
Sunday Review

The Decline and Fall of the English Major

Editorial Observer

By VERLYN KLINKENBORG    JUNE 22, 2013

In the past few years, I’ve taught nonfiction writing to undergraduates and graduate students at Harvard, Yale, Bard, Pomona, Sarah Lawrence and Columbia’s Graduate School of Journalism. Each semester I hope, and fear, that I will have nothing to teach my students because they already know how to write. And each semester I discover, again, that they don’t.

They can assemble strings of jargon and generate clots of ventriloquistic syntax. They can meta-metastasize any thematic or ideological notion they happen upon. And they get good grades for doing just that. But as for writing clearly, simply, with attention and openness to their own thoughts and emotions and the world around them — no.

That kind of writing — clear, direct, humane — and the reading on which it is based are the very root of the humanities, a set of disciplines that is ultimately an attempt to examine and comprehend the cultural, social and historical activity of our species through the medium of language.

The teaching of the humanities has fallen on hard times. So says a new report on the state of the humanities by the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, and so
says the experience of nearly everyone who teaches at a college or university. Undergraduates will tell you that they’re under pressure — from their parents, from the burden of debt they incur, from society at large — to choose majors they believe will lead as directly as possible to good jobs. Too often, that means skipping the humanities.

In other words, there is a new and narrowing vocational emphasis in the way students and their parents think about what to study in college. As the American Academy report notes, this is the consequence of a number of things, including an overall decline in the experience of literacy, the kind of thing you absorbed, for instance, if your parents read aloud to you as a child. The result is that the number of students graduating in the humanities has fallen sharply. At Pomona College (my alma mater) this spring, 16 students graduated with an English major out of a student body of 1,560, a terribly small number.

In 1991, 165 students graduated from Yale with a B.A. in English literature. By 2012, that number was 62. In 1991, the top two majors at Yale were history and English. In 2013, they were economics and political science. At Pomona this year, they were economics and mathematics.

Parents have always worried when their children become English majors. What is an English major good for? In a way, the best answer has always been, wait and see — an answer that satisfies no one. And yet it is a real answer, one that reflects the versatility of thought and language that comes from studying literature. Former English majors turn up almost anywhere, in almost any career, and they nearly always bring with them a rich sense of the possibilities of language, literary and otherwise.

The canon — the books and writers we agree are worth studying — used to seem like a given, an unspoken consensus of sorts. But the canon has always been shifting, and it is now vastly more inclusive than it was 40 years ago. That’s a good thing. What’s less clear now is what we study the canon for and why we choose the tools we employ in doing so.

A technical narrowness, the kind of specialization and theoretical emphasis you might find in a graduate course, has crept into the undergraduate curriculum. That
narrowness sometimes reflects the tight focus of a professor’s research, but it can also reflect a persistent doubt about the humanistic enterprise. It often leaves undergraduates wondering, as I know from my conversations with them, just what they’ve been studying and why.

STUDYING the humanities should be like standing among colleagues and students on the open deck of a ship moving along the endless coastline of human experience. Instead, now it feels as though people have retreated to tiny cabins in the bowels of the ship, from which they peep out on a small fragment of what may be a coastline or a fog bank or the back of a spouting whale.

There is a certain literal-mindedness in the recent shift away from the humanities. It suggests a number of things. One, the rush to make education pay off presupposes that only the most immediately applicable skills are worth acquiring (though that doesn’t explain the current popularity of political science). Two, the humanities often do a bad job of explaining why the humanities matter. And three, the humanities often do a bad job of teaching the humanities. You don’t have to choose only one of these explanations. All three apply.

What many undergraduates do not know — and what so many of their professors have been unable to tell them — is how valuable the most fundamental gift of the humanities will turn out to be. That gift is clear thinking, clear writing and a lifelong engagement with literature.

Maybe it takes some living to find out this truth. Whenever I teach older students, whether they’re undergraduates, graduate students or junior faculty, I find a vivid, pressing sense of how much they need the skill they didn’t acquire earlier in life. They don’t call that skill the humanities. They don’t call it literature. They call it writing — the ability to distribute their thinking in the kinds of sentences that have a merit, even a literary merit, of their own.

Writing well used to be a fundamental principle of the humanities, as essential as the knowledge of mathematics and statistics in the sciences. But writing well isn’t merely a utilitarian skill. It is about developing a rational grace and energy in your conversation with the world around you.
No one has found a way to put a dollar sign on this kind of literacy, and I doubt anyone ever will. But everyone who possesses it — no matter how or when it was acquired — knows that it is a rare and precious inheritance.

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