

## **Why We Educate the Way We Do**

Jacques Barzun (1907-2012)

*This interview was conducted by American Educator Editor Ruth Wattenberg and appeared in the Fall 2002 issue.*

**Editor: The core academic subjects of the K–12 curriculum are widely considered to be literature, history, the arts, science, and math. In your view, should these be the core?**

**Barzun:** You have named the subjects I think essential if what we call our tradition is to be handed down instead of forgotten within a couple of generations. They are the subjects that have the power to open our minds, free our thinking from conventional opinion, and discipline our minds to think productively. Each subject enhances our thinking differently, each in a different domain.

But we must remember that many students have capacities that are not academic. There are mechanical capacities, a sense of space and size and the interconnections of parts in a machine and how things work. Such students should have the option of taking a technical program, taught by professionals, in the last two years of high school—assuming of course, that they have completed the academic program mentioned above.

**Editor: When and why did we begin to teach these academic subjects?**

**Barzun:** The notion of a broad, general education comes to us from the 12th century, when the Cathedral school that was used in the late Middle Ages decided that more advanced teaching should be available. Later, Jesuit colleges were designed to strengthen Catholic faith in opposition to the Protestant, not by indoctrination alone, but by making well-educated minds. Still later, colleges at Oxford and Cambridge Universities in England taught the classics as liberal arts, together with the numerical sciences—the liberal arts being distinguished from the knowledge needed for a profession.

**Editor: You're a historian. Let's start there. What special contribution to our thinking does history make? How does it open our minds?**

**Barzun:** History is really an extension of our lives. We have a natural curiosity that needs to be fed. We want to know about our grandmother—and that leads to curiosity about the grandmother of the grandmother, which leads all the way back to the discovery of America, the character of the western nations that made exploration possible and necessary, in short, the narrative of how our ancestors lived. What of their creations continue to be our daily moral, religious, and intellectual food? Only an animal feels no need of history.

The student who reads history will unconsciously develop what is the highest value of history: judgment in world affairs. This is a permanent good, not because history repeats—we can never exactly match past and present situations—but because the "tendency of things" shows an amazing uniformity within any given civilization. The great historian, Jacob Burckhardt, said of historical knowledge, it is not "to make us more clever the next time, but wiser for all time."

Plus, a person endowed with the knowledge of history reacts a good deal more serenely and temperately to the things that he encounters both in his own life and in the life of the country in which he lives. Besides which, history is a story—full of colorful and dramatic events and persons, of triumphs and dreadful actions, which must be known in order to form a true notion of humankind.

**Editor: What about literature?**

**Barzun:** Literature is another type of story. And everybody loves a story. Literature that consists of something more than striking incidents tells us how life is lived, how it should be lived, how it has been lived in various places in the world and in our own society. Somebody has said very aptly that the novel was invented to teach the young what life is like, and that is exactly true.

The novel is the one form that specifically aims at psychology and sociology, to put it in technical terms. It deals with individual character and with the institutions of society and how the two interact and get into conflict and how those are resolved or not resolved. These mirror the conflicts every student-reader will face. Great literature will help him reflect on them.

There are other forms of literature as well—myth, poetry, drama, biography—which evoke the past, the ethical, the transcendental, and other topics of equal interest.

Literature, then, like history, gets rid of provincialism, of narrowness, of thinking that everything that one does every day is the whole of human existence.

**Editor: Can you pick as an example one work of literature for high school students that "deprovincializes"?**

**Barzun:** Let me see. A good American novel.... Well, I don't believe there is any one particular work that should be taught to all high school students everywhere. There are many choices possible.

But, as one example, take a book like Sinclair Lewis' *Main Street*. It covers a good deal of ground depicting the American town, its behavior, and how the city has eliminated the small town ways of life. This alert mind sees at the same time similarity in difference, the familiar amid the strange, while it develops sympathy to balance criticism. This double vision is what cures the bias, prejudice, and bigotry I have called provincialism. Those comparisons, those impressions that evoke sympathy or distaste, are deprovincializing, as you put it.

**Editor: You say you're not for having a list of books, an official canon. How do you believe teachers should select literature for their students? What kinds of authors or themes do you think teachers should aim to include?**

**Barzun:** They should, in the first place, choose books that are well-written and readable and classic, rather than hot off the press. The classic has survived years of criticism and been enjoyed by millions because it deals with more than concerns of the moment. It's critical, of course, that the teachers have read the books and like them. They shouldn't just take works on trust from a prepared list. That is why I am against the list. The chosen book should be from the canon in the

big sense, the big canon, but it should be something that the teacher can teach with sympathy and understanding.

**Editor: Math?**

**Barzun:** Mathematics speaks for itself: We are surrounded by numbers, swamped by them. We use them to deal with our difficulties—economic, financial, moral, and social. We want to know whether the crime rate is increasing or the divorce rate decreasing. Somebody totally ignorant of any kind of mathematics is an ignoramus, unable to read a certain kind of communication that is continually made in our surroundings and which must be judged as plausible, true, or false. Besides, mathematics trains the mind to observe detail and follow abstraction.

And of course, math is needed for understanding the physical sciences and, just as important, for a possible career in those sciences—not necessarily as a scientist at the top level of discovery, but in many positions throughout the business and governmental world where the command of mathematics is required. High school students should study math at least through advanced algebra and very possibly through calculus.

**Editor: Which brings us to science....**

**Barzun:** Science is the ruling intellectual activity of the day and it is the basis of innumerable social conveniences and arrangements. A person should be oriented into that very complicated world by having some notion of physics, biology, and chemistry. As well, perhaps, a bit of geology if the person is interested in nature and how it works. To know nothing about it, to be unaware of the methods of science, to be ignorant of the elementary rules of mechanics and chemical composition is to be incapable of functioning adequately in our society.

Some knowledge of the scientific method as such, apart from particular techniques, also benefits us in our everyday life as we are better able to discuss evidence, verification, correlation, and cause and effect.

**Editor: When did these subjects take form? For example, when did science become an independent academic subject?**

**Barzun:** This is a clue: The word scientist was invented in the year 1840 by a philosopher at Cambridge University in England. The date marks his observation that there were now people who were exclusively interested in scientific work. Up to that time, as your question implies, the man doing research in science was also interested in philosophy and religion. He was called a natural philosopher. Newton, for example, was not called a scientist—he was known as a natural philosopher, a philosopher about nature. But, of course, the elements of science go back to Greece and very possibly to Egypt, so it has been a very gradual growth. When any subject of human concern attains sufficient breadth and depth, it is separated and becomes a professional discipline. By now, the accumulation of knowledge and of rules for increasing knowledge have become so complex that a man interested in adding to it cannot do anything else with the same capacity and chance of success.

But there's something else as well. The steady progress of the scientific elite goes back 400 years, but it was after 1859 that the achievement of the Age of Reason in astronomy, physics,

chemistry, and biology were given sudden and violent publicity by the controversy over Darwin's *Origin of Species*.

By 1900, science had conquered its share of the curriculum, won a regular place in the press and the pulpit, and invaded literature and the common tongue.

**Editor: And the other subjects?**

**Barzun:** The subjects that we study today were hit upon, were created and declared subjects of study during the last 500 years. The medieval curriculum did have philosophy, theology, and ethics, but it did not have history or sociology or physical science *as such*. It included astronomy and music (deemed a science), as well as mathematics, but it was, of course, of a fairly elementary sort. The astronomy goes back to the Chaldean shepherds from I don't know how many centuries ago—as they made nightly observations. These were accurate and they accumulated. There was a fair conception of astronomy in the Middle Ages. Copernicus changed a good deal of it, by no means all, and since then it has blossomed into an extraordinary kind of picture of the cosmos.

Literature was not taught as a subject until nearly the end of the 19th century. But the Greek and Roman classics were studied as a kind of conglomerate of history, sociology, economics, biography, morals, ethics, and so forth. The study of English literature did not figure in the curriculum at, say, Oxford or Cambridge until about the 1890s.

**Editor: Why did literature suddenly appear at that point?**

**Barzun:** The appreciation of prose literature as something more than entertainment, something very serious which describes and explains human character and human society, began to be seen as needing study because it does not reveal its secrets equally to all minds as soon as it is read. Poetry also became more and more difficult and so it, too, had to be studied. Young people tend to read for the story only, neglecting its implications or significance in the world-at-large.

Even more influential was the desire to be "modern." The scientists wanted room in the curriculum for their disciplines and campaigned against the ancient classics as out-of-date and useless. Studying Greek and Latin took many hours for many years. The humanists gave in to the assault but managed to keep a place for history and literature. Nobody could deny that these subjects threw light on the modern world.

**Editor: You say history entered the curriculum more recently.**

**Barzun:** Yes, shortly after the French Revolution, which established the nation as more important than the monarchy. The nation was now regarded as a people with a history, one which was very different from the annals of the Court and the King. These accounts had been published, but they were designed largely for the glorification of the Court itself and few people read them. But with the advent of patriotism and nationalism, the idea that the past of the entire society was important became a matter of course. By the 1830s, almost all the nations of Europe had established national historical societies to gather all the possible documents, records, separate local chronicles, and annals—all of this to create a national history. Then when

the national, compulsory public school was established, history naturally became one of the important elements for sustaining a feeling of nationality.

**Editor: What about Herodotus and Thucydides? Don't they suggest that history, as a subject, began earlier?**

**Barzun:** They were studied among the other classics but obviously did not offer a modern history with heroes and "lessons" for people who were living 2000 years later in entirely different societies.

**Editor: What do young people gain from studying the arts? What's the window on the world that art provides?**

**Barzun:** The first thing, and it's very important not to forget it, is enjoyment. The arts are enjoyable and that is their primary function. They have all sorts of other valuable attributes, as well. As to teaching art, my view is that we should begin with the rudiments: drawing, theory of color, composition, and maybe modeling; similarly, in music: sight reading, playing an instrument, and perhaps playing in a band. These things have the potential to elicit the interest of the young in a particular type of art.

Also, art can be taught as an adjunct to history. After all, we put the great portraits of George Washington and Benjamin Franklin and Alexander Hamilton in our American History books. Such historical art makes a general impression on students: The costumes that are worn give away the century in which they lived. The artifacts in the painting tell us something about their day-to-day lives. As for teaching "appreciation" of the history of the arts, there is no time in the schedule for a thorough treatment of either. Each needs a sequence of courses, and the hit-and-run substitutes that are often tried do more harm than good.

**Editor: What about foreign language? Its place in the curriculum has suffered in recent decades. Does knowing one give us a special window on the world? Should it be restored to its previous importance?**

**Barzun:** A foreign language is very necessary. It, too, deprovincializes, because it presents the world from a different angle through the very fact that the vocabulary is different and deals with reality in its own peculiar way. The things that you can or can't say in a given language, what makes sense to the French or the Germans in contrast to what makes sense to us, are mind-opening. In addition, there is practical utility in mastering a particular language: it serves to give access to a whole literature, and possibly furthers one's career.

I'm in favor of teaching Latin, of course, but I think that battle has been lost permanently. It's too bad because it is a gateway to all the Romance languages, and even to German, by familiarizing the mind with declension and other features of grammar that, in English, are lost or hidden through usage. Quite apart from this aid to studying foreign languages, learning Latin makes reading and writing English easier. Latin roots explain the meaning of many English words, and Latin grammar shows the relations among words in a sentence so clearly that common blunders in English sentence construction quickly reveal themselves for correction.

**Editor:** Can you give me an example or two of ways in which a particular language is able to convey something that can't be similarly conveyed in another language? For example, it's often said that the Inuit language has many ways to say "snow," depending on whether it is icy or slushy, and so on.

**Barzun:** I wasn't thinking so much of a finer discrimination among objects as I was the slant on ordinary things. For example, we in America understand perfectly well what we mean when we say a "glorious" morning. If you said that in France, people would be puzzled. Has a battle been won on the front? "Glorious" here can apply to the weather—in France, it cannot. Why is that? The very perception that there is a "why" (to which there is no answer) is an eye opener. What is foolish in one idiom is clear as day in another. The two languages have two ways of cutting up the experience of the world.

Again, as another example, we "know" Mr. Jones and we "know" how to swim. Most often, European languages have two different words for *acquaintance with* and *knowledge*. On top of all this are the innumerable idioms that point to realities that one language or another ignores—which is why we borrow such terms as: *belles-lettres*, *coup d'état*, *haute couture*, *fait accompli*...

**Editor:** What's your summarizing message to teachers?

**Barzun:** I'd like, if I may, to sum up the benefits that should logically result from the proper teaching of the subjects we—and many others—have agreed on. They are fit for all minds, endowing students with particular and general abilities to think, speak simply and clearly, express views rationally, know and use a body of facts and ideas that help communicate because they are widely known, detect errors and fallacies, and resolve intellectual problems.

To be sure, these are lofty goals. To reach them regularly and to the fullest would imply flawlessness in teacher and taught, which is not humanly possible. We must accept an approximation, and when the effort is made by competent teachers and administrators, it can be done. It has been done.