1-1-1989

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Access to a Vision: Unlocking the Paradox of a Liberal Education

STEPHEN ROWE

Students opt for a bachelor's degree, rather than one of the other preparations for life and work — vocational or technical programs, the military or corporate training. And they are doing so in amazing numbers, defying demographic studies which continually predict a downturn in college enrollment. One factor accounting for this seems to be the promise of some added benefit from a bachelor's degree, something more than is offered by the other options, something like a liberal education.

Institutions make promises in this direction. Increasingly they advertise themselves, claiming their approach will result in such vague virtues as "well-roundedness." Again, if you scratch the surface of such claims and begin to inquire as to what these institutions mean, the term liberal education reappears as the operative ideal.

Yet very few students or institutions are clear or specific about this term, and how it is linked to what they actually do. Present cultural circumstances make it extremely difficult to be clear and specific about things having to do with deep or basic concerns, even in the midst of an apparent nation-wide revival of commitment to education. But clarity about what a liberal education means and how, in the specifics of actual study, one is to move towards its achievement is essential. Otherwise it is not a real option.

My thesis is that most students at most institutions do have an option: they can either go to school, get a degree, and miss a liberal education; or they can spend the same time and money and become liberally educated. And yet they do not have a choice in this crucial matter unless they realize that a choice exists. In this essay I want to offer some understanding that might enable us (both students and faculty alike) to find and choose for a liberal education, as well as some awareness of why this is so difficult in the present, and some sense of what is at stake.

Sorting through the various and sometimes conflicting claims, one finds at least three levels of understanding (sometimes presented as alternatives) as to what a liberal education means. These are described below, as well as the benefits associated with each.

Substance

A liberal education means becoming a generalist, rather than only a specialist, though it does not necessarily preclude specialized study or even some career preparation dur-
ing the college years. It has to do with coverage, content, becoming familiar at least to some degree with all areas of human knowledge and endeavor. Beyond this it means that the student also considers the interdependent unity of knowledge and endeavor in the broad context of the drama of human history or civilization. And, whether the institution has a “core curriculum” or not, a liberal education implies awareness of the core of common ideas, problems, and aspirations which have been at the center of culture.

The benefits of a liberal education at this level are several. First, one acquires broad familiarity with the workings of the world, as a basis for informed action, in work and in one's life as a citizen, as well as a personal sense of being at home in one's time and place in history. Second, this “common knowing” provides a basis for communication and a sense of significance that can be shared with others; it makes possible entrance into a common world.

Finally, and most basically, a liberal education serves as a catalyst for a quality of character referred to as “empowerment” or “entitlement.” Most people think and act in a derivative or secondary way, always assuming that someone else knows or is in a better position to decide. A liberal education gives direct access to the roots of one's culture, its basic sources, its energizing ideas and values. And this has the consequence of enabling one to move from the secondary to a primary attitude, to the realization — one which is initially negative — that those others to whom one had deferred in the past do not necessarily know any better how to interpret a situation and what action it requires. In a positive frame, direct knowledge of root visions and authorities makes it possible for the liberally educated person to live and act out of knowledge of these primary sources, rather than being at the mercy of what Plato refers to as “the opinions of the many”. The student has been enabled to cross a critical threshold, from the passive to the active stance.

Process

To be liberally educated means that one has learned how to learn, that the art of learning on an ongoing, life-long basis has been developed and fully incorporated. From this perspective, students attend classes, complete assignments, and receive academic guidance until they are no longer dependent on these structures. Once educational independence and the rootedness of learning as a basic human function has been established, the student becomes an independent learner and is ready to graduate.

This involves not only “book learning” and academic work in the narrow sense, but the nurturing of intellectual skills in the classroom that will continue to develop. He is not just a consumer in the world of information, but a fairly articulate producer.

The benefits of this process (when the a student is ready) are several. We live in a world of accelerated change, and when we graduate we can still know more than most of the people we meet. But at a level of core knowing, the person is the one who has the potential to be a leader from the rest of us.

Synthesis

A liberal education is by nature a process, ongoing and evolving, and it is not a matter of learning to study something else but of the student who learns to study the art of learning. Here we can see the synthesis between educational knowledge and educational practice, the identity between the two must be maintained.

Here we can see the synthesis between educational knowledge and educational practice, the identity between the two must be maintained. Some institutions of higher education, and some “classical studies” programs in the human sciences, are examples of this, which can be seen as a synthesis between educational knowledge and educational practice. In them and the art of learning.
Some discipline of transformation is needed

but the nurture of qualities beyond the classroom as it is usually envisioned. In fact, the classroom is understood as a sort of greenhouse where basic critical faculties can develop. Hence one learns to “read” not just books but life experience and situations in the world. One learns discussion, and thereby critical discernment and the arts of analysis, interpretation, and communication. And one learns to write, to fully and fairly articulate both what someone else has said and one’s own response.

The benefits of this approach, in a time of rapid social and technological change (when the average person undergoes several career changes over a lifetime), are evident. We live in a world where static bodies of knowledge are rapidly rendered obsolete, and where the skills of success are primarily those of adaptation and relation. But at a level deeper than survival and success on the job, the truly distinguished person is the one who exhibits practical judgment. This is precisely the quality that develops from the repeated practice of liberal inquiry.

Synthesis of Substance and Process: Dialogue Between the Two

A liberal education requires both substance and process, each balanced with the other and related to the growth of the student. For substance without process degenerates into rote learning that makes no real contact with the person, while process without substance involves into mere technique divorced from depth. (In fact, most of the educational — and cultural — history of this century can be understood as an oscillation between these two approaches, accounting for much of the frustration in our continuous efforts at educational reform.) The key to the third approach of synthesis is that substance and process can occur fully only in the presence of the other, and that both must be related to the development of a mature human being.

Here we come upon what many refer to as the full magnificence of the Western tradition and its vision of what it means to be human. Human beings, unlike other forms of life with which we are familiar, do not simply appear or unfold naturally. Some intervention, some discipline of transformation is needed. The tradition of liberal education, as a distinctive Western form of intervention, maintains that some materials — some “classics,” not only inform but also transform. In these materials, insight about the human condition and the nature of reality occurs at a high level, and in a way which can induce positive growth toward full actualization.

But these materials cannot be merely asserted or applied to the student; they must be approached and handled in the proper way. First, classical materials must be read openly and deeply, independent of the bias and assumption we inevitably bring to them and through which we initially view them. Hence access to materials is always
a pedagogical issue, access to simply seeing or hearing what is there. Second, our own
response to them is necessary, fulfilling the Socratic injunction to “Know Thyself.”
This we achieve not in introspection or some other kind of isolation, but in dialogue
with materials of substance; having seen what is there we must then formulate what
we think in response.

Liberal education, then, moves between phases of reading — again, in the broad
sense — and response, each time at a higher level. The classroom consists primarily
of the intervening stage of discussion, which formally begins in reading and ends in
response, but which actually works the art of separating the two, since any discussion
of materials begins with an amorphous mix of inadequate reading and superficial
response and proceeds to the fullness of each in dialogue with the other. Here lies
the challenge of teaching.

The benefits of this approach are nothing less than the formation of the fully human
person. Taking its rise from Socratic encounter, the practice of dialogue or dialectic
can be seen as both the method and the goal of liberal education. The method, engaging
in successively higher levels of reading and response, is described above. The goal is
two sided: on one side it is well captured by Thoreau’s statement that the ability to
give “a true account of the actual is the rarest form of poetry;” on the other side stands
“Know Thyself.” Paradox is inescapable in this, the basic human paradox of openness
and definiteness. In order to be fully human we need to be open, to have “an open
mind,” a clear mind, to fairly and fully hear what others are saying; yet without being
so open, as Alan Bloom says, that “our brains fall out.” On the other side, we also
need to be definite, to take a stand or a position, to be committed and able to work
toward the achievement of ends in which we passionately believe. And yet on this
side we must guard against taking a position in a way that is doctrinaire or fanatical.
The paradox is that openness and definiteness come into their proper function only
when each is engaged in the presence of the other, within the essential dynamic of
the fully human encounter. This dynamic is at the root of both Greek democracy
and Hebrew “right relationship.” The aim of a liberal education is to make this possible.

There are serious constraints in our time, both in society and in educational
institutions, against any of these approaches to a liberal education.

First, we live in an age of specialization, where inducements and rewards are geared
to expertise in narrowly defined fields. Many educational institutions reflect this structuring as they attempt to prepare students for what they call the “real world.” The
danger is that education degenerates into training. With this orientation it is inevita-
ble that “real world” environments — experience, not indoctrination — should form the way
in which students are exposed to and are predisposed to liberal education.

Related to this are the constraints upon students and educators alike to adopt the
perspective of the power structure. There is no promise of individualism in the manner
by the Nazi concentration camps and the Soviet Gulag. Paradox is inescapable in these
cases as well.

At a deeper level, we find that we live in a world that is divided into two competing
conceptions of the human being: an open and understanding, accepting, and
supremely intelligent one, and a closed, dogmatic, and intolerant one. Both cannot
exist simultaneously, since the foundation of nature is “two-sided,” as every
philosopher, every teacher, every educated human being knows. Not being able to
strike a proper balance between these two concepts makes it almost impossible to
achieve the goals of liberal education, including the cultivation of open and
deriving minds.

One final consideration is the belief that the values of society are
independent of the context within which they exist. This is very problematic
considering the nature of human values. Once we adopt a
philosophy that values the individual as much as the collective, then we
are forced to accept the legitimacy of actions that are motivated by
considerations other than the common good. This is a serious
hindrance to the development of a truly liberal education.
This causes liberal education to become invisible

...
seriousness.

The combined consequence of these constraints, again, is that liberal education is not visible or available to students (and one could make the same case for many faculty and institutions). The situation is complicated by the fact that students pursuing a baccalaureate degree have to deal with terminology, requirements, and structures related to liberal education. But because of the constraints which I have discussed, they never really cross the critical threshold whereby they have direct experience of the benefits of this discipline. Their institutions do not communicate with them effectively; they are too concerned with specialization and employment; they are too skeptical or well-defended against the possibility of investing themselves in an ideal which will later disappoint them.

Liberal education is a practice, something which can be fully known or understood only from the inside, from the doing of it, in the act itself. In the absence of direct engagement, and in the presence of vague requirements and promises having to do with a liberal education, we breed an unconscious disappointment, a gloomy mood of generalized resentment. Colleges, as much as other institutions — perhaps more because of the high ideals with which they are associated — can have the inadvertent effect of teaching students to expect very little in life, to aspire to only the most superficial and material of goals, to become cynical about anything "lofty."

Vision is more than theory; it is that subtle quality which underlies and embraces the tension between theory and practice. It unifies, so that "theory" indicates a way of being rather than merely a way of thinking, and "practice" becomes a doing nourished and disciplined by an encompassing sense of meaning and vivid value.

The vision of a liberal education is not grasppable from the outside, from a detached, merely theoretical perspective. It can only be apprehended from the inside, as an undertaking, an activity. Here lies the problem with the neoconservatives and others who want to assert the substance of a liberal education as against their frustrations with the relativism and career-orientation of the contemporary student (as well as against those contemporary forms of education divorced from vision or theory, where practice degenerates into mere technique). This strategy fails to attend to practice and process, and thus misses the deeper meaning of liberal education as transformation — even if it succeeds to some degree in having students "learn" the classics.

The fullness of a liberal education becomes accessible when we enter into that practice which is dialogue. The paradox of liberal education, again, is that we can only know fully and deeply what others think when we inquire as to what we think as part of the team who we are.
education is still pursued; many faculty teach by pursuing a faculty role related to how they are related to the benefits of direct engagement; they never engage in the benefits of direct engagement positively; they proceed in a critical or well-thought-through way which will later be understood in the process of direct engagement, the process of doing to do, and the process of doing to oneself.

I understand the process of direct engagement to mean two things: the way in which it gives us to ourselves as we give to the other, that energizes.

At this point the paradox of a liberal education is unlocked, so that it becomes a live ideal and transformative practice, rather than either a collection of static concepts or an invitation to do whatever one wants. Reading and responding to the materials of a liberal education can enable us to have a glimpse, through the clouds of our contemporary confusions and illusions, of what it means to be human. And this glimpse is satisfying, decisive; it resonates with our deepest urge to become who we really are. In the full practice of liberal education we are able to discover both the truth and ourselves — and the point of coincidence between the two.

Here also we come to the essential connection between liberal education and civilization itself. For civilization consists neither in the maintenance of certain positions or “substances” as doctrine, nor in the undisciplined “process” of disparate individuals and groups. Rather, it is the vital interplay between the substance of positions from the past and present, each brought to bear on the process of coming into full humanity as it occurs in the present and future. It is in this way that civilization both requires and produces the liberally educated person. Perhaps it is not too much to hope that, as we begin to become liberally educated, we may find it possible to address the constraints that ensnare society now, enabling us to move closer to a civilized world.