

Cooper, D. D. (2014). *Learning in the plural: Essays on the humanities and public life*. East Lansing, MI: Michigan State University Press. 194 pp.

Review by Andrew J. Pearl

In *Learning in the Plural: Essays on the Humanities and Public Life*, David Cooper makes the latest contribution to the Michigan State University Press Transformation in Higher Education: Scholarship of Engagement series with a collection of essays written over a span of 20 years. Although these essays have previously been published, they remain relevant. Cooper explores the interaction between the humanities in higher education and public engagement. With these essays, Cooper claims that “the questions I raise in this book are uncomfortable and, in my view, necessary for reflection, renewal, and reform” (p. xx). Readers will be grateful that Cooper is willing to ask these difficult questions to stimulate critical reflection and discussion.

Cooper begins with a work written more than 20 years ago, “*Believing in Difference: The Ethics of Civic Literacy*” (1993), which opens with the statement, “I can think of no more urgent moment than now for undergraduate educators to be asking ethical questions about the content and context of a liberal arts education” (p. 1). To address this need, Cooper seeks to “explore a moral self-enclosure I see among my students that leaves them indifferent to the obsessions over ‘difference’ and ‘the other’ that dominated—and continue to dominate—humanities curricula, pedagogy, theory, and scholarship” (p. xxi). Two decades later, this concern remains relevant in today’s academic climate, and perhaps the need is even greater.

Much of this chapter is focused on “ethical idealism,” which Cooper calls “a critical ingredient in the democratic humanism that makes civil society more than an entry in a dictionary of cultural literacy” (p. 3). In essence, ethical idealism is the idea that both the common and the individual good can be simultaneously achieved. Serving the common good and serving the needs of the individual are equally important and inexorably tied together. Students become increasingly disillusioned by defining motives, goals, and success when individual goals and success overwhelm ethical idealism. Cooper concludes the chapter by offering an interesting criticism of the American Dream as at least partially responsible for this shift.

The next chapter is “Moral Literacy” (1994), a term Cooper considers “slippery and risky” because of its dangerous potential

to reinforce repressive social structures, with students becoming indoctrinated to the prevailing moral and social wisdom. Cooper claims that one of his “principal concerns as a writing teacher is my students’ moral literacy and, in particular, the critical nexus formed in the writing classroom by language, moral sensibility, cultural values, identity development, and ethical behavior” (p. 17). He is hopeful for the power of language, which

is capable of embracing the most important dimensions of our moral situations as individuals and, in this way, may guide us to react to our social conditions with empathy and critical insight instead of a cynicism and distrust that strike me as inevitable by-products of the strict social constructionist view of moral literacy. (p. 23)

This view may be challenged by “hardliners” or other cynics, but it demonstrates Cooper’s faith in the potential power of literacy. It is the choices that we make with regard to that power that determine whether or not it is used to reinforce social structures. For Cooper, the key to his students’ education is asking questions that drive them toward self-discovery.

Those who are engaged in service-learning pedagogy will be particularly interested in “Reading, Writing, and Reflection” (1998), through which Cooper discusses the importance of providing students with opportunities for critical reflection. Cooper begins with a vignette from a student’s reflective journal that relayed his experience working with a community partner with whom he did not see eye-to-eye. Cooper then follows as the student learns more about himself and notes the role that critical reflection through writing plays in that process. Cooper stresses the importance of the instructor’s role in reflection. It is not about guiding the student to a way of thinking; rather, it is about guiding the students to think in new ways on their own. Reflection in service-learning gives students the platform to ask themselves difficult questions and to learn more about themselves in how they answer those questions. As students connect their academic material to their service experiences, it becomes apparent that the quality of the reflection is only as good as the guidance provided by the instructor. Cooper clearly delineates between cursory reflection and the in-depth critical reflection that is required for students to gain a deeper understanding of their experiences.

To begin the essay “The Changing Seasons of Liberal Learning” (1998), Cooper recalls events surrounding the building of protest

and counterprotest shanties on Michigan State's campus in 1990. From this example, he goes on to explore the ebbs and flows of liberal thought among America's youth and the subsequent conservative reactions as each generation struggles to distinguish itself from the shadow cast by the previous generation. In Cooper's words,

historical pessimism is especially heightened . . . as the current generation views the past from the vantage point of a present where debate rages over the deterioration of values, the loss of ethical standards in business, and the general decline of civility in America. (p. 53-54)

For many, higher education is seen as a process of matriculating into a career and a way to signal qualifications, à la the "sheepskin effect" (*Hungerford & Solon, 1987*), rather than a place where the new generation builds an identity. As the discussion surrounding the recent documentary *Ivory Tower* (*Rossi, 2014*) suggests, this trend continues to be an important issue for many who represent post-secondary education as a costly private good and credentialing service. Worse yet, this credentialing process does not appear to be properly preparing students to enter the workforce (*Hart Research Associates, 2015*). For Cooper, the solution includes a liberal education, which can

cultivate the capacity, desire, and drive for independent learning. A liberal education teaches us how to dig out what we need to know, and how to assess what's worth knowing. . . . A liberal education teaches us to think for ourselves, independent of the opinions of others, yet at the same time squaring our needs and aims in the world with the aspirations of others. (p. 66)

Arguably, this type of thinking is sorely needed today. Imagine how teaching students to think independently and respectfully through the liberal arts and a liberal education can foster intellectual, emotional, and civic growth as it encourages reflective thinking and broad learning.

In his next essay, "Academic Professionalism and the Betrayal of the Land-Grant Tradition" (1999), Cooper contributes to the conversation about what it means to be a land-grant institution in the current context of American higher education. Along the same lines, many readers will be familiar with the Kellogg Commission's reports *Returning to Our Roots* (2001) and *Renewing the Covenant*

(2000). Cooper, the Kellogg Commission, and others have been working toward articulating a current understanding of and role for the land-grant institutions, and this conversation has continued to evolve. At Cooper's own institution, Michigan State University, the world-grant ideal has been conceptualized as a paradigm for adapting land-grant values to the 21st century (*Fitzgerald & Simon, 2012; Simon, 2009*).

Cooper focuses his discussion on professionalism, along with "an entire cultural complex evoked by the mystique of professionalism" (p. 69). This has replaced, even betrayed, what he sees as the original ideas of democracy and access espoused by the land-grant tradition. There has been a shift from the promotion of democratic ideals to self-promotion among students. Optimistically, Cooper does not see the separation between academic expertise and civic culture as permanent, but rather as a relatively recent aberration. However, those of us working at higher education institutions need to continue asking whether we have made progress committing ourselves to the original ideals of the land-grant tradition.

In the foreword to *Learning in the Plural*, Julie Ellison advises that readers may want to begin reading this volume with the essay "Bus Rides and Forks in the Road: The Making of a Public Scholar" (2002), referring to it as the "true beginning" of the collection (p. xi). I was unable to break away from the chronological sequence, but Ellison's suggestion is worth considering.

The essay begins by following Cooper through a "day in the life" of his early academic career, which highlights the speed bumps that one can encounter on the road to becoming an academic professional. Cooper talks about the "challenges and opportunities" of that year and how he found them "morally bracing" (p. 84). The lessons from this chapter should help anyone considering a career in the academy. Along the way, scholars will likely face opportunities for distraction and temptations to stray from what drives them to pursue scholarship in the first place, including pressures to bend to the academic professionalism discussed in the previous chapter. Cooper describes how events and circumstances shaped his thinking and identifies many of the critical moments of his career. Readers will note how Cooper is always prepared to take advantage of and learn from his experiences, reminding us that we can always learn, even if those lessons are not always readily apparent. As an aspiring scholar, I find this chapter particularly instructive and hopeful. Cooper shows that, while by no means guaranteed, it is possible for one to pursue a fulfilling career in

which vocation and avocation align. It is possible to find a harmonious resolution of professional dissonance.

“Education for Democracy: A Conversation in Two Keys” (2004) was first delivered as a keynote address in which Cooper’s own words are interspersed with quotes taken from *The New Student Politics: The Wingspread Statement on Student Civic Engagement*. When first delivered, I imagine this was particularly compelling and in print, the effect is largely the same (although perhaps less striking than it was in person). The two voices and what they are saying show in sharp relief the communication problems that occur between generations and why students often feel that they are not truly being heard. It is interesting to hear the assumptions that are made about students and how genuinely listening to the students is often difficult to achieve. One of the driving questions throughout this essay is what it means to be civically engaged. Students are frustrated by the fact that they view their civic engagement in their own terms—represented by what Cooper calls an “interesting and insightful paradox” ... that students “hate the idea of civic engagement but they welcome opportunities to become civically engaged” (p. 109).

Cooper begins “Is Civic Discourse Still Alive?” (2007) by giving readers a clear understanding of what the phrase “civic discourse” means and differentiating it from other related concepts like “civil behavior.” He discusses the discourse that is often seen on news programs as anything but civil and research suggesting that Americans are frustrated with the extreme polarity in the national debates. Cooper suggests that although national debates are watched on television, local dialogue is a more valued currency. He leaves us with nine factors from the Harwood Group and Kettering Foundation that help us understand how well we are engaging in civic discourse. In light of these factors, readers should consider how the landscape of civic discourse has changed since this essay was first published 8 years ago. As Cooper asks, how can we find opportunities to engage in civic discourse, and how can our anchor institutions facilitate this discourse?

In the essay “Four Seasons of Deliberative Learning” (2008), Cooper describes how he developed a new sequence of rhetoric and American Studies courses that purposefully incorporated deliberative democracy and deliberative learning. In doing so, he hopes that his experience shows “that the synergy between deliberation and active learning can energize the undergraduate humanities classroom at all levels, even the senior capstone” (p. 123). Democracy is fundamentally a rhetorical art, and deliberation, “the discursive

engine of democracy,” can challenge and transform students. For his students, the journey began with the Service Learning Writing Project, which included “rigorous classroom instruction, critical readings in American civic culture, and real-world writing projects in the community” (p. 124), and was followed by a second course offered in the Professional Writing major. The third course was an elective seminar, and the fourth was a senior capstone experience. Teaching these courses led Cooper to ask questions of his students in different ways and through the experience, he became more adept at helping students become better interpreters of their own lives, society, and culture. In his words:

The civic engagement and public work movement in the academy has allowed me to reimagine my role in the classroom and the working relationships I have with students, colleagues, and community partners.... Above all, it has renewed my hope that universities can play a dynamic role in fulfilling Jefferson’s legacy and educating citizens to perform the difficult, necessary, and rewarding work demanded by a strong democracy. (p. 148)

In the final essay, Cooper’s driving question is explicitly stated in the title: “Can Civic Engagement Save the Humanities?” (2013). Cooper believes the answer is a certain yes. Using the genre of romantic comedy films as a metaphor, Cooper states that “the civic engagement movement needs the humanities, and the humanities need civic engagement” (p. 151), but a large number of plot twists have kept the two apart thus far. By the end of the essay, Cooper appears hopeful, sensing

an awakening, maybe even a genuine soul-searching, in the academy and especially among humanists spurred by our loss of public purpose and relevance and the recognition that the vast majority of hyper-specialized humanities scholarship is completely unintelligible to a literate public. (p. 161)

He notes that while some, like the association *Imagining America* (IA), have been pushing an agenda of civic engagement for years, even organizations that have traditionally resisted civic engagement are beginning to recognize that connecting civically is an imperative for keeping the humanities relevant in higher education and society. Cooper fears that this contribution is a “polemic

that will win me few friends” (p. xxii), but I hope it is not. If the reader has an initial negative reaction to the essay, it is important to step back and question why Cooper’s conclusions inspire discomfort. As he stresses throughout this collection, one must constantly engage in a critical examination of one’s work, and perspective is necessary.

In addition to Cooper’s essays, the book includes a foreword and an afterword fittingly provided by leaders from Imagining America. Julie Ellison (founding director of IA) writes the foreword “On the Bus” and, as mentioned above, recommends readers begin with “Bus Rides and Forks in the Road.” Whether or not readers follow Ellison’s suggestion, I would recommend at least rereading Ellison’s foreword immediately after reading “Bus Rides”—her keen insight lends depth to the essay and will be useful to readers looking to apply lessons from Cooper’s experience to their own careers. The afterword, “Speaking and Working in Critically Hopeful Terms,” is written by Scott Peters and Timothy Eatman, currently the codirectors of IA. Their response to the book comes in the form of an answer to the question, “What can and should those of us who wish to advance public scholarship and engagement in the humanities and other fields do?” (p. 171). The first part of the answer is to reclaim and reconstruct a democratic, civic professionalism and how scholars form their professional identities. Second, Peters and Eatman recommend teaching and practicing a different kind of politics, one that is different from how politics is traditionally defined in the humanities and higher education in general. Finally, an agenda should be set that intentionally sharpens and sustains a critical discourse in higher education.

We often speak of the need to communicate clearly and honestly with our community partners in the spirit of mutual benefit and respect. This is how effective partnerships are built and sustained. However, Cooper’s *Learning in the Plural* identifies the need for better understanding between and among groups on campus. It is far more effective to communicate a unified voice from the university to the community partner, and this cannot happen until institutional stakeholders are on the same page. A recurring theme in several of Cooper’s essays is the disconnect between generations of students or between faculty members and students. This disconnect is portrayed as a sharp contrast in “Education for Democracy,” in which there are literally two different voices speaking. If one of our stated goals is to prepare students as engaged citizens, we need to have a common understanding of what it means to be an engaged citizen. In addition to boundary spanners who can facili-

tate communication between institutions and communities, perhaps we also need boundary spanners who are fluent in the language of multiple generations.

In summary, *Learning in the Plural* is a valuable collection of essays that guides readers to reflect on what the humanities mean in higher education, and indeed in a modern society. It should be no surprise that Cooper is an excellent writer, but it is worth noting how well each essay is crafted. He never fails to provide the reader with a clear path to his central theme. To me, it is interesting to imagine a reader coming to this book unaware that these essays are previously published, the earliest having appeared more than 20 years ago. Only the dates and some of the references to popular culture make these essays dated; the themes discussed are just as relevant and pressing as when they were first authored. The argument can be made that the issues are, in fact, even more urgent today. In this way, *Learning in the Plural* is both timely and timeless.

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