

**John Dewey and Practical Liberal Education: Some Ideas for General Education Reform**

By  
Christopher J. Voparil

Lynn University  
College of Arts and Sciences  
3601 North Military Trail  
Boca Raton, FL 33431  
CVoparil@lynn.edu

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Over the past 50 years, higher education in the U.S. has been transformed from an elite to a mass institution. Today, university experience is a reality for millions who in a previous era would have been excluded.<sup>1</sup> While this welcome heterogeneity has revitalized many aspects of university life, divergent expectations from students, parents, faculty, and society at large about the goals of higher education have strained traditional ideals and practices, almost to the point of incoherency. In particular, the value of a general or liberal education that, as John Dewey once held, is “fitted rather to a leisure class in an aristocracy than to an industrial and democratic life” for today’s professionally minded students has been called into question.<sup>2</sup>

In this paper I argue that the traditional divide between general and professional or liberal and practical education must be reconceived for university education to remain a path to responsible, informed, civic-minded, well-rounded, citizens of the world in the 21st century. General education courses designed to provide a foundation in the liberal arts and cultivate free minds are often too removed from the practical training of the majors for students to appreciate their value. Here a rigid dichotomy between a liberal arts core and career-specific majors undermines learning in both areas. In the absence of clear continuities between these two fundamental components of higher education, core courses become outdated requirements simply to be gotten out of the way, while classes in the majors are reduced to conveyances for transmitting large amounts of factual

information that students simply memorize without developing essential habits of thought.

My goal is to articulate a vision of general education, inspired by the American pragmatists, that reconciles the deep bifurcation between the general or liberal, on the one hand, and the specialized or vocational, on the other, that has been with us since classical antiquity. Drawing on the educational philosophy of Dewey and William James, I contend that educating students in the liberal arts is a matter of approach as much as it is a matter of knowledge. More than specific subject areas, as a path to well-rounded human beings the liberal arts represent a particular perspective. Thus, providing students with a foundation in the liberal arts is not just about exposing them to different disciplines. It is also about cultivating habits: habits of critical thinking, reading, writing, and effective communication, to be sure. But also habits of expressing what one believes, of taking seriously the perspectives of others, and of seeing issues from more than one side. None of these need be limited to general education; any subject, including the most practical and professional, can be “liberalized” if taught historically and humanistically.

Incorporating both the historical and humanistic elements of the liberal arts across the college curriculum, as well as, making general education more pragmatic, would revitalize learning on both sides of the divide. Importantly, this approach has key pedagogical benefits, and coheres with the current ethos of student-centered learning and the spirit of what Howard Gardner has called “teaching for understanding.”<sup>3</sup>

Put another way, cognitive skills and practical competencies, such as critical thinking, effective oral and written communication, interpretive ability, and problem-solving, must not be divorced from either content knowledge or the traditional aims of

general education, including the cultivation of moral judgment and social responsibility, opening the mind, understanding one's self, and fostering respect for the culture and history of others. Making general education practical also means recognizing the personal character of all learning. Too often general education becomes the transmission of a largely static body of knowledge that goes under the name of "the wisdom of the ages" to students, of whom we only require deferential reception of this wisdom. As Dewey held, knowledge only becomes knowing when it becomes related to something in one's personal experience that enables you to possess and own it.

After briefly offering some background of the divide between general and practical education, both in its ancient origins and place in American history, I outline the dominant models of general education in America. In the end, the problem of reconciling the goals of these two distinct educational approaches is an American problem that requires an American solution. With this in mind I turn to Dewey's vision of a more practical education, with an eye to his view of the importance of habits as the key to achieving the goals of general education without ignoring or denigrating the practical or useful. As I suggested above, the greatest benefits of a more pragmatic, Deweyan approach ultimately may be pedagogical in nature, a claim I defend in the penultimate section before gesturing toward some practical recommendations in the conclusion.

### *I. The Great Divide*

The bifurcation of college curricula so familiar to us today between general education and the major or concentration is as old as Western civilization itself. The slave-owning societies of classical antiquity to which we paradoxically owe our ideals of democracy and freedom, also bequeathed to us the great divide between general and

special, or specialized, education. An education that was *liberalis* or “fitted to freedom” was general in the broadest sense of cultivating a person’s full humanity, while at the same time yielding an understanding of one’s role in society and place in the larger universe. For the Athenians and Romans, this role was defined by the rights and responsibilities of the contemplative life of free citizens. For non-citizens was reserved a more narrow, specialized or vocational training necessary to undertake the fundamental work of society, from which the free citizens were exempt.<sup>4</sup>

Although never a static concept, this approach to general education retained its aristocratic bent through the medieval period, where it crystallized around the *trivium* (grammar, rhetoric, dialectic or logic) and *quadrivium* (algebra, geometry, astronomy, music) and centered on theological training. It is not until the elitist assumptions of this model collide with America’s egalitarian ideals – and even then not until the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and ultimately *Brown v. Board of Education* a century after that – that the divide between general and vocational education ceased to exist unproblematically.<sup>5</sup> Although the most conspicuous rise of vocational or pre-professional programs occurred began after World War II and took off after 1970, in some sense vocational programs have occupied a place in American universities since Lincoln’s Morrill Act of 1862, which paved the way for the new land grant state universities committed to teaching “such branches of learning as are related to agriculture and the mechanical arts,” in addition to the classical curriculum. Nearly a century and a half later, American colleges and universities are still struggling to find a coherent vision and purpose that would enable them to reconcile these two conflicting traditions.<sup>6</sup>

## *II. Models of General Education*

In a recent book on American universities that aims to move beyond the stale debates and critiques of the late 1980's and 1990s, Derek Bok nicely outlines four models of general education that have dominated the landscape of higher education in America. These models attempt to navigate in different ways the dialectic between the “free elective system” initiated by Harvard President Charles Eliot in the 1870s and the response by Eliot's successor in 1909, A. Lawrence Lowell, that established the idea of a major or field of concentration. Inspired by the German concept of *Lernfreiheit* or “freedom of learning,” Eliot sought to move away from the prescriptive classical curriculum to something that allowed greater range and variation in the trajectories of student development, as well as opened the door to “modern studies” – the romance languages and literatures, history, political economy, and the natural sciences. The backlash that ensued, when after Eliot's 40 year tenure 55 percent of Harvard graduates had taken nothing but introductory courses and 70 percent had studied no subject in depth, led to the introduction of the major and the “breadth and depth” compromise that is still with us today.<sup>7</sup>

As we know, general education programs became the primary means of achieving broadly cultivated breadth in the spirit of the twin classical ideals of forming character and creating “citizens of the world,” while the in-depth study afforded by the major remained the avenue for attaining a measure of competence suitable for employment in some field or occupation. By World War II, Bok tells us, two models of general education had coalesced that are by now familiar: the distribution model and the survey course model. Favoring greater student choice a la Eliot, distribution models ensure

breadth by requiring students to choose courses from within several broad areas, like the humanities, social sciences, and hard sciences. Within these categories students often have complete freedom to select courses that appeal to their own interests and tastes. The assumption is that the classical notion of well-roundedness will result from adequate exposure to the broad areas of human endeavors. Universities like Columbia and Stanford attempted to further cultivate breadth by instituting required survey courses around broad topics, like the growth of Western Civilization, that ensured students would not graduate without engaging “the wisdom of the ages” or “the best expressions of the eternal spirit of man” or some such lofty phrase.<sup>8</sup>

Carried to a greater extreme, distrust of the *Lernfreiheit* model led Robert Hutchins to advocate a Great Books curriculum at the University of Chicago even before the second world war. More recent advocates of this third model, like William Bennett, continue to defend the emphasis on direct engagement with classic texts as the best means for cultivating broadly educated individuals, but also for imparting the essential moral virtues of Western civilization. Unlike the distribution model, here a common core of learning across students is achieved. Lastly, the fourth model goes by the name of a “modes of inquiry” approach. Rather than seeking to impart a specific body of knowledge, as with the Great Books curriculum, the modes of inquiry model focuses on ways of knowing. Thus, training students in the primary methods of intellectual inquiry – how to think like a mathematician, a scientist, an historian – is deemed of more lasting educative value, as well as more actively engaging, than memorizing specific bodies of knowledge.<sup>9</sup>

Today, the most commonly encountered program of general education is a hybrid model of some kind that incorporates ideas from one or more of these models. For example, distribution models that include one or two prescribed courses: perhaps a survey course that reads primary texts from different cultural traditions, or a modes of inquiry course in the area of mathematics or quantitative reasoning.

Yet in all these models the fundamental dichotomy of educational goals and values inherited from the ancient and medieval approaches to learning, with all of its deeply inegalitarian assumptions, continues unchecked. While American democracy has succeeded in universalizing access to education, it has not yet succeeded in democratizing the assumptions inherent in its received model of education in the ways John Dewey insisted it must over a century ago.<sup>10</sup> It is to Dewey's as yet unrealized vision that we now turn.

### *III. Toward a More Pragmatic Vision*

No thinker has understood more profoundly or articulated more clearly the fundamental ties between democracy and education than John Dewey. In his conception of democratic life Dewey is the spiritual heir of the distinctly American tradition inaugurated by Emerson, and later Thoreau and Whitman, which held there is more to democracy than an institutional arrangement. While “universal suffrage, direct participation in choice rulers, is an essential part of democracy,” he argued, “[...] political democracy is not the whole of democracy.” Democracy can only be maintained where it is “social” and “moral.” That is, where a set of what Dewey called “intellectual and emotional traits” are actively cultivated – qualities like widespread opportunities for social mobility, the free circulation of experiences and ideas, and extensive realization of

the purposes which hold men together. Since they eschew by their very nature coercive, authoritarian practices, democracies depend upon “shared interests” for their unity and a “personal appreciation of the value of institutions” for their stability. These traits “do not grow spontaneously on bushes. They have to be planted and nurtured. They are dependent upon education.”<sup>11</sup>

Democracy and education, then, are deeply, organically intertwined for Dewey, both in their method and highest aim – creating the conditions for the moral growth of individuals, and for society as a whole. Indeed, the cornerstone of Dewey’s thinking is the idea that the “supreme test” not only of political and educational arrangements, but human associations more generally, should be “the contribution they make to the all-around growth of every member of society.” Education, like democracy, is a “social function” that involves “securing direction and development in the immature through their participation in the life of the group to which they belong.” The dual dynamics of “widening of the area of shared concerns” and “liberation of a greater diversity of personal capacities” that Dewey believed characterize democratic life, must be sustained deliberately through education. Hence, it is imperative that our educational practices recognize the educative force of social arrangements where cooperation and shared purpose operate as deeply educative in nature, and combined this with the educational aspiration of discovering and developing personal capacities. Poignantly put, “democracy has to be born anew every generation, and education is its midwife.”<sup>12</sup>

So much for Dewey’s overarching vision. More practically, one of Dewey’s fundamental insights was to perceive the way education is primarily about the formation of habits. Habits, he asserted, “may be profitably compared to physiological functions,

like breathing, digesting [...] habits are like functions in many respects, and especially in requiring the cooperation of organism and environment.” But they also are “arts” that involve “skill of sensory and motor organs, cunning or craft, and objective materials” and require “order, discipline, and manifest technique.” In addition, habits are “social functions,” entailing “the support of environing conditions, a society or some specific group of fellow-men.” Attending to the conditions under which habits are formed is therefore essential.<sup>13</sup>

From a Deweyan point of view, where many of our educational practices go astray is our focus on the end-products rather than on the process of learning. Instead of concerning ourselves with outcomes of how much knowledge has been imparted to students, Dewey counseled attending first and foremost to the context in which learning occurs. Informed by his grasp of the fact that most learning occurs indirectly or tacitly, Dewey understood that what was being taught in many instances, below the surface level of achieving a mastery of facts – and to a much deeper and lasting result – was the development of “a special intellectual interest [...] an] ability to view facts impartially and objectively; that is, without reference to their place and meaning in one’s own experience.”<sup>14</sup> The catch is that habits cannot be altered directly, only through transforming the underlying conditions.

To illustrate this, imagine a classroom context that we may call “unproductive.”<sup>15</sup> Students enter the experientially sterile environment of the classroom. The natural, active “life activity” Dewey described is abruptly halted. The free flow of impulses is radically bottlenecked, with only very narrow modes of response permitted and often a specific answer desired. They search for some connection, some linkage to past experience and

existing habits, and find only previous classroom habits, which are likely to be those of passivity and “divided attention” – the ability to simulate attention outwardly, while the mind wanders within. Students are confronted with alien information, occupying a wholly external relation to themselves and their interests, often presented in abstract form with little hope of engaging the emotions. As a result of these conditions, students are forced into a fundamentally passive orientation. Unable to fix the new information within the stream of their experience, the material becomes purely formal – “just stuff to be learned.” Motivation wanes, or is non-existent. Comments or questions from students become a rarity, as the capacity for the information to provoke thought has been neutralized by the cessation of impulse. The entire endeavor is emptied of life for both the students and the teacher – and not surprisingly: as Dewey understood, “the isolation of intellectual disposition from concrete empirical facts of biological impulse and habit-formation entails a denial of the continuity of mind with nature.”<sup>16</sup>

Contrast this with a productive context, organized to assist rather than obstruct the natural process of growth. The student’s current capacities and attitudes – “his demand for realization of his own impulses” – are not suppressed. The supreme aim in the classroom is that of “inducing a vital and personal experiencing” then and there. Most significantly, a concern with conveying information is not primary. Rather, the teacher’s concern is with “the subject matter as a related factor in a total and growing experience,” as opposed to something external and “ready-made.” As Dewey defined it, good teaching is “teaching that appeals to established powers while it includes such *new* material as will demand their redirection for a new end, this redirection requiring thought – intelligent effort.” Put another way, subject matter must involve student “interest,” in

Dewey's well-known usage, although it may be better described as "identification." That is, "the recognized identity of the fact to be learned or the action proposed with the growing self; that it lies in the direction of the agent's own growth, and is therefore, imperiously demanded, if the agent is to be himself."<sup>17</sup>

The point is that without forming the right habits, any edifices of knowledge teachers may succeed in conveying will remain external to students' native – and naive – frames of mind, and thwart genuine understanding. Because the disseminated knowledge never enters the flow of personal experience, meaningful and lasting learning is unlikely to take place. Most certainly, it will fail to yield student growth. On a Deweyan view, this knowledge can be best realized in a context that not only demonstrates, but gives students the opportunity to practice themselves, how to think, write, and talk about the subject matter.<sup>18</sup> Another way of stating this is that liberal education should be concerned above all with a kind of learning, not teaching.<sup>19</sup> In the truest sense, it should be student-centered, rather than centered on the teacher or the curriculum.

The area of higher learning where this is undoubtedly the greatest challenge is in the realm of liberal or general education. Here exposing students to a particular, canonical reading list is often elevated to supreme purpose. We do not need to rehash the voluminous debate over what should or should not be included on this list to underscore the transcendent nature of the curriculum above all else in this context. Here, as usual, Dewey can offer guidance.

#### *IV. Practical General Education and Habits*

The conception of liberal education Dewey inspires emanates from a change in how we understand what it means to cultivate humanity through books. On the

traditional model of liberal education Dewey sought to replace – espoused more recently by people like William Bennett, George Will, and E.D. Hirsch to a certain extent – the aim is the transmission of a largely static body of knowledge that goes under the name of “the wisdom of the ages” or “the memory of civilization.” Whatever its guise, it represents something that purports to be timeless and uncorrupted by the popular prejudices and narrow social aims of today – in short, a tradition beyond question. The task is simply to impart this tradition to students, of whom we only require deferential reception of this wisdom. As one teacher observed – and one might add, by design – “the canonic voices [are] so loud students could not hear their own.”<sup>20</sup>

A Deweyan approach, by contrast, would reject the passivity of this model. Given his focus on habits, Dewey understood that what such education imparted was a narrow constellation of intellectual habits, ironically habits dangerously divorced from any moral traits because of the attendant antipathy in that tradition toward the interpretation, skepticism, and, above all, thinking that accompanies learning rooted in a quest for self-knowledge. Such an education, Dewey once quipped, amounted to “training for the profession of learning.” No less true today than in Dewey’s time, the training of students to approach books like scholars seems a poor model for liberal education in a democratic society that offers higher learning to all its citizens.<sup>21</sup>

Alternatively, a Deweyan conception of liberal education would involve a greater degree of “manual” or practical training. But Dewey’s language here is misleading. Though a committed advocate of the introduction of “practical activities” and “active occupations,” which included things like “shopwork” and the “household arts” of sewing and cooking, into the school system, Dewey stood in staunch opposition to the teaching

of such endeavors as “mere practical devices,” “modes of routine employment,” or “technical skills” – in sum, to anything approached in a narrow, utilitarian way. Instead, these practical activities must be approached in a “broad and generous way” as “methods of life,” conceived in their “social significance” – that is, “points of departure whence [students] shall be led out into a realization of the historic development of man.”<sup>22</sup>

Sounds great, but what does this all mean practically? Dewey gave the example of teaching children sewing and weaving. Nothing, he said, would strike intelligent observers as more strange than seeing both boys and girls in their early teens engaged in sewing and weaving. Seen as practical training of boys for sewing on buttons and making patches, it appears narrow and utilitarian, and surely not worthy of inclusion in school. Yet seen “from another side” such work “gives the point of departure from which the child can trace and follow the progress of mankind in history, getting an insight also into the materials used and the mechanical principles involved.” In the end, Dewey held, “you can concentrate the history of all mankind into the evolution of the flax, cotton, and wool fibers into clothing.” The occupation provides a motive, gives first-hand experience, and brings students in contact with reality. Importantly, it grounds the individual in a picture of communal life, and enables her to see all there is “of large and human significance” in daily work. Translated into “its historic and social values and scientific equivalencies,” it is “liberalized” and made capable of spurring genuine, personally rooted, learning and growth. Attending to the “social and scientific values” found in work even offers an opportunity for students to develop “imagination and sympathetic insight.”<sup>23</sup>

The question then becomes how to apply these insights to the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Adapting this approach to any other topic requires but a bit of creativity and imagination on the part of teachers, along with another habit Dewey sought to cultivate – a spirit of experimentalism. The best guidance I know of for how to teach things in their “large and human significance” was offered by William James, who asserted in a Deweyan spirit,

You can give humanistic value to almost anything by teaching it historically. Geology, economics, mechanics, are humanities when taught with reference to the successive achievements of the geniuses to which these sciences owe their being. Not taught thus, literature remains grammar, art a catalogue, history a list of dates, and natural science a sheet of formulas and weights and measures.<sup>24</sup>

Too many of our subjects today have been de-humanized and are taught in a very illiberal way that reduces the material being studied merely to “stuff to be learned” that is detached from any larger social and historical significance.

Inspired by James’ words, a colleague of mine from the College of Business and I once thought aloud about what such a “humanistic” approach to a business course might look like. We came up with an introductory class, envisioned as one of a series of first-year general education seminars, called “What Went Wrong with Enron?” Discussing the business practices involved in Enron’s scandal would provide ample opportunity to introduce students to principles of marketing, accounting, microeconomics, and markets that the college would want business majors to be exposed to. However, it would also invite an historical treatment of the business environment over the past few decades, including the deregulation of the 1980s, as well as a bit of theory or philosophy from the area of political economy: Adam Smith on the invisible hand, Milton Friedman on free markets, and perhaps even socialist critiques and/or Max Weber on the dangers of bureaucratization. Above all, students could be exposed to moral reflection and ethical

debates originating in a real-world context. Without even getting into the interesting pedagogical opportunities available here, one can see how much richer such a course would be than the typical Introduction to Marketing, Accounting, or Microeconomics. Once one starts thinking in these thematic terms, the possibilities soon become endless.

#### *V. The Pedagogy of General Education*

The key point here is that the most important benefits of such a humanistic or liberalized approach may be pedagogical in nature. Too often academic debates around general education center on what will be taught, rather than how it will be taught. Although lacking today's precise developmental or neuropsychological vocabulary to express it, Dewey perceived the inadequacy of the dominant pedagogy of his day to the diverse population the very new ideal of public education courted. Reacting to charges that the inclusion of "active occupations" in school curricula, by which he meant occupations "of nature-study, of elementary science, of art, of history," somehow deprecated the classical ideal of well-rounded humane learning, Dewey held,

It is our present education which is highly specialized, one-sided and narrow. It is an education dominated almost entirely by the medieval conception of learning. It is something which appeals for the most part simply to the intellectual aspect of our natures, our desire to learn, to accumulate information, and to get control of the symbols of learning; not to our impulses and tendencies to make, to do, to create, to produce, whether in the form of utility or art.<sup>25</sup>

Predating the pioneering insights of Howard Gardner and others into the myriad kinds of minds humans possess by some 80 years, Dewey realized in 1899, "The simple facts of the case are that in the great majority of human beings the distinctively intellectual interest is not dominant. They have the so-called practical impulse and disposition." Rather than cling to an outmoded conception of education he believed ill suited for

current social realities, “fitted rather to a leisure class in an aristocracy than to an industrial and democratic life,” and condemn the failures of those of “practical impulse” as signs of uneducability and slight aptitude, Dewey understood the importance of bringing a critical eye to entrenched pedagogical institutions and assumptions. Indeed, educational reform was inseparable from the advancement or moral growth of society as a whole.<sup>26</sup>

A century later, much work still needs to be done. A recent report by the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AACU) strikes a similar tone, calling for “alert self-reflection and creativity” within institutions of higher learning to meet today’s “changing times.” In broad strokes the report calls for “a newly pragmatic liberal education” that will meet the diverse needs of students in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, calling for educators to reconcile the goals of liberal and professional education. In a Deweyan spirit, it calls for approaches that “look beyond the classroom to the world’s major questions, asking students to apply their developing analytical skills and ethical judgment of significant problems in the world around them.” Although merely suggestive, the report’s vision is for a liberal education for all students, not just those in elite colleges or traditional liberal arts disciplines, asserting that “a liberal education *is* a practical education because it develops just those capacities needed by every thinking adult: analytical skills, effective communication, practical intelligence, ethical judgment, and social responsibility.”<sup>27</sup>

With the addition of diversity and preparation for a global society, Bok outlines a similar array of goals, as does Martha Nussbaum and others attempting to reconceive and

rejuvenate the liberal arts.<sup>28</sup> The shift taking place in all these works is fundamentally Deweyan in nature: from a focus on transmitting knowledge to one of cultivating habits. This is an important change in philosophy that looks back to ancient models of education which prized cultivation, rather than the scholasticism of the Middle Ages that sought merely to impart static bodies of wisdom to be passively received. However, it is also a shift of profound pedagogical significance.

One of the characteristics the unhumanistically orientated disciplines outside the traditional liberal arts is that the subject matter is not approached historically. As a result, what Gardner calls the “text-test” model of instruction and examination has become a familiar fixture in certain areas. As is fairly well-known, part of Dewey’s critique of the regnant educational approach in his day targeted the emphasis on “absorption and learning” rather than “construction and giving out.” The problem with the text-test model is that the information remains external to the students and never enters their “stream of experience,” to use one of James’ phrases. To the extent that instruction fails to connect with student experience, either because its focus is exclusively cognitive or because it remains external to students’ attitudes and feelings, meaningful learning is not likely to occur. As Dewey held, knowledge only becomes knowing when it becomes related to something in one’s personal experience that enables you to possess and own it.<sup>29</sup>

In his recent work, Gardner has dubbed the latter approach “teaching for understanding.” Rather than being organized around rote learning and decontextualized forms of assessment, Gardner advocates “performances of understanding” as a means not only of fostering student learning, but of assessing it. He cites a compelling study of physics students at Johns Hopkins and MIT, who when asked to explain relatively simple

phenomena provided incredibly unlearned responses. Gardner observed not only that the students failed to give correct answers, but that the answers given mirrored those of people who had never studied physics, including younger children. “Despite years of schooling,” he concluded, rote learning of external curricula had ensured “the minds of these college students remain fundamentally unschooled.” Because they never truly understood the material in the first place – despite earning high marks in elite courses at prestigious universities – these students were unable to apply their learning to contexts outside the narrow purview of their examination topics and contexts.<sup>30</sup>

Introducing an historical perspective and topical, thematic focus often affords instructors the opportunity to move away from what Gardner dubs the “text-test” model where students are bombarded with large bodies of factual knowledge that they simply reproduce on exams. Freed from burdensome requirements to cover every chapter in the textbook, instructors could pursue specific themes or examples in depth and immerse students in the given discipline by teaching them to think like an historian, a mathematician, a scientist, or a psychologist, rather than merely survey all aspects of an entire field in an uninspiring manner. Students would be challenged to think and draw connections between their various areas of study, and instructors would be able to design courses they are excited to teach.

Put another way, providing students with a foundation in the liberal arts is not just about exposing them to different disciplines in the hope that enough bits and pieces will be internalized that a kind of shallow, cocktail party “cultural literacy” will result. It is also about fostering habits: habits of critical thinking, reading, writing, and effective communication, to be sure. But also habits of expressing what one believes, of taking

seriously the perspectives of others, and of seeing issues from more than one side. None of this need be limited to courses in the liberal arts.

As the AACU report recognizes, such an approach depends less on the actual subject matter taught than on a particular approach to teaching and learning. Survey courses that aim to cover as much ground as possible should be abandoned in favor of a more thematic approach organized around what Gardner calls “rich or generative concepts” that can be pursued in depth and approached in an interdisciplinary fashion. The type of learning sought – and assessed – must not confuse recall with understanding or acquiring information with learning to think. Here the divide between the general and the practical, between contemplation and action, must be bridged through our understanding of learning itself: “acquiring something you can use because you understand it,” in the words of Michael Oakeshott.<sup>31</sup>

## *VI. Conclusion*

My goal here has been to sketch a vision of how general and practical education might be reconciled through a shift toward focusing on the cultivation of habits, rather than the transmission of information as the overarching goal of higher education. As a result, my practical recommendations have been few. On some level, this is something that faculty and their institutions need to define for themselves. Still, a few suggestions in closing are in order.

As a practical matter, any vision of how to reconcile general and practical education will be of little use without greater collaboration between faculty in traditional liberal arts disciplines and those in pre-professional programs. According to one estimate, some 60% of college seniors are enrolled in pre-professional or vocational

majors. Only about one third choose majors in the liberal arts.<sup>32</sup> Given this reality, general or liberal education bears a certain responsibility to foster the skills and habits of mind even today's employers lament our graduates fundamentally lack: at a very minimum, quantitative skills, effective written and oral communication, analytical or thinking ability, collaborative capacity, and a familiarity with languages and cultures outside one's own.

However, Bok has argued compelling that general education also offers an opportunity "to help undergraduates think about their careers in terms broader than simply making money."<sup>33</sup> It is precisely here that understanding the liberal arts as a matter of perspective – or perspectives – becomes relevant. Engaging students in moral reasoning to cultivate an ethical sensibility, fostering an appreciation of larger social, political, and economic contexts through broad historical approaches to topics, and awakening them to a sense of social justice and civic responsibility, are at least a few ways that a general or liberal education can complement and enrich, rather than oppose, practical or vocational study.

Perhaps the most familiar (and least controversial) of general education goals is critical thinking. Philosopher Alfred North Whitehead once quipped that students should not be given more information than they are able to think about. If we are indeed serious about cultivating an ability to think critically, adhering to Whitehead's maxim is where we should start – at all levels of the undergraduate experience. That teaching students the ability to think and the capacity to judge should be a central preoccupation in the classroom at all may still require some convincing. But it is precisely here that the general and the practical come together. As William James argued exactly a century ago

in an address on “the contrast between college education and the education which business or technical or professional schools confer,” taught in the right way “the narrowest trade or professional training does something more for a man than to make a skilful practical tool of him – it makes him also a judge of other men’s skill.” Like Dewey, James thought the general vs. practical or liberal vs. professional divide was an artificial one, or at least one ill at home in a democratic milieu. All of our educational institutions, James asserted in a famous formulation, should aim to “help you to know a good man when you see him.” On the back of this solitary goal James placed nothing less than the future of American democracy.<sup>34</sup>

Even the most narrow professional training in “the humblest manual trade,” James believed, cultivated a “critical sense” that allowed one to judge first-rate from second-rate work in one’s occupation or area of expertise. This critical sensibility, he thought, was generalizable, even if only in a small degree, to the “power to judge of good work generally.” To recall the quote from James above, the best pedagogy for fostering this sensibility is teaching historically; understanding what has stood the test of time and what has not will give us gain “a richer sense of what the terms ‘better’ and ‘worse’ may signify in general.” Whether what James understood by “critical sense” is exactly what goes under the name of “critical thinking” today remains unclear. However, if our colleges and universities are churning out either culturally literate individuals who nevertheless are “unable to know any good thing when they see it, incapable of enjoyment unless a printed label gives them leave,” or professionally trained experts, crammed full of information they are unable to put to use because it has not been understood, James is surely right that our democracy will suffer.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See George Keller, “The New Demand for Heterogeneity in College Teaching,” *To Improve the Academy*, vol. 24 (July 2005). See also, *Greater Expectations: A New Vision for Learning as a Nation Goes to College*, a National Panel Report of the Association of American Colleges and Universities, at <http://www.greaterexpectations.org/>. In 1940 24.5% of Americans had graduated high school and only 4.6% graduated college. In 1996, by contrast, 87.3% had completed high school and 27.1% had 4 years or more of college. 75 percent of high school graduates get some postsecondary education. Keller, *op. cit.*, p. 234; *Greater Expectations*, p. viii.

<sup>2</sup> John Dewey, qtd. in Will Durant, *The Story of Philosophy: The Lives and Opinions of the Great Philosophers*. (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1953), p. 390.

<sup>3</sup> Howard Gardner, *The Disciplined Mind: What All Students Should Understand*. (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1999), esp. chapter 6.

<sup>4</sup> A great discussion of these issues remains, *General Education in a Free Society*. (Cambridge, Ma.: Harvard University Press, 1945), also known as the “Harvard Red Book.” For a learned and compelling attempt to reinvigorate this classical ideal, see Martha Nussbaum, *Cultivating Humanity: A Classical Defense of Reform in Liberal Education*. (Cambridge, Ma.: Harvard University Press, 1999).

<sup>5</sup> Until the Civil War, American colleges and universities still adhered to a classical curriculum aimed at moral education, which was largely the result of their early connections with theological training in the medieval tradition. In the words of Derek Bok, these colleges “resembled finishing schools more closely than institutions of advanced education. See his *Our Underachieving Colleges: A Candid Look at How Much Students Learn and Why They Should be Learning More*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), p. 12.

<sup>6</sup> Qtd. in Bok, *Our Underachieving Colleges*, p. 26. See also Lawrence Cremin, *The Transformation of the School: Progressivism in American Education, 1876-1957*. (New York: Vintage Books, 1964), chapter 1; and Freeman Butts and Lawrence A. Cremin, *A History of Education in American Culture*. (New York: Hold, Rinehart, and Winston, 1953), Part III. The so-called Harvard Red Book put the two conflicting goals somewhat differently, framing the tension as a rift between Jeffersonianism and Jacksonianism: “that of discovering and giving opportunity to the gifted student and, second, that of raising the level of the average student,” *General Education in a Free Society*, pp. 27-35.

<sup>7</sup> Butts and Cremin, *A History of Education in American Culture*, pp. 392-7; Bok, *Our Underachieving Colleges*, p. 16. On Eliot’s influence, see also *General Education in a Free Society*, pp. 36-41; and Bok, *Our Underachieving Colleges*, pp. 14-20.

<sup>8</sup> Bok, *Our Underachieving Colleges*, pp. 18, 257-62, 266-7. Bok provides detailed discussion of the strengths and weaknesses of each model in chapter 10.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 262-70.

<sup>10</sup> On this point see Cremin, *The Transformation of the School*, Part I. In addition to Dewey, Cremin cites progressive educator William Dempster Hoard as propounding the idea that democracy transforms the fundamental meaning of education.

<sup>11</sup> Dewey, “The Need of an Industrial Education in an Industrial Democracy,” in Debra Morris and Ian Shapiro (eds.), *John Dewey: The Political Writings* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1993), pp. 121-122.

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<sup>12</sup> Dewey, *Reconstruction in Philosophy*, in Jo Ann Boydston (ed.), *The Middle Works of John Dewey, 1899-1924*, Vol. 12. (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois Press, 1982), p. 186; *Democracy and Education* (New York: The Free Press, 1944 [1916]), pp. 81, 87; “The Need of an Industrial Education,” p. 122.

<sup>13</sup> Dewey, *Human Nature and Conduct: An Introduction to Social Psychology* (New York: The Modern Library, 1922), pp. 14-15.

<sup>14</sup> Dewey, “The Child and the Curriculum,” in Reginald D. Archambault (ed.), *John Dewey on Education: Selected Writings*. (New York: The Modern Library, 1964), p. 341.

<sup>15</sup> For the distinction between productive and unproductive contexts, I draw on Seymour Sarason, *And What Do You Mean by Learning?* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2004).

<sup>16</sup> Dewey, *Interest and Effort in Education*, in Jo Ann Boydston (ed.), *The Middle Works of John Dewey, 1899-1924*, Vol. 7, p. 197; “The Child and the Curriculum,” pp. 351-354.

<sup>17</sup> Dewey, *Interest and Effort in Education*, p. 157; “The Child and the Curriculum,” p. 352; *Interest and Effort in Education*, pp. 180, 156.

<sup>18</sup> Interestingly, the demise of the institution of the apprenticeship marks a recurring lament in Dewey’s educational writings. In the apprenticeship learning takes place in a context that unites thinking and doing, theory and practice, rather than attempting to teach swimming while outside the pool, as Dewey once characterized purely intellectualized learning. The apprenticeship also fostered certain habits of discipline, responsibility, an obligation to produce something in the world – in short, it involved “character-building.” See “The School and Society,” in Archambault (ed.), *John Dewey on Education*, pp. 297-298. Howard Gardner advocates a return to the apprenticeship model as well. See his *The Disciplined Mind*; and *Multiple Intelligences: The Theory in Practice* (New York: Basic Books, 1993), Part III.

<sup>19</sup> On this point see Rene Vincente Arcilla, *For the Love of Perfection: Richard Rorty and Liberal Education* (New York: Routledge, 1995), p. 3 and *passim*. See also Michael Oakeshott, “A Place of Learning,” in Timothy Fuller (ed.), *The Voice of Liberal Learning: Michael Oakeshott on Education* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989).

<sup>20</sup> Stephen M. Fishman and Lucille McCarthy, *John Dewey and the Challenge of Classroom Practice* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1998), p. 89. See, among other works, William Bennett, *To Reclaim a Legacy: A Report on the Humanities in Higher Education* (U.S. Dept. of Education, 1984), and *The Educated Child: A Parents’ Guide from Preschool to Eighth Grade* (New York: The Free Press, 1999); George Will, *Statecraft as Soulcraft: What Government Does* (New York: Touchstone, 1983); and E.D. Hirsch, *Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know* (New York: Random House, 1987). In this context I am indebted to the trenchant analyses of David Bromwich, *Politics By Other Means: Higher Education and Group Thinking* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), esp. chapter 2.

<sup>21</sup> “The School and Society,” p. 309.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 299-310.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 304-306. Philosopher Martha Nussbaum has recently argued that such development of the sympathetic or moral imagination is a cornerstone of liberal education. See her *Cultivating Humanity*.

<sup>24</sup> William James, “The Social Value of the College Bred,” in Bruce Kuklick (ed.), *William James: Writings 1902-1910* (New York: The Library of America, 1987 [1907]), p. 1243.

<sup>25</sup> Dewey, “The School and Society,” p. 308.

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid, p. 309; Durant, *The Story of Philosophy*, p. 390. The body of literature on learning differences is rapidly expanding, but the seminal work remains, Howard Gardner, *Frames of Mind: The Theory of Multiple Intelligences*. (New York: Basic Book, 1993 [1983]).

<sup>27</sup> *Greater Expectations*, pp. xii, 26.

<sup>28</sup> Bok, *Our Underachieving Colleges*; Nussbaum, *Cultivating Humanity*.

<sup>29</sup> “Ethical Principles Underlying Education,” in Archambault (ed.), *John Dewey on Education*, p. 118. Dewey made this point in many ways in many places, but see especially, “The Child and the Curriculum”: “Abandon the notion of subject matter as something fixed and ready-made in itself, outside the child’s experience [...Otherwise,] the material is not translated into life-terms, but is directly offered as a substitute for, or an external annex to, the child’s present life” (344, 352). See also, Sarason, *And What Do You Mean by Learning?*, pp. 185, 104.

<sup>30</sup> Gardner, *The Disciplined Mind*, p. 120. For more on this research see Gardner’s, *The Unschooled Mind: How Children Think and How Schools Should Teach* (New York: Basic Books, 1993). On his notion of “teaching for understanding,” see *Multiple Intelligences*, Part III.

<sup>31</sup> *Greater Expectations*, pp. 25-6. Gardner, *Multiple Intelligences*, p. 192. Michael Oakeshott, *The Voice of Liberal Learning*, ed. Timothy Fuller (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2001), p. 8.

<sup>32</sup> Bok, *Our Underachieving Colleges*, p. 283.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid, p. 282, and chapter 11, *passim*.

<sup>34</sup> James, “The Social Value of the College Bred,” p. 1242, and *passim*.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid, pp. 1243, 1247-8.