

Bakersfield College



A MODEST PROPOSAL IN FAVOR OF INEFFICIENT EDUCATION

A Public Lecture by Dr. Victoria Mora



Presented by
The Norman Levan Center For The Humanities
and St. John's College



Colleagues and Friends,

The Norman Levan Center for the Humanities at Bakersfield College is pleased to publish this lecture by Victoria Mora. Dr. Mora is the Dean of St. John's College in Santa Fe, New Mexico. She received her B.A. in English and Philosophy from the University of New Mexico and her Ph.D. in Philosophy from Yale University. She delivered this timely and thoughtful lecture as part of her appearance as a visiting scholar at Bakersfield College.

The Norman Levan Center for the Humanities publishes outstanding papers and lectures by Bakersfield College faculty and by visiting scholars and lecturers. These occasional publications are available through the Center, which is committed to the advancement of the humanities.

Sincerely,

Jack Hernandez

Director of the Norman Levan Center of the Humanities, Bakersfield College

**A Modest Proposal in Favor of an Inefficient Education
Dr. Victoria Mora, Dean of St. John's College, Santa Fe
Given at Bakersfield College
March 17, 2010**

Dedicated to Dr. Norm Levan on the occasion of his birthday and in honor of the remarkable contributions he has made through his own commitment to education and its power to transform human beings.

Part of the impact of what is now being called the Great Recession has been an impressive number of news stories on higher education, treating everything from its cost to its efficacy in preparing students for our fast-paced, technologically-based world. Many have called into question the ends of higher education as a way of evaluating its worth. One thread in these articles has been an unexamined assumption—expressed in the language employed in the articles—that higher education can be (perhaps even ought to be) measured in economic terms: its “value” is determined by the “product” it “produces” and the “worth” of that “product” in the “marketplace”; its “cost” is evaluated according to its “efficiency” in meeting the demands of “consumers”. “Bang for the buck” has become the spotlight under which institutions and their policies for admissions and financial aid and educational programming are considered—with “bang” being defined primarily as the student’s ability to attain gainful employment at the end of however many years at whatever cost.

Now I understand that higher education isn’t special with respect to the requirement that it function within the marketplace and its constraints. And I understand quite clearly that at least part of the purpose of higher education is indeed to prepare individuals to enter the workforce, and so of course any practical evaluation of it will include economic terms. But should we be comfortable with the prevalence of these terms in evaluating the essential worth of higher education? Should the essential worth of higher education be measured in economic terms? Perhaps a way into the question is to step back from higher education to primary education, as a way of thinking about education in itself. Would we as parents, as educators, as citizens be comfortable with viewing our children’s education from a solely economic perspective? Would

we advocate cutting reading programs for developmentally challenged children and fund instead programs that prepare them for physical labor if it meant showing that we have understood that this is a product worthy of the marketplace and that we have cut costs in producing it? Would we cut off art and music and physical fitness classes for students whose aptitude is in science and mathematics, focusing exclusively on the quickest development in those areas in order to maximize efficiency? Would we shorten the course of general education for students who show little promise early on, thus focusing our resources on those most likely to succeed? As all of us know, these questions are not merely theoretical, and I would argue that though they do not get articulated overtly, they are too often just beneath the surface in policy and funding decisions from the local to the national level. That they remain unexamined is, then, especially problematic. Perhaps the reason that these questions are not openly articulated is that we would be embarrassed to admit that we have reduced the worth of our children's education to a matter of mere economic efficiency. Yet we find ourselves embarrassed in the other direction as well. At least economic terms—and especially the terms of efficiency and production—are concrete, and education can hold its head high in the marketplace if it can at least show that it is efficient in its operations and in its contribution to the greater economic good. Talk of education as a good in itself seems not to have a very large audience any more, if it ever did; and how long has it been since we've heard serious public discourse about education as an activity that transforms human beings, one at a time, toward their own good and toward the greater good? In fact, don't even educators find themselves embarrassed by such talk insofar as it carries with it none of the professional prestige that is associated with economic indicators? If we are not asking these questions, then we may be implicitly accepting the reduction of education to a cog in the mere workings of economic efficiency. And the irony is that in so reducing education, it will be the cog that undoes those very workings. After all, it is a human world to which we all belong. And the quality of that world, in its economic capacity and otherwise, is a function of the qualities that have been cultivated in the human beings who inhabit it.

And so I would like tonight to make a modest proposal in favor of an inefficient education. I begin with a reminder of what is obvious and therefore forever in danger of being covered over or missed. Education, in order to be what it is, must concern itself with the development of the human being. This is true not only for primary and secondary school, but for higher education as well. It is true not only for liberal education, but for vocational and professional education as well. And so education cannot be understood under the auspices of efficiency precisely because it is by its very nature time consuming. It is time consuming because it is, by definition, about change. It is about the kind of transformation that leads or brings each individual human being from one condition or state to another. To give way to the language of efficiency, then, is to misunderstand education in its very essence.

With this in mind I would like to turn to three basic points in considering my modest proposal for an inefficient education. Each of my three points will unfold as considerations of a modest distinction. Modest though each may be, however, each is crucial to the fundamental pursuit of education and to the economy which education finally supports. Further, in developing each of my three points and the vision of education

that they suggest I will rely on two essays written by Michel de Montaigne, “Of the Education of Children” and “Of Pedantry”.¹ Both essays present Montaigne’s reader with a serious skepticism about the value and efficacy of a 16th century gentleman’s education, and I recommend these readings to all of you. My interest in turning to them tonight, however, will be limited to recovering from Montaigne’s acute observations a language for thinking and speaking about education that is as relevant today as it was over 400 years ago. In recovering this language, I hope to show indirectly how the application of economic terms to education misleads us in our thinking about the essential worth of education. I will also suggest that this misapplication of economic language to education lulls us into a false sense of what finally constitutes efficiency in education. I begin with the distinction between education aimed at producing learnedness and education aimed at cultivating learners. On the face of it, the distinction between producing students who are learned and cultivating students who are learners may seem fatuous. After all, it would be reasonable to expect that one becomes learned only by being a learner. Maybe. But maybe not. The distinction I have in mind comes into focus when we consider how the intentions that shape education determine both its methods and its expectations for outcomes. The intention to produce students who are learned necessarily must focus on the student’s acquisition of content. To be learned in a particular subject matter is to have acquired that subject matter and to be able to replicate it. But while the intention to cultivate learners also requires a focus on content, acquisition of that content is not of primary importance. Rather, interaction with that content is. How the student interacts with the content, rather than that she or he is successful in acquiring it, is what must drive the methods and expectations for outcomes if the end of an education is to cultivate learners. To put it in economic terms, the business of educating the learned may be radically different from the business of educating learners.

Montaigne’s 400 year old gastronomical observations in his essay “Of Pedantry” suggest an apt metaphor for fleshing out the distinction I have just sketched. He calls our attention to the meaning of an education of substance—one which transcends mere ornament or show so as to be truly transformative. He suggests this metaphor of substance in a variety of ways, beginning with a critique of those who purvey an education aimed only at learnedness. These sorts of teacher fail to nourish the very students for whom the education might be transformative by encouraging students to consider knowledge as something merely ornamental—so many fine words at the ends of their lips—or, in our own day, regurgitated on tests. In so doing, they fail to help students to internalize what they have learned, making it their own. Yet this internalization is precisely what is required for an education of substance, for an education that is transformative. Montaigne accuses these purveyors of learnedness of being pedants who leave their students starving even as they themselves are left starving.

¹ Michel de Montaigne, *The Complete Essays of Michel de Montaigne*, trans. Donald M. Frame

He writes:

Just as birds sometimes go in quest of grain, and carry it in their beaks without tasting it to give a beakful to their little ones, so our pedants go pillaging knowledge in books and lodge it only on the end of their lips, in order merely to disgorge it and scatter it to the winds...

But what is worse, their students and their little ones are not nourished and fed with their learning either; it passes from hand to hand for the sole purpose of making a show of it, talking to others and telling stories about it...²

Obviously the starvation alluded to by Montaigne does not result from having nothing to eat. We have no reason to doubt that the grain in the beaks of the birds is nourishing enough, and so we have no reason to doubt that the knowledge pillaged by pedants is nourishing enough. But insofar as it is neither eaten by the bird nor taken in by its young, the grains of knowledge succeed in nourishing no one. They therefore fail in providing substance, and succeed in transforming no one. Rather, they are merely retained intact, now scattered to the winds, now passed from hand to hand, now talked and told about. Teachers and students alike succeed at being more learned, as witnessed by what proceeds from their lips in the form of fine words, but they starve in the process.

What would make for the opposite of starvation, especially when the grains of knowledge are so plentifully available? Presumably it would be a scenario under which learning would be nourishing for the student, transforming her or him beyond mere learnedness through a process of digestion. Montaigne writes, "We know how to say: 'Cicero says thus; such are the morals of Plato; these are the very words of Aristotle. But what do we say ourselves? What do we judge? What do we do? A parrot could well say as much.'³ Learning from books and the knowledge they offer does not seem to be the problem for Montaigne, but the teacher must find a way to help the student to move beyond parroting. Moving beyond parroting would entail not just knowing what others have said, not just having a memory full like a beak stuffed with grain, but rather having something to say for oneself based on the process of digestion. But digestion isn't possible if the student doesn't swallow, and swallowing isn't even enough, for swallowing can result in no more than regurgitation. As Montaigne puts it, "We take the opinions and the knowledge of others into our keeping, and that is all. We must make them our own...What good does it do us to have our belly full if it is not digested, if it is not transformed into us, if it does not make us bigger and stronger?"⁴

I propose that this sort of transformation, the kind that makes us bigger and stronger and that comes from an education that changes the very substance of one's being, is precisely what is possible when the end of education is to cultivate learners. Here the importance of Montaigne's gastronomic metaphor becomes clear. For while a teacher, a school, or an entire educational system may be committed to providing the means by which education might result in learning, cultivating learners requires more than the proper inputs

² "Of Pedantry," p. 100.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid., p.101.

to effect replication. For learners cannot be made wholly from the outside in; they must also be made from the inside out, even as size and strength are made from the inside out by the process of digesting substance. We all know that digestion takes time—and not the same amount of time for each individual. It cannot be rushed as it is a function not only of what is put into the individual, but also of the individual's capacity to receive it. What one individual digests quickly, another may not be able to digest without help. In short, transformation made possible by education requires activity not just on the side of teachers and the system that supports them, but also on the side of students, who must be moved by what they are fed. These are the conditions under which an education of substance might be had, and they bring me to the second distinction that I wish to offer as food for thought: the distinction between education aimed at cultivating memory and education aimed at cultivating judgment.

Let me begin with a claim with which you might wish to disagree when we come to the question period. If education aimed at learnedness primarily needs to cultivate memory, education aimed at cultivating learners needs primarily to concern itself with the development of judgment. No doubt there are many parents and teachers who are convinced that it is not possible to teach judgment. I have certainly had my moments of despair as both mother and teacher! But while judgment may not be teachable, it certainly must be capable of cultivation—otherwise, we should emancipate our teenagers from home and school while they are at the height of knowing their own minds! On the understanding that such cultivation might be possible, what would it look like?

Again, approaching the question by way of contrast is helpful. When our work with students aims toward memory, we expect some combination of activity and passivity. This combination presents itself in listening. One must listen—whether with one's ears or with one's eyes—in order to memorize. And listening, as we all know, must entail an active component—as compared, for example, with hearing, which may be totally passive. But I would argue that the active element in listening for the sake of memorization is not as important as the passive element required. To memorize, one must be receptive, wholly focused on what is given as it is given. This is what is required of listening for the sake of memorization. To question what one is listening to, to analyze it, or to approach it critically is to interfere with the receptivity required to memorize it. In a certain sense the activity of listening aimed at memorization presupposes a passivity which manifests itself as silence, as a commitment to forego interruption for the purpose of acquiring something exactly as it presents itself. Listening for the sake of memorization is akin to swallowing something whole.

Judgment surely requires memory and the combination of activity and passivity that makes its cultivation possible through listening. But judgment requires a different emphasis, one concerned with a kind of activity that goes beyond listening. Judgment requires that the student interrupt, if not literally and out loud, then metaphorically and in the depths of her or his own listening. This metaphorical interruption can stand for any number of human activities tied to the development of judgment, and so any method that calls forth these activities cultivates judgment. Indeed the very questioning, analyzing, and critical thinking that must be silenced in the student for the purpose of listening with an ear toward memorization must be activated for the purpose of listening with an ear toward exercising judgment.

The important point is that the cultivation of judgment requires movement on the part of the learner that goes beyond listening, memorization, and replication. It may be the case that no learning is truly possible without such movement on the part of the student, no matter how gifted the teacher. For isn't the exercise of judgment precisely the expression of our having come to understand the substance of something? And learning is surely about understanding something if it is about anything at all. To learn, one must go beyond openness to knowing something toward commitment to understanding it. This means approaching it from as many angles as possible, for the sake of allowing it to reveal itself fully and for the sake of having something to say about it for oneself. A crucial element in the cultivation of the learner, then, is the exercise of judgment. Montaigne offers a description of his own learning process that captures the importance of judgment. He does so—and not incidentally, I think—after apologizing for his poor memory. Yet in the end the apologies he makes for his poor memory end up ringing among the more ironic tones in his writing, and even as he complains about the sluggishness of his judgment, he demonstrates that its exercise has made him into a learner who can keep up with the great minds of the past and who can even apply their insights to the matters that concern him in the present. Montaigne is telling us, albeit indirectly, that having a poor memory has not interfered with his accomplishments as a learner. He may not hold memories and knowledge long enough to retrieve them at will, but he does possess an ability to move that establishes, even in his own self-deprecating account of himself, his powers as a learner. If he complains that he hasn't retained much from the books that he has read, he does acknowledge that his faculty of judgment, along with his ability to conceive things, has moved him into the company of those whose books are taken up by the learned. It accomplishes this by leading Montaigne to contribute something of his own, his book of essays; and by leading him to discover that his opinions often coincide with those of the authors whose books he hasn't spent much time reading. He writes:

...As for the natural faculties that are in me, of which this book is the essay, I feel them bending under the load. My conceptions and my judgment move only by groping, staggering, stumbling, and blundering; and when I have gone ahead as far as I can, still I am not satisfied: I can still see country beyond, but with a dim and clouded vision, so that I cannot clearly distinguish it. And when I undertake to speak indiscriminately of everything that comes to my fancy without using any but my own natural resources, if I happen, as I often do, to come across in the good authors those same subjects I have attempted to treat...seeing myself so weak and puny, so heavy and sluggish, in comparison with those men, I hold myself in pity and disdain.

Still I am pleased at this, that my opinions have the honor of often coinciding with theirs, and that at least I go the same way, though far behind them, saying "How true!" Also that I have this, which not everyone has, that I know the vast difference between them and me. And nonetheless I let my thoughts run on, weak and lowly as they are, as I have produced them, without plastering and sewing up the flaws that this comparison has revealed to me.⁵

⁵ Ibid., p.107.

Here Montaigne's movement places him in the company of the learned. While his essays are peppered with the kind of unflattering remarks he indulges here with regard to his natural conceptions and judgment, "groping, staggering, stumbling, and blundering" as they are, he continues in those essays to write, to take his weak and puny, heavy and sluggish motions and direct them toward perfecting his clouded vision. Graceless though this motion may seem when compared with the swift movements of a cultivated memory engaged in the activity of replication, it is the motion of a learner. And as a learner, Montaigne gets somewhere. Through the motions of his own intellect he often lights on the same subjects as worthy authors. What's more, by the awkward movements of his natural faculties, he comes to some of the same opinions. What Montaigne has failed to acquire in the way of memory, he has achieved through the activity of his own conceptions and judgment as these are expressed in his essays. In so doing, he has internalized the knowledge of those who are learned, making that knowledge his own.

In turn, the expression of his conceptions and judgment in the essays seems to poise him to be a better reader—both of books and of himself. For in following along behind an author saying "How true!" he has conceived clearly what the author is saying and he has judged its worth for himself. This takes Montaigne beyond the mere "parrotting" that concerns him in the essay on pedantry. To see the truth in something is to go beyond the receptivity that parrotting requires. It requires the kinds of activities I mentioned earlier—activities like questioning, analyzing, and offering critique. Through these activities, Montaigne has come to a judgment of what is before him. That judgment is actively responsive to what is given in the books he reads, and could presumably be reactivated by returning to those books even if Montaigne's memory fails in its task.

Furthermore, in discerning what is before him, in content and in quality, Montaigne goes beyond what is immediately given and comes to know himself better. He is able to judge the vast difference between himself and the authors he reads. But rather than cripple him, this judgment leads him to greater integrity in his writing. Unlike writers who hide behind the words of others, Montaigne writes to clarify his own thought. "I do not speak the minds of others except to speak my own mind better."⁶ In so doing, he picks and chooses what serves the point he is trying to make; he exercises his judgment as reader and as writer alike. It is this exercise, this activity, which is at the root of deepening judgment. And it is at the root of Montaigne's success as a practicing author.

Here the distinction between an education aimed at memory and an education aimed at judgment becomes especially clear in its importance. An education aimed at memory requires the participation of the student at the level of listening to the subject matter with a view toward being able to reproduce it. But the active work required to cultivate judgment transforms the student not only as a learner about subject matter, but as a learner about herself or himself. In other words, the cultivation of judgment has a practical as well as an intellectual dimension in its potential for transformation of the student. Judgment may even be the central faculty engaged in bridging the intellectual and the practical dimensions of human life; it is called for in both,

⁶ Ibid., p.108.

if an individual is to do more than parrot what others have taught, whether intellectually or practically. This is commensurate with and even necessary to education, it seems to me; for in its essence, education is less an apprenticeship than an awakening. If education is aimed at the whole person, and not just at some abstracted notion of the student as one who “takes on” subject matter in the manner of some beast of burden, then a transformation of self that might change a person's practice—of a profession, perhaps, or perhaps of daily life—would seem to be an important outcome. As I hope I have shown, if only in the broadest strokes, this is made possible by the cultivation of judgment.

This potential for transformation at the level of practical life brings me to the third distinction on which my modest proposal in favor of an inefficient education relies: the distinction between educating with a view toward knowledge and educating with a view toward ability. This is not to say that the two are incompatible, and so once again my distinction calls for a nuanced consideration. To educate toward knowledge is to educate with a view toward the student's ability, in the most basic sense of the student's being able to reproduce certain things—a mathematical formula, perhaps, or a paradigm in a particular language, or a scientific experiment. Many of our most prevalent assessments of student learning are content-focused in this way, from state and federally-mandated tests at key junctures in elementary and secondary education to the ACT and SAT scores that largely determine what institutions of higher learning our children will be allowed to enter. And of course there is something important about an education that requires students to acquire content. Mathematical formulas must be known before they can be applied. Grammatical paradigms must be known before the meaning of a sentence or a paragraph or a book can be discerned. The elements operating in an experiment must be known before a theory can be supported by it. This is to say that an education geared toward knowledge is a perfectly worthy pursuit, and we should be glad to have such an education available to our students.

But the ability I have in mind goes beyond the ability to reproduce something, and therefore an education geared toward knowledge must be understood as preparatory; otherwise, we are back to the kind of transformation described by Montaigne as merely “ornamental”, and ornaments can weigh us down. If, however, the kind of transformation with which education is concerned is substantial, the learner's ability must go beyond acquisitions toward contributions of her or his own. It is precisely the ability to get out from under the burden of knowledge in order to make a contribution of one's own that suggests that education has achieved its essential, not ornamental, end of transformation of the individual from one state or condition to another; it is the ability to make a contribution of one's own that manifests an education of substance in one who is big and strong enough to do so.

Montaigne helps us to understand more clearly this distinction between education whose end is knowledge and education whose end is ability by reflecting on the difference it can make in the life of the student. The language he uses may seem a bit foreign to our ears, and so we will need to listen carefully if we are to discern and therefore judge what he has to offer on this point.

He writes:

I should be inclined to say that as plants are stifled with too much moisture, and lamps with too much oil, so too much study and matter stifles the action of the mind (l'esprit), which, being caught and entangled in a great variety of things, may lose the ability to break loose, and be kept bent and huddled down by its burden.

But it works the other way, for the more our soul (l'ame) is filled, the larger it becomes. And in the examples from olden times, we see as further proof to the contrary that able men in the handling of public matters, great captains, and great counselors in affairs of state, have at the same time been very learned.⁷

Now Montaigne in this passage is foremost assuring us that the knowledge we acquire through education is not simply incompatible with being an able person. This is an important point in our own time, when higher education especially is called to task when it doesn't look and feel like the vocational model that has largely won the day in our collective imagination about what education ought to be. And indeed some of the criticism of higher education, and its too esoteric pursuits, is lurking in Montaigne's account: too much learning can weigh on one's mind, to the point of shutting down one's ability to grow and to shine. Montaigne's use of "l'esprit" in contrast with "l'ame" in this passage is instructive on this point, for he could have used one or the other expression to describe both what in the pupil might be weighed down by knowledge and what might be expanded. But he didn't. He used "l'esprit" for his weighing down metaphor and "l'ame" for his filling up metaphor. "L'esprit" refers specifically to that aspect of the human being rightly translated "mind", namely the aspect concerned with academic pursuits. But "l'ame" is the soul, the aspect of the person that animates a life, in practical as well as academic pursuits. The same knowledge, then, can weigh down the mind even as it can free the soul. And the difference seems to be in whether that knowledge is regarded as an acquisition or as something meant to be discharged into the world.

When learning is geared toward expanding the soul, rather than contenting itself with weighing down the mind, ability is possible. Montaigne chooses his examples carefully, for the handling of public matters, warfare, and affairs of state require one to go beyond learning conceived as so much stuff in our heads. It requires, rather, taking that learning and using it in a variety of ways in order to respond. In short, Montaigne's examples require learners with judgment; the learned with nothing more than excellent memories need not apply. Human affairs of state, warfare, and public matters all require that the individuals who engage them have the capacity to go beyond what is given, to go beyond parroting, to go beyond passivity by taking what they have learned, judging its relevance to the matters at hand, and acting in light of that learning and judgment.

Again, this is not to say that an education aimed at knowledge is incompatible with an education aimed at ability. But we must be keenly aware of how the methods of education differ according to its primary aim or end. This brings us back to the first two distinctions I have asked us to consider: that between an

⁷ "Of Pedantry," p. 98.

education aimed at producing the learned and an education aimed at cultivating learners, and that between an education aimed at cultivating memory and an education aimed at cultivating judgment. For these distinctions have everything to do with the development of ability in our students. Again, Montaigne is helpful on this point. Reflecting on why the learned are so often the butt of jokes and the objects of disdain in his time, Montaigne says in the essay on pedantry:

...that this evil comes from the bad way that men of learning have of going at the sciences; and that the way we are instructed, it is no wonder if neither the students nor the masters grow in ability, although they do make themselves more learned. In truth, the care and expense of our fathers aims only at furnishing our heads with knowledge; of judgment and virtue, little news...

We labor only to fill our memory, and leave understanding and the conscience empty.⁸

Here Montaigne is offering us an opportunity for further reflection on how education is pursued in light of its ends, and it is clear that it can be pursued badly or well. Pursuing education badly has to do with looking at knowledge as so much furnishing, something that fills our heads. To have a head furnished with knowledge, to have a memory that is filled to capacity, may very well result in greater and greater learnedness. But as an end in itself, Montaigne finds it contrary to the spirit of education and therefore unworthy of those who dedicate their lives to educating the young. They may succeed in making students more learned in the process, even turning out individuals who are very like themselves, suited to professorial chairs. But they have failed to grasp the ends of their own profession if they are too caught up in the importance of possessing knowledge. The alternative would be for education to address itself to developing the student's power of exercising knowledge, moving differently in the world because of it. Presumably under this condition the soul might be expanded rather than the mind burdened, and ability would be the result. Ability requires that we reach beyond what is given in order to make a contribution of our own, and judgment is the faculty that makes this possible. It is the faculty that makes us more rather than less responsive to the experiences that confront us—a sign of virtue, or of excellence, in what we do. As such, it is crucial to the exercise of understanding and conscience alike, both of which Montaigne points to as aspects of an educated human being.

Now the problem with each educational distinction that I have made tonight is that the side on which I have come down in considering the distinction—the side of cultivating learners, judgment, and ability—is by its very nature inefficient. It takes time, lots of it, to cultivate learners; “teaching to the test”, which is directed precisely toward learnedness, is far more efficient than cultivating the activity it takes to help students see for themselves how something is working and why, rather than just that it is so. The cultivation of judgment, insofar as it requires moving beyond what is given as it is given, requires many examples, many ways of coming at the same information, before the student's powers of judgment have enough to go on in making a determination. Exercising ability requires stops and starts, failures as well as successes, if excellence is to be achieved. One might even say that exercising ability is a task for a lifetime, while possessing knowledge

⁸Ibid., pp. 99-100. (non-italics, mine.)

can be accomplished once and for all given a well-developed memory. In any case, one can say with certainty that cultivating learners, judgment and ability is a process that not only cannot guarantee efficiency; it cannot even aspire to efficiency given the nature of human beings and the essence of education conceived as transformation.

Thus, the importance of inefficiency is not limited to primary and secondary education. That is, it is not the human being's lack of full maturation that makes the process of education inefficient. For as subject matter becomes more complex, so too do the requirements placed upon the student to respond become more complex. Even the best-prepared learners entering higher education, with robust judgment and ability, will find their matches in the best thinkers of the past and present and in the problems of the future. And meeting their matches is what is necessary if transformation is to take place. If higher education is to accomplish more than passing on the great mantle of learnedness with which it has been endowed; if it is to cultivate learners who can meet the unknown and not just produce the learned who carry with them what is already known; if it is to cultivate those whose judgment allows them to approach our changing world critically and reflectively, not just those whose memory has grasped the world as it has been and as it is; if it can help young people to mature in their abilities not just with subject matter as it is given, but with subject matter as it pertains to the larger world for which education prepares them; then it must resist the pressure exerted on it to justify itself in primarily economic terms. If we are bothered by the thought that primary education might be reduced to economic efficiency, we should be no less bothered that higher education might be so reduced. For education to be what it is, at any level, we must be prepared for inefficiency as part of the terrain. We might even be required to defend that inefficiency if we are to take education in its transformative capacity seriously at all.

Now I began tonight's talk by noting the hold that economic language has come to have with respect to the evaluation of higher education. And while we all know that that language can only be a metaphor, given that even those who use it know that human beings aren't finally products whose value is determined wholly in terms of their demand in the marketplace, we also know how powerful metaphors can be in shaping the ends and expectations that we hold out for education. I have offered up my modest proposal for an inefficient education largely in terms of the metaphors offered by Montaigne which I have taken to approximate as closely as possible the essence of education as a process of transformation: education as substance, nutrition and digestion; education as exercise and discharge in the world; education as expansion, as filling up. These are in contrast to other metaphors offered by Montaigne which might just as well lay claim to the essence of education as a process of passing on knowledge: education as ornamentation; education as possession; education as so much stuff furnishing the mind; education as fuel filling a vessel. In short, the language we choose to express our educational commitments matters. And so if I have accomplished nothing else tonight in making my modest proposal, I hope that at least I have encouraged each of us here to reflect on the real and consequential significance of reducing education to economic terms. The language we use to access and to assess something can come to shape and even drive it. And while short-term gains in education might be made in making it leaner and more focused on bang for the buck, the long-term effects would be disastrous.

For economic efficiency comes not from mechanical cogs, but from human beings and the innovations they bring in thinking about and interacting with the world, economic and otherwise. These human beings, in order to be transformed, need time and a variety of approaches and subject matters if they are to become broad and deep learners and not just narrowly learned; they need opportunities to exercise their judgment as well as their memory if they are to become problem-solvers and not just test-takers; and they need nurturing that cultivates opportunities for their unique abilities to express themselves in response to the knowledge they are expected to acquire and to the ever-changing world with which they are faced. Without the inefficiencies that accompany an education focused on the transformation of the human being, the openness and adaptability that comes with educational transformation is not possible. Is this not the greatest threat of all to the workings of economic efficiency, let alone to the transformation of our world through human efforts? Or to put it another way, doesn't an inefficient education turn out to be the most efficient education of all? ♣



Dr. Mora is the Dean of St. John's College in Santa Fe, New Mexico. She received her B.A. in English and Philosophy from the University of New Mexico and her Ph.D. in Philosophy from Yale University.