

# Liberal Education: Its Goals and Methods

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Upon arriving at the American University in Kyrgyzstan (AUK) on March 10, I soon knew I had entered a congenial environment. It was a Sunday, so classes were not in session. A quick walking tour of campus told me what I wanted to know. The computer labs were full, virtually every terminal occupied with students working on papers, downloading material from the Internet (slowly), and sending e-mail messages. Then, the following week, after attending some classes and talking with faculty, I discovered that unlike many large American universities where students sit quietly in large lecture halls listening to professors standing at the podium (or on close-circuit television monitors situated around the hall), at AUK it is the professor who is often in the audience taking notes and the students who are giving the presentation-- teaching vocabulary in a practice seventh grade English class, reporting the findings of a group project in an American literature class, or participating in a debate on the Kyoto Protocol in an international relations class. I discovered very quickly that there is nothing AUK students and faculty like to do more than discuss issues. To assist with such learning activities, AUK has a resource center, the Critical Thinking Laboratory. Its mission is to make available ways to engage students and faculty in learning. These include student projects, problem-solving, short essays, and advice about how videotaped images and music can enliven and reinforce rather than divert

and distract. The AUK computer network, the Center personnel point out, enables yet other forms of active learning via e-mail discussions, list serves, and chat rooms. Such discussions build the collaboration among students and between students and faculty that creates a community of learners.

An old saying--obviously, by a cynic--is as follows: "Those who can, do; those who can't, teach." Another saying--certainly by a wise individual--goes: "The best way to learn is to teach." How many of us have to admit that we never truly mastered our subject until we finished our graduate work and actually began teaching students? I would bet most of us would have to agree. What is the lesson, then? It probably is that learning occurs when a student carries out activities related to mastery. Experiences such as preparing to teach involve pride, fear, and the alternate possibilities of either disgrace or praise. Such powerful incentives cause adrenalin to flow, overcoming fatigue, inertia, and passivity.

The mastery necessary to teach well should be, in my view, the goal of liberal education. Mastery exists if one can think about a subject--an idea, object, event, theory, or concept--from a variety of viewpoints; make appropriate comparisons with similar subjects in other cultures, times, or disciplines; and relate them to new situations. It exists when one can size up an event or body of evidence, draw conclusions from it, and apply them for a different purpose. These are the skills necessary for con-

structive work in a culture different from one's own, say in the foreign service or in a multi-national corporation. They are the skills of a businessman or attorney who becomes a politician; a general who enters politics; or of a college professor who becomes the head of a charitable endowment. They are also the skills necessary for good teaching.

It is ironic that the most common mode of university instruction in the United States, and perhaps in the world, is not well suited to liberal education. The most common undergraduate learning experience in universities in the United States, as well as in Asia and Europe, is the formal classroom lecture. Students, sometimes several hundred of them, sign up for a course. They arrive the first day and receive a syllabus that lists two lectures and one discussion class moderated by a graduate student (who also grades exams) each week, a mid-term exam (or possibly two hour exams), and a final exam. What, one might ask, is the relationship to mastery? Is the student prepared to apply his or her knowledge, to carry out, even in some limited form, the approach to truth being demonstrated in the course, whether it be sociology, history, philosophy, or some other academic discipline? The student may have memorized--depending upon the subject being taught--sociological concepts, historical events, or philosophical principles needed for answering exam questions. But unless the student also has performed activity that has caused him or her to analyze the material in the manner of the sociologist, the historian, or the philosopher, one must question the level of mastery he or she has achieved.

A tradition of learning more likely to result in liberal education was that prac-

ticed in the Athenian grove of Socrates in ancient Greece. Socrates, the archetype teacher, gathered his students around him and engaged them in a dialogue in which he used examples from contemporary Athenian life--not greatly different in the nature of its societal and moral problems from those of the modern world. He challenged his students on the nature of justice, the structure of logic, the elements of rhetoric, the appeal of poetry and art. His approach was one in which, instead of lecturing, he engaged his students; and they, in return, engaged him. A recently-published study called *How People Learn: Brain, Mind, Experience, and School* by the National Research Council in Washington, D.C. repeated this theme. It concluded, from a summary of years of research, that "fundamental understanding about subjects" involves knowing "how to frame and to ask meaningful questions about various subject areas" and "contributes to an individual's more basic understanding of principles of learning." This, in turn, can assist students to become "self-sustaining, life-long learners. The new knowledge of learning," it reported, is concerned with creating individuals who "seek to understand complex subject matter and who are better prepared to transfer what they have learned to new problems and settings." (Brain Mind, 2000).

Learning that produces such results in the best American and European colleges--and at AUK--results from experiences that involve students in work prior to arriving in the classroom--to gather information; compare it to some question or hypothesis; and formulate persuasive conclusions using evidence and written argumentation. It involves--among many possible activities--group and individual

dialogues with teacher and classmates, student presentations, debates, and five-minutes silent writing in preparation for discussions. The student's notebook, containing his or her formulations, serves as a journal of learning. These experiences invariably include research and writing that uses peer- and instructor critiques of preliminary drafts-- thesis papers (meaning that the student actually does the work of the sociologist, historian, or philosopher)--and the oral presentation and defense of his or her paper's conclusions (the thesis). Like Socrates' grove, the classroom can be a forum in which the student does not simply record what the professor is saying but rather uses and therefore tests his or her own conclusions. This is not to say that a well-organized lecture, especially if it contains visual aids and time for questions, does not produce liberal learning if a student

comes to class prepared. (Certainly, the graduate assistant, during the one discussion per week, can use the above mentioned techniques.) But the lecture format, tending as it does to passive absorption of material and removal of the student from day-to-day accountability, lessens the likelihood.

That AUK's approach is well suited to its worthy goal should be no surprise to anyone. Camilla Sharshekeyeva, Minister of Education of the Kyrgyz Republic and the university's founder, explained in an interview published last autumn in the journal, *Thinking Classroom*, that "Kyrgyz students need to be able to pass examinations that test their ability to think critically and to analyze. These tests must demonstrate publicly the real value of today's education." (Camilla Sharshekeyeva, 2001).

#### Works cited

1. Committee on Developments in the Science of Learning, *How People Learn: Brain, Mind, Experience, and School*, expanded edition (Washington, D.C.: Commission on Behavioral and Social Sciences in Education, National Research

Council, 2000), pp. 5, 13.

2. Camilla Sharshekeyeva interview by Inna Valkova, "My Symphony," *Thinking Classroom: An International Journal of Reading, Writing and Critical Reflection* (Autumn, 2001 [6]), p. 37.