

Liberal education in a shrinking world

Mark Setton

In this paper we argue how, in the era of the global village, the university, and particularly the liberal arts curriculum, can serve as a springboard for the cultivation of global (as opposed to national) civic consciousness. In an age when supranational organizations devoted to global security appear seriously handicapped, the cultivation of supranational civic consciousness would appear to be an obvious priority.

As early as the nineteenth century, liberal education was introduced in an effort to make the curriculum “human, rather than technical or vocational, but moreover to tackle socially and politically controversial issues by systematic study.”¹ This view itself is no longer controversial and for the past century a general consensus has prevailed that tertiary education exists to create better citizens as well as better trained workers.

The American Association of Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) now provides the following definition of liberal education:

A philosophy of education that empowers individuals, liberates the mind from ignorance, and cultivates social responsibility.

The problem is that in a “plugged-in” world where individuals and NGOs have unprecedented power to disseminate ideas and catalyze change, our universities are still sadly underequipped to cultivate citizens who 1) feel a sense of social responsibility, and 2) can implement this consciousness in a global context.

The problem of economic nationalism

One reason for this is the pressure exerted on educational institutions by local and national governments intent on cultivating patriotic citizens who can bolster economic supremacy in the global marketplace. In the case of the United States this emphasis on international economic competitiveness, in contrast to more broadly based cooperation, is evidenced in the policies of the US Commission on Tertiary Education.

In a recent report issued by the U.S. Secretary of Education’s Commission on the Future of Higher Education, the five major goals of higher education in the US are described in terms of creating:

¹ Fieldhouse, R. *A History of Modern British Adult Education*. NIACE 1997

- a world-class higher-education system that creates new knowledge, contributes to economic prosperity and global competitiveness, and empowers citizens;
- a system that is accessible to all Americans, throughout their lives;
- postsecondary institutions to provide high-quality instruction while improving their efficiency in order to be more affordable to the students, taxpayers, and donors who sustain them;
- a higher-education system that gives Americans the workplace skills they need to adapt to a rapidly changing economy;
- post-secondary institutions to adapt to a world altered by technology, changing demographics and globalization, in which the higher-education landscape includes new providers and new paradigms, from for-profit universities to distance learning.

The commission elaborates on the rationale for the topmost goal by concluding that

Finally, we found that numerous barriers to investment in innovation risk hampering the ability of postsecondary institutions to ... compete in the global marketplace. Too many of our colleges and universities have not embraced opportunities to be entrepreneurial.²

It is noteworthy that two of the remaining goals echo the focus on economic priorities with an emphasis on the concepts of affordability, “efficiency,” and “workplace skills,” tailored to a “changing economy.”

We see no elaboration of qualitative concepts briefly mentioned such as the “new paradigms” that are presumably needed in view of “changing demographics and globalization.”

The problem of Eurocentrism

A second reason for the failure to foster a genuinely global education is the inbuilt inertia, or in the worst cases, cultural bias, of Western educational institutions, which has resulted in their failure to keep up with globalization in terms of curricula and faculty composition.

In terms of foreign language study, one of the broadest indicators of curricular globalization, figures released by the U.S. Department of Education in 2006 revealed that only 24,000 students in grades 7-12 were studying Chinese, a language spoken by 1.3 billion people worldwide, yet more than one million students were learning French, a language spoken by only 80 million people.³ In the same month these figures were released, President Bush formally announced the National Security Language Initiative, a partnership between the government and the educational community to promote international education from kindergarten through graduate school with a focus on such “Critical Languages” as Arabic and Chinese. This would normally represent a step

² Margaret Spellings. *Report of the commission on tertiary education*. ‘A test of leadership.’ Republication copy, U.S. Department of Education, Washington DC, 2006.

³ U.S. Department of Education Fact Sheet, “Teaching Language for National Security and Global Competitiveness,” January, 2006.

in the right direction, though describing the purposes of this initiative in terms of national security would suggest that it is hardly the linguistic harbinger of a new era of intercultural communication and rapprochement, but rather an application of Sun Tzu's core instruction in the Art of War to "know the enemy."

Pedagogical Issues

A third more subtle cause of failure is pedagogical. It is associated with the age-old tendency of Western educational establishments to give primacy to the cognitive aspects of civilization and neglect the affective side of the coin.

Simply "knowing" about world civilizations in an intellectual sense is not going to turn our youth into global citizens. We have to teach students how to shift their perspective and put themselves in the shoes of their global neighbors, and this requires a somewhat radical change of course in terms of curricular content as well as educational philosophy.

Towards a philosophy of global education

One of the root causes of the prevailing educational myopia is that the ideology of capitalism has escaped from its economic kennel and sired litters of puppies in the realm of educational philosophy. The capitalist view of human nature is theoretically based on the idea that individuals and nations should, and invariably do, place priority on self-interest. This premise is in itself not irrational or unempirical. The big question is how self-interest is served, and it seems that a considerable number of politicians and educational policy makers, well-versed in economic and realist political theories but ignorant of social psychology, seem to retain premodern, and especially Hobbesian, views of human nature. At best we are seen as tribal creatures whose interests are served on the global stage by pursuing the logic of political and economic zero sum games, and at worst, perceived as unicellular creatures incapable of living symbiotically. In some ways these views fly in the face of the modern concept of the "humanities" which are broadly seen as the academic pursuit of general knowledge and intellectual skills,⁴ with a mind to cultivating functional members of modern societies. By their very nature many of these societies transcend ethnic and cultural barriers.

We suggest two concepts that could serve as guidelines for a philosophy of education that could inform modern liberal arts curricula, with a view to cultivating global consciousness. One is Confucius' concept of *ren* or humanity, which is often interpreted as the golden rule, but is more accurately translated as practical sympathy. The essential idea is that the ability to identify with the feelings and inclinations of our neighbors, and act upon the resulting insights, is a key to social harmony on a national and global stage.

⁴ Wordnet Princeton, 2006

The etymology of the Chinese graph *ren* reveals its strongly social significance. The graph is composed of two smaller graphs, signifying the number “two” and a human, or in other words, two people associating with each other. The most obvious attribute of *ren* is that it consists in “loving people,”⁵ and particularly in loving one’s parents and siblings,⁶ presumably as one’s relationship to kin influences one’s broader social interactions. Another attribute of *ren* is that it involves a certain amount of self-effacement and restraint:

Yan Yuan asked about *ren*. The master replied, ‘overcoming yourself and returning to *li* (propriety, ritual), that is *ren*.’⁷

Rather than constituting two separate activities that need to be carried out in sequential order, “overcoming oneself” and the practice of propriety are dynamically and inseparably linked. That is, sensitivity to and respect for others that is embodied in the practice of propriety naturally requires self-control and self-effacement. The Western reader who is perhaps more familiar with individualistic traditions might wonder whether suppression of the self can possibly lead to a genuine form of humanity. Paradoxically, for the Confucians, the true self is an interpersonal self. The task of realizing one’s humanity is thus largely a question of dissolving the barriers between people. When the poet John Donne proclaimed that “no man is an island,” he may have had this general idea in mind. Yet Donne might have used a different metaphor had he given more thought to the geological implications. The Confucian concept of human existence is graphically symbolized by the structure of islands: Superficially, people appear as individual and separate entities, yet below the surface they are substantially interconnected, in both an immediate and an historical sense. In an immediate sense, people are closely interdependent in that most mundane activities including education are essentially interpersonal. From a historical perspective, moreover, people are interdependent in the sense that the individual is simply one link in a chain that stretches back to distant ancestors who contribute to both the physical gene pool and more abstract cultural traditions. Cheng Yi, one of the founders of Sung dynasty Neo-Confucianism, points out that in ancient Chinese medical texts, a paralyzed limb was referred to as “inhumane.” That is, it was unable to perform fully its natural functions, in the same way that someone who is cut off from the human community, or who is otherwise unable to enjoy affectionate family relationships, is deprived of some of the defining aspects of personhood.

Last but certainly not least, a key attribute of *ren* or humanity is that it involves the practice of *shu*, which for convenience sake may be translated as “consideration for others.” Perhaps it would be more accurate to identify *shu* as the key to the realization of humanity rather than

⁵ *Analects*, 12:22.

⁶ *Analects*, 1:22.

⁷ *Analects*, 12:1

referring to it as a mere attribute of humanity. Mencius makes this clear when he claims that “there is no better way to seek humanity than to vigorously practice *shu*.”⁸

The significance of this concept far outweighs the small number of times it is mentioned in the *Analects*. Each time it is mentioned it seems to carry disproportionate weight. On one of these rare occasions Zigong virtually forces the master to specify his most important teaching. This is a noteworthy exchange because Confucius in most cases studiously avoids spoon-feeding his students with simplistic or rigid formulae as to how they should conduct themselves.

Zigong asked, “is there a single concept that one should practice throughout life?”
The Master replied, “Is it not *shu*? What you do not wish for yourself, do not impose on others.”⁹

Here *shu* is associated with a precept akin to the “golden rule” or, at least, a mirror image of the golden rule. In view of this similarity, many authorities translate *shu* as “reciprocity.” Technically this is accurate, but the somewhat mathematical nuance of the word is quite misleading. Once again, the structure of the graph, which is itself composed of two graphs, provides an interesting clue to its original meaning. The top component of the graph means “like” or “same,” while the bottom part means “mind.” In other words, the meaning of *shu* has something to do with “like-mindedness.” This is clearly the meaning of *shu* in its only occurrence in a later Confucian classic, the *Great Learning*, where it is referred to as a kind of mental measuring square. Simply put, one is able to fathom the basic inclinations of others by reflecting on one’s own likes and dislikes. This is the main psychological assumption behind the golden rule. This begs the question of applicability to a multicultural world, in which one would presume likes and dislikes have a multitude of manifestations. My own take on this is that Confucius is referring to some fairly essential likes and dislikes such as the desire for affection, respect, fair treatment etc.

Piecing together a more comprehensive definition of *shu* in view of these few references, perhaps a lengthier, and more psychological, description would read “putting oneself in another’s shoes and acting accordingly,” or, to borrow a native American idiom, “walking a mile in another man’s shoes.”

This is why the Chinese notion of humanity is relevant to a globally oriented liberal education. It provides an ethical guideline for a shift in curricular content that would combine the accumulation of objective knowledge with more affective, hands-on knowledge. In terms of instructional methodology this shift could be catalyzed by inviting guest speakers from diverse cultural backgrounds and areas of expertise, as well as providing multimedia education that would exploit the power of the internet to, in a virtual sense, transport viewers out of the classroom and into the shoes of their global neighbors. It would challenge students to think about

⁸ *Mencius*, 7A.4

⁹ *Analects*, 15:23

the real world implications of different cultural perspectives in comparing the work of global thinkers, instead of treating their contributions in separate classes. For example, instead of relegating South Asian literature to a course by that name, it could be integrated into core courses on literary classics that would take a comparative angle. This content could be reinforced by state subsidised international student exchange programs that would enable students from lower income brackets to competitively apply for scholarships through which they could immerse themselves in foreign cultures and languages in the target countries. Without this sort of cultural immersion the idea of global citizenship would remain purely .er, academic, for the majority of students.

A second related guideline is the concept of the “unity of knowledge and action,” which emphasizes that genuine knowledge is only realized through action or experience, and that this practical knowledge necessarily has an affective component, and consequently a transformative power. The Ming dynasty thinker and iconoclast Wang Yangming claimed that, rather than simply being close, knowledge and action were identical:

Knowledge is the beginning of action and action is the completion of knowledge.¹⁰

Yangming uses the examples of the practice of filial piety and archery to drive his point home. He points out that it is impossible to learn about filial piety by talking about it in a vacuum and that it is only when one serves and cares for parents and personally puts the principle of filial piety into action that one can be said to be “learning” filial piety. By the same token one could hardly claim to have studied archery by reading a book. To learn archery one must grasp the bow, fix the arrow to the string, draw the bow, and take aim.¹¹ The concept of action as the completion of knowledge is fairly easy to grasp, especially when one takes into account the probability that Wang is referring to moral rather than abstract knowledge. Yet the idea of knowledge as the beginning of action is more counter-intuitive. Fortunately there are many discussions on the topic in Wang’s collected works. Wang makes it clear that the knowledge he is speaking of has an affective component. Responding to a follower who doubts that knowledge and action can proceed simultaneously, Wang answers that:

A man must have the desire for food before he knows the food. This desire to eat is his intention; it is the beginning of action.¹²

To put the problem another way, from Yangming’s perspective knowledge without intention is not really knowledge. If one knows that a mango tastes delicious, at some point that knowledge will affect one’s behavior. If I know that mangoes taste wonderful, then at some point that knowledge will lead me to eat a mango. Conversely, if I contract food poisoning from a mango,

¹⁰ *Zhuanxi lu*, 1:2; Wing-tsit Chan, *Instructions for Practical Living*, 30.

¹¹ *Zhuanxi lu*, 2:5; Wing-tsit Chan, *Instructions for Practical Living*, 100.

¹² *Zhuanxi lu*, 2:2; Wing-tsit Chan, *Instructions for Practical Living*, 93.

that knowledge will lead me to avoid a mango when I am presented with one. The knowledge in each case contains an affective element, in the former case, a love of mangoes, and in the latter case a dislike of mangoes. Wang actually goes further than this by defining liking or disliking as constituting action itself. He argues that not only is knowledge the beginning of action, but furthermore it is the direction of action.¹³

In this way genuine knowledge incorporates an affective and volitional dimension as well as a cognitive one. To draw an analogy, a student may think she knows Archimedes' theorem of buoyancy. Wang might say that this is not genuine knowledge if she does not know how to apply it, and has no intention of doing so. On the other hand, when Archimedes shouted "Eureka!" on discovering his theory, his knowledge was genuine. This knowledge alone was the beginning of action. He was "moved" by it before it propelled him out of the bath.

As Yangming implies, the failure of people to perceive the unity of knowledge and action leads to various pathologies. People who fail to realize that action is the completion of knowledge wait until they thoroughly "know" before they put their knowledge into practice, and consequently end up neither practicing nor knowing.¹⁴ In this sense curricula with a global studies component should ideally embody an ongoing cycle of knowledge and practice in terms of academic exploration and cultural immersion.

Though Wang is mainly talking about moral knowledge his distinction between "genuine" and "empty" knowledge could be useful in formulating a curriculum that would put the cultivation of global civic consciousness at the center of a "liberal" education. If, to creatively paraphrase Marx, the purpose of a liberal education is not merely to observe the world but to change it, we have to satisfy the above core criteria for the realization of "genuine" knowledge. Both students and educators need to incorporate Wang's concept of "intention" as a prerequisite for this sort of knowledge in terms of consistently revisiting and ruminating over the possible real world applications of the classroom experience. Through curricula which would require extensive international exchange, students can "complete" their knowledge through a broad diversity of immersive experiences with global cultures and languages. The resulting synergistic cycle of intentional learning and real world experience leads to the "genuine" knowledge that forms the core of a genuinely transformative education. The graduates of such programs will to some extent be able to put themselves in the shoes of their global neighbors, and, if indeed "(genuine) knowledge is the beginning of action," they will have taken the first step to becoming well-informed activists as well as academics.

¹³ *Zhuanxi lu*, 2:2; Wing-tsit Chan, *Instructions for Practical Living*, 11.

¹⁴ *Zhuanxi lu*, 1:2; Wing-tsit Chan, *Instructions for Practical Living*, 11.