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General Education: What Should Be Its Focus?

Paul F. Haas

It is apparently fashionable today to study and discuss the alternative methods used to teach the principles courses in the social sciences. Many of us have read about and have examined texts with greater lucidity and/or topical orientation. Many of us have also attempted to make our principles courses more relevant (assuming we can define relevant) by altering the course content or means of delivery. However, how many of us have actually attempted to define the purpose of our principles courses and have designed them specifically to pursue that purpose? Let us be even more challenging and inquire how many of us have asked where does our particular social science principles courses fit into the scheme of higher education, especially in the area relating to general education? The intent of this paper is to probe these questions and provide an alternative that will hopefully contribute a viable solution to the dilemma of teaching the social sciences and achieving the goals of a general education.

In virtually every college curriculum which professes to embrace the liberal education tradition we will find principles or introductory courses to all the disciplines. According to the promotional literature of these colleges, these courses are allegedly designed to broaden a student’s perspective of the world and to aid each student generate solutions which may be significantly influenced by study outside the specific discipline of the problem. For example, the study of our energy problem today must certainly include inputs from environmental, political, and economic sources as well as scientific areas in which the problem is centered. Yet, upon closer examination there are some substantial questions as to whether the principles courses actually serve this function or whether they serve primarily as feeders into the professional courses.

It is in reference to this concern that I wish to define the role of social science principles courses as the vehicle to provide not only mastery of some bodies of knowledge, but also coherence among those bodies to enhance personal development and to gain competence in shaping the physical and social world in which we live. [6, McCluskey and Worley, 1974]. In other words, I argue
that the primary purpose of the social science principles courses is to commence the process of a liberal education. In many institutions the pursuit of this liberal education is initiated in the general education courses, i.e., those courses which attempt to establish some sort of unity in the educational subject matter [1, Balkcum, 1974-1975] and mold a student into a responsible human being and citizen [9, Report of the Commission on General Education, 1945]. Thus, it would seem that an instructor of a social science principles course should attempt to develop his or her course to mesh the concepts of a discipline with these goals of general education. In this manner the instructor will be directing the course toward the whole student rather than at the more narrow goal of developing a professional technician in a particular discipline.

Many educators have suggested that one way to achieve this broader goal is to institute interdisciplinary study. However, if we wish to operationalize interdisciplinary study, we need to develop a specific set of guidelines, which would establish a common meaning to liberal education. We need to identify the commonalities that link disciplines together. Without the acceptance of such commonality, attempts to develop and teach a liberal education curriculum will simply work at cross-purposes. For instance, in my own discipline of economics those few economists who do see liberal education as the proper focus of the principles courses do not seem to have gained many adherents because they lack a common definition of what liberal education entails [5, Mann and Fusfeld, 1970; 8, Petr, 1971; and 10, Villard, 1969]. I suspect that the same is true of the other social sciences.

If the objectives of liberal education are to be implemented, we need some technique for determining success or failure. A first step to this end is to define liberal education in terms of a set of competencies or skills which contribute to all types of decision-making and learning. Thus, I argue that education is liberal when it nurtures the following skills:

a. reading comprehension,
b. ability to identify assumptions,
c. ability to understand the patterns created by sets of assumptions, i.e., paradigms,
d. identification of alternative inferences from a set of reasons or data,
e. evaluations of arguments, and
f. clarification of values.

Although it is frequently argued that these objectives of liberal education are attained automatically whenever one studies the rudiments of a discipline, surely no one who understands marginalism would claim that this procedure is optimal. A disciplinary-based curriculum is molded by specialized paradigms which imposed particular agendas and points of view which may work to exclude the liberating influence of other disciplines. [6, McCluskey and Worley, 1974]. If we wish to encourage the development of these liberal education skills, certain emphases upon a small collection of concepts within settings of controversy will provide greater contributions to the students than simply presenting an encyclopedic list of discipline-based concepts like that which is provided in most principles texts.

One major criticism of this approach is that a handful of concepts is not sufficient foundation for professional training. I can think of two responses to
this charge. First, professional training should not be considered as a goal of general education. The basis of general education should be the pursuit of the liberal skills which will enable students to integrate the content that they will be taught in their general education courses and elsewhere. Second, even if professional training is considered to be an important objective of general education, one should note that liberal education recognizes that useful knowledge is comprised of those concepts or processes which contribute directly to decision-making skills [3, Bruner, 1960]. To treat knowledge solely as a body of information or principles, the learning of which is presumed to be intrinsically rewarding, is futile and wasteful.

Although all liberal education produces results which contribute to professional training, it cannot be claimed that specific knowledge required for occupational achievement necessarily aids the acquisition of any of the skills enumerated above. In fact, if you reflect for a moment on the content of our most popular curriculum materials, you will quickly recognize that they are directed at the most elementary and passive areas of the cognitive domain. [2, Bloom, 1956].

Another equally important reason why general education courses should be directed toward the learning of the liberal education skills and not toward preparing majors is the knowledge explosion [4, Gladowski, 1973; 7, McInnis, 1971]. Although I do not have complete confidence in the accuracy of such statistics, we are all familiar with the rough outline of the recent growth of knowledge. The amount of technical research doubles every ten years; approximately 100,000 journals are now being published in sixty different languages; at its present rate and form of accumulation the Yale library in the year 2050 would have to be as large as the city of New Haven to contain its holdings. How can we hope to teach knowledge about the social sciences that will prepare our students for the 21st century when much of that knowledge does not yet exist? However, how can one argue that the skills of liberal education will be any less functional in the next century than they are now? The social sciences are eminently amenable to learning these skills, but only when what we teach is explicitly directed toward that purpose.

The liberal education skills can be taught very successfully in a principles course by focusing on a relatively small group of concepts that you consider to be vital to the understanding of your discipline. This task is certainly a controversial one which will inevitably cause disagreement among colleagues. Nevertheless, choices must be made. The instructor should try to operationalize those concepts by demonstrating how they can aid one in deciding what conclusion one could reach on a given controversy.

In economics I attempt to accomplish this task by identifying three basic paradigms: conservatism, liberalim, and socialism; and seven basic economic goals: growth, fair income distribution, economic security, full employment, prices stability, consumer sovereignty and economic freedom. By establishing an understanding of the different economic paradigms, an instructor can develop an appreciation of why reasonable people can differ on how to solve an economic problem. Specifically, if we identify a controversy like "should President Carter cut taxes to stimulate the economy?" my students would attempt to analyze that question first by identifying the particular set of economic goals that each of them individually intends to pursue. Within each set of goals, the students would use such basic economic concepts as opportunity cost, externalities, market system, collective decision-making and market power to assess how well one might expect a tax cut to accomplish those goals. This process can embody all the elements of liberal education
which I outlined earlier.

In like manner, an entire course can be developed by following the basic steps outlined in the above example. First, the course subject matter should be developed around controversial and conflicting materials. Secondly, the students should be taught at least two paradigms to permit them to search for alternatives. Also, by establishing a list of goals, the students can note how the different paradigms pursue different combinations of goals. Thirdly, emphasize a handful of concepts which are essential to your discipline for the purpose of attempting to choose between the paradigms.

To demonstrate this point further I would argue that the distinction between an allocation process achieved through a market as contrasted to one achieved through a collective decision-making process is more fundamental to the elementary understanding of economics than are the concepts of elasticity, the multiplier or equilibrium in output and money markets. My basic reason for this choice is the greater likelihood that students will encounter my concepts in other disciplines and in their daily lives once they leave the university. Also, with an understanding of the basic elements of a market a student is better equipped to discuss the likelihood of the success or failure of a program which depends upon the proper functioning of a market.

Overall the basic objective is to teach a course which emphasize learning skills rather than just content, a course to stimulate understanding of basic concepts rather than emphasizing professionalism. If these aims were pursued, the goal of general education could be achieved.

References