

Liberal Arts: A Gift of Understanding and Freedom

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In an age in which industry and technology are the focus of most countries and international markets, and during a time in which the philosophical work of Plato, the artwork of Claude Monet, the political thought of Karl Marx, and the poetry of Phillis Wheatley seem further removed from the consciousness of everyday life in the 21st century, many individuals question the legitimacy of the argument that a liberal arts education is not only important, but also absolutely vital to today's modern society. Whether through the study of music, psychology, history, literature, theater, or the many other disciplines included under the title of Liberal Arts, students and teachers alike are encouraged and challenged to critically discuss, consider, and analyze the thoughts and concerns of their generation and the generations which preceded them. Due to this essential process of critical thought both we, as individuals, and society, as a whole, are given a path through which greater global, national, and personal understanding and freedom may be achieved. This greater understanding and freedom is successfully demonstrated through the discussion of three specific subject areas of Liberal Arts-- foreign language, theory, and history.

Through the study of foreign language individuals do not simply learn to speak a new and different language, but they also begin to incorporate a vital aspect of another culture -- language -- into their understanding of the world in which they live. As many

linguists and anthropologists have insightfully noted, language is not only an essential mode of explicit communication between humans, but it is also a vehicle of implicit societal priorities and values. One unique example of this is found within the language of the Foré people, an indigenous tribe found in New Guinea. The Foré have a diet still primarily based upon an expansive array of wild animals and vegetation.¹ One of the staple forms of vegetation within the Foré diet is the mushroom. In order to distinguish and clarify each species of mushroom the Foré not only describe each one with detail, but also have developed very specific and separate terms for each individual species. In all, there currently exist 29 unique names for different types of this vegetation within the Foré language.² Although the number of words utilized by a tribe in New Guinea to distinguish different forms of fungi may seem unimportant, this example is extremely significant. It supports the argument that through learning a foreign language one also learns unique aspects of the given culture, which may have otherwise been easily overlooked. To the Foré people, distinguishing clearly between different species of mushrooms and being able to communicate about them is vital to survival in the thick New Guinea jungle, as some of these mushroom species are extremely poisonous.

As the above example demonstrates, the study of foreign language is not only essential to an individual's and society's ability and freedom to communicate in a global age but, much as the study of the Foré language allows anthropologists and linguists to better understand Foré culture, it is also crucial to an individual's and society's appreciation for the diversity of culture which exists around the globe. One can clearly argue that the study of foreign language is paramount to life in the 21st century, as the

understanding of language allows for cooperation, mutual respect, and freedom of communication in a globalized world.

Much as the study of foreign language lays a foundation upon which greater intersocietal understanding may be reached, so does the study of theory create the soil within which further personal and societal freedom may grow. Although rarely realized, theory is the cornerstone not only of intellectual study, but also basic everyday decision-making. In the words of Bell Hooks, “[Theory is the] ‘lived’ experience of critical thinking, of reflection and analysis.”³ Theory however does not end here, at a point of simple personal interpretation, but continues as a tool of “intervention, as a way to challenge the status quo... [and] to look at the world differently.”⁴ In other words, theory has the ability to be freeing, to allow individuals and societies to challenge cultural norms and practices and to develop a strategy for change.

One interesting example of this is seen in the period of theological change known as the Protestant Reformation. Although there were many aspects which led up to the Reformation, such as the Great Schism of the 15th century, this movement was largely structured and shaped by “ongoing, earnest theoretical debates... [concerning] the nature of the church, and the source and extent of the authority of the papacy, of councils, and of princes.”⁵ This theorizing and questioning of church authority and the role of individuals within the congregation eventually lead to the establishment of numerous protestant denominations and greatly influenced the development of the United States as a country, as many of its founders were English protestants. In this way, the Protestant Reformation paved the path for new thoughts and practices concerning Christianity-- one of the most deeply imbedded and influential aspects of European culture-- and, in the process, also

influenced the ideals and values of European and American society surrounding religious authority and personal autonomy. There is profound freedom found in this ability to move beyond the potential confines of “the status quo” established within any society, whether in relation to religious or other cultural norms, as it allows for intellectual, social, political, and civil growth -- aspects which are vital to an ever changing world in the 21st century.

Along with the profound impact of the study of Foreign Language upon an individual's and society's understanding of other cultures, and the importance of theory as a model for personal and societal freedom of thought and action, the study of history provides a pivotal pillar for both further understanding and freedom in the 21st century. Many people confuse history with a limited focus upon the past that has no significance or consequence to the present. Such a belief is extremely erroneous. As well-known novelist James Baldwin explains: “History... does not refer merely, or even principally, to the past. On the contrary, the great force of history comes from the fact that we carry it with us, are consciously controlled by it... and [it] is literally *present* in all that we do.”⁶ Not only is history “alive” in the present, but the present is “alive” in history, as history is affected by the ideals, beliefs, and goals of the present.

One powerful example of this is found in Eric Foner's book *Who Owns History: Rethinking the Past in a Changing World*. During his exploration of history, and its change over time, Foner describes the mass movement to rewrite South African history after the end of apartheid in the early 1990's. South Africans spent ample time rewriting the history of their country in an attempt to find a history that would help South Africans to discover the future many of them hoped and longed for. This future embraced the

African culture and African involvement in all aspects of political, civil, and economic life. As a result, history changed along with the country, aiding in the difficult task of restructuring a hurting nation. As Foner elucidates: “New South African history ha[d] given voice to those excluded from traditional accounts... [it] allow[ed] ordinary people to relate their lives and express their aspirations.”⁷ As the above statement demonstrates, history became a pillar for the acknowledgement and understanding of an African identity and the freedom to escape the past confines of apartheid.

This ability of history to supply a foundation upon which the present and its goals may be understood and expressed is vital to the many challenges and changes facing all countries and the world in the 21st century. If we are going to embrace the uniqueness of our situation as a globalized society our history must reflect this essential element of our lives in order to create a successful platform, which is sensitive to our new global situation and from which new goals and dreams may be launched. For, as Foner smartly concludes, “a new future requires a new past.” Nothing could be truer.

From these three specific examples, in the forms of foreign language, theory, and history, it is extremely clear that the study of Liberal Arts is vital to the 21st century. Although Liberal Arts encompasses many other critical disciplines, these three examples help to illuminate the power and significance of Liberal Arts as an intellectual foundation which allows not only for a deeper understanding of the world in which one lives, but also sets the stage for freedom to think, challenge, create, and transform oneself and the globe. In this way, Liberal Arts permits us to not only embrace this gift of understanding and freedom, but to also realize the internal strength of ourselves, allowing us to face a

very challenging and difficult world with wonder, optimism, conviction, and determination.

¹ Jared Diamond, *Guns, Germs, and Steel: The Fate of Human Societies* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1997), 143.

² Diamond, *Guns, Germs, and Steel: The Fate of Human Societies*, 144.

³ Bell Hooks, *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* (New York: Rontledge, 1994), 61.

⁴ Hooks, *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom*, 59-60.

⁵ Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia, "Protestant Reformation", http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Protestant_Reformation.

⁶ Eric Foner, *Who Owns History: Rethinking the Past in a Changing World* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2000), ix.

⁷ Foner, *Who Owns History: Rethinking the Past in a Changing World*, 94.