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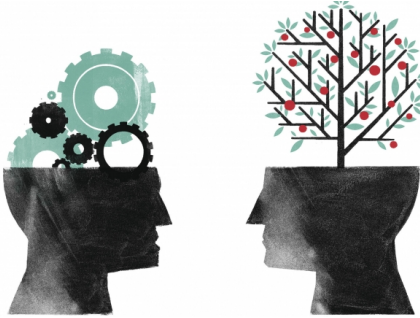
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THE CHRONICLE REVIEW

The False Promise of 'Practical' Education



Keith Negley for The Chronicle Review

By Michael S. Roth | MAY 19, 2014 ✓ PREMIUM

Liberal education is under siege. Educators are scrambling to hold on to liberal-arts traditions in the face of online instruction; critics contend that those traditions do little to prepare students for the high-tech jobs of the 21st century. While these challenges may seem new, brought on by technological and economic change, they

belong at heart to a debate as old as America itself.

But there is a key difference that we ignore at our peril: Today's critics disguise their desire to protect conformity and inequality in the garb of educational reforms that would scrap liberal learning.

From Benjamin Franklin to the Internet pundits, critics of higher education have attacked its irrelevance and elitism—often calling for more useful, more vocational instruction. Franklin skewered learning that took pride in its freedom from labor (in its uselessness) as just a mask for snobbism—learning "to exit a drawing room properly." He went on, though, to propose a compelling version of a broad education that was useful without being narrowly instrumental. Thomas Jefferson thought that nurturing a student's capacity for life-long learning within a university structure was necessary for science and commerce while also being essential for democracy. Neither believed a university should merely train young people for jobs that old folks had already picked out for them.

In the 1800s and early 1900s, battles raged between traditionalists who wanted to preserve what they thought of as the classical core of liberal education (learning to recite Latin and Greek) and moderns who wanted to move higher education in the direction of specialized research bearing on contemporary problems. The growth of the professionalized research university dominated the evolution of higher education in the 20th century, so much so that the most prestigious institutions were increasingly isolated from the work of educating undergraduates. But a liberal education was still viewed as the base upon which further specialization could be built, or a foundation that would allow for a lifetime of learning and a deepening of experience.

The "liberal arts" and "general education"—relevant to undergraduates only—remained contentious topics in a country committed to technological change as an engine for economic development. Still, in the 1967 film *The Graduate*, when the philistine Mr. McGuire says the word "plastics" to the young Benjamin, audiences knew they were supposed to laugh. Despite some ambivalence, at that time educators and much of the public still admired a version of educated well-roundedness and critical thinking, even if they couldn't specify what kind of curriculum enhanced those capacities.

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Over the past several years, however, we have seen a new sort of criticism directed at the academy. These contemporary critics no longer claim to be in search of "true liberal learning," but instead call for an education that simply equips people to play an appropriate role in the economy. Education, from this perspective, is something you purchase; it should be thought of either as an investment or as an "experience" you pay someone else to provide you.

Economists question whether it's worth it for mail carriers to have spent time and money in learning about the world and themselves when they could have been saving for a house. Sociologists wonder whether increased access to college creates inappropriate expectations for a work force that will not regularly be asked to tap into independent judgment and critical thinking. And then there's the cost of a liberal education, its so-called disconnect from the real world, its political correctness. Pundits write that we must make it more relevant, while politicians growl about making it more efficient. Through "disruptive innovation," we are told, liberal learning can be "disintermediated"—a middleman cut out of a market transaction.

Since the founding of this country, education has been closely tied to the ability to think for oneself.

Today, Mr. McGuire would murmur "digital media" or "apps" to a young graduate. But would audiences still laugh?

Since the founding of this country, education has been closely tied to the ability to think for oneself, to avoid conformity, and to contribute to society by unleashing one's creative potential—that is, to individual freedom and hope for the future.

Jefferson, for example, saw education as the key preparation for citizens and as an important weapon in fighting the abuses of wealth and privilege. Despite his many prejudices, he knew that education helps us acknowledge the worth of people and ideas that at first seemed alien.

By the second half of the 1800s, the African-American writers David Walker and Frederick Douglass extended this Jeffersonian vision to those most oppressed. Walker wanted his brethren to seize their freedom, and after his escape from slavery, Douglass reminded all Americans that people strive to learn just as they strive for freedom. Educational institutions should aim to stimulate that hunger for knowledge—not just constrain it within some narrow path destined for yesterday's job market.

As the 20th century began, W.E.B. Du Bois underscored education's role in helping people choose their own destinies: "The function of the university is not simply to teach bread-winning, or to furnish teachers for the public schools, or to be a centre of polite society; it is, above all, to be the organ of that fine adjustment between real life and the growing knowledge of life, an adjustment which forms the secret of civilization."

William James would describe that as "overcoming blindness" and remembering to look for the "whole inward significance" of another's situation. A liberal education should deepen our ability to "animate," as Ralph Waldo Emerson put it, dimensions of the world around us (aspects of nature, culture, enterprise) and not just analyze or criticize them. Emerson wrote that colleges "serve us when they aim not to drill, but to create."

The tradition of pragmatic liberal education in America has also insisted on connecting one's learning to real problems beyond the walls of any campus. Jane Addams, who founded Hull House as a center for immigrants and the poor in Chicago, was the champion of this form of active learning, insisting that we should not merely "lumber our minds with literature," but expand our "sympathetic imagination" and our ability to make a positive difference in the lives of those around us.

In a speech she delivered reflecting on the Pullman strike of 1894, she used the term "affectionate interpretation" to characterize what she hoped people would take from education. The strike was a milestone in American labor relations, but for Addams the events marked the bloody transition away from a paternalistic industrial system in which owners were mini-sovereigns. Addams saw in these events the tragic failure of people from different groups to understand one another. Education, from her perspective, must not merely make us adept at defending ourselves from those with different agendas; it should increase our powers of empathy and our ability to act with others.

In previous times of great social unrest and economic anxiety in the United States, the renewal of liberal learning has helped spawn economic growth, cultural vitality, and a more broadly engaged citizenry. In our age of seismic technological change and instantaneous information dissemination, it is crucial that we not abandon the humanistic foundations of education in favor of narrow, technical forms of teaching intended to give quick, utilitarian results. Those results are no substitute for the practices, sometimes painstaking, of inquiry and critique that enhance students' ability to appreciate and understand the world around them—and to respond innovatively to it. A reflexive, pragmatic liberal education is our best hope of preparing students to shape change and not just be victims of it.

As the philosopher John Dewey argued through much of the 20th century, one can teach subjects with the aim of liberating the students, or one can teach them mechanically simply to train students. Once we drop, as we must, the notion that some people should be educated for leisure and others for work (the notion on which the traditional view of the liberal arts was based), the question becomes only: How can we educate people so that they can continue to learn through inquiry in their private and public lives? For Dewey, liberal education should help us develop the intellectual and moral capacities to imagine a future worth striving for, and to enhance our ability to create the tools for its realization.

Even philosophers as disparate as Allan Bloom, Richard Rorty, and Martha Nussbaum have agreed that liberal education has mattered because, by challenging the forces of conformity, it becomes deeply relevant to our professional, personal, and political lives. That relevance isn't just about landing one's first job; it emerges over the course of one's thinking life. When liberal education works, it never ends.

The calls today for a more efficient, practical college education are likely to lead to the opposite: Men and women who are trained for yesterday's problems and yesterday's jobs, who have not reflected on their own lives in ways that allow them to tap into their capacities for innovation and for making meaning out of their experience. Such an education is not likely to prepare students to translate their intellectual and aesthetic work into effective contributions to their communities.

The calls for "practicality" we are hearing are really calls for conformity, for conventional thinking that will impoverish us.

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