

Humanities and the liberal arts: Creative thinking for fractured times

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May 1, 2018

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THE CHRONICLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION

Featured:



The Republic of Ireland is holding an historic referendum on abortion in May 2018. (Photo Credit: rollingnews.ie)

It's not surprising that the science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) fields are capturing the imagination of university students. The tech sector has enjoyed a long boom — its social media platforms and digital disruptors have made mouth-watering profits, overtaken century-old companies, and revolutionized our daily lives, whether it be ride-hailing apps or disease-diagnosing smartphones. The science and engineering fields, for their part, are pushing the boundaries of human knowledge, developing neural implants, electric vehicles and

super-materials like graphene, which could help everything from water purification to spinal regeneration.

Students see in the STEM educational track the chance to solve social challenges, make money, or both. Preferential visa access for STEM graduates in many countries, including the United States, along with fears of rising automation in a growing number of professional jobs, add further gloss to technical degrees.

One consequence of the rush into STEM, however, is the potential relegation of the humanities and liberal arts to second place on the pedagogical podium. They risk being dismissed as less relevant to the problems of the modern world, or less useful training for tomorrow's job market. Such a view is at the very least ill-informed. The skills, knowledge, and mind-set that the humanities inculcate are, if anything, acquiring new-found significance in a techno-centric age, helping tackle problems that the sciences cannot illuminate, and shaping the ways in which technology itself reconstructs society.

Profiling the views and work of four [University of Birmingham](#) academics, this article explores how today's social and economic challenges call for the elevation of the liberal arts to equal standing with the sciences, showing the often-surprising ways in which knowledge from fields such as theology, anthropology, and classics can counter disease and terrorism and help societies navigate policy changes on issues like abortion. It argues that, in a world of technological intensification and deepening social fractures, the humanities can help cultivate a more informed populace. As technology deepens its penetration into our lives and its unintended consequences emerge -- such as the current election-meddling Facebook scandal -- the skills and sensibilities developed by the humanities will be of increasing importance.



Protester demonstrating against the proposal of ‘Muslim Ban’ policies in the United States. (Photo Credit: Lorie Shaul)

Understanding human actions and choices

Professor Fiona de Londras, Chair in Global Legal Studies at the University of Birmingham, believes that a humanities mind-set is critical for societies that are negotiating difficult change. She has worked in the field of public legal education in Ireland, which is holding an historic abortion referendum this May, and argues, “If we approach abortion from a purely medical perspective, or a technical legal perspective, then we would lose sight of the complexity. Rather than seeing the debate in black and white, it is helpful to use the quintessential characteristic of the humanities mind-set, which looks at things from multiple angles in an open and critical way. This nuance is appreciated by the government members leading the referendum process. Politicians welcome the opportunity to recognize and speak about complexity and try to design systems that are responsive to real life.”

Without understanding the cultural and social forces that shape human choices, technical solutions will fail. Katherine Brown, Lecturer in Islamic Studies in the Department of Theology and Religion, notes that approaches informed by social sciences to counterterrorism have been inadequate, because they reduce religion and culture to a ‘black box,’ resulting in narrow frameworks that just separate ‘moderate’ from ‘extremist’ ideologies, without unpacking the content of religious ideas or understanding what makes them resonant with some communities. A greater understanding of religious context would produce more meaningful

insight, she says, adding, “If we have a more nuanced understanding, we see religion as about belief, belonging and behavior. We realize it can't simply be a matter of isolating whether jihad means ‘violence’ or ‘submission.’”

An understanding of cultural nuance is not for mere pontification in an ivory tower. It can determine outcomes in the starkest of emergencies. During the African Ebola pandemic, some medical teams failed to understand the social and cultural nuances of burial, and how these would aggravate disease transmission, says Professor Michael Whitby, Pro-Vice-Chancellor and Head of the College of Arts and Law at the University of Birmingham. Funerals became transmission hotspots, as mourners came into contact with infected bodies. Medical anthropologists played a critical role in developing protocols to enable dignified burial of Ebola victims, which included family members and encouraged religious rites, while at the same time reducing the physical interaction that accounted for an estimated 20 percent of new infections.

As well as aiding specific real-world interventions, the study of liberal arts can make a broader contribution to forging a fairer, more just, and more peaceful world. The humanities have long fueled civil rights movements, as emblemized by the smuggled copy of William Shakespeare's Complete Works that brought sustenance to South Africa's anti-apartheid activists incarcerated on Robben Island. This was only one in a long lineage of freedom movements that have drawn strength from the Bard, according to Professor Ewan Fernie, Fellow and Chair of Shakespeare Studies at the University of Birmingham's Shakespeare Institute. He points out that from the 19th century onward, a whole range of European freedom fighters have invoked Shakespeare in their struggle. This is art not merely for quiet contemplation or self-edification, Fernie argues, but for having a “real, material effect on the course of world history.”

The values instilled by the humanities become more important than ever in today's divided world. As Britain, the United States, and parts of Europe deal with increasing nativism and far-right groups gain ground, and with ethnic and religious violence flaring in parts of the Middle East and Asia, the underlying principles of the humanities — including openness, receptivity, and cultural understanding — are sorely needed. “By encouraging people to think critically about a diversity of cultural experience, we are educating them to be more accepting, and more receptive to different peoples, different societies, different priorities, and different traditions,” says Professor Whitby. He believes that the critical thinking skills inculcated by the humanities are even more vital in a time of intensifying misinformation on social media and online. “We live in a world where it is of increasing importance that people are capable of analyzing information properly, that they are capable of telling fake news from real news, and that they are capable of interrogating political spin,” he says.

Flexible thinking in an automated age

University students can be forgiven for having a more immediate concern: a career that allows them to adapt to a rapidly changing global economy. Predictions that robots will steal jobs by the millions, including in professional services, creates incentives for many to ensure they are on the right side of the divide between “those who tell computers what to do, and those told what to do by computers,” as Silicon Valley investor Marc Andreessen has said. Yet

paradoxically, automation, because it replaces rule-based and structured work, replaces technical jobs faster than those requiring creativity, flexible thinking, and interpersonal understanding.

Remember too that many founders of today's pioneering technology companies were not technical wizards themselves, as Scott Hartley noted in his recent book, *The Fuzzy and the Techie*. Alibaba, which trounced eBay to dominate China's e-commerce market, was founded by an English teacher, Jack Ma. Airbnb, which has reshaped the way we think about trust and the sharing economy, was co-founded by fine arts graduate Brian Chesky. And Apple co-founder Steve Jobs, one of the pioneers of Silicon Valley, was as intrigued by calligraphy and Zen Buddhism as circuit boards and graphical interfaces.

None of this denigrates the value of STEM education. But it shows what we would lose in a rush toward technical learning at the expense of the humanities. Just as our brains comprise right and left hemispheres, so our societies require skills, knowledge, and mind-sets from both the sciences and the liberal arts. "The world is not just made up of material things," says Brown. "It is made up of ideas. If you study how we shape and understand the world, and the ideas that enable us to make sense of living in it, then you are best placed to make a difference."



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