

GENESEO

New Student Convocation Address

Dr. Jane Fowler Morse, Ella Cline Shear School of Education

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Transform yourself; Transform the world

Congratulations and welcome to college! I can tell you are happy to be here! I can also tell that you recognize this as a solemn occasion: a ceremony marking the beginning of the rest of your life. Looking back (I won't say how far back), I remember some of what you are feeling: excited, hopeful, curious, and probably even a little scared. I admit, I was intimidated; everyone else seemed to be more talented than I was. Being scared is fine, but you don't need to be more than a little scared. Your success is up to you. The advice I gave to my seniors in high school, back in the days when I taught high school, I now pass on to you: sit in the front row, speak up in class, ask questions, and go to your professor's office hours. What you learn in college will become a part of your life, for the rest of your life; classes, friends, college events — these will open up a new world to you. Many of you will look back on college as the best years of your life. You will make friendships that last a lifetime. You may have done so already, even though you don't know it yet. You will learn many new things. You will meet many different people. You will change your perspective on issues. You will discover things about yourself and the world. You will find your niche in a world that is complicated, but has room for your skills and talents. You have excelled in your education so far and you will continue to excel. You have matriculated at an excellent college, well known for the quality of the education it provides. Let the fun begin, and I mean the real fun, being intellectually, culturally, emotionally, and aesthetically stimulated and finding out what you can do with what you learn!

You have arrived at a college where we, your faculty, are deeply interested in your progress. We care about the breadth and the depth of your learning. If you have not decided on a major yet, that is fine. In fact, it may be for the best. You can explore your interests, discover new ones, and make connections between subjects you might have thought were separate. This college is a college of the liberal arts and sciences. You need both "arts" and "sciences" to be a well-rounded citizen, able and ready to participate fully in the intellectual, civic, and cultural life of your community, in your job and at home. You will come to see the point of learning far beyond tests and grades. You will be surrounded by peers who stimulate your development, as you stimulate theirs. Best of all, you will leave equipped to make your mark on the world. You will be ready to transform yourself and the world.

In the end, life is not about getting a well-paying job, owning two cars, having a house with a swimming pool, or supporting a family in high style. It is about doing what you think is right, about doing what you are passionate about, about contributing to the well being of everyone. On a global and a local scale, it is about taking care of the planet and making sure that other people's children have the same chance to thrive that you had and you want your children to have. As John Dewey says, "What the best and wisest

parents want for their own children, that must the community want for all of its children.” He adds that any other ideal is “narrow” and “unlovely.” (Dewey, J., 1915, p. 3). Most of you went to good schools, but not everyone had that chance. You are at an excellent college, but not everyone has that chance either. Your college is also a good bargain, which President Obama’s recent speech in Buffalo acknowledged to be important. We have an excellent retention rate, so you are very likely to graduate. When you do, you will create a world in which more children will have the chances you had.

You have grown up in elementary and secondary education systems obsessed with state standards, state-mandated curriculum, and state-required testing. Covering required material and getting good evaluations from some outside examiner is the measure of success in such places. This is misleading; it makes you believe that someone else has to set the standards (and measure your accomplishment of them), make the assignments, tell you whether your work is good enough. In the real world, starting right now, you have to do these things. You have to set your own standard, choose your courses, know when you have understood the reading; you have to decide when your paper is ready to hand in; you have to choose your major; you may even have to develop your own paper topic. You are in college now; you are in charge.

Years ago, I taught high school in Topeka, Kansas. Once a year, a school administrator would observe my teaching for 45 minutes (often less). My “kids” (yes, they were *my* kids) knew full well how to behave on that day: sit still in their seats as assigned on the seating chart; raise their hands and don’t speak out of turn; appear to be interested; and, by all means, don’t call the teacher (me) by her first name. These were *not* things we did in my classroom on an ordinary day. We had conversations, we got excited and talked about interesting things that did not appear on any “study guide,” we moved around the room, we worked in groups, we sat wherever we wanted to sit. I encouraged my students to call me Jane, so they could regard me as a colleague in learning, a practice I continue today. My administrators did not understand this approach; they thought “respect” must be commanded, that it was inculcated by titles, that order must be maintained, demonstrated by everyone being in their assigned place doing their assigned work. I insisted that respect arises out of collegiality, not from a power relationship. Respect is not due because of someone’s position; it must be earned. If you respect your teachers, they will respect you; if they respect you, you will respect them. This leads to true education, an education that makes a difference, a dialogic education. Paulo Freire, a Brazilian educator, chose the word “dialogic” because a dialogue **MUST** be reciprocal. (Freire, 1973). Both parties learn something. (You have probably figured out by now that I am an education professor!)

Nowadays, most public education is not like the kind of education that went on in my high school room on an ordinary day. Real education is not about Common Core or State Standards, Regents’ exams, mandated tests, grades, or even scores on the SAT. It is not about getting A’s. It is not about “coverage.” It is not, “the answer to #16 is ‘b.’” All of this, you will forget. It is merely incidental. Some of it is harmful to you, because it misleads you by making you think that your education is up to someone else. Instead of memorizing and regurgitating, education is your chance to learn “to read the word and the world,” as Paulo Freire puts it (Paulo Freire, 1970/2010). Think about that: words

mean what they mean in the world because people invest certain meanings in words (Vygotsky, 1940/1999). These meanings arise from peoples' experiences. You have been trained to think that education is memorizing stuff, passing tests, and getting good grades. Friere (1970/2010) called this "the banking model" of education — those in power make a deposit that they can withdraw to use for their own benefit later. Unlearn this right now! Education is about what you remember and use to transform yourself and the world once you leave school, and for that matter, while you are here. There are many chances to use your education right here, right now — volunteer opportunities like Big Brothers, Big Sisters or Livingston Cares, or academic opportunities like doing real research that makes a difference. Activities like these are going on all over campus. Education is about what makes a difference to you in your thought, feeling, and action. It is about what transforms the world into a better place, for you and everyone else. It is about what author and college professor bell hooks, citing Martin Luther King, Jr., calls "The Beloved Community" (bell hooks, 2003). For now, let Geneseo become your beloved community; we welcome you as a member. Human beings can learn things in isolation, studying from books, but that learning remains inert, easily lost, stagnant, until you share it in a community and use it to effect change. Like many other things, you need to use it or you will lose it. Later, let your beloved community include not only your college, but also your town, your state, your nation, and your world. Spread your circle wide.

You are here, in part, because you did well in high school. But I am here to tell you that college is a very different place. This faculty cares about your education, but that doesn't make as much difference as what "care" you take to get your education. You are in charge here. You have to go to class; you have to do the reading; you have complete the problem set to your satisfaction; you have to be ready to participate in a class discussion. If you learn passively, you run the risk of being somebody's dupe. In other words, *you* have to think, *you* have to feel, and *you* have to act. No one is checking up on you. It is up to you.

Earlier I said that the wrong idea about education *can* even be harmful. Let me explain. Educators make a distinction between reproductive education and transformational education. You can probably get the point already: reproductive education merely asks you to reproduce what has been assigned to you to learn. This is not always bad; many things we learn automatically, simple things, like how to form letters to spell words so we can write something someone else can read; how to add and subtract numbers; how to identify the named parts of whatever entity you are observing. But, if all learning is merely reproductive, then no new knowledge will arise. There is not even any guarantee that the person reproducing the knowledge will understand what they are reproducing. For children (and adults) to understand something that someone else has discovered, they have to incorporate it into their thinking, make it work for them, really understand it by using it. So reproductive knowledge can be shallow. The meaning can become lost if merely passively received and never questioned. Maybe sometimes we only recognize why we memorized something as children later in life. But, if we don't use our knowledge *now*, or at least *soon*, we are less likely to remember it later. And it is more likely to be inert, stagnant, or just plain wrong.

So a better idea is that knowledge not merely reproductive, but also transformational; transformational knowledge makes a difference in our thinking, our feeling, and our action. Freire (1970/2010) was “trained” as a lawyer, but he found that occupation unsatisfying. As a lawyer, he had to do things that he knew deep in his heart were not right. He turned to education to make a difference in the world. As an educator, Freire discovered that illiterate adults learned to read when they saw the transformational power of reading in their lives. If and when reading allowed the workers he was teaching to articulate the problems they faced and find solutions, they learned to read fluently; otherwise, it seemed to them to be a skill reserved for the upper class, of no possible use or interest to them. As long as they thought that knowledge of reading was not accessible to them, they struggled to learn to read. Remember how difficult it was to learn something in which you had no interest as a child? How resistant you would become when someone tried to make you do it? If something made sense to you, and you saw how you could use it, the resistance melted away. For Freire, the key to teaching was showing the workers that problem-posing and problem-solving are liberating. Freire asked them, “What are the problems you would like to solve?” Then he showed them the role of reading and writing in solving the problems. From his work, Freire (1973) formulated the idea of critical literacy — literacy that took account of the power relations expressed in a society and in its words. The adults he taught knew how to read the world; he showed them how reading the word allowed them to transform the world. This is transformational learning (Freire, 1970/2010; 1973).

Educators also think of education as Constructivist (Fosnot, 2005). Constructivism recognizes that people construct what they think is true. Of course, sometimes it isn't, and then people have to find that out too. Scientists used to think that heat was a substance. They spent many years trying to weigh it and measure it without any luck. It was so elusive! But they stuck to the theory, called heat “caloric,” described it as a “subtle fluid” that permeated the interstices in other substances, and concluded that it was difficult to weigh and measure. After years of trying, scientists figured out that heat isn't a substance (whew!!). Some of our current theories will also be disproved, but, in the meantime, we think of them as “knowledge.” This makes perfect sense to the Constructivist: human beings construct what they call knowledge (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Vygotsky, 1934/1999; Fosnot, 2005). Constructivists understand that passively memorized, reproductive “knowledge” is not really knowledge to the person who does not understand how to use it or why it makes sense. Reproductive knowledge must become transformational in order to count as “knowledge.” Reproductive knowledge reproduced without understanding is useless; it is worse than useless, because it is disempowering, because the supposed “knower” thinks that someone else creates knowledge, not him or herself. This stifles thought and undervalues the power of people to create new knowledge. In *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, Thomas Kuhn (1962) argues that “knowledge” becomes stifling when it is taught in this way: memorize this, repeat that after me. You will never learn to “do” science, history, mathematics, or anything. For this reason, Kuhn argues that outsiders who do not know the current paradigm of scientific thinking are more likely to come up with new ideas. (*Footnote: A paradigm is a pattern or framework of thinking about the interrelations of things. *Reminder: Look up words that you do not know!!) I contend that thinkers can know the old paradigms, but need to recognize how to use such knowledge and why it makes sense.

That is, they need to make it transformational. If they don't, it is inert, only good for passing tests. If it ceases to transform anything, it ceases to make sense. Transformational thinkers will be able to recognize that old ideas sometimes need to be changed. People make up what they think is true, so people can remake up what they think is true. The hard part is figuring out when it needs to be remade up. So stay open-minded!!

At Geneseo you can learn both the current paradigm and how to figure out when to challenge that paradigm. You will get a broad education. You may even be one of the "border-crossers" that Kuhn (1962) thinks will come up with the new paradigms. You can turn reproductive knowledge into transformational knowledge by continual use and re-examination. Learn how knowledge is constructed, so you can reconstruct it when you need to. Be ready to see your paradigms demolished. We don't need to reinvent the wheel, but we can always improve the vehicle! Remember that human beings are the creators of knowledge. So, you, too, can make your knowledge transformational. In fact, you must, if it is to be any real use to anyone, including you.

Some constructivists also assert that human beings construct knowledge socially (Vygotsky, 1934/1999; Berger & Luckmann, 1966). That is simply to say, we learn more when we work in groups, when we talk, when we function as an inclusive community open to everyone. We don't learn much from talking among people who are exactly like ourselves, who say and think the same things, who have had the same experiences. These people merely echo our ideas back to us. We learn when we encounter difference that challenges our thinking. For Dewey, a "hitch" in experience makes us think, otherwise we can coast along on old ideas. In educational psychology, this is called cognitive dissonance: encountering a challenge to what we think, something that does not follow the usual paradigm (Dewey, 1910; Dewey 1938/1997). So the more diversity you encounter, the more you will be stimulated to think. In the Michigan law school case, *Grutter v. Bollinger* (2003), the Supreme Court upheld the idea that diversity is a legitimate aim for a university administration designing an admissions policy; the Court chose not to strike down that particular ruling in a recent challenge concerning the policy at the University of Texas, Austin (*Fisher v. University of Texas, Austin*, 2013), although the case was remanded to the trial court for further examination. At Geneseo, we continually strive for increase our diversity to make our college a better learning environment for you. Deliberately seek out diversity in our "Beloved Community." Go outside your comfort zone — think, talk, act, and feel with people different from yourself as much as possible. There are many ways for you to do that here at Geneseo.

Curt Cylke, a sociology professor here, gave one of the first convocation addresses I heard after coming to Geneseo nineteen years ago. In it he quoted a line from the Alma Mater, which you are about to sing at the end of this ceremony; the line reads, "With our life's work we repay." As many of you know, this college is supported by New York State; tuition may seem high, but it is much higher at the what we call "the privates." Your tuition does not cover all the costs here. Nevertheless, here, at your Alma Mater, you will be getting an education every bit as good and maybe better than at "the privates." New York needs you to become educated. Your education is both a right and a privilege. As educated people, when your knowledge becomes useful to you, you transform yourself, but you also transform those people with whom you work and live. By your

service to your Beloved Community, you transform the world. You might think: what, me transform the world? I am just a first-year college student trying to survive! Transforming the world may sound daunting, but it is done in increments both large and small. When you transform even just yourself, it affects everyone around you, like ripples in a pond.

In closing, I offer you another piece of the advice. This is the secret trick in your education: to prepare yourself for satisfying work, work that allows you to serve your beloved community. Work by which you can feel, every day, that you have done someone some good. This can come from doing your job well, whatever it may be; it can come from volunteering in the community; it can come from informed voting; it can come from remaining open to the transformational power of new ideas. When you do this, you will indeed “repay.”

Again, welcome and congratulations.

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