COMMUNICATIONS

Abstract

In an era of dropping enrollments and diminishing funding, colleges and universities are facing severe crises. Programs in the humanities are experiencing their most intense revitalization in decades. The serious revamping of the curriculum is necessary to overcome negative student attitudes towards humanities courses and increase humanities enrollments. This article suggests two possible ways to accomplish these goals, through the use of collaborative learning and career-option minors.

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Negative Student Attitudes and the Teaching of Humanities

No one needs to be reminded that modern educational institutions are facing severe crises:

> Gone are the halcyon days when seemingly unlimited numbers of 18-22 year-olds jammed the capacity of all available colleges and universities, bringing with them not only their social and political concerns but also their dollars, which allowed undergraduate education to expand its programs to meet the demands imposed by those social and political concerns. As the pool of college-going individuals declined, those who remained have tended to align themselves away from the traditional liberal arts curricula, and toward professional skill-oriented majors.[1]

In an era of dropping enrollments and diminishing funding, some colleges are carefully scrutinizing their curricula, attempting to retain enrolled students and to appeal to possible future students. Other colleges, however, seem to be deluding themselves:

> I believe we educators delude ourselves if we think that young people today seek higher learning for any other purpose than to launch and advance their career. Knowledge for its own sake, aesthetic enjoyment, and cultural development are simply fringe benefits. Today's young men and women are keenly aware that advanced educational standing is a vital asset in the highly competitive job market they will soon confront.
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> Then does it follow, that if getting a job, maintaining it, and advancing a career are the primary motivations for matriculating at a university or a college, these institutions owe their students every possible assistance toward reaching their goals?[2]

Unfortunately, in an era when many students are seeking to take courses relevant to their career goals, fewer and fewer students are voluntarily choosing to take any substantial number of courses in the humanities.

The reasons for the drop in enrollments in humanities may well be at least threefold. First, many students are now double majoring, or majoring in one subject while minoring in another. "With the diminishing job market for college graduates, especially those with liberal arts degrees" and with "the concomitant decrease in the percentage of students choosing the less obviously career-related liberal arts majors,"[3] students are understandably

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reluctant to crowd an already full academic schedule with courses they perceive as "not relevant" to their career and/or personal goals. Secondly, many students are concerned with maintaining high grade point averages to be competitive in the job market or to be assured of being admitted with financial assistance to top-flight graduate programs. These same students may be cautious of taking courses to explore new subject matter for fear of receiving poor grades, thus jeopardizing their chances for entering graduate school or getting the preferred jobs. However, the main reason for the dropping enrollments in the humanities may well be related to the negative attitudes many students have towards subjects in the humanities, negative attitudes developed as the result of exposure to these subjects in elementary and secondary school. As fewer and fewer humanities courses are required, students who have had negative experiences with a subject in previous educational ventures are not likely to voluntarily elect courses in that subject in college, particularly if they believe that the college course is likely to offer more of the same.

Thus, the crisis is not only one of numbers but of attitudes. A change in educational philosophy and practice is needed if we are to meet the needs of students in the 1980's:

> Universities are facing the dynamics of change in coping with student requirements with a wide range of responses. Some prefer to ignore the situation and pretend it does not exist and sincerely believe that the 'good old days' will return soon. These institutions or academic areas within a university are . . . facing 'future shock' as described by Alvin Toffler and do not perceive, or possibly refuse to accept, the reality of the changes that are taking place. They face a dim future since, as Toffler points out, our option is not to stop change, but only how well can we adapt to it and manage the situaiton.[4]

Innovative approaches must be utilized for the teaching of the humanities at both the elementary and secondary level and at the college/university level. It is not enough to merely opine that a firm grounding in the humanities is important for a meaningful life. We must be able to demonstrate that "an education that broadens the horizons, improves our understanding of the world, deepens our comprehension of the social, political, and economic system, and contributes to our cultural development, can be liberal in the best sense of the word and at the same time lay the groundwork for a variety of careers."[5] At the same time, we must revamp our approach to teaching so that we not only teach subject matter but also begin to be expediters in the reinforcing of positive attitudes or the reexamination of negative attitudes towards the humanities.[6]

The following discussion focuses on two teaching/curricular approaches that attempt to deal with negative attitudes towards the humanities. Although each example specifically deals with the area of the speech and dramatic arts, it is hoped that the discussion will suggest ways for revitalizing approahces to other subjects that fall within the purview of the humanities.

Collaborative Learning

After several years of teaching literature and the performance of literature, I found myself dismayed at the consistently negative attitudes most students had about poetry and the performance of poetry. These negative attitudes were particularly strong among the students training to teach in elementary schools. Although some of the negativism could be attributed to their general nervousness in almost any performance situation, there was no simple way to explain the intensity of their negative attitudes nor their distrust of my impassioned avowal of the joys of reading poetry.[7]

Finally, I asked the students how they felt about poetry in general and children's poetry in particular. Their responses were enlightening. Many disliked poetry because they had been

forced to memorize poems they didn't like or understand in elementary or secondary school for recitation in front of the class; the negative feelings they attached to these experiences seemed to have poisoned any further contact with poetry. Others didn't like poetry because the teachers they had had didn't seem to like poetry and communicated their negative feelings to them. Still others felt negatively about poetry because, frankly, they didn't know any poetry. No one had exposed them to poetry as children, so they had no experience with poetry and were afraid of it, particularly since they felt they had no experiential basis from which to select, analyze, and perform poetry. Finally, other students felt negatively about poetry because of prior experiences with poetry in English classes. They often didn't understand how a teacher came up with his/her interpretation of a poem, and the process of minutely analyzing and dissecting a poem seemed, for many, to have ruined any positive feelings they might have had about poetry. Although a few students had positive feelings about poetry, they were in the definite minority; their positive attitudes seemed to stem from positive childhood experiences, either because their parents loved poetry and read poetry well to them, or they had a teacher who loved poetry and who felt it was important to expose children to poetry and inculcate in children an appreciation for poetry.

At this point it was clear that the standard individual poetry performance would not work, at least not yet. So, borrowing from collaborative learning techniques used by some of my colleagues in the teaching of English composition,[8] I formed the students into groups, hoping that we might be able to work on the negative attitudes toward poetry and, at the same time, increase performance skills.

Many of the students were initially concerned about the group format; for 90% of them, this course was a required one in their major, and they were somewhat resistant to doing any more work than was necessary to achieve a satisfactory grade. In addition, many had had negative experiences with other group projects and were understandably concerned about being involved in unnecessary group activities. So, to avoid dealing with additional negative attitudes, the short presentation of poetry each group was to present to the class was critiqued but ungraded.[9]

Preparatory to the actual group poetry performances, several class periods were spent exploring short children's poems. For example, one class period was devoted to class discussion and experimentation with various ways of performing "This Is The House That Jack Built." During half of another class session, each group explored the meaning and performance possibilities of two other short poems, "Merry-Go-Round" by Dorothy Baruch and "Whispers" by Myra Cohn Livingston.[10] The rest of this session and all of the next session were given over to performances by each group of the two poems and discussion of diverse interpretations. The results were encouraging. One group created a musical score to augment the meaning and flavor of "Merry-Go-Round." Another group took the same poem and utilized a rhythm-band accompaniment to feature the strongly aural imagery. For "Whispers" one group positioned performers in a random configuration in the room, creating a ping-pong effect in the voicing of the poem and bringing new insight to the interpretation of this seemingly simple poem. All the groups explored various ways to present the poems, and the performances of each of the two assigned poems were, almost without exception distinct from one another.

The individual poetry performances near the end of the semester were markedly better than those in previous semesters. Far from being laconic, uninsightful performances of simple, "cute" poems that had been the norm in previous semesters, these individual

performances were intellectually stimulating, dramatically creative, and given with a surprisingly sophisticated attention to technique. Frankly, the students this semester weren't innately more talented than students in previous semesters. It seemed, therefore, apparent that many of the negative attitudes had been altered and, in some cases, dissipated, and the subsequent individual performances showed the positive results of the changed attitudes.

At the end of the semester, the students were asked to comment on the collaborative learning experiment and their attitudes about poetry. The students perceived the following results. First, the sharing of ideas and the exploration of a poem in a group situation creative thinking and led to an increased confidence and interest in reading and performing good poetry. Second, the sharing of performance responsibilities in the group situation, coupled with the encouragement and coaching of more talented or secure group members, helped the timid and insecure students relax and concentrate on learning about poetry. They felt they performed with an increased confidence that carried over into the individual poetry performances. Third, the opportunity to experiment with multiple performances of the same poem led to an increased willingness, for some students, to risk novelty in performance rather than opting for safety in performance. Fourth, the exposure in the collaborative learning situation to other exciting poems encouraged many of the students to find challenging poems for their individual poetry performances. Finally, having had a positive experience with poetry, many expressed an increased interest in poetry and a diminishing of negative attitudes about poetry. In fact, several expressed an interest in taking additional poetry or performance classes.

Although collaborative learning may not work in every discipline in the humanities, the results of this collaborative learning experiment seem to suggest that when negative attitudes towards a subject are faced and dealt with, positive learning can occur, thus increasing the possibility that there will be further exploration of adjunct humanities courses.

Career Options in the Humanities

Another possible approach to increasing enrollments in the humanities is the designing of career-option minors that relate to the students' majors and, at the same time, provide a carefully assembled package of courses with a humanistic perspective to underpin the major. "Sound career education is not incompatible with sound liberal education."[11] Business, law, government, the ministry, public relations, advertising, politics, marketing — these and other fields are increasingly interested in students with career skills as well as a firm grounding in the humanities. Our increasingly complex society needs individuals who are not mere specialists in a particular field, but also individuals who can explain and interpret the problems of that society. How better to achieve such goals than through a firm grounding in the humanities?

Realistically speaking, however, most students are disenchanted with the potpourri of humanities classes that may be confusing in their variety and, on the surface, unrelated to their career goals. Here is where skillful advising and the career-option minor can be utilized to the benefit of both the student and departments offering humanities classes. In consultation with a knowledgeable advisor, a student can put together a cluster of approved humanities classes that will both broaden his/her understanding of the major and, at the same time, provide a humanistic perspective on the world. The career-option minor serves the needs of the student, in that he/she is able to follow a course of study that has been

carefully tailored to individual career goals. At the same time, humanities classes see an increased enrollment of students interested in taking classes.

A specific example of how the career-option minor might work will show the potential benefits of this curriculum option. Imagine that a student is a business major who wants to be able to compete for jobs on the international market. Along with the regular courses in the business major, the student could elect a career-option minor in the humanities. Depending on the particular interests of the students, courses chosen from the following areas might be appropriate: (1) Modern Languages: Courses centered on the speaking, reading, and writing of a foreign language could be elected. A student could take either regular courses already on the books or courses specifically designed for the business major to enable him/her to transact business in that foreign language. (2) English: The student could be encouraged to take not only courses in writing (such as report writing) but also a course or two in world literature, thereby getting exposure to the literature and values of other cultures. (3) History: Courses in world history and a specialized course, such as Latin American history or history of Third World countries, might important, particularly if the student is coordinating specialized history courses with linguistic training. (4) Philosophy: A course in ethics or moral values could serve as a basis for making business decisions, or more specialized courses that investigate the philosophy of modern business and/or technology might be elected if they are available. (5) Speech: Courses in public speaking, persuasion, business and professional speaking, small group communication, and organizational communiction would clearly be of benefit to the potential business person.

Such a career-option minor would, by its very nature, be interdisciplinary in approach. Courses could be added or deleted, dependent on student interest and any emerging clarity concerning career goals. Because the courses would be selected to augment the student's major, there is an increased chance that negative attitudes towards humanities classes would be dissipated. When interest is present, the problem of "relevancy" often disappears. And, best of all, once a student truly sees the value of courses in the humanities to his/her career gals, there is an increased chance the student will elect additional humanities classes.

Conclusion

The suggestions posited in this discussion have centered on two possible ways to decrease negative student attitudes about the humanities and, concomitantly, increase enrollments in humanities classes. In order to provide students with a humanistic perspective on the world, we must first get them into humanities classes and keep them there long enough for them to be exposed to the perspective:

> The challenge of the . . . 80's is to mold a discipline which allows students to gain academic instruction with a wide variety of vocational possibilities. This will certainly mean, in some cases at least, massive curriculum revision, more emphasis in some areas and less in others. It may also mean the designing of interdisciplinary programs . . . We must be willing and able to accept the challenge of providing academic instruction and training which will equip the future manager and/or supervisor to handle the . . . problems that exist in business and industry.[12]

Notes

[1]   Robert S. Goyer and William F. Eadie, "Fitting the Speech Communication Curriculum to the Needs of Business," *Bulletin of the Association of Departments and Administrators in Speech Communication,* 18 (October, 1976), 17.

[2]   Gemma Newman, "Teaching the Basic Speech Course with Career Orientation: An Affirmative Case," *Bulletin of the Association of Departments and Administrators in Speech Communication*, 13 (August, 1975), 46.

[3]   James H. McBath and David T. Burhans, Jr., *Communication Education for Careers* (Falls Church, Virginia: Speech Communication Association, 1975), p. 42.

[4]   Darrell T. Piersol, "Responsibility for Career Training," *Bulletin of the Association of Departments and Administrators in Speech Communication*, 6 (January, 1974), 22-23.

[5]   Paul Woodring, "1984 Revisited, " *Proceedings of the Conferences on Career Education* (Princeton, New Jersey: Educational Testing Service, 1972), p. 21.

[6]   Certainly not all humanities teachers communicate negative attitudes. However, when a student has been introduced to a subject area by a teacher teaching in an unenthusiastic, grudging style, negative attitudes are likely to be formed towards the subject; the situation is particularly acute in the case of those training to teach others. Lest the situation seem too grim, it should be noted that not all ineffective teaching damages a student's prospects of being an effective teacher; native talent can overcome a great deal. Also, a student may be able to teach at the secondary level where there is a stronger possibility that he/she may be able to exclusively teach that subject or those subjects in which he/she is truly competent and interested. Yet, because the majority of those training to teach will spend at least a portion of their careers teaching at the elementary school level, it is vital that prospective elementary school teachers be able to teach, with competence and enthusiasm, a wide variety of subjects; otherwise, the students they teach will come to dislike the subjects as well.

[7]   The individual poetry performances of previous semesters had done little to overcome negative attitudes about poetry. In evaluations at the end of the semester, an exceptionally high proportion of students consistently indicated they profited less from the poetry performance than any other assignment and often suggested alternative assignments they felt would be more interesting and worthwhile.

[8]   By collaborative learning, I mean utilizing the students to teach one another through peer counseling and evaluation. Each member of a group becomes responsible to others in the group; the members help one another to understand and explore assignments and, in the case of the poetry performances, give criticism and suggestions for improvement. The teacher's role becomes that of a resource person to be consulted when the sense of purpose or direction of the group is momentarily lost.

[9]   The opinion of the classes involved in this collaborative learning experience seemed to be split on the value of having the group poetry performance upgraded. Some students saw the project as beneficial, but gave less effort to it than they might have if it had beeng graded. Most of the students, however, welcomed the lack of pressure for a grade, because they felt this lack of pressure allowed them to experiment and to feel free to try approaches that might fail.

[10]   The poem "Whispers" reads as follows:
Whispers
    tickle through your ear
    telling things you like to hear.

Whispers
    are as soft as skin
    letting little words curl in.

Whispers
    come so they can blow
    secrets others never know.

The poem "Merry-Go-Round" reads as follows:

I climbed up on the merry-go-round,
And it went round and round,
I climbed up on a big brown horse
And it went up and down.
    Around and round,
    And up and down,
    Around and round,
    And up and down,
    I sat high up

On a big brown horse
And rode around
On the merry-go-round.

These two poems, and several others like them, were selected for in-class use because they were short, unthreatening, and allowed for quick discussion and performance. In addition, they were rich in visual, aural, and/or tactile imagery.

[11]   Woodring, p. 21.

[12]   Raymond W. Buchanan and K. Phillip Taylor, "The Marketability of the Speech Communication Major," *Bulletin of the Association of Departments and Administrators in Speech Communication*, 14 (October, 1975).