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Tradition, Innovation, and the Value of the Liberal Arts

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Tradition, Innovation, and the Value of the Liberal Arts

Centre College, Danville, KY, August 20, 2015
Paul Jay, Professor of English, Loyola University Chicago

What's liberal about the liberal arts? During the Q&A after a lecture about the liberal arts I gave at another university last fall, one person in the audience asked me why we call the liberal arts the *liberal* arts. He insisted that because the term "liberal" had gotten so politically fraught we ought to come up with another characterization for what we teach under that banner, since the term "liberal" had become such a contentious one in public political discourse.

The questioner seemed unaware that the "liberal" in liberal arts has little to do with the contemporary political position we associate with liberalism. The word "liberal," of course, comes from the Latin, *liber*, meaning free, unrestricted unimpeded. The key point about an education in the liberal arts is that it isn't focused on professional training, but rather, on a general education (from the Greek *artes liberales*) across disciplines ranging from math and geometry to logic and rhetoric in order to cultivate freethinking in citizens who could participate knowingly and wisely in civic discourse and decision-making.

A liberal arts education has never been about either a specifically left politics, or about professional training, but about laying the intellectual foundation for responsible civic engagement and the exercise of citizenship. It's about producing *cultural* rather than

economic capital. It stresses broad intellectual enrichment over immediate practical, mechanical, or professional utility.

Unfortunately, we are living at a time when the ideal of a liberal arts education is increasingly being challenged by a vocational model of education, or by what William Deresiewicz has recently dubbed the *neoliberal* arts. While the point of a liberal arts education is to provide students with an education that isn't systematically organized around professional training, many commentators, political leaders, state legislatures, boards of trustees, and even students and their parents, increasingly embrace the idea that a college or university education ought to be focused specifically on preparing students for jobs. This turn away from a liberal arts to a vocational (or neo-liberal) model of higher education is the result of a convergence of forces. The economic downturn which began in the fall of 2008 and from which we are just now emerging, the election of economically and socially conservative governors and legislative majorities in a number of states (Wisconsin, Illinois, Florida, Kansas, to name a few) who have dramatically cut funds for state colleges and universities. As Janet Napolitano, president of the University of California, has recently pointed out, "during the years of the Great Recession, 44 out of 50 states cut funding on a per-student basis to their public institutions of higher education."

Anxiety about the economy leads students to major in disciplines they think will prepare them for jobs, and this feeds a mindset that envisions higher education as vocational rather than liberal. When the number of students majoring in the humanities and social

sciences dip, as they have in recent years, it is almost always in response to economic recessions (not, as some commentators like to argue, because of radical intellectual trends inside academia). There's ample evidence the recession has lifted, but students and their parents are still deeply concerned with wage stagnation -- which keeps the anxiety about putting job preparation first in higher education very high and thus feeds the erosion of the liberal arts ideal. Corporations and financial institutions are back on their feet, the manufacturing sector has rebounded, but new jobs remain scarce and the increasing inequality of income in the U.S. has shrunk the middle class, perhaps permanently. In this climate, it's no wonder kids and their families are worried about jobs, and that they increasingly see their investment in higher education as an investment in job training. In this climate the very philosophy of a liberal arts education has come to be threatened.

Of course these economic developments have both converged with -- and helped to feed -- the corporatization of higher education, a trend that, as many other commentators have observed, often serves to ratchet up the philosophical skepticism about the liberal arts model of higher education I've been discussing. What do I mean when I refer to the "corporatization" of higher education? For me, the corporatization of higher education has to do with the convergence of a set of interrelated developments, some of them structural, economic, and managerial, but others having to do with *values* --- with shifting notions about the very purpose of a college education. At the structural and managerial levels, the corporatization of higher education is embodied in the fact that universities more and more are being run as corporations,

both in terms of their managerial hierarchies and their stress on the economic bottom line. College and university presidents operate as CEOs in an environment in which shared governance is on the wane. Faculty have less and less say about broad educational goals and curricular and program matters than they did in the past, which means not only disciplinary *knowledge* but disciplinary *values* can take a back seat to economic exigencies or ideas about what will sell to students and their parents. Boards of Trustees are increasingly made up of CEOs, bankers, hedge fund operators, and real estate developers who, not surprisingly, bring a business mentality not only to the budgetary and administrative aspects of higher education, but often to their philosophies of education as well.

This trend was underscored by Wisconsin Governor Scott Walker's attempt last year to revise the mission of his state's university system by replacing references to "the search for truth," the need to "improve the human condition" and to "serve and stimulate society" – the bedrock of a liberal arts education -- with the goal of meeting "the state's workforce needs" (a phrase he proposed moving to the very beginning of the mission statement). In an educational environment like the one Walker envisions, the liberal arts model that helped build this country all but disappears. The value of a liberal arts model of higher education, after all, is that both the student and her professor are free to explore knowledge without being subordinated to a particular professional practice or application that would tie learning to the specific *interests* of that practice or application. The vocational training model threatens to undermine that freedom. It puts the marketplace value of a college degree ahead of the value of a general education in

the arts, languages, history, faith traditions, science and philosophy, an education that puts a premium on the free and open-ended exploration of knowledge and which has traditionally been understood as necessary to the shaping of civic responsibility.

Regrettably, the pressure put on the liberal arts model of higher education these days has created divisions among those of us committed to stressing its value. Gerald Graff and I discussed some of them in our 2012 article, “Fear of Being Useful,” and I spend a lot of time in my book talking about them. The general division I have in mind is the one between those who want to defend the humanities and liberal arts against an overly utilitarian conception of higher education by insisting they have a value in themselves that transcends the practical and the utilitarian (a view often shared by traditionalists and progressives alike), and those like Graff and I who seek to engage the utilitarian critique by stressing the concrete, transferable skills liberal arts students learn, skills that are demonstrably attractive to a growing number of employers.

My argument has consistently been that the humanities and social sciences, like the STEM disciplines, teach both *subjects* and *competencies*, and that we ought to stress the competencies as much as we do the subjects. This means we need to avoid falling into the trap of ceding the practical to the scientific disciplines while claiming the humanities are untainted by utility. That kind of idealism doesn’t do anyone any good. Literature and the visual arts are subject areas, but when students take courses in these areas they not only learn about the history of literature and art while becoming familiar with a representative range of texts and works. They also develop specific competencies: how

to recognize, appreciate, research, analyze, and think and write critically about aesthetic form and aesthetic experience, and about the relationship between aesthetics, culture, and politics. History is a subject area, but when students take history courses they don't just learn about important historical events, they learn how to read, research, analyze, and think and write critically about a whole range of things from a historical perspective. They learn how to think historically. And of course it's the same with philosophy. When students take philosophy courses they don't just become familiar with important philosophers and their ideas. They also learn how to think philosophically, to analyze events, ideas, ethical and moral claims, texts, and the arguments of others from a philosophical *perspective*. They enrich their ability to think about things in *abstract and skeptical* terms. And courses in religious studies not only provide a substantive education in a variety of faith traditions. They also require students to think about and negotiate their inner lives, to supplement their experience of material reality with a consciousness of how that reality is both shaped by, and gives shape to, their interiority. Each of these disciplines is valuable for the *bodies of knowledge* they transmit, but they are also valuable for the *competencies* they teach –reading, analytical, research, critical thinking, and writing skills.

While I don't believe we can – or should – put a price tag on these skills, I also believe we shouldn't shy away from stressing how they constitute an important part of the value of a liberal arts education. In the face of claims that the liberal arts lack practical utility, I think it's important to both resist the over-instrumentalization of higher education *and* yet at the same time make the point that the liberal arts *do* in fact train

students in a range of transferable skills in an interdisciplinary way that employers find attractive. The point, it seems to me, constitutes a balanced approach that, on the one hand, doesn't cave in to the idea that courses in the humanities and liberal arts don't have any practical value, but on the other hand, does not give itself wholly over to the view that practical utility is the sole and best measure of the value of a college or university education.

The balance I'm talking about sometimes gets lost these days in the increasing stress on the good news regarding the employability of humanities and liberal arts students. For example, in late July *Forbes Magazine* posted an article on its website by George Anders entitled "That 'Useless' Liberal Arts Degree Has Become Tech's Hottest Ticket." The article features Anna Picakard, the editorial director at Slack Technologies (they produced the popular office messaging tool, Slackbot), who earned a theater arts degree. Luckily for Picard, Slack's cofounder, Stewart Butterfield, earned a B.A. in philosophy and is bullish about hiring people who study in the liberal arts. "Studying philosophy taught me two things," Butterfield is quoted as saying. "I learned how to write really clearly. I learned how to follow an argument all the way down, which is invaluable in running meetings. And when I studied the history of science, I learned about the ways that everyone believes something is true—like the old notion of some kind of ether in the air propagating gravitational forces—until they realized that it wasn't true" (apparently studying philosophy didn't teach him how to count – that's three things, not two). Anders reports that "throughout the major US. tech hubs, whether Silicon Valley or Seattle, Boston or Austin, Tex., software companies are discovering that

liberal arts thinking makes them stronger.” A similar article from last August on the website Fast Company caught my eye. It’s by Elizabeth Segran and it’s entitled “Why Top Tech CEOs Want Employees with Liberal Arts Degrees.” Segran writes that “while the tech boom is partly responsible for the spike in students majoring in science, technology, engineering and math, many tech CEOs still believe employees trained in the liberal arts add value to their companies.” She cites as an example Steve Yi, CEO of the web advertising platform MediaAlpha, who, according to her report, believes “that the liberal arts train students to thrive in subjectivity and ambiguity, a necessary skill in the tech world where few things are black and white. “In the dynamic environment of the technology sector,’ he’s quoted as saying, “there is not typically one right answer when you make decisions’ . . . ‘there are just different shades of how correct you might be.”

If you want to survey a collection of recent articles that underscore how the liberal arts teach practical, transferable skills attractive to a wide range of employers, you can’t do much better than the Council of Independent Colleges website page called “Op-Eds by Presidents” (just Google the phrase) which contains dozens of recent articles by Presidents of U.S. liberal arts colleges and universities about the business world value of a liberal arts education. While some of these articles do tout the intangible value of a liberal arts education, a majority of them focus on the challenge of making a case for the practical value of a liberal arts education, stressing the fundamental communicative and analytical skills that make humanities and liberal arts students attractive to a wide range of employers. These articles, on the whole, insist there isn’t a divide between the liberal

arts and professional training, that the liberal arts matter in an age dominated by technology, that a liberal arts education speaks both to a calling and a career, producing both good citizens and good workers, providing job training and value in a global marketplace through the teaching of soft skills (all of this language comes from the titles of articles).

One of the key themes in these defenses of the practical utility of a liberal arts education is that liberal arts and humanities students learn how to solve problems through critical thinking. While I think this is true in a superficial kind of way, I think it exemplifies how overstressing the practical utility of a liberal arts education can distract us from the core ideals upon which it was founded – the creation of the free-thinking individual. Critical thinking as problem solving in the world of business and tech too often overlooks the fact that critical thinking in college is less about *solving* problems than *creating* problems. Because the humanities in particular, and the liberal arts in general, provide a space for thinking in critical and skeptical ways about our society's obsession with the practical and the utilitarian, with overly materialistic, bottom-line metrics for judging value, I think it's crucial that we underscore the role critical thinking plays in this process.

While the role of critical thinking in solving specific problems is certainly a skill worth emphasizing, what I want to argue is that critical thinking ought to involve intellectual processes that challenge students *to doubt what they think they know*, and to become *constructively skeptical* of how they have come to believe what they believe. This value

was stressed in one particular article among those by liberal arts college and university presidents that stood out from all the others. It's by Christopher B. Nelson, President of St. John's College in Annapolis, Maryland, and it's entitled "The Power of Doubt." Here's the gist of his argument in a single, cogent paragraph:

Doubting, questioning the certainty of what is taken to be true, is the source of both understanding and innovation . . . To plumb the depths of problems, or even to identify them properly, requires a facility with doubt that must be learned and then cultivated. The trick is not to take on blindly what is given to us, but to awaken doubt about it, question it, accept what is reasonable and appeals to our sensibility, so that it becomes something new in us, not something that belongs to Plato or Aristotle or Darwin or Einstein. In this sort of learning, the student does the work, not the professor; the student molds himself or herself, instead of being molded by some external authority. In this sort of learning, the freedom of the student is respected even as he or she is developing the arts of freedom. This is what is meant by liberal education.

Nelson's stress on doubting gets at the core value of critical thinking I have in mind. Certainly the concrete disciplinary knowledge we teach our students is important, and yes, we do teach our students practical, transferable skills that have great utility in the jobs marketplace. But the ability to doubt is one of those intangibles in higher education we ought to continually stress. As Nelson points out, it's what produces innovation, both among professors and the students we teach. When we explain the value of the liberal

arts we continually reference the way they teach critical thinking, but too often we invoke that term without defining it very clearly, without connecting it to the ability to subject what we take to be orthodox and common sense to what Nelson simply calls doubt. And doubt produces innovation.

In my book I defend the importance of critical theory in the liberal arts in part by insisting that courses stressing theory are central to the teaching of critical thinking. I don't want to spend too much time rehashing the idea, but the gist of my argument is that critics of the humanities are wrong in blaming critical theory for a fall off in enrollments, first because there's no evidence to support the assertion, but secondly, because courses in critical theory – or courses that stress critical theory – are some of the best courses in critical thinking we have in higher education (and they have helped to drive innovation across the disciplines). As Jonathan Culler reminds us at the outset of his book, *Literary Theory: A Very Short Introduction*, the “main effect” of theory “is the disputing of ‘common sense’: common sense views about meaning, writing, literature, experience” (4). From this perspective, theory is a form of critical thinking that in challenging old, naturalized orthodoxies gets us to see that what we take to be “common sense” explanations and assumptions are in fact highly contingent theories. “Theory,” in Culler's view, is an “attempt to show that what we take for granted as ‘common sense’ is in fact a historical construction, a particular theory that has come to seem so natural to us that we don't even see it as a theory.”

I was recently reminded of the link between a liberal arts education, doubt, theory, and critical thinking while reading Ta-Nehisi Coates' extraordinary new book about growing up black in America, *Between the World and Me*. There's a marvelous section in the book describing his experience as a new student at Howard University, and it ought to be required reading for anyone interested in the value of a liberal arts education. He describes beginning his undergraduate education at Howard with a monolithic and romanticized conception of what he calls the "black race," "black culture," and "black beauty," "primordial stuff," as he puts it. "The 'black race,'" he writes, "was a thing I supposed existed from time immemorial, a thing that was real and mattered" (46). But that primordial conception of blackness gets challenged by a range of historical, sociological, and theoretical texts he reads. He starts going to the university library, checking out 3 books a day, consulting writers he'd heard mentioned in his classes. "I went into this investigation," he writes, "imagining history to be a unified narrative, free of debate, which once uncovered, would simply verify everything I had always suspected" (48). But then "the trouble came almost immediately. I did not find a coherent tradition marching lockstep but instead factions, and factions within factions Things I believed merely a week earlier, ideas I had taken from one book, could be smashed to splinters by another I was left with a brawl of ancestors, a herd of dissenters." "*The pursuit of knowing was freedom to me*, the right to declare your own curiosities and follow them through all manner of books The classroom was a jail of other people's interests. The library was open, unending." Coates writes that he began his study with the conviction that the category "white people" was a historical

construction, but soon had to come to face the hard but liberating fact that the category “black people” was a historical construction as well. He found that earlier, grand theories of nationalism simply “relieved me of certain troubling questions – this is the point of nationalism”—and that freedom actually came from the troubling of those questions, from what Nelson calls doubt.

Coates writes eloquently about how his growing intellectual doubt constructively troubled what he calls “the Dream” of a unified, coherent, and ultimately romantic view of identity and culture. “The Dream,” he writes, “thrives on generalization, on limiting the number of possible questions, on privileging immediate answers. The Dream is the enemy of all art, courageous thinking, and honest writing. *And it became clear that this was not just for the dreams concocted by Americans to justify themselves but also for the dreams that I had conjured to replace them*” (51). And here, for me, is the key sentence: “It began to strike me that the point of my education was a kind of discomfort” (53), a “process” that “would break all the dreams, all the comforting myths of Africa, of America, and everywhere and would leave me only with humanity in all its terribleness.” Here, particularly with respect to the history courses he took, he stresses the value of doubt and critical thinking as he writes about becoming systematically disabused of romantic, sentimental, monolithic, grand narratives about blackness. His education leads to a kind of “vertigo,” “contradictions” send him into a “gloom,” “there was nothing holy or particular in my skin; I was black because of history and heritage” (54). “There was no inherent meaning in black blood.” He writes here that he begins to

“escape . . . the invention of racecraft,” but “still and all I knew that *we were* something, that we were a tribe,” “invented” but “no less real” (55).

“Invented but no less real.” That’s key. Coates’ experience captures quite exactly the effect of theory Culler writes about, for it involves a systemic form of scrutiny that reveals not that common sense and orthodox beliefs aren’t “real,” but rather, that their reality is not given and immanent, but invented. Reading Nelson in concert with Culler and Coates we can see the shape and character of what truly innovative critical thinking is all about. As I argued a moment ago, it’s less about solving problems than creating them. It’s about confronting what Coates calls the “discomfort” of having what you think you know and assume to be true challenged and disrupted, being forced to subject the very foundation of those truths and those beliefs to critical scrutiny and skepticism. Lots of articles about the value of a liberal arts education note that employers are attracted to graduates with a strong background in the humanities and liberal arts because they have critical thinking skills, but too often their notion of critical thinking is vague and generic, focused much more on the basic skills of research, analysis, and argument than on the kind of critical scrutiny and skepticism Nelson has in mind and Coates models.

This problem was recently highlighted in a *Wall Street Journal* article entitled “Bosses Seek ‘Critical Thinking,’ But What is That?” (by Melissa Korn, October 21, 2014). Korn notes that, according to one career search site, “mentions of critical thinking in job postings have doubled since 2009. “It’s one of those words,” (this guy can’t count either

– “critical thinking” is two words) according to a director of recruiting at a major accounting firm she quotes, “like diversity was, like big data is – where everyone talks about it but there are 50 different ways to define it.” The problem with almost all the definitions of critical thinking cited in the article is that they have a lot to say about doing research and making decisions but come up short when it comes to anything resembling *critical* thinking. For example, one organization defines critical thinking as “the ability to work with data, to accumulate it, analyze it [and] synthesize it, in order to make balanced assessments and smart decisions.” For Goldman Sachs it involves asking “investment-banking and sales-and-trading candidates to assess company valuations and stock pitches and then to explain how they arrive at their conclusions.” “In late-round interviews” at another company cited in the article, “candidates must show how they would tackle business problems, such as whether it makes more sense for a company to make or buy a product, and why.” As you can see from these examples, the baseline in most of these definitions of critical thinking is “problem solving,” with how to work more profitably inside the box.

And that’s the problem. The emerging, new, vocational model of higher education skews the concept of critical thinking away from what Nelson and Coates emphasize and reduce it to a set of sheerly utilitarian skills any educated person ought to have – the ability to do basic research on a topic, organize and synthesize your findings, and make a recommendation about which course of action will solve a given problem. Are these important skills to have? Of course. Do liberal arts students excel at them? Yes. Do they constitute critical thinking in the best tradition of a liberal arts education? No.

Critical thinking is more than solving specific problems through research and analysis. Critical thinking in the humanities and liberal arts is about producing the kind of doubt Nelson emphasizes, and that causes the kind of discomfort Coates recounts. The more our culture (and our economy) think of higher education as vocational training, the more imperiled the liberal arts model of higher education becomes, and the more the ideal of critical thinking loses its constructively disruptive, innovating force, gets emptied out of its skeptical and critical meaning, and becomes merely instrumental, a skill that solves business problems, produces better products, and achieves higher profits.

In stressing the value of a liberal arts education we need to put the *critical* back into critical thinking. In my view, critical thinking ought to involve systematic skeptical analyses of the underlying premises of the ideas, propositions, assertions, policies, or procedures we are exploring with our students. Critical thinking is not just about informed, researched, objective analysis, summary, and problem solving. It ought to lead to the kind of existential discomfort Coates describes. After all, the word “critical” is closely connected to the word “crisis.” It means “of, relating to, or being a turning point . . . as in a critical phase; relating to or being the stage of a disease at which an abrupt change for better or worse may be expected. Being in or approaching a state of crisis.” Critical thinking leaves you – at least for a while – in critical condition. It denotes the onset of risk; discomfort, and change. We can link this to Culler’s characterization of the effect of theory. Critical thinking has as its ultimate aim the creation of a crisis in thinking that is inherently disturbing and disruptive because its function is to foster

systematic skepticism and the wholesale rethinking not only of *what* you know but the basis of *how* you came to know it.

I'm arguing that if critical thinking doesn't court a crisis in thinking, doesn't lead to an important turning point or juncture in thinking, then it isn't critical thinking. Critical thinking ought to subject not only received ideas and beliefs, but also orthodox forms of thinking themselves, to this process. Critical thinking ultimately scrutinizes the foundations or underlying premises upon which knowledge is based. The kind of intellectual crisis Coates describes is largely of this kind. And what we don't want to wince from here is the element of criticism as negative judgment. Most dictionary definitions of *criticism* and *critical* note that it involves "exercising or involving careful judgment or judicious evaluation," and that in criticism we always have to be "inclined to criticize severely and unfavorably." This means that critical thinking involves considering judgments and evaluations that are unfavorable, the kind of thinking that questions the premises and validity of the assertions, claims, and positions under scrutiny. Criticism often results in disapproval, often disapproval of the orthodox, and of what we take to be tradition and common sense. This is what the so-called "culture wars" around theory and political correctness were all about, for collectively, post-structuralist theory raised critical, often disapproving questions about the historical limits around the rights and forms of agency associated with liberal humanism. The critique of essentialism and foundationalism in contemporary theory is one of the best examples we have of critical thinking. Our students do not have to embrace or adopt

anti- or post- essentialist philosophies, but they will be stronger people for having confronted their arguments.

With my analysis of contemporary definitions of critical thinking in mind, I think we can distinguish between two kinds of critical thinking, *pragmatic* and *epistemological*. The pragmatic view of critical thinking construes such thinking in fairly narrow and utilitarian ways; as research, reflection, summary, synthesis, sorting out possibilities and then making decisions about how best to solve a problem. This is the kind of critical thinking, as we saw a moment ago, that business people like, and so it is increasingly cited as a concrete skill humanities and liberal arts students learn, transferable to a variety of jobs. This approach to critical thinking, of course, is closely aligned with the vocational model of higher education.

The second, epistemological conceptualization I have just been discussing is more closely aligned with the historical grounding of the liberal arts in its orientation over-against the pragmatic, utilitarian, and professional, an education geared to facilitate the freethinking of the free person in a democratic culture. The first is aimed at marshalling research and analytical skills to solve concrete problems (most often in business), the second is aimed at facilitating skeptical analyses of the underlying foundations of thought, raising questions about the grounding of epistemological orthodoxies of all kinds. This is the form of critical thinking Coates experienced at Howard, reading and thinking that was both systematic and eclectic enough to raise not only historical but

theoretical and epistemological questions that brought him to realize that what he had taken to be simply true and given was in fact historically and socially constructed.

I believe it's important that we balance a new stress on the practical utility of a liberal arts education with an equal stress on the value of doubt, skepticism, and even dissent inherent in the kind of education we associate with critical thinking. Many of the disciplines central to the liberal arts – I'm thinking in particular of philosophy, history, literary studies, sociology, anthropology, and history – are particularly well suited to the teaching of both the pragmatic and epistemological forms of critical thinking, and we ought to underscore this fact as we explain the value of a liberal arts education. These disciplines, collectively, focus our attention on what critics like Richard Rorty and Barbara Herrnstein-Smith called the *contingencies of thought and value* – whether conceptual, historical, imaginative, cultural, or social – the frameworks or contexts within which knowledge and truth are produced.

Conclusion

I want to conclude by stressing how the kind of critical thinking I'm advocating ultimately leads to innovative thinking, innovative teaching, and innovative research in the liberal arts. I agree with more conservative commentators that the survival of the humanities and liberal arts depends in part upon our making sure that we preserve the key texts, authors, ideas, and events that have always been central to humanistic learning. However, I strongly believe we also need to stress the importance of innovation and change in the humanities narrowly and the liberal arts in general. Their

survival cannot depend solely on the curation of static or ossified subjects and methodologies alone. It will depend as well on our stressing *innovation* – in both the subjects we research and teach, and in the methodologies we use on our own or collaboratively. We need to defend and explain the value not of an 18th or 19th century conception of the liberal arts, but of a 21st century conception of the liberal arts. The humanities alone, for example, have benefited enormously from the inclusion of new interdisciplinary angles of inquiry informed by structuralist and poststructuralist thought, and by whole new subjects introduced by feminist studies, postcolonial studies, the new historicism, critical approaches across the disciplines that explore the human condition in the contexts of race, class, gender, and sexuality – critical contexts that had long been missing from our study of the human. More recently, they have also undergone a fascinating transformation with regard to posthumanism’s exploration of the intersection between the human, the animal, the biological, and the technological, all unfolding under the new idea that the study of the human might be usefully reoriented around the new temporal concept of the anthropocene. These intersections and linkages are less *interdisciplinary* than transdisciplinary. That is, they represent a new, potentially transformative vitality in the liberal arts in which scholars and researchers from two or more disciplines do not simply apply their separate methodologies toward the study of a single problem, but rather, work jointly within and across the borders of those methodologies to develop new conceptual frameworks that transcend traditional binary differences between disciplines, developing what are sometimes called *translational innovations* that move beyond discipline-specific

approaches to deal with issues and problems that cannot adequately be treated by single disciplines, or even by multiple disciplines working within the limits of their separate methodologies. One of the great strengths of the liberal arts is that they are particularly well suited to developing transdisciplinary approaches to a wide range of subjects traditionally associated with the humanities, arts, natural, or social sciences separately. Biologists and neuroscientists are already working on problems we used to associate narrowly with the arts – and vice-versa. And computer scientists long ago began to contribute to my own discipline’s study of literature and narrative in the now burgeoning field of the digital humanities. (see Tuesday’s “Turn the Page, Spur the Brain” that reports on the work of a consortium of specialists in communications, neuroimaging, radiology, and medicine whose work provides fascinating insights into the cognitive function of imagining through story-telling, insights that will be fascinating to people in my discipline).

The “trans” in transdisciplinary signals transgression and the crossing of traditional borders. It’s not that difficult, whether we teach in the humanities, the natural sciences, or the social sciences, to recognize the broad intersections in what we do that link us together and which, going forward, we ought to foreground and exploit. We tend to think of the sciences as being about material reality, numerical calculation, and measurement, and to think of the humanities as being about words and their interpretation. But writing – and the interpretation of writing – is *also* a form of measurement and calculation. Geologists study rock formations and sedimentary strata, but what do geologists do if not read and interpret the landscapes they study? And

texts, too --- creative, literary, religious, philosophical, historical – are also landscapes, ecologies to be explored and mapped by the various disciplines that create and study them. One way to simplify the message here is to insist that our students need to know as much as they can about words and numbers, to grasp the idea that both are systems of representation that do not simply reflect, but help to constitute, the very realities they help us study. To be responsible, innovative, global citizens in the 21st century, they need to explore in a transdisciplinary framework the intricate, constitutive intersections between the material and the ineffable, between what can be seen and measured, and the abstract systems we use to do the seeing and enable the measuring.

My main message about defending the humanities and liberal arts is that divided we lose. *Divided we lose*. What's great about our disciplines, collectively, is the way in which they preserve and value the past, but in a context in which that past is subject to reflective and constructive critique, so that the ways in which we think about what constitutes the human keeps changing, and the collection of texts, ideas, historical events, material realities, and cultural forms we discuss with our students keeps expanding as well. *The liberal arts are living arts*. They are about both the perpetuation and the production of knowledge *and* the teaching of concrete, transferable skills, some of them directly related to the needs of employers, and others crucial to the functioning of liberal democracy and the vigilant expansion to everyone of the rights and benefits it offers. I think the best way to articulate the value of the liberal arts at a time like ours in which that value is in question, is to do it broadly, stressing the variety of ways in which a liberal arts education is essential not only to the economic, cultural and political life of

the world our students are inheriting, but to their own personal lives as well. We owe it to ourselves as professors of the liberal arts to do so, but even more, we owe it to our students.