Spring 3-2017

Dr. David Sweet: Staying the Course with a Liberal Arts Education

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Recommended Citation
Fountain, Rachel, "Dr. David Sweet: Staying the Course with a Liberal Arts Education" (2017). Oral History Interview Projects. 22.
http://digitalcommons.udallas.edu/oralhistory/22

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Rachel Fountain: So my name is Rachel Fountain and I am sitting here with Dr. Sweet the associate professor and chair of the Classics department at the University of Dallas. Thank you so much for allowing me to interview you. Once again do I have your permission to record this interview with the full knowledge that the recording and transcription will be housed in the University of Dallas Oral History Repository?

David Sweet: By all means, Rachel, happy to do it.

RF: Perfect. The first question I wanted to ask you is what is your background in education?

DS: Do you mean where I did I go to school?

RF: Yeah.

DS: I went to a boys' school in New Hampshire called Exeter. And I went to Harvard for a B.A. in English, then I went to the University of California at Berkeley in English and got an M.A., but then in the middle of that I had come to realize that I needed to revive my Latin, a little of which I learned in high school, and start Greek. I had an experience as a Junior in college with a very kind man…my roommate and I were in a dining hall saying foolish things about Plato’s Republic and he very kindly interrupted our conversation and demonstrated quickly to us we didn’t know what we were talking about. We’d been taking a course in the Republic from an eminent philosopher, who didn’t like Plato, and we simply absorbed his incorrect opinions. [Laughs]

RF: [Laughs]

DS: And this man who corrected us was very kind. He said to us—we were both English majors—“you don’t know how to read.” This was startling. We were sure of course we read very well. “In any case I’ll prove it to you. I am free Thursday afternoons from two to five, and let’s read a Platonic dialogue, Ion. It’s only seventeen pages long, and I’ll translate it for you, and we’ll talk about it.” That’s what we did for a whole semester, and of course very quickly we both realized we didn’t know how to read; it became also clear that we couldn’t go further in life without knowing Greek, so that’s what I did when I went to grad school. And at one point in what I guess was the middle of my third year, my advisor looked at my schedule for the next semester and said “I don’t see any English on your schedule—it’s all Latin and Greek. Are you sure you’re an English student?” [Laughs] And I said, “Well actually you’re probably right.” So I switched. [Laughs] — That is where I got my Ph.D. in Classics. And I taught at Berkeley for a while as an instructor and I taught at Ohio State, and then I came here where I have been extraordinarily happy [Laughs]; this place actually cares about Classics as a university. Berkeley and Harvard and Ohio State and so forth—they all had very good Classics departments but they weren’t central to the curriculum in the way in which Classics here is. There are so many core texts which were originally in Greek and Latin and so many departments that cooperate with us and we have lots of double majors and so forth. So one doesn’t feel as if one is in an isolated discipline. The Classics department was on the third floor of the library in the back end of it at Berkeley, and no one ever went there unless they were in Classics; here people come by all the time. So it’s a very healthy environment for somebody in Classics.
RF: How long have you been a part of the faculty here?

DS: I came in 1979--1980 with another young teacher, Wayne Ambler, and he and I shared many experiences. [Laughs] In those years—we were even going to write a book on the university, which is such a wacky place, then even more so than perhaps now, but loveable. We never wrote that book because we knew it would just be filled with anecdotes and everybody would know whom they were about [Laughs]

RF: [Laughs]

DS: And we would be fired...so… But in any case it was a wonderful time to come here and a real refuge for so many faculty who had taught elsewhere, and when they came here, then they realized this is rare. And increasingly so as education at the tertiary level deteriorates.

RF: And then you are chairman of the Classics department so what are your duties as the chairman?

DS: Oh, to keep my door open and talk to people—that’s pretty much it. [Laughs]

RF: [Laughs] Yeah and when did you become chairman? Is that something…?

DS: Well I was director of the Classics program when we were part of foreign languages—modern and classical languages were all part of one department, and then I became graduate dean, Braniff dean in oh maybe 2001...something like that…and gave up the position of the chair of Classics. And then when I stopped being dean whenever that was in 2013 or so, then I became chair of Classics, replacing Karl Maurer who was a fantastic member of our department and chair for the period from 2006 to 2012 something like that… did you know him?

RF: I did—I met him for a short time.

DS: He was a splendid teacher—really got a lot of people to do things like study the Neo-Latin poet, Jacob Balde, who is practically unknown and is a wonderful poet. And Dr. Maurer had a keen ear, loved poetry and knew an enormous amount of it—probably more than anybody in the university, a lot of which he had in his marvelously retentive mind, and he wrote penetrating articles on poets, but what his great achievement was—was the translation of the Georgics into English verse—a beautiful poem in itself, which we need to get published. I hope.

RF: …which is the class you are teaching this semester…the Georgics.

DS: Yes, this would ordinarily be the class that Karl would teach and we can’t give it up. But it’s very hard to duplicate—he actually made people decide to change their lives by studying the Georgics. We have several grads who did senior projects on the Georgics and so forth. And he was a kind of Pied Piper; he’d play his tune and get everybody to march wherever he wanted to take them. He was a great teacher.

RF: And so what is your philosophy and what do you see to be the main goal of education?

DS: Oh, to enjoy life—to understand and enjoy life, of course. What else is there to do but read and think and talk about all the things that you find in great literature and philosophy, theology
and history…whatever… I like Classics because you can do it all. You do have to stay within
antiquity but the classical tradition of course is rich and you can browse around in it, enjoying
everything and knowing much more than people who don’t have that background in Classics.
You can’t read most English poetry with the same eyes if you don’t know Latin and sometimes
Greek. Because everybody until the last century or well into it was raised on Latin from the age
of five or six, Greek from the age of ten or twelve. All education was for three or four centuries
was Classics: Greek and Latin. And of course it worked because classical texts covered the
whole range of what we call academic disciplines, so it’s a treat—you’re automatically
interdisciplinary and that was one reason I switched I think. I really love English literature and I
also like philosophy, poetry, theology and history.

RF: What changes have you seen in education over the years?

DS: Unfortunately, at the primary and secondary school levels the education that one gets now is
far inferior to what we had fifty years ago, and I just see it getting worse. There’s fortunately a
movement to try to restore some sanity in education. To my mind education is simply reading
good books, reading them with the help of the teacher, discussing them, reflecting on and
learning how to write by using them as models. It’s the best way to learn how to write. The
Adams, Abigail and John Adams, everybody who becomes acquainted with them sooner or later
finds the letters that they wrote to each other which were fascinating. He in Philadelphia, she up
in Quincy, Massachusetts, where the family had their private home and it’s interesting to know
it’s a historical site and a place fun to visit. They wrote letters to each other a lot; and they’re
online, you can even see facsimiles of them and of course they have beautiful handwriting. And
they discussed everything, and she was very intelligent and learned. And on July 4th I think in
1776 in fact—maybe July 5th—they exchanged letters about how to teach their children how to
write. And it’s a letter about cultivating the epistolary style, and the advice was that’s a good
style to use to learn how to write. Of course it gives you more latitude—you can be anecdotal,
you can describe, you can use colorful language and so forth so it’s a little different than an
analytic paper you might write in Lit Trad I. And what did they recommend as models? Pliny.
And Cicero. What Pliny? John just happened to mention two letters on the eruption of Vesuvius
that Pliny wrote and sent to Tacitus. That’s how one should learn to write English, that is to say
by reading very high level letters by Latin authors, and that’s still my opinion. That’s the way to
learn to to write—by reading good models. I think of course, as you know, people ought to be
learning Latin at an early age and then learn Greek as a treat later on, and after you have had a
considerable amount of Latin, Greek is not so tricky—it’s got a huge verb system, but essentially
it behaves in many of the same ways as Latin. Unfortunately, certain obvious verities have been
forgotten. Irving High School--my kids went to Irving and MacArthur—the high schools here, in
the darkness of the night that envelops them, dropped Latin and German so they only teach
French and Spanish now. At a certain point, they even said for the English classes Shakespeare is
too tough—no Shakespeare. [Laughs] And I think one of the UD grads taught English there and
she disobeyed; she got her junior class to read Macbeth—they loved it. And then she got
them…I’m told this anecdote I hope it’s true [Laughs]…she got her students seriatim—to stand
up on chairs in the cafeteria at lunch reciting portions of the play, and everybody quieted down
and was transfixed wondering “what is going on?” and people immediately were charmed. It’s
It's just ridiculous to say “no, Shakespeare’s too difficult.” Good things are difficult of course, but you live with them, and they just have a power and beauty that is irreplaceable. Don’t dumb down the curriculum. And that happens all the time or it becomes politicized unfortunately—the history, the teaching of history is in shambles because of this notion that you’ve got to have politically correct texts and so forth. And the result is the most important dimensions of history are neglected and looked at through very biased lenses. That’s slavery. That’s what it is. So…and the teachers are enslaved who teach this. We had a great corrective program here when the U.S. Department of Education at one point in the… I guess it was early 90s… or later 90s, had a lot of money that they were able to award for what they called the teaching of traditional American history. It had to be document based and oriented around the notion that as citizens we need to know what was in the minds of those who put together our government. It was really traditional. And we got an award…I don’t know; it was a lot, about 660,000 or something… for three summer programs in which we prepared the ground for teaching American history; one was classical sources and one was modern, reading Locke, Rousseau, and so forth. And the third was founded on the basis of the Federalist papers, just like Politics 1311 and on to Tocqueville and so forth. It was very successful, the teachers—a lot of them came; they loved it. It was so refreshing from what they had been doing or required to do, and it was needed. Now that was some time ago, we probably need to do that continuously—but the government does not see fit to supply the money continuously. This was a big program, there were hundreds of schools and colleges who applied for the grant. We were told ours came in third best. It was a really good program. That kind of thing is a sign though, and this was quite a while ago, more than two decades ago, a sign of real deterioration in this instance in secondary school education. But we’re holding the fort I am glad to say—more and more lonely though. I don’t know how many colleges now have no requirements; famous places like Brown, Bowdoin, and so forth—none. And those that do have requirements, they tend to be distribution requirements. Very few places have curricula for instance in which there are fifteen courses that everybody takes and that have a stipulated reading list so all of you who are undergrads share this enormous wealth of magnificent texts and the lenses through which you can look at life—it’s very hard to see life straight on. It is very helpful to have lenses through which to look at it, and that’s what a good book is. So it’s great if you share, as you do, a certain number of them. I enjoy—I’ve taught Lit Trad III in Rome from time to time-- I really enjoy the bus trips, and one of the reasons I do is to listen to the conversations that are going on behind me on the bus. And they are on a very high level, they are very spirited and they are about things that are very interesting. And they are about books—and that you don’t find in very many places. So that’s why I really like being here. And any faculty member thinking, not just about the humanities, would say that’s right. What makes this place distinctive and so lovable is the core. Plus the good students that come here—they’re a real treasure our students are. They like to learn amazingly enough. And they’re not cynics, they don’t think that there’s no point in inquiry into the truth because there isn’t any; it’s all just self-satisfaction of one kind or another and small pleasures. And that is a shame... It means that life becomes unintelligible. And we’re fortunate never to have lost it—I was at Berkeley and of course that place collapsed. Ohio State, Harvard—they have all lost any coherent curriculum that they used to have. I think kids really need help; it’s good that they actually have to read. They have the Iliad, Odyssey, and the Aeneid [Laughs] in
their first semester, suffer through these things together. Where else can you read the *Republic* and the *Ethics*, and those three epics, as freshmen? It’s a treat. And it means for faculty—it’s a privilege because you can teach with the knowledge that people have some acquaintance with those texts and you start connecting things. Everybody talks about the great conversation and that’s right. Authors are conversing with their predecessors; it’s particularly clear in Classics because you can see everybody talked to Homer. Herodotus complained about Homer, he corrected him. Thucydides complained about Herodotus, corrected him. Plato talked about Thucydides, Herodotus, and Homer—corrected them. That is to say they are engaging them in conversation. That’s what this curriculum does for us. Do you agree?

RF: I do agree, yeah. [Laughs]

DS: [Laughs] I don’t know any UD student who doesn’t agree. We get a lot of cooperation from students. And I think the students here are nice to each other—they form fast friendships of course, but I’ve seen students elsewhere, and they’re not so nice to each other. And we’re not a politicized campus; we don’t think it’s important that every now and then we march down Main Street and throw bricks through bank windows, which happens at many universities. They shut down for political reasons. But not here. I used to and I suppose I still do think it might have something to do with the fact we’re in Texas, which tends to be a little more conservative than say San Francisco or New York, if I may employ meiosis.

RF: Right.

DS: And the pressure on the university to give up its core never developed to the extent that it did elsewhere, which was really fortunate. We were a young university and the core was new, but we didn’t have political riots here. There was a “sit in” once, I’m told. It was rather late in the semester—spring semester. And some of the boys thought “sit ins” were going on everywhere and we needed to have one of these to maintain self-respect.

RF: [Laughs]

DS: So they went into the office of the person then who was the dean of men, Jim Fougerousse. It was on a Friday afternoon. And they explained to him they were going to sit in. He said, “Fine, let me send out for some beer,” so they got some beer and he talked for a while. Then he said, “Well now I’ve got to go home. So I will see you on Monday.” And he left them in his office, and he went over to facilities and said, “Turn off the air conditioning.” [Laughs] They were out of there pretty soon. [Laughs] So much for a sit in.

RF: [Laughs]

DS: So for one reason or another I think we didn’t suffer the pressure in the 70s and the 80s to change. There’s this wonderful National Association of Scholars report on Bowdoin, and it’s a devastating indictment of what is going on. Bowdoin—a very respected, solid liberal arts undergraduate college—in 1967 had a new president. He came—a Rhodes scholar, brilliant, and he came in and said “we are going to do things differently…we’re going to get rid of all requirements.” That’s what they did way back then. And it was the National Association of Scholars that—an organization very interested in understanding what’s gone wrong with college
education—asked itself how are we going to study the decline and how are we going to document it. And this was one way of looking through one lens at one college which is representative—it’s a long document, three hundred pages or so. It really shows you what the effect is when you do that. And there was, of course, a huge difference between the graduates from before then and those now. And the graduates from before then are terribly distressed of course at how their beautiful college has been ruined. [Laughs] And that’s going on—has gone on—in so many places—giving up the whole notion of liberal education and also becoming simultaneously politicized.

RF: Is there anything you would say that you agree with in modern education? Because I know you used the word unfortunate…

DS: Well I guess that depends on where. One thing I like to see is at the primary and secondary school levels, I like the Great Hearts academies. I think Hillsdale is also doing what they can with their founders’ academies. Those tend to be traditional in their approach to the curriculum, mainly reading good books, and not being afraid of their being too difficult—obviously sometimes when one introduces good books too soon you have to be careful about how you do that, but don’t underestimate the capacity of kids to respond to something that’s a fantastically good book. I had a friend who used to substitute teach just for the fun of it in Irving. And when he—when he was called, it was very often to deal with intransigent boys who were very difficult to deal with and of course misbehaved. My friend—actually what he’d do is he would take them out to the track where there were stands for people to sit in. And he’d read Shakespeare’s sonnets with them. And they really liked them. They have to do with love problems, you know, the kinds of things high school boys have lots of problems with; they were very interested in them. It can be done. It’s, you know…what is it Alder’s: “What’s good for the best is good for everybody”—something like that. That’s a principle on which we live, makes a lot of sense to me. They do the work for you—good books often. This pablum that often replaces them drives kids crazy. You know the Latin in Rome program we have in the summer gets very good high school kids. We typically ask them, “Well, what have you been asked to read for the summer? Do you have any summer reading?” And they laugh, saying, “This stuff is junk. We don’t read it.” [Laughs] To mention again the National Association of Scholars—they collect summer reading lists just out of curiosity to see what the books are, and what they are looking for are what they would call “Classics”—things that have been a staple in education, good books. And they found the first one they would call a good book was Number 123—it’s was Sophocles’ Antigone and it was only there because it was a feminist tract—crazy. [Laughs] So I appreciate having the opportunity to ask high school kids—they’re good students—what’s going on. And they have this ability to say “that’s junk.” [Laughs] You’re asking them to read stuff that’s so dull it’s drippy, and I know all of that and it’s also you’re treating me as if I’m full of prejudices and that I need to have all these cleaned out somehow. I’m not. [Laughs] It’s boring—give me something good and I’ll read it. [Laughs] So we give them lots of good stuff in Latin… Yes, it’s sad—those are signs of the time I guess.

RF: Then the next question I had for you is why should someone study foreign and classical languages?
DS: Oh, otherwise your brain goes dead. You have to. There’s no way in which you can understand your own language adequately if you don’t triangulate it. And among the languages that are most useful for triangulation would be Latin and Greek. Then you can add French in the middle and German over to one side. There are languages of course that are very close to English for one reason or another historically and illuminate the language, but in order to understand language, especially grammar, you have got to learn Latin and Greek. Grammar is a Greek word. They’re the first ones who took the instrument—it’s all we’ve got to confront the phenomena with—language. And they took that and said the phenomena are very difficult to understand when you look at them directly, but look at them through speech. So we are going to study Greek. And they are the first grammarians, the first ones who made the distinction between a noun and the verb. And they did it on the basis of what’s static and what’s kinetic. It’s a philosophic basis—it’s the difference between above the divided line and below the divided line in the Republic. And that comes right out of Greek and you can see that’s what Plato did, Socrates, and others before him—they looked at their own language in order to understand the phenomena by understanding how language worked. So you have to have a foreign language, and I recommend of course Latin and Greek because they are the foundation of Indo-European grammar analysis.

RF: Then what do you envision to be the direction of future education?

DS: Downhill. Without the help of—a lot of parents of course have really good instincts and they are becoming dissatisfied with education. And of course they are looking for alternatives. And homeschooled kids of course come here in great numbers for that reason. Whatever else is available to them, their parents think is inadequate. But you definitely want schools to be a big help so you hope they can be revived in a way that existed not so long ago. My knowledge of small towns in Texas is that the whole education program there worked because of a couple of teachers in primary and secondary school. And especially Latin teachers—there were a lot of them and of course they have been disappearing and hard to replace—that’s a huge loss. It doesn’t take much studying of the history of education to see how fundamental Latin was. For that reason you can see kids who come here to UD—they don’t know any grammar. Maybe they’ve gone to a good parochial school, might have gotten a nun whipping them on the knuckles with a ruler, telling them you’ve got to learn the parts of speech. Yeah… So everybody agrees if you’ve got a couple of good teachers in your background, that’s enough to get you started on the right track. So I’m hoping to keep the public school system solid, but I think that one of the ways to do it is to have it demonstrated to school boards and superintendents that their system isn’t working. But there is a way that is working awfully well and my example of course is Great Hearts—I don’t know when they started—what? twenty years ago in Phoenix? Recently, there was a study of the top fifteen high schools in Arizona and eight of them were Great Hearts, and they based that simply on SAT scores since those were standardized. And at Great Hearts they don’t teach to the tests, they’re just reading, and it seems to work. And they do start Latin in the 5th grade and Greek in the 11th. Of course I think that there’s something about Greek and Latin that is good for the brain—it makes it work better. Sometimes I have a parent come to me and say “Is there anything you can do to convince my son or daughter not to major in Classics?” And I send them to our website where we show them who does best on the GRE, LSAT, the
MCAT and so forth—it’s Classics majors. Not the nuclear physicists—although they do very well on the analytical, but not so well on the verbal. And the Classics majors do pretty well on the analytical and they blow away the verbal. So something is going on in the brain that is good for it, and you can see that not everybody agrees with me—even in this building. “Oh, French and German are just as good for the brain” Maybe… [Laughs]

RF: Is there anything else you might like to add to this?

DS: Oh that’s a pail full of stuff. Yes, well I would say that it’s very important that the world know the University of Dallas and that we not let it change. Of course, we are all worried about change to accommodate ourselves to the audience that we are seeking to draw here. I do think the word beacon has been used many, many times. And we surely are one, but we’re not sufficiently well-known. We’re getting to be better known because of where our grads go. In Classics I know when they go off to Ph.D. programs, they compare themselves with students who are coming from other universities, a lot of them of course ivy leagues and so forth. And our students are better. They know more. That is to say the core has given them a general liberal education and then their major is one that they practice with great skill and authority. We have these wonderful stories about…do you know Rebekah Spearman? Were you here when Rebekah graduated?

RF: Maybe at the end…

DS: Yes, she went to Chicago which gave her a huge fellowship of $24,000 a year for five years. And she came in a class with a bunch of people from the Ivy League and they all had a qualifying exam after two years in Latin. And the faculty came to Rebekah afterwards and said, “Rebekah, we’re embarrassed that you did so much better than everybody else, we don’t want them to know, but we would like you to know.” And that’s a story that I’ve heard from a number of different universities where we’ve sent kids. Our grads know the big books better, and they also know Greek and Latin better. So it’s important to me that we retain what we have, not dilute it. And there are some other good schools who have joined us in this endeavor—you know Hillsdale, something like that, but we’re better. Go in to ask Andrew Moran and other people who have taught at Hillsdale and here, and like Hillsdale, but can definitely say why they prefer UD. Yes…so… my exhortation: stay the course.

[DS: Have we got a class coming up?]

RF: I believe we do.

DS: Yeah, later, mhm. Good… Anything else I need to do…

RF: No, I think that is all…

DS: …to make this a satisfactory event for whatever you need?

RF: It was plenty satisfactory, thank you…

DS: Sure.

RF: …so much. I’ll go ahead
DS: By all means.]