Liberal Arts and Essays in Advanced Seminars

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The Advanced Seminar, known at the University of Denver by the course abbreviation ASEM, creates a small, medium altitude, briefly visited plateau in the liberal arts curriculum for all undergraduate students. From it the students can look back to their formative general education experiences in entering the university through the First-Year Seminars, sampling broad collections of disciplines and "ways of knowing," expanding rhetorical skill and writing fluency, and acquiring languages. The students as juniors or seniors in ASEM slip momentarily out of their majors, which nonetheless occupy part of their peripheral vision. As future graduates they sit with self-assurance in the familiar setting of a seminar while the next phase of life comes hovers indistinctly at the horizon ahead. At this last explicitly liberal arts moment the students and world citizens consolidate and parlay forward their critical thinking over a mixture of approaches to a topic.

In my class, we contemplate, "Do the Wicked Prosper?" It is a twist on an ancient question of the biblical book of Jeremiah: "Why does the way of the wicked prosper?" (Jer. 12:1). As critical thinkers in a world quite different from the prophet Jeremiah's, we can ask whether in fact the wicked prosper. We can add, "Says who?" and "Why?" As we engage one another on our small plateau, essays offer our best chance of writing to practice and accomplish the goals of the liberal arts.

The course material and its connections to the liberal arts multiply potential topics for discussion. To keep the focus on the essays assigned for the course and the way the liberal arts inform the course design, I will grant each topic its own section. First, liberal arts, then essays.

Liberal Arts, especially for ASEM

The liberal arts, etymologically, are the skills of the free person. They are not the arts as "fine arts" or the arts of today's political "liberal." Rather, as the roots let us know, the liberal arts are "arts," from the Latin "*ars*." *Ars* suggests skills, or developed capacities to do things. The adjective "liberal" comes from *liber*—the free-born man. In the shifts of meaning that accrue over centuries, we will want to include here the *libera,* or free woman. In so doing, we note that even in the ancient world discussions considered whether people who were not *liberi* (free-born men) could demonstrate the capacity for such learning. Thus, while the phrase "liberal arts" carries a complex history of connotations, the notion of the skills of the free person can serve educators trying to prepare people for a thoughtful, active, and useful life in a continually shifting

world. The skills of the free person become all the more important in the U.S.A. today, the world power that beckons people around the world as a home and hope for liberty and finds itself evaluated at times by this criterion in the global press.

What are the arts of the free person? Arguments for the liberal arts today derive in their broadest outlines from the heritage of the liberal arts. Although these outlines would shift if enough fine distinctions were drawn into the picture, we share with our predecessors the belief that training in a wide variety of subjects helps people become ready for participation in the world outside the home. In particular, seven standard subjects dominated theories of the liberal arts through the end of the middle ages: rhetoric, logic, and grammar, as well as arithmetic, geometry, astronomy, and music.

From the classical centuries onward, some of people educated thus would go on to study the professions of law and medicine, and in later centuries theology. Others might become educators or they carry on their family's position in commerce, government, or the military. Their patterns of thought did not differ so much from ours that families at that time would believe that their sons developed the skills of generalship or deal-making directly from the liberal arts. Instead, the belief, like that of liberal arts proponents today, was that people could learn basic intellectual skills, such as how to make a persuasive argument and clear distinctions in thought. The liberal arts would prepare the person for conversation across professional boundaries as well as for the acquisition of further forms of specialization, not all of which would be learned in school. The liberal arts education would serve as a preparation, not a destination. A career would extend the liberal arts, not result directly from them. For us, the corollary idea of lifelong learning flows unsurprisingly from the challenges of readying the mind for rich participation in the life of work and the civic world.

So when I write of the skills of the free person, I am informed by our heritage. Yet customarily we do not teach the seven liberal arts of days gone by. So what skills of the free person do I hope to foster for my students, especially those in the last course of their general education and perhaps of their liberal arts coursework? I hope to continue laying the groundwork for intelligent analysis and reflection and problem solving in the public world. I aim for my students to be able to collaborate with other people to define courses of action, celebrate small outcomes on the way to larger accomplishments, reflect on progress and on accomplishment of big goals, and collaborate again to revise, improve, celebrate, and maintain worthy projects. Several more specific skills help initiate and sustain such efforts.

First, citizens collaborate by speaking and writing clearly about important issues so that the people listening or reading can understand key aspects of the situation. Then the audience can reflect on the speaker's or author's point of view in order to develop their own. Clear speech and writing figure prominently on the agenda of liberal arts, in order to foster a functional civic world.

Second, the free person as citizen should represent facts, points of view, people, and social groups fairly. In this sense, fairness implies crucially that the representation—especially of points of view, people, and social groups—should be recognizable to the people represented. When the liberally educated person speaks or writes publicly, the response from the people she describes should be, in the vernacular, "Yeah, that's me" or "That's us!" Adjustments may be needed, but

sketches faithful to the original should facilitate discussion.

Third, specific skills of fair representation include the following. A free citizen operating in the public world should observe and report with care, so making the contours of the situation plain. His representations should avoid the old complaint and instead generate more light than heat. Fair representation also requires analysis, emphasizing major points and explicating their connections. While people still share the 19th century fear that analysis "kills in order to dissect," adroit analysis should allow the whole to show more thoroughly its structure. In the best instances when analysis draws its conclusions, people should engage with satisfaction a fuller self-recognition. Discernment in reading is also one of the skills necessary to mine many kinds of source material. To read carefully, coordinating various passages of the text with our questions about it and other perspectives on it is critical. It's also difficult. Many students in the liberal arts need to learn how to read beyond the smooth surface of textbooks and magazine articles. These two may please us and even assist with some tasks, but they will not suffice to deal with the public realm. Nor do their writers and publishers claim that they will. Exposure to a wide range of subject matters can help students become adept interpreters of written texts as citizens consulting technical, exploratory, ancient, or otherwise perplexing sources of information and insight.

Finally, as a matter of representation, but also of reading and life in society more generally, the free person must be able to create and respond to wholes as well as parts. For such persons, the old defenses, "I was just following orders," or "not my job, why should I care?" must be indefensible, especially as their own utterance. Orders and jobs are always parts of whole modes of conduct. The life of the other person one encounters, of groups of people, of plants and animals and the flux of the inanimate universe potentially impinge on every discussion. They cannot, of course, all be discussed and weighted equally at once. Therefore, the expectation must remain that the free person will focus closely, then distantly, on the aspect of life at hand and its implications for future action and regard for the past. Similarly, the free person will attempt to draw together attention to the detail of information, the great trains of thought, the individual, the small groups, and the largest communities of people involved at the present.

Essays in the ASEM as it Arises from the Liberal Arts

The students write two kinds of essay in the ASEM "Do the Wicked Prosper?": first, expository; second, application of clearly linked concepts to information and stories that deal with prosperity and deprivation. Both kinds of essay serve the purpose of writing to learn because the students have to increase their familiarity with the course materials and think about how to understand them systematically. The second also should persuade an audience of intelligent non-experts that the student has proposed a reasonable judgment about virtue or vice, wickedness or goodness in the financial crisis starting in 2007-2008. The student comes to a circumscribed claim about the course question or a variant of it. Did the wicked prosper? Did the good? Did the innocent suffer? Did the guilty? What was prosperity and what is prosperity in the face of fluctuating financial circumstances? What is goodness and what is wickedness? The essay assignments discourage research outside the material for class. As described later, the essays are a try at understanding materials and advancing positions; they

need not pretend to be an exhaustive presentation.

If this is the task to be accomplished by the end of the course, how are students to do it? The course readings, discussions, and large and small writing tasks move them toward the goal. In reading, they encounter concepts, narratives, and philosophies of virtue and vice, goodness and wickedness. Most recently, the readings included theories and examples of myths, the first nine chapters of Genesis, and most of books I-IV of Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*. Students use the journal feature of Blackboard to write short entries on these, and develop their expository essays from such informal efforts to set out key parts of the reading. Then, as we listen together in class to shows on the financial crisis from National Public Radio's Planet Money programs, the students hear stories from people living through the financial crisis as well as experts' explanations of it. The programs received strong positive notice from the *New York Times*, as well as from a number of academic economists.

The audience for the NPR program *This American Life*, which first broadcast them, encompasses many educational levels, so the shows are accessible, as well as thoughtful, engaging, and informative. They also represent the kind of information and perspective that the students as free persons in a civic realm will need and encounter in their lives in the future. The students draft expository papers and share them to explore one perspective at a time on virtue and vice or goodness and wickedness. Then they apply each point of view to the financial crisis as presented in the Planet Money programs. Revisions follow to produce the required number of pages of polished writing for ASEMs.

Class discussions afford opportunities to wrestle with the texts and to discuss the larger liberal arts context of the assignment with the students. For instance, they might wonder why we bother to analyze the readings with great attention to detail. One elaboration on the exercise would highlight that we often have to understand a sequence of events and the roles people played in them in order to carry on our lives. The discussion of the financial crisis can be foreshadowed to make the point. Who did what? When? Why? We may never discern full answers to these questions, but we want answers because we hope that answering could lead us to avoid future crises or diminish their impact. Given the need to cope with such complex events and their consequences, we need to be able to look at stories closely and fairly, so that everyone involved can recognize and comment on the narrative without haranguing about its presentation. Given general agreement, people can move more productively to wrestle with implications and courses of action for the future.

The expository essays move forward the process of practicing the arts of the free person. First, they require students to analyze a position that is not their own so that they can present it fairly to someone else. Rather than reproduce the whole of Genesis 3, the story of Adam and Eve and the serpent, for example, they must analyze what important points it conveys about goodness and wickedness. They must be fair to the story. Fairness, when Adam is not available to comment on the essay's depiction of him, implies that the representation of him should be recognizable to people with a range of attachments to the narrative, even if they disagree with the author about its implications. So, for instance, the story exhibits the serpent making arguments to Eve about the goodness of the forbidden fruit (Gen. 3:4-5). After she accepts these and eats, she offers the fruit to Adam, who eats it (3:6). The student then can argue, for instance, that forbidden things can be

made to seem attractive and that evil actions arise from their attractiveness. Among the conclusions that the student cannot draw fairly is that Adam's greed for the fruit overcame his obedience to God and he succumbed to a small nudge from the serpent. Nor could it depict human nature as inheriting Adam's susceptibility to a non-human evil force. Why not? The text says nothing about the reasons Adam accepted the fruit and the serpent does not speak to him.

Essaying

The second kind of essay applies the student's understanding of goodness and wickedness or virtue and vice to the financial crisis. It allows the student to try her skills. It lets her to see that her fair representations and careful analyses can lead to a thoughtful evaluation. And it most likely will culminate in the awareness that nothing absolute, airtight, or flawless can result. The essay suits this situation well because etymologically an essay is a "try." The root of the word in French, *essayer*, means "to try." For a college course, an essay should engage and persuade the reader that it presents a reasonable and sometimes enjoyable try. But especially for someone aiming to contribute as a free person to a public realm, the essay must also allow others to try. It should contribute to a cultural discussion, but not try to dominate it and rarely try to end it. Instead, it should foster a common good that will come into view only as the process of many analysts' and visionaries' work.

This caveat about trying bears repetition for both kinds of essays but especially for the application of concepts to the financial crisis. Typically, by writing the first essay, students have gained confidence that they can articulate some part of Aristotle's philosophy or a narrative account of good and evil. Yet anxieties about their competence appear like mosquitos as the class members try to use their prior work to set out a view on part of the financial crisis. The assignment is loosely worded, so anxiety will tend to accompany the freedom in any case. Are they permitted to limit their discussion to the homeowners who took out mortgages they could not afford? How can they talk about "greedy bankers" when companies exist to make money? How can they evaluate situations too big for anyone to understand fully?

As these questions recur, I repeat that the students are trying; they need not give the be-all and end-all evaluation of the financial crisis and all its players. They have the chance to try to bring into view an evaluation based on what they know; they need not claim to trump every other evaluation based on what anyone else might know. I remind them of all or part of how their paper continues their training in the liberal arts: The process of writing the paper will force them to observe and set out information fairly, analyze and seek the importance of various kinds of information and evaluation for the argument they want to make, read with discernment, and imagine that their perspective will come into conversation with others and perhaps then need revision. This last eventuality is assured, because they bring drafts of the papers to class to discuss with other students. The suggested length of the paper encourages analysis, because the aim is to set out the argument, both concepts for evaluation and information to be evaluated, in five pages. So emphasis of what is important rather than endless rehearsal of concepts or evidence becomes central. And their capacity to enter as a free, if finite, person into the public world becomes plain.

Normally, the students report success with various aspects of the course. Few say in so many words that they find their facility in the liberal arts increased.

Some will say, however, that they discovered that factors of the financial crisis can be highlighted and understood, that they see that evaluative judgments can be made in line within certain guides for thought (i.e., stories and philosophies about goodness and wickedness), and that they would like to know more. If such comments arise face to face, I may respond that the liberal arts education is meant to nourish a desire to know more, and that they have practiced once again with the tools of the free person. I hope they are more ready to participate in the public sphere. When the student rues the fact that none of the efforts have yielded a complete analysis or assuredly correct judgment, I note that no tool alone is complete, just as none of us alone is complete. I encourage them to believe that even if at the end of the formal liberal arts education one cannot say absolutely, "Here is a major problem and I can solve it," one can say with confidence, "Yes, thoughtfully and with some diligence, we can together achieve some progress."

Inevitably, the students descend from the small plateau of our course. They complete the requirements of the major and take it along with their liberal arts education as they leave the university and commence their next activities. As educators we can train students to survey the landscape, point directions, and otherwise prepare for future travels. Whether they keep looking forward or sometimes glance back, they will have the opportunity to see and speak with discernment and care about the world and its inhabitants, close at hand and far off, in presentations that speak clearly and helpfully to their communities' situations and projects.

Appendix

Planet Money Broadcasts on the Financial Crisis of 2007-2008

Blumberg, Alex, and Adam Davidson. "The Giant Pool of Money." http://www.thisamericanlife.org/radio-archives/episode355/the-giant-pool-of-money. First broadcast May 9, 2008. Accessed January 22, 2013. Web.

Blumberg, Alex, and Adam Davidson. "Another Frightening Show About the Economy." http://www.thisamericanlife.org/radio-archives/episode/365/another-frightening-show-about-the-economy. First broadcast October 3, 2008. Accessed January 24, 2013. Web.

Blumberg, Alex, and Adam Davidson. "Bad Bank." http://www.thisamericanlife.org/radio-archives/episode/375/Bad-Bank. First broadcast February 27, 2009. Accessed February 26, 2013. Web.

Blumberg, Alex, and Adam Davidson. "The Watchmen." http://www.thisamericanlife.org/radio-archives/episode/382/the-watchmen. First broadcast June 5, 2009. Accessed February 28, 2013.