General Education as an Alternative to Liberal Education

Raymond Kolcaba
Cuyahoga Community College

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/perspectives
Part of the Higher Education Commons, and the Liberal Studies Commons

Recommended Citation
Kolcaba, Raymond (1975) "General Education as an Alternative to Liberal Education," Perspectives: Vol. 7 : No. 2 , Article 3.
Available at: https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/perspectives/vol7/iss2/3

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Western Michigan University at ScholarWorks at WMU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Perspectives by an authorized editor of ScholarWorks at WMU. For more information, please contact maira.bundza@wmich.edu.
At the Eastern Campus of Cuyahoga Community College, the campus community as a whole has taken seriously the district-wide commitment to general education. Rather than spell out the nature of general education, the campus president left the concept open-ended and invited faculty to discover its meaning through their own experiments and innovative efforts.

Issues shrouding the role of schools are at times distilled into two views. Either schools train students in conformity with ordinary life patterns of society or they promote the personal growth of students without an eye to those patterns. The former has been criticized as unwarrantedly narrowing, perhaps, turning out persons as wheel cogs or interchangeable parts for the societal machine. The latter has been criticized as promoting the development of persons incompetent in ordinary survival skills, such that, an excruciating life of reality therapy is required to undo the damage. Of course the "either-or" delineation of issues on a complex subject is suspect. The optimum would be to view each position in fresh perspective by addressing them quite late in development of a new approach. The present thesis is the beginning of such an approach.

The orientation and commitment of the present work is to view schools as nurturing individuals. Full personhood is assumed as deriving from growth activities where the individual is respected as an autonomous person. Such persons are aided in unfolding where institutional dependencies are minimized. A person's optimum basis for living and survival is rooted in an articulated value system discovered by the individual and central to structuring school and all other activities. The meld of individual
values and current social realities are grounded in activities joining the two
where role and position are comprehended between them. Action in ac­
cordance with a value system is a commitment, an identity commitment , to
it, and given that the system is freely chosen, places responsibility upon the
individual for those values and the life they promise in contemporary
society. Such a picture of the individual lurks behind the scenes of what
follows.

The climate at Eastern encouraged interactions of experience that
crossed the barriers of traditional curriculum development. As a result, the
present paper is in part an extension of dialog with a cross section of the
campus community which took the present writer beyond the ordinary
limitations of his native discipline. In all, major contributions originated in
on-going brain storming sessions with a colleague, in in-service and
workshop themes developed by a dean, in intensive multiple hour
discussions with the campus president, and in continuing perspicacious
dialog with a student.

The major source of experimentation, the results of which gave rise to
the better portion of what follows, was the attempt to develop an in­
terdisciplinary humanities program by implementing on a trial basis as
many new teaching strategies, curriculum sub-components, and alternative
pictures of the human dimension of the teaching-learning situation as could
be dreamed of.

After seeing these processes through their first two years, it became clear
that the evolving concept of general education was so unique an
educational point of view that it stood in many ways antithetical to common
interpretations of liberal education. In order to reveal these differences I
thought it a good exercise to compare the two in order to reveal advantages
of this special concept.

In this century, liberal education has seen many changes which put it in
an advanced evolutionary stage as an applied educational philosophy. In
place of offering a caricature of this advanced stage, I utilize the traditional
view of liberal education politically, as a foil off which to bounce general
education concepts. This view is a description of the ordinary state of
educational affairs employing the lecture method in the standard classroom
with the traditional disciplines for the normal four year experience. Thus.
although it is true that this characterization is unfair when squared against
progressive views of liberal education, my purpose in using it is the purely
pedagogical one of revealing in direct fashion the advantages of general
education. If revised liberal education eventually becomes in the main what
I call general education, all well and good.

In the following, the special formulation of general education and the
traditional concept of liberal education are compared in a point by point
manner (items of the same number address the same issue). Implications of
the traditional view of liberal education can be grasped by reading down
the first column and elements of general education by reading down the
second. The points in each passage are brief and do not pretend to be
demonstrated through argument. In brevity the checklist format is preserved. The points in each comparison are intended as controversial. For this reason, the lists may serve as a handy in-service tool.

THE TRADITIONAL VIEW OF LIBERAL EDUCATION

1. Primarily, the teacher's educational purposes are expected to be adopted by students as their purposes.

2. Teacher experiences are more important than student experiences. In-class activities are, for the most part, teacher activities.

3. The teacher tries to tie students into a spectator role in relation to his or her process, i.e. a captive audience.

4. Curriculum is compartmentalized into disciplines where a "big" picture emerges through four years of endeavor.

5. Grading measures are used as the primary means of evaluating students. These are administered external to the student.

6. Mastery of course subject matter is the primary student goal. Basic learning consists in information retention.

7. Information is learned because it is part of a discipline.

A SPECIAL FORMULATION OF GENERAL EDUCATION

1. Primarily, student educational purposes are expected to be adopted by teachers.

2. Student experiences are more important than teacher experiences. In-class activities are, for the most part, student activities.

3. The teacher facilitates student process. In doing so, the teacher is aware of his or her process and students' processes where the goal is to facilitate student process.

4. Curriculum is designed in relation to student needs with an eye to what can be used in later living. The curriculum is highly flexible in design.

5. Self evaluation is used in response to work accomplished. This is administered by the student.

6. Mastery of skills for projected creative use in future activities is the primary student goal. Basic learning employs student creativity as its source.

7. Information is learned because the student identifies that it is essential to the performance of later life activities.
8. Knowledge about persons is learned in the 'third' person.

9. Courses are teacher centered.

10. Studies are limited to the classroom setting. A student's experiences are limited to the academic community and his native community.

11. Student growth is measured on a comparative scale with other members of a class (i.e. grades, points, and objectives).

12. Student in-school tasks are the stock academic ones.

13. There is no student choice in classroom work.

14. The teacher does not participate in assignments but rather watches, supervises, or moves on to more important work.

15. The teacher-student relation is that of parent/child, boss/employee, or professional/client.

16. Class interaction is discouraged except in relation to the teacher.

17. Students fall back on their strengths in order to survive grade wise. Consequently, they avoid their weaknesses.

8. Self knowledge is cultivated as the spring board for understanding other persons.

9. Courses are student centered.

10. Studies are spun off into various communities via investigative field trips. Students have experiences in a variety of communities.

11. Student growth is measured by a student comparing his early work with his later work.

12. Student in-school tasks are open-ended. They cover the full range of what it is to be a human being.

13. Students have many options for classroom work and can create others.

14. The teacher participates in all assignments and shares experiences with students.

15. The teacher-student relation is that of friends or acquaintances.

16. Class interaction is encouraged among all members of the class.

17. Students are not penalized through a grading system, but are rewarded for attempting what they can't already do well. The development of self knowledge and self capability are encouraged and rewarded.
18. Knowledge is acquired for some unidentifiable point in later life.

19. Courses are pre-packaged commodities which students "take."

20. New concepts are developed only on a verbal level.

21. Verbal modes of communication are used almost exclusively (i.e. reading, writing, speaking).

22. Students learn about select achievements of the greatest talents in human history.

23. Learning is classroom based.

24. Assignments are textbook based.

25. Students are responsible for learning course "content."

18. Knowledge is acquired for foreseeable life activities, examples of which are performed (insofar as possible) in the classroom.

19. Courses are designed while the course is in progress as student needs and interests surface. Students help design the course.

20. New concepts are developed in terms of student experiences (when possible in the classroom). The richer the experience the better.

21. Communication is treated from a whole-person point of view; in many courses, no preference is given to one mode over another (i.e. dance, writing, photography, etc.).

22. Students learn about achievements native to their interests, exposures, and needs. Emphasis is placed upon the culture which a student represents and the culture in which he intends to live.

23. Learning is community or region based with the college as just one community institution.

24. Assignments are experientially and activity based.

25. Students are responsible for learning "how" to learn while learning course content (i.e. course content is a vehicle for mastering skills basic to learning anything whatsoever).
26. Courses are oriented to past achievements.

27. Values are talked about.

28. Perceptual skills have place only in the fine arts.

29. Social skills are neglected by the curriculum as well as in classroom activities.

30. Classroom norms are based on implied threats.


32. The in-class environment is set by the institution.

33. Class time sequences are set by the institution (e.g. 50-minute classes). Time is organized for the student by the teacher.

34. In the classroom, students learn about political, cultural, and social institutions in their communities.

35. Students learn about disciplines; teachers talk about their disciplines.

36. Students learn to be teacher guided and teacher dependent.

37. Learning is for enriching and rounding out the individual.
38. Students are reinforced in viewing their work external to themselves as "school work," course work, assignments, and or requirements.

39. Success or failure polarities are the norm.

40. Work is indirectly compared to the work of great genius' in the past.

41. After a four-year experience, persons are considered to be educated.

42. A single mode of instruction dominates class time.

43. Little effort is made to demonstrate application of knowledge to contemporary life.

44. The sole class resource is the teacher.

45. Student competition is emphasized.

46. Only classrooms, labs, the library and gymnasium are designed for learning activities. Accordingly, classes must be centralized.

38. Students are reinforced in viewing their work as theirs (they are encouraged to take ownership over it).

39. There is no total success or failure, just a series of pieces of work, each with many merits and many ways each can be improved.

40. Work is compared to a student's earlier work. Within his work the student develops his own ideals.

41. Education is a life long, continuing process.

42. As many alternative modes of instruction are provided as is possible.

43. Application of knowledge to contemporary life is an integral part of any course.

44. The teacher, students, and persons from the community are utilized as resources.

45. Student collaboration and cooperation are emphasized.

46. All public spaces are designed for learning activities. Accordingly, classes can be decentralized.
47. Students are in a single role— as students.

48. Student learning is governed by the pace of the class as a group. Class norms establish some students as “slow” others as “advanced.”

49. Feedback to the student about his or her accomplishments and progress is exclusively on the occasion that exams or papers are returned.

50. Courses are arranged according to disciplines where the student takes courses which increase in specialization year by year.

The general education claims are part of an educational philosophy. Certainly it is unreasonable to expect that most of them be included as goals in designing a single course or program of courses. Rather, single courses or programs of courses can be planned to address a healthy subset of the list. The multiple programs at any institution can, as a group, cover most of them. The Humanities Program at Eastern employs eighteen items as bases to course design with minor emphases on ten others.*

* I would like to extend credit and deep appreciation to Campus President Robert E. Shepack, Dean David C. Mitchell, colleague/master teacher Edward Miggins, and devoted student Pamela Brown Drumheller for major contributions to the present work.