

*Is Liberal Education
a Trivial Pursuit?
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Some years ago, I served on what at our school was called The University Curriculum Committee. And during my term on that committee, a decree came down from our president that we were to develop a new General Education program.

I'm sure most of you are quite familiar with the idea, but let me explain for those who are not: In most colleges and universities, students are required to devote up to half their academic time to a certain selection of math, science, and humanities courses outside their majors. The intent is to ensure that all students get what is called a liberal education.

Originally, the term "liberal education" referred to an education that made one fit for the duties of a free citizen. Today, it often carries the additional meaning of education that helps one become a better human being. It certainly sounds like a good thing!

Right from the start, you can see the problems involved in developing such a program. It is very hard to say what the duties of a free citizen are, much less what a better human being might look like. And if you don't know what your destination is, how can you decide on the best way to get there?

Much to my surprise, back on that University Curriculum Committee, I found that nearly everyone had very definite ideas about what is best for our students. And these ideas usually consisted of having students take classes offered by the person presenting the idea, plus whatever other courses that person suffered through during his or her own education.

Implicit in this, of course, was the idea that each of us on that committee was, in fact, an exemplary citizen and outstanding human being.

Our General Education program became a complex, rigid, and downright unmanageable thing that essentially ensured that (a) students were likely to take enough basic courses in Arts and Sciences disciplines to keep us all employed and (b) they would suffer through what we had to suffer through.

There were protests. But the program passed a referendum with flying colors, and academic life went on.

It is not my intention to insult the institution at which I am gainfully employed. I've heard of worse General Education programs as well as better. My intention is to ask the very basic question that we should have asked at the start. Let me phrase it as students might: "Why do I have to take this?"

English

Let's begin with the subject that is most commonly accepted as having a rightful place in a liberal education: English. It is hard to argue that being able to communicate in the dominant language of our nation does not serve the student.

But not so fast. By the time students arrive at the door of freshman English, most have been speaking the language since they were less than a year old, have been writing it since the first grade, have had their spelling, grammar, and punctuation corrected too often to count, have been exposed to Elizabethan plays, Romantic poems, and American short stories.... Shouldn't they know the language by now?

Okay, maybe not. But is three hours a week for 15 weeks going to have a profound impact on habits that are between 12 and 18 years old – especially if you consider that most freshman English classes consist of nothing terribly different from high school English classes? What research, conducted by disinterested researchers, backs up the almost universal decision to make freshman English a mandatory course?

"Writing Across the Disciplines" is one of the newer fads to sweep the nation: Administrators encourage professors to encourage students to write in all their classes. It sounds fine on the surface, until you realize that professors in physics, psychology, economics, or whatever are not trained to teach writing, and in fact are seldom very good writers themselves.

And don't forget that *academic* writing is, for most students, a foreign language, and one that some of us believe does not warrant learning!

We ask students to write about things that are essentially meaningless to them, in a style that only reinforces the point. Personally, I've found that when students are asked to write about their own lives – and are told that they will not be evaluated on the "technicalities" of writing – nearly all can communicate quite well.

Languages

Fashion, in academia as well as clothing, is cyclical. It is once again "in" to require that everyone learn a language other than English. The intent is (a) to expand students' range of communication skills, and (b) to expand students' cultural awareness. But are we being realistic?

As everyone who has taken a foreign language knows, "use it or lose it." Two weeks of "immersion" French followed by five years in Paris and – voilà! – you speak French. Five years of French followed by two weeks in Paris and – voilà! – you still can't order breakfast.

Sure, it's true: You never know when you might need it. But the great majority of American college students never do need it. Most remain in the U.S.

Besides, English has the second largest population of native speakers (after Chinese), boasts the greatest number of literate speakers, has the largest population of second-language speakers, is the most geographically wide-spread, is the leading business and scientific language, has the largest number of newspapers, magazines, journals, and books of any language, is the language into which more literature is translated than any other, and is the *de facto lingua franca* of the internet. A person can get by with English.

So how about expanding cultural awareness? Well, who said knowing a language does anything for cultural awareness? Academics have been so sold on Whorf's hypothesis that they forget it is only a hypothesis. There is little guarantee that if I understand your words, I'll naturally understand you.

I suggest that, to some extent, forcing languages on people may make them less, not more, open to other cultures. Like mathematics, language learning is notorious for creating anxiety and intense avoidance behavior.

Besides, there are much more direct ways of encouraging cross-cultural understanding, such as cultural anthropology and cultural geography courses, international and interethnic discussion groups, casual reading, and travel.

Literature

Most academics believe that reading fine literature (and seeing fine plays) improves a person. They are usually quite prepared to provide a list of fine literature.

But does it improve us? Certainly some literature provides us with new insights into things. But most literature was originally created to entertain, not enlighten, and if to enlighten, then by means of entertainment. And then again, some literature communicates hatred, violence, prejudice, sexism, classism, and superstition.

And getting new insights depends a great deal on the reader, i.e. is he or she ready for new insights? If, for example, a student can't make sense out of Elizabethan English or mores, how can we expect the student to appreciate Shakespeare's grasp of the human condition?

Is it important that students appreciate Shakespeare's grasp of the human condition? Or his masterful use of the language? Are the classics really that much better than the books, plays, and films that people today actually enjoy?

The other argument used to support a "thorough grounding in the classics" is that, as members of a culture, certain knowledge is assumed as a context for communication. The obscure references the well-educated use to enlighten and entertain the equally well-educated should be understood by all!

The "common culture" argument is akin to suggesting that we should all play football because, after all, so many of our culture's metaphors come from football. Personally, I think communication should have a firm grounding in ordinary day-to-day reality, rather than in the fairy-tales of the past, however interesting those tales may once have been.

Art and Music

I'm almost ashamed to talk about Art and Music in this context. These are more often the targets of educational reform than the beneficiaries. While Shakespeare and Calculus are nearly universally deemed "good for you," Art and Music are often considered "cake" courses. Like cake, I suppose, too many students actually like them.

But, just like proponents of great literature, art and music professors are also likely to believe that *everyone* should know "the Masters." That, of course, means having students do the most meaningless things one could possibly do with works of art and music: recognize, categorize, and date them.

Art and music appreciation courses can be even worse. Imagine being taught what to like and why to like it! What happens to most students is that they learn to *pretend* to like what they are told they *should* like, while they continue to *really* like what they simply *do* like.

The saddest victims of educational reform are the studio courses. These are often expressly excluded even from "General Education Electives." There is this neurotic fear that students may get credit for making pottery or playing the guitar. Isn't that peculiar, when one of the few things most people agree on as a quality of a better human being is creativity?

Isn't it equally strange, despite our concern about communication and the clear movement towards graphic forms of communication in modern society, that so very few of us learn to draw? From kindergarten through high school, we are encouraged to cut and paste. Rarely are we taught how to draw a simple representational picture!

But perhaps it's better that studio courses aren't encouraged. If we made them mandatory, as many people would learn to hate drawing and music-making as now hate writing and mathematics.

Mathematics

Yes, you saw it coming. The great majority of students ask at some point, "what do I have to take all this math for?" And I'd like to go on record as wanting to know as well.

Please don't assume that this is a "math-phobe's" pent-up rage. I've had much more math than most, and have done very well, thank you. I have actually used nearly none of it. Even algebra: It has only proven useful in more advance math classes and in helping my teenage daughters solve *their* bizarre algebra homework problems.

I am willing to go out on a limb on this one: The most math that the majority of "good citizens" need in life is arithmetic and a little basic algebra and geometry. A course in bookkeeping and one in carpentry would eliminate even the need for algebra and geometry.

It is true that, if you are going to be an engineer or a scientist you'll need all that math. So let people who want to be engineers or scientists take it! Let the rest of the population spend their time on more worthwhile pursuits.

Wait a minute, you say. We live in an age of science! Every citizen should be able to understand what scientists have to say. Nonsense, I say. We can understand something conceptually without following the quantitative details.

Many people in academia believe that, somehow, math is related to intelligence, and that practice in math is practice in intelligence. After all, intelligent people (such as themselves) are good at math! But that argument is fallacious: People who were good at math were the ones who decided what

intelligence would consist of the first place!

Piaget suggested – and the evidence is strong – that algebra requires a "mind set" that comes with age, and it comes later for some than for others. If you try to teach it too early, the child's mind is just not ready to deal with this abstraction labelled "x." It's like trying to teach reading to children who haven't yet gotten the idea that marks on paper might refer to sounds!

And when you punish that child, they learn a lesson: They learn that they can't do math. This is then called math phobia. Although they would have been fully capable of learning math had we given them time, their belief in their own incompetence and the anxiety that goes with it prevail. It is beyond me why so many educators can't seem to understand this. Perhaps they were punished for studying psychology before they were mentally ready.

The Sciences

The sciences have been on the tops of required lists since Sputnik, and the politicians have been even more adamant about them since we started "losing" to the Japanese. And I agree: Knowing a little science is a good thing.

But what you mean by "a little science" is crucial. What many colleges mean is the first course that a science major would take, or a watered-down version of the same. In Basic Chemistry, for example, you learn the periodic table, what moles and ions are, how to figure out how much of x you have to mix with y to get z, and what to call z when you get it (-ate or -ite?).

This can be a lot of fun for some students. For most students it is boring and profoundly useless. Sadly, this attention to technical details has seeped into the high schools as well. Instead, I wish we could go back to an old 1940's Chemistry text I found, which spent a whole chapter on, for example, how steel is made. *That's* something a dutiful citizen should know!

An alternative to these beginning chemistry (or physics, or biology) courses are courses especially constructed for General Education, such as "Exploring the Atmosphere" and "Our Geological World."

These are often interesting and even useful. It's nice, for example, to actually know what the weatherman means by an occluded front. But I'd be hard pressed to give any reasons why one should *have* to take "Exploring the Atmosphere" to be a dutiful citizen or a better human being.

So let's get down to basics. Shouldn't we all know the scientific method? Isn't it what saves us from superstition? If you mean, by the scientific method, careful reasoning and observation of our world and ourselves, I would agree with you whole heartedly.

But what most teachers of science mean by the scientific method is the small set of paradigms used in their own field, which are used without question over and over again *instead* of careful reasoning and observation.

History

The most common defense of history requirements is a single quote from the philosopher Santayana: "Those ignorant of history are doomed to repeat it." Apparently, Santayana didn't take the right science courses, because this assertion has never been scientifically tested. In fact, it may not be testable: Historical situations are so unique that the question of repetition may be moot.

The biggest problem with history requirements is what to require. U.S. History? Too narrow. World History? Too shallow. Western History? Not politically correct. Non-western History? Not relevant.

Even if you come to a consensus, what would you teach within the course? Too commonly, we teach names, places, and dates. Again, the rationale is "our common culture:" Everyone (for reasons only the claimants comprehend) should know this!

If, on the other hand, you are a good history professor and make an effort to make history come alive, you are forced to select some details and ignore others. Then you are left with the task of explaining why your students have to know what *you* teach, rather than what your colleague down the hall teaches.

If you use specifics to elucidate general principles – the universals of history! – first, you are very brave indeed. But second, couldn't you teach those universals in the context of recent history and current events, i.e. in the context most meaningful to your students?

Again, if a student wants to learn about, say, early medieval Spain, he or she certainly will. But if you force history on people, they may end up agreeing more with Henry Ford than George Santayana: "History is bunk!"

The Human Sciences

Political Science, Economics, Geography, Sociology, Anthropology, and Psychology occasionally find their way into at least the "restricted electives" portion of a General Education program. Rather than address each one individually, let me focus – to be fair – on my own field, Psychology.

As a psychologist I find, for example, Freud's works filled with profound insights into human nature, and Skinner's with sharp criticisms of arm-chair psychology. But my freshman Psychology students are simply not sophisticated enough to separate the wheat from the chaff.

Much of what we teach them is, in fact, very uncertain and occasionally simply wrong. Behaviorism, for example, is dead. We all know it. But we persist in teaching our students that learning is a matter of conditioning. But ask yourself: When was the last time you learned something because of a reinforcement. Even rats learn without reinforcement.

Or take Freud. Few women spend their lives compensating for their lack of male genitalia. Likewise, other than not whittling in the nude, I have never taken precautions against castration. Yet we still present penis envy and castration anxiety as legitimate hypotheses!

On the other hand, in our compulsive desire to be a "real" science, we worship the experimental method and statistics, and force our students to do likewise. (A recent study showed psychology majors more conversant in these matters than physics and chemistry majors!) So, when we are not teaching unsupported theories, we are teaching endless little experiments with next to no relevance to real life. Our lack of progress would seem to show that the control, quantification, and reductionism required by the experimental method is ill suited to our subject matter.

The truth is, we don't know much. We don't know what's genetic and what's learned. We can't even predict behaviors as dramatic as suicide. Our advice to parents and teachers is often downright contradictory. We have a hard time helping neurotics, much less schizophrenics or criminals. Why should *anyone* be required to take Psychology?

Beyond specific disciplines

Instead of more vicious attacks on defenseless disciplines, let me ask a few more general questions:

(1) If liberal education is intended to prepare students for active, responsible citizenship, shouldn't this have been taken care of in high school? The most important tool of citizenship – the vote – comes to us at the tender age of 18, i.e. before the "proper preparation" of a college education. And only about 20 % of Americans complete college. Are we to deny proper preparation for citizenship to the great majority of the population?

For all its rigidity and classism, the Western European systems at least provide their future citizens with what they deem to be a proper preparation for citizenship *prior* to college – and only our defensive pride prevents us from acknowledging the relative quality of that education.

Those that do go on to college may then concentrate on learning their chosen disciplines with all the dedication that anyone gives their chosen discipline.

(2) Another question: How does an authoritarian higher education – i.e. one which prescribes, to adult students, what they should and shouldn't take – prepare one for the life of a free citizen? How does one learn to make choices when one is not allowed to choose? How does one learn judgement? Responsibility?

Maybe this is one of the roots of the problem: We grew up with our educational choices made for us. In this way, we learned that nobody should be trusted to decide such serious issues for themselves, that decisions should be left to professionals, to authorities. Now, authorities ourselves, we send the same messages to our own students.

People are all too ready to surrender their freedom. Freedom is, after all, a terrible burden.

(3) Modern higher education devotes enormous energy and concern to the problem of motivation. I've spent many hours at workshops that focussed primarily on things like "don't stand still behind a lectern" and "throw a cartoon onto the overhead once in a while." If I were giving one of those workshops, I'd just show them an episode of Sesame Street. All the techniques are there.

But many professors – justifiably – say "hey! I'm a teacher, not a stand-up comedian. Shouldn't students be paying attention because they *want* to learn my discipline?" I think they're right: The question is "why don't they want to learn my discipline?"

And the answer is simple: People are not motivated to learn that which is not relevant to their lives. We should seek to find what is relevant to their lives, and motivation will take care of itself.

(4) And that leads right into a fourth question: If our goals are better citizens and better human beings, why do we not require things that would seem rather clearly relevant?

As William Svoboda pointed out at an International Society for Exploring Teaching Alternatives conference a few years ago, shouldn't we all know first aid and CPR? Personal finance? Basic law? Nutrition? How about basic medical diagnosis? Home and car maintenance? Typing? General problem solving and decision making? Relaxation techniques? Study techniques? Using libraries? Dealing with interpersonal conflict? Using personal computers? I'm sure you can come up with more. But they are rarely found on lists of required courses.

Back to the point

I believe that we have instituted general education programs and other course requirements primarily because of our love of tradition, our personal affection for certain subjects, our desire to ensure a continuing demand for our services, our debts to colleagues in other disciplines, and our images of ourselves as authorities. The true values of these programs and requirements are purely conjectural.

How can we justify having people spend one or two years of their lives doing things the values of which are purely conjectural? Or, to put it in a more constructive form, how do we go about demonstrating the value of courses we ask people to take? If a student asks "why do I have to take this?" we really should be able to answer.