

Liberal Arts Education: Imparting Intellectual Vision

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Abstract

This theoretical research opinion aims to elucidate the ways in which a liberal arts education enhances intellectualism and imparts a vision which is both futuristic as well as intellectual. A liberal arts education is the foundation for a society to flourish and prosper. It enables the individual to have richness in thinking or to have "cognitive richness". One useful approach in thinking of a liberal arts education is to perceive the whole problem in its historical context and trace its evolutionary development. The arts have the potential to illumine our contemporary dilemmas and difficulties. Instead of there being "knowledge for its own sake" the disciplines in liberal arts serve as a facilitating tool for achieving success and impacting humanity positively. Not only does this research highlight how the liberal arts provide intellectual vision, but it also focuses on student-teacher relationships. It must be admitted that no single pedagogy is a silver bullet. Pedagogy must be customized or tailored to meet the unique needs of learners. This way the perennial problems of learning to teach can be effectively addressed. Due to the paradigm-shifting nature of pedagogical practice, the art of learning has been reduced to a decontextualized techno-mechanical act. A revival of the liberal arts can be the genesis of important and crucial skills such as critical self-reflection, critical pedagogy and critical responsibility. The liberal arts are a means to produce democratic and evocative knowledges, wherein critical constructivists become detectives of novel ways of perceiving and constructing the world.

Keywords: *Liberal Arts, Education, Intellectual, Pedagogy*

Introduction:

We live in a time where education has become a commodity and students have become customers. Education has thus acquired a utilitarian meaning. To

break free from the shackles of this utilitarian approach to imparting knowledge, the liberal arts seem to hold considerable promise. The academic areas associated with the term liberal arts encompass arts (fine arts, music, performing arts, literature), philosophy, religious studies, social science (anthropology, geography, history, jurisprudence, linguistics, political science, psychology, sociology), mathematics, and natural sciences (physics, chemistry, biology, astronomy, earth sciences). Liberal arts encompass a futuristic approach and at the same time pay tribute to the lost times that have been antiquated. The liberal arts must not be taken lightly for they carry much potential to impact the world and to bring greater understanding and wisdom to humanity. It is a hermeneutic and emancipatory knowledge in question. A society without poets, writers, film makers, historians, artists and philosophers is nothing but a decadent society. When one pursues the arts and the humanities, one appears more relevant because he/she is in tune with life's deeper needs. A liberal arts education brings with it an expansive intellectual grounding in various aspects of humanistic enquiry. It enables the learner to read critically, write cogently, think broadly, and expands his/her perspective about himself/herself, others, life and the world he/she inhabits. Such skills facilitate more profound and eloquent classroom conversations, strengthen cultural and social analyses, and permit the learner to effectively navigate the world's most complex issues. As Christopher Eisgruber quoted, "A liberal arts education is a vital foundation for both individual flourishing and the well-being of our society."^[1] It thus enables enriched intrapersonal as well as interpersonal development, which have far-reaching repercussions.

Why the Liberal Arts are Perennially Relevant

Are liberal arts an anachronism in today's world? Has the term become akin to saying that they stand for the wide gamut of disciplines in the way how "philosophy"

does for all in the phrase “Doctor of Philosophy”?^[2] The term liberal arts has come to acquire a fluid boundary. Today liberal arts include humanities, social sciences, natural sciences and formal sciences. When its historical roots are traced, it is found that the liberal arts were the oldest higher education programme in Western history. It finds its origin in the attempt to discover first principles – ‘those universal principles which are the condition of the possibility of the existence of anything and everything’.^[3] A liberal arts education imparts intellectual vision and hence it may be argued that they are not anachronistic in any sense. The skills that a student with a liberal arts degree acquires include analytical, evaluative, critical and creative thinking; critical and reflective reading skills, ethical decision making skills, foreign language skills and cross-cultural knowledge, to name some. The liberal arts mould individuals into intellectuals. Here, intellectualism refers to the use, development, and exercise of the intellect and to the practice of being an intellectual. The objective of developing intellectual people or the intelligentsia is for a greater humanitarian purpose. Intellectual vision brings with it greater understanding of life’s complex problems and the ability to solve them in the best way possible. Each epoch consists of new challenges, some hitherto not encountered in the history of mankind. These challenges can be successfully addressed by a liberal arts scholar. Thus, the liberal arts will never become obsolete or passé. A scholar in this domain learns how to solve problems and ease the burden of its consequences on the wider community. It is also essential to know which problems are worth solving and which are not worth the trouble. Sometimes, ignorance may be the key but ignorance of the consequences of not taking action is detrimental to the progress of the nation. It is a sort of psychological disaster if such inaction prevails and can have catastrophic effects on the individual’s psyche and on the collective societal psyche.

Student-Teacher Relationships in Liberal Arts Education

One of the most crucial and significant relationships that a child has is with his/her teachers. The teacher wears multiple hats –that of a mentor, counselor, coach, guide and role model. No pedagogical tool used by the teacher

is a silver bullet. The liberal arts educator must attempt to speak not just to the student per se, but to the soul of the student. When the soul is stirred, the student can create ‘ripples’ in the universe. Such is the power of impactful teaching. When the teacher moves the student on the inside, the latter is equipped to create change in the outer world. The pedagogical prowess of a teacher is one of the most important things for imparting intellectual vision. Both quantity and quality of time that teachers spend with master instructors, who are the bridges between raw knowledge, theory, and the actual practice of instruction, come into question for best pedagogical practice. Learning must not be decontextualized like it has become in many educational institutions, learners must not treat the process of learning as a mechanical act, but rather learning must be cumulative and reap benefits throughout the lifespan.

Why We Need a Revival of the Liberal Arts

A liberal arts education teaches the learner to pursue economic growth based on humanitarian values. In addition, empathy and human values are not abstractions, but core qualities required for the survival and thriving of humanity.^[4] The reinvigoration of the liberal arts is more important than free speech. This is the contention of Justin Dyer and Ryan Streeter, who have very recently authored an article titled “Reinvigorating the Liberal Arts Matters More than Free Speech on Campus.” They opine that this is the era of “fake news,” post-truth politics, political intolerance clubbed with polarization. The role of universities around the globe has been forgotten in the fray and their role is not as much discussed as is necessary. A renewal of the liberal arts will help democracies flourish because an honest pursuit of truth often accompanies intellectual curiosity and inquisitiveness.^[5] Critical self-reflection, critical pedagogy and critical responsibility go hand in hand with a liberal arts degree. Critical reflection is a reasoning process that enables one to make meaning of an experience. Critical reflection is descriptive, analytical, and critical, and can be articulated in several ways such as in written form, orally, or as a form of artistic expression. In short, this process of self-reflection provides depth and breadth to an experience.

In addition, it also builds connections between course content and experience.^[6]

Critical pedagogic educator Ira Shor defines critical pedagogy as:

Habits of thought, reading, writing, and speaking which go beneath surface meaning, first impressions, dominant myths, official pronouncements, traditional clichés, received wisdom, and mere opinions, to understand the deep meaning, root causes, social context, ideology, and personal consequences of any action, event, object, process, organization, experience, text, subject matter, policy, mass media, or discourse.^[7]

The third skill of critical responsibility is concerned with responsible ways of critique, and criticism, and not in the abuse of these tools, which could hamper the vulnerable individual's self-esteem and indirectly serve as a detriment to the community. All the skills imbibed through a liberal arts degree paves the way to the inception of critical constructivists who deal with and create evocative knowledges. Critical constructivism emphasizes reflection, imagination, social consciousness, and democratic citizenship, and is recommended as a chief theoretical referent for all educationists. Without such reflection, the educational practitioners of the future may overlook epistemological considerations and fail to become aware of the political consequences of certain pedagogical decisions. In critical constructivism, practices that enable students to shape and reshape their own conceptual biographies through the development of intellectual tools and attitudes about the social basis of knowledge is inculcated, a pedagogy that enables them to understand society's official knowledge as it relates to their own indigenous knowledge. This leads to the development of a new rapport au savoir.^[8] In the field of sociology, Bernard Charlot thus defines rapport au savoir: "the relationship to knowledge is the relation to the world, to the other and to oneself of a subject confronted with the need to learn; the relation to knowledge is the set of relationships that a subject has with everything that belongs to learning and knowledge." This definition shows us that the relation to knowledge concerns both processes: the act of learning and learning situations, and their products: knowledge.^[9]

Conclusion:

In conclusion, the liberal arts bring with them promise, higher knowledge, a mission with a noble vision, a thirst for truth, human values, and an unparalleled collective cognitive metamorphosis.

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