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Energizing Liberal Education

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Abstract

This paper draws on some of the classic literature on the subject along with recent scholarship addressing the increasingly urgent question of the continuing viability of liberal education in colleges and universities worldwide. This literature raises issues concerning the historical idea of a liberal education and points to new directions for the future. The article calls for a reconsideration of liberal education, paying particular attention to the claims of practical knowledge for inclusion in the curriculum. The article concludes that the literature points to the need for new a conception of a venerable idea.

Introduction

Debra Humphreys' (2006) recent redefinition of liberal education could have a salutary effect on colleges and universities struggling with efforts at the renewal of liberal education. I say this because liberal education is desperately in need of the kind of energizing jolt that A. B. Hodgett's classic little book, What Culture? What Heritage? once delivered to efforts promoting social and cultural integration through education across Canada. (Hodgetts, 1968; Mulcahy, 1971) Humphreys has defined liberal education to include, among other accomplishments, creative thinking, teamwork and problem solving, civic knowledge and engagement, ethical reasoning and action, synthesis and advanced accomplishment across general and specialized studies (2006, 3). In its wide embrace of knowledge and skills, Humphrey's conception is far removed from that found in the Yale Report of 1828 and Cardinal Newman's classic, **Idea of a University**, landmark statements of the theory of a liberal education in modern times. The purists, as Mary Warnock (1979) once referred to those unwilling to depart from a discipline bound view of education, will find Humphreys' views objectionable because of the range of educational experiences it recognizes. For much the same reason, these views also fall well beyond the ken of Allan Bloom in **The Closing of the American Mind**. The thrust of Humphrey's position may nonetheless be the more tenable. Emerging scholarship on liberal education in schools and colleges is on her side.

Critiques of Liberal Education

Mulcahy (2008, 35-69) has argued that even Newman was dissatisfied that liberal education constituted a full university education, a point clearly evident in his lesser known work, **University**

Sketches (Newman, 1961). It can also be argued (Mulcahy, 2008, 35-69), that Newman strayed further from his idealization of a liberal education in **Oxford University Sermons** (Newman, 1887) and the **Grammar of Assent** (Newman, 1947b). In these works, Newman highlights the shortcomings of theoretical knowledge of the kind idealized in **Idea of a University**. Claiming, for example, that "arguments about the abstract cannot handle and determine the concrete" (Newman, 1947b, 211), he elevates experiential knowledge and practical reasoning or reasoning in concrete affairs. As Jay Newman—the Canadian scholar as distinct from the Cardinal—wrote, although Newman offered an eloquent defense of liberal education in **Idea of a University**, in the **Grammar of Assent** he "exalts the common man's judgment at the expense of that of philosophers, intellectuals, and rationalists" (Jay Newman, 1986, 171).

The altered stance adopted by Newman in which practical knowledge and practical reasoning are given an elevated status vis-à-vis theoretical knowledge is mirrored and stated more explicitly by another one-time advocate of liberal education, Paul Hirst. Long an advocate of a curriculum grounded in what he termed the seven forms of knowledge (Hirst, 1974), in 1993 Hirst retracted his position, proclaiming that "education may at many stages turn out to be best approached through practical concerns," and now considered "practical knowledge to be more fundamental than theoretical knowledge, the former being basic to any clear grasp of the proper significance of the latter" (1993, 197; 2005, 615-620). For his part, John White emphasized what he calls "the primacy of the practical," and argued that we ought to "begin our thinking about the curriculum with the human being as agent, not the human being as knower." This may lead us to "a more practically-oriented curriculum" of general education as distinct from one premised on the acquisition of knowledge which leads to the neglect of "thinking about ends and means, planning and evaluating one's actions" (2004, 184).

Hirst's retraction of his theory of a liberal education followed along many of the lines brought to bear on his original position by Jane Roland Martin, perhaps his most influential critic. But Martin herself saw her critique of Hirst's theory as applicable to the theory of liberal education in general (Martin, 1994, 170-186). Writing in the early 1980s, Martin argued that contemporary philosophical investigation of curriculum, of which she considered Hirst's theory broadly representative, was stuck in a rut and "endorsed a theory of curriculum that is seriously deficient" (1994, 171). Of particular concern to Martin was the exclusion from the theory of a liberal education of such values as practicality, feelings and emotions, and the 3Cs of care, concern, and connection. These values had been omitted, she argued, because the focus was upon the nature, structure, and uses of knowledge rather than the goals of education. According to Martin, Hirst and others were guilty of the 'epistemological fallacy' by adopting the "mistaken assumption that the nature and structure of knowledge determines the nature and structure of a liberal education." (Martin, 1994, 172) They were also

guilty of “arguing from a theory of knowledge to conclusions about the full range of what ought or ought not to be taught or studied” (Martin, 1994, 176). To this she added that Hirst’s theory of a liberal education (and others like it) “ignores feelings and emotions and other so-called ‘non-cognitive’ states and processes of mind.” It also ignored ‘knowledge how,’ it excluded education for action (Martin, 1994, 173), and relied on a conception of liberal education that divorces mind from body (Martin, 1994, 170-186).

Alternative Conceptions of Liberal Education

If there are serious shortcomings of liberal education such as those implied by Newman and explicit in Hirst and Martin, questions arises as to its continuing value and how it might be reconceptualized. Martin provides a starting point. The key features of Martin’s idea appear in embryonic form in “Needed: A New Paradigm for Liberal Education,” and in more developed form in **Coming of Age in Academe** and elsewhere (2000, 1994, 170-186). Hirst’s failure to attend to the question of goals or purpose may be satisfactorily addressed, Martin suggests, by adding one new goal to the widely accepted goals of education for personal development, for citizenship, for work and, she adds, for passing on the cultural inheritance (Martin, 1994, 231). The additional goal is that of preparation for family, for the reproductive as well as the productive processes in society, and it expands the historical idea of a liberal education (Martin, 1994, 231-233; Martin, 2000). This new idea does not overlook Hirst’s forms of knowledge but sees them as one part of a person’s broader education that integrates thought and action, reason and emotion, education and life (Martin, 1994).

Martin’s theorizing on liberal education is innovative and philosophically sophisticated, and reflects sensitivities around issues of gender and race, for example. Others also point to important new possibilities. These include, for example, Carl Bereiter (2002), White (2004), Ernest Boyer (1987), Mulcahy (2008, and In Press), and Joseph L. DeVitis, Robert W. Johns, and Douglas J. Simpson (1998). Taken together these writers indicate a direction for liberal education pointing away from still dominant nineteenth conceptions to ones more akin to that envisaged by Humphreys.

With a focus on higher education, DeVitis, Johns, and Simpson raise themes resonating with critical pedagogy, feminist theory, and education viewed as preparing one for the callings or vocations of life. They “envision a rich linkage between liberal and service-learning that will permit students to be critically reflective participants in whichever settings or callings they choose to enter.” It is one where students will learn to critically examine service, helping, and intervention (1998, 13), as they investigate social institutions, power relations, and value commitment. As they see it, values of autonomy and service to community are not taught through didactic methods alone but, in part, by experiencing the consequences of confronting individual and group challenges. In fact, in a way that separates them from Martha

Nussbaum, for them one must experience citizenship at a deep level of involvement and participation for such learning to occur.

Considerations such as this regarding the place of pedagogy in higher education are highlighted by Shor (1992) as he picks up on this dimension in John Dewey (1963) and Richard Pring (1976) as well as a growing acceptance of the pedagogical significance of experiential and practical knoweledge. He also advocates an aspect of critical pedagogy where the discussion of the social, economic, and political issues of importance to students is accepted as a starting point for initiating educationally productive encounters. In this Shor's approach to general education contrasts with that of E. D. Hirsch, for example, which he says provides "a Eurocentric canon of information, works, and usage for teachers to transfer to students," and which along with other "traditionalists" presents standard canons of knowledge as "universal, excellent, and neutral." The kind of problem-posing approach Shor adopts for higher education views all subject matter as open to question, he maintains, and is inclusionary rather than exclusionary and in that regard quite unlike "banking education" (1992, 32). Shor and others such as Henry Giroux and Joe Kincheloe also leave no doubt that education of any kind ought to be more sensitive to the experience and interests of students, be more socially conscious, and more activist.

Drawing on cognitive science and the growth of knowledge-based organizations where everyone contributes to the creation of knowledge, as he explores the place and form of liberal education in a knowledge society, Bereiter (2000) introduces other possibilities into the discussion. If liberal education is to survive—assuming it is not already dead—he suggests, it will require a careful synthesis of new ideas and enduring principles. There are two distinct elements in liberal education as Bereiter sees it, namely, knowledge production and existing objective knowledge. His characterization of the place of knowledge production is the more novel and is rooted in his notion of a knowledge society organized around the production of knowledge in which "the school should be a productive part of that society, a workshop for the generation of knowledge." (2002, 12) This idea, he suggests sees schools, like research laboratories, becoming knowledge-building organizations where the daily activities of the classroom undergo a cultural shift "from classroom life organized around activities to classroom life organized around the pursuit of knowledge" (2002, 18). While students remain learners, learning is no longer their job: now "their job is producing knowledge" (2002, 19).

Redefining Liberal Education

The foregoing selective review of the discussion of liberal education captures major points of the debate and new departures within it. It also shows the idea to be in flux. But if the certitude that once sustained this ideal is gone there have also been valuable accretions such as the recognition of practical knowledge and a growing awareness of pedagogical considerations, an awareness

shown by Shor and Mulcahy in their blending of questions of the 'what' or content with the 'how' of liberal education. Also important in any reconceptualization of liberal education is a consideration of the implications of the idea of education as a preparation for life. This is an idea consistent with both the stance of Humphreys already alluded to and the characterization by Bruce Kimball of liberal education as increasingly coming under the influence of pragmatism (Kimball, 1995). Accordingly, if a new generation is to give expression to its own view of liberal education, it will be helpful to have a clearer sense of what is implied by the idea of education as a preparation for life.

Liberal Education as a Preparation for Life

In liberal education as envisioned by Newman and once championed by Hirst, the educated person possesses knowledge and understanding in depth and breadth as measured by the recognized forms of scientific or scholarly knowledge. Through initiation into these forms, the mind develops and learns to reflect. Alternative idealizations by Bereiter, Martin, Mulcahy, Shor, White, and others see the educated person accomplished in theoretical pursuits but also in action, including a range of practical pursuits, such as work, knowledge production, and service.

If the educated person is to embrace knowledge, attitudes, and skills not previously associated with it, and if liberal education is to take cognizance of an extended range of studies, both ideas will differ from their traditional counterparts. This does not necessitate a rejection of traditional values and could even suggest an enrichment of them. The ideal of the educated person conceived by Mulcahy, for example, is of one of many-sided development (2008, 177-196). Such a person could deal with a wide range of the practical demands of living, relate sensitively to others, and engage in a range of work-related and recreational activities. He or she could have an appreciation for truth, goodness, and beauty and an understanding of the world that enables one to develop a philosophy of life that also serves as a moral guide.

Liberal education intended for many-sided development would be more wide-ranging than traditional conceptions and would be sensitive to student experience. Its content would consist of academic disciplines and practical studies, and it would be individualized for all students in accordance with their capacities and needs. In general, liberal education so conceived would be multifaceted and varied. Arising from its inclusion of practical studies and education for action and emotional formation, it would represent a partial departure from a largely academic curriculum. As a consequence, it constitutes an important shift reflecting inescapable contemporary circumstances and idealizations of education and of how we view the content and the scope of a liberal education.

Conclusion

The analysis presented here shows that the idea of a liberal education is a rich and powerful one evolving over time and yet in need of redefinition. It needs to be recast in a way that retains its emphasis on what Newman called cultivation of the intellect, recognizes the importance of practical knowledge and education for action, accommodates the view that education of the whole person brings into play emotional, moral, and spiritual formation, and adopts a pedagogical stance that gives full recognition to the experience, capacities, and interests of the individual. Even though practice already reflects some such developments, the challenge to do so more fully and more consistently is considerable especially for colleges and universities.

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