

— INVITED PERSPECTIVE

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Entangled Education:

How Time, Connection, and Variety are at
the Root of Lifelong Growth.

The following are some of my reflections on the Philosophy Matters Cohort, for which I received the 2020-2021 League of Innovations Award for Teaching Excellence. Throughout the reflection, I use the pronoun “we” to reflect the collaborative nature of the activities as well as to credit my colleague, Dr. Michael Walsh, who provided immense support in both planning and moderating a number of the activities.

Mycorrhizal Metaphors and the Wonder of Entanglement

One of the many tragic aspects of growing up is the wearing away of wonder. Weary with the world, what was once phenomenal becomes merely phenomena, and once profound questions become quotidian. Perhaps we become numb, calloused by the daily toil of life; or perhaps we simply know too much about the world and our humility hardens into hubris.

There are many other explanations, to be sure, but whatever the cause, the result is tragic: the erosion of wonder is a death knell for lifelong learning, suppresses gratitude and humility, and is spiritually and existentially enervating. What's more, most people do not even notice the atrophy; in fact, I'd argue that they mistake it for strength – no more wonder means no more unknowns; the world has thus been understood, one knows one's place, and one can live out one's days in comfort.

Unfortunately, my story is no different. As I reached adulthood, my wonder began caving under the weight of my convictions and the busyness of life, and nothing seemed inspiring – just problems yet resolved. As a result, I found myself viewing the world as a lab to be analyzed rather than a labyrinth to be explored. I had forgotten what made me want to learn.

However, this all changed about 7 years ago. While reading Peter Wohlleben's *The Hidden Life of Trees* (2015), I came across one of the most profound facts I've learned about our world: the mycorrhizal network, otherwise known as the “wood wide web.” For those unfamiliar with the mycorrhizal network, it refers to the collection of mycelia, or fungal filaments (the underground portion of mushrooms), that enter into symbiotic relationships with various tree roots. The term comes from combining “mykes” (fungi) with “rhiza” (roots), which is quite apt: the roots and fungi are literally bound up and entangled with one another – and for mutually beneficial purposes (Sheldrake, 2020). The fungi provide water, nitrogen, phosphorous, and micronutrients for the tree, and the trees provide photosynthetic sugars to the fungi (Wohlleben, 2015). Their entanglement literally sustains them and provides the conditions necessary for forest ecosystems to flourish as they do. And what's more interesting – they are so entangled it is impossible to determine where one ends and the other begins. Upon inspection, the boundaries blur, and one realizes that to understand any one thing requires the exploration of a vast network of diverse connections (Sheldrake, 2020).

Mycorrhizal Metaphors and the Wonder of Entanglement cont.

More importantly, in addition to being profoundly interesting, this "entangled world" is also profoundly inspiring and instructive. Here, I thought, was a panacea to the disconnection, lethargy, and disillusionment plaguing our personal lives and society. The mycorrhizal network reveals how the foundation for a flourishing forest is characterized by interconnectedness, interdependency, diversity, exploration, and time. Importantly, it is not comprised of mere individuals; the beings therein are not singularly focused on their individual success; it is not some grand monoculture to maximize yields; it is not some superhighway to maximize efficiency; and it is not something quickly accomplished. Rather, it represents a model of success built upon the foundations of connection, variety, exploration, and time. This is why in his book, *Entangled Life* (2020), biologist Merlin Sheldrake encourages us to ask, "what would happen if we thought in the logic of mycelia, imagining the relationships of things in terms of involution and entanglement rather than separation and distinction?" (Miller, 2021). In his view, this would lead to a shift in how we approach our problems, our solutions, and our conceptions of success.

Like Sheldrake, the mycorrhizal network has become the metaphor through which I view most, if not all, things in this world. For example, look at concepts: in order to make sense of any one thing, you have to follow all of its connections to everything else, and only then will you realize you can't actually ever disentangle that one concept from many others. We live in a world of "webs" – relational networks that constitute our identities, our histories, our environments, and our conceptual landscapes.

It was this conceptual metaphor that I had in mind as I began reflecting on the success of the Philosophy Matters Cohort at the Community College of Baltimore County (CCBC). For, throughout the series of activities, we always emphasized the importance of collaboration and consensus, engaging with a variety of people, ideas, and experiences, and the importance of sustained engagement over a period of time. As a result, it seems to me that the success of the Philosophy Matters Cohort was largely due to the implementation of what I would call "entangled education," which is what I'd like to elaborate on below.

Creating an Environment of Sustained and Varied Activities

Because I will elaborate on each of these in the following pages, here is an overview of the experiences and activities in which the Philosophy Matters Cohort participated:

Philosophy Matters Cohort Series of Activities		
Activity	Semester	Commitment
Philosophy Club	Fall and Spring	Fall: biweekly – 2 hours Spring: weekly – 2 hours
Summer Reading Group	Summer	Weekly – 2 hours
Ethics Bowl	Fall	Weekly – 2-3 hours + All-day tournament
Ethics Week / Guest Lectures	Fall and Spring	Hour-long presentations
CCBC Humanities Conference	Spring	Presentation planning + Conference attendance
Professional Academic Conferences	When available	2-4 sessions at conference
Philosophy Classes	Ongoing	15-week semester

As this table reflects, we were able to create a learning environment that spanned a 1.5–2.5-year period (depending on students' interests and academic progress). Throughout this time, we offered a variety of overlapping activities that engaged with different disciplines and developed different skillsets. Importantly, we were able to

maintain a cohort of students throughout the series of activities. As a result, this sustained entanglement of diverse activities appears to have created the conditions for deeper and more comprehensive learning, stronger social bonds, and higher overall engagement.

The Value of Time, Connection, and Variety

One of the most important aspects to a thriving ecosystem is time. Similarly, one of the most important elements of the Philosophy Matters Cohort was the regularity of contact over a sustained period of time. As shown above, students were engaged in coursework as well as varying activities throughout the year. At no point during their time in the cohort were they "on their own" or "just taking classes;" they were continually involved in a community in which they had the opportunity to discuss a wide variety of topics in an informal setting. This allowed for the implementation of spaced learning, retrieval exercises, and interleaving, thus providing them not only the space needed to explore new topics and questions, but, more importantly, the time to digest and to practice applying what they were learning to a variety of issues (Lang, 2016). For example, students may first encounter the topic of mercy killing in an ethics class to learn the terminology and the common perspectives; then several months later they may discuss it in Philosophy Club in an open and exploratory fashion, pulling from all relevant subjects; and then they may revisit it again the following semester through the lens of ethical debate, researching not only the morality, but also the legality of the issue. Discussing the

same content in different ways over the course of 2 or more semesters both reinforced the content and allowed our students to examine and reflect on it in different contexts, as well as provided them the opportunity to develop different skills in the process.

As we reflect on the concept of thriving and flourishing, this should be obvious – time is essential. However, in a culture that rewards convenience and efficiency, and where prolonged time spent in college is seen as a burden and a barrier, it is becoming increasingly difficult to convince others of this point. Yet, we still require doctors to go to years of school before they can practice; an electrician works as an apprentice for nearly a decade before becoming a master electrician; athletes and musicians need to practice every day for many years to thrive at what they do; and we regularly abide by the principle that "change doesn't happen overnight." Why, then, do we expect students to learn important concepts in 1 semester, let alone an accelerated winter or summer semester? Flourishing entities – whether people, systems, or forests – need time to root, to form connections, and to grow.

The Value of Time, Connection, and Variety Cont.

Of course, 2 years can be daunting for students. For this reason, it was never presented to students as a 2-year program, and we did not require students to participate in every activity. Despite that, the majority of our students were involved in all activities because, I believe, they became immersed in the process. To borrow from Friedrich Nietzsche (2006), "one day we attain our goal – and then refer with pride to the long journeys we have made to reach it. In truth, we did not notice that we travelled. We got into the habit of thinking that we were at home in every place." The key to completing a long journey is finding a home in each moment, and I believe that is why our cohort thrived. Put more academically, the key to retention was – and is – de-emphasizing the goal. Retention requires engagement, and engagement is immersion in the present.

So how did we foster engagement? Put simply, we sought to build connections to each other and to thematic content. It was important for us to establish a community of trust and accountability before discussing contentious or personal topics. Therefore, we began with "core values" ice-breaker exercises, which allowed us to broach sensitive topics in an enjoyable and interactive manner. Moving forward, we always provided ample – and sometimes the entire – time for conversations about anything on our minds. In addition, we arranged our topic schedules collaboratively, and took a consensus-based approach in our Ethics Bowl practices while working towards our team's position. Building connections between the members of the cohort established both accountability and trust, and with the help of time it grew into a community of mutually supportive friends. These foundational connections were the key to the strong bonds they developed and the success they found both personally and collectively.

A second way we hoped to foster engagement was by connecting students to a variety of content and activities. To do this, we adopted an

approach to learning that was inquiry based and exploratory: after raising a philosophical question, we would utilize Socratic questioning to identify the numerous related issues that also had to be addressed in the course of responding to the initial question. That is, we adopted a "where does this lead?" approach to our thinking. For example, to explore the question, "should we be vegetarian?" we had to traverse the entangled topics of climate change, food deserts, labor, government subsidies, personal health, public health, the economy, and many more beyond – otherwise the inquiry would be incomplete. By emphasizing the connections of different topics and the importance of exploratory inquiry, students cultivated an ability to "map out" the overlapping and intertwined "networks" of ideas. Similarly, the students both attended and led a presentation at the CCBC Humanities Conference, which was an event that reinforced our interdisciplinary approach due to all breakout sessions being led by either faculty from 2 different subjects or by a faculty-student collaboration.

Lastly, in the Summer Reading Group, we would choose a different region or theme every year (2017: Existentialism; 2018: Latin American Literature; 2019: Japanese Short Stories) to discuss how universal philosophical problems arise and how people approach them in a variety of contexts. This allowed us to transcend the limitations of any one subject and instead explore questions in their "natural habitat," surrounded by and connected to an endless family of connections. This had 2 benefits: first, the exploration enabled students to find the topic or subject about which they were passionate, thus increasing their engagement. Second, it cultivated a way of seeing the world in terms of connections rather than divisions, which not only better enabled them to work collaboratively, but also provided them a conceptual framework for better examining questions and ultimately understanding the world.

These efforts proved to be a resounding success. The students – the majority of whom were dealing with personal issues and who had struggled completing their Associate of Arts degree – became invested in the cohort, the content, and the college.

Academically, they honed their skills in reading, researching, writing, speaking, and collaborating, thus leading to improved academic success, which was reflected in markedly higher GPAs and eventual transfer or graduation. Moreover, their engagement in our cohort increased their involvement elsewhere at the college – just like that mycelium entangling itself with a number of

different entities, they recognized the value in fostering connections and sought to build them wherever possible. Ultimately, emulating the blurred boundaries of those beings below ground, we connected our cohort to a number of people, activities, and topics that, with the help of time, ultimately strengthened their learning, their bonds, and their outlook on life.

A Person is a Person Through Other Persons

In describing the South African philosophy of ubuntu, Archbishop Desmond Tutu teaches us "a person is a person through other persons, that my humanity is caught up, bound up, inextricably, with yours" (Desmond Tutu Peace Foundation, 2013). Unfortunately, Archbishop Tutu felt it necessary to redefine what it means to be a human because individualism and disconnection have become pervasive features of our world and, as a result, people seemed to have forgotten our essential entanglement. Whether personal, social, historical, or spiritual, there seems to have been a breakdown in both community and existential purpose.

Unsurprisingly, this has also affected higher education in the form of siloed schools and struggling students. And, as parts of this web, it has also affected my students and me. However, what we learned throughout our experience in this cohort was that it does not have to be that way. By embracing the conception of people and ideas as embodied and entangled, we can reaffirm and reestablish the value of community, the value of exploration, and the importance of regular contact. And in doing this, we can restore the connections that are necessary for one to thrive and flourish as a human being.

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