General Education: A Learner's Viewpoint

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A Learner's Viewpoint

By Eugene Wine

Most of the articles we read about general education are written by those who either teach or administer some kind of general education program. I think it might be valuable to know the viewpoint of someone who has been trying to educate himself generally throughout a lifetime.

The interdisciplinary courses which many schools now have seem to me to be a great improvement over the general education program which prevailed in my undergraduate days, which was the still quite prevalent one of a certain number of credit hours in the various academic divisions. My feeling is, however, that one more last step needs to be taken in general education, and that step is from the several interdisciplinary courses to one transdisciplinary course that will integrate all knowledge which is thought of as general education.

Interdisciplinary divisional courses have already apprehended that the universe to which general education is trying to orient the student is not divided into academic departments. It seems to me only an extension of this logic to realize that for the general education student the universe is also not divided into academic divisions.

If people are to get the most accurate picture of the universe they can get, I believe they must be helped to see it as whole as possible. I therefore feel that what would be of most value to the general education learner would be the most general General Education course that could be devised. Since its objective would be to orient students to the perceived universe, I think a good title for it would be Orientation to the Universe.

Orientation to the Universe should begin with a brief study of the human equipment for perceiving the universe. It should then go to the outer limits of the perceived universe, whence it should gradually come in to focus on the earth and the concerns of its inhabitants. Since it would not be necessary to keep within the confines of any arbitrary divisions of knowledge, the various aspects of knowledge could be taken up as they become appropriate to a holistic survey. For example, when in the very
beginning the creation of the universe is considered, the scientific outlook, the religious outlook, and the psychological relationships of both could be studied together.

Especially in regard to the study of human beings would a totally integrated course be valuable. It appears that nothing in the universe can be accurately perceived except in its relationship to something else, and of all the things we know about in the universe this must surely be most true of the human species. We cannot get a sensible or valid picture of humans by trying to understand them separately as biological creatures, as social creatures, or as artistic creatures. Yet this is exactly the kind of warped picture of humans students get when they are exposed to interdisciplinary natural science, interdisciplinary social science, or interdisciplinary humanities courses. The kind of picture they get from departmental courses is certainly exponentially more fragmented. The fact is that humans are biosocioart creatures, and no aspect of them can make sense, or even exist, without the others. This can only be shown, however, in a course which is determined to make as much sense as possible of the often conflicting and incomplete findings of specialists.

Such a totally integrated course as I am proposing could also be used for another thing I think would be valuable for all students, and that is an introduction to various vocations. Some students think they know what they want to work at, but an increasing number do not know. I believe it would be good for students to know something about other possible careers before they have committed many hours to studying for a certain career. As Orientation to the Universe examines the various areas of knowledge it could show what people do in the major scientific and technical specialties.

While the main objective of Orientation to the Universe should be to give students the “big picture” of their world in an engaging manner as free as possible of specialist jargon, it could also help students see how their life’s work can fit in to the “big picture.” Since the thrust of the course would be to help students “get their heads together” about themselves and the rest of the world, certainly the counseling and advisement staffs would need to be continuously involved, also. At the end of the course, after having been exposed to many kinds of knowledge and to many careers, students could make an informed judgment upon the choice of a career, and they could investigate in depth the career they would by that time have decided upon.

Obviously Orientation to the Universe would include all present divisional general education requirements. But what of that other constant companion of general education, Freshman English?

I can see at least one big advantage to integrating Freshman English into Orientation to the Universe. Although a conscious effort may be made to avoid it, Freshman English students usually end up working a great deal with English literature. This is fine for that minority which is especially interested in English literature, but I think it would be more satisfying to most students to deal in their language learning with a variety of subjects, a few of which are almost certain to interest them and to be directly valuable
to them in the future. Integrating Freshman English into Orientation to the Universe would replace the separate set of exercises in present Freshman English with a set which would have double value as both language training and learning of other disciplines. Such integration would, therefore, I believe, result in more satisfying, effective and efficient learning than at present.

I do not know the methods by which such a course as I have proposed can be taught, but I do feel intensely that the course could be the most valuable kind of general education. This feeling comes as a result of a number of years of trying to get the universe into my head through the use of all the educational media. Regularly the presentations which have helped me most to understand the world I live in have been those which knew no restrictions of discipline in trying to show a whole picture. And the emotions these presentations have brought are those of wonder and excitement instead of confusion, constraint and frustration.

I am aware of the great difficulties in the way of a course such as I have proposed. However, because a thing is difficult is no reason for vigorous people to turn away from it if it is thought to be valuable.

Frankly, I believe that the ideal general education instruction would involve all the educational media in the correct “Mix.” Audiovisual techniques, discussion, reading and lecture need to be put together with just the right pace and timing to keep interest high. If it is to continue to be viable the academic world must not lag behind other educational media in developing broad concepts of general education. I have already seen remarkable BBC educational television programs which have in embryonic form the idea of Orientation to the Universe.

Whatever teaching techniques might be decided upon, however, the information must start in an integrated form and must be kept integrated. There are constant fantastic pressures in the educational world to fractionate knowledge instead of to integrate it, because at present virtually our entire educational system is geared to severe specialization. It cannot be stressed too much that what I have in mind is not a series of first several weeks of elementary courses of departmental subjects.

If Orientation to the Universe seems, as its title would certainly imply, too "philosophic,” it is important to remember that all people have some philosophy of life upon which they operate. All people need guidelines to orient themselves to the world. If knowledge is worth anything, then it will be better for learners to get the most accurate picture of the world they can.

Our age of educational specialization too often presents learners with overly detailed, unbalanced and skewed pieces of information and gives them little help in trying to fit these often conflicting pieces together into a meaningful whole. The first year or two of college is the last free block of time most people will have to learn something outside of their own careers. For this reason and others I recommend that Orientation to the Universe be given in the first three semesters of college.

Many of the world’s problems, and especially the problems of young
adults, have to do with alienation and disorientation. I believe that a course such as I have proposed could to a maximum extent help people to deal with these problems.