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Restructuring the Pleas for the Liberal Arts in an Age of Technology in Ascendancy*
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"The object of education, rightly understood is, first to make good men …secondly to fit them for usefulness." ─ Egerton Ryerson

Abstract

Education is many things, but it is primarily the mode of production and reproduction of socially sanctioned knowledge, including the technical skills and sustaining ideology needed to maintain cultural continuity while adapting to social change. To teach creatively and to explore and shape knowledge amidst vast technological changes is the test of contemporary educational success. Part of that test involves the protracted assault on the liberal arts in the presence of transformational information technology, an increasingly competitive global economy and the neoliberal market mentality. Liberal arts defenders have confronted disparaging critiques with three basic types of argument: autonomy (the liberal arts are inherently valuable); service (the liberal arts support vocational training); and complementarity (the liberal arts properly balance marketable skills). A fourth position is that humanity's precarious position in dangerous times provides the liberal arts' principal rationale: The liberal arts are essential for ecological sustainability, social survival, the future of our species.

Introduction

As long as science and technology were held in disrepute by universities which were dedicated to classical studies and the preparation of men for the clergy, the law and diplomacy, the dominance of the liberal arts went unchallenged. Astronomy was revered more for its theological implications in a geocentric universe than as an empirical science. The practical or applied arts were disdained. Scholasticism trumped empiricism. And, even within the humanities, ancient Greek held sway over literature in the vernacular. Since the advent of what we call modernity from, say, the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, however, Western society has changed, and formal education has changed with it. From the musings of Sir Francis Bacon, Galileo and the revolutionary astronomers to the great Sir Isaac Newton, the ever practical Ben Franklin and on to any generic Task Force Report on Innovation, the message is clear: the liberal arts are no longer privileged; they must repeatedly justify themselves.

Ars gratia artis

The least successful argument for the liberal arts derives from their elite heritage. The liberal arts are, it is said, "intrinsically" valuable. The innate beauty and wisdom of the "Western canon" are self-evidently sublime. The joys of participating in "the great conversation" with Plato and his progeny, of standing awestruck before Shakespeare and Goethe, and of being smitten by Mozart and Beethoven are their own rewards. While such cultural claims have their antique charm, I fear that pleas for funding and for allotted space on students' schedules impress not one in an academic dozen.

If the built-in pleasures of the humanities no longer engage the sceptic, a contingency claim can be made that liberal arts serve to "humanize" or "civilize" students, as though they would otherwise remain barbarians—net-savvy but culturally illiterate in a world deprived of literature and any sense of historical chronology, floating in an atmosphere of Facebook "friends" and 140-character communications: poor players and idiots

strutting, texting and signifying nothing. (Slouka, 2009).

A last resort? Exposure to our cultural heritage, we are told, improves democratic citizenship. Learning respect for the rule of law, human rights and, latterly, cultural diversity promotes the civic virtues needed to perform our duties as competent voters and volunteers in domestic and global society.

All of this might be true, but it's awfully difficult to show that a forty-year-old college graduate with a mortgage has been demonstrably improved in community-mindedness or civic competence by being introduced to Augustine, Aquinas or Alexander Pope at twenty. Besides, the implied snobbery that sticks to the cloak of the austere classicist, the high-minded humanist or the pompous pedant loses the debate before it's begun.

Vocational Relevance

If the self-vindication argument for the liberal arts wins few converts, the second line of defence is to concede the war, but to try to win one redemptive battle. By acknowledging the supremacy of vocational education, many try to preserve an ancillary role for liberal arts by demonstrating their "relevance" to the dominant educational goal of providing graduates with "marketable skills."

Perhaps surprisingly, proving relevance isn't difficult, provided that we refine the liberal arts out of recognizable existence. There are two standard methods. First, introduce terms such as "generic skills" to redefine the content of liberal arts education. Fundamental grammar and composition can replace "Romantic Poetry" and win the hearts and minds of accountants, engineers and public safety professionals. After all, what's not to like about basic literacy? Second, revise the curriculum. Philosophy can be rebranded as "problem solving," Literature as "corporate communications," Psychology as "human resources management," Sociology as "leadership skills" or "becoming a team player," depending on your aptitudes and ambitions. As long as immediate practical pay-offs are promised, the future looks bright.

Moreover, a considerable body of evidence is surfacing that not just re-jigged liberal arts electives, but also liberal arts certificates, diplomas and degrees have potential worth. True, salary expectations upon graduation are lower for specialists in the humanities or the soft sciences of sociology and psychology than for chemists, law clerks and dental hygienists; however, a discernible "catch-up" factor is emerging (Giles & Drewes, 2002). Eventually, liberal arts graduates may draw even in the race for remuneration because of their "flexibility," whereas, without constant upgrading, some vocational skills become almost immediately obsolete.

Finally, a well-advertised "value-added" component of a liberal arts education is proficiency in "critical thinking." Having commented on this elsewhere (Doughty, 2006a, 2006b), I will not repeat myself, other than mention that "official" critical thinking amounts to problem solving (the pedagogy of the Rubik's Cube), when it is problem definition that is desperately needed. In our crisis-ridden society, the task of education may no longer merely be a matter of "thinking outside the box," but of redesigning and rebuilding the box, and maybe even the store shelf upon which it sits.

A Question of Balance

The third type of argument recalls a time when the tussle between the liberal arts and both rarefied science and its technological applications was more sedate. The infamous "two cultures" of C. P. Snow notwithstanding, it was once believed that "a liberal education [was] an educational ideal of the West, for the brightest elite if not all students" (Winter et al., 1981:2). So, even in the hurly-burly of post-Sputnik North America, when immense expansion of postsecondary education opened doors to middle and working class students, the rapid development in science and technology still allowed at least a rhetorical commitment to educating "the whole man."

Some recognized the importance of maximizing the human potential of every citizen. In the generous tradition of John Stuart Mill augmented by Abraham Maslow (1943), the humanist, management psychologist and part-time advisor to the mightiest corporations of his day, they saw the creative possibilities for increased economic efficiency within organizations that would simultaneously promote higher-level

values such as personal self-actualization and (perhaps on a good day) even spiritual awakening. Wholly within the liberal tradition, they imagined a high-tech corporate culture in which people contributed cheerfully to the "knowledge economy" while computers did the tedious clerical work and robots performed arduous and sometimes dangerous manual labour.

Others, sceptical about high technology's capacity to create lucrative and endlessly fulfilling employment, limited their enthusiasm for technological innovation alone (Levin & Rumberger, 1983). They recognized that a future filled with R.E.M.'s love-besotted "shiny happy people" might still leave something to be desired and that the labour market advertised far more opportunities for fast-food servers than for information technology wizards.

Accordingly, higher education and its governing authorities seemed well-disposed toward a reasonable balance between "general" and "vocational" education. Snow's "two cultures" could be reconciled to the advantage of all. Thus, for instance, Ontario's Minister of Education and future Premier William G. Davis (1967, June) celebrated the province's new community college system for including both the "demands [of] an ever-changing pattern of occupations and rising levels of skills" and the infinite benefits of the liberal arts in order to ensure "the fullest possible development of each individual." At the same time, Toronto's newly established York University created an undergraduate curriculum in which every student, regardless of their "major" would take at least one course in the humanities, the social and the natural sciences, plus English, a foreign language and a truly innovative program in logic and epistemology known as "modes of reasoning."

These were, of course, mere star-bursts, bright but short-lived initiatives. The corporate agenda for higher education demanded focus (Doughty, 2008) as optimism and diversity were brought to heel; nevertheless, they remain (fading) testaments to good intentions, though reminders that intentions alone are inadequate.

Interrogation

If the three main arguments for the liberal arts in college education are inadequate, what might substitute for them? Any prospectively satisfying claim must stand on firm ground that is situated not only in current reality, but also in a sound historical and theoretical context. No nostalgia for the groves of academe will do. No strategy that uncritically assumes the momentum of the contemporary neoliberal ideology and hegemonic corporate power structure will suffice.

In the alternative, my understanding of higher education embraces an evolutionary perspective, depending for inspiration on Thomas Kuhn (1962), Stephen Gould and Niles Eldridge (1972), and a housebroken version of the insights of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels (1848). Like the historical pattern of technological, economic and social change, education does not proceed slowly and incrementally, with people in one era seeing far because they are standing comfortably and gratefully upon the shoulders of previous giants. Instead of an overriding logos in which progressive change happens incrementally and advances us all toward an inevitably higher state of being, most significant change is abrupt and sometimes "revolutionary." It is also not guaranteed to be heading ineluctably toward improvement, if not necessarily perfection. While we can be properly sceptical of dystopians, apocalyptics and lamentations about incipient social collapse, we are not justified in adopting a Panglossian perspective on the future. We need a more realistic and deeper appreciation of ourselves and our situation.

As educators, realism may suitably begin with a better understanding of the way in which knowledge evolves. For Thomas S. Kuhn, the process was not as it is often represented in the common glosses on the history of human understanding of nature—both human and non-human. To him, "normal" science was practiced for long periods with research supplying details within an established "paradigm," until the pent-up pressure of contradictions between empirical evidence and established theory blew all comfortable assumptions apart. Think Galileo, Darwin, Einstein and Planck. Copernicus and his followers did not "improve upon" or "refine" the Ptolemaic universe, they destroyed it and built a heliocentric universe in its place. And, of course, that heliocentric universe—totally consistent with a "steady state" theory of cosmology—has been destroyed as well, this time with notions of big bangs, black holes, dark matter and an expanding cosmos in which "revolutionary" discoveries impose themselves even more quickly than most of us can absorb them. What goes for the cosmos goes for particle physics, plant and animal species, cell biology, neuroscience and, I suppose, postmodern literary theory as well.

Even within the Darwinian tradition, Gould and Eldridge precipitated an almost metaphysical shake-up when they showed that rapid speciation (the "creation" of new species) occurred mainly after major mass extinctions, most recently the cretaceous-tertiary devastation sixty million years ago, which eliminated dinosaurs and created lebensraum for mammals and eventually for us.

For Marx, as well, profound changes in human society did not come from the steady, progressive accumulation of gradual political reform and the careful building of human rights, but in major conflagrations when, say, the feudal way of life was replaced by mercantilism, which then gave way to industrial capitalism. Each revolution in the mode, means and relations of production and distribution was "the kicking in of a rotten door." Each time, change resulted from the unsustainablility of existing circumstances—whether theoretical or empirical.

Likewise in education, environmental factors change what is taught, how it is taught, to whom and why it is taught. This has happened since Plato was a pup and since medieval universities built their programs on the "trivium" and the "quadrium." It is now reflected in the influence of technological complexity combined with democratic access to formerly elite institutions. So, in the current chaos that is postsecondary education, we have an odd, unstable mélange of colleges, polytechnics, institutes and universities that betokens seismic faults in society. Something is about to blow.

I am a cautious educator, normally unmoved by hyperbole and relatively immune to each successive media-driven crise de jour. But, any unflustered, disinterested, ascetic or merely "objective" analysis of contemporary events is ever more difficult to sustain. Ecological degradation puts our place on the planet in jeopardy. Economic dysfunctions make prosperity insecure. Domestic and global gaps between rich and poor grow. We are caught up in the "clash of civilizations" (Huntington, 1996) and implicated in mythological wars on terror. We face inescapable energy shortages past "peak oil." There are enough ethical conundrums ranging from questions of corporate malfeasance to issues of the nature, meaning and ultimately the definition of life to keep moralists busy for centuries. It is therefore not subversive, but conservative to address (post)modernity in apparently permanent crisis (Gaydos et al., 2007).

Considering the array of possibly immanent, individual and multiple, natural and social disasters, it may seem absurd to use a self-consciously constructed platform of fear to support teaching the liberal arts. Yet, the severe problems confronting us make it mandatory to think clearly, unsentimentally yet passionately. Continued technical training without critical reflection invites annihilation. We have to start somewhere.

Teachers may offer too little, far too late, but something must be done. Hence, I offer this as the most persuasive plea for the liberal arts in an age of technological ascendance: I rely on Stein's Law, which states that "if something can't go on forever, it will stop." Our exploitation of the Earth and each other cannot go on forever. They will stop. The only question is whether we can guide a transition to a sane society, or whether we will either perish or decline into what some are already calling the "new barbarism" (which may be an undeserved slight against those hardy warriors who sacked Rome). New and better technological solutions to pollution and poverty may, of course, purchase a little time; but if that time isn't used to interrogate ourselves, our cultural patterns and our ways of knowing and doing, we will have ignored history and will therefore be compelled to fulfill it—and not in a good way.

In 1790, Edmund Burke (1962, p. 112) fretted about the French Revolution: "But now all is to be changed … dissolved by this new conquering empire of reason."

In 1848, Marx and Engels (1848) gasped at the changes wrought by industrialism: "Constant revolutionizing of production, uninterrupted disturbance of all social conditions, everlasting uncertainty and agitation... All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profane."

Today, Arthur Kroker (1993, p. 7) warns that "technology is not something restless, dynamic and ever expanding, but just the opposite. The will to technology equals the will to virtuality. And the will to virtuality is about the recline of western civilization: a great shutting down of experience, with a veneer of technological dynamism over an inner reality of inertia, exhaustion and disappearances."

Meanwhile, a contributor to recent edition of a University of Waterloo magazine wrote: "The only thing an

artsy ever gave me was a wax job for my Mercedes." A letter to the editor of *The Edmonton Journal* editor said: "The arts are useless in today's job market." A college administrator (anonymous to protect the guilty) groused: "Those liberal arts people just teach their hobbies."

What to do?

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