The Value of Friendship for Education

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The Value of Friendship for Education

Abstract
In lieu of an abstract, here is the article's first paragraph:

Western philosophers have enthusiastically praised friendship. A few intellectuals have raised doubts about it, such as Thomas Hobbes and Søren Kierkegaard, but friendship has inspired many others, including Aristotle, Francis Bacon, C.S. Lewis, and Mary E. Hunt, who have esteemed its benefits, especially the reciprocal commitment to nurture each friend's 'best self'.

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Western philosophers have enthusiastically praised friendship. A few intellectuals have raised doubts about it, such as Thomas Hobbes and Soren Kierkegaard, but friendship has inspired many others, including Aristotle, Francis Bacon, C.S. Lewis, and Mary E. Hunt, who have esteemed its benefits, especially the reciprocal commitment to nurture each friend's 'best self'.

Similar admiration is somewhat lacking today, however, and the marginalization of the importance of good relationships within higher education complements this trend. With current attempts to make colleges more businesslike, reductive assessments, cost-benefit analyses and data have taken center stage. Students are statistics expressed in the language of graduation rates and post-graduation employment rates, which become selling points to attract future students. This environment shapes relationships between the staff too; in a competitive academic marketplace, faculty need data to justify their existence, and criticisms of others' work, in person or in print, often appear more combative than constructive. The point seems to be to win mental warfare and so gain a superior reputation. Quantity has overshadowed quality, and higher education misses the mark by not engaging and encouraging the whole student and the whole educator as they strive to become their best self. It is time to rethink teachers' roles and their relationships with students and colleagues. In what follows, I suggest embracing an educational framework grounded in a philosophy of friendship to nurture and sustain a more caring, mutually-supportive intellectual community.

The tension I just outlined revolves around different ways of understanding education's role. From a monetary perspective, education is about job preparation and how to capture a portion of the market. But from a different angle, education concerns the development of cultures of intellectual inquiry focused...
on personal development, integrity, and utilizing diverse fields of knowledge for human fulfillment. In today’s context, while many students find education worth the investment, just as many find college classrooms uninteresting. Campuses have high levels of student depression, anxiety, drug and alcohol abuse, sexual assaults, and racism. For professors, the problems are just as real, but of a different kind. Studies have found that professors are dissatisfied with their work and lack enthusiasm, and a scarcity of job security for non-tenured staff has led to unhappiness, a lack of motivation, and negative attitudes in the classroom. Shrinking departments, more responsibilities, and less support, have created a downhearted group of educational laborers. Academia, then, needs an alternative approach that can cultivate better relationships, improve environments for both learning and teaching, and develop more advantageous conditions for personal and social growth. A theory of education grounded in friendship is one response, so the rest of this article will focus on the relevance of four dimensions of friendship for higher education, and how they could shift communities of learners away from a monetary economy toward a focus on the talents and potential of individuals.

Four Dimensions of Friendship

The concept of friendship is historical; philosophers in different cultures and epochs have emphasized certain aspects of friendship that others have not. In ancient Greece and Rome, the civic dimension of friendship was prominent as some argued that it was part of the social glue that held societies together. By the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, however, friendship’s centrality for a good society began to be questioned—such as when Thomas Hobbes challenged the possible socially-destabilizing nature of preferential love.

Identifying the convergences and divergences in philosophers’ views of friendship is important for understanding its nuances. I wish to look at four philosophical approaches, from Aristotle, Bacon, Lewis, and Hunt. Their writings reveal friendship’s significance and how friends help one another when they are weak or struggling. The need to take friendship seriously as a model for all relationships, based on how friends courageously pursue a common truth together, also emerges.

Aristotle (384-322 BC) is Western philosophy’s Mr Friendship. Most scholars would turn to him first for an analysis of the concept. Plato’s *Lysis*, like his other early dialogues, leaves readers with more questions than answers, including the unchallenged assumption that friends share everything in common. In contrast, Aristotle offers several claims and insights supporting the relevance of friendship for a good life. He begins with unequivocal praise for friendship in his *Nicomachean Ethics*: “For without friends no one would choose to live, though he had all other goods” (1155a). Beyond this affirmation, his three types of friendship are useful friends, friends of pleasure, and virtuous friends, and of the three, the latter is the best. This is a relationship where each person loves the other because of his or her good character, and this relationship leads to mutual betterment through deep concern for the friend’s welfare. For Aristotle, continuous personal development plays an important role in living a good life, and friends mutually aid each other to improve their characters, cultivate joy in life and flourish as human beings. In this way, friendship is indispensable to a good life. This stands in stark contrast to contemporary views (such as the TV show *Friends*) which portray friendship as being mainly about hanging out together with little emphasis on personal growth.

Francis Bacon (1561-1626) also thinks friendship a necessary component of life. Drawing on Aristotle in the opening of his essay *Of Friendship*, he comments that any person existing in solitude is “either a beast or a god.” Bacon ends the essay with a stark statement: when someone enters a period of life where he is unable to carry out needed activities, “if he have not a friend, he may quit the stage.” Besides the aid friends offer, Bacon says, there are two other fruits of friendship. The first is the ability of friends to help nurture peace in our emotional lives, and the second is to encourage our good judgment. So friends help one another to become better, stronger people by reducing emotional stress, helping each other to work through difficult decisions, and by doing things that the friend cannot do. Each fruit reinforces the idea that friends mutually uplift one other—that without friendship, people may languish under the burdens of life. In other words, human beings have weaknesses and moments when they cannot succeed by themselves. Friends sustain each other through such moments and their strengths complement each other.

C.S. Lewis (1898-1963) approaches things differently; he discusses friendship (*philia*) alongside the three other Greek words for types of love: *eros* (romantic, desiring love), *agape* (love of neighbor, charity), and *storge* (affection in general, but more specifically, parental love). He directs our attention to the significance of *agape* as a foundation, but this does not mean he thinks lowly of friendship. Instead, Lewis describes friendship as a type of love between two or more people standing shoulder to shoulder, inspired by, and pursuing, the same truth. Unlike *eros*, which is jealous, friendship is open to more than one friend; indeed, the more friends we have, the more they bring out our singular gifts. Each friend is unique because he or she can help others to improve in distinctive ways. Instead of friendship isolating people from the rest of the world, Lewis describes friendship as taking each friend beyond the narrow limits of the self: their friendship is grounded in their shared appreciation of a truth, yet this truth is always beyond their full grasp. Friends exist, then, in a process of appreciating and pursuing a common truth. So *philia* is, arguably, more about the joy of sharing in this experience of pursuit with those we love than it is about the end goal. This would make friendship process-oriented whereby the friends’ growth is nurtured through a shared activity with well-matched values.

Unlike Lewis, who grounds friendship in *agape*, Mary E. Hunt (b.1951) elevates friendship into a model and goal for life. With romantic love’s difficulties and marriage’s failures, Hunt argues that a new relational goal is needed. No longer should the aim be romantic relationships grounded in marriage. This does not mean these relationships are insignificant or should be eliminated, but that they should grow out of friendship and be shaped by its values and orientations.

Hunt associates friendship with *fierce tenderness*. Her analysis includes a focus on *embodiment*, which emphasizes the physiological dimensions of relationships; *spirituality*, which emphasizes
Friendship

deep interconnections with others and the world; love, which emphasizes emotions and commitments; and power, which emphasizes the strength to alter the world and others. This idea of friendship’s fierce, tender side is important because friendship becomes political. It is not simply between two people in isolation; instead, friendship exceeds the private sphere and may be a vehicle through which social change is possible. Friends can unite and encourage each other to take a stand against injustices and to work for peace in the world. Think of the friendship between Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony. With friendship as a goal and the leading relational model, Hunt urges readers to see life in a new way. Friendship is the lens through which we can examine and reimagine private and public relationships, professions, and life. No matter what we are doing, the concept of friendship should play an important role in how we think and act.

I’ve highlighted four different approaches to friendship. Each author has a different angle and different priorities. Character development and friendship’s centrality for a life lived well are important for Aristotle. Friends helping friends in challenging moments is crucial for Bacon. The pursuit of a common truth and the non-jealous inclusivity of friendship are important for Lewis. Being both courageous and tender in friendship and using friendship as the relational model are crucial for Hunt. By bringing these different emphases together, friendship can be seen as a type of relationship dedicated to helping others cultivate their best self even when the odds may not be in their favor. Courageously, with receptiveness and tender attentiveness, friends uplift one another to overcome life’s burdens. By using friendship as a new way for seeing, thinking about, and acting in the world, the various relationships in which we engage could be transformed.

Bringing Friendship into Education

Taking friendship seriously in the educational environment means moving beyond contemporary ideas of education focused on employment, hyper-rationalism, and rote learning. Instead, friendship redirects attention to the relational dimension of education, placing relationships at the center of the learning environment. Whether between students, between teachers, or between students and teachers, a friendship-based educational model emphasizes how these relationships can be more open, mutually supportive, and focused on nurturing the best in each person. It moves the focus away from quantification and reductionist assessments, a monetary economy, and unsupportive power dynamics, toward a focus on everybody’s gifts and processes aimed at mutual betterment and greater relational equality. A philosophy promoting friendship in higher education, then, could help students and educators to stay focused on people helping one another to grow, the relevance of the emotional life for education, the significance of a shared truth and a consensus of values, and the need for courage and care in intellectual pursuits. This would help dispel the dejectedness permeating higher education through engagements that encourage the development of the whole person in a supportive community.

Students pursue education to attain specific goals: self-betterment, a financially secure job, their lifelong dreams. Educators teach because it is enjoyable, offers financial stability, and allows them to pursue their dreams within and beyond the classroom. But education expands beyond facts from a textbook or exam success; it concerns learning to live well in every realm of our lives and in every context we enter, or at least trying our best to improve. And Aristotle’s view of friendship reminds us that education is more than an instrumental good; he reminds us that there is more to think about than the pleasure and utility students and educators get from the classroom. Rather, through nurturing friendship, the classroom becomes a site of mutual support. In seeing students and teachers through the lens of friendship, the relationship becomes about mutual betterment, making students better students and educators better educators, and all of them better people who live life more fully. Aristotle’s emphasis on friends being concerned with the excellence of their friends is crucial for rethinking education, because it redirects attention to the cultivation of a good human being. Moreover, this reorientation can affect every relationship the students and educators have, whether on campus, in wider society, or at home.

Relationships in educational contexts occur within a lattice of lives with unique struggles, fears, joys, and hopes. Surface interactions, however, fail to go beyond polite pretenses and habitual decency. Yet using Bacon’s understanding of friendship, educational systems could learn to avoid the distancing effects of titles and power and dive below the surface to engage the challenges people face. Students and teachers can also learn from Bacon’s emphasis on friends helping one another with intellectual problems and decision-making. The development of critical-thinking skills is already a big part of education, but their development could be greatly facilitated by emphasising friend-
ship in educational relationships.

Friendship's emotional side may seem inappropriate for student-teacher relationships, and unnecessary between colleagues. The problematic assumption here is that emotions are unimportant in the educational environment, except in extraordinary circumstances such as dealing with distraught students. But Bacon's understanding of friendship emphasizes cultivating the whole person - the rational and the emotional dimensions - to bring balance to lives and relationships. Instead of thinking about learning only as a rational process leading to intellectual autonomy, students, teachers, and colleagues should acknowledge and honor the emotional depths of those with whom they relate. This provides an opportunity in education to encounter others through intimacy with their emotional worlds.

C.S. Lewis focuses on the open delight friends share with each other as they pursue a common truth or idea, each person bringing out different dimensions of their friends, from actions and intellect to emotions and humor. What is most important for the educational environment, however, is that friends are following a unique idea or truth. Lewis writes how a group of hunting friends encounters a deer as more than food; they glimpse and can appreciate the animal's beauty, even when the rest of the world cannot understand it.

In educational friendships, for example, a common vision could be associated with social justice, diversity, or living a good life and being a good citizen. Students and educators could bond in the classroom, in the halls, over food, or in meetings in mutually-supportive ways to understand a common truth. This creates commonalities among the members of the community, bringing people's minds, intentions, and actions together, grounded in common values. Despite differences, students and educators stand shoulder-to-shoulder in an inclusive way. Such consensus in diversity supports character development and the expression of individuals' unique attributes, both intellectual and emotional, because each person can have a sense of belonging and security within the campus community.

As she stresses the importance of the example of friendship for all relationships, Mary Hunt reveals how no aspect of life can escape its relevance. Just so, the roles of student and teacher should incorporate the values, support, and benefits of friendship. Hunt's analysis forces us to reassess how mindful we are of the physical dimensions of education: students and academics are embodied beings. Her focus also urges us to examine how love can shape and enhance educational relationships: instead of competition and power hierarchies, love concerns aiding others to benefit and uplift them. Moreover, the incorporation of spirituality would mean that learning transcends the business models and reductionist views that sell education solely for employment purposes. Instead, education would be grounded in insights into the endless interdependencies permeating both life and intellectual disciplines. Education, the multifarious aspects of life, and the robust fields of thought should not be separated, but woven together to bring multiple perspectives to bear on the complexities of existence. Finally, strength or power in education means boldly pursuing learning, understanding the implications of thought and action, and being able to choose the most beneficial paths despite resistance from unjust traditions.

Pursuing friendship in education, then, does not imply making things easier and cozier. To the contrary, education becomes more challenging and risky. Grounded in friendship values, education would be concerned with changing people and the world through intrepid thinking that crosses boundaries and is sustained by courageous caring. Thus, education becomes a process focused on healthy relationships uplifting all who take part. This is a shift to quality, and its value could be assessed by observing the increased trust, benevolence, openness-mindedness, understanding, and empathy that bind the community together. Respect for others is exemplified in the best friendships. The ability to transform conflicts into better relationships is another marker of a healthy community. Employment opportunities and capturing the market would still be relevant, of course, but they would be relegated to being a byproduct of the beneficial relationships that form the foundation of the educational institution that has chosen to be guided and reshaped by a philosophy of friendship. Through healthier communities, more supportive interactions inside and beyond the classroom, and deeper commitments to each other, colleges could gain reputations as transformative environments.

Closing Thoughts

There is little mystery concerning why philosophers have so highly revered the best in friendship: it is an open, caring relationship grounded in equality, mutual care and betterment, a deep commitment to each friend, and an absence of the limitations found in other ways of loving. It is important to remember Aristotle's remark in *Politics* that “community depends on friendship; and when there is enmity instead of friendship, [people] will not even share the same path” (1295b23-25). So the warmth of friendship is a crucial part of a good life and a healthy society; it brings people together in a lasting way. Furthermore, it can be argued that Socrates' deep philosophical engagement with others was also an act of friendship. His philosophical pursuit takes on added significance when one remembers that philosophy's etymological roots in the love of wisdom (*philosophia*) are grounded in *phileo* (I love), *philos* (love of) and *philia* (friendship love).

From Plato to Hunt, friendship has received more praise than disparagement from philosophers, and this is because, ideally, friendship helps to bring out the best in each person. It does this by being receptive to friends' unique gifts and enhancing them in ways that help friends to become the best people they can be. In this way, cultivating friendship can aid students and educators to focus on each other's gifts, to help each person to develop in her or his unique ways, and to do so in a caring, courageous, and receptive fashion. By putting friendship at the center of higher education, the classroom and the entire community could become more humane and focused on the various dimensions of every person's life.

Higher education is currently in need of help. Through nurturing friendship, education could become much more than it is, and more able to honor and to cultivate every community member's distinctive gifts.

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