

The True Value of Liberal Arts Education: *Looking into the Origin and the Consequences of Running Universities like Business Entities*

Abstract:

This essay looks at the origin of liberal arts education and how it has become influenced and dominated by the market forces. It questions the purpose of our modern educational system and its value for the creation of civilized human societies. The contention of this essay is to relate changes in the educational system to the economic forces that brought about these changes and created the political environment within which our existing educational system functions. It concurs with the views that the problem began when the educational system was isolated from its human values and the search of knowledge without adherence to the creation of wisdom took center stage in the politics and the organization of our educational system.

Key Words: Education, Liberal Arts, Market, Humanity, Government, Philosophy, Economy

Where and How It Began

The origin of the university as an institution is debated among scholars. In explaining the starting place of universities, Dr. Kwaku Person-Lynn, who is a professor of African American Studies at Loyola Marymount University, in an article titled: "Afrikan Origin of the University," writes:¹

"Very few are aware that ancient Kemet (called Egypt by the Greeks) was the intellectual, spiritual, scientific and industrial center of the world in ancient time. Ancient Greece's greatest scholars polished their skills and acquired their knowledge in Kemet (Egypt)."

Humanity has come a long way from the early days of establishing centers for education in the tradition it started from ancient Egyptian times to the present time. The purpose of this essay is not to fantasize about the past without seeing the imperative of change and evolution of societies around the world. It is more about questioning the premise of change and its evaluation in direct relation to what served humanity well and questioning the impacts of the forces of change that made us lose what could be functional and positive.

According to late Dr. Asa Hilliard, who was the Fuller E. Callaway Professor of Urban Education at Georgia State University, the concept of education in ancient times was holistic in nature.

"The process of education was not seen primarily as a process of acquiring knowledge. It was seen as a process of the transformation of the learner who progressed through successive stages of rebirth to become more godlike. Disciplined study under the guidance of a master teacher was the single path to becoming a new person."²

This was how ancient civilization viewed education and its life-changing impact on people who became educated. Education was a luxury that only the elite could afford. The situation has gradually changed over time and education has become available to a greater proportion of societies in every country in the world.

¹ See http://www.stewartsynopsis.com/afrikan_origin_of_the_university.htm

² See <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/08/15/AR2007081502328.html>

However, the concept of education is different now despite its greater availability. Formal education is a multi-billion dollar industry engaging significant components of both the private and the public sectors in most developed countries. Today, few believe that education transforms the learner through successive stages of rebirth to become godlike as ancient Greeks and Egyptians thought. In our world, students who receive a university education are mainly interested in the financial and social advancement they will attain through education. This is the reality of the world we live in. Such an attitude has been accepted as a matter of course since capitalism, science, and technology began to form a new world order with a production process that has had occupational training as its centerpiece.

Dominance of Market-Based Educational Model:

In looking back, the nineteenth century Industrial Revolution certainly changed the purpose of education worldwide. It created occupational fields, and economies needed trained people capable of performing specific tasks in the production process. The emergence of new industry-related education brought profound change in the environment of educational institutions as well as their purpose and function.

The transformation was structural and changed the focus of education from humanistic to scientific. It is not hard to understand why formal education has become a means to secure financial advancement. In order to secure greater material well-being, one must compete in school and in the workplace. ***The condition gradually changed and the overwhelming majority of people found themselves with less time for themselves, less time to develop their inner-self that gives them the capacity for compassion, understanding, and love.***

Today, within the rapid global economies, expectations from universities have dramatically changed. Some draw a distinct line between what is expected from an institution of higher education, considering everything that does not serve production purposes as a detachment from reality. Detractors describe the more humanistic and philosophical pursuits as living in the Ivory Tower.

Concepts and definitions have changed. ***Today, in most universities, we have classes to teach professors to be facilitators in their classrooms; students are regarded as end users of knowledge for specific production purposes. They are often seen as consumers of knowledge, a pseudo-concept that has no real meaning and functionality as one thinks about consumption and knowledge and their true meanings.*** This is a concept that, while according to some may simplify a quality control issue (as education is seen in such mindsets as a mere private service), in reality it has caused many problems that reduce the quality of education. The consumer-producer relationship between students and educators, or places of education and students, is troubling.

Milton Friedman, a prominent libertarian economist, argues that education of a child accrues greater success not only to children or to their parents, but also to other members of the society. Since it is not clear to whom these side benefits may go, Friedman calls this concept the “neighborhood effect.”³ Friedman did not put any emphasis on the nature of education as a public good, but does accept the positive externality of educating citizens for the good of the

³ For more information see <http://www.edchoice.org/The-Friedmans/The-Friedmans-on-School-Choice/The-Role-of-Government-in-Education.aspx>

society. He then goes on to ask the question: what kind of governmental action is justified by this particular neighborhood effect? His answer is that each child should receive a minimum amount of schooling of a specified kind. He argues that requiring parents to pay for such costs might not be feasible as it would be the case for other types of goods, such as car safety by buyers of the car, in his example. He further dismisses separation of children from families who cannot pay for such expenses. He agrees that extreme cases could be handled by special subsidy provisions for needy families. His argument goes on and provides a detailed discussion that discusses if government subsidies are justified, then how this should come about and what type and level of schooling should be received.

He finally comes to his conclusion that denationalizing public education and allowing parents to use what then would become a voucher-based system may serve the purpose better. Therefore, he believed that the system of delivery of education should be left to the private sector, and parents can use government subsidies to purchase such services as they decide. Friedman's model some fifty years ago is an indication of how the task and production of education have been changing in favor of greater influence by the market.

Looking deeper into the position taken by Friedman brings the following issues that can still be found as the core principle and the byproduct of a market-based education:

- Government has no place in the production of educational services, but they may provide subsidies for certain levels of education to needy families.
- The subsidies should be provided to those in need, which is clearly testing the basis of needs (a means-tested system of providing subsidies).
- He does not explain how the amounts of subsidies will be determined, and in not doing so, simply admits the possibility of cutbacks as the government financial situation changes.
- Friedman does not definitively reject the possibility of an emerging system that provides substantial product differentiation that may be created based on the ability of parents to pay for their children's education.
- This is a profit-based system, and therefore, the ability of the system to uphold some of the most important principles of academic freedom may be in more danger than otherwise might emerge.
- It clearly brings up the issues of consumer sovereignty as an important issue for competition among various private educational firms.

The question of education, how it should be viewed, its impact on individuals and society, and the role of government is very important in what went on during the 20th century and beyond.

Problems with Considering Students as Consumers or Customers

The issues of considering students as consumers have been taken up by many scholars and educators. The main issues and problems with using this metaphor and adhering to its principles have been explained in some detail by George Cheney, et al (1995).⁴ They point out a number of

⁴ George Cheney, Jill J. McMillan, and Roy Schwartzman (1996), Should We Buy the "Student-As-Consumer" Metaphor? : <http://mtprof.msun.edu/Fall1997/Cheney.html>

issues that have already brought and will continue to generate negative consequences for the educational system as a whole. When students are considered as customers, they become inevitably external to the organization that produces the service. As consumers, they will be seduced by the producers of the services as opposed to entities who are actively involved in the production of the services that they are buying.

Monetary satisfaction of the consumers has no firm place in education, which is entirely based on the quality of the service that students receive. Cheney, et. al. also argue that while the basic impulse behind customer-driven or consumer-driven organizations and work processes seems to be democratic, in practice, a type of pseudo-democracy requiring very limited engagement of each participant (in this case, the student) dominates the process. In order for students to be considered as customers or consumers, the place of education must function like a business (which unfortunately is becoming very prevalent in the Western industrialized countries), and this by itself is a negative development and inappropriate institutional framework. Businesses have product orientation whereas educational institutions have process orientation. Products are produced and delivered; education transforms and allows those who receive them to continue gain more education in the time to come.

Students do not buy education like acquiring services or goods where their impact can easily be measured. The quantifiable outcomes of education, such as salary or professional promotion, often are only part of the impact. The person who receives education often does not know what they are receiving, and there is no limit on intellectual growth and pursuance of curiosity.

Can Using the Business Model be a Conduit to Provide Liberal Arts Education?

To make sure that our economies receive what they expect from educational institutions, mostly through the private sector and for the specific short-term interests of the labor market, funds through public channels have been cut successively and severely. It is not a surprise to see that public schools have lost their funding for arts and other non-production-related educational purposes. We simply do not value non-production-related education the same way.

There seems to be a growing trend that everything should be fashioned after a business model, and the argument for it is that it will make the production process more efficient. The same belief paints a picture that failure to observe “market realities” and will unleash the adverse market impact and make the process unsustainable. A little scrutiny shows that this paradigm in its simple form is poorly constructed and disproportionately feared. Market is an environment that facilitates an exchange of information and its forces operate based on revealed preferences and the willingness of the buyers and sellers as well as their financial abilities. A true and sensible argument about what should be considered as public or private goods or services is very relevant. It appears that many of our leaders do no care for such arguments and sadly, our electorates have lost their interest in holding their feet to fire. ***Presidents of universities consider themselves as CEOs and provosts behave like production mangers, and the focus of our attention is more on marketing our products than any other function that universities have been concerned with in the recent or distant past.*** The outcome of such endeavors is that we are producing fake products, packaging them nicely to capture the attention of our students and their parents and selling them at a good price, just like any other businesses. When a state washes its hands of having a direct responsibility to help its population become educated and gradually puts the responsibility on the shoulders’ of individuals or businesses to cater to their

own needs, a business model in which the emphases are placed on cost management, production efficiency and the earning of profits will emerge victorious.

The principal reason for seeing universities as businesses and running them as businesses is separating education from human concerns. With such separation, it can only make economic sense when we use a narrow perspective of the business model to run our universities and schools. Many think of their government as a business and many presidential or other public office candidates present the image of a CEO as the best kind of candidate for those offices. The problem is not their claim, it is the limitation of their perspective and horizon in seeing the purpose of the office or the organizations that they are to run and lead.

When we look deeper, the negative long term impact becomes evident. One of the outcomes of the separation of education from its human characteristics is having people who know a great deal of information about an extremely specialized subject and not much about anything else. It is true that the division of labor brought higher specialization, reduced cost of production, created greater production efficiency, and made it possible to produce more materials at lower cost for greater number of people. However, the bigger question is if this is the only way to build specialization and gain greater production efficiency.

Education in a standardized form allowed its mass production with the clear aim of having quality control for the uniform understanding of knowledge that can assure our industries to have the skilled workforce they need. However, it is also important to understand the full cost of such an approach. The same principle (economic efficiency) tells us that if we do not take the full cost of a decision into account, we will certainly make wrong decisions. We seem to be very selective when we use the logic of market-based allocation.

In an article entitled “Learning the Love of Learning: Newman’s Ideal Updated” published by Dr. Boria Sax, who worked as a consultant on human rights issues for organizations such as Amnesty International and Helsinki Watch, discusses the concept of liberal arts education explained by John Henry Newman, the nineteenth century British Catholic cardinal and philosopher.⁵ Dr. Sax writes:

“People may not realize that an early form of this phrase, “learning for learning’s sake,” comes from *The Idea of a University* by Cardinal John Henry Newman, which was first published in 1851. According to Newman, the study of liberal arts is not to be pursued for either practical utility or moral virtue, but for “knowledge as its own end.”

Dr. Sax explains that in order to justify the founding of the Catholic University in Dublin against the objections of fellow clergy who doubted the worth of secular learning at that time, he argued that liberal education was not intended to produce “the Christian,” but “the gentleman.” He went on to add that:

“Surely it is intelligible to say that liberal education, viewed in itself, is simply the cultivation and perfection of the intellect. Perfection is considered an end in itself in our garden and parks, in cities, homes, public buildings, churches. Physical beauty is deemed

⁵ Boria Sax (2010), Learning the Love of Learning, Center of Inquiry, Wabash College, LiberalArtsOnline, <http://www.liberalarts.wabash.edu/lao-6-4-newmans-ideal-updated>

desirable, and so with a beauty of our moral being, which is natural virtue. Why cannot beauty, that is perfection of the intellect, be considered desirable in itself? This message has resonated far beyond the Catholic setting in which Newman wrote, and remains the basis for debates about the role of the university today.”⁶

Some of us may think that this is fastidious but hardly a practical approach for what we need in our time. However, a liberal arts education can serve the interests of our modern world just as “efficiently.” A true liberal arts education in the “practical sense” can provide many abilities, insight and skills desperately needed in the workplace while preserving the joy of learning for learning’s sake.

Here are some of the comparative advantages of liberal arts education in the language of a market-based economy:

On a personal level, a liberal arts education can help to build:

- Art of listening
- Self-confidence
- Appreciation of the importance of others’ perspectives

On an intellectual level, liberal arts can help one to have:

- Intellectual enthusiasm
- A discerning quality thought
- The ability to make connections between ideas
- Critical skills to challenge assumptions and look for the truth

On a professional level, it helps one to:

- Make connections between ideas
- Develop problem-solving tendencies when placed in an existing setting
- Be inspired for discovery of new concepts and ideas
- Have an urge for interdisciplinary thinking
- Be able to pursue critical and analytical thinking
- Know where to look for answers and appreciate that often one does not hold all the answers or the truth

On an emotional level, it allows one to:

- Appreciate diversity
- Learn how to encounter others without resentment
- Learn the beauty of self-realization as a path of peaceful coexistence
- Appreciate the value of human interaction in one’s happiness and contentment

On an ethical level, it helps to:

- Associate ideas with values
- Not be apprehensive about asking questions irrespective of raising the difficulty for the ones who have to answer them

⁶ Ibid

- Appreciate the value of our living environment and its preservation for the future generations
- See ethics as a functioning and integral part of our lives, economy and well-being and appreciate that no one has the monopoly of a particular set of moral values

Hopes and Fears of an Uncertain Future

The real question here is the product of the system in our time and lives. Kamran Mofid, founder of Globalization for the Common Good puts it very clearly in his recent article in the online journal, *Globalisation for the Common Good*.⁷

“In the Western world, according to many observers, capitalism has progressively turned everything into something that could be bought or sold, and thus measuring value only by the bottom line. Slowly but surely, such measures are now also being applied to the personal, cultural, social, and familial and more values at the core of society.”

Mofid’s statement has been advocated for by many contemporary social scientists, educators and ethicists. The core of the issue in most arguments is the value of education and what is expected from it in our world. Nicholas Maxwell, a renowned philosopher who taught philosophy of science at the University College of London University is very clear about the purpose of education.⁸ Maxwell does not reject the importance of seeking knowledge, but argues strongly that acquiring knowledge and understanding of how the physical universe operates cannot help humanity achieve what is of value: a more civilized world that functions by using cooperatively rational means. He argues that the only way to avoid in this century the horrors of the last one (wars, death camps, dictatorships, poverty, environmental damage) is to acquire urgently more wisdom. This means that according to Maxwell, our institutions of learning should focus and devote their utmost attention to the pursuit of wisdom as the core purpose of the education they deliver to their students.⁹

Maxwell debates the question of wisdom and curiosity as twin purposes of education in a short essay in *The Times Higher Education Supplement*.¹⁰ He argues that our present academic inquiries betray the intellectual exploration of the intrinsic interests of the world that can improve our knowledge and understanding of the world and search for solutions that can help humanity to overcome its living problems and be peaceful, just, democratic and environmentally enlightened. Instead, there is too much emphases on obscure research conducted to further careers and reputations. Instead of education, our academic institutions have degraded themselves to become institutions for training and skill development. Instead of responding to the needs of humanity, our academic institutions are fixated on serving the requirements of

⁷ See Kamran Mofid (2011) [Can Business Education and the Business Schools Advance Sustainability and the Common Good?](http://www.qcqi.info/news/133-towards-an-education-worth-believing-in) *Globalisation for the Common Good Initiative*, August 29, 2011, <http://www.qcqi.info/news/133-towards-an-education-worth-believing-in>

⁸ Nicholas Maxwell (born 1937) is a philosopher who has devoted much of his working life to arguing that there is an urgent need to bring about a revolution in academia so that it seeks and promotes wisdom and does not just acquire knowledge. For his biography see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nicholas_Maxwell

⁹ McHenry, L. (ed) *Science and the Pursuit of Wisdom: Studies in the Philosophy of Nicholas Maxwell* (Ontos Verlag, Frankfurt, February 2009)

¹⁰ See Wisdom and curiosity? I remember them well. *The Times Higher Education Supplement*, 25 May 200, p14.

business and governments. In the medical field, the entire attention is on the developed countries and what their market requires instead of responding to the unmet needs of the developing countries and nations. Commercialization has overtaken the modern science. Instead of contributing to the quality of human life, our scientists and their scholarship have been focused on satisfying the desires expressed in the markets.

In offering solutions he argues that places of higher education must put aside excessive bureaucracy and instead turn their attention to promoting curiosity, creativity and innovation. According to Maxwell, the over-arching aim of inquiry ought to be to promote wisdom. Wisdom is the capacity to achieve what is of value in life, for oneself and others (thus including knowledge).

The argument of Maxwell and other philosophers, ethicists and educators speaks about the detriments of the emerged system of education that is plaguing our current academic environment. ***The root of such perversion comes from the political environment of our time that has become dominated by the opinions of market fundamentalists who are intentionally or unintentionally supporting the interests of an extremely small group of the plutocracy of the world. The problem is deep and the current situation is rather disappointing.***

The problem in the United States of America has reached a new peak unseen for many decades. The lack of viable political movements that could have given support to the plight of the working families and their disappointment with the direction of the economic and political changes in the nation brought a heightened level of distrust among the people and this, unfortunately, has brought further political gains for the oligarchy in charge. There is no credible way to see what is going on in our educational system, and equally there is no rationale to separate the philosophy of our education from the present or future direction of our politics and the economy. We harvest what we sow and seeing our educational system separate from our politics makes no sense. I concur with Maxwell in his view that the hope for a better educational system can only come from creation of a more morally and politically enlightened and active academia than what we have at present. I would like to add that such academia will not come out of a vacuum, and we need a sustained political debate and activism that can bring such changes in our politics in general and politics of education in particular.

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