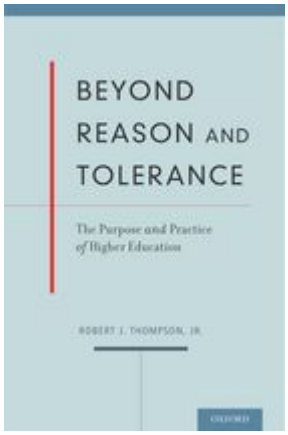

Beyond Reason and Tolerance: The Purpose and Practice of Higher Education

Thompson, Jr., Robert J.
Oxford University Press, 2014

Book Review

Tags: cognitive development | knowledge formation | student learning

Reviewed by: Erik Hammerstrom, *Pacific Lutheran University*
Date Reviewed: February 26, 2015

The purpose of higher education is widely debated, both inside and outside of the academy. The major contribution offered to these discussions by Robert Thompson, a professor of psychology with much experience in administration, lies in his summary and synthesis of findings from the fields of psychology and neuroscience as they relate to the cognitive development of students.

In *Beyond Reason and Tolerance*, Thompson focuses on students within the age range of "emerging adulthood" (late teens to mid-twenties), and he summarizes recent scholarship on this group in Chapter 2. He argues that colleges and universities have a civic responsibility to emphasize education that assists student development in three areas: personal epistemology, empathy, and self-authorship. Separate chapters are dedicated to discussing current research in each of these areas, and they form the core of the book. For example, in Chapter 3 Thompson argues that humans' attitudes toward knowledge change as they age. First, they see knowledge in absolute, black and white terms. Around the time of emerging adulthood, most move to the opposite extreme, and see knowledge as mostly contingent, and based upon one's perspective. Thompson says that higher education should work to help students reach the third stage, in which they recognize the contingency of knowledge but still understand that there are better and worse arguments, and better and worse forms of evidence one can use to validate one's ideas.

The need to help students develop metacognitive skills about their own knowledge-making is related to one of the main themes of the book, which gives it its title. This is the notion that colleges and universities should be working to help students develop the skills needed to

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approach difference – ethnic, racial, cultural, and religious – in a more nuanced way than the uncritical position best exemplified by the now-common expression “It’s all good.” Giving students the opportunity to take positions and defend them with sound, rational arguments is essential for them as they develop their epistemology, empathy, and self-identity, all of which correlate strongly to increased levels of post-college success.

This book does an excellent job arguing for the continued relevance of higher education in society, and its summary of current work on cognitive development is stimulating. That said, the recommendations it gives on how to help students in their cognitive development are generally aimed at larger questions of university structure. Chapter 6 focuses on campus culture, especially in terms of diversity and the modes of diverse connections that most positively impact students’ development. Chapter 7 focuses on developing new curricula and the new degrees they may support. This chapter also emphasizes the positive benefits of undergraduate research, study abroad, and service learning. Beyond pointing to studies showing the benefits of these kinds of programs, little is said that is applicable at the level of the classroom. This was the greatest missed opportunity in the book. I would have liked to see more concrete suggestions about activities and strategies that could be incorporated into existing courses to encourage cognitive development. Classroom instruction does not appear to have been his primary target, however, and he should be praised for what he does do: give faculty and administrators useful ways to speak about the importance of education in terms of current cognitive science.

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