

The Tethered Self: Technology Reinvents Intimacy and Solitude

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When I first came to MIT, in 1976, at the very birth of the personal computer culture, even the most cutting-edge faculty did not know what the new “home computers” would do. It did not seem that many people would want them for writing; they could be used for tax preparation, certainly, and there would be a market for simple games. But beyond that?

I have been a witness to the birth of the personal computer culture, with its intense one-on-one relationships with machines, and then to the development of the networked culture, with people using the computer to communicate with each other. In my most recent work on the revolutions in social networking and sociable robotics, I see a world of new possibilities as well as perils. Technology is the architect of our intimacies, but this means that as we text, Twitter, e-mail, and spend time on Facebook, technology is not just doing things for us, but to us, changing the way we view ourselves and our relationships.

These days, we are on our e-mail, our games, our virtual worlds, and social networks. We text each other at family dinners, while we jog, while we drive, as we push our children on swings in the park. We don't want to intrude on each other, so instead we totally intrude on each other, but not in “real time,” some of us sending many thousands of texts a month. And that's not counting our Twitters, e-mail, instant messages, or social networking messages and postings. When we misplace our mobile devices we become

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anxious, impossible. We archive our own lives as we upload photos to the Web. Indeed, many young people tell me they feel guilty, remiss, if they do not do so. Teenagers say that they sleep with their cell phones, and even when their phones are put away—relegated, say, to a school locker—they know when their phones are vibrating. The technology has become like a phantom limb, it is so much a part of us.

In technology's volume and velocity, we are not being satisfied. Often, our new digital connections offer the illusion of companionship without the demands of friendship. We become accustomed to connection at a distance and in amounts we can control. Teenagers say they would rather text than talk. Like Goldilocks—not too close, not too far, just right. In other words, we become accustomed to connection made to measure: the ability to hide from each other even as we are constantly connected to each other.

But there is no simple story here of monolithic negative effects. Connectivity offers new possibilities for experimenting with identity and, particularly in adolescence, the sense of a free space, what Erik Erikson called the moratorium. This is a time, relatively consequence free, for doing what adolescents need to do: fall in and out of love with people and ideas. Real life does not always provide this kind of space, but the Internet does. No handle cranks, no gear turns, to have us leave a stage of life and move on to another. So, adults, too, use the Internet as a useful place for experimentation—indeed, as an identity workshop.

But there is a point in focusing on “discontents.” They point us to what we miss, what we hold dear and don't want to lose. They point us to our “sacred spaces.” In particular, the “nostalgia” of the young illustrates how young people try to reach for something they never fully knew as they dream the future. Young people reach, for example, for the idea of telephone calls made—as one 18-year-old puts it—“sitting down and giving each other full attention.” Teenagers grew up in a culture of distraction. They remember that their parents were on cell phones when they were pushed on swings as toddlers. Now, their parents text at the dinner table and don't look up from their BlackBerries when they pick them up after school. From the moment this generation met technology, it was the competition. And significantly, young people imagine a world in which information is not taken from them automatically, just as the cost of doing business.

One 16-year-old tells me that when he really wants privacy, he uses a pay phone, “the kind that takes coins . . . and that is really hard to find in

Boston!" Another says she feels safe because "who would care about me and my little life." These are not empowering mantras.

Of technology's current effects on our experience of the self, perhaps the most important is how it redraws the boundaries between intimacy and solitude. We talk of getting "rid" of our e-mails, as though these notes were so much excess baggage. Teenagers avoid the telephone, fearful that it reveals too much. Besides, it takes too long; they would rather text than talk. Adults, too, choose keyboards over the human voice. Tethered to technology, we are shaken when that world "unplugged" does not signify, does not satisfy. After an evening of avatar-to-avatar talk in a networked game, we feel at one moment in possession of a full social life, and in the next curiously isolated, in tenuous complicity with strangers. We build a following on Facebook and wonder to what degree our followings are friends. We re-create ourselves as online personae in games or in a virtual world and give ourselves new bodies, homes, jobs, and romances. Yet, suddenly, in the half-light of virtual community, we may feel utterly alone. As we distribute ourselves, do we abandon ourselves? Sometimes people tell me they experience no sense of having connected after hours of communication. And they report feelings near communion when they thought they were paying hardly any attention at all.

Distinctions blur. We are not sure whom to count on. Virtual friendships and worlds offer connection with uncertain claims to commitment. We know this, and yet the emotional charge of the online world is very high. People talk about it as the place for hope, the place where something new will come to them, the place where loneliness can be defeated. A woman in her late 60s describes her new iPhone: "It's like having a little Times Square in my pocketbook. All lights. All the people I could meet." People are lonely. Connectivity is seductive. But what do we have, now that we have what we say we want, now that we have what technology makes easy? We can communicate when we wish and disengage at will. We can choose not to see or hear our interlocutors. What we have is a technology that makes it easy to hide.

Mandy, 13, tells me she "hates the phone and never listens to voice-mail." She presents a downbeat account of a telephone call: "You wouldn't want to call because then you would have to get into a conversation." And conversation, "Well, that's something where you only want to have them when you want to have them." For Mandy, this would be "almost never.

. . . It [that is, conversation] is almost always too prying, it takes too long, and it is impossible to say ‘goodbye.’”

Stan, 16, will not speak on the telephone except when his mother makes him call a relative. “When you text,” he says, “you have more time to think about what you’re writing. On the telephone, too much might show.”

This is not a teen problem. In corporations, among friends, within academic departments, people readily admit that they would rather leave a voicemail or send an e-mail than talk face-to-face. Some who say, “I live my life on my BlackBerry,” are forthright about avoiding the “real time” commitment of a phone call. Here, we use technologies to dial down human contact, to titrate its nature and extent. People are comforted by being in touch with a lot of people whom they also keep at bay. 📱

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Liberal Education and Lifelong Learning: A Value Proposition

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INTRODUCTION

Today, we are at an interesting and important moment in the arc of American continuing higher education as we experience the cumulative effect of decisions made over the past decade regarding the tasks of continuing education and the place or role of liberal education within it. While liberal education continues to occupy a position on the agenda of continuing higher education, it is clearly imperiled by the growing demand of both our funders and our institutions to refocus our energies on those activities that satisfy the imperative for a tight programmatic linkage with our local and regional economies, for example, through workforce development, as well as escalating expectations that continuing education will be a significant source of revenues to our universities.

The consequences of not meeting these new expectations are clearly evident in the decisions to eliminate Metropolitan College—the center of continuing higher education at the University of New Orleans—and the School of Continuing Studies at Indiana University. This is not a unique American phenomenon; Britain is experiencing the same draconian measures. For example, the *Times Higher Education Supplement* reported that “lifelong learning [is] ‘on the verge of extinction’ across the UK” and the “axe looms over Cardiff.” These headlines were preceded by the announcement of the closure of the Department of Continuing Education at the University of Leeds.

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In this climate there is reason to pause a moment and reflect upon the role and value of a liberal education in lifelong learning and its contribution to professional preparation or professional development. That is, to examine the points of public utility for a liberal education, while at the same time recognizing and holding fast to the intrinsic value of a liberal education for itself and its critical importance to a functioning democracy and the development and support of global perspectives.

It would be naïve, however, to assert that the tension between useful education and liberal education is a new phenomenon arising from our current policy environment. The words of Earl Cheit, in *The Useful Arts and the Liberal Tradition*, are as valid today as they were thirty years ago:

Names invoked [in this argument of the liberal versus the useful]...Dewey, Whitebread, Veblen, Cardinal Newman, Van Doren, Aristotle—testify to the fact that the tension between what is “liberal” and what is “useful” is one of the oldest and most persistent problems in education.¹

Today this tension between the “useful” and the “liberal” is manifest in what is characterized as the new “vocationalism.” Across the country we see growth in:

- undergraduate enrollments in professional programs;
- numbers of professional master’s and doctoral degrees;
- accredited and non-accredited professional certifications;
- efforts by liberal arts colleges to introduce courses into the curriculum that will bridge the liberal arts and professional preparation;
- tensions between the professional schools and arts and sciences regarding course requirements that result in five-year programs to accommodate both parties in technical areas such as engineering and nursing;
- new labor-market realities driving public policy that result in new federal support of community colleges in service to state and federal economic-development strategies; and
- for-profit higher education.

The trend is also evident in our liberal arts colleges as vocationalism invades the curriculum as argued by Victor Ferral in his recent book, *Liberal Arts at the Brink*.

In this environment there is a need to explore the value or utility of a liberal education in a continuing higher education setting and to reexamine

the contribution it makes. Why focus on lifelong learning? The simple answer is that we have too often thought of a liberal education as the province of the young—the undergraduate. This focus on young students overlooks several important consequences of the growing complexity of today's world. The increasing specialization in undergraduate and graduate programs, preparing students for the world of work, does not prepare them for greater levels of responsibility later in life that are linked both to the expectation of a civic-leadership role and to the expanding scope of responsibility in their corporate lives, the latter demanding a more nuanced understanding of the cultural and political contexts in which they and their workplace function. Thus the need to expand our conversation to include an exploration of what lifelong learning means “not only in terms of students having access to our current [offerings or] curriculum, but also in how courses [are] designed”² and how we manage the episodic nature of adult participation in both accredited and non-accredited programs of study.

One further caveat: This conversation assumes we are talking about non-technical providers of education, that is, colleges and universities, cultural institutions, and civic organizations. Our examination of liberal education does not include technical training of the sort one might acquire in a technical college.

So we must start with the question: What is a liberal education? It turns out that this not so easy to answer, for there are several perspectives from which to view liberal education. It is a concept that begs for answers to a host of questions: What are the aims or purposes of a liberal education? What are the intellectual tasks connected with a liberal education? What outcomes can we expect from a liberal education? And “in what curricular and pedagogical forms is liberal education typically carried out?”³ Attached to these fundamental questions are the ancillary issues of interdisciplinarity and specialization—who provides the education, what are the demographics of the adult population, and what is the connection or bridge between liberal education and professional development.

THE AIMS OF A LIBERAL EDUCATION

What are the aims or purposes of a liberal education? Fundamentally they are to liberate the individual through education by creating a broad, integrated, meaningful understanding of the complex world in which we live. Robert Hutchins, former president of the University of Chicago, describes

this purpose as “seek[ing] to clarify the basic problems and to understand the way in which one problem bears upon another.”⁴

This “seeking” has been characterized variously as a conversation, an argument, or a dialogue—think Plato. Whatever word we use, it is an authentic give-and-take of ideas and perspectives that intends to prepare each of us to engage in our civic, social, and economic or work communities in constructive ways. Oakeshott views this as the following:

An initiation into the skill and partnership of ... [a] conversation in which we learn to recognize the voices, to distinguish the proper occasions of utterance, and in which we acquire the intellectual and moral habits appropriate to conversation. And it is this conversation that, in the end, gives place and character to every human activity and utterance.⁵

The metaphor of the conversation in this context suggests a rational interior as well as a public or exterior journey toward clarity or resolution, a journey to reach a common understanding or even agreement. On problems or issues of more than casual importance a liberal education creates a disposition and ability to achieve a resolution of differences on “matters of fact, theory, and action....”⁶ As philosopher Andrew Chrucky told an entering class of University of Chicago undergraduates in the annual “Aims of Education” lecture several years ago, a “liberal education is not about making explosives—it is about such matters as agreeing as to when—if ever—explosives should be used and for what purposes.” One can draw from this illustration that he is arguing for a moral dimension to be imbedded in this conversation and that the absence of a moral dimension is mere sophistry, where to win the argument is all that is at stake. Sophistry substantially undercuts the ability to achieve a common understanding of the issues and problems we confront as a community.

It is the role of continuing higher education to provide a reliable forum for the conduct of these conversations both in the classroom and in more informal settings, to be a neutral venue for the moral dialectician—a place to hone skills associated with knowledge acquisition and truth seeking.

One can infer from this conversation, as well, that a liberal education is socially inclusive, acknowledging and prizing the perspectives and understanding of many segments of the community. Its only criterion for admission is the earnest desire for serious and authentic conversation.

Finally, Charles Anderson, in *Prescribing the Life of the Mind*, gives a more than workable statement of the aims of a liberal education, when, with a touch of reticence, he proposes this:

[The] aim of education might be to develop tolerance and understanding of various perspectives, the mutual search for common ground, and a coherent conception of common good, the faculty of critical examination of alternative policies and justifications given for them.⁷

It is the habits of mind suggested by this statement of aim that make the difference in the quality of the conversation—what Robert Hutchins called the “Great Conversation.”

THE TOOL SET OF A LIBERAL EDUCATION

By what means, then, would we expect to achieve the aims or purposes of a liberal education—to effectively engage in the “great conversation”? In other words, what are the intellectual tasks and tool sets connected with a liberal education?

The core aim of a liberal education—critically exploring, understanding, and developing a tolerance for diverse perspectives in search for common ground—requires developing the capacity for critical thinking, for it is not sufficient to be satisfied with received or settled knowledge in a world that is uncertain and changing. The dynamic nature of our social, political, physical, and economic environment requires the ability to think analytically and critically, to make sense of particular actions, policies, ideas, and events and to acknowledge the following:

[There is] an inevitable subjective element in [our] thought. We see things differently, depending upon our situations, our expectations, and our interests. Now it is this very awareness of diverse perspective that makes inquiry possible—and necessary.⁸

Critical thinking is, as well, contextual: our approach to analysis is shaped by the culture and time in which we live. And we must not lose sight of the moral dimensions of the tasks related to critical analysis.

To think critically, to be discerning, evaluative, appraising, and on occasion scholarly, is not an entirely passive process. In fact, it is comprised of two activities: identifying and challenging assumptions, and exploring and imagining alternatives. It is also subjective and contextually defined—“action and thought are interconnected in bewildering and idiosyncratic configurations.”

The capacity to think critically is developed and refined through inquiry and critical analysis. Brookfield describes this process in this manner:

[It is] reflective analysis with informed action. We perceive a discrepancy, question a given, or become aware of an assumption—and then we act upon these intuitions. As our intuitions become confirmed, refuted, or (most likely) modified through action, we hone and refine our perceptions so that they further influence our actions, become further refined, and so on.⁹

Inquiry, then action. It is an important learning that this is not an entirely passive activity, as might be inferred when thinking about this in the context of an academic course or program.

It is useful at this juncture to introduce briefly the notion of practical reasoning, that is, reflection connected with action. If there is a connection between a liberal education and either social inclusion or professional preparation, then we are concerned with reflection in an action setting. That is, the critical analysis or reasoning that is characteristic of a liberal education is employed in doing something—improving practice or engaging in activities of social, political, or economic importance, for example. The actor in either of these situations is being reflective about what he ought to do or what would be best to do, as opposed to trying to explain or predict, which is theoretical in character. I pose this to make the point that there are norms associated with reasoning and critical analysis that are action- or practice-connected. These characteristics, I believe, are essential when discussing lifelong learning and liberal education.¹⁰

A recent *Wall Street Journal* article makes this argument well under the banner, “Financial Meltdown Prompts Business Schools to Retool Some Courses.” The August 2009 article describes attempts to retool curriculum to impart central and essential notions of a liberal education.

Professors say they want students to avoid repeating mistakes blamed for the [economic] blow-up. Among the class lessons: *question assumptions* behind financial models. Probe for better information about complex products...*better understand* the role of regulatory agencies and governments.” (Emphasis added.)¹¹

The *Journal* reports that these themes of reflective skepticism, active inquiry, and critical analysis connected to informed action are now being systematically incorporated into the curriculum.

Finally, mastery of complex problems or the planning of reflective action will not lead to effective change unless we are able to communicate effectively. Thus, the forms and formats of liberal adult education we may plan must include settings in which we can guide the practice of both written and vocal communication.

OUTCOMES OF A LIBERAL EDUCATION

Given the aims and methods for achieving a liberal education, what can we expect as an outcome or outcomes from this labor?

Fundamentally, the outcomes of a liberal education are the liberation and enrichment of the individual and the sustenance of a democratic and economically viable society. A liberal education, if acquired early in life, ought to, as well, prepare an individual for lifelong learning. The habits of mind created through the exercise of theoretical and practical reasoning, rhetoric and argumentation, logical and systematic analysis, coupled with the disposition to pursue inquiry that result from a liberal education, argue convincingly for a lifelong occupation with education, what Hutchins called an “interminable liberal education.”¹² Hutchins argues on behalf of lifelong learning:

[What a youth can do is] acquire the disciplines and habits that make it possible for him to continue to educate himself all his life. One must agree with John Dewey in this [he says]: that continued growth is essential to intellectual life.¹³

In *The Intellectual Life of the British Working Classes*, Jonathan Rose observed that the “authentic value of a liberal education lies not so much in acquiring facts or absorbing ‘eternal truths,’ but in discovering new ways to interpret the world.”¹⁴

We expect, then, that a liberal education will result in increased autonomy, individuality, and equality for the learner, encouraging the intellectually satisfying pursuit of knowledge and truth that, in turn, supports the individual’s goal to be “free to become everything that is intrinsically good for man to be.”¹⁵ “Not only the mastery of bodies of information and knowledge, but the coherence among them... [enhancing] personal development and a philosophy of life... providing understanding, appreciation, and competence in shaping the physical and social world.”¹⁶ To experience both freedom and growth, intrinsic values of a liberal education.

A liberal education equips individuals to cope more effectively with rapid change and the complexities of modern life positively supporting an informed citizenship, social inclusion, community development, workforce effectiveness, and promotion of a civilized society. In this practical world, a liberal adult education “should help students become effective actors and problem-solvers as well as disciplined thinkers....”¹⁷ That lifelong learning is an essential element in the achievement of societal and personal potentials.¹⁸

PROVISION OF ADULT LIBERAL EDUCATION

In what forms do we provide a liberal education for adults? To explore this question let me deal first with an important distinction in the provision of liberal learning, that is, between “traditional” undergraduate provision and the continuous, lifelong provision of liberal learning for adults. The division of the universe of students, while muddied slightly by the increasing proportion of adults in typical undergraduate programs, is useful to our ability to focus on the adult learner in a continuing higher education setting.

The intention of this distinction between student populations is to undermine the notion that adult liberal education is simply a kind of education that happens to enroll adults, that there is otherwise no difference from that of a usual undergraduate education in terms of “what is taught, how it is taught, and how it is organized.”¹⁹ Consider for a moment the adult population enrolled in a typical, traditional undergraduate program. Their reality as undergraduates is different from that of the traditional student: they are much older, it almost always takes them longer to graduate, more of them work and work more, and their participation in college is episodic, with most dropping in and out of school over a period of years. These realities of the adult undergraduate student come into conflict with the usual construction of the undergraduate liberal-arts curriculum—upper and lower division, linear sequence of courses—creating conceptual bewilderment in the adult student.²⁰

This plight of the adult student in an undergraduate setting, however, is not the focus of this essay. For the assessment of the value of an undergraduate education by a number of measures is less debated than the contribution of a liberal adult education in the form of a graduate degree in liberal arts or liberal studies or non-accredited forms of liberal adult education. It is to these forms of adult liberal education our attention should be turned, as they are the most vulnerable among our programs.

It is important, as a sidebar, to acknowledge that universities do not have a liberal adult education franchise. We regularly find ourselves in the company of a number of not-for-profit, civic and cultural organizations whose missions include the liberal education of adults: structured courses, workshops, or seminars that are directed at more than the acquisition of knowledge, but expect the employment of a discerning and inquisitive mind in the task of connecting those experiences to others resulting in an increasingly nuanced understanding of the world or society in which we live, whether that understanding is applied to our civic, social, or economic lives. In the ambit of the University of Chicago, for example, there are among others, the Art Institute of Chicago, an annual two-week Humanities Festival, the Council on Foreign Affairs, the Field Museum of Natural History, and the Humanities Council. The presence of these important educational institutions, however, is not a substitute for the indispensable role a university plays in the extension of *sui generis* intellectual resources and academic values through continuing higher education.

CONNECTIONS: LIBERAL ADULT EDUCATION AND ITS VARIOUS WORLDS

Our work in continuing higher education is about creating connections. We are consistently challenged as continuing educators to develop educational programs—accredited and non-accredited—that connect in meaningful ways to the changes and transitions our prospective students' experience. This is the value proposition: The connection of life experience or life challenges and liberal education powerfully equips the adult student with the means of understanding and acting effectively in a complex and changing world.

I have tried to argue that a liberal education as a lifetime adventure—an “interminable liberal education”—provides and then hones a set of skills and dispositions on a continuing though episodic basis that exposes perspectives and provides the grounding for analysis, argument, and problem solving. The responsibility for the utility of a liberal adult education lies not only with the provider but with the student as well. Here are several illustrations.

Let me begin with the story of a detective in the Chicago Police department whose beat was the South Side of Chicago, a particularly rough set of neighborhoods notable for their high crime rate, especially homicides and domestic violence; a mean place to spend days, nights, and weekends; a

constant confrontation with the seamy side of Chicago life. At one point, driven by a need for respite, he matriculated into my school's graduate program in the liberal arts, joining other older, mostly female students in a search for enrichment and enlightenment. For him, as well, escape. This graduate program is a mixture in equal number of modules of humanities, social sciences, and natural sciences.

In the first term of his program my detective friend enrolled in classicist Jamie Redfield's course on Greek tragedy, "The Crisis of the Classical Moment." The course was described as a "close analysis of texts... [to] form the basis of an exploration of the interaction between political conflict, social change, artistic taste, and theological uncertainty"—the model of an adult liberal education course. It took him about three weeks to realize that in the readings of Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides there was as much human mayhem—incest, murder, domestic violence, social conflict—as he was experiencing at work. It was a moment of disappointment. But as the class worked harder to understand the writers' perspectives on the human condition, he gained a new, more nuanced understanding. He began to see alternative ways to describe and explain what was happening in the neighborhoods of the South Side, to engage in an internal dialogue or conversation about social condition, motivation, conflict. His professional perspectives changed and expanded.

But the story does not end there. Not many terms after the Redfield experience, my detective friend was given a new, major assignment: to solve a baffling case of the serial rape and murder of black prostitutes, whose bodies were left in abandoned buildings across the South Side of the city. As the head of a task force of Chicago police, he quickly saw the benefit of applying the methods of inquiry and analysis he was mastering in the program's social-science modules, as well as the intellectual skills of critical analysis, reflective skepticism, and argumentation from the humanities. Needless to say—or I would not be relating the story—he was spectacularly successful in solving the case.

This story gives life to the assertion that an important bridge can be built between a liberal adult education and professional practice, and that there is practical, instrumental value in this connection. It is a connection that needs encouragement—the active promotion of the relationship between modules in humanities and social sciences, the core of a liberal education curriculum, and professional development and practice.

This is not an argument that the humanities or a liberal education will change the world—far from it. But as alluded to earlier, the current fiscal exigencies have given others cause to question the value of a liberal adult education. In a recent issue of the *New Republic* the Washington Diarist opines:

The complaint against the humanities is that they are impractical. This is true. They will not change the world. They will change only the experience, and the understanding, and the evaluation of the world. Since interpretation is the distinctly human activity, instruction in the traditions of interpretation should hardly be controversial—except in a society that mistakes practice for philosophy.²¹

While my anecdote about the Chicago detective illustrates the application of the intellectual tools and dispositions of a liberal education in a professional-practice situation, it is equally important to claim that the same tools and dispositions can and ought to be integrated into the curriculum of professional-development programs, that is, programs whose purpose is the preparation or enhancement of practice skills and knowledge by applying the tools of critical thinking, analysis, argumentation, close reading, and question-led discussion to the delivery of modules and seminars in continuing higher education.

For example, this approach has been employed a number of times either through the simple application of the Socratic method, or more specifically, in designing the course to be text-based and discussion-led, as in our “Origins of Modern Leadership Thought,” a module in our leadership-arts certificate program. In employing the Socratic method, it engages the student and instructor as equal partners in a critical reading of selections from *Henry V*, Thucydides’ *History of the Peloponnesian War*, and Machiavelli’s *The Prince*. While not unique this approach does illustrate the efficacy of applying the tools of a liberal education to the development of practice or professional understanding and application. This is how the program is described to prospective students:

Graham School students experience the powerful value of studying the humanities, arts, and sciences. Our classes expand your problem-solving and analytical thinking skills, help you communicate more effectively, become

more globally and culturally aware, and keep your mind sharp. These are benefits that will service you well beyond the classroom.

Equally effective is the explicit linkage of liberal arts and a professional discipline—a focused effort to draw lessons from literature, for example, that may inform or improve understanding of professional development and practice. Recently the University of Chicago Law School organized an interdisciplinary conference on “Shakespeare and the Law,” drawing faculty and advanced graduate students in philosophy, law, and literature as well as practicing lawyers and judges (including a Supreme Court justice and an appellate judge) to investigate the legal dimensions of Shakespeare’s plays. In panels, lectures, and performances, participants wrestled with how Shakespeare explored topics of concern in his time, e.g., mercy or the rule of law, and the subsequent influence of his plays on the practice of law. As one of our faculty observed in his “Elements of Law” class, “Whenever you think you have come up with something interesting to say about law, it turns out Shakespeare said it first...and better.”

To wit: a senior lecturer in the law school engaged participants in a discussion of Shakespeare’s treatment of laws that are not followed. Posited were several questions principally using *Measure for Measure* and the *Merchant of Venice*: Who disobeys laws? When and how disobedience is justified and when is it not? And finally, when is it clear disobedience? The conference structure amply demonstrated the utility of connecting liberal education in both content and approach to a more nuanced understanding of the questions confronting practitioners in daily application of their professional training.

Lest I leave the impression that the utility of liberal adult education is connected solely with professional practice or professional development, let me suggest that a liberal adult education serves the civic engagement and social purposes of our institutions to include those who by class, race, or economic condition have been excluded from participation in our more traditional academic programs. While this purpose may be the victim of policy changes over the past several years, it is nonetheless a powerful mechanism for integrating those excluded into the social, political, and economic fabric of the community. May I suggest as well that it will increase the health and stability of our communities and society generally.

There is a notable program in Chicago called the Odyssey Project. It is a part of a larger, national network of programs, the Bard Clemente Course in the Humanities. It had its origin in the mid-nineties when a writer by the name of Earl Shorris, an editor at *Harper's Magazine* at the time, had an epiphany while researching a book on poverty in America. That work took him to the Bedford Hills Correctional Facility where he went to interview inmates in a program on domestic violence. In the course of his interviews he encountered a woman named Niece, HIV positive, who in the course of her incarceration became a counselor to women with a history of family violence and comforter to those with AIDs. But here is Shorris telling the story:

We had never met before. The conversation around us focused on the abuse of women. Niece's eyes were perfectly opaque—hostile, prison eyes. Her mouth was set in the beginning of a sneer.

"You got to begin with the children," she said, speaking rapidly, clipping out the street sounds as they came into her speech.

She paused long enough to let the change of direction take effect, then resumed the rapid, rhythmless speech. "You've got to teach the moral life of downtown to the children. And the way you do that, Earl, is by taking them downtown to plays, museums, concerts, lectures, where they can learn the moral life of downtown."

I smiled at her, misunderstanding, thinking I was indulging her. "And then they won't be poor anymore?"

She read every nuance of my response, and answered angrily, "And then they won't be poor no more."

"What you mean is—"

"What I mean is what I said—a moral alternative to the street."

She didn't speak of jobs or money. In that, she was like the others I listened to. No one had spoken of jobs or money. But how could the "moral life of downtown" lead anyone out from the surround of force? How could a museum push poverty away? Who can dress in statues or eat the past? And what of the political life? Had Niece skipped a step or failed to take a step? The way out of poverty was politics, not the "moral life of downtown." But to enter the public world, to practice the political life, the poor first had to learn how to reflect. That was what Niece meant by the "moral life of downtown." She did not make the error of divorcing

ethics from politics. Niece had said, in a kind of shorthand that no one could step out of the panicking circumstance of poverty directly into the public world"

Although she did not say so, I was sure that when she spoke of the "moral life downtown" she meant something had happened to her. With no job and no money, a prisoner she had undergone a radical transformation. She had followed the same path that led to the invention of politics in ancient Greece. She had learned to reflect. In further conversation it became clear that when she spoke of "the moral life of downtown" she meant the humanities, the study of human constructs and concerns, which has been the source of reflection for the secular world since the Greeks first stepped back from nature to experience wonder at what they beheld. If the political life was the way out of poverty, the humanities provided an entrance to reflection and the political life. The poor did not need anyone to release them, an escape route existed. But to open this avenue to reflection and politics a major distinction between the preparation for life of the rich and the life of the poor had to be eliminated.²²

From those conversations between Shorris, Niece, and others emerged a concept for liberally educating the poor and the excluded involving outreach to social-service agencies to recruit those below 150 percent of the official poverty threshold into a structured conversation—the "Great Conversation" Hutchins talked about. Patterned after the University of Chicago's approach to text and discussion-based learning, the first Clemente course offered in the early 1990s has evolved into a nationwide college- and university-based program.

At Chicago, the Illinois Humanities Council supports the Odyssey Project. Founded on the premise that a liberal education is education to make people free, it proceeds on the conviction that engagement with the humanities can offer individuals a way out of poverty by fostering the habits of sustained reflection and skills of critical thinking and communication. As with the first course, it accepts only men and women who live below 150 percent of the poverty level. To encourage participation the project provides free onsite babysitting, books, and bus fare. The first-year course is offered in partnership with the Bard College Clemente Course in the Humanities for which students may receive six units of college credit. Texts for this first year include Plato's *Apology*, Shakespeare's sonnets or tragedies, Christopher Columbus' diaries, Sappho's poetry, and Martin Luther King's "Letter

from a Birmingham Jail.” Some students of the project participate in the Graham School’s Humanities Weekend or other academic activities as well.

Added to the original Clemente course is a bridge course open to students who have successfully completed the first-year course and are interested in studying the humanities further and going on to college. In total, approximately 500 have graduated from the Odyssey Project in the past nine years. In a survey of graduates conducted two years ago to which 80 former students responded, we found that 40 had gone on to college, an impressive outcome.

Building on the success of the Odyssey Project and an interest for a more sustained engagement with graduates of the project, Café Society was started, where graduates and others meet once a week at one of six coffee shops around the city to discuss social and political hot topics. Its aim is to foster a more robust civil society, more cohesive and interactive communities, greater media literacy, and a more informed and engaged citizenry.

From these illustrations I mean to suggest there are several curricular approaches to the integration of liberal education in and its contribution to the acquisition of professional knowledge and competence, as well as its role in the expansion of participation in the social, political, and economic streams of our communities.

“MEASURING THE UNMEASURABLE”

In the end we arrive at a conundrum: How do we actually measure the value of a liberal education other than anecdotally? Is this an intractable problem in the absence of metrics? Are we trying to “measure the unmeasurable”? In the first place, there is a logical connection between the aims of a liberal education and activities that are principally practical in nature. That is the value proposition.

The connection of life experience or life challenges and liberal education powerfully equips the adult student with the means of understanding and acting effectively in a complex and changing world.

I include professional practice in this, as well as social and civic engagement—a connection to the affairs of the world. Anderson suggests listening for the connection:

... Listen to a doctor talk through a complex diagnosis, or to hear a manager discuss a difficult business decision is to see the relation of theory and practice, to have the


dispositions of thought we have been assiduously cultivating come alive.²³

The challenge is in creating curricula—forms, formats, and content of instruction—that are intentional about creating this connection, assuming responsibility as student and teacher for creating the pathway to the practical world. There has to be an intentionality to bridge the liberal education and the practical concerns of a constantly changing and complex world.

The logical argument of the relationship between a liberal education and lifelong learning may be buttressed by the results of an exploration of the linkage between the participation in liberal adult education measured by documented achievement, for example, completion of a course or program and outcomes such as salary history, job promotion, or participation in civic affairs. This is relatively easy to do with undergraduates, where data sets exist, than for older liberal-education students in non-degree programs, where data is generally not collected.

CONCLUSION

While I hope that you are persuaded that there is intrinsic and extrinsic value in liberal education in lifelong learning despite the current absence of metrics, or at least exposed you to another point of view about which we can have a conversation regarding the value of the liberal arts in continuing higher education through professional practice, professional development, social inclusion, and civic engagement, its greatest value is its fundamental humanizing acceptance of tolerance, understanding, and the search for common good. The Washington Diarist summed it up well in the March 2009 issue of the *New Republic* when he said:

In tough times, of all times, the worth of the humanities needs no justifying. The reason is that it will take many kinds of sustenance to help people through these troubles. Many people will now have to fall back more on inner resources than outer ones. They are in need of loans, but they are also in need of meanings. The external world is no longer a source of strength. The temper of one's existence will therefore be significantly determined by one's attitude toward circumstance, its cruelties and its caprices... We are in need of fiscal policy *and* spiritual policy. And spiritually speaking, literature is a bailout, as so is art, and philosophy, and history, and the rest.²⁴ 

Based on a lecture delivered at the Cardiff Center for Lifelong Learning, Cardiff University, Cardiff, Wales, UK

ENDNOTES

1. Cheit, 2.
2. Manning, 11.
3. Sullivan.
4. Hutchins, 49.
5. Hutchins, 126.
6. Churcky.
7. Anderson, 50.
8. Anderson, 68.
9. Brookfield, 23.
10. *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*.
11. WSJ, 8/20/2009, B5.
12. Hutchins, GC 68.
13. Hutchins, GC 68.
14. Rose, *The Intellectual Life of the British Working Classes*.
15. Jarvis, 35.
16. Cheit, 11-12.
17. Freeland.
18. Brookfield, 15.
19. Thomas.
20. Lanham 34-37.
21. Washington Diarist.
22. Shorris.
23. Anderson, 141.
24. Washington Diarist.

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