

Reflections on the Nature of Management Education at a Catholic University

by Richard J. Rexeisen

A natural, and arguably fruitful tension exists between the world of the mind and the practical obligations associated with daily living. For the purposes of our discussion, liberal arts is cast in the role of the caretaker of “the world of the mind” and management education plays the part of the practical mentor of “professional career preparation.” The Catholic University then sets the stage for both actors by identifying a unifying mission or context for both liberal and professional education. As provided by John Paul II’s, *Ex Corde Ecclesiae*, “The basic mission of a university is a continuous quest for truth through its research, and the preservation and communication of knowledge for the good of society.” While the tension between the Arts and the Professions can take many forms, this paper will specifically focus on highlighting some ideas that emerged during discussions at a recent seminar on management education at a Catholic University held at the University of St. Thomas.

I am, I confess, of the opinion that many of the contrasting, off-setting or balancing characteristics attributed to the liberal arts and career preparation are frequently overstated. While focusing on differences may facilitate debate and may even appear to provide a parsimonious vehicle for critical inquiry, I find greater similarity in both process and ends than either group cares to openly admit. Nevertheless, this paper is not about explaining nor reconciling the apparent differences between liberal arts and management education. My observation, however, does provide a convenient segue into introducing why I have elected to take “poetic license” with my presentation of ideas discussed at the seminar.

Five of the poems contained within this article were written in response to my reflections on the content and nature of the discussions about the meaning of management education at a Catholic University. Three additional, previously unpublished poems (*Liberal Arts*, *Liberal Education* and *Marketing*) are also included for the relevancy they contribute to the subject matter being discussed.

The first poem is entitled, “Enlightened Self Interest.” It was written in response to the intriguing notion that there exists a state between pure self interest and pure disinterest. If business is to be broadly concerned with the needs and interests of the communities it serves (e.g., sharing some responsibility for the dignity and good of the whole human person) then admittedly there is a need for some level of disinterest in the particulars of a given transaction for the well being of the whole. The resulting concept of enlightened self interest therefore emerges as a necessary potential and becomes the inspiration for the following poem.

Enlightened Self Interest

Why are you here?
asked the small child of the merchant
I am here to serve
was his thoughtful reply
and with a wink he continued
as I've told you before
By helping you, I am helping myself

But why are you here?
asked the child once again
I'm here to sell candy
said the merchant somewhat puzzled by the child's repetition
You see, I try to practice what I preach
By helping another
you are helping yourself

But WHY are you here?
asked the child unrelenting
All Right, All Right, if you really must know
I'm here to make a profit
a living if you like
so that I can afford my modest new home on the hill
That's why, please understand, by helping you, I am helping myself!

No! Why are you here?
asked the child of four now almost in tears
What don't you understand? said the merchant out of patience
I'm a businessman can't you see!
Do you want some candy or not?
Perhaps you're the exception to this the golden rule
Helping you I can see is in no way helping me

No, No, Why are you Here!?!
asked the child of the man
can you not smell the smoke in the air
the hills are on fire
and you're needed up there
that's why I am here as my Father also taught me
By helping you, I am helping myself

I was also intrigued by the discussion and consideration of what constitutes an
“authentic” person; and what by contrast might therefore be implied by the existence of a
“fraudulent” person within the context of the whole human experience. Although cast as

light and dark, there no doubt exists a continuum between the two extremes which becomes in part the basis for the poem entitled "Authentic vs. Arrogant." Perhaps by extension the poem will also stimulate a private if not public discussion relating to how each of us is prepared to cope with the massive body of knowledge that has, and is continuing to accumulate in the world.

Authentic vs. Arrogant

What is it
do you think
that it is you're about
Or does it really matter
as long as it seems
most everyone else
seems to think that you know

Can you admit
ever felt if found out
how little you really know
the jig would be up
and the dance would be over
cause who would pay attention
to one who knew as little as you

And if you have not
are you really being honest
for what question can be answered
without inspiring many more
What is growth
if not the capacity
the yearning to enlarge our sacred trust

Is there one among you
who has nothing left to learn
Is there one among you
who can measure the value of a lesson
Is there one among you
who no longer needs faith
because of the certainty of their knowledge

Have the stars been set in the heavens
that they might be numbered by man
Have you been given all that you are
and all that you use to make of yourself
to cause your reflection to be more than it is

Be rather who you are
the very best that your values will reveal

The search for truth and the application of the treasury of human knowledge for the good of society stands as one of the hallmarks of an education at a Catholic University. The poem “Crucible of Truth” is written in the spirit of capturing this admonishment and with the hopeful intent of inspiring similar action in its readers.

Crucible of Truth

From the fires of inspiration
of the Spirit of the Family of I Am
Behold the Crucible of Truth
out which is rendered
sweet ambrosia for the soul

Reach out now for this your inheritance
with courage and conviction
Learn to be strong
compassionate and generous
as is the responsibility for the gifts you are given

And listen to the Wind
as it calls out your name
Open your heart
your mind and your spirit
and embrace what is yours in the Crucible of Truth

The next poem, “Can You Go Too Far,” is written with the hope of stimulating debate, or at least some thoughtful reflection, about the issue of what responsibility we have for the actions and care of other people who work and live around us. How much should a person do when trying to help another person before you actual begin to deprive them of their own personal growth and independence; and as a consequence cause injury to the good of the whole? The question for business leaders is, how much or how little should they intervene in the workings of their organizations? The trend towards pushing decision making lower in the organization reflects the opinion that you can go too far in centralizing the decision making process. Can you go to far in the other direction and if so, what balance is best for the organization? Another twist of interpretation could be, how much or how little should a firm do for their customers? Are there negative consequences of regulating to the point of consumer complacency or creating, albeit unintentional, an environment wherein consumers assume that warranties absolve the user of responsible use of their products?

Can You Go Too Far?

Follow the Star to the North
to the fork in the road
where there you must turn
take the path to the East
But if you should find
yourself in a valley beyond
where the sheep have gone to sleep
though they be standing on their feet
and in their eyes there's no light
for they no longer participate
in any responsibility for their own caring
turn around and come back
for you've gone much too far

Beleaguered Rulers
what two legged platform
have you allowed yourselves to be placed upon
Is it your job to cause ...
the rain to fall
the seasons to change
or the Sun to rise in the East?
As you mull over your options
looking for what else there is for you to do
consider well
there comes a time
when less is more
when others must learn to do for themselves

As its title of the next poem suggests, "Potpourri," is a collage of impressions brought together from fragments of several conversations to include: a) the importance of the role of ethics in management education at a Catholic University, b) on the nature of integration, c) what outcomes arise from the dynamic marriage of the liberal arts with professional education, and d) the purposes and use of human understanding.

Potpourri

Ethics are important
not as a public convention
stirred by the winds of popular demand
but exist for all time as a core public good
that is for the good of the whole human person

Even as integration depends
upon a chorus of diversity
the roots that feed

this mother of invention
are the very same that nourish the meaning of integrity

And what fruit pray tell
can be born as the offspring of tension
as is manifest between the Arts and Management Education
Why mutual respect I suspect
in keeping with the virtues that brings them together

And as for the treasury of human understanding
take care that it's used as a proper stepping stone
along the path that leads us all
to the milestones of a meaningful life
celebrating human dignity and the forever beyond

The next three poems, as previously noted, were written prior to my attendance at the recent seminar on management education. However, above and beyond whatever value the reader may find in these writings, they also serve to illustrate that the search for understanding about the nature and integration of liberal arts and professional education at a Catholic University is a dynamic process and is not bound to the confines of a given seminar. It is the active, on-going conversation itself that embodies much of the spirit that the conversation would somehow hope to describe and understand. I have used each of these poems in the past to stimulate some interesting discussion among my students.

Liberal Arts

Consider if you will
with me if you please
but alone as we must
the meaning and purpose
of what we're about
and where we should go
if you should think
it important at all.

Trivium, quadrivium
and the essentials of more
crossroads not pitted
but blended through time
circle us about
like an eye to the future
while anchored in reference
as all learning must be.

What is liberal arts?
Why should you care?
Behold the questions
the forms they may take
listening to reflections
as they open your mind
defining what is
all are gifted to seek.

Liberal Education

Here then are we
who would wish to debate
defend or refute
or resolve to discern
between what is art
the liberal education
from that which is not
training some say
skill or vocation

Yet puzzled I've been
must confess some confusion
as to why there should be
such a focus on differences
as opposed I suppose
to our trying to synthesize
till long last I surmised
that I as a teacher
had but been trained for a job

So at least I find solace
can put in perspective
realign expectations
that people so constrained
by professional preparation
should in any way resolve
as a consequence of discussion
what requires a liberal accounting
not acquired in on-the-job training

Marketing

Marketing is more
 than a simple set of tools
 it is the values that wield
set in motion their use

It is the value
 and valuing of others
 in relation to self
that forms the foundation of all exchange

In closing, I would like to draw upon the wisdom of Archbishop John Ireland, Founder of the University of St. Thomas, who so aptly observed for us all:

Brief is the span of man's life; few the summer suns he counts. Hence, to live with profit to himself and others, he is wont to borrow time. Years that have gone and years that are to come he makes his own - from those that are gone he garners experience and ideals, from those that are to come he obtains scope and purpose of action. Thus he widens all the frontier of life and adds to his possessions power and inspiration that were otherwise beyond his reach.