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Although humanities courses in secondary schools can be used to introduce valuable curricular and pedagogical reforms, certain dangers are inherent in such courses: (1) the superficiality of the "Great Works" course organization which stresses broad coverage rather than depth of understanding, (2) the neglect or loss of distinctions between disciplines, (3) prescriptive teaching--e.g., telling students what to find in literature rather than allowing them to make their own discoveries, (4) the treatment of imaginative works as sociological documents, and (5) the tendency to read literature for its ideas, or to equate the value of a literary work with the value of the ideas found in it. There is no one model for a good humanities course, but the better courses arouse a student's interest in the arts for their own sake, encourage his desire to master new sets of intellectual skills, and exploit the particular talents and resources of school and community. (SW)

ERIC

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HIGH-SCHOOL HUMANITIES COURSES: SOME RESERVATIONS AND WARNINGS*

FRED H. STOCKING

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I BELIEVE that Humanities courses are a useful gimmick, at this point, for inserting in our school curricula certain things that might otherwise never get there at all, just as the Advanced Placement Program has been—and continues to be—an educational gimmick for helping teachers to introduce curricular and pedagogical reforms which they might otherwise have not been permitted even to consider. I am in favor of the Humanities course, in short, as a temporary gimmick for introducing attitudes and subjects which will gradually bring about reforms until the entire secondary-school curriculum, like that of a liberal-arts college, constitutes a large, clearly departmentalized Humanities course.

I have long wished, for example, that high-school students might study Philosophy—that they might learn what formal, responsible philosophic thinking *is*. Very few public schools can offer such a course, which would encounter opposition from parents with strong religious opinions. Yet a little philosophy might be inserted into a Humanities course, and a few students might discover a new interest within themselves which would otherwise have remained hidden. They might even read enough Philosophy to learn that they need training, under a professional student of philosophy; in short, they might discover not only a novel and exciting new interest, but the need for fresh knowledge and a new set of disciplines.

Students at a secondary level have also long needed studies which will free them from the prison of utilitarian biases. They need to learn the supreme value of *useless* activities, activities which their local Chambers of Commerce may scorn as frills; they must be introduced to the philosopher's distinction between *intrinsic* and *instrumental* values, as well as to the idea that intrinsic values are superior—that the most important experiences in life *are* important just because they *are* useless: they are experiences worth having for their own sake.

A Humanities course might help a student, for example, to forget for a while his competitive attitudes toward earning a

* Revised from a speech at School and College Conference on English, Barnard College, February 15, 1964.

living and to develop a contemplative attitude toward being alive; it might enable him to stop, look, and listen—not for the practical reason that he might thereby avoid an accident, but because there are things worth stopping to see and things worth stopping to hear. Music, for example. A little music in a Humanities course—not performance, but listening—might enable students to discover still another interest in themselves which would otherwise have remained hidden. They might even listen hard enough and hear enough music, to learn that they need a lot of training, under a professional student of music; in short, they *too* might discover not only an exciting new interest, but the need for fresh knowledge and a new set of disciplines.

Similarly a Humanities course might introduce some work in art—it might introduce some *looking,* looking that would open a student's eyes and start him reflecting on one of the most important distinctions in human experience: the distinction between beauty and ugliness; it might even get him to start *despising* ugliness, and to express his opinion as forthrightly as Peter Blake does in GOD'S OWN JUNKYARD, a book which I'd like to see abundantly distributed in every classroom in America. Students in such a Humanities course might even look at enough art to discover still another interest within themselves, and to learn that they need a great deal of training under a professional student of art who would help them acquire some more fresh knowledge and still another set of intellectual skills.

Learning to think like a philosopher, learning to listen like a musician, and learning to see like an artist—these are all things worth learning simply because they will make anyone more interesting as a human being—interesting to his family, to his friends, to his colleagues, but—most important of all—interesting to himself. If Humanities courses will even begin to do this, I am in favor of them. If Humanities courses will help young people to *see*—and to *hate*—billboards and ugly shopping centers, I am in favor of them. If Humanities courses will do anything at all to awaken people to the fact that there *is* such an issue as the issue of vulgarity—I am in favor of them.

Having declared myself in favor of Humanities courses—even bad ones—as extremely valuable at this point in our educational development, let me turn now to what I regard as dangers inherent in some of these courses. For there are good ones and bad ones—or there could be—and I'd like to define, as boldly

and dogmatically as possible, some of the things I have encountered which horrify me.

I have found myself opposing, for example, that form of Humanities course which might be called "Great Works." Like "Great Books" courses, they are too ambitious; somebody starts drawing up a list of great works, and pretty soon there is a Humanities course featuring *The Iliad, Oedipus Rex,* selections from the Bible, *Plato's Republic, Aristotle's Poetics,* the Parthenon, the *Aeneid,* the Coliseum, *The Divine Comedy,* Chartres cathedral, the chief works of Leonardo da Vinci, Michelangelo, Raphael, and Botticelli, More's *Utopia,* Montaigne's *Essays, the Faerie Queene, King Lear, Paradise Lost,* Mozart's *Jupiter Symphony,* Gibbon's *Decline and Fall* . . . But you can keep the list going for yourself; the names are easy: Beethoven, Wagner, Renoir, Tolstoy, Cézanne, *The Education of Henry Adams* and finally, of course, Debussy, Picasso, and *Lord of the Flies.*

Almost any course with the word "Great" in the title is destined to be superficial simply because there are so many famous and wonderful works in the world, and the word "great" offers no principle of selection whatsoever. Such courses encourage a glib familiarity with popular names and titles rather than any understanding of the various arts as different modes of human understanding, and thereby insult the very works which they profess to honor.

There is another danger inherent in such courses: the danger that the differences among disciplines will be neglected and lost. I think these differences are important. I think the capacity for making distinctions is a central feature of an educated human being, and I squirm when I encounter an educational program which ignores or defies this vital ingredient in education.

We English teachers, for example, must remember that our distinctive function is to introduce our students to the special reading techniques which are necessary for understanding imaginative writing, or literary art; techniques which are radically different from those needed for understanding a factual exposition or a news report.

I feel we must teach our students how to read, understand, and thus to appreciate literature; and I feel that we should do this inductively. If we are any good at our job, we don't tell them what is in literature; we teach them how to find it on their own.

This is why I am uneasy when I pick up the syllabus of a course in the humanities for high-school seniors and read the following sequence:

Unit II—Man and Society

Section I. Introduction: Four filmed lessons, *Our Town,* by the Council for Television Course in the Humanities for Secondary Schools, Inc.

1. The Humanities—What They Are and What They Do
2. The Theater—One of the Humanities
3. Our Town and Our Universe—Our Place in Society
4. Our Town and Ourselves—What the play *Our Town* Says to Us Today

Section II. Class reading of the play, *Our Town.*

I have not seen these filmed lessons, so that my objections to the procedure described here are merely hypothetical. Let me list them.

1. I object to telling the students in advance what the Humanities are and what they do. I'd rather have the students tell me, at the end of the course, and on the basis of what they have personally experienced, what the Humanities are and what they do. Then they might look at the film and decide which parts of it are wise and which are foolish, which ideas they had not thought of and which ones the author of the film had not thought of.

2. Similarly, I object to having someone lecture on "What the play *Our Town* says to us today," before the students have read the play for themselves. Let them read and discuss the play first and then look at the film and discuss the film critically.

3. I fiercely object to starting with a general lecture on general ideas: "Our Town and Our Universe—Our Place in Society" and then using the play as an illustration of some of these ideas. But I'll return to this objection in a minute.

Here are the next two sections of this unit.

Section III. Dramatic presentation of *Our Town* to the school and the community by members of the Senior Class, in conjunction with an exhibition in the foyer of the auditorium consisting of authentic articles indigenous to life in the United States at the beginning of the twentieth century: costumes, furniture and furnishings, interior decoration, pictures, curios, souvenirs, bric-a-brac, domestic

utensils, toys, etc., etc. (An integral part of the exhibit is background music, taped from the organ and vocal music utilized in the production of the play: e.g., Handel's *Largo, Blessed Be the Tie That Binds, Art Thou Languid, Art Thou Weary?, Love Divine All Love Excelling,* etc.)

(Noteworthy in the exhibition are present-day items included to point up contrasts between life in 1900 and today, such as "sophisticated" dolls; streamlined diesels with iron toy locomotives; jar of "instant coffee" with wooden coffee mill; etc.)

Section IV. *Culminating Activities and Evaluation*

1. Re-acting episodes from the play *Our Town* for class discussion and analysis.
2. A panel discussion of the unit, considering the following:
   a. The technical aspects of the play, such as the author's departure from contemporary stage conventions, etc.
   b. The universality of the theme as presented in the play.
   c. A contrast and comparison of life in 1900 and today, particularly in regard to educa tion, entertainment, culture, customs and mores, romance and courtship, individual freedom and security, pace of life, etc.

Section V. Follow-up of materials for study and consideration

See attached sheets: *Life in the United States, circa 1900* (a selected reading list); examples of art (c. 1900) and music (c. 1900).

The attached sheets offer lists of history books dealing with American life at the turn of the century, paintings by artists who flourished around 1900, and music which was popular in that era: selections by Victor Herbert; Ethelbert Nevin and others, including Edward MacDowell, whose wife—it is noted —founded the MacDowell Colony at Peterborough New Hampshire, the environs of the "Grover's Corners" of *Ou Town.*

What troubles me about all this is the apparent assumption that it is legitimate to regard a work of imaginative literature as a sociological document. *Our Town* is apparently read as

though it is important for what it tells us about the turn of the century.

I would feel uneasy if I were a history teacher and a student turned in a paper on the Roman Empire, using as his chief documentary evidence what he found in Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra;* or a paper on the early Christians based on Shaw's *Androcles and the Lion.* For both artists are *using* the past—interpreting the past—giving us a highly selective *view* of the past—in order to assert something about experience in the present. Shakespeare's *Henry V* tells us more about the year 1599 than about the year 1415; Hawthorne may write about the 17th century, but we learn about Hawthorne's own 19th century. Similarly, Thornton Wilder's *Our Town* tells us more about the year 1938, when it came out, than it does about the year 1900. The play is Wilder's 1938 view of 1900, just as *Henry V* is Shakespeare's 1599 view of 1415.

Indeed this is very likely *how* the teachers of the Humanities course under discussion may treat the play. I hope so. I hope they show that Wilder's play is a bunch of lies about 1900, or at least a bunch of half-truths (carefully selected and manipulated half-truths), and that the issue of the play's sociological or factual accuracy is irrelevant to the play's worth as a work of art, just as the factual accuracy of Scott's *Ivanhoe* or Wordsworth's *Michael* is irrelevant to their artistic value as a novel and poem.

Now let me return to my objection to the general lecture on a general idea, and the great deal of attention to the "universality" of the play's theme. What worries me here is the most common flaw in Humanities and Great Books courses: namely, the tendency to read literature for its ideas; to extract the ideas from the literature and then to discuss the ideas for their own sake.

The value of a work of art is not equal to the value of the ideas which may be extracted or abstracted from it. We all know that poor art may express splendid ideas and that superior art may express commonplace ideas. It is not the ideas in *King Lear* that make it an experience worth having, nor ideas that make Brahms' Fourth Symphony worth hearing or Monet's lily pods worth looking at.

Imagine asking your art students to look at Fragonard's *The Swing* and then to write an essay on what they had learned from this painting about the value of outdoor recreation!

I detect the same kind of thing in Syllabi where literary works are grouped according to themes: *Man and Society, Man and Himself, Man and the Universe, or Man's Capacity for Heroism.* The fun in looking at Tables of Contents arranged in this way is to see how easy it would be to use the same titles under *every* heading.

These, then, are some of the dangers lurking in the syllabi of a few Humanities courses which I have seen: superficiality, telling the students what to find in books rather than letting them make and articulate their own responsible discoveries, treating imaginative works as sociological documents, and subordinating art-works to ideas, or equating the value of a work with the value of the ideas which may be found in it.

But of course all these tendencies are examples of bad teaching rather than bad courses. For any course is as good as or as bad as its teacher, not its syllabus.

It is obvious that I am no authority in humanities courses, and I have no formula for a good one, even though some people think I do, and write to me for advice. Here is what I send in reply—a form letter:

> During the last two or three years I have received a number of letters asking for advice about the formation of a secondary-school course in the humanities.
>
> I have thought a lot about this problem, I have talked with a number of people who have taught such courses, and I have arrived at *four strong opinions* which I offer for whatever they may be worth.
>
> 1. There is no such thing as an *ideal* course in the humanities for high school students: an excellent course might be designed in any of a dozen different ways, and the best course for any school exploits the particular talents which are available.
> 2. The better courses are usually taught by two or more teachers—one from music or art, one from literature, one from history, for instance. But unless there happen to be two or more teachers who share an exuberant desire to work together in such a course, a single energetic and enthusiastic teacher, with diverse interests and a mastery of several disciplines, might well be preferable.
> 3. The best courses awaken that kind of interest in the humanities which is based on depth of understanding rather than on a glib familiarity with names and

titles, or on the social fun of field trips. That is, good courses never make any attempt at coverage. One novel, one painting, and one opera out of the middle of the 19th century might well provide more than enough material for a semester.

4. The goal of such a course should be: first, to arouse interest in the arts as providing experiences valuable for their own sake; second, to show that an art work acquires deeper meaning when placed in its historical context; and third, to make clear that a full understanding of—and delight in—any one of the arts requires the eventual mastery of difficult, complicated, and highly rewarding intellectual disciplines.

In short, I urge you to follow no fixed model; the best course in humanities, provided that you guard against superficiality, will be the course which you create for yourselves, and which makes the very best use of whatever special talents are available in your school and community.

Let me repeat: I am in favor of Humanities courses as a powerful temporary device, a device for what may become a prolonged emergency. But someday, I hope, the curricula of American secondary schools will themselves be large, clearly departmentalized Humanities courses.

ERIC