundamental and likely to occur in the graduates’ working lives? Most of the case studies demonstrate a similar ‘so-what’ factor although many do present some interesting ideas for activities that might be included in curriculum delivery. The reader might adapt them for their own courses confident that they are based on respected academic practices at the most prestigious American institutions. Details of the case study syllabi are contained in the book’s appendix.

The first two chapters of the book contain details of the case studies including the background to the courses they inform, the ethical and practical issues that students are to consider and their responses to the activities. The third chapter presents a detailed narrative of the seminars. This includes the results of partner discussions between pairs of members from different disciplines. It also reveals a high level of intellectual discussion and argument that appeared to do little to achieve any common ground but rather to create obstacles to achieving any agreement. The fourth chapter is entitled 'Practical Reason as an Educational Agenda' and investigates ways in which critical thinking can be incorporated into an educational agenda and how practical reason can contribute to an alternative educational agenda. This chapter includes some useful references to recent research undertaken in this field in the US and examples of how practical reasoning has been incorporated into professional education. What are identified here are the barriers to the integration of practical reasoning into mainstream American higher education. These are centred on the current situation of academic isolation prevalent in the American system including the proprietorial nature of much teaching in the hands of individual academics rather than shared practice. Those who do try to include practical reasoning in their curricula do so against the accepted practice in most institutions and any cross-disciplinary and cross-professional activity which may foster the new insights into practical reasoning are very rare in the participants' experience of American higher education. All of this suggests an understandable dissatisfaction with the conservative career-oriented ethos of US academia.

It is not specifically stated but is suggested that this study involved representatives from the leading American institutions for their particular subjects and, as such, the students they teach are 'high flyers' who will become major players in their field and whose work may have significant impact. Many of the students referred to are mature students in employment and who are sponsored by their employers to enhance their career prospects. The inclusion of representatives from less prestigious institutions may have provided a wider perspective on this issue and a broader range of pedagogic activities.

An interesting study involves the study of law and issues around the pressures placed on students at the most prestigious law schools to succeed and in doing so, to subsume many of their personal and moral feelings that might be construed as weaknesses and disadvantages in the highly competitive career race.

This study might have been improved by including a broader range of subjects, particularly practical arts subjects. It would have been interesting to have included courses in the American media, multimedia and journalism and considered how they address issues of critical thinking and moral responsibility.

This study would appear to reflect the ongoing argument between purely academic study and vocational education similar to 'The Debate – Is the Renaissance scholar dead?' between Adrian Monk and A.C. Grayling covered in the Education Guardian (The Guardian, April 8, 2008) but with a more concerted attempt to reconcile the two opposing sides and a recognition that such a reconciliation is essential to the future of higher education.

As suggested earlier, many of the case studies and suggestions for new teaching activities could be taken up by readers and adapted for their own courses but again, there is little that is innovative in this as they are similar to suggested activities found in most text books aimed at A-Level, other further education and first year undergraduate students. It would appear that normal practice in British further education and undergraduate teaching is perhaps in advance of that in the higher levels of American academia. This book is aimed at readers from the American

higher education community and a knowledge of the US system would be a considerable advantage in getting the best out of it.

The preface to the book opens with the old joke about “how do you get to Carnegie Hall? Practice, practice!” Perhaps it should read. How do you get to the Carnegie Foundation? Work in the British education system.

Monk, A., and A. C. Grayling (2008) ‘The Debate – Is the Renaissance Scholar dead?’, The Guardian, 8 April.  
<http://www.guardian.co.uk/education/2008/apr/08/highereducation.uk>. Date accessed 01/09/08.