

Taking the Humanities to the Market: The Way Ahead?

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Abstract

In a world dominated by the rationalisms of money, consumer demand, techno-science and 'econo-production', the debate over the relevance of the humanities is gaining momentum. Globally, governments assert that the humanities must descend from their ivory tower and focus more on training future leaders for business, government and the professions. To this effect, they attempt to coerce universities into becoming more competitive and serving national interests within the international marketplace. This study resists such a pragmatic, sterile and businesslike orientation, aiming instead to de-globalize educational pedagogies by emphasizing the primacy of lifelong learning. This paradigm encompasses the voluntary and self-motivated pursuit of knowledge for both personal and professional purposes. It is grounded in the belief that the real challenge facing the humanities is not achieving a modus vivendi, wherein academics must labor to tailor curricula to the needs of policymakers, but rather is maintaining the humanities' essence and raison d'être.

Key words: humanities, globalization, job market, university education, lifelong learning

Introduction

As the twenty-first century unfolds, the debate over globalization and the relevance of both the social sciences and humanities is gaining momentum. Around the globe, governments have attempted to coerce universities into becoming more competitive and into serving national interests within the international marketplace. This study, therefore, begins with the premise that globalization has undeniably impacted the humanities and that its effects have been considerable for society at large and for the humanities and higher education in particular. No doubt, globalization already represents "a shift in our very life circumstances, it is the way we live" (Giddens, 1990, p. 8).

The central concern of this study, however, is not just to highlight the impact of globalization on the humanities, but rather to explore how human values have been displaced by market directives and how research universities have been transformed into money-making corporations. It also examines how, in addressing this complex situation, a myriad of approaches have emerged and a torrent of scholarship has discussed the implications of globalization, its trends and responses to it.

In light of the above, the paper explores a new symbiosis between academe and commerce, which has produced a range of approaches to globalization's impact on the humanities. Since responses to globalization are many and varied, just two, which are of particular relevance to our present interests, will be pinpointed.

The first is a paradigm based on a pragmatic perspective. It asserts that the role of the humanities and a university education is to seek a *modus vivendi*, prepare students for future emerging markets and provide them with high-level technical skills. In other words, the humanities must descend from their ivory tower and focus more on training future leaders for business, government and the professions. The second is an alternative approach that promotes lifelong learning and the premise that students and academics should reject authoritarianism and seek knowledge for its own sake.

1. A Modus Vivendi and Pragmatic View on the Humanities

Those embracing a businesslike perspective on globalization argue that it brings "huge benefits, better health, as well as an active global civil society fighting for more democracy and greater social justice" (Stiglitz, 2002, p. 214).

Favoring a globalization-from-above approach, many government ministers and professionals maintain that globalized knowledge and diversity must become priorities for the humanities and that higher education should adjust to globalizing practices and focus on research involving the community and seeking to solve practical problems. Accordingly, academics should not pursue knowledge for its own sake; they should instead be driven by market forces and competition, otherwise they will not survive in the globalized world. To meet the challenges of the new millennium, according to this approach, university communities must see that their success depends on their endorsement of programs leading to economic and cultural openness. In view of this trend, furthermore, many thinkers concede that the humanities should relinquish their leading place in education, urging humanists to abandon their ideals and the pursuit of perfection. In other words, academe should attempt to make a profit from teaching, research and other activities, and thus accumulate money to expand the size and reputation of an institution. But what are the motives driving this trend to disparage the humanities and transform universities into money-making institutions?

There are, it seems, several. The trend was mainly triggered by faculty and students' pragmatic need to supplement their income outside the realm of teaching and research and seek "attractive possibilities for turning specialized knowledge into money" (Bok, 2003, p. 13). There is also a growing suspicion that the humanities are not responding properly to a world transformed by new technologies and global capitalism. They are blamed for paying more attention to their own theories and methodologies, while neglecting the society they are supposed to serve. More important still, severe discipline erosion has resulted from a slackening of the global economy and public dissatisfaction. True, the move to commercialize educational institutions has met with applause from some commentators, academics and researchers hungry for funds to finance discoveries and provide their universities with the latest technological equipment. Yet most have shown resistance to attempts to bend universities to the corporate purposes of business leaders. Such concerns have, in fact, given rise to suspicion and fear that businessmen and administrators are taking over academe.

Fearing such bureaucracy, scholars in the humanities have observed that "the learning enterprise has become subject to the growing power of administration, which more and more responds not to faculty and students but to political and corporate forces that claim sovereignty over higher education" (Aronowitz, as cited in Bok, 2003, p. 20).

These reservations, however, do not mean that the present study opposes profit-seeking within reasonable bounds. It simply stands against commercial pursuits that chip away at the values, mission and *raison d'être* of the humanities and research universities. What the paper opposes is the principal danger that commercialization may incur, namely that students will embrace the idea that the fundamental value of education is to make money and accordingly study to obtain a diploma of value in the marketplace. While satisfying development needs within institutions, the humanities "must fully serve their purposes beyond boundaries" (Stevens, 1953, p. 30).

2. Toward Maintaining the Humanities' Raison d' Etre

Based on the above discussion, it seems hard to refute an argument advocating a pragmatic approach to the humanities, as businesses have every right to expect that university research should produce benefits. Yet this should not mean, in my view, the outright commercialization of academia or radical changes to the fundamental values of the humanities. Fearing the demise of these traditional values, the paper endorses a globalization-from-below approach that views the new practices as a threat to "intellectual virtues such as honesty, intellectual courtesy, indifference to the mere fashion of ideas, and a dedication to the regulative ideal of truth" (Coady, 1996, p. 51).

Some commentators, furthermore, see globalization as a real threat to academic freedom, critical thinking and social critique. Pointing to the commercialization of education as a potential loss, they argue that neglecting and downgrading the humanities will result in a market-model university, "which prioritizes those subjects that make money, study money, or attract money" (Press and Washburn, 2000, p. 52). Similarly, many other scholars and educationists argue against the commercialization of education and its short-term profits and point out that "the purely pragmatic university, intent upon increasing its financial resources by any lawful means, may gain a temporary advantage now and then, but it is not an institution that is likely to prosper in the long run" (Bok, 2003, p. 206). To this effect, in Bok's view, universities should defend basic academic values and seek reputation and quality, even at the risk of financial sacrifice.

Peter Scott also touches on the disadvantages of globalized knowledge and asserts that it makes research universities more profit-oriented and transforms them into "victims even, [...] subjects or key agents of globalization" (1998, p. 122). To be fully effective, the essence of the humanities and the mission of university education should not comprise only a set of methods, techniques or skills. They should also promote a liberating approach grounded in general human principles rather than in universally applicable methods. Arguing against the promotion of specialized knowledge simply to train students for the marketplace, this study suggests that knowledge is not about reaching a predetermined destination but rather a way of being, "a becoming, a permanent process of discovery, of searching, investigating, inquiring, [and] probing" (Horton & Freire, 1990, p. 101). Chester E. Finn further explores the role of the humanities for a successful education. He argues that without the values and ethics of the humanities, we risk becoming a society that loses its balance, "like a foolish athlete who builds up just one side of his body on the false assumption that he only needs strength in the limbs and muscles" (1984, p. 4). To show that the humanities are vocationally essential, he attacks:

[a]n educational system that only strengthens itself in math, science, and basic skills, producing a generation of 'techno-peasants': individuals who manipulate complex machines without knowing why [...], and who lack any sense of a collective past or any vision of a better future." (1984, p. 6)

In turn, Jacques Derrida reassesses humanist pedagogy and argues for "a university without conditions", an institution that encourages "a profession of faith: faith in the university and, within the university, faith in the humanities of tomorrow" (as cited in Cohen, 2002, p. 24). The university that is really needed, in Derrida's view, is not an institution that seeks profit but rather one that remains "an ultimate place of critical resistance [...] to all the powers of dogmatic and unjust appropriation" (as cited in Cohen, 2002, p. 25). What he suggests, then, is that the task of modern humanities should not be based on naïve humanism, nor should it be contained within the traditional limits of departments. Inspired by Nietzsche and Heidegger, he maintains that the modern university should have the freedom to assert, to question, to profess, and to say everything. The new humanities and new learning opted for in this study, therefore, are based on a paradigm that takes into account both skills and knowledge. As Bruni puts it:

Let your study be twofold, first in the skill of letters (*litterarum peritia*), not the vulgar and common kind, but one which is more diligent and penetrating, and in this I very much want you to excel; and second in the knowledge of those things which pertain to life and moral character (*mores*). These two are therefore called the humanities (*studia humanitatis*), because they perfect and adorn a human being (*homo*). (as cited in Biesta, et al., 2001, p. 210)

Put differently, the education system the study wishes to promote is a model of lifelong learning that requires formal, non-formal and informal learning. In order to equip students and professionals to deal with the new demands of globalized knowledge and the labor market and to keep abreast of new knowledge, what is needed is a context where learners reflectively master and use a set of competencies, and where they and their instructors are lifelong learners. This new environment should also engage policymakers, government and university administrators in a dialogue on continuous learning in order to create visions and action plans for the future.

The type of learning the paper recommends, therefore, is a view of learning as critique of knowledge, as temporary and endless discovery, a type of learning that is "relevant throughout the life course, and which is an essential aspect of our whole life experiences, not just that which we think of as 'education'" (Harrison, 2002, p. 1). In addition to upgrading skills, lifelong learning is also "a source of access to career development", and "an ideal tool for fulfilling both economic and social imperatives as a way to optimize employment potential for adults and workers of all ages" (Leader, 2003, as cited in Poley, 2005, p. 7). In other words, lifelong learning replaces the materialism and consumerism that is so much part of today's society, takes the questions and the concerns of the community and then explores how resources in the humanities might address them.

It bears repeating, therefore, that lifelong learning should become a norm and that the creation of a framework for this requires a change of skill types, in the way we look at the humanities and in how learning takes place. Any future assessment of the humanities, therefore, should be based on their ability to frame crucial choices around the type of learning and student's universities should produce and what practical skills they should be trained in.

Conclusion

In brief, then, the paper argues that "the humanities are out of time, but always timeless and changing" (Stevens, 1953, p. ix), that the real crisis of the humanities is one of a change in their definition, their nature and mission. The study aims to sensitize those who shape and implement educational policies to the essential difference between a university and a company, between studying and learning, and between a *learner* and a *'learned'*. It warns against evaluating the humanities and the social sciences purely on the basis of economic profit. It recommends that academics and university administrators act cautiously and resist any moves by politicians to transform universities into mere money-making institutions.

Arguing against the commercialization of higher education, the paper finally recommends instead a vision with, at its core, a challenging learning environment that emphasizes both workplace training and the pursuit of knowledge through 'lifelong learning'. As Denis Diderot stated:

L'education ne devrait pas abandonner les individus ou ils sortent des ecoles, elle devrait embrasser tous les ages ... assurer aux hommes dans tous les ages de la vie la facilite de conserver leurs connaissances ou d'en acquerir de nouvelles.

[Education should not end when individuals leave school, it should embrace all ages ... to ensure that men at each stage of their lives are able to maintain their knowledge or acquire new knowledge]. (1792, as cited in Ego, 2007, p. 125)

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