2008

Humanities Education Then, Now and Why

Marshall W. Gregory
Butler University, mgregory@butler.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.butler.edu/facsch_papers

Part of the English Language and Literature Commons

Recommended Citation
Gregory, Marshall "Humanities Education Then, Now and Why" South Atlantic Review, 73.4.

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the College of Liberal Arts & Sciences at Digital Commons @ Butler University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Scholarship and Professional Work - LAS by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ Butler University. For more information, please contact omacisaas@butler.edu.
Academics are suckers for sexy educational metaphors—education is trekking from the cave of ignorance to the sunshine of knowledge; teaching is not being the sage on the stage but the guide on the side; the teacher is a midwife, a coach, a guru, a shepherd, a missionary, a mountaineer; students are little pitchers, their brains are warehouses full of facts, they learn by encoding data in their ROMs, and on and on—but the bad news about flashy educational metaphors that stomp down the linguistic runways of educational discourse like models at a Paris fashion show is, first, that the sense we have of their aptness often disguises their inability to map onto the complexities of education in all of the detail that a full, non-metaphorical account might provide, and, second, that once we find ourselves pleased with some sense of a metaphor's aptness, however misled that sense might be, we fail to see the extent to which the metaphor drains our willingness to be self-critical.

The problem of educational metaphors in the humanities is that the metaphors driving the humanities since the late Middle Ages and the Renaissance—metaphors that educators still rely on today—no longer work in the twenty-first century. Social circumstances, political processes, the kinds of work that people do, attitudes about the good life and who gets to lead it, the density and size of population centers, and, above all, the uses that people imagine and demand of education are all so different now from what these were in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance that the metaphors of humanistic education appropriate then are not only not always appropriate now, but are sometimes downright dysfunctional. Yet, generally speaking, academic humanists have not thought this issue through in either the historical or philosophical ways that might help us see why we have lost so much ground, much less what to do about it, not only in the world beyond the walls of academe but inside those walls itself (all through the twentieth century and into the present). What I propose to do in this essay is to provide both an historical and conceptual analysis of the
long-standing metaphors that keep the humanities in contemporary universities and colleges confused about their mission and methodology. I will then offer an alternative way of thinking about the function of the humanities in contemporary universities and colleges that, I hope, may help us out of our long impasse.

**ONE HISTORICAL TAKE ON THE HUMANITIES**

Historically, it is important to distinguish certain domains of human achievement generally associated with the humanities—languages, literature, history, philosophy, and so on—from the humanities-as-academic-disciplines because these domains of achievement have existed much longer and on a much wider scope than the academic humanities that have been developed to study them. Speaking a language, telling stories and myths, narrating the past, and inquiring into reasons are universal and primal activities that human beings invented as coping strategies, presumably, to live better lives. The humanities as academic disciplines, however, are neither primal human faculties in the sense that language is a primal human faculty, nor are the humanities universal.

The humanities as academic disciplines were invented in the Western world in the late medieval and Renaissance universities of Europe, and they were born of trauma, loss, and hope. The trauma and loss stemmed from the collapse of what we now call “classical” Greek and Roman civilization in the seventh and eighth centuries of the modern historical era, the civilization that medieval scholars called “antiquity” or “the ancients.” As the texts, institutions, Sophistical training, philosophers’ inquiries, the chants of the rhapsodes, and other supports of learning that had maintained a fairly stable thread of cultural coherence from the time of Homer, Plato’s Academy, and the lamentations of Empedocles through the entire reign of Rome all collapsed as the Roman empire shrunk and shattered, the classical learning that had been at least 2000 years in the making quickly degraded into physical fragments and mere memories as manuscripts got torn apart, separated, carted to Constantinople, burned in the library at Alexandria, carried to the Middle East and translated into Arabic, and, in thousands of instances, just plain lost. As the texts disappeared, so did the apparatus of scholarship, libraries, and educated commentary that not only depended on them but that kept them alive as intellectual, moral, ethical, and civic touchstones. Most educated persons in
medieval Europe—the few knew about these texts by title and author, or about many of them at least, but hardly anyone possessed access to them, especially full access to complete works. Thus, whatever learning did survive in the Middle Ages was burdened by a profound despair over the vast loss of knowledge from classical times. Most of those who lamented this loss had no idea of the real extent of it, but it is not difficult to suppose that vagueness over the size of the loss only increased the sense of its vastness.

As classical learning disappeared or became fragmented across Europe, one important consequence among many is that its lost contents tended to become mythologized, idealized, and, since that learning could no longer be interrogated or developed directly, static. In the Middle Ages, the learning that had been embodied in Greek and Roman civilization no longer enjoyed an organic, vital life subject to criticism, refinement, debate, and development. As medieval learning became further and further removed from any direct contact with the complete texts that had once conveyed the words and thoughts of Homer, Plato, Aristotle, Ovid, Cicero, Virgil, Terence, and so on, the few surviving words of these authors ceased playing the role of living words and became words of authority from another realm, a golden realm that became more and more idealized over time. The words and echoes-of-words from that golden time were granted the status of trump cards in any discussion, or, in an analogy perhaps more appropriate to the mindset of a culture dominated by the vast bureaucracy of the Catholic church, the words and thoughts from ancient times came to be treated on the model of authoritative words from the pope and other church dignitaries, and viewed as second only to biblical words in prestige and reverence.

A perfect example of the elevation to dogma of words and ideas from classical texts—and thus a perfect example of how those words ceased to operate dialogically in western thought—is the way Aristotle's inductively descriptive comment in Chapter Five of the Poetics about the time span usually represented by a tragedy ("Tragedy endeavors, as far as possible, to confine itself to a single revolution of the sun" [51]) gradually became elevated in European theory and practice of drama into the dogma of the Unities of Time, Place, and Action. Corneille and Racine might have preferred to appear at court in their underwear as pen a drama that violated Aristotle's "law" of dramatic Unities, only Aristotle wrote no such law. Given his aims in
the *Poetics*—to provide a taxonomy of the aesthetic infrastructure of tragic effects—his comment about a "single revolution of the sun" is a descriptive comment—it's not analytical and certainly isn't prescriptive—but once the words of Aristotle or any other classical author were brought into a medieval conversation, they functioned to close off discussion, not lead to further analysis and investigation. (It wasn't until at least the middle of the Renaissance that European scholars could begin to compare classical texts or to see the words they quoted in their full context.) In his own time, Aristotle was an active philosopher muscledly wrestling with difficult problems that might call for a different analysis tomorrow from the one he offered today, but in the Middle Ages he began to be treated on the model of an ecclesiastical author who gave answers rather than formulated problems.

I have said that the humanities were born of trauma, loss, and hope. The hope upon which the academic humanities was founded, a hope that also provided them with an educational mission, began in the Renaissance with the recovery and textual "cleaning" of classical texts, activities that became a growth industry for scholars for more than 200 years. Intact manuscripts in Constantinople that had been fragmented in the West for centuries began to make their way back to such universities as those in Padua, Bologna, Florence, Oxford, and Cambridge. Manuscripts that had been carried to Arabia by triumphant Muslims in the eighth century began to show up in Europe again in the 1100s and 1200s, in part a ripple effect of the Crusades. As European state economies became more prosperous and resources could be devoted to pursuits other than war and commerce, scholars were funded to search for "antique" manuscripts in ruins, ancient temples, monasteries, churches, and private collections. As these manuscripts began to be recovered, collated, re-translated, emended, commented on, restored, and made generally available not just to scholars, but, with the invention of Gutenberg's printing press in 1439, to a general public eager for a sense of connection with the wisdom of "the ancients," Europe's sense of the precious value of these texts settled to the bottom of cultural and academic sensibility so deeply—and hardened there so strongly—that still today a nearly absolute commitment to the inherent value of texts provides the starting point for how most academics define the content and mission of a humanities education in the Anglo-European world.
THE MISSION OF THE HUMANITIES THEN:
THE METAPHORS DRIVING THE CHARIOT

From these embarrassingly sketchy historical remarks, it is easy to see that the mission of the humanities in the medieval and Renaissance universities was naturally conceived as a mission of (1) recovering precious and ancient formulations of wisdom, and (2) stocking knowledge of ancient texts in students' minds and memories as models of conduct, principles of ethics, and touchstones of truth. (It didn't hurt that the requisite ability to read Latin and sometimes Greek helped elevate the educated person to a vastly higher plane of social ascendancy than that occupied by ordinary people.)

The driving metaphors of the humanities, the metaphors that captured the abstractness of this educational mission and put it in contact with domains of sensation and everyday experience were metaphors of refinement (as in refining gold from the impurities of ore) and virtue (as in education's power to elevate the learner's moral character). Sir Philip Sidney succinctly displays the typical manner in which Renaissance humanists talked about the refining power and virtue-instilling effects of education, especially of literary education. "To what immediate end soever [learning] be directed," says Sidney in An Apology for Poetry (1595),

the final end is to lead and draw us to as high a perfection as our degenerate souls, made worse by their clayey lodgings, can be capable of [. . .] having this scope—to know, and by knowledge to lift up the mind from the dungeon of the body to the enjoying of his own divine essence.

A few sentences later, Sidney adds the summative claim, "the ending end of all earthly learning being virtuous action, those skills, that most serve to bring forth that, have a most just title to be princes over all the rest" (159, italics added).

These metaphors of the body as "clayey lodgings" and a " dungeon," in contrast to the ethereal properties of "knowledge," "divine essence," and "virtuous action," clearly enunciate a view that knowledge is a kind of magical elixir that, once its essence is imbibed by the learner, automatically drives out the ore of gross ignorance and lifts the learner into some "improved" moral and intellectual version of himself. The methodology of this kind of learning is either friction or swallowing: the learner either rubs up against (or swallows) the illustrious texts from classical times. It is worth quoting a passage from Sidney at length here that illustrates the time honored methodology of
the humanities: put unrefined students in a room with great books and, voilà, you get better people when they come out.

Anger, the Stoics say, was a short madness; let but Sophocles bring you Ajax on a stage, killing and whipping sheep and oxen, thinking them the army of Greeks, with their chieftains Agamemnon and Menelaus, and tell me if you have not a more familiar insight into anger than finding in the schoolmen his genus and difference. See whether wisdom and temperance in Ulysses and Diomedes, valor in Achilles, friendship in Nisus and Euryalus, even to an ignorant man carry not an apparent shining, and contrarily, the remorse of conscience in Oedipus, the soon repenting pride of Agamemnon, the self-devouring cruelty in his father Atreus, the violence of ambition in the two Theban brothers, the sour-sweetness of revenge in Medea, and [. . .] finally, all virtues, vices, and passions so in their own natural seats laid to the view, that we seem not to hear of them, but clearly to see through them.

(161)

These are exactly the sorts of claims in favor of a humanities education that one is likely to hear in any literature or history classroom in the U.S. today: “rub up against this great material I’m giving you, dear students, and it will both penetrate and purify, lifting you up to a higher plane of thinking and feeling.” I quote Sidney only because he is so eloquent, not because he is singular. He is speaking from the center of a tradition of discourse that both precedes him and succeeds him. Petrarch, for example, the artist whom we extol today primarily as the father of the sonnet but who was primarily known in his own day as a humanist who enjoyed remarkable success in discovering and distributing works from the classical period (some of Cicero’s letters, for example), asserts a few years before his death in 1374 but more than 200 years before Sidney’s Apology, that the study of the great Roman authors, Cicero, Seneca, and Horace, in particular, penetrate the learner with almost miraculous powers of moral and even physical elevation:

[These works] stamp and drive deep into the heart the sharpest and most ardent stings of speech, by which the lazy are startled, the ailing kindled, and the sleepy aroused, the sick healed and prostrate raised and those who stick to the ground lifted up to the highest thoughts and to honest desire. Then earthly things become vile; the aspect of vice stirs up an enor-
mous hatred of vicious life; virtue and ‘the shape, and as it were, the face of honesty,’ are beheld by the inmost eye ‘and inspire miraculous love’ of wisdom and of themselves, as Plato says. (156)

Who knew that humanistic education could not only yield honest desires but also heal the sick? Defense of humanistic education in these extravagant terms prevailed long and powerfully, however, and nearly every subsequent commentator on humanistic education clung tenaciously to this mode of talk. We have already seen Sidney, 200 years after Petrarch, saying much the same thing, and even cursory historians of education will find it easy to hear the reverberations of this kind of discourse 250 years after Sidney in Shelley’s Defense of Poetry (1840), where we find him confidently and rhapsodically asserting that Homer embodied the ideal perfection of his age in human character; nor can we doubt that those who read his verses were awakened to an ambition of becoming like to Achilles, Hector, and Ulysses. [. . .] [T]he sentiments of the auditors must have been refined and enlarged by a sympathy with such great and lovely impersonations. (502)

The mission of the humanities based on this vision and these metaphors (note how Shelley introduces the new but complementary metaphor of sympathy) ruled European education for more than 600 years, depending on how precisely anyone wishes to delineate the beginning date of the modern humanities. As I have already indicated, the ending date for this kind of discourse, despite the changes that have occurred in both society and in academe, has not yet been reached.

For the 600 years prior to the last half of the nineteenth century, schoolboys learned their Latin—and the bright ones learned Greek—so that they could metaphorically rub up against the lovely representations from classical literature, history, and philosophy, and, by means of contagion, absorption, swallowing, or sympathy, improve their moral character and their ethical practice. Generation after generation of privileged schoolboys translated a certain number of lines from Virgil or Cicero or Aristotle every single day, usually Virgil, and, as we all know, dutifully showed up, without exception, to take their turn at occupying positions of social and political leadership as persons of wisdom, grace, generosity, and enlightened views.

Except, of course, that they didn’t. Some of the European school-
boys who received a classical humanities education turned out to be
great men—heroes and statesmen—but others turned out to be rigid
protectors of patriarchal privilege, racists, xenophobes, and architects
of the European colonization and oppression of Africa, India, and
Asia, not to mention being the architects of the politics that blasted
western civilization with two world wars occurring within the first fifty
years of the twentieth century. Where are the civilizing and morally
uplifting effects of a humanities education to be traced in these
events?

Even those of us who are steeped in the humanities up to our eyes
know that there is often a huge gap between the typical promises of
“improvement” supposedly generated by a humanities education and
the everyday performance of those who actually have that education,
many of whom—our colleagues—manifest motives and emotions not
noticeably formed by the heroic courage of Achilles or the lordly gen­
erosity of Aeneas. And even those among us who are decent and gen­
erous are not likely to attribute our good moral character to having
performed the modern educational equivalent of the Victorian school­
boy’s translation of forty lines of Virgil a day as an exercise in drudg­
ery and tedium.

Criticism of the inefficacy of a humanities education is often much
more potent than merely pointing out that humanists are sometimes
more like hypocrites from Tartuffe than like heroes from the Odyssey.
An exaggerated and misguided belief in the automatic uplift of classi­
cal education often lies at the heart of the deeply bitter accusations
against it made by thinkers such as Elie Wiesel and George Steiner,
who seem never to tire of pointing out that the humanities education
received by many of Europe’s political leaders in the early part of the
twentieth century did nothing to prevent the Holocaust or the spread
of fascism across Europe in the middle years of the century. It is hard­
ly necessary to point out the vast chasm between the Holocaust on the
one hand and Petrarch’s claim on the other hand that in the classically
educated learner, “the aspect of vice stirs up an enormous hatred of
vicious life.” Steiner makes the case with his usual vividness.

We now know [. . .] that the formal excellence and numerical
extension of education need not correlate with increased
social stability and political rationality. [. . .] In other words, the
libraries, museums, theatres, universities, research centers, in
and through which the transmission of the humanities and of
the sciences mainly takes place, can prosper next to the concentration camps. [. . .] Men such as Hans Frank who administered the "final solution" in Eastern Europe were avid connoisseurs and, in some instances, performers of Bach and Mozart. We know of personnel in the bureaucracy of the torturers and of the ovens who cultivated a knowledge of Goethe, a love of Rilke. (77)

THE MISSION OF THE HUMANITIES NOW: A CRITIQUE OF THE ACADEMIC OBSESSION WITH CURRICULUM

I can read some of your minds right now, wondering why it seems relevant to me to rehearse all of this ancient history. I can picture you wishing to say to me, perhaps with some annoyance, that, in fact, the humanities have undergone at least one or two fundamental restructurings since the middle of the nineteenth century that now make all of this history irrelevant, or, if not irrelevant absolutely, mostly irrelevant to any search for solutions to our contemporary problems. Perhaps you subscribe to the conventional view of academic history in the twentieth century which says that, beginning in the 1960s, humanists finally liberated themselves from the futility of classical education by changing the curriculum, and that, by embracing postmodernism (from roughly 1970-2000) we have retooled the humanities to meet the needs of our twenty-first-century students entering an American society where white ethnicity, patriarchal values, traditional Anglo-American values, and an uncritical belief in either the virtue of our founding fathers or the transparent good will of our political and social leaders no longer go unchallenged. The second stage of our liberation, the postmodern stage, like every other stage of academic development, concentrated on curricular reform, and, in addition, cultivated a hermeneutics of suspicion that invites learners to protect themselves against texts' disguised ideologies such as traditional forms of "ethics" and "law and order." Having become knowledgeable about theory-laden facts and the inevitable reduction of all arguments to the rhetorical struggle for dominance, not truth, we congratulate ourselves on having become savvy. We have changed, you may wish to say: my parents' humanities are not my humanities.

In truth, if relevance is the appropriate criterion for evaluating these claims, I think they mostly aren't. Curricular reform and reading practices are concerns that are indeed important and worthy of sus-
tained thought, but, nevertheless, these important concerns mostly miss the even more important points that need to be made about humanities education, points that I am eager to make before I finish. However, I must begin my reply with a few concessions.

It is certainly true that from 1870-1970, and especially from 1970 to the present, the circumstances of education in America have changed profoundly, and it is also true that, to some extent, the humanities have changed along with them. We have endured the trauma of attacks from logical positivism that spanned the closing decades of the nineteenth century and the opening decades of the twentieth century. We have survived the competition of scientific education that surged during the Sputnik era and led to sustained government funding on a huge scale for university science research. (We have “survived” this competition, at least, in the sense that we have not disappeared.) We have kept watch as the ancient aims of humanities education, character development and social responsibility, have given way to the aims of research as the research university created in Germany in the eighteenth century made its way to America first at Johns Hopkins University in 1876, then at the University of Chicago in 1890, and now everywhere. We have seen education as a community enterprise based on face-to-face relations turn itself into a corporate octopus with armies of administrators marching in all directions and tentacles of “outreach” that go everywhere at once, into government funding, into the community, into evening instruction, into “semesters abroad” programs, into surging new majors in pre-professional fields, into programs of massive endowment growth, into online courses, and into “enrollment management” rather than student recruiting (meaning that colleges and universities now know how, no less than shampoo or car manufacturers, to “spotlight their demographic” rather than simply open their doors to young people who wish to become educated). We have seen our campuses transformed from the fairly austere physical facilities they were in the 1950s, consisting of bare classrooms, cold dorm rooms, and scruffy playing fields, into the typically lush facilities of contemporary campuses marked by health-and-fitness centers complete with Olympic pools and climbing walls, field houses and stadiums that bring to mind colossal Egyptian temples, 24-hour food courts, hot cookies and free massages during exam week, and, in short, amenities that make most American college campuses look like centers of assisted living for wealthy twenty-year-olds. We have seen the per-
percentage of high school graduates in this country who go to college grow from about 15% in the 1950s to more than 65% today. And we have seen the nature of campus culture and classroom instruction turn itself over and over as the technologies of photocopiers, computers, Google "research," internet plagiarism, "mediated classrooms," "clicker" feedback, paperless classrooms, cell phones in class, "instant messaging," customized textbooks, and wireless connection have come to be common on all campuses.

In the humanities, classics departments have disappeared, English departments have transformed themselves from centers of canonical study into centers of culture studies, and language departments have seen French and German shrink as they now teach endless sections of Spanish, pride themselves on teaching languages that would once have been considered "exotic" (such as Japanese, Hindi, and Chinese), and run complex media labs in which students can do anything from watch foreign films and European soap operas to receive endlessly available instruction via headphones on pronunciation subtleties and conversational conventions. Philosophy departments are now as likely to teach "business ethics" as they are to teach the *Apology*, and history departments gave up teaching European and American survey classes back in the eighties in order to introduce history courses that veer sharply away from the traditional instruction in "big moments" and "important figures." In light of all of these changes—if, indeed, our parents' humanities is not our humanities—why is the history of humanities education relevant?

The beginning of the answer is that, somehow, just like the theory that schoolboys who translate Virgil every day should automatically turn out to be morally superior but then don't, we find that the changes and reforms we have advanced with such energy and good will to persuade our students that a humanities education is superior to pre-professional training aren't actually doing the job. We find, sadly, that our arguments on this front not only do not stop students streaming steadily away from humanities majors, but wouldn't persuade a grass cricket to sing in high summer. Every year since the early seventies, the number of students who major in humanities disciplines gets smaller. The 1960s mantra of "is this relevant?" still sounds like a fresh and cogent question to contemporary students who are asked to read the poems of John Donne and Thomas Gray in British literature survey classes. The fact that we are now likely to teach Julian of Norwich
and Mary Wollstonecraft along with Donne and Gray has not generated any collective response of “ah, now I get the humanities.” Students are flocking to pre-professional majors. Every revision of a liberal arts Core program in every school inevitably winds up decreasing the required hours that students must spend in classes of literature, history, language, or philosophy. Humanities professors wring their hands and deplore the barbarian hordes at the gates of civilization. They feel professionally assaulted and demeaned, and they are. In response, they blame television, the internet, commercialism, capitalism, and Pop Tarts. “Why isn’t our stuff working for us?” we ask. “We have changed so much, and we are so well intentioned.”

Pardon me, but it isn’t so. As for our good intentions, they are, to adapt John Nance Garner’s evaluation of the vice-presidency, “not worth a pitcher of warm spit.” I don’t mean that we shouldn’t have good intentions—let us always be well-intentioned, and, while we are at it, nice—but neither good intentions nor niceness will solve any of our problems. As for humanists’ claim that they have changed so much, the only part of their educational program that humanities educators have ever tinkered with in any systematic, thoughtful way is the curriculum. Curricular reform, curricular tinkering, and explanations of the wonderful aims accomplished by the curriculum are favorite faculty obsessions. The myopia with which educators in general suppose that every problem in education has either a curricular fix or no fix—and humanities educators are not only no exception to this principle, but are, in truth, more wedded to it than any other constituency in academe—is, frankly, breathtaking.

It is breathtaking because there are a large number of obvious considerations showing us, if we would only look, that the curriculum is fairly far down on the list of crucially important variables that determine how fully and effectively students learn, but humanities teachers by and large ignore these considerations. They do so not because this issue is too subtle for them to see or to think about—we are all smart people—but because no matter how far down on the list of crucial variables the curriculum may be for students, it is vitally important for faculty members. The curriculum may be, let us say, the eighth most important component of our students’ education, but it’s always first on the faculty’s own list because the curriculum is where faculty specialties exist, and it is thus where faculty interests and futures and career-making exist. So far, a period of time that spans about 600 or
700 years, the faculty in western universities and colleges have shown no sign of being willing to give up the position of prominence that they accord to the curriculum merely because it is less important to students' educations than it is to faculty careers.

Thus, if faculty perceive an education problem, any educational problem, they address it by revising the curriculum: they invent new courses, they pull in new authors, they add or delete prerequisites, and so on. To highlight the shortsightedness of the single-minded curricular approach to every educational problem, I offer here a discussion of several educational variables crucially important to student learning that are visible to humanities teachers in every class they enter, but that, because they are variables that cannot be either defined or understood in curricular terms, have not from the Renaissance to the present received any serious attention. (I speak, of course, of serious attention across the profession, including institutional attention. There are many individual teachers who pay attention to these issues as a matter of personal insight and personal integrity, but such efforts do not change the shape of the profession.) There are many considerations that we "know" but that we nevertheless refuse to bring into hard focus. Thus the fact that we "know" these things doesn't wind up making a difference in our classrooms.

It doesn't matter, for example, that we know in advance, or should know, that learners forget most of what they learn in our classes unless they keep reinforcing that knowledge by becoming disciplinary specialists in our own fields. What students remember or don't remember is important to their education, but students are left mostly on their own to figure out what to do with the fact that the material they learn always evaporates on them.

It doesn't matter that we know in advance, or should know, that teacherly modeling is what our students remember. Unfailingly, graduates with whom I have spoken over decades never mention one single piece of class content, but they are full of memories about me and their other teachers' tones of voice, everyday habits, boring talk, inspiring talk, tough grading, jokes, hairdos, kindness, wrinkled shirts, contempt, unavailability, and on and on. A half hour's conversation with past students would lead even a Barbie Doll to see that teachers teach themselves in ways that remain much more memorable to their students over time than the content they work so hard to "get across." We also seem never to focus on the truth that an important part of student learning is seeing
their teachers modeling for them the process of genuine learning. Most teachers are good at modeling the product of learning—what it looks like when you get there—but not the process that gets you there.

It doesn’t matter that we know in advance, or should know, that our students’ heads are full of education narratives from movies and television that operate as powerful filters on student perception, such that students have a difficult time seeing what is really occurring in their own classrooms, and, sometimes, in their own minds. The outrageous Animal House (1978) was made years before this fall’s crop of first-year students were born, but watching this film is still a rite of passage for an overwhelming majority of college students.

It doesn’t matter that we know in advance, or should know, that our students’ heads are full of education narratives from movies and television that operate as powerful filters on student perception, such that students have a difficult time seeing what is really occurring in their own classrooms, and, sometimes, in their own minds. The outrageous Animal House (1978) was made years before this fall’s crop of first-year students were born, but watching this film is still a rite of passage for an overwhelming majority of college students.

It doesn’t matter that we know in advance, or should know, that our students’ heads are full of education narratives from movies and television that operate as powerful filters on student perception, such that students have a difficult time seeing what is really occurring in their own classrooms, and, sometimes, in their own minds. The outrageous Animal House (1978) was made years before this fall’s crop of first-year students were born, but watching this film is still a rite of passage for an overwhelming majority of college students.

It doesn’t matter that we know in advance, or should know, that our students’ heads are full of education narratives from movies and television that operate as powerful filters on student perception, such that students have a difficult time seeing what is really occurring in their own classrooms, and, sometimes, in their own minds. The outrageous Animal House (1978) was made years before this fall’s crop of first-year students were born, but watching this film is still a rite of passage for an overwhelming majority of college students.

It doesn’t matter that we know in advance, or should know, that our students’ heads are full of education narratives from movies and television that operate as powerful filters on student perception, such that students have a difficult time seeing what is really occurring in their own classrooms, and, sometimes, in their own minds. The outrageous Animal House (1978) was made years before this fall’s crop of first-year students were born, but watching this film is still a rite of passage for an overwhelming majority of college students.

It doesn’t matter that we know in advance, or should know, that our students’ heads are full of education narratives from movies and television that operate as powerful filters on student perception, such that students have a difficult time seeing what is really occurring in their own classrooms, and, sometimes, in their own minds. The outrageous Animal House (1978) was made years before this fall’s crop of first-year students were born, but watching this film is still a rite of passage for an overwhelming majority of college students.

It doesn’t matter that we know in advance, or should know, that our students’ heads are full of education narratives from movies and television that operate as powerful filters on student perception, such that students have a difficult time seeing what is really occurring in their own classrooms, and, sometimes, in their own minds. The outrageous Animal House (1978) was made years before this fall’s crop of first-year students were born, but watching this film is still a rite of passage for an overwhelming majority of college students.
the curriculum in order to get clear either with ourselves, our col-
leagues, or our students about the aims of education.

It doesn't matter that we know in advance, or should know, that our
main educational competition comes not from student resistance, but
from commercial marketers. Commercial marketers are the teachers in
American society whose pedagogy penetrates right to the core of peo-
ple's basic structure of desires. These are the teachers who persuade
their "students," all of us who are real and potential customers, about
what kinds of persons we want to be in the world, how we want to
look, how we want to be valued, how we want to spend our money and
time, and so on. Not only do commercial marketers know how to
influence the very structure of people's desires, but they know how to
coop our own educational rhetoric of autonomy, freedom, and
choice, only they pervert these terms by redefining them and limiting
their coverage to consumer issues.

It doesn't matter that we know in advance, or should know, that stu-
dents' instrumental way of viewing the value of their college educa-
tion is not an entrenched ideology, but merely the mimicking of views
that have been shoved at them like fast food through a drive-up win-
dow for as long as they can remember. Students do not come to college with
an entrenched, well-developed philosophy of education. They come with a lot of
clichés, a lot of bromides, a lot of pre-scripted brown-and-serve
notions they have heard forever, and a lot of anxieties. That we often
treat students' instrumentalism as if it makes them enemy combatants
means that we are not thinking deeply about where our students are
"coming from," as people say, or what they need from us in order to
"get where they are going."

It doesn't matter that we know in advance, or should know, that the
students in our humanities classes are very likely facing the last oppor-
tunity of their lives to encode within themselves a mental habit of
"questing for nuances" rather than "solving for X." This is a matter of
learning the difference from us between the mental practice of persist-
ently unfolding the various nuances of life's intractable conundrums as
a habit of life—a way of making life richer, fuller, more varied, and less
prone to ideological rigidity or ethical arrogance—and the contrary
mental habit of treating the world's conundrums on the model of an
algebra problem that one "solves for X" and then moves on from,
ever again having a reason to revisit one's "answer." Do we not know
that if our students never learn this difference while they are with us
in humanities classes, they will probably never learn it at all?

It doesn't matter that we know in advance, or should know, that students' shock is legitimate, understandable, and worthy of sympathy when they first hear from their college teachers that many of the adult competencies they have been working hard for eighteen or twenty years to master—they often look like deer caught in the headlights: "who knew this was coming?"—are now not good enough. We should know in advance that the common response of "kill the messenger" rather than "deal with the message" is merely a knee-jerk defensive-ness to cover their shock, not a premeditated attack on our educational values, methods, or us. Students have worked hard to develop views and opinions of the world that are different and independent from those of their parents—a necessary stage on the way to adulthood—but we suddenly tell them that common sense is not their friend, that their views have to be tested against logic and evidence, and that their opinions are unearned and often indefensible. Students feel profoundly shocked when they discover the gulf between competence and excellence, a gulf that they have never seen before but which we thrust in their faces every day in the classroom.

It doesn't matter that we know in advance—or do we actually know it at all?—that the structure of knowledge in our disciplines is not the same thing as a philosophy of education, and that substituting the former for the latter leaves our students, and us, unable to answer the most elemental academic question of all, "what's educational about education?" Whenever we teach our disciplinary content without placing it for our students inside a transparent educational framework, we force them to infer that not "getting" our discipline leaves them une-ducated. We do this because we so seldom indicate to our students—other than invoking a few vague clichés such as the virtues of being "well rounded" or "thinking critically," whatever these phrases mean—that there is any educational philosophy or any educational aims in our courses larger or more important, or, more telling, no educational aims different from our disciplinary content.

Think about the amount of time, energy, and creative attentiveness that faculty members devote to any of the issues I have just discussed compared to the amount of time, energy, and creative attentiveness they devote to discussing the curriculum. To repeat: if a problem we see doesn't map onto a curricular solution, then mostly it remains invisible and/or unsolved.
STILL WEDDED TO THE SAME OLD METAPHORS

So, you may wonder, am I a heartless curriculum basher, a contemptible content leveler, a touchy-feely advocate of classrooms that are all about skills and feeling good but not about content? Not at all. What I’m bashing is not the curriculum, but the long habit of humanities teachers conflating the curriculum with education in general, and the even worse ancient practice of each teacher treating his or her small slice of the curriculum in a myopic, ethnocentric, partisan manner that leaves students with the profoundly dysfunctional misimpression that being educated is just learning a bunch of disciplinary knowledge.

The curriculum matters, and it matters profoundly, but it is a means to an end, not an end in itself. It is a means to helping students acquire an education, not a means to making them disciplinary colleagues. None of us can help students get an education if the curriculum is not “right” (in the sense of “fit” or “well adapted”) for our educational aims, but it is a serious mistake to conflate disciplinary aims and educational aims. I could not stretch my students’ linguistic capacities in my literature classes if my content consisted of Hallmark cards or internet blogs, but I need to remember that the level of my students’ educational achievement has much more to do with how the literature I teach accomplishes the “stretch” I am talking about than what it has to do with how much they remember from any single sonnet, novel, or lyric poem I teach.

The humanities are still wedded to the same old metaphors of refinement and virtue by means of contagion that we saw earlier in Petrarch, Sidney, and Shelley. Whether you are Sidney extolling the power of Homer’s epics to teach learners about anger or love of country, or whether you are a postcolonial theorist extolling the power of Chinua Achebe’s novels to teach learners about the immorality of colonialism or a postmodern feminist extolling the power of Andrea Dworkin’s essays to teach learners how to interrogate sexual/sexist practices, the underlying assumptions are that texts contain knowledge, that texts teach knowledge by contagion, and that knowledge makes us “better.” Modern educators are not as likely as Sidney to endorse explicitly an ethical program for humanities education, but the ethical program is always there. The “better” that knowledge makes us may be labeled by contemporary humanists not as an “ethical better” but, instead, as a more “politically conscious better,” or a more “critically thinking better,” or
a better who is “more tolerant of diversity,” but these alterations of locution are mere quibbles. Better still means better: it refers to a change of ethos, and a change of ethos is what “ethical” analysis is all about. The profound faith that humanities teachers have always placed in the curriculum to make learners better entails the corollary assumption (always silently held) that teachers’ favored texts work their contagious magic mostly on their own. If humanists did not silently assume this to be true, they would spend as much time thinking seriously about their pedagogy as they spend thinking about their curriculum. A rival assumption is not that textual/student contiguity accomplishes learning, but that learning is mostly a consequence of what learners are led to make of texts by means of teacherly modeling.

WHY THE HUMANITIES REMAIN RELEVANT, BUT NOT LIKE CRESCENT WRENCHES OR CASH

The point to my argument is not that the curriculum should be marginalized, or, worse, trivialized, but that effective humanities education is a lot harder to accomplish, a lot more complicated to pursue, and entails the consideration of many issues a lot more subtle than merely deciding what texts and courses we are going to teach. We are not just disciplinary specialists, we are also educators, and we have a responsibility to develop our ideas and insights about education as carefully, as thoughtfully, and as fully as we develop our ideas and insights about our discipline. Except that, mostly, we don’t.

And we need to alter our metaphors. Students do not learn by contagion, sympathy, inspiration, or contiguity. These traditional metaphors, embraced as much by those who oppose the traditional curriculum as by those who support it, blind teachers to the real process of learning. Contagion, sympathy, and contiguity are without doubt useful supplements to learning, and no teacher worth her salt is going to stand in the way of her students’ sympathetic engagement with texts or with her own teaching, but we all know, if we reflect for a moment, that no matter how delightful contagion, sympathy, and contiguity might be, we learn not simply by standing next to some learned person or text and “absorbing” what they know, but by practicing. We learn by practicing, failing, practicing again, failing again, and repeating this process over and over, each time raising the bar of achievement a little on the skill, insight, knowledge, or methodology that we are practicing. This is the meaning behind James Redfield’s sagacious comment that
the function of an educational institution is to institutionalize failure, to control failure and set some tolerable limits on it. [. . .] An educational institution tries to match the problems to the student, to set him a challenge just a bit more difficult than the last, to allow him to fail without obliterating him so that he can fail again and finally succeed. (172-73)

We also know that the primary marker of an educated mind is not knowledge—the universe of knowledge is so immense that all of us are terminal beginners—but a person’s ability to take whatever knowledge he or she possesses and to deal with it thoughtfully, introspectively, critically, honestly, judiciously, imaginatively, rationally, aesthetically, and humbly, not rushing to judgment and not calcifying knowledge into orthodoxy or ideology. And we all know, or should know, that this kind of mind is acquired mostly by students watching their teachers model the operation of such minds in classrooms, not from reading texts. The aims and hopes that drive our curriculum from behind, so to speak, but that also define the aims that we are moving toward, include the larger goals of helping our students become persons with an educated sensibility, that is, persons who know how to live lives of intellectual perspicacity, personal enrichment, social responsibility, and moral integrity.

Fine words, you may say—more high-flown rhetoric about the virtue “inspired” by the humanities—and you may wish to remind me that our students talk more about jobs and professions and the future than they do about virtue and self-development. You are right. Our students do talk about these things. They are taught to do so by their parents, friends, television, and their high school counselors. So if this is what students and their parents wish to talk about, we should be up to the task of saying how a humanities education will contribute to the aims of success and independence about which our students are so anxious.

But in order to do so, we will have to stop talking about the intrinsic value of students mastering our curriculum for the sake of the curriculum or even for the sake of some imputed intrinsic utility it possesses. Who are we kidding here? When I assign Thomas Gray’s “Elegy in a Country Churchyard” to my students, I know that no one in their entire lives is going to ask them, or care, if they have ever read this poem, and I cannot be self-deceiving enough to think that any one text is essential either to my students’ self-development or to their professional goals later in life. So I don’t offer the poem to my students as
knowledge. I still make them read it, and I don’t apologize for making
them work hard at understanding the language and the ideas in it, but
I offer it to them as a kind of exercise regimen for the development
of certain educable capacities that will help them construct the kind of
educated mind that I described above: a mind marked by thoughtfulness,
introspection, honesty, criticism, and so on.

So, let’s take the challenge head-on of talking turkey to students and
their parents about the real value of a humanities education. How does
such a discourse unfold? Let us take up the challenge in the strongest
possible form, by defending the claim that students will be not just ade­
quately prepared for professional life by a humanities education, but
will be better prepared for professional life by a humanities education
than by any other kind, especially an education allegedly focused on
professional skills alone. Here goes.

WHY A HUMANITIES EDUCATION IS
THE BEST PREPARATION FOR PROFESSIONS

To many students, to most parents of students either in college or
heading for college, and, truth be said, to many non-humanities col­
lege teachers today, the claim that college students will prepare them­
selves better for professional success by majoring in any humanities
field sounds, at best, fanciful, or, at worst, simply false. The explana­
tion for why this claim sounds fanciful or false—perhaps a desperate
fabrication advanced by literature and philosophy teachers trying to
keep their jobs?—lies in American society’s deep confusion about a
number of issues having to do with human development, with the
nature of learning, with the relationship between job skills and think­
ing skills, and the reasons for success or failure in professional work.
The claim that sounds fanciful or false to many people can, in fact, be
supported by reasoning and evidence that are available to anyone will­
ing to think past the misleading and, indeed, false clichés of popular
culture.

As most of the professional parents who are eager for their sons
and daughters to major in business already know—if they stop to
reflect—the colleagues and peers whom they have watched succeed
and fail in their various professions over the years never do either one
because they are either dufuses or masters of the specific kinds of
technical skills that are taught in pre-professional college courses.
Many of those peers labeled “failures” match the description of “the
student who is sure to make an A on any test but who never has anything interesting to say;" while many of those labeled "successes" match the description of "the student whose grades are unpredictable but who always has interesting things to say." In other words, as anyone who has been a professional more than a few years knows, the real causes of why people either succeed or fail seldom if ever lie merely in technical incompetence, yet we keep telling our undergraduates that if they don't learn "job skills," they will fail in their professions. The fact that there is such an obvious and huge disjunction between the reality we live with and the ideology we preach simply points to our deep confusion.

Let me make this point in more concrete terms. Successful professionals only need to be reminded of what they already know, which is that they have learned most of the specific skills that they need for their job on the job. Reading the spreadsheet, operating the computer, repairing a customer's car, installing software: these are the easy things. The difficult tasks have to do with forms of self-mastery, such as the control of impulse and the rush to judgment, and the maintenance of professional relationships, such as helping someone else read the spreadsheet, explaining to someone else why one way of operating the computer is better than another, clarifying to the customer why aligning the front wheels when he buys new tires is cheaper in the long run than not aligning the wheels, inventing a new process or business initiative, or describing what you are doing as you install computer software to someone who does not understand your computer's operating system. Professional jobs, as all professionals know, are performed inside a matrix of social relationships and intellectual demands in which mastery of social dynamics and general intelligence, not specific skills, are the determinative, operative threads that weave a career into the fabric of either success or failure.

But let me be even more concrete. Beyond the general issues of social dynamics and general intelligence, there are other requirements of being a professional that have even less to do with specific skills but that are even more determinative of whether one succeeds or not: requirements such as

- knowing how to use language that is clear, graceful, economical, and persuasive;
- knowing how to treat other people with honesty, respect, and consideration;
• knowing how to reflect on your own performance such that you can be self-critical and self-correcting;
• knowing how to judge the aesthetic shape of systems, proposals, ideas, and so on such that you can see the difference between a system that is beautiful in a clean, balanced, and compact way, as opposed to a system that is ugly in its clutter, unnecessary parts, and inefficient redundancy;
• knowing how to solve problems with rational directness and logical precision;
• knowing how to invent a better process, a better mouse trap, a better means of connecting Point A and Point B, an alternative route, a different goal, a better world; and
• knowing how to take your own and others' physical proclivities into account on the job, such that you don't push yourself and others past the point of efficiency and responsibility, such that you don't indulge yourself in physical attractions or physical repulsions at a personal level when interacting with your colleagues, or such that you are unaware of the physical cues you are giving other people.

The first point behind the enumeration of these professional requirements for success is that these are in fact the real requirements for success. The specific job skills that so many people in our society are so eager to see students acquire by taking pre-professional courses and avoiding courses in "irrelevant" domains such as the humanities simply have the relationship between education and success figured out in reverse order. Job-skills college courses teach skills that will be outdated by the time the students taking them enter the job market. These same skills, moreover, are the ones that are the easiest to learn and that are usually learned best on the job, not in college courses. The second point behind the enumeration of the real requirements for success is that, contrary to the cultural clichés of the moment, the humanities teach these real requirements better than any other program of study, and they teach them in robust, developed, and nuanced ways that students do not superficially recall as little nuggets of information, but that they deeply imbibe through practice as ways of thinking, evaluating, planning, analyzing, imagining, deliberating, speaking, writing, reading, and explaining.
For example, if we agree with the assertion above that professional success entails “using language that is clear, graceful, economical, and persuasive,” it follows that we are talking about professional success requiring an education in language, and there is no domain of study that focuses on the teaching of language skills in more depth, with more subtlety, and with greater comprehensiveness than humanities studies. In courses focusing on literature, languages, and texts and arguments in general, students practice, and thus encode, language skills that underwrite the requirements for success insofar as such success is partly predicated on language skills.

If we agree that “knowing how to treat other people with honesty, respect, and consideration” is also a prerequisite for success, it follows that we are talking about the skill of moral and ethical deliberation, and this is also a skill that students practice inside the domain of the humanities. As students track the moral and ethical deliberation of characters in novels, plays, and poems; as they track the arguments of figures in historical texts; and as they analyze the arguments of philosophers and ethicists in philosophical treatises, they are forced to track, understand, and practice the deep skills of moral and ethical deliberation that they cannot do without in the realm of professional achievement.

If we agree that “knowing how to reflect on your own performance such that you can be self-critical and self-correcting” is also a requirement for success, it follows that we are talking about the necessity of acquiring an education in the cognitive and intellectual skill of introspection, or, in simpler language, we are talking about the skill of thinking about thinking. It also follows that as students confront the voices, ideas, sensibilities, self-accounts, explanations, arguments, and opinions of other people as embodied in historical, literary, and philosophical texts, as they confront the different way that “second languages” put the world together, they are prompted and cued toward the development of their own inner space that introspection requires. Most important, the inner space thus discovered by humanities study is not experienced solipsistically, but is a discovery and a space that entails comparisons with the experience and ideas of others.

If we agree that a requirement for professional success is “knowing how to judge the aesthetic shape of systems, proposals, ideas, and so on such that you can see the difference between an explanation or an hypothesis that is beautiful in a clean, balanced, and compact way, as opposed to ones that are ugly in their clutter, unnecessary parts, and
inefficient redundancy," it follows that what we are talking about is the skill of aesthetic responsiveness, and it also happens to be the case that when students are learning to understand, appreciate, interpret, and analyze language-based art forms such as novels, poems, and short stories, they learn to practice—often without realizing how deeply these forms of practice affect the operation of their perceptual system—general standards of aesthetic responsiveness that will help them in many ways both in life and in professions. Developed skills of aesthetic responsiveness, for example, help students understand the difference between the kinds of language that articulate the depths of human life as opposed to the kinds of language that skim over the surface of life by means of clichés, bromides, platitudes, and whatever the current "small talk" of the moment happens to be.

If we agree that "knowing how to solve problems with rational directness and logical precision" is a requirement for professional success, it follows that what we are talking about is the skill of reasoning (often referred to as critical thinking), and it also follows that as students take humanities courses, they acquire a deep sense of how human minds operate when those minds know how to test the flow of opinion, discourse, and assertion against such criteria as logic, reasonableness, proper use of evidence, an ability to interrogate the connection between premises and conclusions, a deep suspicion of cant and rant, a visceral objection to overstatement, a stubborn resistance against the rush to judgment, and so on.

If we agree that a requirement for professional success is "knowing how to invent a better process, a better mouse trap, a better means of connecting Point A and Point B, an alternative route, a different goal, a better world," it follows that we are talking about the operations of imagination, that ability to see in our mind's eye what is not present before our physical eyes, but what could be made present in the physical world because we have first learned to see it in our imagination. Business, technology, government, institutions, and traditions grow rigid, brittle, stale and unprofitable, in both fiduciary and psychological senses, without the refreshments of vision and feeling that stem from imaginative liberation, imaginative alternatives, and imaginative insights. What's more, it turns out that job-skills courses cannot teach imagination: they are tied to skills that have already been formulated and calcified. What's more again, it turns out that in the domain of the humanities—within the study of such fields as literature, history, phi-
losophy, and languages—students encounter the richness of imagery, the complexities of language, the precision of utterances, the pyrotechnics of rhetorical nuance, and that persistent encounter with others unlike ourselves that stimulate their imaginations to grow in fecundity, robustness, vividness, and strength.

If we agree that professional success entails “knowing how to take your own and others’ physical proclivities into account on the job, such that you don’t push yourself and others past the point of efficiency and responsibility, such that you don’t indulge yourself in explicit behaviors of physical attraction or physical repulsions when interacting with your colleagues, or such that you are unaware of the physical cues you are sending out in social contexts,” it follows that we are talking about the skill of physicality, including physical self-command, physical forms of communication, and knowledge of physical limits and needs, such as the requirements for rest, exercise, good nutrition, and both the stresses and joys of physical companionship. It is difficult to imagine any jobs-skills course that might give students ways of thinking productively about the site of intersection between social exchange and individual physicality, a site that is vexed by our culture’s exploitation of physicality as a primary means of marketing and political suasion. In humanities courses, however, students are persistently invited to contemplate physicality in terms of historical perspectives, gender issues, and sex and sexual orientation issues. In art works of plastic, pictorial, musical, and literary kinds, students are given an education in physicality, the ethical and historical constructions by which it may be interrogated, and the numberless accounts of physicality that are explored in narratives and poems.

It turns out, in other words, that the requirements for professional success map with profound congruence onto such cognitive and intellectual operations as language, imagination, reasoning, moral and ethical deliberation, aesthetic responsiveness, sociability, introspection, and physicality, and it turns out that these are the kinds of operations that students will not only encounter but will learn to develop on their own in humanities courses. The education that pretends that students are well-served by learning to push the buttons and pull the strings of specific job-skills is just that—a pretend education—but it is the case that the profundity of American confusion about these issues has created a public discourse and a current of opinion in which a pretend version of education is persistently valued, funded, pursued, and sold with more ener-
gy, money, and attention than a real education, much to the disadvantage of students who quickly learn that almost anyone in their first job can teach them what buttons to push and what strings to pull, but that if they do not learn from us how to develop their fundamental capacities internally—and how to deploy them socially—they will have lost the chance to learn these skills forever.

The world’s corporations and bureaucracies are not in the business of cueing and prompting fundamental forms of self-development. They expect their employees to fit the company curve. The students who have never learned to ask themselves if the company curve is or is not the same thing as a full, rich, challenging, or worthwhile life will have to discover—if they can—how to invent the form of education that asks these questions on their own, and none of us can pretend that their odds of doing so are high. It is disheartening to consider how common a scenario these words describe, when a humanities education that addresses the fundamental needs of self-development, self-command, and self-completion is available to students during the whole four years of their college education, the same four years in which outsiders from news analysts to high school counselors to everyone’s Aunt Matilda eagerly urge students en masse to concentrate on forms of education that carry the least utility in the world of human affairs both professional and personal.

In the context of developing the skills discussed above, a humanities education in languages and texts also develops certain competencies profoundly valuable in the arenas of professional striving.

First, students who work on developing these skills learn the personal competency of accepting delayed gratification. Complex problems cannot be solved by brown-and-serve methods. Immature persons get frustrated with delayed gratification, and either work on the complex problems badly and fruitlessly, or move on to simpler problems that reward them more quickly. But not all professions can guarantee new employees that they will be rewarded every five minutes by having the boss attach their latest crayon drawing on the lunch room refrigerator with a smiley-face magnet. The students who become professionally successful must learn to deal with delayed gratification.

Second, students who learn to live with delayed gratification also learn patience, and, with patience, they discover those inner recesses of self inside of which the virtues of self-knowledge and self-command may be developed.
Third, students who work on self-development skills learn how to live with uncertainty and ambiguity, not as frustrating problems that demand erasure, but as a more or less permanent dimension of complexity. Students of the humanities share with students of the sciences an education which shows them that the world is stranger, more unpredictable, more complex, and more indecipherable than all of the world's collection of bromides, common sense views, clichés, and stereotypes can possibly account for. Professionals who know how to live with uncertainty and ambiguity see the world more as it is, and are less likely to deceive themselves about processes, products, and policies grounded in ideologies that pretend to possess certain knowledge and complete explanations.

Fourth, students who study the humanities learn the competency of looking for and employing non-scientific kinds of evidence. They learn to look for evidence of people's beliefs by examining their rhetoric and their metaphors. They learn to look for evidence of values and commitments by examining people's representations in narrative and poetry. They learn to look for evidence of causality by examining the data from history. They learn to look for differences and sameness in the human community by studying the images, idioms, linguistic locutions, and views of the world as embedded in different languages. On and on, in the humanities students learn that the world of scientific evidence, conveyed mainly in terms of numbers, statistics, formulas, and proofs—as necessary and valid as these are—are complemented by a vast array of evidence from forms of language and art and argument that, in their own way, are also profoundly revelatory of the conundrums of existence. Professionals in the world who know how to look for, how to use, and how to evaluate evidence are surely more realistic and effective in their understanding and promulgation of policies and products than professionals who elevate their wishes over evidence and their desires over reality.

Fifth, and perhaps most important of all, students who study inside the humanities learn a cognitive and intellectual competence that is perhaps the primary marker of any educated mind: the ability to pay prolonged analytical attention to the sub-component parts of complex structures, whether these structures are material, conceptual, artistic, linguistic, argumentative, musical, or whatever. The world is filled with complex structures that can neither be understood nor appreciated by looking merely at their surfaces or by waiting for the object under
scrutiny to announce its own meaning. Complex structures, including the structure of our own ideas, values, and feelings, can only be understood by the patient analysis of how the sub-component parts of those complex structures actually work—how they actually allow the structure as a whole to bear its load of trucks or tone, its freight of meaning or mass—by a dynamic that can only be understood through the mechanisms of detailed inquiry, not quick impressions or vapid common sense or current small talk.

It turns out, then, that a humanities education trains students to claim for themselves a liberation of mind and intellect that prepares them to be successful in their lives and their careers simultaneously. This claim suggests another truth about which American society is profoundly confused. This truth is that there is no difference between the best education for life and the best education for jobs. All that human beings ever bring to life both in their personal domains and professional domains is the same array of dispositions, skills, and ways of making meaning. There is not a separate set of skills by which one understands one's professional tasks as opposed to one's non-professional tasks. We all have one brain and one set of skills and forms of understanding that we must use in all domains of endeavor. Life gives us fundamental capacities that we either use and develop or that we don't. But these capacities are all we ever have as our tools, regardless of whether we are making love, making war, making money, making meaning, or making nonsense.

The education that addresses the development of these capacities, that prompts and cues them into wakefulness, into vibrancy, into fertility, and that gives them content and stamina is the kind of education that people need for their lives and their professions alike. It is the honor and the glory of the humanities—or, in less lofty language, it is the job of the humanities—to provide students with this most necessary and useful kind of education.

NOTES

1 The remainder of this essay is a revised version of a document that I created for an MLA ad-hoc committee called the Teagle Working Group, a group of about twelve faculty members from different universities and colleges around the country who were sponsored (and funded) by a challenge from the Teagle Foundation to engage in a two-year long series of deliberations focused on the problem of how to bring the English major into greater alignment with the aims of liberal education. I turned an earlier version of this argument over to the ad-hoc committee, but it has not been previously published, and I cannot say at this time what role it will play in the committee's final report.
WORKS CITED


Steiner, George. *In Bab embryos Castle: Some Notes towards the Redefinition of Culture*. New Haven, Conn.: Yale UP, 1971.