

An Empowering Education

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At first, when getting to know people during my semester abroad, it was the question that I dreaded the most. "What do you study?" I would offer my best Spanish translation of "Latin American, Caribbean, and Iberian Studies," followed by a brief summary of the wide expanse of subject areas this covered: Spanish and Portuguese language, literature, history, political science, international relations, art, and economics, among others. It did not take many confused faces and incredulous stares for me to realize that this type of answer was just not going to get a worthy reception in Argentina. Not only was my accent foreign, but so, most apparently, was my intensely multidisciplinary liberal arts major.

For the sake of simplicity, and to facilitate more interesting conversations with the people I met by avoiding those initial dreaded responses, I became accustomed to choosing one of the many conventional areas of study that my major encompassed. One day, I was a literature student telling the woman working at the laundromat how eager I was to finish my first Manuel Puig novel so I could dive into the essays and short stories of Jorge Luis Borges. The next day I was a political science major, asking my partner at salsa lessons what his opinion of President Kirchner was. I studied languages, according to the travel agent, and would finally be able to practice Portuguese during my trip to Brazil.

It was an extremely liberating exercise. Not only was wearing different hats a fun pastime, but it made me reflect on the empowering nature of my liberal arts education. My peers in technical or pre-professional fields of study cultivate land with a single crop from which to draw information, analysis and perspective.

But what a multidisciplinary liberal arts education has given me is a flourishing, diversified garden of knowledge.

However, the true empowering essence of a liberal arts education is not the breadth of knowledge ascertained, but rather the depth of understanding that results from that breadth. The importance of a liberal arts education is not being a whiz at trivia. It is, rather, the ability to contextualize human events by drawing from a framework of knowledge, and to furthermore interpret and analyze these events more completely.

My liberal arts education has instilled in me a need to constantly be on the quest for knowledge. Entering college, as much as I wanted to stay informed on current events, I could not bring myself to read a daily newspaper. The information interested me, but the process of acquiring that information did not. Now, I enjoy my routine of reading online newspapers from four different countries, in three different languages, on a daily basis. I owe this love of learning to something intrinsic to a liberal arts education.

A contemporary issue that appears regularly in headlines of each of these news sources is the increasingly radical and revolutionary policies of Venezuelan president Hugo Chávez. Most Americans recognize President Chávez as the man who referred to President Bush as the devil in an address to the United Nations. Or, the far left extremist who is "threatening democracy" in Latin America. But as a liberal arts student, I see these superficial news blurbs as mere pieces of a larger puzzle that I have to construct for myself. I have to draw from not just my personal experiences and surroundings, but also seek out and

expose myself to information and opinions from diverse perspectives.

Furthermore, I use my breadth of knowledge to evaluate and filter this information in order to reach a complete and comprehensive understanding.

Watching several of President Chávez's speeches on YouTube.com, I noticed a resemblance to the populist leader in the 1967 Brazilian film *Terra em Transe (Land in Anguish)* which I saw and analyzed in my Brazilian cinema course. The film is a strong commentary on power and populism in Latin American politics. Approaching the populism of Chávez's leadership from a very different perspective has facilitated my understanding of the universality of his type of politics while still acknowledging the nuances that make his case unique.

The most prominent of these differences is of course the significance of petroleum. I took a seminar while studying in Argentina titled "Latin America Facing the World Energy Crisis." I gained a unique economic perspective with which to approach the policies of Hugo Chávez. When I saw him call President Bush the devil on television news stations, I asked myself what his motives were, knowing that up to 60% of Venezuela's oil output is purchased by the United States. Is he crazy to boldly insult the man who is essentially his number one customer?

It is asking more questions like this that leads us to more complete answers. For example, President Chávez has declared a Bolivarian Revolution in Venezuela. But who was Simón Bolívar and what does this imply? In my course centered on revolutionary icons in Latin America, we studied Bolívar by reading his original texts and analyzing how he has become mystified and

idealized over the past two centuries. I found strong contradictions in his writing regarding democracy and tyranny. Actually, armies that were much more popular (comprised of mixed raced peasants) fought against Bolívar in the wars of independence. Bolívar himself ended up being expelled from Venezuela at the end of his life, viewed as a tyrant. But Chilean writer Pablo Neruda's 1941 poem "Un Canto Para Bolívar" depicts him as the father of the land who awakes every one hundred years when the *pueblo* arises in revolution. Chávez's evocation of the symbol of Bolívar has powerful connotations in Latin America. Both studying the roots of this icon and critically analyzing the shape that it has taken over epochs provides for a much more comprehensive understanding.

Thus, I draw from a framework of knowledge that includes economics, international relations, history, literature, and even cinema to interpret the daily news events that I read about President Hugo Chávez.

While it may have been beneficial, for simplicity's sake, to tell the woman at the laundromat or my partner at salsa lessons that I study *literatura* or *ciencias políticas*, it is not beneficial to simplify our world view in such a way. I no longer dread being asked what my major is. I am proud to study the liberal arts in an interdisciplinary fashion because it gives me the tools to be a better world citizen. I can use my broad base of knowledge to see the world from diverse perspectives. I can approach salient problems and issues not by simplifying the answer, but rather by asking more questions, by digging deeper. We are part of an increasingly pluralistic world order. My liberal arts education has liberated me from the limitations of interpreting issues in terms of black and white. It is

incredibly empowering to be able to contextualize and analyze human events in colors, hues, and shades.