

## 252. Accommodating cognitive and emotional impairments at a university

23 August 2017

Mark Mercer  
Department of Philosophy  
Saint Mary's University  
Halifax, NS B3H 3C3  
mark.mercer@smu.ca

Bruce Pardy is against granting students with cognitive or emotional impairments extra time to write exams. (“Mental disabilities shouldn’t be accommodated with extra time on exams,” *National Post*, 17 August 2017, <http://nationalpost.com/opinion/bruce-pardy-mental-disabilities-shouldnt-be-accommodated-with-extra-time-on-exams>.)

Pardy is a professor of law. He might be right that extra time is both unfair and unwise in professional schools. He’s wrong that it is in universities generally.

The point of testing in law school is to determine not just how well the student understands the material but how well he can remember and display that understanding in a set short time. Pardy writes that since “pressure is part of the conditions of the test,” it is unfair to relieve some of the pressure for some of the test takers. A student who received a B but took two hours has not performed as well as has a student who also received a B but who had to drop her pen after just 90 minutes; thus, it’s unfair to the second student to say the two did equally well.

It is also unfair to the second student to present her to prospective employers as no more accomplished or skilled than the first. She has earned their first consideration. Furthermore, to the extent that society benefits from knowledgeable and skilled lawyers, we all lose when on paper the good and the mediocre are indistinguishable.

Those are Pardy’s arguments, and, for law school, they may well be sound.

One might object it’s best for society that the law and other professions be marked by a diversity of cognitive and emotional styles. Perhaps law firms would understand and serve different clients better; perhaps the play of styles and attitudes would test old ideas and promote innovation. This is not my objection to Pardy.

The goal of a law school is to train and to bestow credentials on prospective members of an elite. Such is the goal of any professional school, not just law school. Any school meant to train doctors, engineers, nurses, economists, managers, and so on is in the business of ensuring that the next cadre of professionals can do their jobs, and, through the grades on transcripts, of ensuring that the best trained get noticed first. Accommodations for students with cognitive or emotional disabilities are, then, inconsistent with the school’s mission.

But neither training nor credentialing is a goal of the many other schools and programs at a university. Their goal is education. Courses in science, social science, and the arts aim to help students acquire the understandings and skills they need simply to engage well with the topics of their fields. Students study history in order to be able to respond intelligently to the problems of understanding the past; they study English in order to be able to understand and appreciate literature. Programs and courses of liberal study do not train students to take their place in work or society.

Students in professional schools might well be competing with each other, and the ability to work under pressure might be an important part of it all. University students outside the professional or vocational programs, though, are not competing with each other. Competition implies that resources or rewards are scarce, that if Sally consumes a resource or receives a reward, George won't. Yet Sally's excellent understanding of the problem of free will (say) is not diminished by George coming to an equally excellent understanding. Hers is not a better understanding even if she attained much more quickly than George did his, and even if she can express it under pressure more articulately than George can. Despite their differences, as students of philosophy they are peers.

There is certainly a place for testing and test scores in liberal study. Testing motivates students to focus. Test scores help a student to identify weaknesses, so that he might improve. Test scores also help the professor to determine whether the student is ready to undertake more difficult and demanding study. Time limits function merely to keep things moving. The pressure they create is incidental, not part of the conditions for the test. Those who function better under pressure are welcome to it, but it's good to try to remove pressure from those who are distracted by it.

Parry writes that the "proper purpose of accommodation is to facilitate participation, not to compensate for lack of ability that the test is about." In liberal study, performing under pressure is never what the test is about. Whatever accommodations facilitate participation in the life of the mind are not inconsistent with liberal study.

Again, while the mission of a professional school might well legitimately include discriminating between students who perform well under pressure and those who don't, that is no part of the mission of any university program dedicated to liberal study. (What is necessary is discriminating between students possessed of understanding and skills enough to continue to higher levels of study and those not.)

This point should be obvious. Unfortunately, many people confuse training and education. They take the aims and mission of the professional schools to be those of the university as a whole. Parry, for instance, presents his case as applying to testing across the university, not just in the law school. His critic, the mental health advocate Alicia Raimundo, also runs training and education together, for she speaks of accommodations as "levelling the playing field." In education, there is no playing field, no finish line, no net on which to score.

Whatever we can do to help people engage successfully in the life of the mind is perfectly fine for us to do.