

**What is an Educated Person?: Historical Perspectives on the Purpose of Education**

**Rationale for the course:** From the ideal curriculum that Plato outlined in *The Republic* (380 BCE), to current day discussions of massive-enrollment open online courses (MOOCs), debates over education have never produced simple answers. The enduring question of these debates – “What is an educated person?” – cannot be answered without addressing related questions such as “What is the purpose of education?,” “Who should have access to education?,” and “What are the best methods of educating future workers and citizens?” Given shifting philosophies in Western thought, it is not surprising that these questions have generated different, sometimes competing, answers at different times. For Plato, an educated person was a member of the privileged “guardian class,” a wealthy male landowner who had been enlightened through instruction on beauty and tradition, in order to lead the merchants, craftsmen, and slaves below him. During the Enlightenment, an educated person was someone who had been freed from the provincialism, superstition, and tradition of their upbringing by training in the rational methods of the sciences. In the late nineteenth century, John Dewey, and other reformers in the American pragmatist tradition, saw an educated person as someone who had moved beyond the mere acquisition of skills to realize their full potential as a human being and as a critical citizen.

We find ourselves grappling with the same question today, both at an institutional level, when discussing changes in educational policy, and at an individual level, when selecting courses of study or designing educational experiences. The purpose of education is tied to our economic competitiveness, the quality of our citizenry, and the maximum achievement of human potential. Current debates over the Common Core Standards Initiative for K-12 schools and revisions of the “essential learning outcomes” that inform general education requirements are helping to determine the educational experiences of millions of students, while signifying the

core competencies we value in an educated person.

On a personal level, college students can be particularly vexed by the question of what it means to be an educated person, as they attempt to balance the educational content they find meaningful and enlightening with coursework or majors that are explicitly designed to prepare them for professional success in a specific field. The rising costs of going to college have also increased the desire to major in fields with a clear “return on investment,” prompting greater interest in STEM or vocationally-oriented fields, despite the fact that many of the transferrable skills needed for rapidly evolving work environments – like multi-modal communication, critical thinking, and creative problem solving skills – are more often found in the humanities.

The proposed course will use this tension between liberal education and professional training as a lens for considering how the enduring question of “What is an educated person?” has shaped Western thought since the Ancient Greeks and Romans, and as a means of making the history of education come alive for today’s students. Although some may view this tension as a contemporary concern restricted to higher education, it has informed key differences and debates in educational philosophy for as long as we’ve been writing and talking about education. Writing about education in 55 BCE, for example, the Roman philosopher and lawyer Cicero pondered whether teachers should focus on helping students win cases in the courts, or on expanding their minds and making them better citizens. Reading thinkers like Cicero will help students see how writings from hundreds or even thousands of years ago can be directly connected to their current concerns about the professional relevance of their course work.

**Course design:** The proposed course will be directed primarily toward sophomores and juniors, who have completed at least one year of college but still have the opportunity to expand their personal curricula. It will be offered as an interdisciplinary course in the College of Arts,

## NEH Enduring Questions • Course Proposal

Humanities, and Social Sciences, and open to students of any major. Using the AHSS prefix will allow me to situate the course in the context of broader interdisciplinary conversations, attract a variety of majors, and foster a diverse intellectual community. The proposed course's content is also unique; the university offers a 1-credit seminar on college success for first year students, but it lacks the depth, rigor, and historical perspective on education I envision for my course.

The proposed course will be worth 3 credits and taught in a twice-a-week seminar format over 16 weeks. Rather than starting with the ancient Greeks and ending with contemporary debates over education, the course will have a "temporal loop" structure that is intended to repeatedly return our attention to foundational works of the past, while highlighting the current relevance of these issues at regular intervals. Thus the course will be divided into three major parts – the history of liberal education, the history of professional education, and the history of combining both approaches – with each loop taking approximately 5 weeks to complete.

We will begin in ancient Greece and Rome with Plato's writings on the ideal curriculum in *The Republic*, and Cicero's thoughts on rhetorical education in *De Oratore*. These works, along with secondary sources that place the books in their historical context, will help to establish the classical understanding of a liberally educated person. After tracing the evolution of the liberal arts curriculum through the Middle Ages, we will contrast the classical understanding of a liberally educated person with the philosophies of education that emerged during the Enlightenment by reading Locke's *Some Thoughts on Education*. Once these major historical threads of liberal education have been established, we can consider how they have influenced the liberal arts tradition in the American educational system, from the reforms of Dewey and other American pragmatists in the 19<sup>th</sup> century (outlined in *Democracy and Education*) to the current focus on reforming general education requirements at the college level.

## NEH Enduring Questions • Course Proposal

The second part of the course will explore the history of vocational and professional training, with the goal of illuminating how the plurality of answers to the question of “What is an educated person?” extends beyond the differing approaches to liberal education. Although there exist fewer historical documents on professional training, we can develop our understanding by reading social histories of the apprenticeship model that preceded modern vocational training (such as *Learning on the Shop Floor*), and educational histories of professional training in the United States. We will conclude this section of the course by discussing current policy reports on the competitiveness of American workers in highly specialized fields.

In the third part of the course, we will revisit a selection of the readings we’ve already completed to consider how, if at all, previous thinkers combined elements of liberal education and professional training in their conceptions of the educated person, how each thinker’s historical context informed their negotiation of this tension, and how issues of power and identity shaped the answer to this course’s enduring questions. We will conclude by applying the lessons learned from our historical survey to contemporary debates over STEM education, calls for renewed emphasis on liberal education (Roth’s *Beyond the University*), and educational reforms like the Common Core and the AACU’s LEAP initiative. At the conclusion of the course, each student will be asked to explain, in written and video essay format, how the general education courses they have taken connect to the more specialized courses in their major, and to demonstrate how both have transformed them into a particular type of “educated person.” This articulation will be grounded in what they’ve learned about the history of education.

**Course goals and assignments:** By the end of this proposed course, I want my students to be able to (1) explain how the concept of the educated person in the Western tradition has shifted over time, (2) analyze contemporary debates about the purpose of education within this

## NEH Enduring Questions • Course Proposal

historical context, (3) offer informed and innovative solutions to current educational problems based on their understanding of this historical context, (4) appreciate key differences in the learning experiences of other students, and (5) articulate connections between their broader, liberal arts-oriented, general requirements and the professional training in their majors.

I plan to employ a flipped classroom approach at least once a week, where students will view my lectures in video format before class. This approach will help me to provide additional background from my preparation for teaching the course, highlight key points in the reading for students, and maximize time for in-depth discussion and debates during class. I also plan to extend the proposed course past the boundaries of the classroom. In order to better understand differences in the learning experiences of students who have chosen other educational paths, for example, we will take two field trips – the first to the North Dakota State College of Science and Technology, a local technical college, and the second to Concordia College, a liberal arts college in Moorhead, Minnesota. Students will also share their final projects in a video format directed at advising incoming students, so others can benefit from what they are learning in this course.

Although we will be reading key chapters from some of the books cited in the course overview, one of my learning process goals is to have students read more extensively and ambitiously than they typically would, by engaging with both primary and historical texts, and reading 120-150 pages per week. In addition to the final essay (of 12-15 pages), students will be asked to actively reflect on what they are learning by journaling throughout the course (writing 2-3 pages per week). The journal prompts will be focused on connecting historical readings to current issues. One prompt, for example, will ask them to consider why they went to college, and to compare their rationale to the reasons others have pursued education throughout history.

**Digital humanities component:** I plan to use several digital technologies to disseminate

## NEH Enduring Questions • Course Proposal

the resources I will develop to teach the course, and my students' articulations of their learning histories, to the widest possible audience. I will post the syllabus and a list of related resources based on my bibliography to a public website developed for the course. Students will be able to share their educational history videos with a broader audience through the website, and using a public website connected to my personal domain will ensure longevity of materials. We will also encourage site visitors to share their perspectives on the purpose of education, in order to solicit a greater diversity of opinion on the question of "What is an educated person?"

**Course preparation and development:** I currently teach undergraduate courses on media, technology, and gender, as well as graduate courses on research methods and effective communication in the college classroom. The grant will allow me to forego teaching in summer 2015 so I can focus on reading the primary texts, researching the histories of liberal and technical education, identifying past and present debates over educational reform, and investigating issues of identity in the history of education, areas which are beyond my current expertise, but which will contribute to the intellectual pluralism of this EQ course. It will also enable me to establish connections with my colleagues at NDSCST and Concordia, in order to coordinate field trips.

I plan to develop the syllabus by August 1, 2015, in order to seek preliminary assessment of my course plan by the learning designer in our college, and to develop a systematic plan for formative and summative assessment of the course when it is offered in Fall 2015. I will review these assessment measures and make adjustments before the course is offered for a second time in Fall 2016. I plan to give a public talk on key issues raised by the course at NDSU's Teaching and Learning Conference in August 2016, and at the National Communication Association (NCA) conference in November 2016. Although I am not able to budget for travel in this proposal due to indirect cost rates, my department covers travel for conference presentations.

### Tentative Course Readings

These six texts anchor major topics in my course, and will be read in the following order:

Plato. *The Republic and Other Works*. Trans. Benjamin Jowett. New York: Anchor Books, 1973.

We will read *The Republic* (thought to have been written in 380 BCE) to establish the classical understanding of the educated person and liberal education. This reading will also help us to consider issues of identity and power in Plato's views on the ideal curriculum and society. To deepen our discussions of classical education and help students get more out of this reading, I plan to assign secondary sources on Plato's educational philosophy.

Locke, John. *Some Thoughts Concerning Education*. Ed. John William Adamson. Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 2007.

We will read *Some Thoughts Concerning Education* (written in 1693) in order to contrast the Enlightenment era understanding of the educated person and liberal education with the classical understanding. We will also read excerpts from Gill's *Education Philosophy in the French Enlightenment* to situate Locke in a broader historical context.

Dewey, John. *Democracy and Education: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Education*. New York: The MacMillan Company, 1922.

We will read *Democracy and Education* (written in 1916) to explore the connection between education and society (the educated person as critical citizen) in the 19<sup>th</sup> century pragmatist movement. Although Dewey published several treatises on education, I have selected this book because it comments directly on the educational philosophies of the Enlightenment and classical eras, providing a third view of the tension between liberal education and professional training.

De Munck, Bert, Steven L. Kaplan, and Hugo Soly, eds. *Learning on the Shop Floor: Historical Perspectives on Apprenticeship*. New York: Berghahn Books, 2007.

To understand the history of professional training, and how it differs from liberal education, we will read this social history of the apprenticeship model. We will discuss how the apprenticeship model views the "educated person," and how it informs vocational education in the modern era.

Thelin, John R. *A History of American Higher Education*. 2nd ed. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2011.

In addition to serving as a broad historical overview of issues impacting higher education, this book will help us to consider the race, gender, and class dimensions of "the educated person."

Roth, Michael S. *Beyond the University: Why Liberal Education Matters*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014.

We will read this book in the last third of the course, in order to critically analyze its argument for the importance of liberal arts to "the educated person" living in era of specialized instruction.

### **Course Preparation Bibliography**

In addition to the primary course readings listed on the previous page, I plan to read the following books and articles to prepare for teaching the proposed course. They are organized by headings indicating how each section contributes to the course and expands my expertise.

#### **History of Liberal Education (Classical Era)**

- Altman, William H. F. *Plato the Teacher: The Crisis of The Republic*. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2012.
- Cicero, Marcus Tullius. *On the Orator, Books I-II*. Trans. E. W. Sutton and H. Rackham. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1942.
- Kimball, Bruce A. *Orators and Philosophers: A History of the Idea of Liberal Education*. New York: Teacher's College Press, 1986.
- Marrou, Henri. *A History of Education in Antiquity*. Trans. George Lamb. New York: Sheed and Ward, 1956.

#### **History of Liberal Education (Enlightenment Era)**

- Gill, Natasha. *Educational Philosophy in the French Enlightenment: From Nature to Second Nature*. Farnham, Surrey, England: Ashgate, 2010.
- Woodward, William Harrison. *Studies in Education During the Age of the Renaissance*. Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1906.

#### **History of Professional Training and Vocational Education**

- Foreman-Peck, James. "Spontaneous Disorder? A Very Short History of British Vocational Education and Training, 1563-1973." *Policy Futures in Education* 2.1 (2004): 72-101.
- Geiger, Roger L., and Nathan M. Sorber. *The Land-Grant Colleges and the Reshaping of American Higher Education*. New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Press, 2013.
- Gordon, Howard R. D. *The History and Growth of Career and Technical Education in America*. 3rd ed. Long Grove, IL: Waveland Press, 2008.
- Reyerson, Kathryn L. "The Adolescent Apprentice/Worker in Medieval Montpellier." *Journal of Family History* 17.4 (1992): 353-370.
- United States Bureau of Apprenticeship and Training. *Apprenticeship Past and Present*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Labor, 1991.
- Venn, Grant. *Man, Education, and Work: Post-Secondary Vocational and Technical Education*. Washington: American Council on Education, 1964.
- Vickerstaff, Sarah. "‘I Was Just the Boy around the Place’: What Made Apprenticeships Successful?" *Journal of Vocational Education and Training* 59.3 (2007): 331-347.

#### **American Pragmatists and Progressive Education**

- Dewey, John. *The Collected Works*. Ed. Anne S. Sharpe. Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 2008.
- Fairfield, Paul. *Education After Dewey*. New York: Continuum, 2012.
- Hansen, David T., ed. *John Dewey and Our Educational Prospect: A Critical Engagement with Dewey's Democracy and Education*. Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2006.

#### **History of American Higher Education**

- Brubacher, John S., and Willis Rudy. *Higher Education in Transition: A History of American Colleges and Universities*. 4th ed. New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2004.
- Rudolph, Frederick. *The American College and University: A History*. New York: Knopf, 1962.



### **History of Educational Reform**

- Bell, Daniel. *The Reforming of General Education: The Columbia College Experience in its National Setting*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1966.
- Earnest, Jaya, and David Treagust, eds. *Education Reform in Societies in Transition: International Perspectives*. Rotterdam, The Netherlands: Sense Publishers, 2006.
- Grant, Gerald, and David Riesman. *The Perpetual Dream: Reform and Experiment in the American College*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978.
- Horn, Raymond A. *Understanding Educational Reform: A Reference Handbook*. Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2002.
- Proefriedt, William A. *High Expectations: The Cultural Roots of Standards Reform in American Education*. New York: Teacher's College Press, 2008.
- Stolz, Stefanie, and Phillip Gonon. *Challenges and Reforms in Vocational Education*. Bern: Peter Lang, 2012.

### **Contemporary Debates over Education**

- Goldstein, Dana. "The Future of Vocational Education." *The Nation*, 19 April 2012. Web. 9 Sept. 2014.
- Humphreys, Debra, and Patrick Kelly. *How Liberal Arts and Sciences Majors Fare in Employment: A Report on Earnings and Long-Term Career Paths*. Washington, DC: Association of American Colleges and Universities, 2014.
- "Is College Worth It?" *The Economist*, 5 April 2014. Web. 9 Sept. 2014.
- Kendall, John. *Understanding Common Core State Standards*. Alexandria, VA: ASCD, 2011.
- Kiviat, Barbara. "The Big Jobs Myth: American Workers Aren't Ready for American Jobs." *The Atlantic*, 25 July 2012. Web. 9 Sept. 2014.
- "Liberal Education and America's Promise (LEAP)." Association of American Colleges and Universities, n.d. Web. 9 Sept. 2014.
- Martin, Andrew, and Andrew W. Lehren. "A Generation Hobbled by the Soaring Cost of College." *New York Times*, 12 May 2012. Web. 9 Sept. 2014.
- "Read the Standards." Common Core State Standards Initiative, n.d. Web. 9 Sept. 2014.
- Sawchuk, Stephen. "Educating Americans for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: What to Make of the Debate Over Common Core." *Smithsonian Magazine*, 4 Sept. 2013. Web. 9 Sept. 2014.

### **Contemporary Critiques of Higher Education**

- Bok, Derek. *Higher Education in America*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013.
- Delbanco, Andrew. *College: What It Was, Is, And Should Be*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012.
- Deresiewicz, William. *Excellent Sheep: The Miseducation of the American Elite and the Way to a Meaningful Life*. New York: Free Press, 2014.
- Kerr, Clark. *The Uses of the University*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1963.
- Menand, Louis. *The Marketplace of Ideas*. New York: W. W. Norton, 2010.

### **Pedagogical Resources for Course Design**

- Bergmann, Jonathan, and Aaron Sams. *Flip Your Classroom: Reach Every Student in Every Class Every Day*. Arlington: International Society for Technology in Education, 2012.
- Bowen, José Antonio. *Teaching Naked: How Moving Technology Out of Your College Classroom Will Improve Student Learning*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2012.