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Bobby G. Bell

Wingate College

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The Social Sciences
In General Education

Bobby G. Bell

Proponents of general education maintain that every person is worthy of an education that is most general. Translated into a formal curriculum general education refers to that part of a student's education lying outside his area of specialization. Cultural and social literacy remain the dominant goals. Even though controversy surrounds the definition of general education and the philosophical approaches to its realization, the objective seems to be clear, that education "for an informed responsible life in our society" and "that part of a student's education which looks first of all to his life as a responsible human being and citizen."¹

To achieve general education objectives in the social sciences courses have generally included the problems approach, the systematic approach, and the historical approach in some interdisciplinary relationship. Philip Phenix expects the social sciences to assume a more dynamic role in general education.

He says that "the social sciences may be expected to play an increasingly important role in liberal learning, as it becomes ever more evident that the conditions of human existence are not simply imposed by fate, nor the results of the interplay of blind, impersonal forces, but the consequences of deliberate human action. The human community need not suffer in resigned impotence from the pains of social disorder and inequity. Human beings are free and responsible agents; they play the major role in creating the social world in which they live. The study of the social sciences within the context of liberal learning is one of the major sources of insight for such responsible world-making."²

The dominant challenge for the social sciences in general education is the construction of integrated courses from a broad interdisciplinary base. This challenge is difficult to achieve because of the increased specialization of the various social science disciplines. Historically, the development of the various sciences has led to a sharpening of the differences among them.
Since the social sciences are characterized by relationships rather than by common syntax, Michael Scriven suggests three different concepts of these relationships:

1. Interdisciplinary which views the several social sciences as specializations of a common subject matter.
2. Multidisciplinary which views the social sciences as independent sciences concerned with human behavior and related only by the common source of that behavior.
3. Reductionist which views the social sciences as in the initial stages of developing a vast human macrophysics since human beings are, after all, but collections of atoms.

Only the third view promises a complete unity of the social sciences. Scriven labels this view as “far out” and the interdisciplinary approach as unproductive since no common subject matter has yet been defined. He thinks the multidisciplinary approach is the most promising, but that it poses problems for educational objectives for the social sciences in the curriculum.

The multidisciplinary view of the social sciences retains the distinctive role of the several social sciences. Their distinctive roles would allocate around the following dimensions:

(a) The goal-seeking personality situation with its somatic, as well as private and interpersonal motivations, which comprise psychological data; (b) the social-institutional situation, which identifies sociological data; (c) the cultural situation, which identifies anthropological data; (d) the diachronic process, which identifies historical data; (e) the administrative situation, which identifies political data; and (f) the allocative situation, which identifies economic data.

The possibilities of interdisciplinary cooperation among the social sciences for curriculum purposes derive from several directions such as the development of interdisciplinary research, the restructuring of traditional disciplines into combinations of “hybrids,” and the focusing on common themes through some policy orientation where social science materials are gathered from several disciplines.

Henry Winthrop believes that certain emerging fields of research which rely on interdisciplinary postures exhibit great potential. He identifies these fields as operations research, linear programming, game theory, decision theory, information theory and advanced forms of symbolic logic. Winthrop is convinced that “the interdisciplinary curriculum will be a major portion of the educational wave of the future.”

The main difficulty for more integration centers around the various conceptual stances of the several social sciences. These concepts are derived either from empirical data organized by the researcher or from a more scholastic position to which the data is related. To be useful, concepts must be clearly defined in the context which produced their meaning. This is the major difficulty since different contexts produce different meanings.

Theoretically, disciplinary integration has been proposed from a synoptic position, a single-cause deterministic position, rules of inquiry position, interrelated dynamic parts, and integration into one of the established disciplines.
Talcott Parsons understands the relations among the social sciences from a synoptic viewpoint grounded in his social theory. Parsons recognizes an element of voluntarism in social interaction which produces the possibility of new and constantly enlarging social systems. Society is, according to Parsons, a structural-functional system that is dynamic by nature. From an empirical perspective society is a network of differentiated sub-systems in very complex relation to each other. These sub-systems are the adaptive sphere, the goal gratification sphere, the value maintenance sphere, and the integrative sphere. These spheres operate in a given cultural context, thus cultural anthropology would study the overarching cultural phenomena. The adaptive sphere Parsons defines as the economy to which the discipline of economics would correspond. The goal gratification sphere is the political to which political science would be related. The integrative functions, value maintenance institutions, and changes which each sphere causes in the other, would be the area of study for sociology. Since the individual is not considered atomistically but as a psyche in a social context, then, social psychology would deal with psychic behavior. History as a discipline would be concerned with the processes of change and a sensitivity to emerging patterns within the social system.

Another theoretical position focuses on single-cause deterministic models. If a single factor is assumed to be the most dominant in society, then, the social sciences would relate to that factor and find their relationship around the necessity to elaborate a single-cause explanation. For example, Marxism, which interprets individual consciousness as a reflection of social consciousness which in turn is determined by the economic mode and means of production, would relate the social sciences around the necessity to explain this causative factor. The same would be true of Freud's theory concerning neurosis. The repression of sexual energy frustrated by social mores, resulting in collective action to release suppressed energy, results in a psychic determinism causing social action and behavior of individuals and collectivities. Deterministic explanations do provide a common ground for integrative endeavors. Their acceptance is another question.

Patrick Gardiner suggests that the disciplines interrelate at the level of their sensitivity to logic, evidence, and the scientific attitude. It is doubtful that the subjective element can be eliminated. But increased sensitivity to the continuity of fact and theory with the attendant role of intuition makes for clarity and a greater possibility for communication among disciplines if not for more integration.

Those who would emphasize behavior as the proper study of the social sciences — indeed, who wish to change the name of the social sciences to behavioral sciences — through the methods of empirical research see the social sciences as a dynamic unity of operating parts, with each part being indispensable to all other parts. This orientation is strong in sociology, psychology, political sociology, economic sociology, and social anthropology.

Some visualize more possibilities of social science integration and cooperation in the curriculum through one of the traditional disciplines — namely history. H. Stuart Hughes says that history can play the role of a synthesizing discipline even to the extent of incorporating the historical span of the humanities. History, according to Hughes, has been adding
economic, cultural, and psychological aspects of the past to the traditional politico-military emphasis. This trend, he thinks, provides history the opportunity not only to cooperate with the social sciences but to help the social sciences understand themselves through an historical perspective. Hughes would have history be the mediating discipline in the curriculum.\textsuperscript{10}

It is to be expected that partisans of the various disciplines would tend to think their discipline holds the promise for some scheme of integrating the various disciplines. An exception is the economist, Kenneth Boulding, who suggests that geography "has a strong claim to being the principal integrator of all sciences, insofar as it studies the earth as a total system. ... Unfortunately it suffers as a discipline from some lack of organized contact with the social sciences and also from a quite unwarranted feeling of inferiority. It can provide an important link between the social sciences and the biological and physical sciences, and one can visualize a curriculum in which all the sciences are organized in an essentially geographical setting."\textsuperscript{11}

The relating of the social sciences to questions concerning policy decisions is dependent upon interdisciplinary research and the focusing of the disciplines on those social problems perceived as demanding attention. From this perspective the "focus" becomes the integrator. Cross-conceptual hybridization may result but not necessarily.

The issues involved in generating social science interdisciplinary explanations are both substantive and philosophical. There are at least five different philosophical orientations utilized in the social sciences. They are the (1) logico-deductive, (2) dialectical, (3) causal, (4) statistical, and (5) structural-functional. Elaborate methodologies are connected with each of these orientations. They all have staunch adherents and disciples. The use of one model or a combination of models in the various disciplines generates controversy and analytical separation of social phenomena into separate fields where each field formulates its own questions and develops its own concepts.

Faced with the limited possibilities of interdisciplinary endeavors for educational purposes and the substantial philosophical differences which generate a multiplicity of concepts, the educational burden of the social scientist centers around the avoidance of exclusive attention being focused on certain aspects of the social world. To avoid exclusiveness each discipline in the educational process must help students to understand the limitations as well as the uses of a single discipline and the possible interconnections with the other social sciences.

Scholars from the various disciplines provide justifications for including their particular discipline in social science general education programs. They indicate the possibilities of realizing general education goals. Historians usually make very comprehensive claims. Hans Kohn writes that "history is the foundation and synthesis of all liberal arts and should be taught as a synthesis of the development of the human mind and human society throughout the ages so that the students become conscious of their share in man's heritage."\textsuperscript{12}

In the field of geography the Association of American Geographers commissioned a project to define the place and purpose of geography in general education and to seek ways to stimulate actions to improve the content of college undergraduate courses in geography. A modern geography course provides the student in general education with basic facts,
necessary skills, and an appropriate conceptual frame of reference, includ-
ing the understanding that most phenomena in any area are spatially asso-
ciated and interdependent; that areas are interrelated; that man is both a
creature and creator of his environment; and that environmental change is
a natural function of all world features and relationships. Such a course
will supply the chorological approach to the systematic and chronological
approaches in the curriculum. The chorological approach focuses "upon
the distributions and associations of terrestrial phenomena in the world as
a whole and in particular places, and upon the interrelationship and inter-
action of these particular places." 13

According to the project report geography provides several values to
general education. Among them are the following:

1. It exhibits the causal interrelations of physical, biotic and human
phenomena, and shows how these can serve as clues to the origin
and function of socio-economic and political processes.
2. It stimulates the observation of pattern, especially regularity in the
occurrence of landscape phenomena.
3. It provides the key to understanding the importance of place in
human affairs, in historical as well as in contemporary perspective,
so that the student sees the present world in context.
4. It cultivates a sense of value relative to man's stewardship of the
earth.
5. It fosters the appreciation of differences and similarities from place
to place; the geographer views the world as both richer and more
significantly complex because it is diverse.
6. It involves the student directly in the study of the real world
(through map and photo interpretation and field work) and encour-
ages him continually to test abstraction against experience. 14

Geography is historically understood as a "bridge" subject among the
natural sciences, social sciences, and the humanities. Assuming this role in
the curriculum geography makes one of its most valuable contributions to
general education. 15

A study group composed of several leading psychologists explored the
general education possibilities of psychology. They agreed that the major
objectives of psychology in the collegiate curriculum revolve around the
persistent problems of psychology such as the nature of man, the basis of
knowledge, the forces that direct and regulate conduct, the uniquely
human reactions that are called religious and aesthetic, and man's relations
with other men in society. 16

In 1962 the American Sociological Society organized a panel to con-
sider the role of sociology in general education at the collegiate level.
Charles Page presented the possibilities for sociology in general education
in the following statement:

Several significant advantages are provided by sociology to its
teachers in their general educational role. They are introducing students
to an increasingly salient mode of inquiry and body of substantive
knowledge in our 'sociological age.' Supported by the longstanding
methodological canon of cultural relativity and by the growing empha-
sis upon comparative studies, they are helping to demote group-rooted
and ethnocentric restraints and to promote informed and less-biased
views more appropriate for citizens of a highly mobile society and a
rapidly changing world. 17

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Seven contributions of sociology were suggested by Robert Bierstedt.

1. The study of sociology liberates the student from the provincialisms of time, place, and circumstances and frees him from the constrictions of his natal culture.

2. It introduces the student to the role of logic and of scientific method in the acquisition of knowledge.

3. It contributes to the student’s sense of order and to his methodological sophistication.

4. Sociology is a discipline that spans two cultures, the scientific and the humanistic, using as it does the method of science to explore the concerns and affairs of humanity.

5. Sociology initiates and keeps at the front of student awareness the ancient problem of the relationship between society and the individual.

6. When history becomes positivistic it is indistinguishable from sociology thus it is the responsibility of sociology ultimately to find the answer to this age-long quest.

7. The literary quality of sociology has its style and is not inferior to that of other learned disciplines.  

Margaret Mead summarizes the comprehensive potential of anthropology in the following manner:

Anthropology is a uniquely situated discipline, related in diverse ways to many disciplines, each of which, in specializing, has also inadvertently helped to fragment the mind of modern man. Anthropology is a humanity, ... concerned with the arts of language and with the versions that human cultures have given of the definition of man and of man’s relationship to the universe; anthropology is a science, concerned with discovering and ordering the behavior of man-in-culture; anthropology is a biological science, concerned with the physical nature of man, with man’s place in evolution, with the way genetic and racial differences, ecological adaptations, growth and maturation, and constitutional differences are implicated in man’s culture and achievements; anthropology is a historical discipline, concerned with reading the record of man’s past and establishing the links which unite the potsherd and the first inscription on stone, in tying together the threads between the preliterate and the literate world wherever the sequence occurs; anthropology is a social science, although never only a social science, because in anthropology man, as part of the natural world, as a biological creature, is not separated from man as a consumer or producer, member of a group, or possessor of certain psychological faculties.

Thus the anthropologist views his discipline as sufficiently broad enough to achieve general education objectives.

Bernard Haley suggests that economics should free the minds of students from their narrowly circumscribed economic environments. To accomplish this goal through the study of economics, according to Haley, the following should be realized by the student.

... (1) He can be given a comprehension of what an economic system is, and how its interdependent elements operate to allocate resources to different uses, to maintain or not to maintain full employment of resources, and to promote or not to promote growth in income and
welfare overtime. (2) He can acquire a way of thinking about economic issues — the habit of looking at them analytically, of treating them objectively, and of separating out the value judgments involved from the analysis of how the system works.20

Ben Lewis argues for economics in general education because of the present realities concerning citizenship in the United States. Lewis maintains that "the simple business of living in the United States in our age calls increasingly upon men to participate actively with other men in the gigantic undertaking of collective governmental decision-making on a vast array of complex economic problems and issues. It is demanded of these men that they have economic understanding."21

William Robson contends that political science achieves general education goals when it enables students "to participate effectively in political discussion, to grasp the important questions of policy, to withstand the flattery of the demagogue, to resist the lies of the dictator or the promises of the imposter, to distinguish between propaganda and truth, to bring informed criticism to bear on public authorities, or to appreciate the criteria by which government action can be appraised."22

The following elaboration is provided by Robson:

If political science is to substantiate its claim to be an important part of a liberal education, those who teach it must rise to the full height of their opportunities. They must deal with political ends as well as means; with the governance of man in the past, the present and the future; with the great contemporary political issues at home and abroad, and in the international sphere. They must show the relation between political ideas, political institutions, and political programmes. They must combine a knowledge of legal or constitutional structure with a realistic understanding of how public authorities work in practice. They must try to present a picture of homo politicus which is neither abstract nor absurd nor remote from reality. They must show an ability to synthesize the disparate elements in the subject so that their essential unity is revealed. Above all, they must endeavor to throw some light on the great problems of our time; such as the problem of avoiding war, of increasing international peace and security, of extending freedom, of assisting the development of backward countries, of preventing the exploitation of native races, of using government as a means of raising living standards and promoting prosperity, of banishing ignorance, squalor, destitution and disease through the social services, of increasing the welfare, happiness and dignity of mankind.23

If political scientists incorporate these ambitious goals in their teaching responsibilities they will be achieving an educational orientation that is "concerned with the development of the intellect, the comprehension of general principles, the inculcation of methods of thought, the proper approach to problems, and a systematic view of the subject."24 By realizing these goals political science contributes to general education.

Beginning with the 1960's emphasis has been placed on the structures of disciplines as the proper mode for curriculum construction and instructional strategy. In this approach a "subject" is fundamentally a mode of inquiry about something. Through this approach educational objectives are matched with the structure of knowledge from which a discipline receives
its instructive character. This approach is a departure from selecting certain closed systems of knowledge to be taught as truths. Anthropologist Joseph Casagrande argues the validity of the inquiry approach when he says that:

... It is important to learn not facts or the content of a discipline so much as its distinctive modes of thinking and inquiry, the theoretical frameworks employed, and from a more philosophical perspective, the particular image of man that emerges from a discipline's working assumptions and its 'way of knowing.' At least as important then as learning the results of work in other fields is learning the kinds of questions that are posed, the concepts and methods employed, and the ways in which evidence is obtained, analyzed, and marshalled to answer these questions.25

Historian G.R. Elton succinctly states this approach when he writes that the teacher should "employ the techniques of his own craft in the elucidation of the subject matter of his teaching."26

The inquiry approach through the structure of knowledge found in the several social science disciplines does not necessarily solve the problem of relating content and educational experiences with desirable goals, if learning is to be relevant to those questions which are most immediate to the minds of students.

It is becoming increasingly obvious that our contemporary history provides the challenge for the social sciences in the curriculum as they relate and find relevance to the questions that are most urgent to students. Kenneth Boulding defines our contemporary situation as "the great transition:" the movement from a civilized to a post-civilized society.27 What he means is that we have been in the process for some time of moving from a work-oriented, legalistic, stable society to a mass-media, cybernetic, change-oriented society. Geoffrey Barraclough argues that "the twentieth cannot be regarded simply as a continuation of the nineteenth century, that 'recent' or 'contemporary' history is not merely the latter end of what we call 'modern history,' the most recent phase of a period which, according to conventional divisions, began in Western Europe with the Renaissance and the Reformation."28 In short, contemporary history should be considered as a distinct period of time, with characteristics of its own which mark it off from the preceding period. Barraclough maintains that we are experiencing the formation of a world civilization in which all the continents will play their part.

So rapidly have we begun to feel the effects of these revolutionary times in presenting us with new configurations that all of us today are displaced persons living in a world that has little to do with the one in which we grew up. The process of modernization increasingly leads to a situation where the individual loses existential ties that bind him to his social structure. And our socio-cultural environment is not able to provide us with meaning, reality and freedom. A viable curriculum for the general student in the social sciences demands a responsiveness to the personal through an encounter with the issues of our contemporary history. Choice replaces fictitious necessities and a more human world is possible. Education becomes more a matter of personal engagement and existential confrontation. The subversion of the personal in relation to the issues of our contemporary history isolates education from the mainstream of practical life, trivializes the learning process, and produces a disintegrative learning
experience for students. The analytical fragmentation of reality and detachment from issues of value are being questioned for their inappropriateness to the present needs of students. This traditional stance coupled with a rampant vocationalism intent on certifying people for entrance into the meritocracy has neglected the relationship between students' processes of reflection and their experience.

The achievement of general education objectives must ultimately be evaluated in relation to the construction and teaching of particular courses in the curriculum. Course construction and strategies of teaching become most important in terms of their practicality and relation to the learning experiences of the individual student. Social science courses cover a continuum of heavily programmed factual surveys to those which attempt integration by focusing on current social problems or by emphasizing methods of social analysis. The general education movement has been noticeably concerned with broad courses which attempt comprehensive surveys of scholarly materials. This approach is being criticized in favor of courses which emphasize methodology, concepts, generalizations, principles, and their utilization.

A more likely approach may be provided by Jerome Bruner when he sums up under one basic principle what he thinks is a more valid process: the succession of studies need be fixed in only one way; whatever is introduced should be pursued continuously enough to give the student a sense of power of mind that comes from a deep understanding of the situation at hand. 29

The present challenge for history and the social sciences in the general education curriculum centers around the achievement of their several modes of intellectual inquiry in relation to the needs of students and with the clear recognition that the needs of both may not be compatible, thus creating the need for increased attention to the processes of decision-making. The education can relate the scientific, internal insights, and normative speculations. This role challenges the disciplines from becoming sterile methodologies. History and the social sciences provide an elaborate process whereby opinions and experiences can be sifted, and feelings of obligation, responsibility, and purpose can be clarified.

The basic justification for studying history and the social sciences is the assumption that the world is knowable by man through some process which can be communicated; and that knowing the results of man's interaction with the world is valuable. These are not self-evident, they must be chosen options. These disciplines provide an opportunity to process experiences through human intelligence. As the tempo of social change becomes faster, communications more instant, and conflicts more dangerous, the possibilities of personal and institutional marginality are increased, thus creating a greater need for history and the social sciences.

The social sciences reflect in their organization the growth of competing groups, rather than the growth of intellectual order. The search for interdisciplinary stances in the disciplines and in the teaching dimension is important though. Each social science discipline suffers a bias inherent in its particular reality unit. The continued attempts to construct hypothetical sets of relationships that explain the variation in perspective found in the social sciences are necessary in order to understand what each of them is saying.

In meeting the challenge of general education in the curriculum the temptations of determinism and of scepticism must be resisted, along with

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the temptation to yield too readily to the blandishments of utopia. A viable curriculum is maintained in a spirit of experimentation and change by bringing policies and practices in accordance with new knowledge and the changing conditions of life. If curriculums do not approximate this spirit they become increasingly dysfunctional and destructive in their relation to people. Curricular irrelevance, obscurantism, and ossification result. The rapid pace of change makes the task even more difficult.

Recent dissent in higher education expressed through the discontent of students demands general education experiences for students in history and the social sciences that will illuminate the historical and social context of their private discontent. In this manner history and the social sciences can contribute to the development of an informed electorate and possibly a common culture. In order to do this it may be necessary for the curriculum to adopt a more critical, innovative approach to the social universe rather than an apologetic, adaptationist approach.

Increasingly, the social sciences will concern themselves with the relation between descriptive and normative paradigms. The questions, "What kind of world is it?" and "What kind of world do we want?" will be harder to separate if the objective world is the result of man's actions and his perceptions of that world are the result of values created in the analytic process. Determinism is broken (or blunted) and a way can be sought to allow the disciplines to achieve the goal of general education — the freeing of the student's mind.

**SOURCES**


