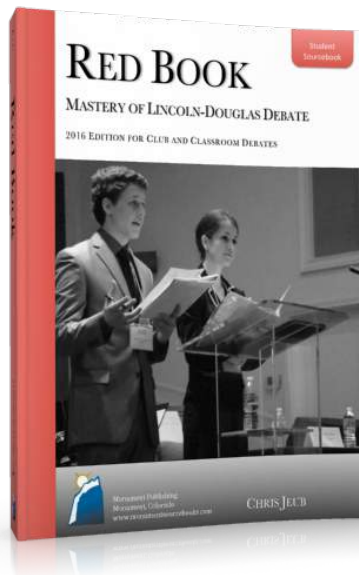


The New Red Book

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Lesson 9: Liberal Arts vs. Practical Skills

The following is a review chapter from the 2016 *Red Book*. Monument Publishing is overhauling its publishing cycle to maximize its ability to serve Lincoln-Douglas debaters throughout the entire year. Based on four units of academic debate study and modeling, the following chapter will help next year's debaters prepare to become champions in value debate.

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LESSON 9: LIBERAL ARTS VS. PRACTICAL SKILLS



The Debate of Lesson 9:

“Resolved: In formal education, liberal arts ought to be valued above practical skills.”

The resolution in this lesson helps capture an argument that has been brewing for a few decades, especially in guidance counseling offices of high schools. Chances are good that you will face this decision soon as you prepare for graduation. Should you go to a liberal arts college? Or should you go to a more technically focused school and jump into a job? This is the conflict that the value resolution covers in this lesson.

Your Pace for Lesson 9

You are going to take an affirmative and negative side to the resolution, *Resolved: In formal education, liberal arts ought to be valued above practical skills*. To prepare you for your debate, you will have to accomplish the following:

1. Understand the conflicts and differences between liberal arts and practical skills education.
2. Develop core understanding of applications surrounding the two educational philosophies.
3. Study two model cases—one affirming and one negating the resolution.

To pace yourself, here is a suggested daily routine:

- **Day 1.** Read the entire Lesson 9. Fill out the worksheet provided, answering all questions to your fullest potential. This should make sure you comprehended the new material in the lesson.
- **Day 2.** Together with your teacher and your classmates, review the worksheet. Preview and discuss the cases for this lesson's debate.
- **Day 3-5.** Conduct in-class scrimmages debating this resolution on privacy and security. If time allows, make sure you debate both sides of the resolution.

Understanding the Resolution

There are three definitions in this resolution that house the conflict debaters will be arguing over in this lesson:

1. **Formal Education.** "Formal" is defined by Dictionary.com as "being in accordance with the usual requirements, customs, etc.; conventional." Simple enough, but the same dictionary has two definitions of "education," as explored in the next two definitions of the resolution.
2. **Liberal Arts.** The first definition on Dictionary.com for "education" is "the act or process of imparting or acquiring general knowledge, developing the powers of reasoning and judgment, and generally of preparing oneself or others intellectually for mature life." This is the kind of education most people would refer to as a "liberal arts" education. It is a more general education that encompasses many fields of study. This is sometimes contrasted with...
3. **Practical Skills.** The next definition of "education" on Dictionary.com is "the act or process of imparting or acquiring particular knowledge or skills, as for a profession." This may be considered career or technical training specific for a "practical skill."

Both types of educators see themselves as preparing their students for the real world. On the one hand, you have the liberal arts teacher teaching children things like social sciences and all sorts of things that the student may not ever need in real life. The other hand—the practical skills teacher—sees such things as a waste of valuable educational time. Instead, the practical skills teacher works hard to prepare his or her students for professions with skills necessary to do well.

Examples and Applications

Do you see the conflict? There are several advocates for both sides of this debate. Let's look into a few of them.

Marc Tucker, the CEO of the National Center on Education and the Economy, suggests that high schools should be viewed as a new home for the liberal arts curriculum. He recommends that educators “reconceive the last two years of high school as serving the same purpose that we used to allocate to the first two years of college: providing a solid base of knowledge and skill that can be used throughout one's life, no matter what path that life takes over the years.”²¹

A nationally ranked high school in Texas called the Liberal Arts and Science Academy seeks to “produce graduates with exceptional knowledge and skills in English, other languages, mathematics, science, social studies, and technology” in order to equip their students to “make a significant contribution to community, state, and nation.”²² Additionally, there are sixty-four “middle college high schools” in California that offer programs that allow the potential for a student to graduate from high school with the equivalent of an Associate of Arts degree.²³ Other such schools are found across the country.

Clearly, high school educators are wrestling with the very issues raised by this debate resolution. While practical skill training may seem to be occupationally specific in its orientation, liberal arts education is designed to prepare students for life as a whole, teaching them to be good citizens both on and off the job.

The popularity of Mike Rowe and the Discovery Channel's *Dirty Jobs* has given rise to the importance of vocational education. Rowe's foundation (called the Mike Rowe Foundation) exists to provide

²¹ 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

²² "Mission Statement." Liberal Arts and Science Academy. [lasaonline.org](http://www.lasaonline.org), n.d. Web. 12 July 2015.
<http://www.lasaonline.org/about/mission.jsp>. URL is changing and new domain is currently under construction. You may contact Fred Cutler, the school's IT Director at (512) 414-1900 or fred.cutler@austinisd.org for current URL.

²³ "CCEMC." CCEMC.org. California Coalition of Early and Middle Colleges, 2015. Web. 12 July 2015.
www.ccemc.org

educational opportunities for students who have a specific trade in mind. Practical skills are at the center of what the foundation espouses, and Mike Rowe claims that liberal arts education—or education in general in America—is “profoundly disconnected.” He cites a trillion dollars in education loans, record high unemployment, and three million good jobs that no one seems to want as examples of an education system gone awry.²⁴

Vocational or tech schools share in Rowe’s alternative education vision. Rather than encouraging students to go to college, these schools usually take half the time (they’re mostly two-year degrees) and cost a fraction of a liberal arts degree. Better yet, graduates are usually geared up and ready to get to work in the trade for which they were trained. Opportunity Nation is a bipartisan campaign aimed at closing the opportunity gap in America, and the director, Mark Edwards, explained the conflict this way:

“We’ve done a disservice in this country by suggesting that there’s only one path to success, which is to get a bachelor’s degree. There are many good-paying jobs available today that, quite candidly, a four-year Bachelor of Arts degree does not prepare them for... We need to expand how we think about success. It’s just a smarter, more nuanced way of thinking about workforce development.”²⁵

This resolution will likely get you thinking about your own values on education. Are you up for going to college and getting the most out of your post-secondary years by giving you a well-rounded, robust liberal arts education? It’ll arguably come at a cost, but perhaps it is worth it. Just as much, you could entertain a faster, more applicable, and less expensive alternative of a school that values giving you practical skills.

Your Model Cases

Whichever you end up choosing for your life after high school, you will likely do so with a fair amount of knowledge about the choice. Why? Because you’re going to debate *both* sides of the debate. Let’s delve into two perspectives for this model round, but don’t limit yourself to just these. Keep exploring the conflicts between a liberal arts and practical skills education. You’ll be better off in your future if you do.

On the affirmative, you will value “job adaptability.” The case makes the strong point that the trend toward practical skills education is turning back to liberal arts. Citing journal pieces, the case brings attention to the technical “half-life” of modern trades and how technical cultures (e.g., China and

²⁴ Taken from Profoundly Disconnected: <http://profoundlydisconnected.com>

²⁵ Allie Bidwell, “Vocational High Schools: Career Path or Kiss of Death?” US News and World Report, May 2, 2014. <http://www.usnews.com/news/articles/2014/05/02/the-return-of-vocational-high-schools-more-options-or-the-kiss-of-death>

Japan) have rethought their value of what makes a strong technical education. Much more valuable in job preparation is the ability to be flexible enough to the changing world. Affirming the resolution helps to that end.

Not surprisingly, the negative side takes a more practical approach and values “career outlook.” This case first contends that the most difficult jobs attainable in today’s world market are jobs catering to a liberal arts education. The second contention paints a much brighter picture for the practical skills student. Engineering and manufacturing are applications given to help convince the judge that a negative ballot is in order.

Review Copy

Worksheet for Lesson 9

Name: _____

Date: _____

Read Lesson 9. Answer the following in the spaces provided.

1. Have you had a conversation with your parents or guidance counselor about liberal arts or practical skills education? What are your initial thoughts about the two pathways?

2. The three definitions in this lesson were taken from Dictionary.com. Find a different source for these definitions and write them in the space provided.

Formal Education:

Liberal Arts:

Practical Skills:

3. Do any of these definitions from different sources change in meaning from Dictionary.com? Explain.

4. After reading the lesson, which side do you think will be easier to debate?

AFFIRMATIVE CASE: JOB ADAPTABILITY

Introduction

Suppose for a moment that I am a liberal arts student at UCLA. In order to graduate, I must take credits of English, history, language, math, and science. My ultimate goal is to get an MBA and go into business. But, one might ask, how do classes in history, language, or science contribute to a successful business career? So goes the argument against a liberal arts course of study.

I seek to prove that a liberal arts education is actually foundational to other pursuits and am firmly resolved that: *Resolved: In formal education, liberal arts ought to be valued above practical skills.*

Definitions

Before I explain my position in more detail, I'll provide the following definitions:

- Formal education: An education that is “classroom-based, provided by trained teachers.”²⁶
- Liberal arts: A “college or university curriculum aimed at imparting general knowledge and developing general intellectual capacities in contrast to a professional, vocational, or technical curriculum.”²⁷
- Practical skills: Derived from both individual definitions: “The ability to do something”²⁸ and “appropriate or suited for actual use”²⁹ Prioritizing practical skills means choosing the most pragmatic course of study to the exclusion of other fields.

Before I continue I want to give context in the way of resolitional analysis:

Resolitional Analysis

Liberal arts foundation – I want to make it clear that by valuing a liberal arts education I am in no way indicting the importance of the hard sciences. My position is merely that everyone, engineers, scientists, and doctors included, will benefit from a foundation in the liberal arts. By valuing liberal arts, we hone important skills like creativity, critical thinking, and problem solving, which all contribute to our ability to adapt in any workforce. Incidentally, my value is:

²⁶ From *Enhancing Education*, © 2002 Corporation for Public Broadcasting.
<http://enhancinged.wgbh.org/started/what/formal.html>

²⁷ Encyclopedia Britannica. <http://www.britannica.com/topic/liberal-arts>

²⁸ Merriam-Webster Dictionary. <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/practical>

²⁹ Merriam-Webster Dictionary. <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/skill>

Value: Job Adaptability

Job adaptability is operationally defined as flexibility and the ability to react successfully to changing circumstances both within the workplace and within the overall labor force.

People may generally complain about their jobs, but jobs are an extremely important part of our lives. The ability to adapt to a constantly changing workplace and workforce environments ensures personal livelihood as well as the continued functioning of our economy.

Value Link: Goal of Education

While the goal of formal education is not exclusively to land a job, this end is nonetheless a very important part of education. Yet that education will have been a useless waste of resources if it does not equip us to tackle changes at work. Unfortunately, a pragmatic training in practical skills greatly limits our ability to adapt. This brings me to:

Contention 1: Practical Skills Hamper Adaptability

The problem with prioritizing practical skills is that it requires one to view education from a purely pragmatic standpoint. Using this logic, one would conclude that, because of the great need for software engineers right now and the high potential salary, one should study computer science and ignore the liberal arts altogether. Unfortunately, this approach limits job adaptability for those entering the workforce or a specific industry.

A: Practical skills eliminate flexibility

Valuing practical skills demands that you specialize in a specific field. However, just as technology advanced past vacuum tubes, punch cards, and floppy drives, the workforce must constantly adapt to changing situations and standards. One example of this is the astonishing rate at which practical engineering knowledge becomes obsolete. Liberal arts educators teach people to be flexible; practical skills educators do not.

Application 1: Engineering half-life. The National Academy of Engineering published a fascinating study:

“A decade ago, a group of experts estimated the half-life of an engineer’s technical skills—how long it would take for half of everything an engineer knew about his or her field to become obsolete. For mechanical engineers it was 7.5 years. For electrical engineers it was 5. And for

software engineers, it was a mere 2.5 years, less time than it takes to get an undergraduate degree. Today, those numbers are surely even smaller.”³⁰

The study continues, coming to the harsh conclusion:

“A generation ago, an engineer could expect to carve out a niche in one well-defined area...and remain there for a lifetime. No longer. As technological change accelerates...engineers must be prepared to switch nimbly to a new field when the old one peters out.”³¹

The important, varied, adaptable problem-solving skills developed in a liberal arts education enable engineers to succeed. Strict practical skills don’t.

B: Practical skills overlook critical thinking

Critical thinking, a key skill that is developed through a rigorous liberal arts education, is integral for success in the workplace. The ability to process information in different forms from different sources and draw rational conclusions is important to every profession. Unfortunately, many proponents of practical skills overlook this. At most universities, students on a strictly practical track can avoid literature, English, philosophy, language, and the arts altogether. While seemingly more efficient, this approach ignores crucial skills necessary for job adaptability. An example of this is the:

Application: Asian labor stagnation. When we hear about labor in Asia we often think of the millions of workers performing both skilled and unskilled tasks for the American consumer. But for the past decade a startling change has taken place. China and Japan specifically have placed so much emphasis on practical technical skills, to the exclusion of any form of liberal arts education, that workers have become less adept to creative problem solving and critical thinking. This is beginning to negatively impact the competitiveness of Chinese and Japanese industries, causing both nations to reconsider their approach to education.³²

So here’s the alternative:

³⁰ Lifelong Learning for Engineers: Riding the Whirlwind. National Academy of Learning, Winter 1996. <https://www.nae.edu/Publications/Bridge/LearningforEngineers/LifelongLearningforEngineersRidingtheWhirlwind.aspx>

³¹ Ibid, ellipses added. The full quote: “A generation ago, an engineer could expect to carve out a niche in one well-defined area—automotive steering systems, say, or chemical plant instrumentation—and remain there for a lifetime. No longer. As technological change accelerates and product lines rise and fall in ever-diminishing life cycles, engineers find themselves switching jobs more often, to the point that those starting out today may hold half a dozen jobs over their careers, even if they manage to remain with the same company throughout. So besides staying abreast of developments in their own specialties, engineers must be prepared to switch nimbly to a new field when the old one peters out.”

³² Carol T. Christ. “Myth: A Liberal Arts Education Is Becoming Irrelevant.” American Council on Education. Spring 2012. <http://www.acenet.edu/the-presidency/columns-and-features/Pages/Myth-A-Liberal-Arts-Education-Is-Becoming-Irrelevant.aspx>

Contention 2: Liberal Arts Enable Flexibility

Liberal arts education, by definition, gives workers in all fields the tools they need to truly think. Learning a practical technical skill only goes so far. Without the ability to reason and communicate, workers in any field will be unable to adapt to changing conditions. This is relevant when viewed from the macro perspective of entire economic sectors, and when considered from the micro perspective of creative problem solving in specific labor applications.

In order to promote job adaptability we must value liberal arts in formal education.

Review Copy

NEGATIVE CASE: CAREER OUTLOOK

I'm excited to argue against this resolution because it means I get to dispel some of the big myths about today's job market. There's this widely held belief that jobs you do with your hands are dirty and low-tech and don't pay well. But nothing could be further from the truth. So we're going to shake free from that myth—and this resolution.

Let's start with my:

Value: Career Outlook

Career outlook is operationally defined as: "The likelihood that a student will be able to obtain meaningful, stable, well-paying work soon after graduation."

Here's why this is the best way to measure the resolution:

Reason to Prefer: Purpose of Education

Modern formal education was invented as a way to prepare students for jobs other than what their parents did. It is the foundation of the dream that you can grow up to be anything if you study and work hard.

That's why education is structured in terms of careers, and why your choice of a college major is so important. Career outlook is the whole focus and purpose of education, which makes it the only suitable way to measure this resolution.

Contention 1: Liberal Arts Have Weak Outlook

For liberal arts majors, the real world after graduation is less "Indiana Jones" and more "moving back in with your parents." That's because so many people want these jobs, but there are very few actual jobs in those fields to go around. Not everyone gets to be a ballerina.

Rick Newman wrote an article in *The Exchange* in 2013 titled: "The 10 Worst Majors for Finding a Good Job." He listed: Business Management, Criminal Justice, Drama/Theater Arts, Anthropology, Liberal Arts and Sciences, History, Psychology, Biology, English, and Economics.³³

Every entry in that list is, either wholly or in large degree, based in liberal arts.

³³ Rick Newman. "The 10 Worst Majors for Finding a Good Job." *The Exchange*. June 18, 2013. <http://finance.yahoo.com/blogs/the-exchange/10-worst-majors-finding-good-job-121045408.html>

That doesn't mean everyone should avoid liberal arts, or that it's always a mistake to study them. But it does mean that having everyone focus on liberal arts as a rule of thumb—which is what the resolution proposes—is a recipe for failure.

Contention 2: Practical Skills Have Strong Outlook

Everyone knows there's a job crisis for college graduates. Here's the thing: that crisis is only for people who studied liberal arts.

People who study practical skills are often being hired before they even graduate. The demand for skilled workers and a potentially high salary are enormous.

Application 1: Engineering

Engineering is one of the most important fields in the modern age, driving growth and innovation in every sector of the economy. Engineers enjoy tons of job offers with great salaries.

PayScale lists bachelor's degrees by salary potential. Here are the top entries:

Petroleum Engineering, Nuclear Engineering, Actuarial Mathematics [which is applied math used for things like calculating insurance], Chemical Engineering, Electronics and Communications Engineering, Computer Science and Engineering, Electrical and Computer Engineering, Systems Engineering, Aeronautical Engineering, Computer Engineering, Mining Engineering, Electrical Engineering, Mechanical Engineering, Aerospace Engineering, and Computer Science and Mathematics.³⁴

In other words, 13 of the top 15 majors are engineering, and the remaining 2 are applied professional math. Not one of them overlaps with liberal arts. There is a huge demand for good engineers, and students who choose to focus on it have excellent career outlook.

Application 2: Manufacturing

Forget what you've heard about downsizing in factories. Anywhere but Detroit, the demand for skilled practical laborers is skyrocketing.

CNN reported in 2012:

³⁴ "Highest Paying Bachelor Degrees by Salary Potential." *Highest Paying Bachelor's Degrees*. PayScale, 2015-2016. Web. 21 Sept. 2015. <http://www.payscale.com/college-salary-report/majors-that-pay-you-back/bachelors>. From a chart of the 2015-2016 report.

“As millions of young Americans struggle to land jobs, students in manufacturing trade schools are sitting in a sweet spot. They're being hired even before they graduate.”

The article goes on to quote Jimmy Hodges, dean of applied technologies at Wallace State Community College, saying:

“Young people in the country think manufacturing is nasty and dirty,” he said. “Not so. It’s clean, high-tech, and the pay isn’t bad.”

By “not bad” he means the average salary for a new hire is

“about \$40,000 a year, with the potential to jump to \$55,000 to \$65,000 in less than two years.”³⁵

Let me conclude with this thought.

A lot of college students are scared right now because they’ve seen last year’s seniors graduate and fail to get jobs. And it’s true; it’s really hard to get your career going when you made the mistake of upholding the resolution.

Again from Rick Newman of *The Exchange*:

“Sure, the human psyche is fascinating and bottomless. That doesn’t mean somebody’s willing to pay you to study it, which may be why one of the top jobs held by recent psych majors is barista, earning about \$19,000 per year.”

But crucially, the future doesn’t have to be bleak. Practical skills jobs are awesome and there are plenty to go around. We just have to choose our education wisely by rejecting the resolution.

³⁵ Kavilanz, Parija. "Nine Months in Trade School. Job Guaranteed." *CNN Money*. Cable News Network, 23 July 2012. Web. 21 Sept. 2015. <<http://money.cnn.com/2012/03/14/smallbusiness/trade-schools/index.htm>>.