Book Section:

In the 16th century, the great humanist Francois Rabelais developed a radical educational ideal in his Abbey of Thelema. In it, there are no one rules, no formal distinctions between teachers and learners. All are invested in the development and maintenance of a micro-society, where all do as they please, and collective life is organised by the naturally harmonizing general will of all. Moreover, men and women live together side by side (a radical notion in the context of 16th century monasticism), drinking, reading, singing, and playing music. The only guiding principle is that humans ought to follow their inner sense of deepest will (from the Greek θέλημα/'thelema'), which Rabelais understands to be fulfilled by learning and self-development.

However, even in such an idealized world, Rabelais still conceived of the Abbey of Thelema as a place outside of society, reserved for the elites, and designed to enhance their 'knightly' and 'maidenly' features. In this manner Rabelais's fictional world echoed a rather widespread understanding of the place and purpose of universities in Medieval times.

Since then universities in Western Europe and in North America have opened up to many more people and turned towards their cities and nation-states to serve the needs of their wider populations. In the late 19th century the training of the professional classes (doctors, nurses, lawyers, engineers, teachers, etc.) and in the second half of the 20th century the production of economically and militarily useful research have been the primary means for this engagement.

The end of the 20th and the beginning of the 21st centuries saw a further shift towards integration, with the birth of engaged (or service-based) learning. University students were asked to use their knowledge to work with communities in exchange for academic credit. This implies two things: (1) a recognition that learning is more than a merely cognitive activity; and (2) a recognition that knowledge that inheres outside of the scholarly community has epistemic value.

Perhaps nowhere more presciently do we find these points articulated than in the book, *Democracy and Education*, published one hundred years ago by another great humanist, the American philosopher, John Dewey. In it, Dewey develops the notion of learning by involving one's self in the functioning of the school, and ultimately of the broader democratic community. For Dewey, learning involves all of the self (mind and body) and is best done when actively engaging in the process of solving real, experienced problems. Learners must then engage as equal problem solvers in their wider communities. Although this type of civic learning enables the understanding of facts, what it does above all is cultivate the capacity for inclusive and responsible decision-making – arguably, the moral zenith of citizenship.

Whether engaged learning successfully develops this capacity in all who participate in it (as learners, community members or teachers) remains an open question. Yet, it remains an educational ideal and a democratic aspiration worth pursuing, for it puts the work of universities squarely where it belongs, namely: in the city.

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