

Sense of serving

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On January 14th 2015 John Maynard Shoemaker, associate professor of Amsterdam University, awoke early. He felt a little restless. Today he would try to capitalize on all efforts he had put in research, in teaching and mentoring students to prepare them for the challenges of contemporary society. At 10 am he would meet the Faculty dean to explore the possibilities for promotion to the rank of full professor.

John Shoemaker was the winner of several teaching awards, both at the faculty as well as at the university level. According to his current and former graduate students, he really lighted a fire under them and his plea for thoughtfulnessⁱ, dignity, truthfulnessⁱⁱ, ignorance, craftsmanship, and caring still resonated with them. His purposefulⁱⁱⁱ and courageous^{iv} way of teaching and the role-model behavior he demonstrated were in sharp contrast with the science teaching^v of many of his colleagues. They considered teaching predominantly as a task that had to be fulfilled very efficiently. They plugged in their memory sticks a minute before a lecture would start, pressed the button ‘beamer on’ and provided their large audiences with a two hour slide show.

Although John knew that his teaching qualities were above average as well as his *Bildung* abilities, he was also aware of the importance of excelling in research for promotion on the academic ladder. Therefore in the past decade he had decided to adapt to the publish-or-perish-regime in Academia to make sure that he wouldn’t lose his license to teach as well as to avoid that he would find himself in a dead end road. Moreover, he really liked to be involved in research with a meaning for society. For that reason in the early nineties he successfully obtained an MSc in Psychometrics. Nevertheless, as from the start of his academic career, he primarily felt the responsibility for moving his students forward by creating sufficient conditions for individual learning and development.

John turned over in bed, and again. His thoughts went back to October 2003 when he finished his first bachelor course as an assistant professor. At that time he was insecure about his teaching abilities, because he could only rely on workshop skills, developed during his career start in the

consulting industry as well as lessons learned from a period in which he was a part-time mountain guide. He therefore was very proud when the student evaluations were pretty promising. After printing the student evaluations John shared his relief rather naively with a colleague, professor Mary Houseman, who replied very seriously: “You could better have paid more time to research”. John was embarrassed, it was the first time that his sense of morality^{vi} was triggered in the new workplace. He trickled away to his office, to reflect on the things that happened. His thoughts were with Siedjay Roepassie, one of his undergraduate students. Siedjay’s father passed away recently and his mother was suffering severely from the consequences of diabetes. Siedjay had a hard time and tried to survive. John had invited Siedjay to come to his office every Friday afternoon, to discuss his progress and dilemmas, though strictly this could be considered as extra-role behavior. Should he skip the meetings with Siedjay, to be able to pay more time to research? John decided to persist.

The alarm was sounding. Doctor Shoemaker and his wife Eve arose to prepare breakfast for their family. During breakfast Lea, the youngest Shoemaker, who had just made a start in primary school, raised a question: “Dad, you are a teacher right? Do you also start with your students sitting in a circle to discuss their weekends on Monday morning?”. “It always makes me feel happy and it provides me with a sense of togetherness”, she continued.

“No”, John replied, “I even do not know the names of the large majority of my students”.

“Wouldn’t that be a good idea?”, Lea continued.

“I think it would, because we want them to be a community of learners, without any efforts from our side in community building”. “We only pay lip service to this intention”. “Thank you Lea.”

“You don’t have to thank me, dad, I was just wondering how you guys start a new week in your school”.

John left the table. He had to leave, to catch the train to Amsterdam. “How could we foster a sense of community^{vii} amongst our students to enhance individual learning^{viii}?” he was thinking. “Should we also start with sitting in a circle and sharing weekend experiences on Monday morning? Maybe I can discuss this with the dean at ten.”

At ten John Shoemaker took the elevator to the 8th floor of Amsterdam University's main building. He was a little insecure, but he also noticed a strong sense of identity^{ix}. He would not disown his calling as a servant teacher.

“Please sit down”. The dean got straight to the point. “We really value your contribution to our education programs, but you do not qualify for a position as full professor”. “I hope this is not too disappointing.” Maybe you should consider to move to a high school, because in high school excelling in teaching is much more appreciated”. “We want our professors to publish in journals with high impact factors”.

Doctor Shoemaker's thoughts were with one of his colleagues, Hilde Struns, for a minute. Her academic career was nipped in the bud. She did not succeed in getting tenure, because she pursued a high risk publication strategy based on the results of sound qualitative research. Without any doubts she was a great teacher, an impact factor, as well as a promising researcher, but at the moment she was trying to sell her apartment in Amsterdam, because she got a reject in the third round of a triple A journal. Was this ‘all in the game’ or the result of a degrading system with perverse incentives?

John Shoemaker's thoughts were back in the meeting and he decided not to lose his self-respect. He soon recovered from the dean's harsh words and decided to raise a question, with a brief introduction. “In front of our Amsterdam University we have put a billboard, with a claim on it, the great philosopher Hanna Arendt^x would really like”, John started.

“Foundations for a caring society has been put on it”, he continued. “Do you think that we, the academic community, live that promise?”

The dean answered: “I think we do”. There was some hesitation in his voice followed by a moment of silence and finished by the elusive statement “In other universities it is even worse”. “You have to live like a monk to become full professor”, he continued. “In complete isolation”. “You have to much better balance efforts in research and teaching”.

“How would my students benefit from me, while I would live like a monk?”, John was thinking. “Would my prayers and writings move them forward?” “That is very unlikely”. John intuitively

knew that his sense of morality would reward him with wisdom in a way that Spinoza so aptly describes: “Intuition is the source of all deeper cognition, of all wisdom and truth....”^{xi}

He intuitively knew that attempts to balance research and education would result in unsatisfactory results in both areas. He also knew that only attempts to reconcile research and education would serve the overarching purpose of providing the foundations for a caring society. He made up his mind and explained the dean that although he was disappointed, he was also grateful for getting the final push. In retrospect the meeting was a focal event^{xii}, the crystallization of discontent and an input for getting more sense of destiny. He left the meeting room and said, while moving the door handle: “You will be pleasantly surprised”.

The day afterwards, on January 15th John had a meeting with the students who recently made a start with their master thesis. Unfortunately Ricardo Rapelli, an exchange student from Italy was missing. He had to return to Italy because his father was dying. John felt really sorry for Ricardo and asked his fellow students to care about him. Emo-John, one of them, took the floor and assured that they would do that. “.... and also because you care about us, we will definitely care about Ricardo”. After the meeting John was reflecting on Emo-John’s statement. “Providing the foundation for a caring society can only be accomplished if the academic staff would live it and would be able to resist opportunities to write about it eloquently”, crossed his mind, as well as “Great teachers care”. “They care about themselves, their families, their students and about the ‘I don’t care’ mentality in society.”

John stared out the window. “Great teachers care. They do not prepare students for exams, but for society. They have a strong sense of serving society. Sense of Serving? Wouldn’t that be a great title for a book about the transition that Science so evidently needs? A book that would reconsider the role that universities play in contemporary society. Sense of serving? An SOS message! The poet John Keats (1795-1821) would be proud on me”, John smiled affably. After all, according to Keats “Beauty is truth, truth is beauty, that is all”^{xiii}. Also the seminal work of Jerome Bruner crossed John’s mind^{xiv}. ‘Bruner suggests that there are two fundamental ways of knowing. One is the ‘paradigmatic’ way, the search for universal truth conditions. This way is primarily the province of the natural and physical sciences. The other fundamental way of perceiving and knowing about the world, according to Bruner, is the ‘narrative’, which looks for particular connections between events. Narrative ordering makes individual events

comprehensible by identifying the whole to which they contribute and the effect one has on another' (p. 208)^{xv}.

John's colleague doctor Methodius Reeddike came in. "How was your meeting with the dean?", he asked.

"Not too bad", John replied aloofly.

"Can I already open the champagne?", Methodius continued.

"Not yet Methodius, but I have got a wonderful idea, for which I am very grateful to the dean".

"Tell me more", Methodius replied curiously and started his computer.

"Well, I think that our university, like many others, has been estranged from its roots: the *universitas*. Under that heading the first universities were founded in medieval Europe. In that period scholars lived what Von Humboldt, founder of Berlin University, would call 'the unity of research and education'. Teaching nowadays definitely benefits from research, but we have neglected the opposite, because 'publish or perish' has been institutionalized. However, through contemporary *Bildung* approaches we can make sure that our research has much more societal meaning.

"My meeting with the dean was a case in point. I had a strong sense of alienation, for which I am grateful. We have to turn the tide and I know many of our colleagues will agree. Science is facing what Haifetz and Lauri^{xvi} call an adaptive challenge: to reconcile research and education to improve the human condition". Our deeply cherished beliefs are at stake. The illusion of control is.....

"Have you already thought about a publisher?" Methodius interrupted.

"Not yet", John replied.

"Should it be a publisher in the triple A category?", Methodius continued.

"No, please, although I want to compose a peer reviewed book. What I want to share with the academic community, without theoretical rigor, is that universities should liberate themselves

from the ‘publish or perish’ culture and from exaggerated reductionism. They now sacrifice their ideals and beliefs for the sake of control and competition. One does not have to organize craftsmanship, it will organize itself.”

“Hmm, I would suggest Oege Jannema, from the Amsterdam University Press”. He is really a socially engaged publisher.

“Sounds good”, John replied enthusiastically. “Maybe we can jointly prepare a contribution for the Education section of the leading academic journal *Science* afterwards. If we would be able to do that successfully then we would beat the system. Wouldn’t that be the ultimate intervention in Academia?”

“It would, but don’t forget John. Changing universities is like moving a grave. The ones inside are never willing to cooperate”.

“Right....., but anyway we have to share this with the world, it’s our moral duty”.

“John, listen to this YouTube. It is the Dalai Lama. I frequently benefit from it at graduation ceremonies.”

“Our prime purpose in life is to help others and if you can’t help them, at least don’t hurt them.”^{xvii}

ⁱ Hickerson, M. (2010). ‘Thoughtfulness as the Aim of Liberal Education?’

<http://blog.emergingscholars.org/2010/08/thoughtful-as-the-aim-of-liberal-education/>).

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^v Wals, A. E., Brody, M., Dillon, J., & Stevenson, R. B. (2014). Convergence between science and environmental education. *Science*, 344(6184), 583-584.

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