

Aims of Education address

2024 Professor Kelli Fuery

Thank you to President Struppa and Provost Bouchard for the invitation to give this year's Aims of Education Address. It is an honor and a privilege.

Welcome Class 2028 to Chapman University and to the beginning of what will become four of the most formative years of your lives, both professionally and personally. The extent to which these college years will be highly productive, or simply a waste of time, is entirely up to you. No-one else is going to do the work for you.

As the incoming class, you collectively form a key part of Chapman's future, what it will become over the next four years. I welcome and encourage you to become an active participant in what that future will be. Don't let it just these years happen, get involved in as many ways as you can so that at the end of your four years here, you can look back and account for the role you played in determining different courses of action.

I remember when I became an American citizen, the presiding judge said that becoming a US citizen meant so much more than waiving a flag at the ceremony, or cooking burgers on 4th July. It meant being engaged with what is going on in the world, becoming familiar with issues domestic and abroad, to learn about histories and world events, challenging things that you don't agree with and finding collaborative, mature and productive ways forward. The same applies here with your college education. You're not here to simply wave your diploma in 2028. You're here to become an intelligent, proactive global citizen of the world, and Chapman is here to support you in realizing that goal.

In his 1929 inaugural Aims of Education address, Alfred North Whitehead set out some clear foundational tenets of what his idea of becoming educated entailed. He emphasized the process of education as one that is realized through:

"possessing culture and expert knowledge in a special direction," meaning our intellectual journey is inseparable from personal development. We must, he argued, "guard against ...mental dryrot" and reject the prevalence of "inert ideas". This hasn't changed. There are still a lot of inert ideas around! And you will certainly encounter some of those during your time here.

Whitehead also said we must "experience the joy of discovery" and for an education "to be useful ... [we must develop] an understanding of an insistent present." Perhaps most importantly, Whitehead argued that to become educated meant that we should consciously and purposefully seek to connect various areas of knowledge and determine how these relate to and impact our current situation.

Let's take that word: 'situation' and think about it for a moment. Situation refers to constant lived experience – we all have situations, and these determine how and what we become – but each situation is different and is formed through varied histories and contexts.

In Jean-Paul Sartre's 1943 play *No Exit*, the character Garcin states: 'Hell is Other People' which is famously misinterpreted as meaning 'other people are the problem,' as though they get in the way of one's own wants and desires. While there may be some truth to that (!), that is not really what Sartre meant. He meant that our situation is dependent on others, we see ourselves not through our own eyes, but always through the eyes of others. Because we are aware of this lattice of looks (real or imagined), Sartre's 'hell is other people' meant there will always be inherent conflict in our relationships with others, even and perhaps especially concerning self-regard.

Simone de Beauvoir saw it differently. Beauvoir agreed with some of what Sartre said: that each person's freedom is their own, but she did not agree that there is always inherent conflict between people. Instead, Beauvoir proposed what we call an 'existentialist ethics' meaning that she developed a position of reciprocal recognition. She argued that in order for us to be free we must recognize that we depend on each other and that freedom, specifically moral freedom, is made possible through our interactions with others AND our capacity to see them as other morally free individuals.

It sounds a bit fanciful doesn't it? That in order to be free all I need to do is see that others are free, too? Let's put this philosophy of situation into context.

In your current situation, you are a new college student. That is your shared experience – the common thread that finds you here – but that might be the only specific thread that binds you with your peers. You may here to get a degree in a STEM subject, which is different but no less valuable from degrees in the Creative and Cultural Industries. So, how then do you work together to realize each other as a free being and how do you work together to become educated global citizens of the world?

You must enter into revolutionary encounter-based dialogue.

Your four years here will be your 'becoming educated' years that hopefully will continue throughout life. It is a process that should never stop. But you're in the early stages. If you find yourself in a situation where you know more about a subject/topic than your classmates, then becoming educated means you must help them to learn so that you both learn.

When you find yourself in the situation of feeling lost either in class or socially, it is your responsibility to act, to exercise your freedom to change your situation. You must ask for help – ask your professor, your peers.

And there will be moments where you find yourself knowing more than your professor – what then? You must enter into revolutionary encounter-based dialogue.

If Beauvoir's philosophy was that for a person to achieve freedom, they must recognize, validate and defend the freedom of others, perhaps we can say to become educated, we must work to support the education of others, and in so doing, remove limits to what we believe is possible.

It's not easy to challenge those who holds positions of greater power than us, but it is absolutely necessary – if growth mindsets are something we pursue as part of our lifelong becoming educated.

Of course this involves struggle and a lot of hard work but there is strength in struggle and working hard. It involves the revolutionary encounter I just mentioned.

The Brazilian philosopher, Paulo Freire, rejected the 'banking model' of teaching, wherein the teacher is regarded as the arbiter of knowledge – the banker who 'deposits' knowledge into students who are seen as receptacles. Freire's solution was a problem-posing approach, which referred to an encounter-based dialogue between students and teacher.

He saw 'dialogue' as a joint process of thinking and acting towards the world that needs to be changed and made more human. This dialogue is not a one-way transfer of ideas from one person to another, nor is it a mere sharing of ideas that the discussants use for their own purposes.

Instead, this dialogic encounter is an 'act of creation' intended on pursuing and facilitating of the freedom of the other. Freire says it 'cannot exist without humility' (Freire 62). His model locates education as a revolutionary and liberating experience in the service of student freedom. It is not about fact acquisition or skill deposit. He argues we should reject the banking model of education so that true education may emerge.

It is an attractive and appealing position.

It is also easy to say but very hard to do. You will be obsessed with your grades and GPA. But if we think about what it is to be truly educated, we come to understand that becoming educated means we must go beyond grades and GPAs, seeing them for what they are.

With the rapid rise of inert ideas stewarding education away from any real revolutionary goal or experience, is it with any surprise that the current climate of higher education seeks to sustain the 'banking model' Freire rejected?

For education to be truly revolutionary, and therefore liberating, we must reflect and act to ensure oppressive and limiting structures are transformed. If we understand education to be a form of revolution whose entire purpose is to rethink, reflect and act with Whitehead's call in mind: that 'culture and expert knowledge [is directed toward] some special direction.' Not only should curricula be transformed but so too the practice and style of teaching.

I cannot stand here and ask you to be a part of a revolutionary encounter-based dialogue without also imploring you to challenge the system itself. Be brave enough to challenge faculty on issues that warrant it. Pursue independent study to fill gaps as you see them in your learning. At the same time, be fearless in your own moral assessment.

You only get out what you put in. I sound like a Peloton instructor. Change doesn't happen *to* you; it happens *with* you.

If the true and genuine purpose of education is to ***facilitate student freedom***, then part of your role as student is to think about how you participate on all aspects of your education journey – the institution, instruction and overall student experience.

Reject the teacher-banker mentality in favor of a more student-beneficial social structure of education, that is, stimulate the transformational potential of a class through dialogic encounter.

Ask your faculty about alternative models of evaluation, ones that attend to strengths and weaknesses of education (rather than instruction deposit or fact recall); ask that enough space is given to different (even opposing) points of view that allows critical thinking to develop in the service of pursuing freedom.

And to the faculty listening be open to this challenge. Humility is a two-way street and demonstrative of Beauvoir's reciprocal recognition.

We should not be afraid to expect or demand that education possesses a core revolutionary intention. It isn't just that you, as students, come to develop your critical thinking at university but that we, as faculty, should also be transformed by the process. Why else are we here?