Philosophies of Resolution 1

Resolved: In formal education liberal arts ought to be valued above practical skills

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Once I ventured into a team policy outround to watch. The 1A, who was a funny guy, asked for judging philosophies. The last judge said that she was a lawyer and wanted an entertaining round. The 1A responded, “We’ll try to provide you with that,” and the room chuckled. Later, in 1AR, the 1A was providing clarification on a statistic the negative had questioned the importance of. He said, “Look, judges, this evidence clearly supports the Affirmative! Even a lawyer could see that!” The room erupted in laughter; the speaker couldn’t move on with his speech for twenty seconds. Everyone thought it was hilarious, except the kids who came in just before the 2NC. They were lost; they didn’t understand the larger context of the discussion.

Why did I tell this story? Because it’s what happens to a lot of LD debaters. I don’t mean LDers are late to debate rounds, I mean they often miss the larger context of the discussion in which they are participating. This year the resolutions are about education, the economy, and the environment. Many great minds have already given brilliant speeches about these things. Unfortunately, competition-age debaters haven’t been around long enough to see the discussion. It is like walking into that TP round and asking the guy in the next seat, “What’d they say so far?” He might have a good summary; he might not. What would be far better is a transcript of the previous speeches. If a debater had the transcripts, he could probably give the next rebuttal speech.

It’s the same with the ideas in LD. What some debaters do once they get the resolution is go to Google/Wikipedia and ask, “What’s been said about this?” They might find a good answer; they might not.

What would be far better is a record of the best minds and thoughts about the ideas. There is such a record—great books.

If you’re even slightly intimidated by the thought of reading original philosophical works, remember C. S. Lewis’ admonition that, “The simplest student will be able to understand, if not all, yet a very great deal of what Plato said; but hardly anyone can understand some modern books on Platonism. It has always therefore been one of my main endeavors as a teacher to persuade the young that firsthand knowledge is not only more worth acquiring than secondhand knowledge, but is usually much easier and more delightful to acquire.”[[1]](#footnote-1) This year, do not be the debater who just relies on summaries of the works of John Dewey or Adam Smith; read them yourselves. You might be missing out on more than a joke about lawyers.

What is the difference between arts and skills? For the purposes of this resolution, there are not any. An art is "A skill at doing a specified thing, typically one acquired through practice”[[2]](#footnote-2) A skill is a “A developed talent or ability.”[[3]](#footnote-3) These two are largely indistinguishable.

# What are Liberal Arts?

There are two common definitions of liberal arts: one modern, one traditional. The modern definition of liberal arts is “Academic disciplines, including literature, history, languages, philosophy, mathematics, and general sciences, viewed in contrast to professional and technical disciplines.”[[4]](#footnote-4) As you can see, this definition covers nearly all school subjects; the second part of the definition casts liberal arts as non-professional (i.e., you can’t make money with them) and non-technical (i.e., archaic or non-scientific). This definition is problematic because it’s very broad and general. It ignores the significant grey area of arts that are both liberal and professional; e.g., astronauts and engineers actually do use calculus on a day-to-day basis. Is calculus liberal or practical? The first definition can’t answer this question neatly. The second definition of liberal arts is “The disciplines comprising the trivium and quadrivium.”[[5]](#footnote-5) The trivium–which means three roads—consists of grammar, dialectics, and rhetoric: more concisely, the arts of language. The quadrivium—four roads—consists of arithmetic, geometry, harmonics, and astronomy: the arts of number. These liberal arts are part of a larger tradition of classical education. Two other key components of classical education are shaping students’ loves—especially in early childhood, surrounding the student with art, literature, and people that embody wisdom and virtue—and the study of the four sciences—bodies of knowledge about nature, people, metaphysics & epistemology, and God. Most of Western education since the ancient Greeks has been in this classical tradition.

Greek Education is the birthplace of classical education. Largely, the Greeks asked all the right questions: “who is man?” (Anthropology), “what should he do?” (Ethics), what is the world? (Natural science), and many more questions. The liberal arts, especially mathematics, composed the body of Greek education; these were seen not as useful but as good for their own sake. Greek education was largely for elite, free populations; thus, the origin of the term ‘liberal arts’ meaning arts for a free person. Greek education was good but incomplete; without the special revelation of God’s Word and Incarnation, the Greeks were missing answers to many of their questions.

Enter medieval classical education. Taking the best of Greek Education, mostly books, medieval educators shaped the Christian classical tradition. It tended to emphasize the Trivium, language arts, more than the Greeks. This is the educational system that produced the Renaissance, the Reformation, the Enlightenment, and America (seriously, John Adams studied math, Latin, and Greek—the Liberal Arts—for most of his formal education; other Founding Fathers did the same).

Several philosophers have articulated what makes liberal arts the heart and soul of education. Here are a few of them.

## Plato/Socrates

The importance of Plato to Western thought cannot be overstated. Alfred North Whitehead tried when he wrote, “The safest general characterization of the European philosophical tradition is that it consists of a series of footnotes to Plato.”[[6]](#footnote-6) Socrates exists only as a character in Plato’s writings; i.e., Socrates himself never wrote anything that we still have today. He is the namesake for Socratic method teaching, the way classical educators try to teach. It consists of two stages: first, the ironic stage, wherein the teacher, through questions, helps the student see that he does not know something; second, the maieutic stage, wherein the teacher, again through questions, helps the student arrive at the truth himself.

Read [*Book VII of The Republic*](http://www.apple.com) to get a feel for the Socratic method and Socrates’ views on education; the most relevant to the debate is that he thought society should be ruled by philosopher-kings, who should be educated in mathematics and dialectics (liberal arts) in order to be fit to rule.[[7]](#footnote-7)

## Aristotle

The star-pupil of Plato, Aristotle tutored an even greater pupil himself—Alexander the Great. Alexander the Great exported Greek culture to the Eastern Mediterranean and later Greek culture spread to Western Europe through the Rome Empire. In a very direct way, Aristotle was the teacher of the West. His primary belief was that education is necessary to live a good life. Only the educated are happy. He also thought liberal arts were better than skills useful for paid work. In fact, he thought that even if the liberal arts were totally useless, “…these studies are to be valued for their own sake, while those pursued for the sake of an occupation must be looked upon as no more than necessary means to other ends.”[[8]](#footnote-8)

## Charlotte Mason

Charlotte Mason was a late nineteenth- early twentieth century educator in Britain. She is largely in the classical tradition of older philosophers but incarnated her ideas about education somewhat differently; she was a translator of old ideas into the modern world. She also desired “Liberal Education for All.”[[9]](#footnote-9)

To argue effectively for the Affirmative, debaters should acquire a working knowledge of classical liberal arts education. The two best resources for this are the *Circe Institute’s* [*website*](https://www.circeinstitute.org/) and Ravi Jain and Kevin Clark’s *The Liberal Arts Tradition: A Philosophy of Christian Classical Education*, a thorough but short book on the basics of liberal arts education.

# What are Practical Skills?

Practical Skills, unlike Liberal Arts, are somewhat harder to define because they are so broad. Synonyms like ‘useful’ skills are ultimately unhelpful because they don’t explain any further. In my case, I define practical skills as immediately beneficial skills, because action, and not theory, is the purpose of a practical skill.

## John Dewey

Dewey was he most notable educational progressivist. He was part of the broader philosophical and cultural movement of the turn of the century towards bettering humanity. The guiding principle that humans are, and always have been, progressing formed the foundation of Dewey’s educational philosophy.

He believed that education “proceeds by the participation of the individual in the social consciousness of the race”[[10]](#footnote-10); basically, education exists to initiate children into society so that they can carry it on—so that they can progress. Dewey sees the child as a social creature and the child’s education as unconscious adoption of his civilization; thus, Dewey believes “the true centre of correlation of the school subjects is not science, nor literature, nor history, nor geography, but the child’s own social activities.”[[11]](#footnote-11) It follows that social skills, being extremely immediately beneficial, are the most practical of skills. Dewey is a great resource for the Negative. It may be worth reading Dewey’s *Experience & Education*. If a ninety-seven-page read is too long, try *“My Pedagogic Creed,”* which is only three pages.

## Rudolf Steiner

Rudolf Steiner was an eccentric man in the truest sense of the word (he was outside the center of normal society). He was a theosophist until he founded his own school of thought, Anthroposophy; both of these belief systems are concerned with forming an inter-faith network of thinkers striving to find Truth by developing the self; it’s complex and odd stuff. Steiner founded the first Waldorf schools (the name came from the German cigarette factory where most of the parents of the children of the first school worked). Waldorf education is distinctive because of (among other things) its division of children into three stages—practical, artistic, and intellectual. Waldorf educators strive to evenly balance all three areas in education. This is very useful for balanced negatives: intellectual (corresponding to the liberal arts), artistic, and practical education are all equal; thus, the resolution cannot be true.”[[12]](#footnote-12)

## Ralph Waldo Emerson

Ralph Waldo Emerson was, perhaps, the most influential transcendentalist. He saw education, and life in general, as having meaning only when viewed and lived in accordance with great transcendental ideals that the individual must organize for himself. In this quote from “The American Scholar,” Emerson makes the point that action is inextricably linked with real thought and scholarship. “There goes in the world a notion, that the scholar should be a recluse, a valetudinarian, — as unfit for any handiwork or public labor, as a penknife for an axe. The so-called ‘practical men’ sneer at speculative men, as if, because they speculate or see, they could do nothing…Action is with the scholar subordinate, but it is essential…Inaction is cowardice, but there can be no scholar without the heroic mind. The preamble of thought, the transition through which it passes from the unconscious to the conscious, is action. Only so much do I know, as I have lived. Instantly we know whose words are loaded with life, and whose not.”[[13]](#footnote-13) Since liberal arts, as their proponents often say, are not necessarily practical and have no intrinsic use, Emerson thinks they cannot be worth very much, because they are un-action-able.

# Common Sense

Common Sense is relied upon too little in debate rounds. If you doubt the authority of common sense, don’t. Common sense is just the name for the philosophy we all already believe. The first resolution this year has room to argue from general grandparent-type life advice. There are two nuggets of wisdom that are very applicable to the debate.

First, practical skills are the tools most people need to live well. Most of your life is going to be spent doing practical things. People’s lives could be significantly improved if they knew how to sew their own clothes, interview well for a job, treat others with politeness, and a host of other very useful skills. Especially in our modern, divided economy, practical skills are not taught like they once were.

Second, liberal Arts are not that useful (the college student’s familiar complaint “I hate Gen. Ed classes!” is another version of this same sentiment). Despite what your high school mathematics teacher may tell you, most people don’t use calculus on a day-to-day basis. Most people do, however, have to lead a group of some kind and size daily; so, leadership training is extremely important.

Daily life is mostly about the practice and mastery of basic skills that we already know. If one cannot sustain a conversation for more than a few minutes, what good is a comprehensive knowledge of astronomy?

1. 1. Lewis, C. S. “On the Reading of Old Books.” Introduction. *The Incarnation of the Word of God*. By Saint Athanasius. Trans. A Religious of C.S.M.V. (London, 1944).

   [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. 1. “The American Heritage Dictionary Entry: Art." American Heritage Dictionary Entry: Liberal Arts. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing Company, n.d. Web. 09 July 2015.

   [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. 1. “The American Heritage Dictionary Entry: Skill." American Heritage Dictionary Entry: Liberal Arts. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing Company, n.d. Web. 09 July 2015.

   [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. 1. “The American Heritage Dictionary Entry: Liberal Arts." American Heritage Dictionary Entry: Liberal Arts. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing Company, n.d. Web. 09 July 2015.

   [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. 1. “Definitions of Terms.” *Definitions of Terms*. Circe Institute, n.d. Web. 13 July 2015.

   [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. 1. Whitehead, Alfred North. "Alfred North Whitehead Quote." BrainyQuote. Xplore, n.d. Web. 13 July 2015.

   [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. 1. Plato. "The Republic by Plato." *The Internet Classics Archive | The Republic by Plato*. Trans. Benjamin Jowett. Massachusetts Institute of Technology, n.d. Web. 06 July 2015.

   [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. 1. Hummel, Charles. "Aristotle." (1995): 6. International Bureau of Education. UNESCO-IBE. Web. 10 July 2015.

   [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. 1. Mason, Charlotte, ed. "A Liberal Education in Secondary Schools 1-12." Editorial. Publisher's Review Mar. 1920: n. pag. AO Parents' Review Archives AmblesideOnline.org. Ambleside Online. Web. 13 July 2015.

   [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. 1. Dewey, John. "My Pedagogic Creed." School Journal 54 (1897): 77-80. Pragmatism Cybrary. Web. 13 July 2015.

    [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. 1. Ibid.

    [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. 1. Ullrich, Heiner. "Rudolf Steiner." (2008): 6. International Bureau of Education. UNESCO-IBE. Web. 10 July 2015.

    [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. 1. Emerson, Ralph Waldo. "The American Scholar." Phi Beta Kappa Society, Cambridge. 31 Aug. 1837. Ralph Waldo Emerson Texts. Web. 13 July 2015.

    [↑](#footnote-ref-13)