

A Manifesto for Liberal Education

 theimaginativeconservative.org/2019/03/manifesto-liberal-education-eva-brann-90.html

Eva Brann

March 26, 2019



Since liberal education is non-academic, in my sense, it has real gravity, moral gravity. And so it is, finally, also concerned with questions of “good and evil.”

The college years are the time for students to frame those moral allegiances that will help them decide more sure-footedly how to act when leisure is over and life is racing by.

For at least three decades now I've talked about liberal education in public, but I can say in my own favor that I've done it—at least done it lately—with a somewhat bad conscience. That bad conscience comes in part from adding yet more to a magnitude, that of words about education, which is already large (though *not* great) beyond all reason. The other part of my slight sense of guilt comes from talking at the public and the students and the teachers, just when my point usually is that people shouldn't talk *at* but *to* each other.

This time round, and I've resolved that it should be the last time (though I haven't much faith in that resolve), I'll therefore do it differently. I'll still talk for a while, but I'll leave off in time for an ample question period. And instead of expanding in consecutive arguments and rounded periods on this subject, which is so close to my heart that I could probably do that, I'll be concise to the point of brusqueness and bold to the point of offense. So much the more important will it be that you get your chance to give your counter-opinions as you question my theses. For that is the way I want to proceed this time: to nail my nine theses concerning liberal education on the imaginary gates of this college and then to weather whatever small storm results. So let me begin forthwith and in accordance with my introduction by announcing the following first thesis.

Thesis One: Lectures are not a legitimate part of liberal *education*, at least not as a primary part. I conceive of liberal education as quite sharply distinct from vocational training. This distinction goes back to Aristotle, who speaks of liberal, that is to say, free learning as being done for its own sake and not as a means to an end. Now when students are being trained in some expertise in which it is important that they should receive the most effective methods and the established facts from those who are learned in them, that is, from the professors and authorities, then lectures may be the right mode of imparting that knowledge. It might be more efficient to excuse students from class and to hand them outright the paper or notes from which the professors are reading, but insofar as a certain amount of theater on their part helps students remember the material, a live delivery may be useful. But liberal education as I understand it does not have the purpose of shaping students to professional standards. Instead it is a slow self-development guided by teachers who are also and genuinely fellow learners. The subject matter of liberal education is not primarily jigged methods and established facts, but questions and inquiries of the sort for which there are no experts and in the face of which students and teachers are not so far apart—not because the teachers are not far more learned but because the matter is so very deep. One way to put my first thesis is that professors should give up

professing and take up teaching. Liberal learning is by its nature conversational or, to use a fancier term, dialectical. In a dialectical education the student is not the passive recipient of knowledge but an active participant in a common search. So the class is a place of real, not pretended questions, and the conversation is not a disguised solicitation of fixed answers but a shared effort. And that means throwing to the winds such false professorial ambitions as “covering the material” or “making students see” a certain thing, and above all “teaching them the methods of research” in a subject—for methods are, as I said, jugged ways of figuring, and they are the last thing a student should learn about, perhaps even as late as graduate school.

Thesis Two: This subject matter, the matter proper to liberal education, has the following character: It is what is *elementary* in all the subject matters. By elements I mean much what Euclid implied when he began his book on mathematics called *The Elements*, which ranges from plane geometry to the Platonic solids, from the theory of proportion to incommensurability, from discrete to continuous magnitude. He begins with Definitions, Axioms and Postulates as the elements of elementary mathematics. Plato in the *Republic*, which contains the first exposition of a liberal arts curriculum, has Socrates point out that there are two motions or directions of inquiry. One leads by deduction from the axioms and postulates down into the specialists’ fields. The other motion is upward in the sense that it takes the axioms themselves as questionable and rises to inquiries above and beyond them. In this elementary or fundamental realm there is plenty to dwell on together. And while students should certainly learn some of the fundamental arts of inquiry such as logic and linguistics in the broadest sense as well as a lot of mathematics and experimental science, in those few college years in which they are free to learn just in order to know and in which they have the leisure to return reflectively to the same questions over and over, there should be much less emphasis on competence than on thoughtfulness about beginnings, about elements.

Thesis Three is really a corollary to Thesis Two: Those who have liberal education in their keeping, by and large the faculties of liberal arts colleges, should not give an inch to demands for *utility* or *currency*. The public makes mistaken demands because faculties don’t express themselves with the force of conviction. What parents and students ought to hear is that in education utility is impractical. Eventually almost everyone had better become a this or a that—a research physicist or a licensed plumber. But parents and the world owe the young some (let it be four) clear years for becoming not a this or a that, but for learning to be a human being, whose powers of thought are well exercised, whose imagination is well stocked, whose will has conceived some large human purpose, and whose passions have found some fine object of love about which to crystallize. It is flabbily inflated and implausible to talk of teaching students to think—no one can do that. But to give them the occasions not

only for thinking with depth but also for imagining with elan and, above all, for loving with discretion—that is a practical possibility. A liberal education, we should tell the world, is not necessary for mere life but it is almost indispensable for a good life. So to disrupt such an education with intrusions from the so-called real world is counterproductive for dozens of reasons, chief of which is that it prepares students—if it does even that—for lives they may not wish to lead or that may not be available when they leave college.

Thesis Four: Students should not *specialize* (or at least not soon), and professors should teach not what they know but what they don't know. They say that nothing concentrates the mind more than being about to be hung, but the truth is that graduate school does even better (and so, for that matter, does a job). If students wish to be research scholars concentrated on and immersed in a specialty, graduate study is what they need. But undergraduates do not need to know a great deal about an evanescently small topic, usually chosen under the influence of a professor's personal interest and pursued with the callowness of a deficiently mature elementary preparation. Above all, they don't need the illusion of mastery that doing a piece of research induces nor the pretend-enthusiasm that they are encouraged to feel about a piece of knowledge that in all candor they couldn't care less about. The world can and should become totally interesting, from the question of water rights in desert environments to the problem of providing janitorial services to underfunded elementary schools—my example is a real-life education major paper—once the foundations are properly laid and the resulting human being becomes enmeshed in the affairs of life. But in itself not every matter is equally worth a beginner's attention.

That is why students are better taught by non-specialists than by authorities in their field. Or more accurately, they should be taught by people who have achieved mastery in some field but are venturesome enough to try a new inquiry which will throw them back to the beginnings, the elements. Here they can best attain that level of co-learning on which liberal teaching comes into its own.

Thesis Five: A large, probably the largest, part of a college education should be prescribed. If specialization is suppressed the elective system vanishes along with it. So an all-required or largely-required program of college education does two healthy things at once: It stops departmental electives and it obviates student choice. The former will lead to much sounder departmental practice: such advanced specialized courses as undergraduates are still taking could be much better controlled by the departmental faculties. In subjects like mathematics the professors are in general agreement what the proper progress for students is, but in the humanities courses tend to be electable in a helter-skelter fashion, and no one wants to say what is essential. Yet faculties ought to be so educated that they can make a broad-viewed, unself-serving and fairly consensual judgement. But perhaps I'm dreaming.

The latter, and obvious, effect of reducing electives is that students are more constrained. Now they think that they hate that constraint—not only the lazy ones who want to opt for gut courses, but also the spirited ones who want to follow their bent. But they are wrong in this aversion, on a simple logical reckoning. Real choice depends on knowledgeable judgement, and such judgment comes after education, not before it. There's no way students can know what they need. In fact it is a terrible judgment on the education offered that is unwittingly made by faculties who assent to elective systems—the judgment that students are as well oriented in the *orbis intellectualis*, the intellectual universe, before they choose their course of study as they will ever be. “First learn, *then* choose” ought to be the curriculum-maker's motto, and who can make curricula but a faculty?

Experience teaches that a largely required curriculum has several other bonuses. With such a curriculum a faculty presents itself to students as having strong shared convictions about education. Just as those children march most boldly into the world who trust the arrangements of their parental home, so those students exercise their intellects most confidently who have faith in their faculty's curricular structure. Moreover, not only is the anxiety of blind choice removed, but the comfort of common study results. Students in required curricula can talk to each other, all to all, confident in their shared references. And such talk is, as I claimed before, the essential mode of liberal education, the indigenous way of a community of learning.

Thesis Six: Everything falls apart when *politics* rears its ugly head. By politics I mean current party politics and also ideology. I do not mean that political philosophy and statesmanship are not proper classroom subjects.

It is the fashion now to claim that all is politics, and that every frame of thought is an ideology. From this claim it follows that theory and practice are nearly indistinguishable, since every theoretical proposition is also a political ploy. And then it follows in turn that students should be made aware of these hidden attempts at gaining power. Now to my mind these claims are either delivered as hyperbole or in bad faith. For my part, I can distinguish pretty often between politics and ideology on the one hand and contemplative thought, or pure theory on the other. The test for the presence of politics is getting hot under the collar. Theory, to be sure, also engenders passion, a long slow cool passion, but politics arouses quick and brittle emotions because it touches life not in the long and deep run but right now, in the short and material run. Ideology reveals itself in predictability. When a fixed scheme of analysis is brought to every subject matter, you can be pretty sure that there is an ideological approach at work. It is, incidentally, fairly clear to me that ideology and method have certain features in common: both generate similar kinds of answers across the board. Of course Descartes, who made “method” philosophically fundamental to modern times, thought of it as a great boon, as introducing effectiveness and efficiency into

human inventiveness—that efficiency and effectiveness to be gotten by analyzing a problem into its parts and then quantifying them. But the works of Descartes are probably among the best tests for liberal inquiry: although themselves radically destructive to such inquiry, they form an indispensable part of liberal learning. That is because such learning is radically open and appreciative of all serious ways, whether friendly or inimical to its very nature. Consequently when people learn in a liberal spirit they give appreciative weight to both method and ideology, though the converse can't be claimed. That is why liberal education is better than ideological critique, which has no place as a classroom mode, though as a subject of inquiry it certainly does.

To make a long story short, a teacher who seeks to exercise domination over students' thoughts, be it by "raising their consciousness" or by driving them into "role-playing" or by pursuing incessant one-sided critiques of whatever is at hand or by intruding political opinions, left or right, or by leaning in any way on students for anything but that they should read their assignments and speak their minds thoughtfully, articulately and civilly—such a teacher is no teacher but a particularly despicable type of tyrant. I expect to get some flack on this.

Thesis Seven: Liberal education is irremediably bound to reading. The following are neither enhancements nor substitutes: life experience, service learning, interactive electronic programs, projects of all sorts, and so on ad *infinitum*. All these bright ideas might as well be called "anything but read a book" programs.

When I said "reading" I did not say enough. Reading plus conversation is the dual essence of liberal education. Being alone and then together, occupied in either condition with a text—it could be a text of words, symbols, notes and even a visual composition—that is what liberal study is. For the central activity, the one through which liberal education gives people their full human shape, is that of interpreting and finding the significance of everything whatsoever. A liberally educated person is one to whom all things hold the promise of significance and who knows how to go about interpreting all the world. It happens that those texts we read in a primary sense, books, are the ones in whose intended significance we are most entitled to trust and in whose interpretability we have most reason to believe. So the reading of books is simply the most immediate and the most manageable case of interpretation. Books are the microcosm in which we best learn how to practice that art of disclosing significance in the great world—the art that marks above all others the liberally educated person. Here, incidentally, is the reason why a liberal education tends to be a source of happiness. It is because seeing the world as full of significance is the antithesis of and the antidote for despair.

Thesis Eight: The reading that defines liberal education is that of *great books*. I can count on your knowing that I have been for forty years a tutor—for the reasons given before we do not call ourselves professors—at a so called Great Books college. So you might well think that I will now be or have perhaps for quite a while been trumpeting my own horn. And in that you will not be wrong. But consider that I blow this trumpet with long-breathed and heart-felt enthusiasm, and grant me credence accordingly.

The first and all-determining choices in education are those made by the teacher. Currently such choices are made along all sorts of dimensions: relevant or passe, marginalized or mainstream, social-documentary or purely literary. At my school we use a different scale: great or not great. Almost all of us, I think in fact all of us, believe the category of greatness to have reality and meaning. That is to say, we think that there exist great books; we have faith that we are able, nay obligated, to discern them; and finally, we believe that they are the books that ought to be formally assigned for the students to read. I'll explain.

First, the thought that there exists greatness not only in books but in other human enterprises defines and illuminates a certain kind of life. It is a life in which there is splendor and drabness, significance and insignificance, extraordinariness and ordinariness. I think most of us would not argue that the second member of each of these pairs is unworthy or uninteresting. On the contrary, the pairs are complementary. The low is illumined by the high, but the high in turn takes its subject matter, from the low. I cite as my best-loved example the first epilogue of *War and Peace*, where Tolstoy casts a golden light on the mundane incidents of family life, and that same life lends its warmth to this epilogic culmination of the world's greatest novel. This willingness of ours to accept the category of greatness is of some interest because there are frames of mind, aside from those arising from envy or resentment, that do not entertain this notion but believe rather in a sort of equanimity of receptiveness that extinguishes such distinctions; Buddhism seems to be the great example.

When I say that we accept the obligation to discriminate great from, say, merely good books, I mean that, having read many books and talked to each other about them, we have a whole collection of articulable criteria that allows us to carry on a rational discussion. We ask: Is this book original in the sense of being at the origin of something truly new? Does this book have the plenitude of ideas that make it indefinitely re-readable? Is it composed so artfully that it repays study aside from its thesis or story? Might it possibly tell truth? And—this is secondary -has it had a long-range effect in the world?

Finally, here is why—or at least one chief of many reasons why—we think our students should read prescriptively such and only such books. (It goes without saying that they should and do read a lot of the other books extracurricularly.)

As I said earlier, liberal education is not for life but for a good life. What kind of a good life? Those of you who recall what you read in Nietzsche, will have in mind his distinction between the pair “good and evil” and “good and bad.” The latter pair might also be called “high and low” or “noble and mean.” I think most of my colleagues have the sense that the world with all its troubles is best served by those of its inhabitants who are imbued with what is noble, high, and good and who have occupied themselves with theories and visions of what is best in the face of all that can go wrong—better than by those who have made a study of specific and current problems. The best preparation, we think, for doing good is not the somewhat spurious experience of social ills and personal badness that students are provided with in academic settings but the genuine absorption in excellence that liberal education naturally induces. In short, long liberal reflection on the way things ought to be is a better prelude to real life than a premature immersion in the worst facts of life. I mention as an aside the fact—at least it seems a fact to me—that those alight with the self-sufficient pleasures of theory tend to be of the best heart and what’s more, of the best temper, once they go into action.

Thesis Nine: My final thesis says: Education should never ever be *academic*. I use “academic” here as in the sentence “That’s an academic question,” meaning no human being in the normal mode could care less. No subject should ever be taught to undergraduates from which some human resonance can’t be fairly elicited. But what is more important is that no book should ever be read in such a way that its human weight is nullified. No text would be dangled before students as a specimen of what is curious, bygone, and academic. Eventually, after some effort has been made just to understand the author’s meaning, the question should always be: What humanly applicable significance is to be found here? Is what it says here true? It is most emphatically not the teacher’s mission to *answer* these questions (though a teacher who has not assiduously worked to form an opinion about them is a light-weight), but it is a teacher’s first task and greatest art to ask the questions that will focus the conversation.

Since liberal education is non-academic in my sense it has real gravity, moral gravity. And so it is, finally, also concerned with questions of “good and evil.” The college years are the time for students to frame those moral allegiances that will help them decide more sure-footedly how to act when leisure is over and life is racing by. For don’t we all know that once life is on, time for thought is short? I think we all agree that nothing is harder for students than to leap over that narrow but evidently forbidding chasm between the reading of books and the living of life. And that chasm

is not, we think, best bridged by diluting study with concocted life-experience but by reading books well—liberally, as if they mattered.

I know that I've imposed on your patience not so much by speaking long as by talking outrageously. But there is plenty of time left for you to ask for more argumentation and for me to listen to your counterarguments. I have to confess though, that there is one kind of argument that leaves me responseless and unresponsive: the argument from impracticality. Of course, some things in this life are simply impossible, but with respect to education the reply "It's not possible" usually means "I don't want it all that much."

This essay was originally published here in March 2015, and appears again in celebration of Dr. Brann's ninetieth birthday.

The Imaginative Conservative applies the principle of appreciation to the discussion of culture and politics—we approach dialogue with magnanimity rather than with mere civility. Will you help us remain a refreshing oasis in the increasingly contentious arena of modern discourse? Please consider [donating now](#).

Editor's note: The featured image is "Philosophers in Study" (1700) by Johann Bretschneider, courtesy of [Wikimedia Commons](#).