

Liberal Education and the Learner's Benefit

Christopher Martin

The University of British Columbia

In “Reimagining ‘Learning for Its Own Sake’ in Liberal Education,” Caitlin Brust argues for a conception of liberal education better attuned to the relationship between the learner and intrinsically valuable forms of knowledge and understanding. On her account, traditional liberal education requires students to engage simply because it is assumed to contain “something worth knowing.” This conventionalist justification fails to account for the student’s own interests and motivations. Consequently, she argues, students are compelled to either adopt an instrumental attitude toward liberal learning, or alienate themselves from their own point of view in order to successfully master a homogenizing liberal arts curriculum.

Brust’s solution is to reframe liberal education as an educationally distinctive “valuing activity.” While valuing something is a general cognitive and affective attitude that can capture a great many things—I can value, say, time with my family or solving a puzzle—educationally worthwhile valuing requires the “appreciation of a worthwhile object.” These worthwhile objects are the forms of knowledge and understanding that are typically thought to define a liberal education.

What distinguishes Brust’s approach from ostensibly traditional models is the volitional dimension of a valuing activity. When students are empowered to freely link the curriculum to “their personal or cultural histories” or “motivating interests,” they experience agency over the cultivation and broadening of their values. The student becomes the ultimate arbiter on how far, and in what ways, their mind is freed. Liberal education reimagined as a valuing activity therefore warrants a reframing of a liberal education from “learning for its own sake” to “learning for the *learner’s* sake.”

I fully agree with Brust that the relationship between the learner and the forms of knowledge is essential to our understanding of what makes a liberal education distinctly worthwhile. A conception of liberal education

that neglects to justify the desirability of this relationship, or is focused only on what ought to be learned, may be rightly charged with “scholasticism” (as Dewey pejoratively put it). Her articulation of that relationship is incisive, especially when viewed in light of cases where advocates for a liberal curriculum assume that this relationship speaks for itself and focus their efforts on defending the importance of the canon or various reading lists. Justification abhors a vacuum, and in its absence a caricatured or one-sided understanding of what a liberal education entails can be left to flourish.

However, while some educational programs that happen to call themselves “liberal” function in this way, I do not think that we can infer that *conceptions* of liberal education trend, logically, in this scholastic direction. It could be that, in practice, some educational offerings simply do a better job of satisfying the criteria of a liberal education than others. Therefore, I think that the solution to Brust’s problem is not a reimagining of liberal education as such, but a call for liberal education programs to hew more closely to their conceptual foundations as Paul Hirst did in his 1965 analysis of the Harvard Committee Report.¹

If I’m right about this, I think the next step for Brust’s account is to establish where she believes her proposal stands in relation to various philosophical conceptions of liberal education and how *they* characterize this relationship. I don’t presume that Brust is, or ought to be, in full agreement with any of these conceptions. But it would be a useful reference point for understanding in what respects her proposal is a true *reimagining* of liberal education, a needed *reemphasis* of the relational dimensions of a liberal education, or an educational vision entirely different from a liberal education.

Let me illustrate. Brust claims that we should see the content of a liberal education as objective, or “agent-neutral.” In order for this content to take on educational significance for the learner, it must link up with the student’s existing motivations and interests. This move makes sense if we assume that, in a traditional liberal education, intrinsically valuable forms of knowledge and understanding are motivationally inert in the first place. And why should we think otherwise? If knowledge is valuable for its own sake, it must surely be detached from our worldly motivations. And not just econom-

ic motivations, but our personal and cultural interests, as well.

However, liberal educationalists such as Oakeshott, Peters, and Hirst do not see forms of knowledge and understanding as agent-neutral in this motivationally inert sense, exactly. They characterize these forms, variously, as a “a conversation...made more articulate over the course of centuries,” “public forms of experience,” or “distinct forms or discourse...disciplines that form the mind” that arise from our common human curiosity.² Works of art, revered plays, philosophical tracts, famous political manifestos, and so on are not to be understood as reified, highbrow cultural artifacts to be appreciated by the elect (although they often are treated in this way). They represent hard fought public contributions to humanity's attempts to know and to understand. This “discourse” or “conversation” has the characteristics of what economists call a public good: it is non-excludable and non-rivalrous. Constituted by humanity, it belongs to literally every human being. It is not a discourse merely for scientists and professional artists and university professors.

How does this bear on the motivational question? Allow me to proceed in measures that are equal parts conceptual and sentimental, if only to make the distinctiveness of the philosophical conception of liberal education clear. The learner is situated in the local. The local is a valuable community of intellectual origin. The challenge for the liberal educator is to bridge the daunting motivational gap between the student's local world and a world-historical conversation that stretches back millennia. Motivating students by showing them there is something in that conversation that affirms their particular personal or cultural interests might sometimes be an effective approach, but it is neither necessary nor sufficient.

One might point to that last claim as evidence of a liberal curriculum's elite and exclusionary mindset or its hostility to the particularities of the learner. On the contrary, a liberal education is committed to a more demanding and pro-active form of inclusion.³ The liberal educator aims for the student to realize that they have a distinctive point of view. Their initiation into the larger conversation should not only enrich that point of view, but empower the learner to make their own contribution to that same human

conversation. Liberal education sees the learner as an intrinsic end, never as a mere means, and this moral commitment should serve as a basis for assessing the educational policies and practices carried out in its name.

Yet, aren't the forms of knowledge inherently politically authoritative and hierarchical? We tend to see things in this way when we mistakenly conflate the forms with their institutionalization in schools and universities.⁴ Of course, like any conversation we find ourselves joining, *in media res*, we need to spend a little time listening in order to get our bearings on what the conversation is all about, where it has been, and where it's going, before jumping in. But the liberal educator wants the learner to jump in all the same, partly because what the learner may mistake as simply their parochial personal or cultural insight may turn out to be a profound contribution to humanity's public intellectual good.

Does this (admittedly broad) characterization sufficiently capture Brust's insight into the value of student agency in liberal learning? Is there enough of the learner's "own sake" in this formulation? My hope is that I've provided a picture that goes some way to addressing these concerns, though we will need to hear more about Brust's thoughtfully rendered contribution to the conversation about liberal education before we can say for sure.

1 Paul H. Hirst, "Liberal Education and the Nature of Knowledge," *Philosophical Analysis and Education* 2 (1965): 113–140.

2 Michael Oakeshott, "The Voice of Poetry in the Conversation of Mankind," in *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays* (Carmel: Liberty Fund, 1962); Paul H. Hirst and R. S. Peters, eds., *The Logic of Education*, vol. 16 (New York: Routledge, 2011), 34; Hirst, "Liberal Education," 45.

3 Krassimir Stojanov, "Overcoming Social Pathologies in Education: On the Concept of Respect in R. S. Peters and Axel Honneth," *Journal of Philosophy of Education* 43, no. 1 (2009): 161–172.

4 Brust notes that abstractions such as "knowledge and understanding" can obscure how elites structure their teaching and learning in order to advance

their own interests. If this is true, we should take seriously the possibility that when a growing number of university elites reject a liberal curriculum on the grounds that it is fundamentally marginalizing, they are simply continuing to press their interests (and their cultural power) under a new guise. I'm not arguing that a liberal curriculum *qua* curriculum would not benefit from rigorous debate and reform. My point is that growing elite consensus on the failings of a liberal education may itself reflect a desire to maintain monopoly control over certain forms of knowledge and understanding. When most anyone can access "the Great Books" online, one powerful way to reassert institutional authority is to claim that, for one to receive an authentic liberal education, these books need to be deconstructed (and sometimes repealed and replaced) at the behest of educational elites.