

The Outcomes from Engaging Liberal Education and Critical Inquiry: Matrimony, Divorce, or Kissing Cousins?

Landon E. Beyer
Indiana University

I have been a faculty member in three liberal arts colleges, each of which had a particular history, and a distinguishing character and set of values. The culture of one of those institutions was framed within an ethos that was virtually anti-intellectual, which of course had a significant impact on both students and faculty. At the same time, the administration of the college generated a new structure and timetable for classroom activities that would enhance the college's budget. The upshot was a significant focus on economic rationality, on one hand, and a lack of faculty collegiality, on the other.

At the opposite end of my experience in liberal arts colleges, a fundamentally different culture was pervasive from 1837—the year the college was founded. From the beginning, that culture focused on three primary educational and political purposes: providing opportunities for working class males and, somewhat later, educational opportunities for women, who would receive a diploma and a liberal education. The final purpose for founding the college was to assist in extinguishing slavery; and, indeed, during the first few years of the college, several members of the Board of Trustees were jailed due to their efforts to help runaway slaves from the state of Missouri.

I mention these two colleges because their interests and values are quite different—even contradictory—yet both are formally classified as “liberal arts colleges.” Seeing the clear contradictions between the mission of those colleges, I wondered if the meaning of “liberal education” was also not one thing, and not committed to the same directions and ideals. This in turn led me to the suspicion that perhaps “liberal arts education” is not one thing. More important for my purposes today, it may well be the case that what “liberal education” consists in may also have multiple interpretations and diverse purposes. If that is so, liberal education and liberal learning may not be consistent or a single, simple phenomenon. Perhaps that complexity can be useful in reconsidering the aims and purposes of what we are pleased to call a “liberal education.”

Having completed my graduate studies and my doctoral work at two large Midwestern universities, working with faculty members who were keenly interested in critical inquiry, I agree and disagree with some of the topics and analyses discussed by Benjamin Endres. I also want to say that I think the ideas in his essay are both provocative and important. Regarding the liberal tradition associated with Robert Maynard Hutchins, I wonder if we should agree with the admonition that “we should understand the [liberal] tradition as well as we can in order to understand ourselves, so we should be as good liberal artists as we can in order to become as fully human as we can.”¹ Again, there are multiple versions of liberal education and the process of liberal learning. Yet certain directions for liberal education have displayed a particular deference for traditions that overlook or ignore particular individuals,

groups, intellectual traditions, and so on. Those practices are often coupled with a detachment from everyday life, which can easily generate a kind of ideological conservatism that narrows what is good and true, and defines who can “play the game.”

Consider, as two examples, the ideas of Lynne Cheney and Allan Bloom. The need to resist political perspectives within higher education has, for instance, been the rallying cry of Cheney, the former chair of the National Endowment for the Humanities. Again, her text, *Telling the Truth*, includes the view that “the aim of education, as many on our campuses now see it, is no longer truth, but political transformation of students and society.”² Leftist scholars, she asserts, have abandoned the traditional goal of teaching the “disinterested” pursuit of knowledge, which aimed to “discover the truth.”

Similarly, Bloom longs not just for the Great Books or the classics in general—while heaping scorn on such recent and “faddish” domains as women’s studies and Black studies—but for a return to at least a neo-Platonic epistemology. Such an epistemology could, he says, cure the problems of higher education and presumably via liberal learning recreate a needed form of general education that would in turn promote a better society. As he puts this:

[Plato’s *Republic*] is for me *the* book on education, because it really explains to me what *I* experience as a man and a teacher. . . . The real community of man, in the midst of all the self-contradictory simulacra of community, is the community of those who seek the truth, of the potential knowers, that is, in principle, of all men to the extent they desire to know. But in fact this includes only a few, the true friends, as Plato was to Aristotle at the very moment they were disagreeing about the nature of the good. [emphasis added]³

Bloom’s criticism of “faddishness,” Cheney’s embrace of disinterestedness in teaching, and their joint disdain of Leftist perspectives and scholarship, have resulted in an abandonment of the traditional goal of teaching. Yet disinterestedness seems both unseemly and impotent for both progressive and classical works, as well as issues that aim to “discover the truth.”⁴

In her introduction to *Cultivating Humanity*, Martha Nussbaum argues that,

in contemporary America as in ancient Athens, liberal education is changing. New topics have entered the liberal arts curricula of colleges and universities: the history and culture of non-Western peoples and of ethnic and racial minorities within the United States, the experiences and achievements of women, the history and concerns of lesbians and gay men.⁵

She also suggests that we need to work harder to dispel the idea that “readers are given the picture of a monolithic, highly politicized elite who are attempting to enforce a “politically correct” view of human life, subverting traditional values and teaching students, in effect, to argue in favor of father-beating. Nussbaum continues by saying that “Socratic questioning is still on trial. Our debates over the curriculum reveal the same nostalgia for a more obedient, more regimented time, the same suspiciousness of new and independent thinking, that find expression in Aristophanes’ brilliant portrait.”⁶

Critical educators, of course, have been accused of being too political, too ideological, too abstract, too focused on issues of race, gender, class, and sexual

orientation, and divorced from the “real realities” of social life and public school classrooms.

Too often liberal education and liberal educators focus on the written word, the analysis of the word, and the ideas and perspectives transmitted through forms of study—all of which are, of course, fundamentally important. What is frequently missing, however, is the need not only for reflection, analysis, and study, but for conscious action and engagement in and with the world. Working at the Highland Center in 1987, Myles Horton and Paulo Freire focused on two basic themes: (1) the importance of freedom of people everywhere, and (2) the radical democratic belief in the capacity and right of all people to achieve freedom through self-emancipation. Such commitments have been taken up by a range of intellectual-political writers and activists, especially around issues of social justice and social change.

If, one, the “moral of this story” is that meaningful liberal learning is necessary for understanding the classics, social purposes, and complex understandings; and, two, if critical inquiry focuses not only on understanding those purposes but also actively engages in democratic and progressive actions, the two might become “dance partners,” though if it were me I would probably be at arm’s length—at least for awhile. Yet perhaps the critical legacy in education—including scholars and teachers such as Freire, Counts, Greene, Parker, Martin, West, Apple, and dozens of others—can generate democratic and ethical directions for education and social life, as we consider more progressive liberal learnings and actions.

Since the Philosophy of Education Society must be focused on educational and philosophical issues that may change certain problematic situations in our communities and institutions, I want to end by emphasizing the role of educators in the process of remaking our worlds. As Maxine Greene has put it,

Teacher educators and teachers...would not only be actualizing the educational process (and, in fact, promoting mastery) by working against mystification and for self-emancipation. They would be acting on behalf of a tradition of free institutions, acting on their freedom in the light of principle. For all the present pressures and aberrations within contemporary society, I cannot see this as anything but the enactment of what is thought of as democracy.⁷

Finally, we need to remind ourselves that we cannot come to any significant conclusion about the lives we should live, or the institutions that we need to have—whether we are committed to a liberal education or to critical inquiry, or both—without generating a comprehensive moral perspective that engages criticism, alternative interpretations, and more than likely, normative detours.

Let the engagement begin.

1. Robert Maynard Hutchins, *The Great Conversation: The Substance of a Liberal Education* (Chicago: Encyclopedia Britannica, 1952).

2. Lynne V. Cheney, *Telling the Truth: A Report on the State of the Humanities in Higher Education* (Washington: National Endowment for the Humanities, 1992), 7.

3. Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987), 381.

4. Landon E. Beyer, “The Curriculum, Social Context, and ‘Political Correctness,’” *The Journal of General Education* 43, no. 1 (1994).

5. Martha Nussbaum, *Cultivating Humanity: A Classical Defense of Reform in Liberal Education* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), 2.
6. Ibid.
7. Maxine Greene, *Landscapes of Learning* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1978), 68-69.