An Interdisciplinary Humanities Program as an Approach to Literature

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An Interdisciplinary Humanities Program As An Approach to Literature

By Frederick F. Ritsch

My task is, as I understand it, descriptive. I am to describe, in about ten minutes, the direction we are taking at Converse toward revitalizing both the teaching of and interest in literature. Some of you might have noted William V. Shannon’s editorial page article in the July 2 New York Times. Shannon, appalled at the extent of curricular change being introduced into American colleges and universities, declared that the day of the “New Barbarian” had arrived, and suggested that, basically, nothing had ever been wrong with the old curricular structures in the first place. I feel certain some of you might be in agreement with Mr. Shannon, but three years ago we undertook a careful look at our situation and concluded change—perhaps I should say “growth”—was necessary, although I hardly think we have ended as “New Barbarians.” On the contrary, what we have implemented is extraordinarily conservative, and would be criticized as such by many of today’s more enthusiastic innovators.

Our explorations led us to several—well grounded (we feel)—observations. We concluded that the tendency to treat literature as an end in itself rather than as an integral part of the total liberal education process was a major fault brought about by over-specialization and departmentalization. In the effort of faculty and administration to define themselves as specialists and to erect governable units of the college, the student had somehow been overlooked. Next, we concluded
that no particular specialty possessed anywhere close to a monopoly on the truth of the human situation. We deplored the tendency, conscious or unconscious, to present the specialized major as if it did possess that truth. With regard to literature, we believed that literature possesses revealing and profound insights valuable not only in the liberal education of the student, but also to the teaching of disciplines other than literature. A sub-feature of this was our conviction that literature is often the means to bring life to the classrooms of disciplines that have become mechanical in presentation. We came to see the various disciplinary methodologies as traps for students, especially when these methodologies are presented as "scientifically" grounded, and thus become self-validating. This is a point which should, perhaps, be further developed, and is interestingly dealt with in such diverse writings as Commoner's *The Closing Circle*, Mill's *On Liberty*, and Kuhn's *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. Finally, we deplored the anti-historical and anti-humanistic contemporary modes of structuring and teaching subject matter. On the one hand, there is a habit of literary humanists to treat their subject matter as if it exists in a historical vacuum and thus possesses no relation to the present; i.e., scholarship replaces the liberalizing function of education. On the other hand, there is the "raging nowness" of especially the social sciences, which seems to cry out that only immediate relevancy counts. Plato, Cervantes, Fielding, Dostoyevsky, etc., are all "old hat," outdated; their ideas, insights, and so on are better presented in more up-date and objective manner from the research of contemporary social and natural scientists. Note especially B. F. Skinner's *Beyond Freedom and Dignity*, or, more specifically, his article "Humanism and Behaviorism" in the July/August *Humanist*. In general, our immediate concern was with the apparent danger, posed (primarily) I think by the social scientists, of making immediate relevancy the major criterion for liberal education. This view, we felt, had so permeated our academic society at large that it had convinced even the more vital humanistic innovators, and was at the root of their eagerness to establish a "new humanism" *a la* Reich or Roszak. We believed, however, that there already exists a powerful Western humanistic tradition which does address itself to the relevant issues, and which is quite capable of continued growth. The problem was how to get this across to the student.

The approach we have adopted consists of breaking down the disciplinary walls between literature and other disciplines by establishing courses with thematic structures. We were also sensitive to the problem of motivation. As Joseph Katz observed in a recent issue of *Liberal Education*, the issue of motivation becomes, in the contemporary classroom, a key feature to learning; thus one must take into consideration more than the presentation of information or the ap-
propriate cognitive sequence ("The Challenge to 'Body of Knowledge' Learning from Person-Centered Advocates"—May, 1972). In our particular case, we felt that most of our students had pretty well accepted the cliché that the purpose of a college liberal arts education is "preparation for today's society"—as the emphasis seems to be on "today's," this suggested relevancy appeared to us to require training for a contemporary conformity. Perhaps this is too harsh, but it was evident that it was becoming increasingly difficult to encourage student enrollments in courses with such traditional-sounding titles as Victorian Literature and Classical Literature, or into areas such as Philosophy and even History. Ten years ago it was the norm for our woman's college that English should have the largest number of majors; and ten years ago we had an active program in Classical Literature. In the last five years, English majors dropped far behind the social sciences, and, until two years ago, we were seriously considering eliminating Classics altogether.

We determined to approach the student on her own ground. We explored areas of student and general contemporary concern; we attempted to identify and understand those questions the students considered most alive for them. As it is our conviction that the humanist has both a right and an obligation to address himself to all areas of human activity, we ranged into science, technology, the social sciences, etc. We then examined the ways our total humanities offering was addressing itself to these issues—and we found, of course, that in many ways our courses were directly on target if the students were bright enough to realize that, say, the study of Greek tragedy is a means of preparation for the exploration of contemporary problems of alienation. In other words, the humanities faculty could easily draw the so-called relevancy-relationships, but, this being secondary to the academic purposes of the courses, it was being left to the students to discover these relationships for themselves. Secondly, we saw that the departmentalized curriculum resulted in fragmented representations of the humanistic tradition. Since students do not take every course offered, it was ridiculous to demand that they recognize that our humanities curriculum, taken as a whole, provided a relevant humanistic platform for exploring the contemporary world. We discovered other interesting features that evolve from departmentalization and over-emphasis on a single method approach. For example, we were woefully weak in comparative literature, the English department being centered on English and American literature, while the Modern Languages, utilizing the conversation method for teaching a foreign language, provided very limited opportunities for students in the literature of the studied language.

The up-shot of all this was the development and implementation of an inter-disciplinary humanities program which emphasized theme-
oriented courses built around and starting from contemporary issues. These courses carry such odd titles as Perspectives on Violence, Alienation and Contemporary Fiction, Myth in Literature, Technology and Human Dignity, Studies in Utopian Literature, etc. These courses require the student undertake in-depth investigations of the themes under consideration utilizing a wide range of literature, both fiction and non-fiction. The course in Myth, for example, demands an investigation of the meaning and operation of myth in Western culture, proceeds to a study of Yeats and Joyce, and concludes with readings and discussions of other writings wherein the student applies methods of determining and analyzing myth. An effort is made by each instructor to focus the student's attention on the relationship of contemporary themes or issues to similar concerns within the Western tradition. A more direct approach to this is seen in the course Modern Tragedy—Ancient Tragedy, which has become one of our most popular offerings. The student taking just one course for elective credit finds the course is successful in providing insight and information, as well as an interdisciplinary model. For the major or minor the dividends are greater. Courses are inter-linked; instructors are familiar with the materials and questions under consideration in other courses of the program, and thus both students and instructors enjoy a great amount of carry-over of discussion and materials from one course to another.

The greater difficulty we have experienced has been with ourselves, the faculty. Trained in the usual Ph. D. manner, we find it much harder than the students, who are naturally interdisciplinary, to free ourselves from telescopic, sometimes microscopic, views. Thanks to grants from NEH, the college, and private foundations, and especially thanks to the willingness on the part of faculty to make time available, we have spent three years working together, attending one another's classes, studying, and attending conferences and institutes. In addition, in our search for new faculty, we now look for persons whose interests, breadth of knowledge, and concern for teaching is congenial with our interdisciplinary efforts.

The most obvious immediate result of our program is seen in increased student motivation and production. Student writing and discussion have shown considerable improvement; the old term paper has become an exciting essay or effort at original writing; we have noted less student reliance on secondary sources and more willingness to rely on individual insights. Students have also shown increased breadths of interests and, happily, have discovered more diverse vocational opportunities. In addition, students who enter the program have manifested a renewed appreciation for the value of the standard course offerings, especially in Classical Literature, History and English. They also, by the way, seem to lose much of their fear of taking courses "outside the major," so that we have Humanities juniors and seniors
in courses in Chemistry, Physics, Biology, Psychology, etc. Last year, in response to a student request that we provide some formal study in the literature of Western Humanities, we introduced a team-taught course entitled simply Introduction to Humanistic Literature; the course met for one large-section lecture a week, then broke down into small discussion groups. The syllabus was a bit large, calling for reading the *Iliad, Oedipus Rex, the Aeneid, The Prince, Lear,* and long readings from Plato, Augustine, Aquinas, Pico, and Calvin. Nearly 70 students, an extraordinary size for us, signed for the course, and the student evaluations were excellent.

As you can see from this brief presentation, our effort has been one of presenting literature as an integral part of the total curriculum. We have been impressed by the student response and we feel revitalized as teachers. Still, there were many who in the beginning opposed our program, arguing that students could not possibly learn anything from an interdisciplinary approach of our sort except a hodgepodge of subjective, perhaps even subversive, matter. In the interest of the great authority accountability, we agreed that our students would take the Princeton URE Humanities test. Our majors scored an average of eighteen percent above the national norm for Humanities Literature majors; in fact, the over-all average in relation to the national norm was higher for our majors than for any other area of our college.

Let me conclude with a statement from Maxwell Goldberg, the author of *Design in Liberal Learning:* "Without becoming amorphous or aimless," writes Professor Goldberg, "we are trying to replace the static, mechanical, closed-system, monistic, and self-contained routine thinking of conventional liberal learning with the open-structured, pluralistic, multilinear, multilectic thinking of the new liberal learning." He provides us with an excellent metaphor here: the concept of "freedom flowing into form."* And I might add, in our case we do not seek a "new humanism," but rather seek to revitalize the presentation of that humanism which is an integral part of our tradition.


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