“Education That Makes Our Hearts Sing”

Affirmative Case: Human Flourishing

by Breanna Vincent

# Introduction

“...technology alone is not enough. . . . It is technology married with liberal arts . . . that yields us the result that makes our hearts sing.”[[1]](#footnote-1)

It is because I agree with these words by Steve Jobs that I affirm today’s resolution: *“In formal education liberal arts ought to be valued above practical skills.”*  Man is more than a worker, more than a cog in the industrial machine.  Man is a living soul, and education is most valuable when it nourishes the soul and prepares students for life, rather than merely cultivating specialized skills needed for a particular occupation.

# Definitions

“**Formal education”** is definedas education that is “classroom-based, provided by trained teachers,” as opposed to informal education “that happens outside the classroom…”[[2]](#footnote-2)

The Free Dictionary defines **“liberal arts”** as“academic disciplines, including literature, history, languages, philosophy, mathematics, and general sciences, viewed in contrast to professional and technical disciplines.”[[3]](#footnote-3) According to Dr. Michael Thomas of Concordia University, liberal arts were viewed in ancient times as “the general skills . . . a free person . . . needed to contribute meaningfully to society."[[4]](#footnote-4)

I am defining **“practical skills”** as “skills in a specific area needed for a particular profession.” (operational)

In this round I will be viewing “Liberal Arts” and “Practical Skills” as representing two *approaches* to education.  Therefore, I will be arguing that the “liberal arts” approach to education should be valued above the “practical-skills-only” approach offered by vocational schools.

# Value: Human Flourishing

My valuefor this roundis **Human Flourishing.**[[5]](#footnote-5)This value was first suggested by Aristotle and defined by him as “living well and doing well.”[[6]](#footnote-6) Human flourishing is a state in which a person thrives in his full humanity and experiences true success by all sound measures of goodness and integrity in all of life.

In this speech, I will be making two contentions.

# Contention 1: The Liberal Arts Approach Best Promotes Human Flourishing

The liberal arts approach to education promotes human flourishing by broadening the student’s mind through the rigorous study of multiple disciplines. This approach helps students make connections and see the big picture, rather than merely teaching them about one small compartment of knowledge needed for a particular career.  Liberal arts allows students to learn to read and write, and to think critically and creatively. It also hleps students become good citizens by teaching them how to communicate with others and how to think for themselves.

The liberal arts approach to education also makes students more valuable in the workplace by cultivating skills that are highly valued in the workplace.

## Application 1: Survey Result

Ninety-three percent of employers who were surveyed for the Association of American Colleges and Universities Report agreed with the statement that "candidates’ demonstrated capacity to think critically, communicate clearly, and solve complex problems are more important than their undergraduate major." This survey result means that employers care more about a potential employee possessing the broad range of knowledge and skills cultivated by liberal arts than the specific abilities needed for a specialized field.[[7]](#footnote-7)

## Application 2:  Electrical Engineer

In the *Education Week* newspaper, Marc Tucker asked a successful engineer what made him so valuable to his advanced electronics employer over the long haul of his career. Here is Tucker’s description of this engineer’s answer: “He said that it was not his skills in electrical engineering...that set him apart. What set him apart was the fact that he related to his team members and his superiors well, he was highly disciplined, he could make the crucial creative contribution at the moment it was needed and, in a business in which communication among technical teams was an essential requisite of success, he was a very good communicator.”  Marc Tucker went on to attribute each of these skills to this engineer’s liberal arts education from UC San Diego.[[8]](#footnote-8)

# Contention 2: Practical-Skill-Only Training is Limited in its Contribution to Human Flourishing

This is true for the following reasons:

## Reason 1: Practical-Skill-Only Training Inhibits Liberty

Imagine a dystopian world in which a child is assigned an occupation early in his life, and all of his education is specialized for that particular occupation.  Would you not agree that such a student would be left more vulnerable to the manipulations of the “powers that be”? This concern is one of the fixations of dystopian writers like Aldous Huxley, who imagine a world in which everyone is trained to work in a narrow field, and no one is allowed to think beyond their specialty.[[9]](#footnote-9) If everyone’s knowledge is compartmentalized and segmented in this way, and only the people in power know how they all fit together, then the masses can be manipulated to do whatever the people in power please, thus making them less free.

## Reason 2: Practical-Skill-Only Training Misses Opportunity

Practical-skill education misses an opportunity to cultivate the soul and help a person to become more fully human. A practical-skill-only education is focused only on training a person for the forty hours a week that he is working on the job.  However, a liberal arts education trains the whole person for how to live his life both on the job and off the job. It teaches people how to behave in the public square, how to be knowledgeable citizens, informed voters, and intelligent thinkers who contribute to the common good.

## Reason 3: Practical-Skill-Only Training Decreases Flexibility

With technology advancing at a rapid pace, specific occupations are sometimes vulnerable, making it more risky to receive practical skill training only in one particular field.

## Application:  Semiconductor

Take, for example, a career as a semiconductor processor.  Back in the 90’s, some American students went to vocational schools and earned associates degrees in Semiconductor Manufacturing Technology.  Unfortunately, from 1998 to 2008, almost 1,200 semiconductor manufacturing plants closed in the United States. These closures happened because the work was outsourced overseas to countries like India and China.  Forecasts suggests that another 146,000 of such jobs will be lost in the United States over the coming decade,[[10]](#footnote-10) partly due to the fact that more of the work will be done by robots rather than humans.[[11]](#footnote-11)

Those with an associate degree in this narrow field are now left without the broad liberal arts training that would have made them more employable in other fields.

# Conclusion

It is for all these reasons that I strongly urge you to stand with me and affirm that liberal arts ought to be valued above practical skills in formal education.

Negative Brief: Human Flourishing

You can attack the affirmative’s operational definition of “practical skills” and ask why the definition is limited to “skills necessary *for a particular profession*.” Why can’t “practical skills” be applied to all of life? The benefit for the negative in attacking this definition is that it begins to blur the distinctions (between liberal arts and practical skills) upon which the affirmative’s case depends.

Also, you can challenge the affirmative’s attempt to frame the debate as being between two *approaches* to education: the “liberal arts approach” and the “practical-skill-only approach.” You can point out that the word “approach” is not in the resolution.

The affirmative can respond by saying that the debate simply must be between general “approaches.” Otherwise, the resolution writers are saying that on all levels of formal education liberal arts courses should always be valued above practical skill courses. Does anyone actually believe that?

Nonetheless, you give yourself the best chance against this affirmative case by running a balanced negative case, wherein you argue that liberal arts and practical skills should be valued equally. To win this argument, you cannot allow the affirmative to get by with framing the debate as being between the “liberal arts approach” and the “practical-skills-only approach” to education. You must convince the judge that the debate is between liberal arts *courses* and practical skills *courses*, and then you can argue that liberal arts and practical skills should be given equal value in one’s overall education.

To support your case, you can point to liberal arts universities that provide a variety of specialized majors (practical skills) and minors (practical skills) along with their basic liberal arts curriculum. Every liberal arts school provides a nice balance between liberal arts courses and practical skill courses as a part of their educational package.

You can turn Application 2 (Electrical Engineer) by arguing that the engineer’s education is actually an example of the need for both practical skills and liberal arts. This engineer would not have even been hired if he had no practical skill training in his field, and he would not have succeeded so well if he did not have the liberal arts training he received. His education is a perfect example of why both liberal arts and practical skills are necessary and why they should be valued equally.

1. Lehrer, Jonah. "Steve Jobs: “Technology Alone Is Not Enough” - The New Yorker." The New Yorker. The New Yorker, 07 Oct. 2011. Web. 22 June 2015. http://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/steve-jobs-technology-alone-is-not-enough [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. "Formal vs. Informal Education." Enhancing Education: Corporation for Public Broadcasting, 2002. Web. 15 June 2015. http://enhancinged.wgbh.org/started/what/formal.html [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. "Liberal Arts." The Free Dictionary. Farlex, n.d. Web. 15 June 2015. http://www.thefreedictionary.com/liberal+arts [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Bogart, Julie. "What Are Liberal Arts?" - My College Guide. My College Guide, 2011. Web. 11 July 2015. http://mycollegeguide.org/articles/8/145/what-are-liberal-arts [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. The Greek word Aristotle used was *eudaimonia*, which Daniel Robinson suggests is best translated as “human flourishing.” Robinson, Daniel N. “Aristotle’s Psychology.” Daniel N. Robinson, 1999. Print. 29 June 2015. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Brown, Curtis. “Aristotle’s Ethics.” *Aristotle’s Ethics.* Trinity University, 16 Aug. 2001. Web. 29 June 2015. http://www.trinity.edu/cbrown/intro/aristotle\_ethics.html [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Holland, Kelley. "The Case for Liberal Arts Education." CNBC. CNBC, 07 Nov. 2014. Web. 15 June 2015. http://www.cnbc.com/2014/11/07/the-case-for-a-liberal-arts-education.html [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Tucker, Marc. "High School: A New Home for the Liberal Arts Curriculum? "Education Week. Education Week, 10 July 2012. Web. 15 June 2015. http://blogs.edweek.org/edweek/top\_performers/2012/07/high\_school\_a\_new\_home\_for\_the\_liberal\_arts\_curriculum.html [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Huxley's *Brave New World* opens with an educator training his “newly arrived students.” While training them, he intentionally gives his students as little of a general understanding as possible, because “generalities are necessary evils,” but "particulars...make for virtue and happiness." With a menacing smile, he says to his students, "Tomorrow...you won't have time for generalities" (Huxley 3-4).

   This is the dystopian future, and liberal arts education is a rebellion against this potential future. Huxley, Aldous. *Brave New World.* New York City: HarperCollins Publishing, 2006. Print. 3-4. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Sandars, Christopher T. "America’s Overseas Garrisons." Outsourced (2000): n. pag. [www.workingamerican.com](http://www.workingamerican.com). Working America. Web. 21 June 2015. http://www.workingamerica.org/content/download/7589/83634/file/OutsourcingReport.pdf [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Hess, Alex E.M., and Thomas C. Frohlich. “Top 10 Disappearing Jobs in the USA.” *USA Today.* Gannett, 30 Aug. 2013. Web. 13 July 2015. http://www.usatoday.com/story/money/business/2013/08/30/disappearing-jobs-in-usa/2750105/ [↑](#footnote-ref-11)