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Apropos of...

Liberal Education in an Asian Context

By Kathryn Mohrman

AM INTRIGUED BY DISCUSSIONS of liberal education in unexpected places—new universities being created in Eastern European nations recently independent from the former Soviet Union, prestigious institutions in China experimenting with innovations for their undergraduate students, and Japanese campuses rethinking their long-standing traditions of general education.

Why are academics in widely separated places talking about the same thing? Or do they really mean the same thing when they use the terms "liberal arts" or "liberal education"? What might be the implications for Asian universities?

This topic has special salience for me because I am a passionate advocate for liberal education, having been educated at an American liberal arts college, having served as president of another, and more generally having been an advocate for my entire career. It is one thing to be enthusiastic at home, however, and another to think carefully about educational issues while working with institutions on the other side of the globe. I hope, however, that my teaching experiences in China, and my travels in other Asian countries, give me some understanding of the history and culture of this part of the world.

American colleagues usually respond to the phrase "liberal education" in one of two ways—a philosophical conversation at the macro level of mission statements, or a micro level discussion of curriculum requirements

and general education courses. I am attracted by a different approach taken by William Cronon, William Jackson Turner Professor at the University of Wisconsin at Madison. (His article is on line at www.aacu.org/issues/liberaleducation/cronon.cfm; this is an adaptation of printed work found in *The American Scholar*, v.67, n.1, Autumn 1998 and *Liberal Education*, v.85, n.1, Winter 1999).

Cronon describes liberal education in terms of the qualities of its graduates rather than the courses offered, an alternative way of thinking about the issue. Cronon poses a challenging question: "How would you recognize liberally educated persons?" He gives a 10-point answer, which I have condensed below.

1. THEY KNOW HOW TO LISTEN AND TO HEAR. Educated individuals know how to pay attention to people and to the world around them. They can follow an argument, track logical reasoning, detect illogic, hear the emotions that lie behind both the logic and the illogic, and ultimately empathize with the person who is feeling those emotions.

2. THEY READ AND THEY UNDERSTAND.

Liberally educated persons are literate across a wide range of genres and media. They can enjoy popular fiction, classic literature, and works of nonfiction ranging from biographies to current policy to recent discoveries of science. They also know how to enjoy great art museums, concerts, and theater productions. They can wander through a prairie or a woodland and recognize the creatures they encounter there, the meaning of the rocks, the lay of the land. They recognize fine craftsmanship, whether in carpentry or plumbing or auto mechanics. The liberally educated encounter the world as a fascinating and intricate set of texts waiting to be read and understood.

3. THEY CAN TALK WITH ANYONE.

They can ask thoughtful questions and they can hold a conversation with anyone they meet, whether that person is a high school dropout or a Nobel Laureate, a child or a patient in a hospital, a factory worker or a farmer, or a corporate CEO.

4. THEY CAN WRITE CLEARLY AND PERSUASIVELY AND MOVINGLY.

They have the ability to express what is in one's mind and heart so as to get these things across to the reader—to teach, persuade, and move that person.

5. THEY CAN SOLVE A WIDE VARIETY OF PUZZLES AND PROBLEMS.

This ability includes basic numeracy, but the broader and more practical skills are those of the analyst, the manager, the engineer, the critic: the ability to look at a complicated reality, break it into pieces, figure out how it works, with the end result of being able to do practical things in the real world.

6. EDUCATED PEOPLE RESPECT RIGOR, NOT SO MUCH FOR ITS OWN SAKE, BUT AS A WAY OF SEEKING TRUTH.

Truly educated people love learning, but they love wisdom more. They can appreciate a closely reasoned argument without being unduly impressed by mere logic. They understand that knowledge always serves values; they strive to put these two, knowledge and values, into constant dialogue with each other.



7. THEY PRACTICE RESPECT AND HUMILITY, TOLERANCE, AND SELF-CRITICISM.

They have the intellectual range and the emotional generosity to step outside their own experiences and prejudices to recognize the parochialism of their own viewpoints, thereby opening themselves to perspectives very different from their own. From this commitment to intellectual openness and tolerance flow all those aspects of liberal learning that celebrate the value of learning foreign languages, exposing oneself to cultures far distant from one's own, learning the history of long-ago times, and encountering the many ways in which men and women have known the sacred—a rich sense of how very different people are from each other and how much they also share in common.

8. THEY UNDERSTAND HOW TO GET THINGS DONE IN THE WORLD.

Learning how to get things done in an effort to leave it a better place is surely one of the most practical and important lessons we can take from any education. It is fraught with peril because the power to act in the world can so easily be abused. So we study power and ask ourselves what it means to act rightly and wrongly in our use of power. We struggle to try to know how we can do good and avoid doing wrong.

9. THEY NURTURE AND EMPOWER THE PEOPLE AROUND THEM.

No one ever acts alone. Liberally educated persons understand that they belong to a community whose prosperity and well-be-

ing are crucial to their own; they help that community flourish by giving of themselves to make the success of others possible.

10. THEY FOLLOW E.M. FORSTER'S INJUNCTION IN THE NOVEL HOWARD'S END: "ONLY CONNECT."

More than anything else, being an educated person means being able to see connections so as to be able to make sense of the world and act within it in creative ways. A liberal education is about gaining the power and the insight and the generosity and finally the freedom and the wisdom to connect.

Cronon is writing as an American for an American academic audience. He makes a number of assumptions that may not apply in other cultures and in other settings. Let me broaden the dialogue by asking some questions inspired by elements of Cronon's presentation. I am raising questions since it seems presumptuous of me as an American to make declarations about the meaning of liberal education for Pakistanis, Malaysians, or Koreans. I hope, however, that my questions will inspire responses by Asians and Asian Americans to extend the conversation.

First, *What is the role of the individual?* Cronon assumes the primacy of the individual, although near the end of the passage he speaks about community responsibility as well. For an international audience, however, his assumptions may be less valid. The conventional wisdom, when comparing Western and Asian characteristics, is that the former is focused on the person as the

unit of analysis while the latter emphasizes the group—family, corporation, neighborhood—to a greater extent.

Cronon's final injunction, "only connect" must seem strange to many Asians. If the group predominates over the individual, then any one person is naturally connected in a complex web of relationships. As I understand the traditional values of East Asian societies, the person is part of a family and a community, not an autonomous entity as is so highly valued by Americans and others in the Western tradition.

Cronon might well have started with his last point first if he were writing for an Asian audience. Rather than exhorting people to "only connect" he would focus instead on the existence of families and communities, emphasizing the person in context rather than the person as a separate unique individual. It is no accident that names in many Asian cultures begin with the family name to signal the identity of the person as part of a multi-generational lineage.

To be fair to Cronon, however, most of his descriptions discuss the ways in which human beings interact—to listen, to empower, to persuade. But in my mind, as I read his 10 characteristics of liberally educated persons, I had a picture in my mind (my very American mind) of a recent college graduate, a young adult, speaking one-on-one with another individual to listen, to empower, to persuade. My mental image did not include parents, siblings, neighbors, coworkers, the fabric of community that seems so much more prevalent in the world beyond the borders of the United States. My guess is that Asian readers of Cronon's essay might well have a different picture in their minds. Thus the unspoken, unacknowledged emphasis on the individual might well be the biggest challenge in translating the concept of liberal education to cultures beyond the Western tradition.

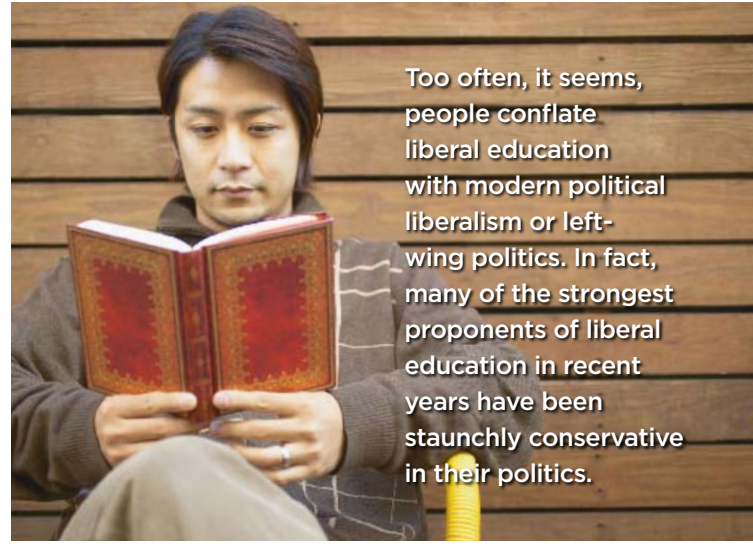
Second, Cronon's essay raises questions of other types as well. For example, *What is "liberal" about liberal education?* The meaning here is cultural and historical although a number of Asian colleagues continue to presume a political interpretation. I remind my audiences that the ancient Greeks viewed liberal education as learning that was reserved for citizens (i.e., free men, in contrast to slaves). Too often,

it seems, people conflate liberal education with modern political liberalism or left-wing politics. In fact, many of the strongest proponents of liberal education in recent years have been staunchly conservative in their politics. One need only glance at such recent American examples as Alan Bloom, Lynn Cheney, and Dinesh D'Souza.

Third, *Is some specific content necessary for a liberal education?* The ancient Greeks thought so, but with an international perspective it seems impossible to say, "These texts are essential and others are not." Virtually any material can be taught in a liberally educating way, while even the most venerated works can be presented in a dry, pedantic, decidedly non-liberally educating way. Thus an accounting professor, challenging students to think about ethical issues, could be described as engaged in liberal education, while a classics professor, asking students only to memorize dates or arcane points of Latin grammar, might well be considered illiberal.

So if it is not content that makes the difference, what fosters the qualities that Cronon articulates? The previous paragraph hints at my position—that pedagogy and process are critical. I believe that the combination of intellectual and human interactions can best develop the abilities to communicate, empathize, solve problems, and so on, rather than being developed by specific subject matter. Certainly the goals of liberal education come more easily with the *Ramayana* than with comic books, with history more than with chemistry, but *how* one approaches the academic enterprise is vital. Research on American higher education has found that the most important characteristics of effective undergraduate programs are interactions between professors and students, especially outside the classroom; the second most important factor is interaction among the students themselves.

While it is possible to have interaction in mass situations, the more conducive environment is the seminar or the tutorial, with



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a small group of learners actively engaged around challenging intellectual material. Although most universities rely heavily on lecture courses in which students are primarily passive recipients of information, they also use seminars, tutorials, discussion sections and mentoring relationships between students and professors to make education more personal. In Confucian cultures, too, there is an old tradition of teacher-student interaction in which young men gathered around venerated scholars to study Chinese classics in preparation for careers in the civil service. The tutors in this *shuyuan* tradition were responsible for both moral and intellectual development of their pupils.

Seminar-style teaching is a very expensive pedagogy, to be sure, because it requires a high faculty-to-student ratio. At a time when many universities in both Asia and the United States are struggling with financial limitations, my desire for classroom interaction may seem to be a fantasy. I hope, however, that students might have at least an occasional small class in which to hone their discussion skills and to experience the joys of true intellectual engagement in the company of other learners.

Interestingly, Cronon omits any discussion of the process of learning, of the excitement of discovering new concepts, of the joy of interacting with ideas throughout one's life. He speaks at one point about wisdom but is silent on the ways in which one might develop the characteristics and applications of wisdom in everyday life. The thirst for learning is one uniquely human quality we all share; becoming a lifelong learner is certainly one hallmark

of a liberally educated person.

What are the impacts of globalization on liberal education? Cronon writes about communication with and tolerance of other people, but in this era of increasing interdependence he could have said more about experiencing different cultures. In today's world, one is impoverished if restricted to only one ethical, religious, or cultural tradition. This is one reason why I am such a strong advocate of study abroad—it forces students to confront beliefs, values, customs, cultures, even food different from their own. Americans are quite parochial; only about 15 percent of U.S. citizens possess passports. Few U.S. citizens travel outside our borders although our history of immigration has brought many cultural traditions to our shores. A number of Asian societies tend to be more homogeneous even though the impact of Western cultures means that citizens of Thailand, Bangladesh, and the Philippines know much more about American movies, sports, politics, and values than their American counterparts know about Asian topics. The importance of experience with other cultures, however, is valid for all.

The next question that comes to my mind is *What is truth?* Cronon never claims that there is one absolute truth although he speaks about the search for truth. I don't want to get into a postmodernist debate about relativism but I do think truth is contextually defined. For an international audience, it might be necessary to think about multiple truths, or culturally mediated truths, or even individually relevant truths rather than a simple statement about "the search for truth."

What about the truly private sphere—the spiritual, the contemplation of the mystery of life? Asia is the source of many of the world's great religions and philosophical traditions as human beings have searched for meaning beyond family or immediate community. For millions of people outside of Western societies, the existence of a rich fabric of shared belief is virtually a given. Many others, less overtly religious, find deeper meaning in nature, human creativity, or the enormity of the cosmos. Cronon's totally secular essay reflects another assumption of American

culture—that spiritual matters are rarely acknowledged in public discourse.

Cronon demonstrates another American characteristic in his emphasis for action. His ten points describe skills and activities—talking, reading, problem solving—rather than fundamental characteristics of being. Perhaps this also reflects the utilitarian or instrumental approach to education favored by many Americans, who see a college degree as a job credential or a status enhancement. Thus, Cronon says almost nothing about the "being" end of a doing/being continuum; he does not discuss aesthetic sensibilities or even such fundamental human qualities of kindness and generosity (although they can be inferred from his discussion of humility and tolerance). He could do much more with ethical and moral behavior, certainly a central tenet of many Asian religious traditions.

Finally, *What characteristics of the ideal person would Asian scholars wish to include in a definition of well-educated or liberally educated persons?* What is missing in Cronon's ten points? What would be vital to include in a statement by a Hindu or Buddhist or Muslim observer? For that matter, would an Asian Christian respond differently than a European or American Christian? And do these points vary with gender as well? Should they? I leave these questions as challenges to readers of this essay.

Let me conclude with two variations on Cronon's initial question:

Is the development of liberally educated persons an appropriate goal in Asian societies?

And if so, what characteristics would allow you to recognize them?

I look forward to the perspectives of others as we work together to educate the leaders of the twenty-first century—worldwide. **IE**

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