

A COMPREHENSIVIST APPROACH TO GENERAL EDUCATION

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I wonder if we have ever asked ourselves what education means. Why do we go to school, why do we learn various subjects, why do we pass examinations and compete with each other for better grades? What does this so-called education mean, and what is it all about? This is really a very important question, not only for the students, but also for the parents, for the teachers, and for everyone who loves this earth. Why do we go through the struggle to be educated? Is it merely in order to pass some examinations and get a job? Or is it the function of education to prepare us while we are young to understand the whole process of life? Having a job and earning one's livelihood is necessary—but is that all? Are we being educated only for that? Surely, life is not merely a job, an occupation; life is something extraordinarily wide and profound, it is a great mystery, a vast realm in which we function as human beings. If we merely prepare ourselves to earn a livelihood, we shall miss the whole point of life; and to understand life is much more important than merely to prepare for examinations and become very proficient in mathematics, physics, or what you will (Krishnamurti, p. 9).

At most colleges and universities, the purpose of the general education or "liberal arts" program is to help prepare students to understand and seek meaning for the entire process of life. This goal reflects universal principles which underlie a broad range of approaches to the quest for knowledge. Bakan, for example, suggested that the fundamental impulse of all forms of human inquiry (science, humanities, philosophy, religion, etc.) is—

... the singular impulse of man to appreciate the nature of his existence in time, in space, in history, and in corporeality, and to appreciate the possibility of transcending any specific expression of his nature. . . . This impulse pre-supposes that the manifest is but the barest hint of reality, that beyond the manifest there exist the major portions of reality, and that the function of the impulse is to reach out toward the unmanifest (p. 152).

Appreciation of the nature of existence requires looking beyond what is immediately apparent and, by making connections among various experiences, contacting the more fundamental reality which lies beyond. Does general, liberal arts education in our colleges and universities reflect this broad and comprehensive perspective for seeking the truths which characterize this vast, profound, and mysterious realm? Or have we become so deeply entrenched within our specialties and subspecialties that we have "forgotten" the fundamental human questions? Are we instead teaching fragmented knowledge about specific subjects rather than preparing students for the lifelong pursuit of understanding of their lives and the universe?

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Fragmentation and Specialization

Although various academic disciplines may be rooted in this singular fundamental impulse, recent studies indicate an increasing level of fragmentation among the college professoriate (Clark, 1985). Academics are described as highly alienated and pluralistic, divided into various specialties across a wide range of disciplines. Within this context a premium is placed on individual creative divergence, and, as a result, faculty members have more allegiance to their specialty fields than to the college where they work or the broad education of their students. With the emphasis on specialized expertise, and the proliferation of new areas of specialization, each with unique vocabulary, methods, and problems, there is very little sense of "shared mission," communication, or commonality among people in various disciplines. Professors tend to develop great "faith" in the power of their specialty fields to answer the most important human questions. Specialty areas become an independent concern in their own right and are "worshipped" almost in an idolatrous fashion, engendering contempt for those who follow another approach to the quest, and contributing even more to fragmentation and lack of communication among scholars. Within this context there is little encouragement for investigating broad, general pursuits that are relevant to the larger questions of life.

As society continues to emphasize factual, scientific knowledge and concrete technological accomplishment, professors are increasingly encouraged to become "experts," and the reward system in academics favors this narrow specialization (Schuster & Bowen, 1985). Society has willingly adopted the belief that the only valid knowledge is "technical fact" and this notion helps to perpetuate the idea that to be educated is to possess a collection of "facts" or "skills" with respect to particular specialty disciplines. From the standpoint of the average person, the purpose of a college education is not to produce a well-rounded person but to train skills which will insure employment within an increasingly technically oriented job market.

These values often lead young professionals to develop competency in marketable skills in order to be socially and financially "successful," and technical competence becomes an ultimate virtue (Brown, 1985). Professional competence, however, is only useful as a means to some more important end, and does not in itself provide a method for determining the value of an activity or rendering judgments about what lies beyond any specialty area. General education should prepare students to work across a range of fields, and "... make their beliefs and ideals the basis for their judgments and participation in public life" (p. 46).

Admittedly, specialization is not totally negative. Human progress occurs through differentiation and individuation, and tremendous advances in knowledge have resulted from specialization. Students benefit greatly from education in the technology which has evolved from this knowledge (Kanigel, 1986). *Total* reliance on deep, but narrow, specialization,

however, leads human inquiry away from the larger issues of life. Specialty knowledge alone lacks comprehension of these fragments and integration of this knowledge into a superordinate system of concepts, values, and personal understanding.

Specialization and General Education

This predominant emphasis on specialization is reflected in most undergraduate studies. Even the "general education" portion of the curriculum is typically a "cafeteria style" selection of introductory or survey courses in the various specialties, taught by professors who are primarily specialists in their particular disciplines. Additionally, students are usually allowed to select the particular courses they take from among a list of many, providing little assurance that any particular knowledge is gained. Our current system of education has been called the "Green Stamp Book" approach, in which students collect their "stamps" (units of credit in various courses) until they have "filled their book" and then can "redeem" it for a diploma. This approach perpetuates among students the same type of fragmentation that exists among the faculty, and they may obtain degrees without ever developing a basis for an integrated, comprehensive understanding of these fragments of human knowledge.

Our commitment to general education is based on the assumption that there is value in broad, general knowledge, but the current fragmented academic environment is not supportive of these general pursuits. Moreover, there is typically no consensus among faculty as to what constitutes a general, integrated education. This difficulty is compounded by the lack of a viable alternative to the specialist model. The term "generalist" is often used in contrast to specialist, but tends to have negative connotations, particularly in the present culture that values specialization so highly. A generalist is usually seen as a "jack of all trades and master of none," a dilettante who dabbles in many areas but who has no valued "expertise." In order to combat increasing fragmentation and specialization, it would be helpful to have an alternative model that is not handicapped by these negative perceptions.

The Comprehensivist Approach

Buckminster Fuller coined the term "comprehensivist" to refer to someone who "specializes" in comprehending knowledge within the broadest possible framework. Fuller's own work reflects this refusal to be restricted by disciplinary boundaries:

Nobody is born a specialist. Every child is born with comprehensive interests, asking the most comprehensively logical and relevant questions. Pointing to the logs burning in the fireplace, one child asked me, "What is fire?" I answered, "Fire is the Sun unwinding from the tree's log. The Earth revolves and the trees revolve as the radiation from the Sun's flame reaches the revolving planet Earth. By photosynthesis the green buds and leaves of the tree convert that Sun radiation into

hydrocarbon molecules, which form into the bio-cells of the green, outer, cambium layer of the tree. The tree is a tetrahedron that makes a cone as it revolves. The tree's three tetrahedral roots spread out into the ground to anchor the tree and get water. Each year the new, outer-layer, green-tree cone revolves 364 turns, and every year the tree grows its new tender-green, bio-cell cone layer just under the bark and over the accumulating cones of previous years. Each ring of the many rings of the saw-cut log is one year's sun-energy impoundment. So the fire is the many-years-of-Sun-flame-winding now unwinding from the tree. When the log fire pops, it is letting go a very sunny day long ago, and doing so in a hurry." Conventionally educated grown-ups rarely know how to answer such questions. They're all too specialized (Fuller, pp. 62-63).

The primary characteristic of a comprehensivist approach is the search for connections among what may initially appear to be disparate facts. A comprehensive understanding may be defined as one that subsumes a *variety* of particular events and concepts (Kelly, 1955). Such an understanding enables one to consider a wide variety of events at one time and organize them at a higher level of understanding. Philosopher of science Michael Polanyi (1969) characterized meaningful comprehension as "... an intimation of coherence among hitherto uncomprehended particulars..." (p. 131). For Polanyi (1958) this process was a deeply personal one in which the knower participates intimately in the knowing process through a deep commitment to the experience of the comprehended entity. The "variety of events" or "uncomprehended particulars" may refer, among other things, to specialized knowledge produced within individual disciplines. The task of the comprehensivist is to conceptualize this disparate knowledge within a broad, integrated framework which permits an understanding relevant to life.

Comprehensivism assumes that events in the universe hold no allegiance to our particular disciplinary-based ways of studying them (Kelly, 1955). An event is not in itself "biological" or "chemical" or "philosophical." These are perspectives from which understanding of the event may be approached, but the discipline holds no *exclusive* right to the domain. Thus, a comprehensivist attempts to develop understanding of themes or patterns which recur in various events without regard to the discipline from which information originates. Jaynes' (1976) approach to understanding human consciousness is an excellent example of such an inter-disciplinary, comprehensivist method. He asked the question "How can I be aware of myself being aware?" and pursued it from a variety of perspectives including brain physiology, psychology, anthropology, archaeology, literature, and mythology. He developed a comprehensive theory of self-consciousness and a persuasive argument about how it evolved in Western civilization. Had he remained committed to only one discipline, this comprehensive understanding would have eluded him.

Comprehensivism is not proposed as a substitute for specialization or as an exclusive approach to human knowledge. Not everyone should become a comprehensivist. It would be useful, however, if the opportuni-

ty existed for those scholars whose interests are comprehensive to have the opportunity and the vehicle for developing such understanding.

Comprehensivist Education

Comprehensivist education is suggested as a vehicle for developing an alternative approach to much of liberal education. Rather than the present system of "general studies" as almost *exclusively* a collection of surveys of specialties, "comprehensive studies" would be a curriculum specifically designed to approach human knowledge in the most broad and comprehensive manner. This curriculum must be consciously *adisciplinary*. Rather than taking the *inter-* or *cross-*disciplinary perspective, which usually results in the creation of still another specialty (Edgerton, Lovett, & Rice, 1985), the focus should be on ideas, issues, questions, and problems that are relevant to major human concerns. The curriculum should be developed without allegiance to traditional academic discipline boundaries but with respect for the broadest possible ways to construe knowledge. Professors who teach comprehensive studies courses should be those whose commitment is primarily to the quest for comprehensive understanding rather than to their discipline and its specialties and who can provide a model for students by drawing connections among disparate "facts." In addition to considering major questions relevant to understanding our place in the universe, a comprehensivist approach should focus on the *process* of human knowledge and the philosophy and history of alternative ways that humans have come to perceive their worlds.

Courses in comprehensive studies would, by necessity, be more "personal" in nature than those in orthodox disciplines. True comprehension, as Polanyi (1958) has discussed, evolves from a very personal act of "in-dwelling" in a subject or a question, and the development of an awareness of ways in which disparate events all reflect upon a theme or a pattern. It is the deep, passionate yet responsible, commitment to this awareness which drives meaningful discovery, and this commitment would be the cornerstone of a comprehensivist approach. Good examples of broad, personal understanding at a comprehensive level can be found in the television programs, usually shown on PBS, in which an individual has brought together a wide range of personally relevant information within a meaningful framework. Programs such as Bronowski's "Ascent of Man," Clark's "Civilization," Cooke's "America," and Sagan's "Cosmos" reflect this personal approach. Although not all scholars can have access to such elaborate resources, they should be allowed the freedom to apply the principle to a range of courses.

An Example: Cross-Cultural Understanding

Comprehensivist education may be effectively applied throughout the curriculum to concerns typically present in most general studies programs and within the context of usual academic areas. An example of one rele-

vant topic within the liberal arts tradition is the perennial concern that students be broadly educated regarding the range of cultures and modes of experience and expression that are reflected in the population of our planet. Such knowledge allows greater understanding of the relativity of one's own modes of experience and the unity that exists within the diversity of humankind. Often, foreign language study is proposed as a vehicle for addressing this concern, and many general education programs require that the student demonstrate proficiency in a foreign language. It is easy to agree with the proposition that it is desirable for every educated person to be able to speak more than one language, but it seems unrealistic to expect that many educated Americans will reach this goal. In America one may travel for several thousand miles without encountering anyone who is not fluent in English. Thus, there is little significant incentive to learn another language and minimal environmental support for maintaining one once it is learned. Additionally, for most students, enrolling in a college course does not lead to fluency.

Perhaps the more fundamental issue which this requirement attempts to address is "monoculturalism," the tendency of most people to think that "ours is the only way to live." By being exposed to a comprehensive understanding of the way people from other cultures live; students can learn to view their own culture and their way of experiencing the world more relatively. Language is one important part of this understanding, but does not address the entire concern. Many general education programs also require students to select from courses that offer some exposure to various facets of "non-Western" cultures by taking one or more courses in anthropology, history, or oriental studies. The aim of exposing students to a range of ways that human beings have evolved to live their lives, however, is not usually met by this potpourri of courses.

Comprehensive courses could be designed specifically to meet this goal. These courses would investigate cultures or national groups from a variety of different perspectives or disciplines that study how people perceive, judge, interpret, communicate, think, and feel, what they eat, how they make a livelihood, etc. Knowledge derived from all of the humanities, social, and natural sciences could contribute to this offering. The course could investigate several cultures from the perspectives of languages and linguistics, culture, religion, philosophy, history, literature, geography, modal personality, economics, political system, modes of perception, social structure, genetics, ecology, evolution, etc. Through a set of courses, several cultures could be studied during one or two semesters. A wide range of cultures could be covered, but each student might be required to study at least one European culture and one Oriental culture. Latin American and African cultures as well as sub-cultures within these areas might also be offered. This example is not proposed as an ultimate solution to this problem nor to all issues addressed in a general education curriculum, but rather as one potential way in which a comprehensivist approach might be applied to an area of common concern to a liberal arts education.

Administrative Hurdles

A major hurdle to be overcome in the implementation of comprehensive studies is the current structure of academic institutions. The administrative structure of colleges and universities supports and maintains the emphasis on specialization and expertise. Colleges are divided into schools and departments, each of which hold strong allegiance to their own specialty discipline and, as most academics are painfully aware, much effort in curricular deliberations is devoted to departmental "turf" battles. Since each discipline believes that it is fundamental to knowledge, each department wants, quite understandably, to participate in the general education requirements, and the assignment of "credit hour production" as a basis for determining departmental resources contributes to emphasis on departmental territoriality. Comprehensive studies can succeed, therefore, only with a change in the academic structure. The best situation would be a separate department or school for comprehensive studies, in which faculty members would have their tenure track appointments. Additionally, support for an integrated, comprehensive approach to general education, coordinated by a comprehensive studies department, would be required at the highest levels of college administration.

In the context of a society which values technological advance and specialty expertise, there is great need for comprehensive, integrated understanding of our lives as human beings in relation to the universe in which we live. As specialty knowledge continues to develop, its wise use requires that comprehensive knowledge also evolve in parallel with it. A comprehensivist approach to general education in colleges and universities would be a significant contribution toward supporting this continuing evolution of human understanding.

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