The Liberal Arts: A Historical Explainer

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Students across the country are leaving home to begin college careers. Those beginning at liberal arts colleges will almost inevitably misunderstand, or not understand, the function of a liberal arts education. And those of us who work in higher education and understand innately the multi-leveled value of a liberal arts education must do a *much* better job of explaining it.

Last spring I taught a course on Medieval France that included a unit on the emergence of the university. I spent a discussion period with my students reading through the prologue of Peter Abelard's (d. 1142) *Sic et Non*. For me, this is the document that gave birth to the purpose and importance of university education.

It defines what is, and how to teach, the critical inquiry within a scholarly context that led to the foundation of the University of Paris and ultimately the system of higher education based on liberal arts learning to which we are, *mutatis mutandis*, the inheritors. It was a great class. It was a great class in large part because it ended with the students having their "aha moment" about what exactly they were doing in college. It was what we call a "live question" – a historical issue that had direct relevance to their contemporary experience, giving meaning – giving *understanding* – to their college experience. But this was itself alarming since they are attending one of the country's premier liberal arts institutions.

A productive answer can start with just where the liberal arts came from in the first place. The "Liberal Arts" (*artes liberales*) go back to the ancient world, well before the rise of the university around 1200. They were the skills (*artes*) taught to free men (*liberales*) – that is, non-labourers or slaves. They were what trained free men to be able to think independently, and thus be competent to participate in governance and society. In time, there were seven of them: grammar, logic, rhetoric, arithmetic, geometry, music, and astronomy. The trivium (the first three) had to be mastered before undertaking the quadrivium (the next four), since a basic understanding of the laws of language and logic were necessary to take on knowledge (*artes* again) on which they were based. Their teaching was based on canonical texts. Cicero for rhetoric, Boethius for music, and so forth. With the collapse of the Roman Empire and its institutional structures, learning in the West moved into the monasteries. But it remained rooted in the teaching of the seven liberal arts. After the elementary skills of reading and writing, basic

education was rooted in mastery of the canonical texts that defined the seven areas that made up the trivium and the quadrivium.

Throughout the early medieval period (say, up through about 1050), education was largely about the study of these received authorities (*auctoritates*). Intellectual and scholarly work might build on the authorities, but the truth of their content was accepted. Inaccuracies from the authorities might be ignored and simply drop out of scholarly discourse, but they weren't falsified. Intellectual experience based on acceptance of the authorities was thus the intellectual mode for the high-intellectual work for theological and philosophical work.

The problem, of course, was the authorities didn't always agree. A young scholar named Peter Abelard was troubled by this, and collated 158 instances where the great authorities appeared to contradict one another. He placed them side by side, and invited his readers and students (he was a *brilliant* teacher) to apply reason in an effort to resolve the conflict. While preserving utmost respect for received knowledge, he proposed that that through rational inquiry, distinguishing opinion from truth, and understanding the complexity of language, scholars could come to resolve issues and achieved better understanding.

"By doubting we examine, and by examining we come to the truth" he wrote in his prologue. In fact, the entire prologue was – and still is – a kind of road map to critical thinking and the production of knowledge. He discusses issues of audience, interpretation, inference, ambiguity, the trustworthiness of evidence, the importance of evaluating evidence against context, discerning reason, and ultimately, drawing conclusions. Through the process of rigorous critical thinking and the use of the reasoning intellect, we push beyond received knowledge to further, new, and more accurate understanding, or to entirely new ways of thinking.

Peter Abelard taught in Paris in the 12th Century and gained an enormous following as the premier philosopher, and later, theologian of his day. The method articulated in the *Sic et Non* would develop into what we now call scholasticism: systematic inquiry based on reason, disputation and critical thought. His teaching in the schools of Paris would lead directly to the formation of the University of Paris. The University of Paris was one of the earliest examples of the particular form of higher learning that is now found across the globe. In the twelfth and thirteenth century an influx of Jewish and Muslim learning, wedded with the hungry intellectual optimism established with the scholastic method, opened up wide new vistas of knowledge and understanding. Between 1200 and 1400 universities popped up all over Europe. So did the Western Economy.

And here is where I make my point. The very basis of this knowledge revolution continued to be rooted in the seven liberal arts. In the medieval university, one began one's program of study with these, starting with the trivium and proceeding to the quadrivium, before taking on the more specialized inquiry of law, or philosophy, or – especially – theology. They taught the basic intellectual skills needed *before* undertaking any of the "practical arts" (medicine, law, etc.), because the liberal arts were the training ground for intellectual competence that was the prerequisite for continuing on into the specialized disciplines (or professional practice) where there were actual stakes involved. Through the study of these seven essential knowledge skills ("*artes*") one mastered the rudiments of competency (reading, writing, arithmetic) and has a wide sense of the breadth and limits of knowledge and the world generally (music, astronomy).

Skills. Breadth. Critical thinking. And the ability, like Abelard, to push *forward*, beyond received wisdom and practice and to create a new world. This is still the aim. Rhetoric has given way to English Literature. Arithmetic is now Math. Music is now mostly what we would call Physics. Modern liberal education still trains the basic intellectual skills of query and discernment that Abelard aimed for, generally now through general education and major requirements. Once mastered – just as in the Middle Ages – these skills can be applied to specialized training – medical school, the public sphere, business, whatever – what the Middle Ages regarded as the practical arts.

But I think those of us who teach, advise, and administrate in these schools routinely fail in explaining to our students just what liberal arts are — and why they matter. I don't mean the historical explanation based on Abelard. I mean an explanation that seeks to show how and why learning to think critically, to reason, to push the boundaries of received knowledge is the value that they should seek to gain from their college education. Economic value, career value, and social value. Great and successful careers rarely end up having much connection to majors. They do to intelligence, leadership, innovation, creativity, aptitude in assessing uncertainty, ability. Not surprisingly, the corporate representatives I have interviewed to gain insight about why they recruit from Dartmouth routinely echo Abelard in what they are looking for: critical thinking, an ability to deal with ambiguity, to reach conclusions based on considered mastery of research and context, and so forth.

A recent piece in Forbes (http://www.forbes.com/sites/georgeanders/2015/07/29/liberal-arts-degree-tech/) showcased how liberal arts has become the ticket into the high-powered tech world. The point of liberal arts is not the teaching of a content. But rather, the teaching of Abelard's basic instinct to question, to maximize the capacity of human intelligence, and push what we know and what we do forward in order to make a new world.