

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 115 129

FL 007 331

AUTHOR Cannon, Harold C.
 TITLE The Academy and the Agora: Education Today.
 PUB DATE 29 Nov 75
 NOTE 17p.; Not available in hard copy due to marginal legibility of original document; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Conference on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (Washington, D.C., November 1975)

EDRS PRICE MF-\$0.76 Plus Postage. HC Not Available from EDRS.
 DESCRIPTORS Classical Languages; Classical Literature; *Cultural Background; *Educational Attitudes; Educational Objectives; *Educational Philosophy; Enrollment; History; Humanistic Education; Humanities; *Humanities Instruction; Language Enrollment; Language Instruction; Literature; Philosophy; Student Attitudes; *Student Motivation

ABSTRACT

Familiarization with the thoughts and creations of great minds, past and present, is a significant function of education. Many students, however, are effectively denied such opportunity for intellectual growth by the identification of education with job-training. Much of the curriculum neglects the past and the foreign. Humanists approach this problem not by reforming humanities curricula per se but by proposing "bridges" between the humanities and vocational interests. There is a great need for individual humanities courses that are not introductions to further work in a particular discipline. The "arguments" for persuading students to study the humanities have changed little in this century; these are categorized as (1) the traditional, (2) the exemplary, and (3) the pragmatic. All are persuasive, but none offers absolute proof of the benefits of such education. The methods of the sciences and social sciences should be applied to furnish that proof. In addition, it should be possible to popularize the content of the humanities without vulgarizing or diluting it. Everyone beyond infancy has skills and knowledge of a humanistic kind. There are hopeful signs of a resurgence of interest in humanities education. Humanists must choose now whether to harness this interest to their own purposes or to decry it as a dilution of their discipline. (Author/KM)

 * Documents acquired by ERIC include many informal unpublished *
 * materials not available from other sources. ERIC makes every effort *
 * to obtain the best copy available. Nevertheless, items of marginal *
 * reproducibility are often encountered and this affects the quality *
 * of the microfiche and hardcopy reproductions ERIC makes available *
 * via the ERIC Document Reproduction Service (EDRS). EDRS is not *
 * responsible for the quality of the original document. Reproductions *
 * supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made from the original. *

ED115129

THE ACADEMY AND THE AGORA:

Education Today

Coping with more than two thousand five hundred years of recorded human experience is only one of the challenges education tries to face. The psychologists tell us that our early years are made more secure and favorable to growth by the understanding that our parents, aunts, uncles, and grandparents were once like us and yet grew and prospered. Once we have attained their physical growth, however, we need new models to emulate, and these are to be found among the cultural, spiritual and intellectual giants of our own and preceding ages. These are not so many that we can afford to limit ourselves geographically or temporally. Not all great figures of past or present are admirable, of course, or even instructive. But most will serve "to point a moral or adorn a tale," and there is abundant room for scepticism, iconoclasm, and individual preference.

The business of education, in its systematic and institutional forms, is to parade the exemplars and arm the students with the weapons of analysis and criticism. An educational system which fails to do this is guilty of condemning thousands to the prisonlike treadmill of a confined and contemporary existence, of preventing the life of the imagination, and of limiting the intellectual freedom of the people.

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH,
EDUCATION & WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF
EDUCATION

THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY.

FL007331

-2-

Anyone who has studied Latin knows that the word "education" means "nourishing," "causing to grow," "nurture"--and that all these, by application, have as their object the non-physical aspects of man. By etymology, therefore, the business of education is the development of the powers of the mind and not the training of particular techniques which we see so much of nowadays masquerading as education. Such training is the business of industry or commerce, and not the business of the schools. Foreign language instruction furnishes an example: a business-trip to Tokyo may be usefully preceded by a few hours of instruction at a Berlitz language school--but do not expect to learn very much of Japanese history or culture from that source. Education, at its best, will combine "utile dulci"--the useful and the pleasant--but pragmatism is the sole philosophy of the market-place.

Thus the dwindling of Latin and Greek in the twentieth century curriculum is not an isolated phenomenon. It is to be seen as part of a more general picture, whose principal feature is the scornful neglect of the past. In many schools and colleges the study of history begins in the eighteenth century--"The Age of Revolution"--and moves with bewildering speed into the twentieth--"The Age of Technology." An essential part of the maturing process

for young people is learning that the world existed before they were born; far too many curricula today tend to reinforce the infantile impression that there was "nothing much" here before 1955 or 1960. Trying to peddle the classical humanities in such an atmosphere may well be futile.

A secondary feature worth mentioning here is a parallel neglect of the foreign, by which I mean the areas of the globe where English is not the major language. It is ironic to note that much of the effort in bilingual education is being devoted to improving the English of the non-English-speaking student. It is true that English is the language of economic and social survival and improvement in this country, but this fact has been established on the arrogant assumption that foreign languages are in many ways inferior to English, and that there is certainly no shame in the admission that you know nothing of them. I am a man, said Terence; the business of mankind is my business: homo sum; nil humani a me alienum puto, and the ghost of Jacob Marley made a similar protestation to Ebenezer Scrooge.

It is interesting to note that there has been a simultaneous dwindling of religious faith, and that the

-4-

premonitory fears of Matthew Arnold's "Dover Beach" have all been realised in our times.

Is this the waning of our civilization? Are we the fifth-century Romans with the barbarians at the gates and the dark ages looming closer and forcing culture and the life of the mind into cloistered seclusion? Are our cultural institutions no more than the museums of past achievements, the Byzantine custodians of an intellectual tradition more imperfectly understood by each succeeding generation?

I doubt if a firm "yes" or "no" can be given to such questions. But there can be no question of one thing: those of us who have been trained to pass on the torch of learning to succeeding generations cannot stand by idly and see it extinguished in the dust. Some action is demanded of us, whether we are optimistic or pessimistic about current and future trends.

My business at the National Endowment is with those humanists in the classroom who are trying to take positive action. While there is plenty of business in that area, its style and quality cause me concern. I have noticed that the great majority of applications we receive have to do with adapting the humanities to vocational, pre-professional, or scientific needs; very few applications deal with the humanities per se and, when they do, the

effort is most likely to be trans, inter, or multi-disciplinary, rather than intradisciplinary.

The motivation that prompts many of these proposals for curricular development is the struggle for the survival, whether of individual faculty or of a department; we all know what is threatening that survival, but the remedy chosen seems to me odd, since it seldom suggests reform within a department or a reconsideration of a single discipline.

Yet one fact stares me in the face: very few undergraduate majors in the humanities will go on to graduate school in those fields. Expressed another way, this suggests that few students who take introductory courses will ever go on to second or third year work. In spite of this, most curricula (and a great many teachers) treat all students as though they were destined for graduate school in that particular field. My first piano book was called "Gradus ad Parnassum"; my piano playing has never attained Parnassus but I know that, had my Latin been good enough at that tender age to make sense of the title, I would have been mightily discouraged!

Why can't we develop semester or year courses in the humanities that are self-sufficient, rather than being preparatory or introductory? Why can't I take a French

course for six months and derive from it some sense of the exciting differences between French culture and my own? Most students now emerge from that experience with the impression that verbs are irregular to the point of perversity and that the gender of nouns has a peculiar importance. If I study Latin for six months I would like to glean from it some understanding why a few people devote their lives to this field of study without losing their sanity or the respect of their neighbors. Such a course in the social sciences would, I believe, make me respect sociologists and psychologists and give me an appetite for further reading in those areas.

If we could develop such courses in the humanities, I think we'd find large numbers of adults eager to take them too. If we could explain to adults why we find these subjects exciting and interesting, then I think we could do better with their children.

The present decline in humanities enrollments in our schools and colleges and the Ph.D. glut in this as in all fields are commonly blamed on the nation's economic status, the decline in the birth-rate, and the post-Vietnam disillusion, since these are current phenomena receiving much attention in the media.

But the task of persuading neophytes to devote their time and energy to studying apparently "useless" and evidently difficult subjects like Greek and Latin has always been arduous; it is true that many of our instruments of compulsion have been abandoned or lost in the last twenty years, but the unwilling captives of required courses seldom developed any "staying power" or abiding interest in these subjects in any case.

My point here is that the armament we bring forward for this war of persuasion has changed little in living memory; I mean by this that it has been ineffective for a very long time, even though our varied eloquence has frequently made it appear stronger. Our principal items of artillery are: first the traditional, second the exemplary, and third the pragmatic. I think you are very familiar with all three, and so I will do no more than sketch their outlines here.

The "traditional" argument considers the origins of our Western civilization, the usefulness of a knowledge of the past, the consideration that society's leaders are conscious of the models furnished by their predecessors. It does make a difference in our lives whether the Secretary of State emulates Metternich, Machiavelli, or Demosthenes, or if a President uses George Washington or Abraham Lincoln as a model. On a more humble level, it gives us all a sense of security to observe current events as the latest chapters in an unfolding story that goes back some three thousand years. Another aspect of this traditional argument is that there is a common fund of knowledge in which all cultivated people have an investment, and that allows us to quote Shakespeare or refer to Homer without any fear of being misunderstood.

The "exemplary" argument uses happy and/or successful people as if they were proof of the results of such studies. Such models are of two kinds: those who continue the study of classics into their dotage, and those who break away and flourish in other, quite dissimilar fields. Fortunately one can still find bankers, lawyers, and doctors who will declare that they "owe it all" to the study of Latin in high school and college, and Eric Segal's commercial success with the romantic novel "Love Story" a few years ago seemed to be a

godsend for the purposes of this argument. Teachers and professors themselves, of course, can also be examples to the young; probably more of us in our early years were persuaded into classics by the attractive personality of the teachers we encountered than by any intellectual convictions. Public scholars like Werner Jaeger, Gilbert Highet, Edith Hamilton, and John Latimer have been useful to all of us along these lines.

The third kind of argument I have called the "pragmatic," and it tries to demonstrate that learning Greek and Latin will enhance skills in other areas, e.g., building vocabulary in English -- particularly in polysyllabic scientific and technical terms --, understanding grammar (since English departments no longer teach it), and developing the intellect as though it were a muscle which could be trained by athletic rigor. Probably it is still true that, with the right combination of other courses, successful work in classics can secure admission to the many law and medical schools to which so many of the youth aspire.

There may be more categories of argument than three, but I think you get the general idea. There are two common factors here: one, that you've heard all these arguments before, and two, that they are effective only as forms of persuasion and not in terms of absolute proof. The foundation of all such

arguments is what Plato calls *δόξα*, a word which connotes both "opinion" and "appearance". Cicero would often declare that "the best people believe such-and-such" meaning, by the word "optimi" either his colleagues in that particular political party or those who believed themselves well-read and better-informed than the rest of the human race. In institutional terms, this has been generally effective from the middle ages up to the first third of our century, but it won't do now. Other arguments must be found if such forms of education are to survive in a society already democratic and struggling hard to be egalitarian.

These new arguments are not ^{to} be found, I believe, in the humanities themselves; the old arguments I have been describing are humanistic and, as I have suggested, demonstrably inadequate in today's mass market. We must all learn to become more scientific and more businesslike in defending and pleading our cause.

We need scientific methodology to tackle the hardest questions: will humanistic education make me a happier person, a better citizen, a more articulate or more intelligent worker than an education in physics, sociology, or business administration? I suspect we all know physicists, sociologists, and businessmen who seem to be happier, more responsible, and ever

more intelligent than we are. Such an inquiry would have to begin with a consideration of the purposes of education; is education today the nourishment of mind and spirit that the etymology of the word suggests? Are its prime purposes the satisfaction of intellectual curiosity about the world and society we live in and the training in discrimination between fact and opinion? Or is it principally engaged in the business of producing skilled workers (in appropriate proportions) and community-minded citizens for today's industrial society?

Last August in a speech given at Ohio State University, the President spoke of the need to bring the worlds of education and of work closer together. For many of us, this is not a signal pointing to a new direction, but an encouragement along a path already deliberately taken by most of our educational institutions. We may doubt whether today's high school graduates are functionally literate, but we can be reasonably sure that virtually all of them have driving licenses. Whether education is to be society's servant or its most helpful critic remains one of the great questions of our time; on a more practical level, it is also one of the features of the gulf between much secondary and post-secondary education.

In the humanities we are being criticized for training bricklayers in a society that needs experts in iron-and-concrete construction; to push the analogy a stage further, as brick becomes rarer and more expensive so it becomes an attractive feature to discriminating buyers of the smaller private buildings. Elitism and antiquarianism combined again!

Perhaps sociology, psychology, statistics, and such disciplines can furnish some reliable data on the ultimate values of an education based on the various fields of the humanities. Humanists are not trained in such matters and often regard with jealous hostility any intrusion by other disciplines on to "our turf," but some evidence from a presumably objective source would be better than all the defenses offered from within the ramparts.

I say too that we need to be more businesslike in advertising our wares in the marketplace. Language should be carefully edited when it slips -- as it so easily does -- into professional jargon, since that is interpreted as perverse obfuscation by the lay audience. Let us talk about reading, writing, talking, and thinking; about private joys and public service; about values, and how they are best formed and defended. We can popularize the content of our work without vulgarizing or diluting it; we have not been trained to do that, but we have acquired habits of intellectual honesty

and industry in tackling new tasks. It would be helpful here if we could acknowledge that we are not members of an exclusive club; everyone beyond infancy has some understanding of history, language, literature, and philosophy, although many never use those terms to describe their understanding. I am impressed by the fact that one of the longest running features in "Reader's Digest" has the title "It Pays to Enrich Your Word Power"; it is, in essence, a monthly lesson in some of the more difficult but common words in the English language. The longevity of this feature seems to me proof of its popularity, since the editors of RD know their business far too well to maintain any feature that fails to attract considerable readership. I suspect that there is greater awareness of the humanities and practice of the skills of those disciplines than there is of the natural or social sciences.

Thus the audience is prepared for what we have to tell them; but the style and content of our speech must be selective. Any claims we make for our specialization should be based on demonstrable evidence (rather than on informed opinion or individual preference) and should not diminish any

other specialization. Even so our arguments will prove ineffective if they are perceived as self-serving; the will to survive is a basic (and not necessarily a base) instinct, and many are obliged to fight such battles nowadays. But the debate will favor our cause better if it is apparent that our concern is with the improved education of students.

Apart from individual efforts -- which we can all make, since we have all been trained to speak and write persuasively -- there are tasks here for professional associations, state education authorities, school systems, and federal agencies, since no individual or individual institution can furnish the basis of evidence to encourage belief in and support for the work on which we are engaged. Students from kindergarten to the baccalaureate are over-tested and surveyed; we need such analyses of the adult population to determine the correlation between education (formal and informal) and the pursuit of happiness. Measuring the lifetime income of college graduates is woefully insufficient for such purposes. When we have the needed evidence, we will find much of it will be surprising and even disappointing, but we will know better which claims to assert with confidence in that marketplace.

III

There has been a great deal of gloom, alarm, and despondency in all that I have said; but the role of Cassandra is inappropriate for me - I'm not dressed for the part in any case. Many of you are wondering, I suppose, if you needed to come here today to learn that there are problems in persuading our students and their parents that we have something valuable to teach.

Let me remind you, then, that there is good news too. The MLA surveys for 1972 and 1974 indicated mounting enrolments in ancient Greek - although the figures may have been inflated by those taking in-translation courses. The national concern over reading scores and functional literacy may well accelerate the movement towards more traditional curriculum in elementary and secondary schools, if only as 'alternatives'; such a movement will help assure the growth of Latin in the schools. Consider the increasing number of paperback translations of the classics - most of them issued by commercial publishers with a keen eye for turning a profit. Probably at no time in this nation's history has so large a number of our young people been engaged in the study of Homer, Sophocles, Plato, Cicero, and Vergil. Knowledge of the classics is no longer confined to an intellectual or social elite. In a variety of disciplines, teachers are dipping into the classics for materials; the social scientists have been digging in our fields for decades. This gives us the choice and the challenge: we can deplore the dilution of our discipline at the hands of those who understand its import only imperfectly or we can harness this new explosion of interest to our own purposes and

+ Chronicle of Higher Education, November 3, 1975.

turn it to everyone's advantage. I think I have made it sufficiently clear which of these options I prefer.

#####