

LEADERSHIP AND CRITICAL THINKING

How to foster critical thinking skills in critical times?

The emerging generation of leaders is tragically ill-prepared to exercise the critical thinking required of their positions, primarily because the dominant paradigm of primary, secondary and post-secondary education available to the past two generations have focused on a hyper specialised track in one's chosen discipline. Very few adolescents know what they might want to pursue as a career, but that is a less urgent problem than the general neglect of the [Seven Liberal Arts](#), the lower Trivium – Grammar, Logic and Rhetoric which in the not too distant past served as the bedrock of any Western-educated person.

Apart from a few schools, whose price points are typically out of the reach of lower and middle class households, the seven liberal arts are no longer regarded as an essential part of a well-rounded education. It might even be argued that modern education equips one with more skill in test preparation and taking than in subject knowledge, much less a solid foundation in the humanities.

Academic rigor and discipline have also fallen by the wayside in Western countries seeking to capitalize on a large market of post-secondary students from emerging countries. A prime example is the [Further and Higher Education Act 1992](#) of John Major's Conservative government in the United Kingdom. Entry requirements, once relaxed, become a societal norm that is nearly impossible to reverse, as is the now-pervasive notion that one has to attend university to be successful in life.

The advent of social computing, the world wide web and broadband access have arguably stymied the single-task concentration and discipline needed to deeply engage with printed texts. In this respect, the much-lauded 'multi-tasking' skills in some quarters are [immeasurably harmful](#) to humans in their earlier developmental stages. If never cultivated, and especially if disastrously coupled with processed and refined diets, the ability to sit with thoughts and text will die out within a generation, if it has not already. It should come as no surprise that many financially-successful leaders, amongst them Warren Buffett and [Bill Gates](#), retreat to non-urban settings to think and recharge. Hyper-activity impedes the focus and discipline that critical thinking requires.

There is no established educational system of historical record that has not required a form of cogitation as part of a well-rounded education. Deep immersion in texts, and re-presenting them to an audience, were not achieved by flitting from one activity to another, or in this modern case, one app notification to another.

Defunding public universities is not a viable option for various political and ideological reasons. A counterbalance to public and private universities acting as paper mills to soothe the neuroses of middle-class parents would be an increased private and public sponsorship of institutions who focus on cultivating the next generation of leaders using the Seven Liberal Arts. Entry would be

selective and meritocratic, with generous scholarships provided. To ensure this is not perceived as an exercise in elitism, a modular curriculum would be replicated for any other institution who wished to adopt it for the sake of their students, and it would be a prerequisite for public funding. This 'new canon' would educate all students, primary and upwards, in the civilisations the world has produced thus far, along with close and critical examination of their histories, literature and customs.

Unfortunately, there is no substitute or shortcuts for a truly rigorous academic programme. Shortcutting and turbocharging students through three-year undergraduate degrees, one-year masters degrees and three-year doctoral degrees, as is the current system in the United Kingdom, is a recipe for a well-papared population with few skills beyond politicking in group projects, bartering with supervisors and entering the job market ill-prepared to be a 'leader' a mere ten years down the road.

Corporatist interests in the sanctum of higher education have diluted the meaning of learning for learning's sake. Having 'KPIs' and 'outcomes' and 'return on investment' defeats the very purpose of higher education, if indeed society agrees that its purpose is to cultivate the next generation of leaders, not solicit hefty endowments from alumni to bolster chancellors' salaries.

There can be no [cultivation of critical thinking skills](#), which the world so direly needs both in its leaders and its citizenry, without attendant effort. The current demagoguery plaguing mature democracies can be traced retrospectively to the West's post-WWII obsession with industrialization, specialization and single-track majors. A citizenry untrained in critical thinking skills are more likely to fall for the first silver-tongued orator who appeals to any number of fallacies than one who have been equipped with foundational skills in grammar, logic and rhetoric. Leaders such as the technocratic Angela Merkel and Tsai Ing-wen, and the empathetic Jacinda Ardern, are now the exceptions rather than the rule, with worrisome implications for the state of global political leadership.

[Nussbaum](#) puts it eloquently, ““Socratic questioning is unsettling, and people in power often prefer docile followers to independent citizens able to think for themselves. Furthermore, a lively imagination, alert to the situations, desires and sufferings of others, is a taxing achievement; moral obtuseness is so much easier. So we should not be surprised that the humanities are under assault, now as ever. The battle for responsible democracy and alert citizenship is always difficult and uncertain. But it is both urgent and winnable, and the humanities are a large part of winning it.”

The idealistic purpose of higher education is the cultivation of humanity to reach their potential as human beings in their communities, not their potential as cogs in a capitalistic corporatist machine in which no true community exists. Tragically, entrenched corporate interests have metastasized across higher education to an extent that, much like the protests and riots currently sweeping across the United States, dearly held interests may have to be ruthlessly dislodged before true change can take place.

There is no apparently East-West dichotomy in this context; in fact, it would be a false dichotomy, and the Chinese have the analogous [Six Arts](#). Before the Indo-Sinitic civilisations adopted Western educational systems, their native ones similarly stressed an oral, then written, familiarity with their canons, preparing years for [imperial examinations](#).

A leader trained in economics with a specialization in data analytics might be able to forecast the next five years' of sector growth, but he or she would be ill-prepared to understand the second and third-order effects of their policies and decisions on the people they lead. No amount of training can create empathy, sincerity and experience, but a grounding in the humanities could go a little way in mitigating the worst excesses of bot-like behaviour.

Personally, I have the privilege of a liberal arts education coupled with a lifelong inclination in those subjects. Having to make a living in the corporate world is simultaneously depressing and illuminating, as the realization dawned several years ago that capitalistic corporatist interests are diametrically opposed to the liberating independent thought that the liberal arts can and do cultivate. Society will have to decide if they will accept leaders with subpar critical thinking skills or if they will start insisting on educating themselves in the three basics that provide it – grammar, logic and rhetoric.