



From the Guest Editors

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Teaching Democratic Thinking: Introduction to a Special Issue of *Partnerships*

This special issue of *Partnerships* is devoted to a critical examination of teaching democratic thinking. It emerged from a three year faculty/staff/student project, the Elon Research Seminar on Engaged Undergraduate Learning (ERS), co-sponsored by Elon's Center for the Advancement of Teaching and Learning (CATL) and the Association of American Colleges and Universities. (Further ERS iterations have been sponsored by Elon's new Center for Engaged Learning [CEL]; information about this seminar can be found at <http://www.elon.edu/e-web/academics/cel/mentoringur/about.xhtml>.) In this brief introduction, we will first describe the motivation for a seminar examining teaching democratic thinking, then briefly describe the seminar itself and how the seminar led to this special issue, and finally conclude by recognizing and thanking the large number of collaborators who made this special issue a reality.

The question of the relationship between political matters, thinking, and education is, in the West, at least as old as Plato. It is easy to forget that the "Allegory of the Cave," the heart of Plato's *Republic*, is not just about the way the philosopher ought to be made king in order to allow for the best community (and, maybe equally importantly, to avoid the persecution of philosophers); and is not just about the nature of the real in contradistinction to the apparent; and is not just about the way most people are duped, and duped by a particular group of master manipulators; although it is all of these, too. It is, as Socrates begins the "Allegory" explaining, about the education of the soul. As Socrates tells it, he will answer the problem of the good city, and of the good soul, by offering "an image of our nature in its education and want of education" (Plato, 1968, 514a1-2).

But it was not Plato and his call for the melding of knowledge of the real with rulership that was the motivator for this project. Rather, the immediate impetus for this seminar came from the questions raised by Hannah Arendt in her examination of Adolf Eichmann, famously introduced in her *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (1964), but often more deeply and more compellingly examined in several essays, including "Thinking and Moral Considerations: A Lecture" (Arendt, 1971) and "Some Questions of Moral Philosophy" (Arendt, 1994). In Plato's work, the problem for the many is that they are actively duped by those who are masters at manipulating others' sense of reality. Whereas in Arendt's reading, there was no need for Eichmann to be manipulated to go along with evil; he was more than willing to go along with the Nazis. As Arendt describes him, Eichmann was not a convinced Anti-Semite or a convinced Nazi, or, really, convinced of much of anything (Arendt, 1964,

pp. 25-26); he was motivated by nothing other than a simple desire to fit in and get ahead.¹ As she points out, he became a Nazi at a time when he was also investing his energy in a Freemason group devoted to humorous toasts (Arendt, 1964, p. 32). Put in other ways, for Plato, the manipulators seem to be the active agents in the misunderstanding of the many; the many are merely the passive targets of their efforts. According to Arendt, however, there was no need for master manipulators for Eichmann and people like him because they were more than willing to go along without any particular reason and without much (or any) effort on the part of others (although this was by no means true for all Nazis).

Specifically, what is so haunting about Arendt's picture of Eichmann is that he did evil for so little: he did it, she argues, because he did not think. As she puts it in "Thinking and Moral Considerations":

Some years ago, reporting the trial of Eichmann in Jerusalem, I spoke of 'the banality of evil' and meant with this no theory or doctrine but something quite factual, the phenomenon of evil deeds, committed on a gigantic scale, which could not be traced to any particularity of wickedness, pathology, or ideological conviction in the doer, whose only personal distinction was a perhaps extraordinary shallowness. However monstrous the deeds were, the doer was neither monstrous nor demonic, and the only specific characteristic one could detect in his past as well as in his behavior during the trial and the preceding police examinations was something quite negative: it was not stupidity but a curious, quite authentic inability to think. (1971, p. 417).

Though it did not describe many of the Nazis, Arendt did not find this problem unique to Eichmann either and was concerned with how larger political, economic, and historical forces made this kind of thoughtlessness a sign of our times. (This is intimated in "Ideology and Terror: A Novel Form of Government," originally published in *The Review of Politics* and subsequently included in the second and third editions of *The Origins of Totalitarianism* [see Arendt, 1953].) And she was focused on how to combat these larger forces, through her own vision of participatory democratic politics and, where that fails or is unavailable — as it was during the Holocaust — how thinking can be a bulwark against the evil she describes as banal and attributes to Eichmann.

The question, when turned to our role as teachers, staff, and students, was how to prepare students for the kind of politics that would counteract the larger forces that lead to thoughtlessness, and, where that is not possible, how to teach for a kind of thinking that stands in when there are no other possibilities (Schulman, 2006). It thus made sense that, when Peter Felten (the then Director of Elon's CATL, now Executive Director of CATL and of Elon's CEL) approached Bloch-Schulman, they would turn to Elizabeth Minnich as the ideal person for the role of Senior Scholar for the seminar. She had been a graduate student of Arendt, and, more importantly, has devoted her life to understanding similar concerns and to explicitly bringing these issues of thinking and democracy together with issues of

¹ While one might claim that this desire to fit in and get ahead itself was a motivation, Arendt's point here is that, to whatever extent it is a motivation, it pales in comparison to the acts that were done; and, as she points out, it could have been met in a much less nefarious way. That is, the evil done was not motivated.

pedagogy and learning in higher education, exemplified by her wonderful “Teaching Thinking: Moral and Political Considerations” (Minnich, 2003), the title of which was the basis for the seminar itself. Together Bloch-Schulman, Felten, and Minnich invited three other Research Scholars to co-guide the seminar (Donna Engelmann, John Ottenhoff, and Rita Pougiales, with Edward Whitfield invited later to join the team), and sent out calls for participants. For more on the seminar, and to see its founding articulation, see Bloch-Schulman, “When the ‘Best Hope’ Is Not So Hopeful, What Then?: Democratic Thinking, Democratic Pedagogies, and Higher Education” (2010).

During our first summer, we had 28 faculty, staff, and students set off on a journey together. That collaboration has led to this special issue, which brings together authors and reviewers from the seminar with others interested in these ideas and questions — from very different and diverse perspectives— as well as the review board of *Partnerships*, who together have made this issue a reality. We thank all involved: the seminar participants, the authors, the reviewers, and everyone at *Partnerships*, and, in particular, Peter Felten and the staff of Elon’s CATL and CEL for supporting the seminar and Spoma Jovanovic (editor), the editorial board, and the staff at *Partnerships* for being so encouraging, helpful, and patient as we worked on this special issue.

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