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Education versus Training?

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A False Dilemma?

I’ve enjoyed reading the discussion, in Discourse 2:1, of arguments in favour of the preservation of liberal arts curricula in the face of the apparent onslaught of more career-focused instruction. A similar discussion is raging here at Malaspina, and so perhaps all through the community college system in BC, and it is hardly surprising that most of the points that could be raised have indeed already been raised in Discourse. What I propose to do, then, is not to repeat those arguments, but perhaps to restructure and reinforce the overall case of which they are components, and with whose conclusion I am in strong agreement. My ultimate conclusion will be that casting the debate as an opposition between education and training obscures an important argument in favour of liberal education, namely that, whatever its other merits, a liberal education is also, for many students, the best form of employment training.

It seems to me, first of all, that there are two perspectives from which we ought to judge arguments supporting the contention that liberal learning should be granted at least equal, if not greater, emphasis in our post-secondary system. Let me oversimplify outrageously by calling them the “rational” and “rhetorical” perspectives. What I want to suggest is that, in so far as these arguments are to serve in a campaign, of a sort, for the preservation of the liberal arts, it is important that they satisfy two related but different sets of criteria. They must be rationally sound, on the one hand, but also, on the other, rhetorically effective at convincing those who tend to the opposite view.

It is primarily from the second perspective that I am prone to impatience with many educators who argue for the out-and-out superiority of liberal education over vocational training, on the grounds that their objectives are fundamentally distinct, and that those of the academy are infinitely preferable to those of the workshop. Yet arguments of this nature are not immune from rational criticism also.

I think I can agree that in some rather general sense the flourishing of the whole person is probably more important than the development of advanced welding skills. However, this judgment has an air of the Platonic about it, since it ignores a host of contextual factors relevant to the appropriateness of a particular form of learning for a particular individual at a particular point in that person’s life. It is not elitist to admit that some people are ill-equipped to reap the full benefits of liberal education, and given the sorts of socio-economic pressures which drive many to enter the post-secondary system as students, it strikes me as supercilious, if not socially pernicious, to assert that they would be better served by Humanities 130 than by Office Administration 100. A further assumption of this view is that the nominal objective - human
flourishing - is in fact achieved by liberal education but not by career training. While I have no doubts about the positive claim here, I think the negative one is contentious in the light of recent advances in vocational pedagogy.¹

In any case, arguments which preach the unequivocal superiority of liberal education over career training are not likely to engineer assent among faculty and administrators of an applied bent, whatever their intrinsic strength. And it is not necessary to employ such arguments in order to support the conclusion at hand, that liberal education opportunities should be maintained and enhanced in the BC system. As Rhoda Friedrichs has pointed out,² one of the important arguments in favour of liberal education, one which she attributes to BC Premier Glen Clark, accepts the legitimacy of career-related objectives in education, and stresses the very great extent to which liberal education enhances employability. Before examining this argument in more detail, however, I want first to comment on Bob Nichols’ contrary suggestion³ that education is definitionally distinguished from training by the fact that it cannot be said to have any instrumental purpose at all.

Is Education Existential, Training Totalitarian?

Now Nichols is certainly correct to point out that a great part of the current political thrust for vocational training arises from a set of attitudes which one can only call totalitarian. The Protestant work ethic remains strongly embedded in our societal mores, buttressed as it is by the neo-conservative devotion to unfettered competition, for commerce and hence employment, and by a wilful blindness to notions of human flourishing which take notice of - as importantly human - states of being, or approaches to living, which bring into question the uncompromising hegemony of global capitalism. Much of the proffered justification for career training, then, is based upon a notion of fitting people to operate as cogs in the economic machine. However, it does not follow from this fact that career training actually has this effect and no other, nor that there are not alternative justifications less pernicious, and more successful. Nichols, of course, is not denying a rôle to training; he simply wants to deny that it qualifies as education in the pure sense he thinks is important. But at the same time, he is not merely quibbling over words: the ultimate conclusion he wants to support is, so to speak, that existential education is more valuable for the individual than totalitarian training. As I pointed out above, I find this context-free generalization unwarranted, no matter how true it might be of some individuals.

I think the main difference between Nichols and myself on this issue can be brought out as follows: suppose that he is right when he claims that education is, by definition, an end-in-itself which cannot be justified by any further end.⁴ Presumably, then, Glen Clark’s argument is not one in favour of liberal education, but one in favour of what we should have to call “liberal training.” This reveals, however, why Nichols’ definitional claims about education are difficult to sustain, for it would not be disastrous for my courses in Philosophy or Liberal Studies, say, either that they happen to enhance the employment skills and prospects of my students or that I believe that the fact that they do so is part of the justification for offering them. The intrinsic
value of the learning involved would not be tainted in any way by its having also an instrumental
value, or by its being thought to have it.\(^5\) Because of this, and because what liberal education \emph{is}
defined more reasonably by what liberal educators \emph{do} than by its real or intended effects, we
should not shun the suggestion that liberal education can be supported by reference to its success
in the development of general employability skills.

\section*{Is Glen Clark Right?}

It remains to be determined, however, whether it is correct to say that liberal education
contributes significantly not only to human flourishing, but also to the enhancement of
employment skills and prospects. The historical argument that it has always been the intention of
liberal educators to develop such skills as those of written and oral communication, critical and
creative thinking and so on, and the pedagogical argument that the activities undertaken by
liberal arts students require the formation of such skills, would be entirely otiose if it could not be
shown that the historical and theoretical intentions were and continue to be translated into actual
results. Fortunately, I think we can be relatively sure that this is indeed the case.

My confidence is based upon research into the employment outcomes of liberal education
as well as personal experience following up graduates of Malaspina’s Liberal Studies BA
program, in which I am Coordinator. Of specific relevance are Michael Useem’s \textit{Liberal
Education and the Corporation: The Hiring and Advancement of College Graduates}\(^6\) and Robert
Allen’s “The Economic Benefits of Post-Secondary Training and Education in BC: March
1996.”\(^7\) Both studies conclude that liberal education enhances to a maximal degree the
employment opportunities, viewed in the long term, of graduates.

Useem’s conclusions are based upon a combination of objective and subjective factors.
Working on college graduates of the late eighties, employed in 1989 in the American corporate
sector, he compares the salaries, rank, promotion rates and so on of graduates with a variety of
degrees. He also reports on the attitudes of top-level managers towards the educational
credentials of their employees. The study is too detailed, and the conclusions too intricate, for a
full treatment here, but the overall message is that those who succeed best in the corporate sector
are those who combine in their educational backgrounds both business studies, or some similar
professional program, and the liberal arts. Such graduates far outrank engineers, for example, in
their ability to gain promotion in management.

Allen’s discussion investigates the local employment economy in BC from more or less
the same point of view, except that he is concerned specifically to compare degree graduates with
those who have taken instead some form of vocational or career diploma. The study concerns the
employment fates of 1990 graduates, as this is the latest year for which StatsCan and other
relevant data are available. Again the conclusions are multifarious, but the overall message is a
clear vote of confidence in favour of degrees.

An important part of Allen’s article is devoted to a debunking of the (rather ironically
named) \textit{Training for What?} report prepared for the BC Labour Force Development Board. He
shows convincingly that that report based its conclusions in favour of increased emphasis on
career programs not on actual employment outcomes, but instead on a theoretical job-forecasting
model which has little empirical validity. One can only speculate about whether Glen Clark’s
remarks supporting liberal education betoken a change of heart, at the government level,
occaisioned by Allen’s study. It seems clear, however, that the provincial hegemony of the
Training for What? model is at last on the wane.

These empirical studies are perhaps not entirely immune to criticism themselves.
Retrospective studies obviously have the feature that they are no more current than the last year
for which data is now available, and in the present cases that year occurred seven years ago. In
planning for the future, it might be argued, only a theoretical model which incorporates the best
guesses as to changes in the employment market will be sufficient. Nevertheless, aside from the
fact that according to Allen Training for What? uses an arbitrary model, the likelihood is that we
can place appreciable weight on the retrospective data favouring liberal education. This is
because such education has always emphasized not job-specific skills, which might become
obsolete as the world of work changes, but the transferable abilities (to think, solve problems,
communicate, learn to learn, work in teams etc.) identified by the Conference Board of Canada
as generic employability skills. It is precisely the flexibility engendered by these skills, it is
plausible to argue, which will enable today’s graduates to negotiate tomorrow’s employment
uncertainties.

Bringing It Home

I find this argument compelling, though to some degree theoretical, and when I first came
to Malaspina I used it regularly when reassuring students about the value of a degree such as the
Malaspina Liberal Studies BA. It would be less than honest to deny, however, that I was a little
surprised when, in 1995, after the program had been running for five years and had graduated
three classes, I started tracing former students to see how they had fared in life after graduation,
and found out that my assurances had proved justified. I was able to contact or obtain reliable
news of 65 out of 111 graduates, whose occupations at the time were as follows: 34% were
teaching, or learning to teach, in the K-12 system; 8% were employed in adult teaching (ESL,
ABE and literacy); 20% were in graduate or professional school, in such programs as philosophy,
English, folklore studies, creative writing, archival studies, marine archaeology, law, architecture
and public administration; another 20% were employed in the corporate and government sectors,
about half in supervisory positions; 9% described themselves as self-employed, as artists or
software consultants, for example, and the remaining 9% were travelling overseas. None was
unemployed.

It’s too early yet, of course, to predict the future career trajectories of these graduates, but
I feel pretty confident that their lives will corroborate the findings of Useem and Allen, and show
that it makes sense to extrapolate from those findings into the next century. Those who have
chosen to follow a liberal education with specific career training, in professional school for
example, will discover that they have created for themselves the best of both worlds. They will
demonstrate that “Education vs. Training” is a false dilemma not only theoretically, but also
practically, since their education will have included training in both general and specific skills.

These observations, and the empirical studies I mentioned earlier, suggest models for
curriculum development at the new university colleges, and for any others which are created in
the future. One model involves combining four-year degrees focusing on a wide range of general
skills, in the traditional liberal arts mould, with one-year post-graduate diplomas to enable
students to set their first feet in the workplace door. Another would include the professional
training as a minor in a liberal arts major. These models exist in BC universities - in teacher
education, for example - but the university colleges are better positioned to implement them than
the universities since, drawing upon the resources of their existing vocational and career
programs, they can offer a much wider range of training on the professional end.

Unfortunately, models which try to combine the advantages of what have traditionally
been distinguished as education and training have not received much attention at Malaspina, nor,
I think, at the other university colleges. In Nanaimo at any rate, all recent efforts in degree
development have gone into traditional disciplinary majors similar to those available at the
universities. As a philosopher, I am partly pleased by the fact that liberal education (though with
the exception of the Liberal Studies program perhaps not of a kind sufficiently interdisciplinary
for my own tastes) is receiving emphasis in the struggle between education and training. The
other part of me regrets our inability to transcend this conceptual dichotomy and to open our
thinking to models of undergraduate education which combine the advantages of both of its
poles. Nevertheless, if it is only possible to opt for one of the poles, Useem and Allen, along
with my own experience, have convinced me that liberal education is by far the better.

Endnotes
1 My evidence for this claim is admittedly anecdotal, arising from personal contacts with instructors in
career fields. Among these contacts were workshops on critical thinking I led at Douglas College and
BCIT in the spring of 1989. These were attended by vocational faculty, who appeared both well-
 intentioned and experienced in relation to the inclusion of critical thinking approaches in their
pedagogies.
2 Rhoda L. Friedrichs: “What Do We Need to Know?: Liberal Education and the Free Society,”
*Discourse* 2:1 (Fall 1996), p. 16.
4 For brevity of expression, I am adopting here a terminology which, like Nichols’, ignores Aristotle’s
crucial distinction between productive and constitutive means-ends relationships. When Nichols denies
that education is instrumentally useful, he is denying that there is any productive end, any distinct state-
of-affairs which it produces, and which justifies it as a practice. I do not think he would wish to deny
that it is possible to talk of education as having a constitutive end, a state-of-affairs which constitutes
being educated and which can be judged to be valuable in itself. My references to “human flourishing”
gesture towards the characterization of such a constitutive end, and are thoroughly Aristotelian in spirit.
Thus it would be possible to agree with Nichols that education is not to be justified instrumentally
without being committed to his arguably incautious claim that the essence of education is its “groundlessness” or “pointlessness” (ibid).

5 This is an oversimplification. What I take to be Nichols’ point here is salutary in so far as it alerts liberal educators to the danger of shifting emphasis, within their curricula and pedagogies, away from humanistic objectives and towards the development of skills associated with a limited conception of employment. Too formulaic an approach, for example, to outcomes-based instruction could overlook the self-questioning aspects of liberal education, and this would be a bad thing. However, the temptation can be resisted and, furthermore, these aspects themselves speak to an important component of employability skills as I see them.

