

The Humanities: What Keeps Us Human

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Try to picture a society where the arts and humanities do not exist. There would be no music, art, or literature. Religion and philosophy would be nonexistent, the study of history would be nullified, and intelligent debate would never happen. Obviously, a culture like this would be dry, unimpassioned, and rather incomplete. However, this appears to be the type of world that is commonly depicted as ideal—a world where science, math, and technology reign supreme and the arts take a backseat to these more practical fields. Many people today are discounting the value of the humanities and attempting to minimize their importance in education as well as their significance to daily life.

In modern culture, the humanities tend to attract much more derision than respect. They have been labeled as elitist, outdated, and unnecessary. Their funding has been drastically cut and their status in universities significantly reduced. The justification for these actions: that science, math, and engineering are more practical and applicable in real life and therefore deserve more money and more attention. This has not always been the case though. The humanities, especially fields such as writing, debate, and philosophy, used to be regarded as very valuable. The founders of our country, from Thomas Jefferson on, promoted civic involvement and liberal arts education from the very beginning. However, as our culture becomes increasingly technologically minded, the humanities have been pushed to the periphery.

As a Writing and Rhetoric major, I feel the need to defend my area of study by arguing that what I am studying is in fact significant in the global scheme of things. The humanities remain highly relevant and important today, despite, and perhaps even in

connection with, our technologically minded culture. Throughout my paper, I will discuss the place of the arts in education, in government, and in modern culture as a whole, as well as the ways in which science and the humanities complement each other.

The first place where the humanities are often attacked is in schools and universities. In a speech by creativity expert and educational adviser Ken Robinson, titled “Changing Education Paradigms,” he confronts the current lack of emphasis on the arts in education. He notes that the arts create an aesthetic experience, engaging the senses, rather than an anaesthetic experience such as that provided by other disciplines like science and math. Robinson brings up the issue of the “ADHD epidemic” that some claim is sweeping the US, and proposes that ADHD is not really a problem with the children but rather with the educational system. The way children are taught today requires them to shut off their senses and simply memorize facts in order to “get them through their education” (Robinson). They learn hard-and-fast facts and that there is only one correct answer to most problems. However, a focus on the arts would allow children to learn as they are naturally inclined: by using all of their senses (Robinson). Areas such as theater, music, and art are especially useful in encouraging students to employ all of their senses and devise creative and original solutions.

Robinson also raises the topic of divergent thinking, or the ability to come up with many solutions to a problem rather than just one. Experiments done to test children’s divergent thinking showed that their aptitude for this skill decreased significantly in direct correlation with their progress in school. This demonstrates how the educational system stifles this type of thinking, which could be encouraged through more instruction in the arts (Robinson). In “The Relevance of Liberal Arts to a Prosperous Democracy” by Martha J.

Kanter, she brings up another good point: that instruction in the arts has been shown to benefit students' learning in other areas as well. The lack of emphasis on aesthetic fields appears to stunt important critical thinking skills and goes against the grain of a child's natural method of learning.

Outside of the school system, the humanities still have value in real-life situations. Many people, particular those whose occupations involve science and math, doubt this. They use statements such as "No one ever died of English" to propose that the humanities do not have practical, useful applications. However, in "The Case for History and the Humanities," Gabrielle M. Spiegel rebuts this claim by saying, "Anyone who says 'no one ever died of the humanities' has not thought much about what happens when states claim the right to define what humanity is, or who is good and who is evil, and therefore justify movements like ethnic cleansing." The main task of the humanities is to promote understanding of other cultures' ways of living and to emphasize the importance of every human life, which is something that should never be devalued (Spiegel). The arts give perspective about the world and other cultures and discourage discrimination (Kanter). Dimensions of the humanities involving ethics and linguistics are crucial in situations such as the ongoing war in Iraq, which the US entered without a clear understanding of the politics, religion, and culture of the Iraqi people (Spiegel). As Spiegel wisely points out, "The exercise of power without a sense of ethical responsibility is dangerous; the exercise of power without historical knowledge is a prescription for disaster." We interact with all kinds of people on a daily basis, and without a proper understanding and respect for what they have to offer through our understanding of the humanities, we risk getting ourselves in big trouble.

As demonstrated by the example of the war in Iraq, the humanities are of great importance to the government in this day and age. In "The Relevance of the Humanities," Harvard professor Gabriel Paquette encourages more partnership between colleges and government in the areas of the humanities. Paquette suggests that "It is not farfetched to imagine government-university collaboration on a wide range of crucial issues, including public transport infrastructure, early childhood education, green design, civil war mediation, food security, ethnic strife, poverty alleviation, city planning, and immigration reform." Clearly, assistance from students in humanities fields is in high demand as far as the government is concerned. Fields such as law, foreign languages, and philosophy can be especially useful here; researchers in the humanities also can have good insights into human behavior, communication across cultures, and historical perspectives on current issues (Paquette). This is especially important considering the US's prominent place in the world order and the many cultures with which we interact. In fact, in 2004, the government issued the *Call to Action for National Foreign Language Capabilities*, acknowledging the need for the humanities in foreign relations (Spiegel). Not only does the study of the humanities help us to better understand other cultures, but it also gives us a better understanding of our own nation and what we stand for and support as a country (Spiegel).

The humanities also have other applications in real life beyond foreign relations and diplomacy. As Chuks Oluigbo proposes in "Nigeria: The Relevance of Art to Practical Living," one of Nigeria's most widely recognized uses of the humanities is as a source of pleasure and relaxation. The humanities, such as art and literature, provide leisure activities that also broaden the mind (Oluigbo). At the very least, the humanities are sources of aesthetic beauty that can be appreciated and enjoyed (Oluigbo). On a more

practical note, employers today value strong writing, communication, and teamwork skills, which are all abilities that are fostered by the humanities (Kanter). The arts also can be a way of teaching moral truths and bringing social wrongdoings out into the open (Oluigbo). Often, an issue that someone might be afraid to directly address could be brought to light through a work of art, a song, or a poem in a much less obtrusive and confrontational way. One of the most important roles of the arts is to pass down aspects of a culture (Oluigbo). The humanities capture the essence of a society—the sufferings, worries, and passions of a people—which science, math, and technology, valuing fact over feeling, can never do (Robinson). Because the humanities are not founded on facts but rather promote creativity and imagination, their manifestations vary from culture to culture, and understanding these variations helps us to better understand as well as cooperate with our fellow human beings. I believe this is by far the most significant application of the humanities; living in harmony with other people is absolutely essential to a prosperous, peaceful, and happy life.

Of course, no one attempts to deny that math and science contribute significant concepts as well. In fact, great results can often come from collaboration between the sciences and humanities. Surprisingly, liberal arts colleges give almost twice as many doctorates in sciences as other universities do per capita, demonstrating that even in colleges centered on the humanities, the sciences are by no means considered inconsequential (Kanter). According to Kanter, who is the Under Secretary of the Department of Education, “a new melding of the arts and sciences at the margin of the disciplines can foster an explosion of creativity and innovation resulting in new fields of study.” The collaboration of two seemingly opposite branches of learning has the potential to produce radical new ways of thinking. STEM fields (science, technology, engineering, and

mathematics) are often lauded for their ability to teach problem solving and adaptive solution seeking, but the arts are capable of teaching these skills as well because they value “divergent thinking” and creativity (Kanter). Additionally, instruction in the humanities has been shown to help students in other areas of learning including math and reading, and it results in better grades and higher graduation rates (Kanter).

Despite these benefits, some would still argue that the humanities are irrelevant and unimportant, claiming that factual scientific knowledge is the only thing important to the modern world or that the humanities are outdated, leftover from a long-gone way of life. With the increasing significance of fields such as medicine and technology, many people question why the humanities should continue to receive funding in our schools and universities. Why are they relevant? According to Oluigbo, “The word ‘relevance’ presupposes usefulness and value.” The humanities possess both of these qualities. Their value comes through the fact that they are a source of beauty and a joy to many people and that they provide historical perspective (Oluigbo). However, arguments for the humanities based on their historical worth and sensory appeal are often not enough to convince critics; therefore, one must consider why they are also useful. Gabrielle M. Spiegel perhaps states it best, saying, “The case for historical and humanistic study rests on our ability to address the growing needs of the contemporary world for historical, linguistic, and cultural competencies.” While it is true that the arts do not provide cures for diseases or new technology, the humanities are useful because they allow people to communicate across borders and deal with other people in just and reasonable ways. They promote a sense of morality and responsibility, which are unquestionably key characteristics we look for in our leaders. In fact, I was interested to learn that our current president studied for two

years at a liberal arts college, and nearly 20% of past US presidents graduated with liberal arts degrees (Kanter). President Obama states that his time at Occidental College helped him to mature and to begin to comprehend the world beyond himself and encouraged him to dream of creating change—all because of a well-rounded education that included ample instruction in the humanities (Kanter).

Whether in the school system, government operations, or everyday living, the humanities play a significant role in modern society. Though some would claim that science and math are more important, the truth is that the humanities also have valuable applications and insights to contribute to real-life situations. I am certainly not discounting the worth of the sciences, though. In fact, when the arts and sciences are combined, they have been shown to produce even better results than they would have separately. Therefore, despite skepticism, the humanities remain integral to our understanding of the world and people around us, which is an ability that should never be undervalued.

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