**Why Are People Less Interesting: in Defense of the Liberal Arts?**

**By Jay Cravath, Ph.D.**

Sitting in a coffee house in San Diego recently, I was eavesdropping on conversations of the other patrons. They seem to discuss nothing of substance or sound engaging in any way. The couple ahead of me could have just parked their Harley. They guy is reading texts—the woman across staring blankly. Neither seems interested in discussion. To the side of me is a party of five. One loquacious young woman dominates the conversation. She’s talking wedding planning. The others nod in acquiescence. Underneath, they look bored—as though somewhere is a deep recognition that it’s all pointless—they are just filling time.

It is our fault. America’s parents and our education system have failed them. You’ve heard that before but let me offer a new take. A recent article by Simon Doonan addresses these ennui bar moments. In a Huffington Post piece “Where did all the Accomplished people Go?” the author observes that, in the past the “vamps and tramps and bimbos” had to share the spotlight with those gifted in other fields. The 50’s and 60’s of his childhood was an age where the truly interesting and talented shared celebrity more widely. Everyone was just as impressed by Arthur Miller’s playwrighting skills as their fascination for his wife Marilyn Monroe. Doonan’s general public now finds celebrities their panacea for empty moments. His Bertrand Russell conclusion: “We are living in an everyone-is-special-and-there-are-no-losers society.” We are not interested in them, insists Doonan, because we are “more comfortable with the famous-for-nothing paradigm.” “During the last century, consummate skill was HOT!” says he.

True enough—a message delivered with wit and style. However, there is something deeper happening here, Mr. Jones. People used to be more interested in knowledge—attaining it and those who had it. In Doonan’s 1960s, the regular middle class—those War Babies in the quiet old neighborhoods and growing subdivisions of America—wanted to show they were smart, had learning. Their Depression-era parents drummed it in. The undereducated were the most affected by the crash of ’29 and its subsequent misery.

In Doonan’s youth, all those clubs, fraternities and sororities—from the Elks to the Rainbow Girls—they talked to each other in person. They clustered for conversations. Little knowledge scrums formed—and it required boning up for interaction. After all, it was brains that won the war. I recall my father reading Time Magazine cover-to-cover so that he—as a school teacher—could hold up his end of the conversation at bridge club. My parents, elevated through charm, ran with a crowd of advanced degrees. Dr.’s, lawyers, MBA’s—professionals who benefited from a time when the liberal arts was more infused into higher education.

The notion of liberal earning (from those “liberated”—free men of the Middle Ages) originated in ancient Greece. A “well-rounded education”—as we term it, was advocated by Pythagoras around 540 B.C. For free men then as well. It is much easier on the state education budget to exclude slaves and females. He insisted on: sacred teaching, mathematics, science, music, reading, writing and poetry. Plato’s course of education included musico-gymnastic (beautiful and the good forms), philosophy (he called dialectic), reflection and intellectual insight. Pollio, a Roman contemporary of Augustus, claimed the branches of knowledge were organically related: “The inexperienced may wonder at the fact that so many various things can be retained in the memory; but as soon as they observe that all branches of learning have a real connection with, and reciprocal action upon each other, the matter will seem very simple.”

Pollio recognized that by knowing one branch of knowledge, it somehow enhanced the other disciplines. Through the Middle Ages, Hugo preached the Greek “Seven pillars of knowledge: the trivium (grammar, rhetoric, dialectic) and the quadrivium (mathematics, geometry, astronomy and music). This carried to the Renaissance and into the Enlightenment period. Our founding fathers brought the liberal education to America. They saw fit to make some minor alterations, separating theology from philosophy. That split was the inspiration for the first amendment. Theology, once called the “queen of all the sciences”—now was another branch of philosophy.

In America, a liberal education continued to be valued into the 20st Century although there was no hard research explaining why it made one a better thinker. As in classical curriculum of Greece and Rome, liberal ideas often embodied a transdisciplinary framework. That is, the subject areas are integrated across the curriculum. The humanities—history, philosophy, religion and the arts (both performing and visual)—link great human ideas to mathematics and sciences to make up liberal studies. Students are taught the interconnection of the knowledge canon. Scientists of the early 20th Century recognized that our brain needs and loves ideas and their connections. It is all over concepts—part of the prefrontal survival need to figure stuff out. That old line we were quoted in English class: the mind is the only vessel, when you put more in, the more it will hold—is true. We know more through patient study of diverse ideas through a response called schemata.

The notion of schemata was first introduced by Frederic Bartlett in1932, who said learning is a complicated network of mental structures that create our concept of world. Piaget—the child psychologist—took this idea and ran with it. Webbed together as schema, our brain ties these bits of information we gather at light speed into interconnected threads that are instantly available. For example, when you hear someone say “bird,” and at the same time another says “webbed feet”—the thread between those two pieces of schemata connect to another word: “duck.” Even graduates with a bachelor of science or arts from an acceptable liberal arts college, are generally more interesting to have at “Buffalo Wild Wings” than those from a state university who escaped a small battery of humanities courses on subjects like “Atoms to Stars”—a watery approach to physics. Graduates from true liberal arts colleges have a pretty good bank of general knowledge because they took subjects they had no interest in and had to hustle for a passing grade. Sometimes, that created a life-long interest in an area they had shunned. For a scholars of specialties, say of the indigenous tribes of Borneo, those hours of study fit into an elaborate web ready for recall—a fiber optic network that allows them to expound ad inifinitum.

Jerome Bruner, in his research on perception, explored knowledge “scaffolding” as he called it—to describe how learners build off information they already have stored. The tangle of schema doesn’t disappear after taking a college Introduction to Pope, Dryden and Swift. It gets neatly tucked in a little section of gray and can be available during a newspaper article or when a TV correspondent compares an inept robber as having the brain size of a Lilliputian. These aha moments—made through literary, scientific and historical references—are incorporated by good writers to appeal to readers who recognize the metaphors and allusions in a given piece.

My humanities students get a healthy dose of this effect in their college introduction class. Many are working parents, approaching middle age, just beginning an associates degree, never having had a class above high school. Diverse, interesting stuff is new to them. One assignment is to read “A Room of One’s Own,” Virginia Woolfe’s novella on a fictional sister of Shakespeare and how her gender would never have been able to write fiction through history unless her parents were very rich. For this and other assignments, I have copies of articles that reference the book—or made a play on words of it. Time Magazine had an article—“A Room of Their Own”—on the home for retired actors in Hollywood.

The point is that knowledge isn’t just floating inside you without a purpose. It is stored away, ready to be grabbed as insight. The more you know, the more little zings of recognition are encountered throughout the day. Joseph Campbell, a mythologist, said: “We are not seeking a meaning to life, we are seeking an experience of life.” Ideas create meaningful experiences through media, art and conversation—the references cause recognition and a knowledge response.

The more we know, the more and deeper we think—and thus the more we make connections among various branches of knowledge. In fact, we are what we think because if those webs of information are imbedded, they are ready to be whipped out at a moment’s notice.

The dumbing down of ideas and conversation has been gradual. Robert Putnam, a Harvard sociologist studied this and wrote a book called “Bowling Alone.” In the bowling leagues and bridge clubs of yore, ideas political and philosophical were exchanged—along with gossip and celebrity talk. Intellectual prowess was regarded. Opinions were honed—and sometimes changed!

We have now adopted the construct of the media-marketed opinion. Packaged so well on talk shows, those Ideas become sound-bites in lieu of one’s. The visual and polemic side of popular media has slowly built influence. Keep the TV shows fast in video and slow in content, the Hollywood suits knew. That way, grandpa will watch with his 3-year-old next generation simultaneously. When ideas on talk radio are presented with such force—bullying persuasion—they must be true. How convenient to have an opinioned wrapped and delivered. These ideologues craft their spiel with such carefully chosen buzz, it hits all the pre-dialed buttons. Takes the mess out of having an opinion. We can’t practice all that interacting if we don’t have the interest or ideas.

Neil Postman contributed insight to the sorry state of our education system as well. In what began as a talk to the Frankfurt Book Fair in 1984 on the year’s eponymous book, Postman’s take on contemporary culture switched the culprit from an evil Big Brother leaning his calloused, oppressive thumb on our heads, to a world where we volunteer not to be engaged in the lives of our minds, neighbors or democracy. Prescient stuff. We have already invited the forms of amusement enjoyed by Aldous Huxley’s characters in *Brave New World.* The disturbing dystopia chronicles a life in 700 years where culture is overtaken by a society given to free love. Disease and fertility have been genetically engineered away. Abundant feel-good drugs like “Soma” are freely distributed to the masses; space-age carnival rides—centrifugal bumble puppies sling us about while we scream mindlessly (don’t we have these in Las Vegas?) “Feelies” like Woody Allen’s Orgasmatron are emerging technologies.

And while that can’t be all bad, Huxley’s characters do not read, write, or engage in politics—they are too busy having fun. If the populous is content, due to a supposed benevolent unseen oppressor, they will not sharpen their pitchforks, scythes, and rise up like the proletariat of the Arab Spring. Those citizens have not tasted true democracy. We seem to be growing weary of it—or, rather distracted a la Huxley’s vision. In the 1962 Congressional election, 47.3% of our eligible citizenry voted. In 2010, 37.8. No upward trend in the future that is predicted. Some would rather text to than speak to each other. Where did that come from?

Good liberal arts for all children, I am convinced, would fight these trends. Another deeper dumbing down of our education systems is at work. In primary and secondary schools, such mandates as No Child Left Behind, have attempted to decrease the deficit of cognitive skills among many of our students through high-stakes testing. Unfortunately, the transdisciplinary piece has been left out. It is what makes learning interesting, challenging—and it costs too much money. Teacher training, hiring more specialists for arts subjects at the primary and intermediate level—not in most budgets. And class preparation for subject-integrated programs is twice as lengthy. Teachers either teach a half day and plan the rest or stay up late at night and on weekends. Our best teachers who recognize the significance of authentic learning and are doing the latter. When subjects are integrated, it requires coordination among the faculty.

Education at the post-secondary level is in trouble as well. Woodrow Wilson and his well-heeled Ivy Leaguers were the beneficiaries of a true liberal arts approach. After World War II it was recognized we had conquered the world through specialization—math, science and technical training kicked butt. A college education only afforded the rich before the war, was now within reach. The GI bill, Servicemen’s Readjustment Act of 1944, invited returning veterans to college—as well as an interest-free house, business, and vocational loans. Our victory through specialization, it is argued, was the beginning of academia’s dumbing down. Colleges and universities began responded by shrinking the humanities arm of liberal learning—whittling back those courses not directly concerned with a major. Baby Boomers were taught to get a job—be practical. Except for those schools that continue liberal arts—Stanford, Yale, some 4-year colleges, it is not like it used to be.

Twenty years ago, a study of college freshmen professors signaled alarm from the growing inability of the incoming students to write a decent essay. Another professor of English recently stated that their verbal/writing schools come in at a median 7th grade level. A statistic from Postman’s book goes like this: we retain five times the amount of information through typographic transfer—reading, compared to videographic. I’m talking the absolute best documentary you have witnessed and the ideas don’t stick like reading. Something happens in the translation of information from the printed page to prefrontal cortex that adds an extra bookmark to the concept. That ages-old tradition of taking copious notes during a lecture, and hammering it in before the big quiz. Research says that works. Yet reading and revisiting those schema presented in class cement the ideas in a string of knowledge pieces that are recalled spontaneously. The best crib sheets are those behind your eyes. Only 6-8% of adolescent boys read for pleasure—girls a few points above. That is not preparation for the rigors of Intro to History 101.

For those of us interested in discourse with all the spice and zing of a good philosophy class—or argument on the limits of democracy—the battle cry to keep liberal education in the schools has essentially been ignored except for those outliers.

If your mind remains open, consider if children could experience a liberal education from K-12? The International Baccalaureate(IB) program one such source. Founded in Switzerland in the 1960’s, it was intended to give the kids of diplomats a college preparatory diploma. Quietly growing around the world, IB offers the curriculum, with safeguards to ensure that a school partner is maintaining the standard.

“The program focuses on getting kids to think deeply about disciplines, about learning and about themselves,” says David Weiss, president of the Guild of IB schools of the Northeast. “It imbeds the best educational practices there are: authentic assessments, different modalities involved in learning, and group work. Throughout the years of study, six academic areas are the focus: Language; Second Language; Individuals & Societies; Experimental Sciences; Mathematics; and Arts and Electives. All of those are linked with transdisciplinary connections. Service learning—community work—is required as well as an extended essay of special interest to graduate.

It is a rigorous and demanding curriculum yet students are motivated as they grasp these deep connections and explore subjects in real depth. An important component of IB is teacher training—and retraining. “You’re asking teachers to look at their practice, to focus on depth of study over breadth, to focus on what students are learning rather than what you’re teaching,” Weiss says. “You’re really pushing the edge of what education is about.”

International Baccalaureate also emphasizes the performing arts: Besides the study of art history and aesthetics they are “encouraged to identify particular creative abilities and to master techniques appropriate to that form of expression.” Learning to express oneself in an artistic way can lead to what Daniel Goleman terms “emotional intelligence.” His book by the same name suggests that, among other learning, exploring the world of ideas through the arts, puts one in touch with inner expressiveness and can develop traits of empathy, patience and a wider perspective of humanity. Could the epidemic of bullying in schools be a product of increasing students who do not have such a personal inward outlet and so express anger and frustration—the fright or flight response—at peers, teachers and themselves? Most schools are simply not zeroing in on individual talent—only those who will excel on the SAT or Stanford 9, the criteria employed for smarts—mathematical/logical and verbal/linguistic ability. That has left a number of students lacking those abilities out in the cold.

The Evolution of IQ

Tests for IQ (Intelligence Quotient) grew out of Alfred Binet’s work in France before World War I. The government asked him to “create a measurement for deficient children” to place into special education programs. When the war began, the test was revised at Stanford University and used to distinguish the varying intelligences of soldiers. Still, it tested only the cognitive, or left-brain side.

Howard Gardner believed there were more testable aptitudes than those of Stanford-Binet. He viewed intelligence as “the capacity to solve problems or to fashion products that are valued in one or more cultural setting.” As a graduate student at Harvard, Gardner worked to find a description of the breadth of human ability. He thesis asked questions like: what about Mozart? Is not music an aptitude. And wasn’t he a genius? Musical/rhythmic, said Gardner. Michael Jordon, as remarkable athlete as the modern world has seen—bodily/kinesthetic. Ghandi—intrapersonal—the powerful gift to self-reflect. Ronald Reagan—interpersonal—connecting immediately with people. Goya—visual/spatial of course.

Gardner suggested we have “multiple intelligences” and that those not traditionally tested—affective or right-brain—are just as important to recognize and promote as the purely cognitive. He also recognized that the cognitive and affective inform each other in solving problems. Gardner’s Project Zero—a Harvard think tank born out of his work—has promoted the exploration, development and assessment of the other intelligences. The kid constantly doodling in 4th grade; the class clown; the Jr. High ne’er-do-well breaking moves on the way to lunch; the artistic taggers. Gardner insists we have ignored these students rather than legitimizing their gifts.

For me, this aspect begs the character piece of education—linked to emotional intelligence. All of us have some form of artistic expression. To identify those attributes early in life and nurture through development, can make us more settled during the walking chemistry lab of adolescence and beyond to a career. Pairing a concerted program of multiple intelligences development along with rigorous, meaningful liberal arts, could have a substantial positive effect on the outcome of young students. When explaining the cognitive versus affective side of our brains, The verbal/linguistic and math/logical side are cognitive. The other five are affective/intuitive but connect to the cognitive through the creative process. Many decisions need to be made in painting a picture. Being involved in the arts process involves the feeling and logical side of experience. The humanities, I say, is the rainbow bridge that connects the affective to the cognitive. They explain why it feels good to do good. This is the notion behind service learning. It gets students responding emotionally to those they are helping, shows them lives and issues outside their own small worlds.

Academic programs such as IB need implementation on a wider scale. Students are sick of high-stakes tests. They know something’s up. They are bored and realize the linear classroom is cheaper to run. A transdisciplinary approach with good and dedicated teachers makes learning challenging but exciting. It requires more teacher time. More willingness to develop lessons, units of study that engage, inspire and motivate curiosity, and that connect to other subjects. I cannot tell you how often I have read a schools mission that stated something to the effect of “creating life-long learners. It is all hogwash because it requires more than discreet subjects and multiple choice tests for students to discover themselves and others through creative, rigorous learning.

Before mass transportation and media, service learning, development of skills related to the arts, conversation, and direct relationships with others was more prevalent. Parents spent a lot more time with their children—served as their mentors for job skills, home-schooled. Before the age of mobility, families and extended families gathered together more because they lived closer. Farmers helped their neighbors. Life was slower. Conversation ruled. Imagine before even radio. Information was conveyed through the written and spoken word. Music before the Victrola was live or not at all. Socialization used to be much more hands-on and less the responsibility of the public school.

Finally, some popular media has suggested that those who can hold an engaging conversation, have a good amount of general knowledge in diverse subjects, and are truly life-long learners, worth using as a basis for commercials. The “most interesting man in the world” Dos XX’s take—pushes the notion that ideas and liberal knowledge have cachet. The early spots revealed a diverse life, perhaps more scientific and diplomatic: gathering eggs from birds nests and cavorting with queens. He has lately been seen with Buddhist monks—perhaps a degree in philosophy as well. Some crazy Zen tale makes them all laugh uproariously. Hard to read his Renaissance man credentials. For these vignettes of this “interesting” guy, I would like to see little more time with a sculpting tool; at his desk with a poem; conducting a symphony orchestra. When we lose interest in our Orson Wells characters (the last Renaissance Man for me)—we’ve fallen too far below Leonardo as a model, and civilization is in serious decline.

Willa Cather’s novel *My Antoinia*, describes a professor of the main character as a hero. In her paean to the Nebraska prairie, he is painted as able in vivid terms to describe “antique life.” His own fascination with subject matter transformed the information she received into captivating narrative and motivated her to learn more.

All experience, facts, ideas eventually become stories. We each carry these and the stuff of everyday life, trying to put it all into meaningful chapters for our own narrative. The power to describe it eloquently, honestly to ourselves—to convey it to others, is the gift of a liberal education.