Notes for talk to faculty meeting
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# Historical Roots & Basic Assumptions of SLC Education

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## Origins and early days

We owe our being to a collaboration between William Van Duzer Lawrence, who supplied the financial wherewithal to found the college, and Henry Noble MacCracken, president of Vassar, who brought a rich fund of educational ideas.

> We are also indebted to the faculty of Vassar because they rejected MacCracken's proposals for change which were fueled in part by his familiarity with John Dewey's work. MacCracken was eager to put some of his ideas into practice, and so he journeyed to Bronxville. Apparently, the outlines for the college – initially a two year college – were formed jointly by MacCracken and Marian Coats, president for the first year.

The precepts on which the college was founded were nothing short of revolutionary, based on a strong critique of traditional modes of education.

> Many years have passed. We may think that the conflict between innovative, progressive education and traditional education has faded into oblivion. It hasn't. The conflict is a deep one – based on divergent views of the human being, of ways of learning, of the relation of learning to other aspects of life, and of the individual to society.

Sarah Lawrence education draws deeply on the progressive education tradition as developed by John Dewey. At SLC, the progressive education view of learning was (and is) infused with the idea that our intellectual, social and emotional lives are not as compartmentalized as traditionalists would like to think. Rather -- there is an interaction among different spheres of life.

> The notion of educating the "whole person," being aware that the student is an emotional and social creature, not pure intellect – and that different spheres of life may impinge on one another -- is fundamental to progressive education ideologies. Dewey regarded such awareness as part of what he called the "new psychology."
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> Some of our early faculty -- Helen Merrill Lynd, Lois Barclay Murphy, and Esther Raushenbush -- were specifically concerned with the place of learning in the context of the student's life. (Note their interest in psychoanalytic perspectives and their general psychological orientation). They were dedicated academic types but they brought to their teaching a profound interest in educational processes – an area of inquiry usually left to those in pre-college education – and they wrote about it. For example, Helen Lynd wrote an entire book about field work in college education; Esther Raushenbush authored "Literature for Individual Education." Three additional volumes, including one edited by Ruth Monroe, comprised the series of Sarah Lawrence College Publications (published by Columbia University Press).

**Five basic precepts and the instrumentalities through which they are realized**

Needless to say, there's great peril in reducing any complex set of ideas to five basic precepts. Nonetheless, I am going to hazard doing so. It goes without saying that this is greatly condensed and therefore oversimplified.

I. Learning should be meaningful to the student, not routinized

The person is not a *passive learner* whose mind is an empty receptacle to be filled with information in pre-defined compartments but an *active, inquiring problem-solver*, turned toward the world.

Education should not consist in the *transmission* from teachers to students of a solidified body of theories and facts, but of an *exploration and exchange of ideas* – with attention to *differing theories, and points of view* in the context of the times and of culture. The stance of the teacher is non-dogmatic, providing students with opportunity, indeed encouragement, to develop their own points of view.

> *Seminars* provide an optimal environment for asking and responding to questions, engaging with others in the exploration of ideas -- students with the teacher and with each other. (This does not mean there is no place for lectures, but lectures should provide some opportunity for questions and response – i.e. interaction).
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> *Writing papers* leads to more profound engagement with material than does taking tests. Rather than calling forth relatively isolated pieces of information, writing papers requires gathering together the parts (often involving research) and shaping pieces into a coherent whole, as a configuration or narrative. Also, and equally important, ideas evolve in the process of writing papers which is not generally the case in preparing for or taking tests.
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> *Primary sources* are preferred over textbooks as sources (which doesn't mean that textbooks should be banished but that they should be used selectively). Again, because you have to do the organizing rather than it being done for you. Also, it is important and stimulating to hear the original voices, to know you are in contact with the author of the viewpoint.

It's worth noting that Dewey (who was a psychologist as well as philosopher and educational theorist) often speaks of the cognitive value of organizing material, making the parts into a whole.

II. Teaching should be meaningful to the teacher; heirarchization should be minimized; the school should be a democratic institution (non-authoritarian in structure and process)

Rather than being forced into a grid of required courses with prescribed syllabi, teachers at Sarah Lawrence– even from the beginning – are encouraged to develop their own courses, to teach from their areas of interest. The underlying idea is that, as for students, the greater the personal/intellectual investment, the better the outcome.

However, in the spirit of a democratic society, attention must be given to the curriculum within fields, and across the college – which sometimes involves compromise. The individual teacher, as well as the divison and faculty group (e.g. psychology), should think about specific offerings in

relation to what is needed, what is optimal, for the curriculum as a whole. (Dewey tended to assume that individuals in a democratic institution will cooperate for the good of the whole).
II. Teaching – continued

At Sarah Lawrence, the attempt to minimize hierarchization is reflected in the absence of academic ranks and the very real 'power' of faculty committees – which is not to deny that some hierarchization exists as it does in all institutions – and that it did from the beginning.

III. <u>There is not one form of learning but several and these are complementary</u> – (This idea is implicit rather than explicit in much of the writing about progressive education but I think would stand up to further analysis)

First: *Learning through reading, writing, and talking with others.* This is the 'academic' mode, but the concept of academic learning is reconstructed as described above (precept I).

Second: *Learning in and through the arts.*. The arts are seen as essential parts of the curriculum, and important fields for learning – not as "add ons."

> The arts provide languages that are at once deeply personal, social (in the sense of being addressed to others), shaped and re-shaped by the culture.
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> Work in the arts requires ways of using the imagination, modes of problem solving and communicating, that are distinctive. Contrary to some popular belief, work in the arts also requires serious intellectual engagement, as well as providing paths for self-expression.

Third: *Learning through direct experience* – experiential learning – a concept widely misunderstood and much maligned. Roughly, it refers to getting out there, into the world – to observe, and to engage in activities, not randomly but guided by intent which becomes increasingly focused as the process goes on.

> - Dewey's metaphor: The explorer goes out in the world, makes observations, moves from one thing to another, explores the terrain. The explorer thus gains little pieces of knowledge but these are scattered. The explorer returns and makes a map that organizes the parts, displays relations among parts "irrespective of the local and temporary circumstances and accidents of their original discovery…(and) renders the whole communicable." The teacher has an important role in guiding exploration and the map making.

This is where field work comes in..To be meaningful in any long lasting sense, the experience must be reflected upon, organized, integrated within a more abstract framework. Anthropologists have known this since they founded the discipline. The process involves keeping notes or a journal, relating observations and experience to research and theory in the discipline. Field work (as in the Early Childhood Center) optimally involves participation in the work process in addition to observation.

IV. The curriculum should be constructed to reflect concern with current issues in the culture as well as established areas of knowledge and forms of inquiry in various disciplines

This does not mean that the curriculum should change every year, but that it should be *open to change*.

We do not need 'foundational' courses – one can enter a discipline in one of several ways – but a distinction should be drawn between 'beginning study' in a field and more advanced work – often within a single seminar (as in an 'open' class).

The curriculum is constructed in terms of different disciplines, but connections should be drawn between different fields of knowledge , conventional boundaries sometimes crossed, students encouraged to explore interconnections. This can be facilitated through interdisciplinary seminars or in a student's program.

V. Education should be concerned with the development of the individual, as an independent thinker, a collaborative learner, and more generally, as a person going out into the wider world.

Since there are few requirements, the don plays an essential role in helping the student plan her program, each semester and over the four years. The student's interests play a central role in planning – but are not the only consideration. There should be some sense of 'progress' over the four years.

The don should attend to the "whole person", to be open for discussion of matters in the personal as well as academic sphere – but not elicit the personal. As Constance Warren said, "[The don's] predominant concern is with the student's educational development…."

A central aim of progressive education is to *foster independent learning*, to facilitate the person's becoming an autonomous learner. We do this in several ways – most notably, through the conference system and projects in the arts.

> The conference system – an SLC invention --was designed for this purpose. The idea for a student's project is generated by the student – and, if not too far afield – it is accepted and, with the teacher's help, shaped into something do-able. Here, as elsewhere, *process is as important as product*, but the product is important too and often shared. Conference work is usually presented to the class; art work is exhibited; dance and theatre projects eventuate in performances. The individual's work assumes new meaning in the context of being presented *with other students' work*, and *to others* (the audience).

At its extremes, "focus on the individual" can lapse into inadvertently encouraging narcissism. We need to rewrite our texts to reflect Dewey's concept of *integrated individuality:*

"To gain an integrated individuality, each of us needs to cultivate his own garden. But there is no fence about this garden: it is not a sharply marked-off enclosure. Our garden is the world, in the angle at which it touches our own manner of being" (Dewey, *Individualism Old and New*, 1929/1962, p. 171—see also preceding pages).