

Thinking About the Good Life:

Meanings and Challenges to the Humanities in the Academy**

Roosevelt Montás *

Columbia University

I believe strongly in the value of general education and in the particular genius of courses based on classic texts that are required of all students. In this paper, I want to discuss the history and rationale for general education, that is, for non-specialized, or liberal education, sometimes also called Core Curricula. Secondly, I want to examine the value and place of general education in today's university. Lastly, I will discuss a particular and extremely successful way of implementing a program of general education: the Columbia College Core Curriculum.

A famous story of the Buddha drawn from the Pali canon provides an excellent framework for understanding why general education in the humanities should be a vital part of the undergraduate curriculum. This passage is called the Simile of the Mountain.

** This paper is adapted from keynote address given at the "3+3+4 Symposia, 3rd Symposium: Core Curriculum" at the University of Hong Kong on May 12, 2009.

* Associate Dean of Academic Affairs, Director of the Center for Core Curriculum, Columbia University.

The setting of the story is that King Pasenadi of Kosala comes to the Buddha and the Buddha asks him, “what have you been doing, great king?” And the king says, you know, doing kingly things, affairs of state and the like. Then the Buddha says to him:

“What do you think, great king? Suppose a man would come to you from the east, one who is trustworthy and reliable, and would tell you: ‘For sure, great king, you should know this: I am coming from the east, and there I saw a great mountain high as the clouds coming this way, crushing all living beings. Do whatever you think should be done, great king.’ Then a second man would come to you from the west . . . a third man from the north . . . and a fourth man from the south, one who is trustworthy and reliable, and would tell you: ‘For sure, great king, you should know this: I am coming from the south, and there I saw a great mountain high as the clouds coming this way, crushing all living beings. Do whatever you think should be done, great king.’ If, great king, such a great peril should arise, such a terrible destruction of human life, the human state being so difficult to obtain, what should be done?”

“If, venerable sir, such a great peril should arise, such a terrible destruction of human life, the human state being so difficult to obtain, what else should be done but to live by the Dhamma, to live righteously, and to do wholesome and meritorious deeds?”

“I inform you, great king, I announce to you, great king: aging and death are rolling in on you. When aging and death are rolling in on you, great king, what should be done?” (Nikaya, 3: 25; I 100–102, in Bhikkhu Bodhi, 2005, p. 26)

I invite you to linger on this question for a moment: “When aging and death are rolling in on you, what should be done?” This is where humanistic study begins, because this is the grounding question of all thoughtful reflection about what it means to be human.

This question—what should be done?—is not unlike the question Socrates asks at the beginning of the *Republic*, the text with which Columbia sophomores begin their academic year. The *Republic* opens with a debate between Socrates and Thrasymachus about the nature of justice. Thrasymachus insists that justice is simply a function of power, and that whoever has the most power determines for everyone else what is just and what is unjust. The intelligent person, argues Thrasymachus, will behave “justly” when necessary to appease power, but disregard norms of “justice” and seek his or her own advantage whenever possible. Having made this argument, Thrasymachus gets ready to leave the discussion, but Socrates stops him pointedly, and begs him to stay, asking “Do you think it is a small matter to determine which whole way of life would make living most worthwhile for each of us?” (Plato, 1992, p. 21) And *that*, is the fundamental question of the *Republic*—“What kind of life is most worth living?” It is the founding question of philosophy, of religion, and of humanistic study; another version of the Buddha’s question to King Pasenadi: “When aging and death are rolling in on you, what should be done?”

The question is not merely philosophical. “What whole way of life is most worth living?” is a question we all have to answer—no one can escape it—and no one can answer it on our behalf. Each of us has to answer the question for ourselves. And more, it is not a question one can answer theoretically; it’s a question one has to answer in practice. It’s a *practical* question. How do we live well? What is the good life and how do we attain it?

To repeat myself, this question, as large as life itself, is the subject of humanistic study and it constitutes the platform from which we pursue all other further forms of study. Humanistic studies teach us to live well, so that when we come to die, to quote Henry David Thoreau, we don't discover that we have not lived.¹

Some might object that it is not the place of a college education to raise these questions; that this type of thinking is suitable for private education in the family, or for the pastoral function of a church or spiritual community, but not for the modern-day knowledge-driven enterprise that is the university. Indeed, today's university seems to be animated by an impetus in the opposite direction of these questions—an impetus away from contemplation of the human meanings of the life of the mind. Today's university, one might say, has no time for existential questions; its mission is driven by what we can know, what we can quantify, what we replicate, and what predict. This is an age of knowledge and the university is its shrine.

I want to address this line of thinking by looking back at the rise of the research university.

To put it in its most elementary terms, the driving force behind the rise of the research university and the concomitant explosion of knowledge that characterizes our age, is science. Beginning in the 1860s with the creation of Land Grant Colleges in the United States—which had a Congressional mandate to study and develop agricultural techniques—the story of the last 150 years of American higher education is the story of the rise of the sciences and the dominance of the scientific model of research. The vast research

1 See Thoreau, 1983, p. 135. It was originally published in 1854 with the title *Walden, or Life in the Woods*.

enterprise that emerges as the modern university is focused not on the training of young men—as the American Colonial colleges were—but rather is devoted to the production and accumulation of new knowledge—always with a partial eye to the national economy and to national defense.

In the United States, the mid-19th century brought a decisive re-orientation of higher education away from the goal of introducing young people to the most important ideas of the past and present. The new trend in higher education—modeled on the great German research universities—was specialization, scientific accumulation of knowledge, and forward motion.

The impact of this re-orientation on undergraduate curricula in America was quick and decisive. In 1869, Harvard's young President, Charles W. Eliot (1834–1926) set the tone by introducing the elective system at Harvard College. The elective system eliminated the common classical curriculum at Harvard and allowed students to pursue areas of concentration that were suited to their tastes and talents. Among other important changes, Eliot's elective system allowed faculty to teach only within their specialty, creating the conditions for focused and sustained pursuit of specialized questions within academic departments. This system of elective courses offered within departmental specialties is still, more or less, what Harvard calls its Core Curriculum or, more recently, its Program in General Education.

Eliot's intuition that the education of the young in the lockstep classical curriculum had become obsolete in a fast changing, knowledge-driven world, proved correct by its own success, re-invigorating Harvard College and, indeed, introducing modernity into American higher education as a whole. A scientist himself, Eliot brought into the undergraduate curriculum the paradigm of cumulative growth in knowledge that characterizes scientific progress. He noted

this link when defending the system of electives: “It is one of the most important functions of universities to store up the accumulated knowledge of the race, and so to use these stores that each successive generation of youth shall start with all the advantages which their predecessors have won” (Eliot, 1898, p.143). Eliot introduced a desperately needed revolution in American undergraduate education, placing the production and accumulation of knowledge squarely inside the college mission.

But humanistic knowledge is of a different sort than the scientific knowledge that informed Eliot’s paradigm of accumulation and progress. When it comes to humanistic learning, we cannot stand on the shoulders of giants. The most we can do with great figures of the past is to look up at them and try to engage them in a difficult, human dialogue. Knowledge, in the humanistic sense, isn’t cumulative—every generation, indeed every individual, has to build it anew for him or herself and test it, not in the classroom or in the laboratory, but in the ordinariness of his or her own human experience.

I want to be very clear here: the specialized orientation of College that Eliot introduced at Harvard with the elective system and which prevails today in the United States—though still not approaching anything like the specialization of European colleges—has proven its value. Its benefits cannot be disputed. But the focus on academic disciplines in college also left a deep vacuum of self-reflection with regard to the meaning and social function of education—a vacuum most acutely felt by advocates of liberal education. Humanists in the academy continued to feel that an important function of college was to introduce young people to the study of history, literature, philosophy, the arts, and, most importantly, to the idea of

knowledge pursued for its own sake, separate from its practical application. So together with the move towards academic specialization at the undergraduate level, there were those who, in the tradition of the religious mission of early colleges in America, felt that a college education ought to enrich the inner life of the student, not simply fit him or her for the economic activity of the marketplace or the academic pursuits of graduate programs.

What I am describing here is an old tension, as old, at least, as the quarrel between Poetry and Philosophy that was already old when Plato referenced it at the end of the *Republic*. Wherever the education of the young is at stake, and particularly in the crucial developmental transition from adolescence to adulthood, two principles are in competition: the principle of a liberal education and the principle of professional specialization. Every undergraduate institution must find its own unique balance between these poles, one that emerges and can subsist within its own particular ecosystem of traditions and organizational structures.

One famous instance on this debate between liberal and applied study happened in America just at the turn of the century between the two great African-American leaders: W. E. B. DuBois (1868–1963) and Booker T. Washington (1856–1915). Coming out of the period of chattel slavery in America, Washington advocated a practical education for blacks, one focused on learning the trades and achieving economic self-sufficiency. DuBois, a graduate of Harvard and the recipient of the first Ph.D. awarded by that institution to a black man, had a more expansive conception of education. In *The Souls of Black Folks* (1903), he argued for an education based on “the determination to realize for men, both black and white, the broadest possibilities of life,” adding with typical elegance that “the true

college will ever have one goal—not to earn meat, but to know the end and aim of that life which meat nourishes” (DuBois, 1994, p. 51).

DuBois was not alone in seeing the purely instrumental approach to education as a soul-devouring trap. Jesus famously asked: “Is not life more than meat, and the body more than raiment” (Matthew 6:25, King James Version)? Today, one can take the form of Jesus’ question and bring it closer to home by asking, is not learning more than the accumulation of facts, and education more than increasing one’s earning potential?

Along the lines of DuBois, I submit that education, true education, involves personal transformation. In addition to the mastery of particular bodies of knowledge, college must be a place of moral education in the deepest sense, education about how to be human, education that fosters habits of self-examination, critical skepticism, and openness to the new. This personal education, of course, has broad social implications.

Writing in 1938 and observing the European build up to the Second World War, Virginia Woolf (1882–1941) saw a clear connection between the professionalization of modern life and the spread of values that lead to war. She felt herself compelled to “doubt and criticize and question the value of professional life—not its cash value; that is great; but its spiritual value, its moral, its intellectual value . . . if people are highly successful in their professions they lose their senses” (Woolf, 1938, p. 72). Her antidote to this danger—which I believe is our responsibility to try to transmit to our students—is to learn how to think:

Let us think in offices; in omnibuses; while we are standing in the crowd . . . let us think at baptisms and marriages and funerals. Let us

never cease from thinking—what is this ‘civilization’ in which we find ourselves? What are these ceremonies and why should we take part in them? What are these professions and why should we make money out of them? Where in short is it leading us, the procession of the sons of educated men (Woolf, 1938, p. 63)?

Let me turn to the special value of general education today. The ultimate goal of humanistic study is self-knowledge. But self-knowledge is not a place or a goal to be reached; it is rather a process to be engaged in. The 17- or 18-year-old student who comes to college today, despite the breathtaking advances of modernity, is not very different with respect to self-knowledge than the 17- or 18-year-old student of 500 or even 1000 years ago—both are facing the same existential predicaments; both feel with special urgency the weight of questions which our accumulated knowledge has not made us better at answering; both stand before the fundamental problems of human existence in the same naked exposure. And it is to this situation that general education addresses itself. When we think about the place of general education in the undergraduate curriculum, this is what we are thinking about. We ask ourselves, “how do we stimulate, encourage, and provoke in our students this process of inner unfolding, this process of fully developing their own humanity? How do we equip students with the tools to organize a worldview and a personality on the basis of which they can meaningfully pursue specialization?”

To summarize the dilemma: the imperative of efficiency pushes us in one direction, while the idea of the irreducible value of self-development pushes us in a different direction. Kant called this irreducible value of

individuals “dignity,” or that which admits of no equivalence; whose value cannot be calculated in an economy of exchange (see Kant, 1997, p. 42). It is the job of general education programs to strike the balance between these competing aims in undergraduate teaching.

Two simultaneous trends characterize the expansion of knowledge in our contemporary society. The first trend is hyper-specialization: a narrowing and a focusing of expertise on ever more precise and technical questions. The second trend is towards complexity: everything has gotten more complex—for instance, we no longer live in a world of predictable Cold War conflicts, the texture of international tensions is now much more complex; climate change is complex; the internet and innovations in information technology are disruptive in ways we don’t understand; the ethical implications of the manipulation of human genes are only beginning to dawn on us, etc.: everywhere we look we find more knowledge and more complexity than we can rationally assimilate.

It is because of this complexity that general education matters today more than ever. Technical knowledge alone is not adequate to prepare students for the actual world in which they will make decisions. General education teaches us to interpret, to formulate sensible answers to problems that admit of no precise solution, to tolerate complexity and ambiguity, to reach judgments that are both rooted in evidence, and take into account our values, emotions, and biases.

Instrumental knowledge, professional and pre-professional, is necessarily framed by ideas and values. As human beings, we do not produce and exercise knowledge a vacuum, but rather within a matrix of values, beliefs, and goals. To give a quick example: financial instruments

and institutions that maximize capital flows and generate wealth are crucial in today's society. But the only question that matters is not how to create wealth; another and more difficult question is that of how to regulate wealth in society in a way that is just and humane. That latter question is a general education question and technical knowledge is of little help in answering it. It is a question, like most great questions in life, that is *situated* in history, in society, in traditions, in values, and only fluency in those areas can give one a framework with which to approach an answer.

I will close by discussing the model of general education with which I am most familiar, the Columbia College Core Curriculum.

In 1880, some eleven years after Eliot's introduction at Harvard of the elective system, Columbia moved in the same direction, making the last two years of a four-year curriculum largely elective and de-emphasizing the study of Greek and Latin. For the next several decades Columbia continued to scale down its requirements in classical studies and to introduce pre-professional specializations. As Columbia College found itself increasingly surrounded by and secondary to a colossal research university, it sought for a way to affirm its identity and consolidate its purpose.

Columbia's answer to the professionalization of undergraduate education was the Core Curriculum, initiated in 1919 as a single year-long course in the foundations of Western civilization. Later, in the 1930s and 40s, Columbia added to that course a year-long sequence in Literature, as well as required courses in Art, and Music. Today, the Columbia Core Curriculum consists of the following six requirements:

1. Introduction to Contemporary Civilization in the West (year-long)
2. Masterpieces of Western Literature and Philosophy (year-long)

3. Masterpieces of Western Art (1 semester)
4. Masterpieces of Western Music (1 semester)
5. Frontiers of Science (1 semester)
6. Global Core Requirement (2 semesters of coursework in non-Western traditions).

Columbia's Core Curriculum has four principal characteristics:

1. **Uniform, required courses.** A student's first and second years are organized around two year-long courses that follow the same syllabus on the same chronological order, so that the entire student body of any given class reads the same books at roughly the same time. In addition to these two year-long courses, students take 1 semester survey courses in Art, Music, and Science, which again follow a common curriculum and meet in small groups.

2. **Study of primary texts.** Whether in philosophy, literature, art, music, or science, each course is organized around the study of primary sources with almost no secondary readings.

3. **Discussion-driven seminars.** The importance of which I will discuss briefly below.

4. **Interdisciplinarity.** Both subject matter and faculty are drawn from multiple disciplines. (It is a rare and precious phenomenon, not widely seen in American universities, for faculty members from different disciplines to come together regularly to discuss the same texts).

I could go on at length about each of these features—the institutional, disciplinary, and administrative challenges that they entail, and also about the extraordinary benefits to the student body, the faculty, and the institution as a whole that this model confers. But rather than expounding each of these characteristics, I will only discuss briefly the third characteristic: the small, discussion-driven seminar.

The Brazilian educator Paolo Freire (1921–1997) introduced a very useful term into pedagogical theory: the “banking” concept of education (see Freire, 1970, chap. 2). The “banking” concept of education describes the model in which the teacher acts as the sole authority and repository of knowledge in the classroom who dispenses it to the students in a one-way channel of communication. This “banking” model is clear in the lecture format and is embodied in the architectural design of the traditional lecture room.

By contrast, in the discussion-driven Core seminar, we understand knowledge as a dynamic psycho-social collaboration between the members of the seminar; something that students and teacher construct together. This builds on the recognition that, unlike the sciences, humanistic knowledge does not grow cumulatively but rather, in the words of Andrew Delbanco “changes its internal proportions.” The discussion-driven seminar recognizes that humanistic learning is not about answers, but about the *process* of questioning; in the seminar, we do not learn answers but learn how to ask better questions. In this conversational investigation of big and enduring ideas, the seminar builds a store of concepts, common references, and shared inferences over the course of dozens of conversations. It is a definite and sometimes group-specific vocabulary that comes to link all of the texts we read; a language that is compatible with and fluent in the specific cultural moment of the class, but which also connects it to the past, and to past approaches of the same questions that impinge on us today. I find it useful to think of this vocabulary as an inter-language of ideas and concepts that, in its best manifestation, synthesizes the past and the present in the lived experience of the seminar group. As alumni of the Core Curriculum testify endlessly, this is how the Core transforms students, transforms their habits of

mind, transforms the psycho-social lenses through which they will experience their lives.

Not to push the Columbia model too hard, but let me add, in passing, that a version of this process I have described among students and teachers in the small, discussion-driven seminar happens among the faculty members who teach outside their specialty and come into contact with colleagues from different departments who are teaching the same texts to students at the same level. The benefits this brings to individual faculty and to the institution's faculty culture are impossible to overstate.

Let me end with a quick point about a challenge facing all of us involved in general education. It is the utilitarian challenge. It is notoriously difficult to communicate the value of a humanistic education to a general public and to institutional decision-makers who have not experienced it for themselves. Many humanists have refused to even try. But we need to do it, and we need to do it well, and often. Moreover, we have good arguments, good evidence, and, as I have tried to argue, a propitious historical situation in which to make the argument for the enduring value of humanistic learning. When thinking about this, I am reminded of the story of Physicist Robert Wilson, who when testifying before Congress about a particle accelerator, responded to a question about how the accelerator would help in national defense by saying that the accelerator would be among the things that made the country worth defending.

General education is important not because of the past, but because of the present. Assessing the stability of markets, identifying the consequential features of a new policy, imagining the human implications of theoretical models, and most crucially, conceiving how an idea looks from someone

else's point of view... all these are things that cannot be taught by the transmission of specialized bodies of knowledge; nor are they things that we as a higher education community can step away from and think of as someone else's responsibility. The responsibility is ours, and the only way to meet it is through a serious, unapologetic, and sustained commitment to general education.

References

- Bhikkhu Bodhi. (2005). *In the Buddha's words: An anthology of discourses from the Pali canon*. Boston, MA: Wisdom.
- DuBois, W. E. B. (1994). *The souls of black folk*. New York, NY: Dover.
- Eliot, C. W. (1898). *Educational reform: Essays and addresses*. New York, NY: Century; De Vinne Press.
- Freire, P. (1970). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. New York, NY: Continuum.
- Kant, I. (1997). *Groundwork of the metaphysics of morals*. Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press.
- Plato. (1992). *The Republic* (G. M. A. Grube & C. D. C. Reeve, Trans.). Indianapolis, IN: Hackett.
- Thoreau, H. D. (1983). *Walden, and civil disobedience*. New York, NY: Penguin Books.
- Woolf, V. (1938). *Three guineas*. Orlando, FL: Harcourt.

