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The Liberal Arts: Making Science Make Sense

Pondering the question of what my life will look like in five years has taken on an entirely new meaning. None of us know where we will be even within the short length of one day. Now, we are faced with a relentless pandemic. One which shows no regard for future plans or certainties, and that has taken the lives of many. When facts do not provide all the answers to our most driving questions, where do we go next? A liberal arts education teaches students to read texts actively and consider focused problems in a larger context. In a world stricken by COVID-19, a liberal arts education allows students to examine the data provided by scientists and answer the country's most pressing questions through an analytical mind.

The liberal arts prepares students to respond to questions that have not yet been answered through science. The ability to think critically is a versatile and powerful tool obtained through learning how to engage and respond to and with texts. Scott L. Newstok in his “How to Think Like Shakespeare” prefers to refer to critical thinking as “‘negative capability’ ... ‘capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts’” (p.5). Newstok explains that students who are taught to think critically allow themselves room for questions, curiosities, and apprehensions. Our world in 2020 is dominated by these uncertainties; liberal arts students are better prepared to respond to them, even if there is no solid evidence to provide that answer. As Jeffrey Scheuer in his “Critical Thinking and the Liberal Arts” puts it, a liberal arts education is “a wellspring of ideas

and questions, and a way of promoting flexibility and openness to diverse perspectives” (p.3).

Scheuer explains that individuals with a liberal arts education allow their certainties to be flexible and have open minds; Newstok’s ideas expand on this by explaining that this education also enables students to ask meaningful questions and maintain space for curiosity and unease. So, how does this apply to our pandemic-driven society today, in 2020? A liberal arts degree could not be more useful. In March we were faced with the unprecedented COVID-19 virus, which threw our lives into a whirlwind. Since then, each day has been nothing but uncertainty and a constant flow of worried questions that science does not yet have answers for. When will this end? What is next? Without making room in our minds to allow these questions to be open, we would simply not be able to handle the constant questions that science has not yet provided an answer for. However, an individual with the ability to think critically will realize that it is okay to not be provided with an answer. History has played a similar hand before. Although science cannot yet provide a set answer, a liberal arts degree prepares students to be comfortable with being uncomfortable through seeing situations through an analytical perspective. People must remain curious, involved, and be able to solve problems that do not involve numbers; they must have the capacity to be in doubt in order to maintain their ability to rationalize when there is no set solution.

The liberal arts allows students to look at situations contextually and analytically. Through this education, students develop reading and writing skills through immense practice. They learn to engage with and annotate their readings actively, simultaneously being exposed to a variety of writers and viewpoints. Author Patrick Sullivan describes active reading in “An Open Letter to High School Students about Reading” when he describes that “‘deep reading’

requires reflection, curiosity, ... [and] a consideration of multiple possibilities” (p. 3). This reflection and curiosity prompts students to compare their experiences and societal environment to the contexts being described in the text or experienced by the author. This is extremely important when exploring historical texts. Learning how to actively consider the current events happening in our own lives and putting them in the broader context of the historical events taking place in the reading can help students consider problems through a different perspective. Our current world is dominated by conversations of the pandemic that has taken the reins of our society. Many sources refer to this pandemic as “unprecedented.” Sure, we did not anticipate a pandemic to occur during our lifetimes. However, we can engage in readings that teach us of similar events that occurred historically. The CDC has a portion of their website specifically for the purpose of sharing stories from the 1918 pandemic. It mostly consists of grandchildren telling the stories that were passed down to them from their grandparents. It serves as a significant contrast to our conditions compared to those described in the stories. I decided to navigate to the section labeled “Plantings,” and found myself reading a story named “Dr. Frank Biberstein.” In this story, Paul Kendall describes what his grandfather, Dr. Frank Biberstein, experienced during the 1918 pandemic. In short, Biberstein was a freshman at a seminary college when the pandemic hit. His duty was to go around with a fellow student and pick up dead bodies from homes by foot alongside a horse-drawn cart. One line stood out more than any other to me: “My grandfather was not a big man, so I remember him telling me how hard it was for him to carry the bodies out” (Kendall). This is an aspect of the pandemic that our generation has not been faced with directly. Over 271,000 people have died from the virus in the United States alone. It would be useful for someone with a trained analytical mind to explain the significance

of this number who do not think to put it into a historical perspective. As every day citizens, we are not faced with this reality; our medical personnel are. This ability to put readings like Dr. Frank Bibersteins in context of the problems around us allows us to consider the magnitude of numbers and the reality of our situation. It may not be comforting, but we must maintain our humanity and passion and empathy for others if we are ever to see an end to this illness. It is essential that we add meaning to the numbers.

Some may say that I am demeaning the value of a STEM education, and that a STEM education is more important in these times than a liberal arts education. I am a Medical Biology, Pre-Physician Assistant major here at UNE. I am a STEM major. If I did not believe there was value in this degree, it would be foolish of me to pursue it. Without our researchers and doctors, nurses and EMT's, where would be now? STEM degrees have immense value, especially in the midst of a pandemic-stricken society. However, if everyone was a STEM major, who would help us to analyze, write and report out more than just the facts? I believe this should not be a debate about whether either area of study is more or less beneficial than the other. In fact, they work together more synchronously to create and educate valuable citizens than we acknowledge. I am enrolled in two liberal arts based classes and two science classes, and I find myself more well-rounded as a student and a person than I have ever been. The value of my education is demonstrated by my ability to look at the facts and be able to analyze them both logically and critically. I don't know about you, but I have personally caught myself becoming blind to the significance of the data being provided to us each day. While reading the story of Dr. Frank Biberstein and his experiences picking up dead bodies from people's homes, I annotated with the purpose of putting his world in context with mine; a skill I learned to be so useful in through

reading Sullivan. I learned to be okay with not knowing, while also maintaining my doubt and questions through reading Newstok and Scheuer. We need people who interpret this data and report it out to us in a way we will understand. We need people to be the voice of human emotion and ideas, when science is the only thing we are asked to interpret. We need people who allow us to access our deepest thoughts and questions so that we do not go insane trying to make sense of only factual information. STEM and the liberal arts go hand-in-hand. We need facts, and we need people to decipher these facts and access our relatability as humans and not just numbers or vessels of a virus.

In conclusion, the liberal arts allows us to consider issues on a larger scale, and to interpret them through a critical, analytical mind. Students who pursue a liberal arts education gain the gift of open-mindedness, the ability to interpret information and consider it through multiple lenses. Throughout my first semester in college, I learned to utilize my analytical tools more than I have ever in the past. My english professor gave me the resources to access my ability to put my ideas into conversation with the texts I was reading, and to transfer this to paper. Our society is in the midst of a pandemic that could have never been predicted, even through the history books. However, individuals who received any amount of liberal arts education attained the versatile skill of critical thinking, the ability to be apprehensive, and to be okay with doubts and uncertainties. Medical personnel are equipped with the tools of logic and scientific data; those trained in the liberal arts are there to interpret and make sense of this data by putting it through a translator of human perception and knowledge. Without the liberal arts, we would not have the experts to make sense of what science cannot. The ability to think critically expands horizons, opens minds, and allows small, complicated problems to be

considered in larger contexts. Moving forward, we must expose students to the importance of the liberal arts earlier in the education process to ensure we always have people who can access our deepest, seemingly unanswerable questions.

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