The Importance of Liberal Arts in the Digital Age

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Abstract: Liberal arts are vulnerable to the challenge that they are useless in the digital age. "Uselessness is a kind of usefulness" — that is, although liberal arts fail to mold the practical skills, for example, the skills that enable people to earn much money in markets, they are useful in other senses, which is a common and seemingly philosophical answer to the question about the function of liberal arts. Such an answer, however, seems insufficient and abstract. In this article, the author intends to demonstrate with examples and statistics that liberal arts play an irreplaceable role in nurturing people's critical thinking, expanding their imagination and understanding of the differences of the world. Moreover, technology is essentially related to the understanding of human society. User-friendly technology is the combination of empathy and the understanding of humanity.

Keywords: liberal arts, soft skills, the digital age

1. Liberal arts as subjects

1.1 The brief history of liberal arts

The history of liberal arts can be traced back to Ancient Greek, and they were viewed as a way that shapes people's abilities to participate in civil lives, for example, debate in public and self-defense in courts. At this period, liberal arts mainly consisted of three subjects: grammar, logic, and rhetoric. In the Middle Ages, the three subjects were extended to arithmetic, geometry, music, and astronomy. Nowadays, liberal arts, together with natural science, are absorbed into a whole, becoming part of liberal arts education.[1]

1.2 Liberal arts: making the invisible visible

Liberal arts are misunderstood as subjects independent of intelligence. Given this popular misunderstanding, a basic question that should be answered is: what functions they can serve. In *Why We Should Study Literature, History, and Philosophy*, Long Yingtai defines literature as a subject that enables the invisible to be seen. She takes Lu Xun's *Medicine* as an example to illustrate the function of literature. "Through the scene described by Lu Xun in *Medicine*, you not merely see the ignorance of the villagers, but also the life behind the ignorance — seeing people's desperation, sorrow, and misery."[2] "Making the invisible visible" is also the function of other liberal arts. Writers, historians, and philosophers turn the situations that the average people like us take for granted into objects of thinking by keeping a distance from the context they live in. Thanks to the sensitivity of these great minds, the complexity of human emotion and situations are exposed and channeled into a collective reflection.

2. The skills shaped by liberal arts

Questions remain: with what skills liberal arts can equip people with. According to Princeton University, liberal arts offer "an expansive intellectual grounding in all kinds of humanistic inquiry." Immersing ourselves in questions, theories, and methodology that liberal arts concern, we would have the abilities to read critically, write effectively, and think broadly. These abilities "will elevate your conversation in the classroom and strengthen your social and cultural analysis; they will cultivate the tools necessary to allow you to navigate the world's most complex issues."[3] More specifically, the abilities molded by liberal arts, according to Richard Sigurdson, include the following: analysis and construction of knowledge; effective expression and writing; the ability to raise questions; improvement of self-confidence and self-understanding; tolerance of cultural differences.[4] These skills, however, are insufficient to convince people who hold a deep bias toward liberal arts. So, in what follows, I shall revisit the aforementioned skills that liberal arts offer us with concrete examples.

2.1 Doubt and critique

Like natural science, liberal arts are guided by questions and doubts. For example, *Bad Blood: Secrets and Lies in a*

Silicon Valley Startup by John Carrevrou, which was published in 2018 and documented how deception was peddled in the cloak of great invention, manifests the abilities that liberal arts prepare people with: doubt and verification. Carrevrou's investigation started with the question of whether it is possible for a student lacking systematic training to invent something that would change the history of medicine. Amid the praise flowing to the inventor, the journalist remains his doubt. This doubt is grounded in common sense that different from computer programing, medicine relies on the accumulation of knowledge and systematic training. This investigation embodies the quality that liberal arts aim to prepare people with: the ability to question and challenge with evidence.

2.2 The theoretical imagination

Liberal arts make sense of social phenomenon through explanative frameworks. Offering a new framework is not easy. In this sense, liberal arts are not subjects that feature the chronicle of the events, which suggests the skills shaped by liberal arts are just good memory. For example, before Kant, concerning the question of why knowledge is objective, a classic explanation is that because knowledge is a reflection of the world. Then, the more accurately our perceptions mirror the world, the more objective our knowledge of the world is. Kant proposes a new pattern as to the objectivity of knowledge, which, in his view, does not stem from the accurate reflection of the external world but from transcendental categories that exist in our minds. Kant's epistemology reverses the traditional interpretation of the relationship between the external world and internal minds. This example shows that it is imagination that braces up and invigorates liberal arts. And what we receive from liberal arts is the skill to understand the world from different perspectives.

2.3 Expansion of the spiritual world

Besides shaping critical thinking and theoretical imagination, liberal arts also serve the role of nourishing our souls. As Zhou Ning says, "the great literature makes people feel happy and spiritually refreshing, disperses their loneliness, and leads them to the paradise bathed in the light of sensibility."[5] More generally, what makes us spiritually rich is not merely literature, but also history, philosophy, and other subjects of liberal arts. With their own questions and theories, they expand the boundary of our thoughts and show us the world broader than where we live. It is in this world that we find out that our misery and sadness are understood; that our loneliness is being experienced by others; that our vulnerability can be confessed to others with no pressure of being teased; that our confusions are also others'. In brief, liberal arts create a spiritual homeland, in which we find companionship, courage, love, purity, nobleness, and the light.

3. Liberal arts and the digital age

Liberal arts are arguably valuable in molding abilities necessary for people's intellectual integrity. However, a practical question is: whether students majoring in liberal arts are competitive in the digital age.

3.1 Liberal arts and technology companies

Prof. Vivek Wadhwa surveyed 652 American-born CEOs and directors of product design in 2008 and found that less than 37% held the degree of engineering or computer and that the number of people with the degree of mathematics was just 2%. For the rest of respondents, the degrees they held were about management, accountancy, hygiene, and liberal arts.[6] In the meantime, Prof. Wadhwa reminded us that the leaders in many successful technology companies held degrees related to liberal arts, for example, Stewart Butterfield, the founder of Slack, majoring in philosophy; Jack Ma of Alibaba holding the degree of English; Susan Wojcicki, the CEO of YouTube, with the degree of history and literature; the founder of Airbnb, Brian Chesky receiving the degree of fine arts.

In addition to the statistics and the list of names mentioned above, which is suggestive of the relation between technology and liberal arts, some well-known leaders unequivocally claim the importance of liberal arts in the digital age. Steven Jobs is frequently quoted: "it is in Apple's DNA that technology alone is not enough — it is technology married with liberal arts, married with the humanities, that yields us the result that makes our heart sing." Mark Bertolini holds a similar view — math or engineering background is not good enough. As he said, "I have seen many an actuary and many engineers who are brilliant, but they fail in their ability to communicate or commercialize an idea because they cannot relate to people they are dealing with."[7] The ability to connect with people is what liberal arts intend to prepare their students to have.

3.2 Liberal arts and soft skills

According to a survey conducted by National Association of Colleges and Employers in 2017, the three skills that employers assign high weights are abilities of communicating, problem-solving, and teamwork. These skills are called soft skills and are established through dialogue between teachers and students in the classroom, extensive readings, and detailed analysis of texts.[8]

According to Scott Hartley, it is the comprehensive study experience (namely, the study of natural science and liberal arts) that enables engineers to develop products that meet people's needs.[9] In the essential sense, technology is related to the question of how human beings should live. This relation suggests that in designing products, we should see technology not merely from the perspective of engineers — caring about the issue, like the property of materials or the feasibility of technology, but also from the perspective of human beings. That is, what kinds of life people can live with the products we design and whether that life is desirable. The thought experiment that is based on expectations of future life and interpretation of humanity should be incorporated into the design of products. Then, it is plausible to say that in the digital age, liberal arts are irreplaceable in nurturing people's skills to understand the complexity and differences of human society and to connect with customers.

The key to good design, Wadhwa encapsulates, "is a combination of empathy and knowledge of the arts and humanities."[10] "An engineering degree is very available, but the sense of empathy that comes from music, arts, literature and psychology provides a big advantage in design… A psychologist is more likely to know how to motivate people and to understand what users want than is an engineer who has worked only in the technology trenches."[11]

4. Conclusion

Technology is unquestionably important in the digital age. However, technology is not important in itself; it matters because it can make human beings as a whole live well. Good technology exudes the aesthetic value and sympathetic understanding of humanity, which are nurtured in liberal arts. So liberal arts are important even in the digital age.

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