

THE LIBERAL ARTS: FROM GREEK ROOTS TO HUMBOLDT'S IDEAL¹

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Short summary: Study in the tradition of the liberal arts developed over several millennia, with roots in ancient Greece and developing its full character in recent centuries as a result of significant contributions from many people, nations, and cultures. It is designed to fulfill the common good – of value to society and the individual – through a relational educational environment involving the study of the full span of knowledge.

Wilhelm von Humboldt left behind a powerful vision for higher education – one sometimes referred to as “Humboldt’s Ideal.” He asserted that a university should be an establishment of general education, integrating the study of the full range of the arts and sciences and using research as a pedagogical tool, with the purpose of advancing humanity.

While the specific influences on Humboldt’s educational philosophy were unique to his own educational experience, his conception of education has deep European roots: study in the tradition of the liberal arts. Its beginning can be traced back 3500 years to the needs of Greek society at that time for effective warriors trained for compulsory military service – a purpose that improved the ability of both the individual and their society to progress. As Greek civilization matured the content of ancient Greek schooling changed to substitute symbolic conflict (athletic competition) for war, and focusing learning on a number of areas of intellectual study, including classical poets and writers, composition, mathematics, and music. (see Marrou) This became an education for “free citizens for their new role in democracy.” (Kimball, 17)

This was an education based on the thinking of the great philosophers of ancient Greece, although there were differences of opinion about the most critical components of advanced learning. Some prioritized oratory so their students could develop and deliver persuasive arguments in civic discourse (e.g., Gorgias, Protagoras); others focused on the development of ideals of intellect and the pursuit of truth (based on Socratic ideals, including Plato and his followers); and still others felt people should learn to live based on traditional, noble virtues (e.g., Isocrates and his persuasive oratory).

¹ This article is based upon, and includes excerpts from, a book by the author which describes this history in greater detail, elaborates on the meaning and methods of the liberal arts, and provides evidence of its impact on the lives of graduates: Detweiler, Richard A. *The Evidence Liberal Arts Needs: Lives of Consequence, Inquiry, and Accomplishment*. The MIT Press, 2021.

Thus, while the content of this higher education expanded as the extent of knowledge grew, the underlying purpose of this education (to meet the highest needs of society and the individual) remained consistent over millennia. In addition, the approach to teaching and learning also remained consistent, with an emphasis on the development of close relationships among teachers and students. Most often this involved a tutor who traveled to homes or other community locations where they worked with individuals or small groups of students or learning communities such as Plato's Academy and its descendent organizations. A close relationship between student and teacher was consistently seen as essential: "...advanced education involved a deep and absolutely personal bond between teacher and pupil, a bond in which... emotion, if not passion, played a considerable part." (Marrou, 67, 165-166, 221) Indeed, Plato, in the Dialogues, supported the active engagement of students in learning. (Marrou, 67)

In the second century BC the Roman Republic conquered Ancient Greece, and the Greek educational approach was assimilated, including its purpose, the content of study, and a relationship-based approach to learning. Teachers were easily available among the great numbers of slaves that conquest had provided. (Marrou, 284) This education was "liberal" – with the Latin word being "liberalis," meaning 'of or relating to free men.' These were virtuous, knowledgeable, and articulate people who could contribute to the common good – benefitting both society and the individual – by participating in public debate, defending themselves in court, serving on juries, and providing military leadership. It was not until the end of the Roman Empire – indeed merely a few decades before its final demise in the fifth century AD – when a North African in the Roman province of what we now call Algeria wrote a book that for the first time defined the necessary content of liberal arts study. Martianus Capella's book "On the Marriage of Philology and Mercury" described the content of a liberal arts education as requiring the study of seven essential disciplines which when combined describe the knowledge of a learned person. (Stahl) The first three of these seven, later labeled the "trivium" related to thinking and communicating: logic, grammar, and rhetoric. The other four, and later labeled as the "quadrivium" involved an understanding of physical reality: arithmetic, music, geometry, and astronomy.

The descent of Europe into the early Medieval period (sometimes called the Dark Ages) was a hostile environment for higher learning. Greek knowledge disappeared; indeed, in 529 A.D. the East Roman (Byzantine) Emperor Justinian banned and had destroyed the work of the Ancient Greeks since he believed them to be pagan and therefore contrary to his view of the purposes of Christianity. The Academy of Athens – originally founded by Plato nearly a thousand years earlier – was closed.

Yet these developments ultimately resulted in a tremendous expansion in the content of higher learning. The scholars of the Greek classics found refuge outside of Europe in Persia, at the Academy of Jundhi-Shapur (a city in what is now western Iran). There "they preserved these traditions, improved upon and added to them." (Nakosteen, 17) In the middle of the eighth century, Caliph al-Mansur established a new Muslim capital by creating the city of Baghdad. This city was to be the center of an empire stretching from Spain, through the Middle East, and into South Asia and the edges of China. Based on the Islamic ideal that "to pursue knowledge is a way to come closer to God" (Lyons, 66) al-Mansur's purpose was to assure that this new center of learning – the House of Wisdom – would become an intellectual superpower and he invested substantial funds to assure this occurred. He acquired Greek, Sumerian, Persian, Byzantine, Indian, and Chinese

knowledge by purchasing or negotiating the receipt of thousands of manuscripts from many nations and eras. His emissaries traveled extensively, not infrequently at the cost of their own lives, to acquire knowledge from throughout the known world. He brought together a diverse range of scholars; he had Muslims, Christians, Jews, Hindus, Buddhists, and others with different areas of expertise exchanging ideas and teaching each other. It was interdisciplinary, intercultural, international, and interreligious. He supported the translation of works (Freely, 72-75) ranging from classical Greek philosophers to Hindu scientific works. These were all preserved through translation into Arabic. By bringing the Chinese technology of paper making to Baghdad these translations could be made into books which were a far more useful and compact form of information storage than animal hides and scrolls. He established a royal library, complete not only with a staff of scholars but administrative and financial support. (Lyons, Chapter 3)

This era is described as the “Golden Age of Islam” (750 to 1150) – a time characterized by the open pursuit of knowledge as a divine calling. (Morgan, 10-11) It yielded “centuries of uninterrupted, organized research and steady advances in mathematics, philosophy, astronomy, medicine, optics, and other pursuits...” (Lyons, 65) Arabic was the language of science and all other areas of advanced knowledge. Indeed, much of what we now possess of the great Greek and Roman philosophers and writers – having been systematically destroyed as anti-Christian in Europe – were preserved through these translations into Arabic.

Cordoba (in today’s Spain) became a center of learning when its caliph established one of the most renowned of the many hundreds of libraries established during the Islamic Golden Age. This “gave Cordoba a reputation for learning that spread throughout Europe, attracting Christian scholars as well as Muslims, not to mention the Jews who lived under Islamic rule.” (Freely, 107) Arabic was the language of the educated and of scholarly discourse.

Learning continued to serve a higher, common good purpose of advancing humanity through personal and public enlightenment. The ancient Greek and Roman content was combined with a dramatically increased span of human knowledge from all then-known nations and cultures with the new ideas of Islamic scholars in the arts, philosophy, medicine, and sciences. The educational context was again based on relationships: students would travel long distances to sit with a great teacher and hear and discuss his lectures at “Circle Schools.” “Students showed great devotion to teachers and often preferred direct intellectual association with them than with their writings.” (Nakosteen, 56) Great universities were founded in the Muslim world, including the still operating al-Karaouine in Morocco (founded by a woman, Fatima al-Fihri, in 859) and Al-Azhar in Egypt (founded in 970). The teacher/student relationship was central with “the educational model relying not simply on close study of the text, but on intensive, personal interaction with a shaykh (scholar).” (Berkey) Until the eleventh century these schools and universities were privately supported and secular. (Berkey, 38) The Islamic Golden Age saved classical Greek and Roman knowledge and added very significantly to the span of knowledge with far more extensive content in the sciences, mathematics, natural sciences, engineering, social sciences, health and medicine, arts, poetry, architecture, and many other areas of inquiry.

In France, during the Islamic Golden Age, a peasant shepherd boy was offered a place in a monastery school by an abbot who was impressed with his apparent intelligence because of a chance conversation. (Brown, 14) This boy, Gerbert of Aurillac, quickly

exhausted the learning resources of that school, with libraries in Europe typically having only a few dozen books. Indeed, a “great” European library at that time had a collection of only hundreds of books. (Brown, 36) In 967, having consumed the learning resources of France, and having mastered grammar, logic, and rhetoric, Gerbert was sent for advanced studies to the monastery of Vich in Catalonia, then a distant Christian frontier outpost abutting the scientific and cultural powerhouse of Muslim Spain.” (Lyons, 36) There he had access not only to teachers with greater knowledge, but to the estimated 40,000 Arabic-language books in the library in nearby Muslim Cordoba. (Brown, 50) The fact that Gerbert was Christian was not a problem – Muslims, Jews, and Christians in Spain lived and worked together – and he undoubtedly mastered Arabic since it was the *lingua franca* of that time.

Gerbert brought this new knowledge and open perspective back to France where he took up a series of teaching posts. He introduced Europe to a number of the innovative concepts he had learned in Cordoba, including not only new understandings of subjects such as arithmetic and geometry but Arabic numerals, the abacus, and the astrolabe. His growing fame resulted in his being named abbot of a monastery in Italy with an immense (for Europe) library of 690 books. (Brown, 159) In 999 Gerbert was named pope by the Holy Roman emperor. Calling himself Pope Sylvester II, he encouraged the flow of knowledge and intellectual openness from the Islamic world to Europe. While he lived only four years as pope, his introduction of knowledge and educational perspectives from the Islamic Golden Age unleashed a tidal wave of new knowledge to Europe. The earlier translation of Greek texts into Arabic – which had occurred hundreds of years earlier – now reversed direction with translations from Arabic to Latin and other European languages. Because of the immensity of the Muslim collections, it took a very long time for all of the knowledge to be transferred to Europe. For example, around 1100, a century after Pope Sylvester II, Englishman Adelard of Bath spent seven years in the Middle East and returned with a massive collection of “*Studia Arabum*” (scholarly materials in Arabic) and spent a lifetime translating materials. Through the work of Adelard and many others who worked to translate Arabic into Latin or other European languages, it took nearly 300 years for the knowledge from the Golden Age of Islam to fully infect Europe.

In the eastern Mediterranean, in what is now Turkey, the Byzantine Empire remained a home for scholars of ancient Greece. In the early 1400s Italian scholars traveled to study in what is now Turkey, stimulating a migration of experts from East to West where “Byzantine scholars who taught in Italy represented the richness of the Greek heritage to their Western admirers.” (Bisaha, 107) In 1454 the Empire fell to the Ottomans and many more scholars fled west, stimulating the development of the Renaissance as they brought with them additional ancient Greek wisdom and texts. The Renaissance now swept Europe, further broadening knowledge and insight. European nations became deeply involved in the “Age of Discovery” through exploration, trade, and colonization around the world.

The impact of this slow flood of knowledge was enormous and the stage was set for the rebirth of higher education in Europe. Translations “were destined for Italy, France, and England – home to groupings of scholars and students who came together around the early thirteenth century to create the West’s earliest universities in Bologna, Paris, and Oxford.” (Lyons, 161) All students were required to complete an extensive liberal arts education before receiving professional instruction.

The essential purpose of higher education in this era was to inform and support the constructive development of society. The educational context revolved around a residential

The humanities and the arts and many other areas of knowledge cannot escape from controversy because in them there are fewer right and wrong answers. There can only be discussion over conflicting visions of what society's goals should be, and of what kind of world man should make for himself.

NORTHROP FRYE

educational community involving people of a wide range of backgrounds, cultures, and life experiences. Students lived and studied together as people from many nations traveled long distances to join these educational communities.

With the large number of students and lack of written materials in this era, the lecture became central to European higher education. But lecturing was not meant to be impersonal nor unengaging. Mirroring the emphasis on the importance of effective student engagement found during the

Islamic Golden Age, teaching guides were developed. With hauntingly contemporary advice, requirements for effective lecturing included: a lecture should be “clear, short, relevant, and easy to listen to;” it should “start with generally well-known things, so as gradually to penetrate deeper into the material and (help students) learn to distinguish between essentials and inessentials;” it should lead “to independent reflection outside hours, and to a personal engagement with problems ... that would supply the scholar lastingly with a ‘life full of inward joy and all possible comfort in this vale of sorrows.’” (Pederson, 248) An effective teacher was described as a “‘classroom entertainer,’ bold, original, lucid, sharply polemical, always fresh and stimulating, and withal ‘able to move to laughter the minds of serious men.’” (Haskins, 54-55) Students were encouraged to request debates among scholars on particular topics or issues, and out-of-class teaching and learning opportunities were created. (Pederson, 250-251)

In the eighteenth-century Europe was becoming a land of nation-states, and higher education was to serve the needs of the state and its monarch. As epitomized by Prussian higher education it was to be “from beginning to end, through and through, a professional school.” (Menard et al., 138) Youth were, through position of birth or a winnowing process implemented in elementary and secondary education, tracked either into practical trades or into university-based preparation for specific professional positions. Napoleon further shaped European higher education; during his time 40% of the universities were destroyed (Ruegg) and universities were transformed “into specialized academies designed to produce efficient bureaucrats for the state.” (Menard et al., 106)

Gone was the millennial-long focus of European higher education on a liberal arts approach serving the common good with breadth of study in a relational educational context. In this environment, an educational innovator emerged: Wilhelm von Humboldt. The son of wealthy and influential parents he was educated by private tutors. His mother arranged for him to be taught by a wide range of great minds of his time, including noteworthy philosophers. Although study in the liberal arts tradition had been rejected by monarch-serving states, the education he received was the epitome of a liberal arts approach to learning. He attended university only fleetingly, finding their purpose and narrowness limiting, stating that he wanted to “study on my own and in the greatest detail everything that can broaden my view of the world and of man.” (UNESCO)

In 1808, with most Prussian universities destroyed in war and the entire educational system in shambles, the King of Prussia, William III, appointed Humboldt to be head of the Educational Department. Humboldt believed education should be the “complete training of the human personality” even for the poorest members of society. (Hohendorf, 673) He asserted that this approach to education should start in the early years and

continue through university. Indeed, he believed a university education should be “an establishment of general education... and not concentrate on occupational training” (Hohendorf, 673) and should “continue and complete the general education imparted in the previous school years.” (UNESCO, 8) He asserted that there should be close relations between teachers and students and the curriculum should be open to student exploration rather than involving only a fixed course of study. (Ash, 246) While, in Humboldt’s thinking, research retained an important role, rather than having the purpose of producing knowledge to advance the economy of the state it was to be a pedagogical tool in which students should engage in independent research under the tutelage of the teacher. (Ash, 674) He stated that a student is “a person who undertakes his own research, while the professor directs his research and supports it.” (UNESCO, 8)

These proposals were in direct conflict with the then-dominant state and monarchy-serving specialization approach of European universities. After leading the education ministry for only 16 months (and serving for only nine months since he was on leave for seven months), he was discouraged by the opposition to his plans in the government. Wishing to return to his wife and children who were still in Rome, he resigned from the education ministry. As a result virtually none of Humboldt’s ideas about the liberal arts nature of education nor the importance of an engaging approach to education were adopted at that time, and his educational ideas were not rediscovered until a century later.²

With its salutary impact on the needs of the nation-state, this Prussian specialization-based approach to education was viewed by many as the world’s best and was adopted by virtually all other European monarchs. Further, since this era – the nineteenth century – corresponded to the imperial empires of the major European powers, this model was then spread globally through European colonialism to become the standard approach to higher education in essentially all world regions with the exception of some English universities of that time (e.g., Oxford and Cambridge) and the young United States where this approach was rejected in an influential 1828 analysis by the faculty of Yale University in which the principles of the liberal arts became the national norm. (Detweiler, Chapter 3)

It is a great irony that the contrast often drawn between American-style liberal arts education and European-style research/specialist education exists because only the research component of Humboldt’s ideal was adopted. Specialization and research became the sole focus in European higher education and his emphasis on *Bildung* (cultivating the mind, heart, and self) – so closely related to a liberal arts-approach in its purpose and content of study — was excluded. Indeed, had Humboldt’s ideal been fully adopted it is likely that Europe would today be seen as the historic epicenter of contemporary education in the liberal arts tradition. Instead, liberal arts approaches remain controversial in European higher education, although there are a growing number of European institutions offering a liberal arts approach.³

Indeed, the principles of the liberal arts, as first developed in ancient Greece and enhanced by the knowledge and wisdom of numerous nations and cultures over the

2 It is paradoxical that a new university, the University of Berlin, was founded in 1810 and later renamed Humboldt University (in honor of Wilhelm von Humboldt and his more famous brother Alexander, a natural scientist) and without knowledge of Wilhelm’s innovative concepts, refined the methods of the specialized research university with no consideration of broader purpose, general education, or his other ideas.

3 See www.ecolas.eu

centuries, has been adopted and adapted by universities in many nations. This liberal arts education is designed to serve the common good through a relationship-based learning environment that involves the study of the full span of human knowledge. With this purpose, content of study, and method of education, students are educated to live lives of consequence, inquiry, and accomplishment – benefitting humanity, their nation, and their own lives.

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Scholarship is, by definition, a communal act. Disseminating or sharing knowledge makes the work of academic life complete. Consider how we always say "research and publication", suggesting that scholarly investigation takes on meaning only when it is passed on to others, which might be considered an act of teaching. Surely teaching undergraduates can be an authentic form of scholarly work.

ERNEST L. BOYER

Extracurricular activities rarely compete with coursework in a manner that hurts academic performance. On the contrary, within reasonable limits, involvement in such activities seems to improve the self-discipline of students and increase the intensity and quality of the effort they devote to academic pursuits.

[Feedback is crucial:] Unless undergraduates can learn where they have not done well and why, they are unlikely to discover how to do better.

DEREK BOK

Mimoškolské aktivity nekonkurujú školským zadaniam tým, že poškodzujú akademický výkon. Naopak, zapojenie do takýchto aktivít v rámci rozumných medzí zlepšuje sebadisciplínu študentov a zvyšuje intenzitu a kvalitu úsilia, ktoré venujú akademickej oblasti.

[Spätná väzba je kľúčová:] Ak sa bakalári nedozvedia, kde a prečo sa mýlili, pravdepodobne na to neprídu sami.

DEREK BOK

The simple truth is that almost all of us are where we are today because of the inspiration of an inspired teacher. Yet, on far too many campuses, it is deemed better for a professor to deliver a paper at the Hyatt in Chicago than to teach undergraduates back home. And it's really sad the way we speak of research "opportunities" and teaching "loads".

ERNEST L. BOYER

It is the college... that has traditionally left the most enduring memories. As Louis Auchincloss has observed: "Never again does one receive impressions with quite the same kind of emotional intensity that one does between the ages of seventeen and twenty-one. It is so brief a time, so very brief, yet one can build a lifetime on the exploitation of it."

DEREK BOK

Práve bakalársky stupeň... zanechá v študentovi tie najtrvácnejšie spomienky. Ako poznamenal Louis Auchincloss: „Človek už nikdy nenadobudne dojmy rovnako emocionálne intenzívne ako vo veku od 17 do 21 rokov. Je to krátky čas, taký kratučký, ale po celý život možno budovať na tom, že z neho čerpáme.“

DEREK BOK