

March 2011 | Volume 68 | Number 6

What Students Need to Learn Pages 22-26

The Humanities: Why Such a Hard Sell?

David J. Ferrero

In our efforts to help students achieve economic success, let's not ignore the personal and civic goals of schooling.

In fall 2009, interested television viewers could watch Harvard philosophy professor Michael Sandel deliver pithy lectures on Aristotle and Immanuel Kant and then pose tough moral questions, such as, Should we have the right to sell our organs on the free market? and Is it OK to kill one person to benefit thousands? These lectures were part of *Justice: What's the Right Thing to Do?*, a 12-part series examining competing theories of justice from ancient times to the present and their applications to contemporary ethical challenges. The series, which aired on Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) stations and is now available online at www.justiceharvard.org, was based on Sandel's popular freshman course on moral reasoning. It consisted entirely of Sandel's lectures and discussions with the 900 or so students enrolled in the course.

It would be difficult to imagine a more unlikely television series. But for an old humanities teacher like me, the mere fact that PBS would air it, and that sufficient funders could be found to underwrite it, was heartening. Here was a TV show focused on the relevance of the philosophical tradition and based on a college lecture course whose goal is to develop not engineers or entrepreneurs, but reflective citizens, wise leaders, and *good persons*. These aims garner little attention among those who are setting U.S. education priorities today.

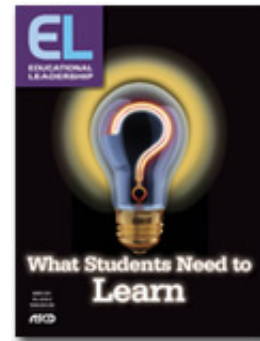
The Purposes of Schooling

Historically, democratic societies have recognized three broad purposes of schooling: personal, economic, and civic. At the *personal* level, schools have helped students discover and cultivate individual interests, talents, and tastes; form good habits; and develop an understanding of what it means to lead a good life. Schools have prepared students to contribute productively to the *economy* by preparing them to pursue a vocation or further study leading toward some profession. And schools have achieved *civic* goals by equipping students with the knowledge and skills necessary to be good citizens. Together these three imperatives have constituted a holistic understanding of persons as having private, productive, and civic selves.

That holism has atrophied. The civic purpose of schools, when invoked at all, is usually an afterthought, treated largely as a by-product of the economic imperative to develop 21st century skills said to be essential to the modern workforce. The personal dimension of schooling has been reduced to self-expression and self-advancement, wherein a school's value is defined primarily by whether it helps students earn credentials that will make them employable.

Both the civic and personal purposes of schooling, in other words, have been subsumed by the economic. Education reform today is all about credentials and competitiveness. And so has vanished a centuries-old tradition of educational aspiration, one known as *paideia*, *bildung*, or *humanitas*: the forging of good persons through a broad, humanistic liberal arts education. With it has gone any interest in those aspects of curriculum that cannot justify themselves in economic or credentialist terms.

The economic imperative does allow for a more well-rounded curriculum than it might seem at first glance.



Math and science are no-brainers, of course, as are social sciences such as sociology, psychology, and economics. Physical education supports good health and long life, adding to productivity and reducing the costs of health care while honing that competitive edge. The arts fare surprisingly well, too, because they're hands-on, often involve working in groups, and help cultivate creativity, all of which rank high on lists of 21st century workforce skills. English and language arts also provide some clear cash value insofar as they help students develop strong communication skills.

But what about history? This requires some shoehorning. Some have argued that a global economy requires more knowledge of world cultures, and therefore of world history. But how deep a knowledge of the history of China does one really need to do business there? And how in workforce terms does one justify teaching the history of the Ottoman Empire, Carolingian Renaissance, or even American Revolution? History certainly has an economic component—the role of trade, competition for resources, and technology in shaping cultures over time. But what of the role of religion? Or art? Or political philosophy? Or literature? To justify the study of history, or indeed any of the humanities, in economic or workforce terms cuts out enormous swathes of human experience and accomplishment or distorts their meaning and value.

Learning from the Humanities

Has the study of history, literature, art, and ideas—what we commonly call the humanities—outlived its relevance? I hope not. I believe students can still learn from the humanities and that these lessons can enhance their lives—and our collective life—in a variety of ways.

For one thing, a culture that celebrates consumer choice might want to ensure that young people have access to a full array of ways of using leisure beyond those that provide the most immediate appeal, instant gratification, and producer profit. People who have a broad exposure to a full range of arts and letters can graze the full range of entertainments, heading off to see a play after a day at the ballpark; indulging in the antics of Rabelais alongside those of Russell Brand; filling their iPods with Bach, Basie, and Beyoncé.

Further, because such people usually owe much of their exposure to the humanities to teachers and professors, they also have some grasp of the formal elements, historical evolution, and standards of excellence that define different humanistic and creative domains and connect contemporary popular forms with their "classic" forebears. Such knowledge helps them get more out of more popular entertainments, applying the same kind of acuity to their Monday morning musings over *Mad Men* as they do to their Wednesday night book club discussions of *Wuthering Heights*. (This runs against the common assumption that those who appreciate opera, fine wine, and abstract art turn up their nose at popular entertainments. Those who haven't been exposed to a variety of entertainments often do plenty of snubbing, mocking opera, wine, and anything that smacks of the hoity-toity.)

A second reason to teach the humanities is that the humanities teach us about human achievement. A culture that prizes excellence might ask schools to provide exemplars who seek excellence across the full range of human endeavor. The study of history introduces us to the *people* whose lifelong pursuit of ideals, questions, or power led them to accomplish extraordinary things of consequence to others (and not always for the better, which is instructive). Pericles, Charlemagne, and Elizabeth I; Copernicus, Galileo, and Newton; Plato, Spinoza, and Nietzsche; Buddha, Jesus, Muhammed; Dante, Shakespeare, and Austen; Raphael, Velasquez, and Cassatt; and yes, Edison, Ford, and Gates were all driven to excel in an important domain of human endeavor. Understanding them and their pursuits opens us up to a fuller range of ways to both improve the world and find our place in it.

Third, and perhaps most important, those who believe in democracy and its elevation of the individual might ask schools to help students cultivate both a citizen identity and genuine autonomy. Here I'm talking

about an aspect of humanistic learning that has been so thoroughly forgotten that people hardly bother to express disdain for it anymore: *tradition*. Yet the more I learn, the more I am convinced that immersion in traditions of thought and culture serves the important though seemingly contradictory ends of forging a collective public identity while enabling more autonomous thought and informed action among individuals.

Linking tradition to a shared identity is the easy part. Studying the history of the society or civilization to which we belong helps us situate ourselves in a story bigger than ourselves, recognize our inheritance, and deepen our identification with those who share that inheritance. The fierceness of the culture wars in the 1980s and 1990s reflected recognition of this, which is why they became virtually synonymous with identity politics. Lost in these arguments was any notion of a shared citizen identity—whether national or global—that could foster civil discourse and encourage common projects. I daresay that the quality of our current political discourse reflects that loss.

The role tradition plays in shaping autonomous thought is less easy to grasp, but it is dangerously underappreciated in a society that places so much importance on individual agency. We can start developing our own appreciation of tradition's role with the simple recognition that our present is shaped by the past. Pretending otherwise only strengthens the past's grip on us by rendering its influences invisible.

Consider: When historians trace a genealogy of formal thought about government from ancient Greece and Rome to 15th-century Florence, and another from Germanic tribal governance and Magna Carta to British liberalism, and note their confluence in Enlightenment innovations that later give way to romanticism, then to modernism, and a host of other political isms, they aren't just making up the connections. The debts to past thinkers were generally acknowledged by each innovating generation (often through explicit challenge or rejection). These arguments over time underlie much of what people in the present-day Western world consider "common sense." Western ideas about democracy, civil and human rights, free markets, individual autonomy, and so on all emerged out of this tradition. Knowing the roots and evolution of prevailing ideas and values, as well as those they supplanted, enables people to embrace (and question) them with greater self-awareness. Such knowledge also provides an important context for interpreting current events and enables people to look more sympathetically and critically to *other* traditions for insight and inspiration.

The relevance of the humanities rests on a broader understanding of *humanism*, an orientation toward teaching and learning that goes beyond workforce competency and credentialing to encompass personal and civic dimensions of life. If educators take seriously the ideal of the whole child, we'll need to work to preserve and perpetuate that humanistic spirit. Just don't expect a lot of policy support for it.

Finding a Space for the Humanities

I don't know whether the audience sympathetic to humanistic aims of schooling numbers in the thousands or dozens, but I'm confident that it's neither large nor influential enough to convince Intel that its engineers need to read Homer or to persuade the U.S. Congress that widespread familiarity with Baroque music will boost productivity. And it's quixotic to expect them to care about the intangible, hard-to-quantify benefits of discussing, writing about, and grappling with such stuff. Fortunately, current U.S. policy trends provide some space for practitioners to pursue the humanities while serving the policymakers' goals of competitiveness and credentials.

The Common Core State Standards, released in 2010 and adopted by 42 states by that year's end, were developed out of a preoccupation with competitiveness and credentials. But a careful reading of the standards for the English language arts suggests that the architects consciously designed them to allow for legitimate diversity of aims and breadth of content. See, for example, this note on reading content:

To become college and career ready, students must grapple with works of

exceptional craft and thought whose range extends across genres, cultures, and centuries. Such works offer profound insights into the human condition and serve as models for students' own thinking and writing. Along with high-quality contemporary works, these texts should be chosen from among seminal U.S. documents, the classics of American literature, and the timeless dramas of Shakespeare. Through wide and deep reading of literature and literary nonfiction of steadily increasing sophistication, students gain a reservoir of literary and cultural knowledge, references, and images; the ability to evaluate intricate arguments; and the capacity to surmount the challenges posed by complex texts.¹

This statement unequivocally endorses a *raison d'être* for K–12 other than work training and creates space for the humanities. The architects of the standards wisely defer to others to work out the details.

One such tool for working out these details is the set of curriculum maps developed by the coincidentally named Common Core, a nonprofit organization established in 2007 that is unrelated to the Common Core State Standards project. (See the article by Lynne Munson on p. 10 of this issue of *Educational Leadership* for more on Common Core.)

Working in collaboration with teachers and content experts, Common Core the *organization* uses Common Core *standards* to create curricular units—six per grade for grades K–12— that tie rich humanities content to the standards. The online resources at www.commoncore.org/maps include outlines, pacing guides, sample assessments, recommended works and artifacts, and other resources. The site includes a 5th grade unit called Clues to a Culture, which "focuses on clues to Native American nations/ cultures as revealed through pairings of literature and informational text," and one for 11th grade called American Romanticism, which examines "the emerging movement of American Romanticism in the early 19th century and the period leading up to the Civil War." Though incomplete as a curriculum package, the project demonstrates how standards motivated by credentials and careers can anchor humanistic aims.

Secondary educators who have already developed their own content and need to align it to the Common Core State Standards will soon be able to turn to the Literacy Design Collaborative resources for English language arts, social studies, and science for grades 6–12. The toolkit, expected to become available later in 2011 or in 2012, includes content-neutral formative assessment templates teachers can use to help students progress through reading and writing assignments that grow more demanding in terms of text complexity and expectations for thinking and writing. The templates include rubrics to help teachers gauge both the level of difficulty of an assignment and the results of the student's work.

When complete, the suite of resources will include a growing online library of free teacher-developed instructional modules similar to those developed by Common Core the organization and, eventually, model courses pegged to the Common Core State Standards. For now, the flexibility of the templates regarding choice of content and the focus on getting students to think rigorously, argue cogently, and write fluently represent another way the competitiveness and credentials agenda can serve the broader aspirations of the humanist educator.

A Few Good Models

Long before the Common Core State Standards existed, other educators had already developed ways to marry competitiveness and humanism. Two quite different secondary school models do this particularly well. As a STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Math)–themed 6–12 charter school, the Denver School of Science Technology in Denver, Colorado, aspires to create the next generation of entrepreneurs and high-tech innovators; and its curriculum places heavy emphasis on projects and internships. Yet the school's leaders and faculty take pains to characterize it as a liberal arts school with a STEM focus.

In Illinois and Wisconsin, meanwhile, high schools adopting the Aligned by Design program put civic humanist priorities first, aiming to create the next generation of *citizens* through curriculums that expose students to the deep histories and idea systems underlying contemporary issues and teaching them how to reason and argue about those ideas in speech and print.²

Both models rely on the ACT's Standards for College Readiness and accompanying tests to help teachers incorporate the skills students need to succeed in college, careers, and civic life. Denver School of Science Technology teachers embed the ACT standards in daily lessons and administer homemade, web-based mini- assessments at the end of each class period. These inform both the next day's lessons and individualized student supports the teachers create. The Aligned by Design model relies less on frequent assessments and more on deep analysis of the standards and teacher collaboration in determining how to integrate them across all content domains. Both models have found that this obsessive attention to the skills embedded in the ACT standards serves both their college- and career-ready missions and their humanistic ones.

Valuing the Devalued

In policy and reform circles today, the humanistic aims of education are undervalued, and their place in the K–12 or even college curriculum is by no means assured. But they are at least tolerated, and the policies and tools being developed to support credentials and competition can be used to strengthen the humanities curriculum. Educators can cultivate in practice the humanistic ideas about which policy is largely silent.

Students want and deserve the opportunity for material prosperity that the credentials and competitiveness agenda seeks to provide. But insofar as educators do speak about the aims and purposes of schooling, we should take care to speak forthrightly about the full range of benefits a broad basic education seeks to provide, both for students and society. Otherwise, these other, equally important aims may be lost to public consciousness altogether.

Endnotes

¹ Common Core State Standards Initiative. (n.d.). *English Language Arts Standards*. Retrieved from the Common Core State Standards Initiative at www.corestandards.org/the-standards/english-language-arts-standards/anchor-standards-6-12/college-and-career-readiness-anchor-standards-for-reading

² I wrote previously about this model in Ferrero, D. (2006). *Having it all*. *Educational Leadership*, 63(8), 8–14.

Author's note: Development of the Common Core Standards, the Common Core organization's modules, and the Literacy Design Collaborative resources are funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, which is the organization I work for. These views expressed here, however, are my own and are in no way intended to represent those of the foundation.

David J. Ferrero supports STEM and other college- and career-ready initiatives at the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation; djferrero@comcast.net. He also serves on the board of directors for the DC Arts and Humanities Education Collaborative in Washington, D.C.
