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ABSTRACT

This paper argues that the current debate over humanities curricula has failed to articulate a vision for humanities education because it has turned on a liberal/conservative axis. It also contends that educators must stop debating elite versus democratic values or traditional versus contemporary problems in humanities education, and start communicating with students, colleagues, and the rest of the world. Reformers want students to take more humanities courses, but they have forgotten that what portion of the humanities proves viable and enduring depends not upon what is taught but upon what is learned. The question is raised as to how well humanities teachers are communicating their ideas when much of what they teach, students regard as simply noise. In an age in which information accumulates at an alarming pace, meaning lags far behind the information received. It is concluded that humanities teachers must be more concerned with their students needs and the applicability of what they are trying to teach. A 7-item bibliography is included. (DB)

Overload and Boredom: When the Humanities Turn to Noise

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"The current public debate about humanities curricula and enlarging or restricting the literary canon is to be welcomed," say Professors Henry Giroux and Harvey Kaye in a recent issue of The Chronicle of Higher Education, "for it represents acknowledgment that schooling is about more than job training and preparation for careers." However, the debate has "failed to articulate the critical promise of humanities education." (1) I agree with the professors.

According to them, this debate falters because it turns on the wrong axis: the conservative/liberal axis. Conservatives want us to teach the traditional humanities texts. But, because we can no longer assume our students come to us knowing a common body of cultural knowledge, conservatives have seized E. D. Hirsch at gun point and forced him to publish a cultural dictionary of several hundred pages which can be shoveled into our students' heads. Liberals don't see the need for this. They view the humanities as being culturally relativistic; and since valuable artifacts are still being produced, students can more readily learn the usefulness of the humanities in the contemporary world, in the marketplace of their future, and in the preparation of their chosen careers which spans the two by studying the "now."

This liberal view is the view of the Shared Vision Task Force. In fact, much of its report is taken up with proving the relevance--or really the likability--and therefore the necessity--of the humanities. But likability is neither relevance nor necessity. It is simply an indication that the object liked is considered harmless by those whose opinions were tabulated. As Frank Burns unwittingly put it once: "It's nice to be nice to the nice," but it doesn't prove anything.

Professors Giroux and Kaye say this agrument between conservatives and liberals over which literary texts to use is not relevant to why the humanities should be taught in the first place. Giroux and Kaye argue that the humanities are essential because they help us to govern our society since they contribute to the "cultivation of an informed, critical citizenry capable of actively participating in shaping and governing a democratic society." (2) The key concept here is democracy. Previously those who governed were elites; now, we who govern are the members of mass society. (All of us who have received the benefits of HUD grants are aware of just how much the American government has moved away from the concept of elites.) What Giroux and Kaye want to include in their humanities curriculum to make us better governors of our mass is not specified or made clear.

But one thing that all these reformers favor is very clear:

they want to increase the amount of humanities education students receive. They want students to take more hours of courses in the humanities, whatever they are, whatever their purpose. Having students take more courses will improve their cultural skills and knowledge, make them better people, and not hurt the humanities teachers either.

Unfortunately, for all of their reforming, these reformers have forgotten the reformees. They have forgotten that what of the humanities proves viable and enduring depends not upon what is taught but upon what is learned.

Professor Orrin E. Klapp of the University of Western Ontario, a sociologist specializing in communication, believes that much of what we teachers think we are communicating is not accepted by our students because they do not listen to it. To our students what we communicate is simply noise.

Klapp, in his book Overload and Boredom: Essays on the Quality of Life in the Information Society, explains why our computer technology has failed to improve communication and has in fact caused more communication than ever before to break down. His theories offer to humanities teachers some very valuable insights.

Klapp believes that communication fails when those listening do not perceive the content to be information but only noise.

For example, when we are interested in hearing what someone who is in a crowd of talking people is saying--such as at a party--we can tune out the others and concentrate on what for us is information. Unfortunately, if there are too many people talking or we are too easily distracted, we will be unable to hear. As Klapp says, "the more noise, the less meaning; by generating so much noise, modern society loses some meaning." (3) According to Klapp, "as news, philosophy, literature, and the arts accurately report a disorderly world, they, too, become noisy." (4)

As T. S. Elliot reminded us:

> Where is the life we have lost in living?
>
> Where is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge?
>
> Where is the knowledge we have lost in information?
>
> (from "The Rock," I)

Orrin Klapp reminds us that

> events burst upon us with staggering rapidity. A dozen mind-boggling moral dilemmas might be presented in the evening news. What is the meaning of these events? We get a few minutes to ponder one question before the next comes on. Do these provisional decisions coalesce into well-grounded positions and ultimately character and wisdom? Or is it more likely that large questions remain unsettled, and we go on to new ones, dissatisfied with what we know, no wiser than before.
>
> In the meanwhile, information floods on, demanding that something be done. Computers are rushed into operation to supply new data faster. But lack of data wasn't the problem before--why should it be now? Overload rather than scarcity seems a fit description of the supply of information, much of which, as we have pointed out, consists of bad redundancy and noise. (5)

Noise is defined by Klapp as anything that interferes with

what the hearer is seeking, and bad redundancy is not repetition for the purpose of emphasis but repetition whose purpose is to fill in time or space (such as the lyrics of most teenage music).

Meaning is usually the last thing to change as information accumulates. Klapp states, and I can now concur,

> as a university teacher, I can say after 25 years of experience, that the average instructor teaches as much as he can of his own subject without the faintest idea of how it all adds up in the student's mind with the other subjects he is taking. Nor is there any testimony from most graduates that they have reduced the meaning gap when they finally put on their cap and gown. On the contrary, they enter careers realizing that changes have made nonsense of institutional values such as the idea that all must work...or that economic growth is good. The conventional wisdom seems absurd, but the new wisdom is yet to be found.
>
> A meaning gap is not merely inability to come to a decision or policy, but failure to agree on what a policy should be for. ... So I would define a meaning gap as an inability of people in the same society to agree on larger patterns, purposes, and values even when they share the same factual information, which is piling up at a rate faster than they can agree about purposes and values, and may lead to a sense of absurdity. Such a paradox flouts what we normally expect of information: that it should bring people together, make sense of the world, and finally hand us the crown of wisdom on a golden platter of happiness.
>
> A second reason for lag in meaning is that its formation requires thought, pondering, wondering--even dreaming--all time-consuming things that only humans do. Pondering, distinguished from calculative thinking..., is inherently slow.... The pace of modern life, with media messages urgent, strident, and shifting, allow little time for pondering before new items demand attention. ... Deep discussion, epitomized by Socrates' teaching, takes hours, even years or decades, to reach meaning other than superficial. (6)

In other words, more will result not only in not better but probably in even less. As Klapp says,

> we do not judge the quality of information by its accuracy and clarity alone, but how it acts upon receivers.... (7)

We can no longer simply intrude upon our students' lives for

> a result of all this intrusiveness is that, along side the slogans of "access to information" and "the right to communicate" of a free society, there begins to be a new emphasis on the right not to communicate and not be communicated to--to disconnect, to switch off--.... (8)

We are in effect: broadcasting our cultural values without the consent of our receivers. This has resulted in what Alfred North Whitehead calls "fatal disconnectedness." (9) Our students simply turn us off--something not unique to the humanities, by the way.

A long time ago, Ralph Barton Perry, Emeritus Edgar Pierce Professor of Philosophy at Harvard, wrote in The Humanity of Man that there were four hindrances to teaching humanities to students:

> The first of these is simply apathy. The second is the individual's preoccupation with his own subjectivity. A fellow creature is a means or an obstacle to one's own pre-existing ends.... In the glaring light of one's own felt interests the vast field of interests all about, the hopes and fears and joys and sorrows of other men, are invisible. One thus lives in a provincial world, embracing only a minute fraction of the values of the larger world. ...
>
> The third hindrance . . . is preoccupation with the means to a given end. ... A man who is in peril of his life can choose only among the means of self-preservation. When the struggle for existence is hard and relentless, the options are restricted to

> food, drink and shelter. ... The maximum of freedom requires that there shall be at least moments of life in which a man freely chooses that ultimate goal which prescribes the chain of subordinate choices with which the greater part of his life is necessarily concerned. ...
>
> A fourth force ... is the tendency of means to usurp the place of ends. A man who leaves his country on account of religious persecution and settles in the wilderness to worship God finds that in order to worship God he must live, and that in order to live he must subjugate the wilderness. In time he is likely to forget God, and devote himself with his whole heart to the acquisition of material goods. (10)

Professor Perry even felt that college was probably not the best place to teach the humanities because colleges and their teachers tend to focus on the minute, the unrelated, and the vocational. (11) But Professor Perry wrote over thirty years ago and certainly things have changed since then.

I think not. I think we can not ignore either Perry because of his age or Klapp because of his area of expertise. We cannot hide from the rather obvious idea they present: we are endangering our own species (humanities teachers) and our own work if we continue to consider reform without considering our students. We may end up simply fooling our supporters, our publics, and ourselves that we are actually providing useful humanities education when, in fact, all we are doing is creating a Disneyworld of the humanities, what Klapp refers to as a placebo--"a cocoon of comfort created [to soothe] the irritation of noise and the mind-numbing impact of banality." (12)

Perhaps, if we really wish to do good and to create a lasting

effect upon our culture, the only immediate way for us to improve humanities education is to encourage our students who are mostly interested in obtaining certification and training for careers not to take ever more hours in the humanities. Instead, we should be encouraging the creation of a more fertile climate in which the humanities can live and be honored as a viable part of our lives, both individual and social. There are many ways to do this (see, for example, Lynne V. Cheney's "American Memory: A Report on the Subject" which concentrates on primary and secondary education). One way, in particular, which would be in keeping with the spirit of the Shared Task Force, is to work more closely and honestly with our colleagues in those other disciplines which concentrate on vocational training.

Once, on my campus, when our humanities experts were preaching the more-is-better approach, one of our professors in an engineering technology stopped the entire sermon with these comments: You (he said) have never bothered to get to know us. Because I teach CAD-CAM, you assume I know nothing about the arts and the humanities. You are wrong. I have a masters in English literature with an emphasis on Shakespeare. How many of you (he looked directly at the Chair of the English Department, a Ph.D. in Shakespeare) know anything about technology except that you can't make it work for you? Well, I can and I can enjoy Shakespeare too!

In conclusion, we are simply debating the wrong arguments

when we concern ourselves with elite versus democratic or traditional versus contemporary problems in humanities education. Our major concern and purpose must be to stop making noise. And to start communicating with our students, our colleagues, and the rest of the world we think we know so much about.

Notes

1 Giroux and Kaye.

2 Giroux and Kaye

3 Klapp, p. 83.

4 Klapp, p. 91.

5 Klapp, p. 105.

6 Klapp, pp. 109-113.

7 Klapp, p. 85.

8 Klapp, pp. 86-87.

9 Klapp, p. 88.

10 Perry, pp. 32-33.

11 Perry, p. 58.

12 Klapp, p. 154.

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