

# High Impact Practices in Utilitarian Theory and Practice

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Many universities now encourage faculty to incorporate “high impact practices” (advocated by the Association of American Colleges and Universities) into undergraduate courses: first year seminars, capstone courses and projects, learning communities, service learning, and undergraduate research. A problem with the uncritical acceptance of these practices is illustrated in an AAC&U publication. Brownell and Swaner acknowledge, “There is a risk, certainly, of assuming certain activities are ‘high-impact’ in the absence of either strong empirical support or a compelling theoretical rationale.” Yet noting this, they state “we now know enough to urge faculty and staff to find ways to adapt and sew these and other good liberal arts educational practices into teaching and learning settings, inside and outside the classroom and on and off the campus.”<sup>1</sup> In spite of the scope of the endeavor, the only qualms raised concern whether given practices are high impact—not whether the nature of the impact itself deserves a second theoretical look.

How could these practices not be desirable? One example may be undergraduate research. It is argued that the “student’s work should be original and make a contribution to the student’s discipline,”<sup>2</sup> but supporting evidence is peppered with the term “self-reported”—as in “those involved in undergraduate research self-reported gains in... the personal and professional realm... ‘thinking and working like a scientist.’”<sup>3</sup> A question arises: do undergraduate research programs truly enrich the disciplines, or do they create a climate where students *self-report* this, while in truth the program hastens an outcome Milan Kundera predicts: “One morning (and it will be soon), when everyone wakes up as a writer, the age of universal deafness and incomprehension will have arrived.”

Utilitarian thought is a rich resource on the theory and practice of education. In this paper Bentham’s *Chrestomathia* will be the principal focus. Bentham’s ideas, such as that an advantage derivable from learning is “security against ennui, viz., the condition of him who, for want of something in prospect that would afford him pleasure, knows not what to do with himself,” may be more crucial now than ever (in that this condition of “uneasiness,” to which “men of business” and those inheriting opulence are susceptible, may now infect the student population).<sup>4</sup> Bentham’s ideas will help assess whether high impact practices counter this condition or contribute to it. Other works will also be used. If much undergraduate research is not truly original, for example, its encouragement by faculty may be cousin of the institutionalized hypocrisy fostered by enforced subscription to the Thirty-nine Articles. Other works such as Mill’s inaugural address as Chancellor of St. Andrew’s University will provide external standpoints from which the program of high impact practices may be viewed. The exploration will involve related issues also, such as Mill’s education, and the difference between utilitarian educational theory and its perception by critics such as Dickens in *Hard Times*.

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<sup>1</sup> Jayne Brownell and Lynn Swaner, Five High-Impact Practices. Association of American Colleges and Universities

<sup>2</sup> Hu et al., quoted in Brownell and Swaner

<sup>3</sup> Seymour et al., quoted in Brownell and Swaner

<sup>4</sup> Jeremy Bentham, *Chrestomathia*, eds. M.J. Smith & W. H. Burton, Collected Works of Jeremy Bentham (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983), 19–21.