In Search of New Directions for Humanities Education

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──────────── Abstract ────────────

　　Looking back at liberal arts education over the past few decades at the university where I have been studying, teaching, and serving, I feel uncertain whether as college educators we are taking pressing problems of humanities education with sufficient seriousness. Is humanities education preparing our students for a mature and fulfilling life? In response to the dramatic changes in an age of digitalization and globalization, this paper discusses university-level humanities education in Taiwan and beyond. I will first identify major crises of the current situation, such as dwindling enrollments in humanities-related departments and dehumanization in the cyber age. These are serious concerns educators are facing in Taiwan, East Asia, and worldwide. I will then move from crises identifying to look for new possibilities and directions in the humanities arena. We must reinvent our classrooms to be places not simply to acquire knowledge or transmit information but rather to empower students to conceptualize the abstract, conduct critical analysis, form ethical judgments, foster creative imagination, and develop interpersonal skills which lead to persuasive communication. For these purposes we need to reconsider the current significance of humanities education. Schooled as I was in the discipline of comparative literature and with my teaching experience in the College of Liberal Arts, I will map out proposals with references to humanities training, such as to instruct, invite, and inspire cultural creativity; to equip students with the narrative art, including writing, expressing, and communicating. Finally, I will assert how the cultivation of a humanistic mind can reduce prejudice and vindictiveness in mental climate. Humanities education is perhaps the most economical and least costly investment in higher education. By facilitating self-growth, self-cultivation, and interconnectedness with others, humanities education leads to a healthy, enriched and fulfilling life.

Keywords: humanities/humanistic education, liberal arts education, liberal education, cultural creativity, narrative art

　　The humanities are the traditional core of liberal education. In the West, liberal education has been understood as a philosophy of education that aims at cultivating a *free* (Latin: *liber*) human being. It is based on the medieval concept of the liberal arts. In the context of the Greco-Roman tradition, liberal education, by definition, *liberates* the mind from the bondage of habit and custom, producing people who can function with sensitivity and alertness as citizens of the world. In the Chinese context, the concept of the humanities has taken a different path from that in the West. We may trace humanistic education in China back to the Six Arts in the Confucian framework.[1] The Confucian notions of fashioning a well-rounded person (*ren*) and Mencius' "holistic education"[2] come closest to the western concept of liberal education. In our times, East or West, a twenty-first century liberal education usually includes a general education curriculum that provides a broad range of transdisciplinary learning, along with in-depth study in a major. It has been characterized by the Association of American Colleges and Universities as "an approach to learning that empowers individuals and prepares them to deal with complexity, diversity, and change." As such, humanities education should aim to cultivate students for "the functions of citizenship and life in general

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[1]　Six Arts are rites and rituals, music, archery, charioteering, calligraphy and writing, and mathematics or prediction.

[2]　Mencius' education is "holistic" in the sense that it aims at igniting a renewal from within oneself and that it affirms the totality of human life. His educational philosophy is based on his theory of the original goodness of human nature.

(Nussbaum 1997: 9). In what follows, I will give a brief outline of the situation and challenges faced by humanities in higher education in Taiwan based on my experience as a faculty member and administrator.

1. Problems and Challenges We Face in the 21st Century

One of the main challenges humanities disciplines have had to face is how to position themselves vis-à-vis utilitarian goals in education systems which increasingly "run on an explicitly commercial basis" (Chan & O'Sullivan v). A combination of factors contributed to the pursuit of utilitarian goals. Added to careerism and commercialism are the rupturing effects of cyber-addiction, dehumanization, and cyber violence. In many ways the liberal arts and humanities are in a perilous situation both globally and in Taiwan.

1.1 Humanities Education Undervalued, Trivialized and Discredited

Universities worldwide face the peril of being undermined by a growing interest in vocational, rather than liberal, education. Let's first look at the situation in the U.S., presumably the world's leading producer and consumer of knowledge. Victor E. Ferrall, Jr., President Emeritus of Beloit College, in a survey of 225 liberal arts colleges between the academic years 1986-87 and 2007-2008, concludes that the movement away from liberal arts education to vocational instruction appears to be an accelerating trend and that "the demand for vocational instruction is skyrocketing" (154-55). In Taiwan a warning sign has been signaled by a key indicator, the Joint College Entrance Examinations (JCEE). The entry scores of the humanities-related departments have been continually dropping in the JCEE, which shows how humanities disciplines are unfavorably valued by prospective college students and their parents. East or west, locally or globally, a shared pessimism has long been in the air—that humanities education has little application to the real world.

In her essay "The Liberal Arts Are Not Elitist," philosophy professor Martha C. Nussbaum identifies a worldwide crisis in education, a crisis that goes largely unnoticed and in the long run is likely to be "far more damaging to the future of democratic self-government" (88). Nussbaum's warning holds a mirror to the present situation in Taiwan as well. After three decades of comparative wealth and prosperity, Taiwan's economy has been rather stagnant over the past few years, with a rising unemployment rate and low salaries. According to a recent survey released by the Ministries of Labor and Education based on analysis of data from the years 2010-2013, new university graduates receive an average first-year monthly salary of NT$25,500 (Hsiao 1), namely, new graduates could only expect to live beyond their means. Science or engineering graduates, however, may price themselves two or three times higher in the job market than their humanities peers. In this economic climate saturated with careerism, people hold colleges responsible for bettering their students' professional skills rather than their overall well-being. As a result, liberal arts have gradually lost their place at the heart of the university curriculum.

On the other hand, within the academia research is valued more highly when it is deemed to have economic and practical application. Education, in short, must have practical value and be more widely imparted and shared. Such practical value is most visible in the so-called STEM disciplines (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics). For the humanities, the traditional core of liberal education, such economic value is less visibly apparent. As a result, policy makers question the value of the humanities in higher education. Humanities education is undervalued, trivialized or even discredited.

1.2 A Real World Giving Way to a Virtual World

Never has human history witnessed an age like the present one where people are disconnected from their fellow human beings, from the world at large, and even from themselves, dwelling within comfort zones nurtured by 3C devices (products related to computers, communication, and consumer electronics). A real world of culture, fellowship, and creativity is giving way to a virtual world where life can be easily extinguished (and miraculously restored) and desires are immediately gratified, while human feedback or interaction is minimal. There are many ethical issues in regard to virtual environments which need to be addressed,[3] but for us educators, there are a few issues

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[3]   For a discussion on virtual reality in relation to ethical issues, refer to http://www.vrs.org.uk/virtual-reality/ethical-issues.html

which demand our attention in the age of the Internet.

a. Cyber-addiction

As with drugs, people can become addicted to electronic games and video games which involve a high degree of immersion and, as a consequence, start to blur the boundary between real and virtual life. Cyber-addicts spend increasing amounts of time in a virtual environment which has a detrimental effect on their actual lives. There is a growing scientific consensus on such "process addiction" and the assumed chemical etiology of addicts.[4] In extreme cases the gift of love, the gift of hope, and the gift of happiness are "virtually" deprived. Those who immerse themselves in video games, such as simulated gunplay, risk the danger of mistaking virtual reality for everyday reality.

b. Desensitization

Psychologists have noticed that repeated exposure to virtual reality may lead to desensitization. This is particularly alarming with virtual reality games which involve high levels of violence (such as combat scenarios which include killing) or sexual behavior (such as internet pornography). Overexposure to brutality or sexual stimuli first leads to addiction and then progresses to desensitization, namely, the person is numbed by extreme acts of behavior, be they violence or sex, and consequently fails to show empathy, compassion, or respect to living creatures. Some people actively seek out this type of scenario for an adrenaline rush and sense of control. Long-term desensitization progressively dehumanizes a person.

c. Dis-humanity

Dehumanization has been a topic of great interest within social psychology over the past decade. In their research on how and when dehumanization affects how we view others, Brock Bastian and Crimson Daniel have found that our perceptions of others are not the sole province of dehumanization; instead, dehumanization can also be found in our perceptions of self. Self-dehumanization may also motivate behavior aimed at reparation, perhaps in an attempt to regain lost humanity. Bastian and Daniel's findings demonstrate that the way we treat others not only has implications for how human they see themselves, but also for how human we see ourselves (9). What, then, is this new emerging "dis-humanity" in the cyber age? This is a difficult question to answer. In the worst cases, it might be a subject deprived of human nature, predicated on brokenness, on being "dis-eased" and "addicted" to sex, lust, violence, or pornography.

d. Cyberspace, a New Utopia

In their quest for understanding the triggers for self-dehumanization in relation to video game violence, Bastian and Daniel have found that simply observing one's own violent behavior—independent of its consequences—could be sufficient to change self-perceived humanity. Many tests have verified the possibility that simply priming violence can lead to dehumanization of others. Overall, research findings from related studies indicate that cybersport violence is a potential dehumanizing experience, impacting on self-perceptions of humanity. The evidence suggests that this effect may be most evident in the case of core human attributes, with people feeling these attributes are diminished as a result of overexposure to virtual criminality.

The disadvantages of virtual reality described above may seem trivial in comparison to the tremendous potential benefits of VR. But when we have briefly factor analyzed the risks of exposure to virtual environments, or worse still, cybersport violence, there is something to mention on the other side, namely, the self-dehumanizing consequences. In her classic work on the philosophy of education, *Cultivating Humanity*, Martha C. Nussbaum foregrounds the capability of "narrative imagination"—the ability to think what it might be like to be in the shoes of a person different from oneself (1997: 85-112). Examined in this regard, some university students have never culti-

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(4) For a study on behavioral addictions, see Steven Sussman, "Love Addiction: Definition, Etiology, Treatment."

vated narrative imagination to enter a broader world of human diversity and are thus impoverished personally, mentally, and even spiritually in a self-centered age. This otherworldly habitat has become a new utopia where freedom or individualism might be mistaken for the assertion that "I may attempt anything as long as it pleases me"—a slogan popular among Taiwanese youth.

1.3　Gap between Learning and Practice

There exists an alarming discrepancy between what we educators claim we are doing and what is actually happening in classrooms across the country. Confucius advocated a teaching-learning model which stressed continuing practice, expressing such ideas as "Is it not pleasant to learn with constant perseverance and application?" On the philosophy of learning, he described a proficient learner metaphorically: "A good questioner proceeds like a man chopping wood—he begins at the easier end, attacking the knots last, and after time the teacher and student come to understand the point with a sense of pleasure" ("The Process of Learning" *Hsuehchi*, *Liki*, Chapter XVIII; Lin 493). Similar ideas were to be articulated by western scholars such as John Dewey and Jean Piaget 2400 years later. Rubenstein, the great musician, once said, "If I omit practice one day, I notice it; if two days, my friends notice it; if three days, the public notices it." It is the old doctrine, "Practice makes perfect." Nevertheless, the time-honored experiential learning model, "learning by doing," is receding into oblivion as society's urge to explore the ever widening unknown leaves little space for pause and practice. Our failure to update the curriculum in accord with the global era also contributes to the widening gap between learning within academia and practice in society.

Taken together, these dark clouds on the horizon may seem to push the cause of liberal education to the brink of triviality or irrelevance. Yet I believe that this is to misconceive and misdiagnose what our new circumstances require. Education in the "First Machine Age" was expected to provide training for a new range of skilled careers, for scientists, engineers, doctors, corporate lawyers, executives, and even farmers and artisans.[5] Among the emerging professions was that of education itself, as college education was moving in the same direction, putting a greater emphasis on professionalism and specialization. In a time of transformative and globalized technological change, the so-called the "Second Machine Age,"[6] even at the level of sheer practicality, the skills and capacities required are now more cerebral than manual, involving creating and designing more than fabricating. Han Yu (768-824) a leading man of letters and education philosopher in the Tang dynasty, in "*Shi-shuo*" ("Treatise on the Importance of Teachers and Education") explicated that "a teacher is one who transmits the *dao* (path or truth), passes on knowledge, and eliminates confusions." This description has since become a role model for teachers in Chinese culture. Such a classic image of a teacher-educator, however, has met challenges in the twenty-first century; the role of a teacher and the function of education have been greatly complicated by the diversity and new adjustments in our age.

I have identified a few crises and problems of humanities—the core of liberal arts education—in higher education. These are the crises before us, but we have not yet fully confronted them. In the following section I shall bring forward some positive steps that course schedulers and department chairs can take to turn around an enrollment decline from the trough.

2.　New Directions

In response to the dramatic changes in an age of digitalization and globalization, we must reinvent our classrooms to be places not simply to acquire knowledge or transmit information but rather to empower students to conceptualize the abstract, conduct critical analysis, form ethical judgments, foster creative imagination, and

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develop interpersonal skills which lead to persuasive communication. For these purposes we need to reconsider the current significance of humanities education. *Schooled as I was in comparative literature and with my teaching experience in the* College of Liberal Arts, I am more familiar with the programs of liberal arts.[7] The following proposals are inevitably filled with references to humanities, but I feel that they are also applicable to other liberal education programs.

2.1　To Offer Introductory Courses of Broad Appeal

Peter J. Kalliney, associate chair and a professor of English at the University of Kentucky, has successfully reversed their declining English Enrollments by working within the existing curriculum—offering better classes and add some new ones. I find his strategic thinking inspiring. First, making sure the introductory courses are attractive and balanced topically. Second, do not let required writing or language courses be an undergraduate's sole exposure to the humanities. The reason may look familiar to us: many students resent those requirements even if they need them. In course scheduling Kalliney complements them with course offerings on topics that lots of undergraduates are eager to study: film, creative writing, mythology, the Bible, science fiction, Shakespeare, and Great Books. All of those have tremendously broad appeal. Third and most importantly, bring out the big guns to teach non-majors, namely, to have the department's best and most experienced professors teach introductory and general-education courses on a regular basis. It is crucial that all faculty members should strive to teach upper- *and* lower-division courses. General education courses, he argues, are where humanities departments fight for majors and should be used as recruiting opportunities.

2.2　To Instruct, Invite, and Inspire Cultural Creativity

The creative and cultural industries (such as publishing, advertising, music, cinema, crafts, design, and fashion)[8] continue to grow steadily and, predictably, have a leading role to play in the future of culture. Liberal arts play a vital role in cultivating the powers of the imagination which are essential to creativity. As educators we need to take up the challenge of actually tapping the talent and cultural literacy in students. Many liberal arts majors have the ability to add a cultural dimension and hence add extra value to a product. To find and bring forth stories behind a product, be it artificial or natural (such as a tourist or sightseeing spot) is to let narrative imagination take wing and exert power. The creative industries have become increasingly important to economic well-being, and since human creativity is the ultimate economic resource, the industries of the twenty-first century will depend increasingly on the generation of knowledge through creativity and innovation.[9]

As the globalization of exchange and new technologies open up exciting new prospects, NTU has made a vigorous response to the new demands of this era, as evidenced by Stanley Wang D-School@NTU established in 2015, a school of creativity and design sponsored by and named after the alumnus. The three primary objectives of the D-school are: (1) establish an interdisciplinary environment; (2) emphasize a hands-on approach; and (3) solve problems.[10] Core courses involve entrepreneurship programs, incubation projects, and interdisciplinary collaboration. However, the introduction of the creative and cultural industries into the curriculum has met resistance within the College of Liberal Arts at NTU. At collegiate meetings, one critical response has been that since NTU is a research-

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⑺　The Carnegie Foundation has identified the following broad fields of study as liberal arts disciplines: English language and literature, Foreign languages, Letters, Liberal and general studies, Life sciences, Mathematics, Physical sciences, Psychology, Social sciences, Visual and performing arts, Area and ethnic studies, Multi- and interdisciplinary studies, Philosophy and religion (*A Classification of Institutions of Higher Education, 1994,* vii; qtd. in Ferrall 9). However, at NTU, we have separate colleges for Liberal Arts, Science, Social Science, and Life Science. My discussion, as a result, covers a much narrower spectrum of liberal arts.

⑻　The creative industries refer to a range of economic activities which are concerned with the generation or implementation of knowledge and information. They may also be variously referred to as the cultural industries (especially in Europe) or the creative economy, and most recently they have been denominated "the Orange Economy" in Latin America and the Caribbean.

⑼　For a general introduction to the creative and cultural industries, refer to http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Creative_industries#CITEREFFlorida2002

⑽　Visit Stanley Wang D-School@NTU website at http://show.gw-design.com/about/about_en

oriented university and our college the last front for humanities, we should stand up to capitalism because bringing higher education to heel by forcing it to serve business is self-defeating and disgraceful. Such arguments center on defending a self-evidently sublime entity unsoiled by the grime of monetary interest. The opposite camp, in contrast, does not have a strong voice. The chair of the Department of Drama, however, asserts a positive attitude toward befriending industries. The drama students have been, she says, actively involved with off-campus events and working part-time for advertisements, exhibitions and performances by using their training in costume and makeup, stage design, sound and lighting, and curatorial management. These activities, she argues, enhance the motivation for learning and actualize the concept of "learning by doing." The Department of Foreign Languages and Literatures, responding to the new demands of the twenty-first century, in 2016 academic year recruitment announced a track for "Literature and Culture Theory" which included the following disciplines: visual culture, digital humanities, new media, and comparative literature with East-Asian emphasis (research conducted in English required). The recruitment has showcased the new territory toward which the department is heading.

Given the shortage of jobs in the arts and humanities and the ever-widening gap between what we teach at school and what business demands, we must allow and even encourage industries to see beyond the traditional zone of arts and humanities in order for the arts and humanities to fulfill their civic function. The international dimension of the creative and cultural industries opens a wide horizon for students in terms of freedom of expression, cultural diversity, and career planning. Carol G. Schneider, the former president of the American Association of Colleges and Universities, thinks the way "to reclaim our commitment to [the] aims of liberal education" is through "the creation of a new partnership between the academy and leaders in the business and civic communities" (qtd. in Ferrall 157-58).

2.3 To Return to the Narrative Art: Writing, Expressing, and Communicating

Regarding the relationship between literature and the compassionate imagination, Martha C. Nussbaum writes:

> The basis for civic imagining must be laid in early life. As children explore stories, rhymes, and songs—especially in the company of the adults they love—they are led to notice the sufferings of other living creatures with a new keenness. … It was in connection with the moral education of young adults that ancient Athenian culture ascribed enormous importance to tragic drama. (1997: 93)

On these grounds I am appealing for a return to traditional methods of teaching and learning which employ the following approaches.

a. Enlightening Students with the Best Works of Literature, History, and Philosophy

Students in Taiwan are fascinated by western and Japanese popular cultures, especially the youth culture, but seldom do they explore these cultures in depth. The teaching of western languages, English in particular, is greatly valued, yet western history and literature are largely ignored. This yawning gap could be bridged by reserving a place for classics in reading assignments. Literature, history, and philosophy, the core disciplines of a humanistic education, have been considered important in human life because they sustain us when we are weak, deepen our understanding of history, and expand our sense of what it is possible to think, feel, and reason. Literary qualities, for instance, are present in writings and speech outside of *belle lettres* and academic literary studies. Students are expected to gain a general understanding of a work and be able to talk about its meanings, significance and importance. They are also expected to learn to appreciate and critique the work via guided analysis of some of the best secondary source material, such as reviews and criticisms. These benefits are rarely found in cyberspace, where the freshness of information does not last long.

Admittedly there has long been a debate against elitist obsession with classics. Even William Shakespeare, who is considered the English-speaking world's greatest man of letters, is losing his place in the U.S. college curriculum. In a news story entitled "Shakespeare getting little love from American colleges," Nanette Asimov reports that

American academia is lowering the curtain on Shakespeare. According to a study, "The Unkindest Cut: Shakespeare in Exile," which looks at the 26 top-ranked universities in the U.S., including the eight Ivy League schools, and the 26 top liberal arts colleges as ranked by *U.S. News & World Report* in 2015, more than 92 percent do not require English majors to take a course on Shakespeare. The study's lead author, Michael Poliakoff writes that English departments that eschew a Shakespeare requirement yet claim to provide a true liberal arts education are "full of sound and fury and signifying nothing." He questions why universities are dis-serving students in this way.

Similarly in Taiwan, Chinese classics appear to be endangered species that are losing territory to popular culture at an alarming rate. Over the last few decades there has been a heightened effort to rescue Chinese classics from a high-brow position and return them to college classrooms. This has involved a new pedagogical approach designed to combat students' alienation from classics, an alienation that emerged out of the cynical view that the canonized texts have trapped us in a stifling obsession with outdated works which no longer answer the needs of contemporary society. In this regard Prof. Li-Chuan Ou's open education courses have set a successful model in reviving classics. Bai Xianyong, a leading contemporary Chinese novelist, said on receiving the seventh Master *Hsin-yun* Award (*Xin-yun zhen-shan-mei chuan-bo jiang*) for his contributions to Chinese literature: "Will we remain human beings without *Shi-jing* (*The Book of Songs*, 1122-570 B.C., greatly valued by Confucius), *Mu-dan-ting* (*The Peony Pavilion*, a sixteenth-century drama by Tang Xian-zu) and *Dream of the Red Chamber*? My faith in literature is relentless." He answered a rhetorical question, "What is the use of literature?" by saying, "Literature greatly consoles a traumatized soul" (Ho). The famous novelist and producer of *Qun* Operas (崑曲) has been invited by NTU to open courses such as *Dream of the Red Chamber* and The New Esthetics of *Qun* Opera, each included in NTU Open Course Ware, financially subsidized by Trend Micro, a global leader in internet content security software and cloud computing security. This is a happy but rare instance of a union between technology and classics in academia. Bai's 2015 course on *Qun* Opera attracted 2386 students for a class with a quota of only 400.[11]

b. Befriending a Book

Undoubtedly, the influence of many a book has gone beyond the land which nourished it and has captured the minds and souls of many people from different cultures. Wayne Booth in his *The Company We Keep: An Ethics of Fiction* proposes a metaphor for the interaction of a reader with a literary work: "A literary work is, during the time one reads it, a friend with whom one has chosen to spend one's time" (qtd. in Nussbaum 1997: 100). The question now is, where does this friendship lead us? Some books are meant for quick consumption. Some just offer cheap sensationalistic forms of pleasure and excitement. Others, by contrast, "show what might be called respect before a soul" (Nussbaum 1997: 100). In this regard, I recall a passage from Bertrand Russell's recollections on his early childhood:

> Throughout my childhood I had an increasing sense of loneliness, and of despair of ever meeting anyone with whom I could talk. Nature and *books* and (later) mathematics saved me from complete despondency. (27; emphasis added)

It is easier in our culture to purvey a sensational emotion-laden message than to tell, with accurate information, humanity, and even humor, stories of people's real diversity and complexity. I am concerned, first and foremost, with whether a book brings us closer to humanity or better still, to the Confucian idea of *ren* (a pun with reference both to a human being 人 and to humanity 仁). In other words, the value of a book lies very much in whether it connects to our personal experience and to humanity at large. We cannot make informed choices about important aspects of our lives (such as career choices and marriage), or about ethical dilemmas (such as terminating or extending the lives of others) without understanding people who are different than us. Befriending a book in this sense involves interactions with its author and his ideas and values. Besides enlarging our horizon of knowledge, this abid-

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⑾ For a report on Bai's course in the news media, refer to https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5cr1sh2S56w

ing friendship with books or authors allows us to exercise and develop sympathy/empathy and make more inclusive and informed decisions.

c. Assigning Papers and Supervising Senior Theses

Assigned papers should require students to read, take notes, write, learn, and inwardly digest—not merely click, copy, and paste. This training is particularly important in the College of Liberal Arts. Early in NTU history a senior thesis was required as partial fulfillment of a bachelor degree, but that requirement was canceled in 1956. After almost half a century, some professors appealed for the revival of the thesis requirement. This appeal was made in part as a response to the University's promotion of "capstone" courses. The four-year curriculum of each discipline at NTU was metaphorically conceptualized as a construction project with foundations being laid at each phase of education. The courses were thus labeled as cornerstone (in the first year), keystone (in the second), and capstone (for juniors and seniors). The idea of having a capstone course in the last year was for each department to open an integrated course for seniors to exercise and apply whatever knowledge and skills they had acquired in their own fields. In the beginning the models singled out by the Office of the Dean of Academics were exclusively engineering related disciplines.

However, since 2013 the Department of History has offered a capstone course which guides seniors through the process of thesis writing so that they may turn in a full-length thesis upon graduation. The Department of Foreign Languages and Literatures has long offered Composition Three, a course aimed at research paper writing, though the term paper of an enrolled student usually falls within twenty pages in English—far shorter than the usual length of a senior thesis (50-60 pages). Since English is taught and learned as a second language in Taiwan, the shorter required length seems reasonable. The Department of Japanese has recently considered the capstone idea, but their freshmen are mostly zero-degree L2 learners who have hurdles to overcome. The department may require a small research paper of some 4000 words, according to Chair Fang Xu-wen. Other departments are encouraged to revive the classical model of a thesis submitted upon graduation in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Bachelor of Arts. Overall, the College of Liberal Arts at NTU is offering a wider range of courses to enable students to develop critical literacy.

2.4 A Spark to Ignite the Tinder

In the days before matches, our ancestors had to strike pieces of flint again and again, dozens of times, before they could get a spark to ignite the tinder; and they were thankful enough if they lit it at last. Such a wisdom is well illustrated by Confucius when he stated that "a piece of jade cannot become an object of art without chiseling" (*Hsuehchi, Liki,* Chapter XVIII; Lin 477). Shall we not be as persevering and hopeful about university liberal education which will influence generations to come? We would have more certainty of thriving in this business if we could keep striking hard to get a spark of light as our forefathers did for acquiring heat and light, which has made all the difference in human civilization.

Given that economic growth is so eagerly sought by all nations, especially at a time of global economic crisis, few questions have been posed about the direction of education or what liberal education can do to serve society. With the rush to profitability in the global market, values precious for the future of society are vanishing. Nevertheless, even economic interest requires us to draw on the humanities and arts "to promote a climate of responsible and watchful stewardship and a culture of creative innovation," as Nussbaum aptly argues. Considered at a practical level, humanities education prepares people "for employment and for lives of rich significance" (2010: 90). Now let's look at the benefits of liberal education from the perspective of economics. Back in the year 1984, as a green lecturer at NTU I came across an argument of Bertrand De Jouvenel (1903-1987) for the *raison d'être* of a liberal education in the first lesson of a NTU's *Modern English Reader* compiled by my colleagues:

> Let us by all means so educate our young man so that his hours of work will be more productive … that might add to his economic capability in such a way that the life-product for the total hours remaining will be increased, not diminished—and indeed, so increased that shortening of normal work year may ensue. (1)

In purely economic terms, the French philosopher and political economist advanced his argument with meticulous calculations of the work time, leisure time, and sleep time in one's life, concluding that the use of all the waking hours ahead of our youngsters—those hours not consumed by work or taken up by sleep—depends on the education we provide them. Simple arithmetical calculations show that a man's waking hours (2/3 of his whole mature life) will be proportioned 1/4 for work and 3/4 for free time. The greater the share thus liberated for leisure time, the more pressing it becomes to educate students for the fruitful use of that free time. There is a wealth of examples of self-cultivation or self-improvement, but it would be optimistic to believe many people are capable of this. Most of us depend for our cultivation upon the good start given us by our teachers.

At this point I want to share an episode in my own career. To increase opportunities for interdisciplinary dialogue, NTU has since 2013 established a semi-annual event named Cross-College Symposium and Feast, hosted in rotation among eleven colleges of the university, participants being the chief administrators of the university. At the latest symposium and feast, hosted by the college of Liberal Arts on December 18, 2015, I heard many participants saying that they felt very much at home, a feeling they had seldom experienced at forums held elsewhere. If I were to account for this feeling, one possible reason might be the alienation by jargons the professors of sciences and technology experienced in their circles. Invoking Thomas Kuhn's theory of paradigm shifts, Norman Doidge states:

> … once the revolution becomes mainstream, a new kind of scientists emerges. These scientists work on problems, and puzzles *within* the new paradigm they inherit. … And because they communicate largely with one another, a specialized jargon develops so that even colleagues in adjacent fields cannot easily understand them. (354)

So how different was this symposium at the College of Liberal Arts? Whence its uniqueness? The symposium was conducted according to the routine procedure: professors from different disciplines (anthropology, musicology, philosophy, linguistics, and Chinese in this case) each gave a presentation on how a project of their choice could inspire interdisciplinary creativity or imagination. Complete understanding was not to be expected, yet all presentations were comparatively accessible to the audience because, as I assume, they were humanities-related subjects and therefore related to the core values of human nature and human uniqueness. The Dean entertained the participants with a feast in the main corridor of the College of Liberal Arts. On that winter evening, the 87-year-old building featured architectural beauty and human warmth. Unlike most NTU buildings, the College stands in unique, historical (and perhaps solitary) grandeur. Time makes a man mellow. Likewise, the mission of historic continuity makes the existence of the College of Liberal Arts a worthy one.

Looking back at liberal arts education over the past four decades at the university where I have been studying, teaching, and serving, I feel uncertain whether as college educators we are taking pressing problems of liberal education with sufficient seriousness. Is liberal education preparing our students for a mature and fulfilling life? Knowing and loving—the critical and reparative impulses of the humanities—are pursued in different mixes by scholars occupying adjoining niches of the academic landscape, contributing their complementary energies to the ideational dynamism entrusted to the liberal arts.

Conclusion

As intimated throughout the discussion above, vital and creative curriculums, and lucid, articulate professors in the classroom are absolutely crucial in humanities education. William J. Bennett states that humanities teach us how "men and women … have grappled with life's enduring, fundamental questions" (3). In this sense liberal education helps students to reclaim a legacy to which they are rightful heirs. I hope these preliminary findings shall support an argument that liberal education is not an educational luxury; instead, it addresses life's enduring, perennial questions. The humanities alone are their *raison d'être*, though humanistic education does not stand alone—it fosters creativity and critical thinking, and above all, it helps to fashion humane, well-rounded graduates who are able to interact *in person* with their fellow human beings, and thereby improve the quality of social life. Our humanity may

be less attached to our own individual identities and more a product of our interactions with others. This interconnectedness may elevate our humanity, but when destructive, it becomes a detrimental source of dehumanization.

In closing, humanities education empowers individuals and prepares them to deal with complexity, diversity, and change. It helps students develop a sense of social responsibility, as well as transferable intellectual and practical skills such as communication, analytical and problem-solving skills. Improvements in education are a low-cost investment in our shared future. The cultivation of a humanistic mind can reduce prejudice and vindictiveness. By facilitating self-growth, self-cultivation, and interconnectedness with others, a liberal education leads to a healthy, enriched and fulfilling life, which will in turn guarantee the maximum success of any human society.

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