



**Liberal Education for a Time of Uncertainty:
Reflections on Mark Van Doren's *Liberal Education***

Bill Koch

For several months now I have been reading up on composition theory, and I've noticed that scholars like Anne Berthoff and Patricia Bizzell quote some of the seminal thinkers and philosophers of the early 20th century. These scholars (such as Cassirer, Richards, Whitehead) wrote their most influential texts during the 1930s, as if the awful gathering military storm had pressured these thinkers into formulating crystalline expressions of what the human mind must do to—as Richards puts it—“remedy our misunderstandings.”

We too live in a time of gathering storms, if not in the storms themselves. And another writer who might help us during our troubling times is Mark Van Doren, who wrote and published *Liberal Education* in 1943, and we all know what was going on then.

But I propose commenting on this book for another reason: the University of Northern Iowa has begun to formally examine its Liberal Arts Core, and I find that Van Doren says many things relevant to our mission as a Liberal Arts institution.

Van Doren felt the topic was important enough to broach even in the midst of a worldwide conflagration; indeed, he felt this war demanded that academics rethink their mission so that the psychical pieces which remained after the war could be reconstructed with a modicum of tragic wisdom. Our times seem to be beckoning us to do the same. How can academia contribute to a global educational program that meets the needs (physical and psychical) of humanity while also respecting the prerogatives of specific nations? How can academia—perhaps more accurately, how can liberal education—most effectively shape students so they will and can contribute to the fruition of humanity's potential and dreams? This is another way of saying—how can Liberal Education help students fulfill their destiny?

I find it interesting that in the Preface for the 1959 edition of *Liberal Education*, Van Doren notes that scientists doubt their own wisdom, and that the layman feels he has no capacity to wisely judge the merits of science. Yet, Van Doren declares, “This is the age of science: an age, oddly enough, in which it might be said that we know less than ever before what we are doing” (n.p.). Hence, “the age of science is [...] also [...] an age of ignorance.”

Thus Van Doren presents the irony that because we doubt our wisdom, because ignorance pervades this age of science and experts, it is clear that **“there is a great deal to be thought about [and] as many persons as possible should do the thinking.”** [As to what exactly constitutes thinking will be a topic Van Doren discusses in his book.]

For Van Doren, liberal education lives up to its ideal when opinion “flourishes and argument goes on: **argument, that is to say, about the greatest things, the difficult, the all but insoluble things that haunt us every morning as we wake.**”

Van Doren notes that a Liberal Arts Education (LAE) is not an end in itself. Rather, “it prepares the intellect to search for [answers to tough questions] and to recognize [them] when or if [they are] available.” This means that while course content (such as the readings of a humanities course, the lab work of a science course) provides important knowledge, a LAE

must insure that another type of knowledge is conveyed through content: **“knowledge of the intellect and its powers, [...] its powers of precision.”**

I would posit that our present LAC framework needs to highlight this kind of knowledge and precision better, because precision deals with the processes of thinking that transcend all disciplines. And I would submit that precision development begins with the assumptions we have about the nature, power and limits of thinking.

When I begin my College Reading and Writing class I am always struck by the divergence between myself and the students over our assumptions about the nature of education and learning. You cannot fault students too much for this, because their assumptions come from the larger society that convinces them that material things are most important, that a happy life is filled with things and activities, that an education’s purpose is to improve one’s chances of getting a “good” job. We as faculty must move students from these unhelpful assumptions to assumptions that affect their understanding of the nature of the intellect and its powers, assumptions that reveal to students how they can learn how to learn.

Van Doren identifies one of these faulty assumptions. Everyone knows that precision operates in science, he says, but “the student doubts it operates anywhere else. [...] But the precision of Shakespeare was marvelous, too, and of Mozart and of Dante.”

When Liberal Education shows the student that the precision of mind is possible on many “fronts,” then the student can learn to “be at home with the intellect at its happiest, even though most of its masters are dead.”

When a student reads literary achievements, he or she is in “contact with the mind at its happiest, [which] makes the dead come alive,” Van Doren says, and “to that extent, [the student’s] own life increases, for he knows how to think of every great mind as his contemporary. He is prepared then to add to the whole glory if he can.”

I find that last statement especially compelling, and a similar thought occurred to me this past semester. I tell my students that we require them to take courses in a variety of fields for two reasons: not just to expose them to the achievements (and failures) that contributed to our present situation, but—more importantly—to show students that those inventors and thinkers were human beings just like them. And I challenge them to believe that **their knowledge of the past should show them that they too could come up with the Next Big Idea.** Why not?

Van Doren’s 1959 introduction reiterates his original conclusion of 1943 that Liberal Education “is a specific discipline, and has rules, also an inescapable content.” He then dryly says, “I am not aware that during the years since then there has been much agreement with this claim.” But he was not advancing his own views on the discipline, just the claim “that the discipline exists [. . .and] that the chief duty of teachers is to discover its content.”

I don’t know if it’s an irony or just interesting, but my own scholarship of the past year has suggested to me what that content might be, and I am now using Van Doren as a vehicle (and a crutch?) to outline—and test—this content, this discipline. And it is the genius of the discipline and content (but not of me) that if we are to fill in the outline of a LAE, the faculty (and students?) must discuss the issues, argue for their position, listen to each other, weigh the merits of various opinions, and try to come to a workable consensus. But I would also repeat the focus of our discussions. They should be about, as Van Doren says, “the greatest things, the difficult, the all but insoluble things.”

In connection to this last point, Van Doren concludes his introduction with remarks that seem to be directed specifically to those of us on this campus:

Any college can be better than it is; but all colleges would be better if those in charge of them considered together, at regular intervals, the ideal college curriculum. They would not need to fear that every college would then become identical with every other; such identities cannot exist in nature. But if all liberal colleges had the same aim, and if they were serious in their pursuit of it, the differences among them would become, for a change, really interesting.

Concerning that same aim, Van Doren writes, “I continue to believe that the way to produce individual intellects is **to teach** all students the **same things**, and of course the **best things**.”

Van Doren’s first chapter, “Nobody Thinks He is Educated,” characterizes general features of a liberal education that I think most academics would agree with:

“Education can afford to ponder **programs of being** no less deeply than schedules of doing” (5).

A parent “is not told [but should be told?] to expect the transformation inside the son which tradition takes to be the main thing” (6).

Students “can benefit by knowing that education is something they must labor to give themselves” (7).

“The good educator is very **serious** but also very **sensible**. And somewhere in his soul there is a **saving lightness**” (7).

“The good educator knows that the secret of the discipline he imparts is not the final secret of existence. [...] **Education does not pose as insurance against error and sin**. [...] The world of men must manage itself. With education it can be wiser, but deeper things decide its fate” (8).

“Modesty in an educator bases itself, furthermore, upon his perception that **accident plays a high role in the affairs of human life**, including the affairs of education” (9).

All of these remarks lay out the limits and the power of liberal education’s mission, and when we perceive the limits of education, education “becomes truly important” (7).

In the same vein of humility, Van Doren declares that although he may be an expert on Shakespeare, “[this] book is not by one who considers himself educated. It is by one who still wishes to be, and who has set out to discover, if he can, of what the experience would consist” (11).

Van Doren identified three things that an educated person must have “**a reasonably deep and clear feeling about** the bearings upon one another, and upon his own mind.” Those three things are, significantly I think, “**art, science and religion**.” Van Doren claims that an educated person by definition necessarily “arrives at the center from which these radiate—if there is a center. He would like to know that first of all, and to realize what knowledge of it means” (11).

But he then notes that his own education has been mostly literary, while society as a whole values the sciences over the literary (and whatever is valued the most becomes that person’s religion, it seems to me).

The implication, I think, is that an ideal (but eminently possible) liberal education provides equal doses of knowledge (which it presently provides adequately, though by itself is thin gruel), reflection (often lacking) and experience (including practicing an art—also often lacking).

Perhaps we could call those three “doses” the three prongs of methodology: knowledge of a topic, reflection on that topic, and experience in it (in lab and in studio).

(In addition, would the three prongs of content would be art, science and religion?)

This kind of bare outline says little about what a complete education, “within the limits

of human reason and imagination,” should result in (12). I would pose these as the outcomes:

First, **one develops a perpetual flexibility of intellectual cognitivity** (a neologism, I know) such that, to quote Robert Pirsig from his book *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*,

One’s rational understanding [...] is modified [...] as one [...] sees that a new and different rational understanding has more Quality. One [won’t] cling to old sticky ideas [when] one has an immediate rational basis for rejecting them. [...] Then] you never get stuck. [Rationality] has forms but the forms are capable of change. (363-4)

As Van Doren will say later in his book, “the liberal arts are the liberating arts” (79). I believe we should take those words seriously and see their radical implications.

Second, **one develops what Kieran Egan calls a philosophical and ironic level of understanding (PIU)**. By philosophic he means that one has not only ingested a lot of information, but one has digested it in a way that helps him or her realize that one’s prior understanding of a particular topic, or value one adheres to, was very partial, incomplete, and unable to handle the complexities of the modern world. And, I would suggest that when a student is aware of his or her level of understanding AND—more importantly—knows how to developed their understanding AND knows how to recognize humane development, then liberal education has fulfilled its mission.

In addition, with a PIU, one embraces an **ironic perspective**, too, the purpose of which is not to deflate values and ideals, but **to deflate one’s hubris and egotism**, reminding one that no matter how sophisticated one’s understanding has become through PIU, it is still provisional, likely to be reformed by the next day’s news and discoveries. Irony reminds us that even education has its limits, and that life is bigger than our cognitive abilities.

So I would suggest that despite over 2,000 years of Western intellectual tradition, **we have barely gotten going in the education of the species**. (Lately I’ve suggested to students that we are just beginning to understand the power of literacy!) In fact, I’d say we are only **at the end of our childhood as a species**, though the signs can be interpreted as the End end. But I think such a view comes not from PIU but from an infantile, or adolescent mythic or romantic level of understanding.

Such levels of understanding have their value and purpose, and PIU itself has an element of the mythic and romantic (perhaps its saving graces—the “lightness” Van Doren referred to earlier). But an adult cannot consider himself or herself truly educated if he or she operates from a simplistic mythic or romantic perspective. That this is often the case is reflected in the axiom that newspapers try to write their news at a 6th grade level.

I would suggest then that **the time has come to articulate**, as a faculty, the **discipline of cognitivity that would transcend all disciplines**—this would be PIU?—and we have to hammer out its contents, a set of limited yet related ideas that all disciplines find useful, even necessary.

What that content might be may be hinted at in Van Doren’s next chapter, titled, “The Educated Person.” My next essay (should anyone be interested) will discuss that chapter and perhaps more.

But as a closing image, I’d like to share a passage from the Jesuit scientist Teilhard de Chardin, who, even while being an ambulance carrier in World War I, found the optimism to write,

So far as one can guess, the developments [in biology] to be expected are primarily of the intellectual and moral order. The impression one gets is that after having been completely occupied for a long time in the work of constructing organisms, **life is only now beginning to see its internal dispositions**; it is concentrating its attention and care on advances and refinements of a finally **perfected consciousness**. At present, **evolution is continuing much more through improvements of the psychological order than through organic transformations**. (*Writings in Time of War*, 17)

I would suggest that education, especially Liberal Education, now has the opportunity to unlock the doors of the psyche and activate the processes that refine biology's internal dispositions and advance them to levels we have not seen or expected, but should have.

It may seem the task has been going on a long time—a couple million years?—but perhaps PIU sees that as a very short period of time. The clay of consciousness has been built up; the first round of early urban civilizations has given the clay of consciousness its general features. It may now be the time to refine them—and fire them—in the furnace of self-examination and communal catharsis.

Bill Koch is an Instructor in the Department of English Language & Literature at the University of Northern Iowa

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