

An Ancient Approach to Education for the Post-Modern World

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Abstract

What kind of higher education will allow us to meet the challenges of a 21st century economy? Though we are repeatedly told that we need to produce more specialists in STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Math), the best education suited to our age is a well-rounded, liberal education in natural science and the humanities. Looking backward to Ancient Greece, we introduce and explain the history of liberal arts education. The model of that form of education, adapted to the demands of the modern world, can be found at St. John's College, which requires a general education in the tradition of Western great books. That education cultivates the habits of virtue, of discussion, of translation, writing, experimentation, mathematical demonstration, and musical analysis to train students to become highly adaptable, creative thinkers around complex problems. Paradoxically, it is the oldest education in the arts of understanding that, as our pioneers in the fields of technology and entrepreneurship have demonstrated, will prepare students to be "future-proof" in the uncertain economy of the future.

1. Introduction

The Greek god Hermes, or Mercury in Latin, was the swift-footed messenger of the gods. Carrying a staff entwined, and with winged feet, he travelled at the speed of thought. Hermes was the god of commerce, communication, and travel.

Today, we live in the world of Hermes. The internet allows information to travel with the velocity of thought across a nearly boundless globe. This development has had deep and lasting effects on the economy, which is now dominated by information-centered businesses. It is often noted that, by contrast to the past, the cost of transferring that information is negligible. Information is made valuable only insofar as we can master the capacities for understanding, conceptualizing, and using it. In fact, after Hermes, we might say that our "mercurial" economy rewards those who can become god-like in their capacity for analytical mastery of otherwise meaningless information.

This creates substantial challenges for educators, who are the engines for the global economy. The nature of educational institutions is to change only slowly. When change does occur, it is generally reactive. This has been especially true of universities. Our universities are now in the business of inventing new fields to catch up with technological and economic developments. But what is little recognized is that the era of the college major, in which students specialize in a field

that may indeed become “outdated” by the time they graduate, is over. Although employers use the degree as a sorting mechanism, they find that those educated according to majors lack the capacities to succeed at their jobs. The demand for students of true self-confidence and creativity before the unknown has never been greater.

The information age has made our lives more efficient but also much more unpredictable. According to Jayson Abel and Richard Dietz of the Federal Reserve Bank of New York, only 27 percent of college graduates have a job related to their major (Plummer, 2013). In 2006, the United States Government verified that 30% of workers in America were self-employed and the software company Intuit claims that the number will balloon to 40% by 2020 (Neuner, 2013). And we still have not been able to anticipate the effect of artificial intelligence or automation on the workforce of the future.

What is clear is that thinking of university-level education as preparation for specific jobs, which could be called the “guild model,” is becoming increasingly problematic, if not futile. With the rise of majors in the late 19th century, graduates were trained to fit into predictable and highly lucrative and secure professions. The system was dominated by those who were deemed to be “experts,” or those who had monopolized access to the technical arts associated with the professions. Employers drove the system: whatever the economy demanded, higher education would have to adapt. However, we have seen that this mode of thinking about higher education is rife with many pitfalls and problems. For one, human beings are independent wholes whose working life is not hermetically sealed from other endeavors. When humans are trained to think and act only as narrow instruments who are fitted only for one task, they become, as Max Weber wrote, “[s]pecialists without spirit” and “sensualists without heart” (Weber, 2001, p. 124). Entrepreneurship stalls. Men and women continue to think in constricted and unimaginative ways. The economy and growth grind to a halt.

Men and women who are not diminished by their education, but improved by it, fully realize their humanity in its creative and imaginative energies. Those educated deeply in the past can see new problems and figure out their roots or causes. They also become more humane through the understanding of their fellow man, their cities, and their civil institutions. Indeed, they can become aware of the full height of human happiness and seek to live a life of excellence, both economically and otherwise. It is not an overstatement to say that almost all those who are the most dynamic creators of capital today, both human and economic, seek to enhance their capacities of understanding rather than add to their technical knowledge. They learn to think beyond their own disciplines and even their own times, places, and cultures.

2. A Recovery of an Ancient Model

We in the United States have begun to wake up to the problem of narrow, instrumental education. Recently, the National Education Association, the largest professional interest group for

educators in America, established the Partnership for 21st Century Education. After careful analysis from a wide range of sources, this initiative determined that there are four essential meta-skills that must be developed for success in our rapidly evolving world. These attributes have been designated the Four C's: critical thinking, communication, collaboration, and creativity (NEA, 2019). What is incredible about this finding is that these capacities are the very same that are cultivated by the holistic liberal arts tradition whose spirit emerged from ancient Greece.

We can see evidence of this by turning to a powerful example in Google, perhaps the world's most iconic and powerful technology company. In 2013, Google, which was founded by computer scientists Sergey Brin and Larry Page, found surprisingly that technical education in the STEM disciplines (Science, Technology, Engineering and Math) was not the best preparation for success in the industry. This is contrary to the expectation Brin and Page set for themselves. When they founded Google, they were of the resolute conviction that "only technologists can understand technology" (Strauss, 2017). This conviction caused them to strongly prefer hiring only computer scientists with top grades from elite technical universities, like MIT and Caltech. After having commissioned a full review of their hiring, firing, and promotion practices since 1998, they found that STEM expertise came in last as a predictor of success at the company. According to journalist Valerie Strauss, "[t]he seven top characteristics of success at Google are all soft skills: being a good coach; communicating and listening well; possessing insights into others (including others different values and points of view); having empathy toward and being supportive of one's colleagues; being a good critical thinker and problem solver; and being able to make connections across complex ideas," (2017). They started to prefer to hire liberal arts college graduates.

In producing these capacities and qualities of character—perhaps we should call them "virtues"—there is no substitute for an education in the great books produced by the profoundest sources of the key human traditions. Those sources together reflect the full range of human opinions, modes and varieties of communication, and all of the most abiding and significant human ideas. In reading them, one acquires an education that is as broad as it is deep. A student in them learns to see the world through the eyes of thinkers, artists, and creators who themselves saw further and deeper than their contemporaries. He acquires the conditions of mind and of heart for entrepreneurship. An education according to majors, in which students are trained to think and see the world according to their disciplines and in accord with scholarly "paradigms," stultifies students; it makes them assimilate everything they see in the world according to their predetermined opinions. What we need now is a refashioning of the ancient liberal arts model, which united the humanities and sciences, in one absorbing pursuit of human wisdom.

Holistic liberal arts education is rooted in traditions of Ancient Greece. It is derived from the insight that to understand who we are as human beings shaped by the opinions of others, we need to examine them and study their foundations. Studying the foundations of our opinions means for us studying those thinkers in the tradition who express them with the most comprehensive and profound originality. In so doing, the world that we take for granted, the world that is of concern for

us, becomes radically unfamiliar and new. We learn to question what we know and think we know. We learn to ask why and what a thing is. We relearn to ask questions rather than assume we know what we do not know. The world may become alien, but filled with possibilities. Jacob Klein, who presided over the renaissance of holistic liberal education in the United States, wrote that the study of old and transcendent books is the only means by which we have access to truly creative, original, and critical thinking. According to Klein, this kind of education is the only education which allows us to assess whether what we regard as knowledge and progress are genuine or mere errors:

Animals do not pass on their skills to their progeny in such a way that those skills can accumulate and grow. Man, and only man, does precisely that. His skills and knowledges are many-storied edifices. Each generation adds something to what has been previously built and preserved. We are proud of this fact and call it progress. And, indeed, such progress does exist in definite areas. But this very fact confronts us with the ever-present danger of sedimentation, fossilization, or petrification of our knowledge (Klein, 1985, p. 167).

Liberal arts education can resist ossification of humanity through the art and continued act of questioning. And questions can only emerge when and if radically different points of view from across the disciplines and from across time are brought to bear on an important subject. At the core of liberal arts education is the belief that students are best served not by teaching them narrowly, but by helping them learning how to ask questions of the world around them.

3. St. John's College and the Liberal Arts

At St. John's College, founded in 1696 in Annapolis, Maryland in the United States, this education of the whole person occurs by virtue of invigorating conversation and questioning in a seminar setting. At other institutions, this has become known as the "Socratic method" after Plato's Socrates. But at St. John's, unlike other institutions, we do not proceed by virtue of an "expert" who presides over the questioning of her students who then look to her for the presumed answers. Our professors, or "tutors" as we like to call them, are learners and seekers too. They may have read a book or considered a question many times and for many years. But each and every class presents to them a challenge: regardless of their so-called "expertise," they are required to transcend what they think they know in the direction of re-opening questions assumed to be answered. The primary mode is of an intense reading of texts as means of coming to greater self-awareness.

The St. John's curriculum, which is known simply as "The Program," has as its end, therefore, the acquisition of the arts or capacities of understanding. As Peter Marber, a prominent Wall Street professional and public intellectual relates:

[The St. John's] curriculum is carefully designed not only to build knowledge, but also to understand how knowledge is ultimately created; it is teaching students *how to learn*. In this respect, St. John's students de facto major in *epistemology*. And for those of us who never studied Ancient Greek (a St. John's requirement for two years), epistemology is the

philosophy of knowledge, or the investigation of what distinguishes substantiated and supportable belief from mere opinion (Marber, 2017).

At St. John's, we get at this question through the reading of nearly two-hundred texts across four years (the full curriculum is available on the St. John's website). All our students follow the same course of study. In the first year, they focus primarily on texts from ancient Greece, encompassing philosophy, literature, history, mathematics, the sciences, as well as music. In a given week, therefore, their reading might include Plato's *Symposium*, Euclid's *Elements*, Plutarch's *Lives*, and Lucretius' *On the Nature of Things*, all while studying the ancient Greek language. The second year proceeds from Rome into the medieval period and the Renaissance, and readings include Virgil's *Aeneid*, Augustine's *Confessions*, the plays of Shakespeare, and Copernicus' *On the Revolution of Spheres*. The third year moves from the Renaissance through the Enlightenment, with students studying the French language and reading such works as Cervantes' *Don Quixote*, Descartes' *Meditations*, Huygens' *Treatise on Light*, Moliere's *Misanthrope*, and Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*. And in the final year, the Program moves into the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, with students encountering Goethe's *Faust*, Lobachevski's *Theory of Parallels*, Dostoevsky's *Brothers Karamazov*, William James' *Psychology*, selected papers of Einstein, and Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*.

All of these texts, whether mathematical, scientific, philosophical or literary, are discussed in lively seminar settings, where students are compelled to probe the underlying questions that animate each author and to think carefully about how each text relates to others on the Program. By mandating that students study what are the enduring texts of our tradition, St. John's does not aim to produce a worshipful or slavish deference to the impressive achievements of the past. Rather, by studying all of these texts together and in the same sequence, students are compelled to deliberate, converse, and argue over the meaning of the texts in question. They are tasked with becoming active participants in the great conversation that has shaped our thoughts and ideas. They are asked to prepare themselves to judge it as rational beings. And this great burden elicits an experience of wonder, of coming to terms with the vanity or hubris that makes impossible collaborative and creative thinking. Students therefore do not descend from their classrooms to the dorms with the academic content of their lives cordoned off from their social, moral, or religious lives. Their education makes them more sensitive and doggedly analytical than their peers. In fact, St. John's graduates often report becoming the person in their organization or field who excels at probing assumptions and unearthing overlooked issues or problems.

4. St. John's College and International Educational Culture

We stand at a moment of the renaissance of this ancient model. Across the United States and the world, we see more and more students, parents, educators, and policy makers sense that something has been lost in the development of our educational approaches. Our students have access

to the entire world in their pocket, yet know less and less how to wonder about that world. They feel an ineffable sense of longing for meaning. They desire to answer the question, “Who or what should I be and why?”

Just in the past twenty years in the United States, many radical new experiments in education have emerged to meet this need. In the United States, where much of education is still very instrumental and narrow, thousands of parents have stood up and demanded liberal education for their children. The American “classical education movement,” which is responsible for hundreds of public, private, and religious primary and secondary schools across the United States, has introduced countless children to the power of reading great books. St. John’s has supported this movement by showing that such an ancient education in the post-modern world is not only possible, but also successful at producing highly employable and dynamic graduates. St. John’s has also played a more direct role by supplying the classical education movement with hundreds of teachers, administrators, and intellectual leaders.

While the St. John’s approach to liberal education emerged from and in the West, its spirit and particular mode could be adapted to and integrated with other traditions. In fact, St. John’s has been approached by parties interested in adapting our curriculum at universities in the United Kingdom, Romania, Australia, and even in Korea. In addition, just in the last decade, our international student enrollment—from countries as far off as Nigeria, Moldova, Nepal, and China—swelled from a negligible amount to twenty percent. These “foreign” countries are no longer as foreign as they once were, for we are increasingly living in a world touched and influenced by Western sources. According to Dean of St. John’s in Santa Fe, Walter Sterling, Jr.,

[An international student’s] social, political and economic world, like my own, has been shaped by Hobbes and Rousseau, Hegel and Marx, even as her physics and technology have been shaped by Newton and Einstein. Of course, other cultures and traditions have their own distinct rich, nuanced perspectives on the roots of our shared modern world, but in 2019, there is no meaningful sense in which Western thinkers, texts and ideas are any more rightfully mine than hers (Sterling, Jr., 2019).

At St. John’s, the great books are not treated as the product of any particular civilization or appropriate only to a particular people. In fact, what makes books great lies in their ability to transcend their times and cultures to reflect a deeper and broader humanity. St. John’s therefore recognizes that the West has no monopoly on human wisdom or that it is of great prejudice to assume its superiority. Seeking to integrate other traditions and learn from other peoples, St. John’s created a post-graduate program in Eastern Classics, featuring the traditions of East and South Asia. Students study either Sanskrit or Classical Chinese and read Confucius, Chuang Tzu, the Bhagavad Gita, and more, all with an eye to dialogue and comparison between traditions on key human questions. This comparative approach, which employs the same method as our undergraduate program, provides yet another way for students to begin to think about what shapes us as distinct

civilizations. In other words, it provides yet another avenue for students to think critically about their own tradition, to communicate across traditions, and to nourish the habits of creative insight.

5. Conclusion

Often it is the case that you can better see and understand yourself by looking at the world through another's eyes. No clearer an image of St. John's and the ancient model was presented than by an outsider, the American editorial columnist Frank Bruni, who in September 2018 published a story on St. John's College in the *New York Times* that struck a nerve. Calling St. John's "[t]he most contrarian college in the country," Mr. Bruni showed how the Four C's predominate precisely because St. John's has bucked the trends that are dominant in modern education. St. John's for Mr. Bruni is a model education for our age because of three characteristic features:

[Tutors] steer winding, soulful discussions that demand engagement. I eavesdropped on several. Three dynamics stood out. The first was how articulate the students were. Something wonderful happens when you read this ambitiously and wallow in this many words. You become agile with them. The second was the students' focus. A group discussing Homer's 'Iliad' spent more than 10 minutes on the phrase — the idea — of someone having his 'fill of weeping.' If digital devices and social media yank people from one trumpet blast to the next, St. John's trains them to hold a note — to caress it, pull at it, see what it can withstand and what its worth. The third dynamic was their humility. They weren't wedded to their initial opinions. They weren't allowed to be. And they moved not toward the best answer but toward better questions. In the "Iliad" and in life, is there any catharsis in revenge? Any resolution in death? Does grief end or just pause? Do wars? Jack Isenberg, a senior, told me that St. John's had taught him how much is unknowable. 'We have to be comfortable in ambiguity,' he said. 'What a gift. What an education.'

These habits of listening, of slow and careful reading and thinking, of questioning—these are the arts of understanding that will energize and sustain the West in its intellectual and economic dimensions. The great authors have given us the resources to flourish. It is now up to us to embrace and use them.

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