

The Humanities Build Political Capital

Stephen Woolpert, Saint Mary's College of California, United States

The Asian Conference on Arts & Humanities 2019
Official Conference Proceedings

Abstract

Each generation is shaped by the historical context in which their education takes place. By providing us with a fuller understanding of the world and our place in it, the humanities help us make sense of these larger events. Today's citizens must be prepared to function in a culturally diverse, globally interdependent, and technologically sophisticated world. Yet sadly, our society is suffering from excessive self-interest, growing intolerance, and a decreasing sense of responsibility to one another. The humanities help remedy these problems by building "democratic capital". The primary ingredients of democratic capital are social trust (a belief in the reliability of others), political efficacy (the capacity to engage in public life), and democratic tolerance (extending respect to those whose viewpoints differ from one's own). The humanities promote good judgment in a world of uncertainty, cross-cultural understanding a world of diversity, and integrative thinking in a world of complexity. Technical skills may become obsolete over time, but the democratic capital generated by studying the humanities will not. While hardly a panacea for our social, economic, and political ills, the humanities are more important now than ever.

Keywords: Democratic Capital; Humanities; the Future

iafor

The International Academic Forum

www.iafor.org

Introduction

"It's in Apple's DNA that technology alone is not enough. It's technology married with liberal arts, married with the humanities, that yields us the results that make our hearts sing." Steve Jobs

Some see the study of literature, the arts, philosophy and history as a retreat from the concerns of the world at large—an opportunity for carefree students to reflect, explore, and develop with relative freedom. To them it seems that today's students should pursue more "practical" fields that will prepare them for the emerging occupations in high-tech or science-based industries. They see the ongoing decline in the proportion of students who study the humanities as a sensible adaptation to globalization.

However, I argue that familiarity with the humanities is in fact the most practical preparation for entering a world that is changing in ways we cannot foresee. Technical skills may become obsolete over time, but the humanities will not. While hardly a panacea for our democratic, economic, and political ills, the humanities are more important now than ever.

An Uncertain Age

Our political journey has reached a crossroads. The present age is one of heightened conflict, anxiety and turbulence. Something is dying and something else is being born, but precisely what we cannot foresee. Symptoms of the discontinuity between past and future are ubiquitous: the divisive impacts of globalization, the escalating damages to our environment, and rapid advances in telecommunications, artificial intelligence and biotechnology.

Transitional periods, in which one age merges into another, are by nature ineluctable and protean. What lies ahead will be qualitatively unlike what has gone before. Whether such turmoil yields beneficial or destructive outcomes depends on the kind of politics used to deal with it. Therefore, the turbulence of contemporary politics is the most significant dimension of this historical turning point.

The malfunctioning of public processes and institutions is pervasive and widely felt. There is growing dismay over excessive self-interest and growing civic disengagement. Politics is suffering from increasing intolerance and a decreasing sense of responsibility to one another. Evidence includes the rise of right-wing populism, fear-mongering media pundits, bitter partisanship, governmental gridlock, and disaffected electorates.

Such democratic malaise decreases our sense of responsibility to one another and our pursuit of the common good. We risk living in polarized, fragmented societies whose members have little sense of common purpose.

Each generation is shaped by the historical context in which their education takes place. It is the responsibility of educators to prepare the young for responsible membership in

the communities in which they will live, learn, and work. Today, students need to be prepared to lead responsible lives in a culturally diverse, globally interdependent, and technologically sophisticated world that is marked by uncertainty, rapid change, and destabilizing inequalities.

The Humanities and Democratic Capital

What will prepare today's youth to participate in bringing about a fundamentally better world? Rigid moral frameworks are no remedy for these problems—indeed they contribute to the same result: a polarized and fragmented society whose members have little sense of common purpose. Instead, *what is required is greater democratic capital*. Democratic capital is the glue that holds political communities together in the face of inevitable conflicts, scarcities, and threats. Its primary ingredients are democratic trust (a belief in the reliability of others), political efficacy (the capacity to engage successfully in public life), and democratic tolerance (extending respect to those whose viewpoints differ from one's own).

Powerlessness is a root cause of a broad array of political conflicts. If today's college graduates are to be positive forces in the world, they need to possess more than practical know-how. They must also be willing to act for the common good and capable of doing so effectively. Democratic capital—trust, efficacy, and tolerance—not only prepares them to function in the existing political system, but also creates the ability to *renew* it, by developing the capacity for self-direction through interaction with others.

Democratic capital has been eroded in today's world of multiplying responsibilities and fragmenting loyalties. But the humanities can help to rebuild democratic capital by providing students with a fuller understanding of the world and their place in it. The humanities promote good judgment in a world of uncertainty, cross-cultural understanding a world of diversity, and integrative thinking in a world of complexity.

Familiarity with the humanities inculcates the enduring values of human civilization: conviction and courage, intuition and insight, compassion and diversity of expression, among others. These values in turn foster open-mindedness, community engagement, and pursuit of the common good. Such values are therefore critical for preparing future generations to assume leadership and stewardship of the world.

The humanities shun indoctrination on the one hand and relativism on the other. They promote freedom of inquiry, the willingness to take seriously the ideas of others, the collaborative examination of perennial issues, and a commitment to rational discourse. They foster the habits of looking twice and asking why, the very habits required to become empowered citizens and leaders. In so doing they develop democratic capital. They are, consequently, powerful antidotes to narrow self-interest, anomie, and intolerance.

What is the future of democracy?

Much of the current literature on the future underscores the growing need for human skills such as flexibility, mental agility, ethics, resilience, systems thinking, and communication. As we move through this age of rapid and profound change, democracy needs people who know how to think on their toes — who can problem-solve in the most uncertain and ambiguous of situations. Citizens need to know that their problems can have more than one solution and their questions can have more than one answer.

The academic fields that study the human condition, society and culture prepare young adults for the most essential aspects of democratic engagement: getting along with other people, understanding multiple points of view, and coming to terms with one's place in the world. The humanities may not enable learners to fully understand the emerging technologies in the world around them. But they do nurture the qualities that are unique to humans—namely their capacity for creativity, critical thinking, and emotional intelligence. Such skills cannot be easily automated. As such, students in all fields of study need exposure to the humanities to be practically prepared for the future.

Conclusion

Students who study history, literature, philosophy and culture delve into a myriad of stories and events that reveal how people have worked and lived throughout history. They learn about hierarchy, power, deceit, injustice, love, compassion, sacrifice, and rebellion - the range of human emotions and behaviors that have molded and continue to shape our realities. They help us realize that we are not the first to experience anything on this earth, but are part of a larger collective experience of being human.

In addition, the humanities increase our resilience in the face of difficult life experiences. For example, learning about the inappropriate use of power through the study of history or literature leads to a better understanding of how the abuse of power functions in contemporary society. As a result, we are better prepared to manage our responses, recognize the larger patterns of human behavior, and effectively deal with such challenges. And finally, our heritage of cultural myths, literature and the arts may awaken us to the possibility of political transformation. As Thomas Jefferson observed:

"Laws and institutions must go hand in hand with the progress of the human mind. As that becomes more developed, more enlightened, as new discoveries are made, new truths disclosed...institutions must advance also, and keep pace with the times."