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Plato and Liberal Education

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Dr. Gregory T. Papanikos
President
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Plato and Liberal Education

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Abstract

The humanity began to search ways and methods of knowledge transfer in very ancient times. From ancient times until today different educational systems were founded, some of which continued to operate and the others became part of history of pedagogic.

One of the unique educational systems indisputably is so called liberal education, which takes its origins from antiquity and, in particular, from Ancient Greece.

The aim of paper is to discuss several aspects related with meaning, concept and goals of liberal education in times of Plato and today.

The principles of liberal education first are introduced in works of ancient Greek philosopher Plato. Plato still is considered as a founder of concept of liberal education. So I'll shortly represent the basic concept and goals of liberal education in Plato's works. The paper considers Plato's educational plan – curriculum and its relation with modern curriculum.

Plato describes education as an art to make perfect man. When Plato speaks about education he means liberal education. liberal education is education whose end is man himself. When men are trained vocationally we may expect better products, but we have no right to expect better men in the wide sense of this term. That's why this product may not be useful for society. From the 21th century liberal education has new defenders, but the concept and goals of liberal education are the same: to prepare human being to live responsible, productive, and creative, to be ready for lifelong learning.

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The humanity began to search ways and methods of knowledge transfer in very ancient times. From ancient times until today different educational systems were founded, some of which continued to operate and the others became part of history of pedagogic. One of the unique educational systems indisputably is so called liberal education, which takes its origins from Antiquity and, in particular, from Ancient Greece. The aim of paper is to discuss several aspects related with meaning, concept and goals of liberal education in times of Plato and today. What did mean liberal education for Plato and what it means for people of the 21-th century?

Nowadays this subject is very interesting for scholars as liberal education becomes more and more popular in modern world and in modern Europe. The principles of liberal education first are introduced in works of ancient Greek philosopher Plato. Plato still is considered as a founder of concept of liberal education. So I'll represent the basic concept and goals of liberal education in Plato's works. Plato describes education as an art to make perfect man. When Plato speaks about education he means liberal education.¹ liberal education is education the end of which is man himself. When men are trained vocationally we may expect better products, but we have no right to expect better men in the wide sense of this term. That's why this product may not be useful for society. The key for Plato's system of education is the Greek term *mousikhv*, which had very specific meaning in ancient Greek and included within its comprehension of seven liberal arts. Greek mythology personified seven liberal arts making each one of them a Muse.

If we see Plato's dialogues more detailed we'll find out the fact that in each dialogue we have a picture of education and in every case we find that education is growth, a movement from confusion to clarity, from ignorance to knowledge. The student is his own teacher. The role of teacher is to help the student in acquisition of knowledge and this teacher in Plato's dialogues is Socrates. The teacher is midwife, who assists at the birth of the idea in the mind of student. But to assist to the student is not simply. To do this you must be wise yourself and you need to have some kind of "virtue" – virtue of Socrates.

Plato organized educational plan – curriculum, which was designed for four epochs. 1. The first twenty years are concerned mainly with the body and the organic faculties. The children as early as age of three were introduced to mythology and then gymnastics, reading and writing, poetry, music and mathematics. From the eighteenth to the twentieth year military training was recommended. In the first epoch factual knowledge was not so important, but only skill of distinguishing good from bad and formation of right senses. 2. The second period, extending from the year twenty to the year thirty, is concerned with the sciences of geometry, astronomy and harmony. The fundamental knowledge transferred in this period prepared the way for philosophy. 3. The third period occupied the years thirty to thirty-five and is concerned with the arts of dialectics. 4. The fourth period, requiring fifteen years of life and

¹2008. New York: From IHM School. by Maluf F. M., available at: <http://ihm.catholicism.Org/2008/12/plato-and-liberal-education-part-one/>.

terminating at the age of fifty, is a period dedicated to real experience in the world.¹

In the context of liberal education the term “liber” doesn’t refer to politics. It is derived from Latin word “liber” and means “free”. For Plato education is process when one becomes free from ignorance. The result of liberal education is freedom, free person itself.

At the beginning of 21th century the great part of society rejected liberal education and subject-based education was established. The very small part of society recognized the importance of liberal education to frame cultural well-educated people.²

From the 21th century liberal education has new defenders, but the concept and goals of liberal education are the same: to prepare human being to live responsible, productive, and creative, to be ready for lifelong learning. The liberal education means that we understand foundations of knowledge and inquiry about nature, culture and society, that we master core skills of perception, analysis and expressions, that we recognize the importance of historical and cultural context and that we explore connections among formal learning, citizenship and service to our communities.³

We must underline that when we speak about modern liberal education, first of all we mean American model of education. The American tradition is incorporated in some European countries with more or less success. The main purpose of the liberal education which is established by the U.S. model is to promote more employment and to enhance academic and student mobility.

In the modern statement on liberal education it is said that: liberal learning is not confined to particular fields of study, but it is rigorous methodology. The spirit and value of liberal education are equally relevant to all forms of higher education and to all students. Because liberal education aims to free us from the constraints of ignorance and myopia, it is global and pluralistic by its nature. It embraces the diversity of ideas and experiences that characterize the social, natural and intellectual world.

The modern liberal education includes the disciplines of humanities, natural, social and political sciences. The curriculum of American liberal education is based on Trivium-Quadrivium cycle and includes propedeutical courses of arts and sciences.

A. Bloom believed that when we discuss the concept of modern liberal education, the main misunderstanding is that we cannot derive modern equivalent of liberal education from the “classics”. We mustn’t search the essence of the problem in past, but in present.

What, then, is the modern equivalent of a liberal education? A. Bloom’s suggestion is notable point: to be liberally educated one does not need to

¹2008. New York: From IHM School. by Maluf F. M., available at: <http://ihm.catholicism.org/2008/12/plato-and-liberal-education-part-three/>.

²Conor, W. R. (2008). *Liberal Arts Education in The Twenty-first Century*. New York: New York Press, 49.

³Conor, W. R. (2008). *Liberal Arts Education in The Twenty-first Century*. New York: New York Press, 72.

master the whole range of modern learning. This is why it is dangerous to compare closely ancient Greek and modern models of liberal education.¹

But if we look at main principles of modern liberal education, we'll see that they are the same as in Plato:

1. You will develop strength of mind and an ordered intellect.

Let's see in Plato's dialogues. The attempt of Socrates is nothing other than to try to strengthen someone's mind and to cultivate someone's intellect.

2. You will able to think for yourself. In all of the dialogues of Plato Socrates tries to make his interlocutor to think for himself and to do conclusions by himself.

3. The world becomes understandable. No one can reject that the dialogues of Plato make the world understandable for characters and for us – readers of great philosopher.

4. The more you learn, the more you can learn. Socrates tries to assure his interlocutors that knowledge builds upon knowledge. When you learn something, you learn how to learn. That's why Plato's dialogues are full of references on previous dialogues.

5. Knowledge makes you smarter and smarter is happier. This is the concept of Plato's philosophy which is demonstrated by Socrates in dialogues. To make one's mind smarter is purpose of Socrates' whole life.

The key for curriculum of liberal education is curriculum which doesn't bombard student with facts. The liberal education curriculum ought to adopt only this structure. Liberal education curriculum tells a story to the student and then gives him chance to make conclusions. After this story student ought to try to dig deeper into the psychological dynamics of this story. The curriculum which is designed by connection of syllabi structured in this way creates the model for liberal education curriculum.

What is common for Platonic and modern models of liberal education? The common is that liberal education has always been to aspire to personal characteristics, critical thinking, skills and learning opportunities for future development. The main difference is liberal education in Plato's times was more accessible to small groups – free people, and in our era it is considered for wide range of people.

And finally it is fairly notable one similarity between Platonic and modern models of liberal education, which is covered by the essence of liberal education itself, but isn't declared not by Plato nor by modern theorists of liberal education. The liberal education will be successful only in that case if it is combined with specific subject-based field. The liberal education considered this important and necessary. The liberal education is propedeutic and introduction for future learning. It prepares student to learn specific subject-based field and develops skills for such type of learning. Thus, the real

¹Bloom. A. (1987). *The Closing of the American Mind*, New York: Simon & Schuster, 44-51.

outcome of liberal education will be useful and fruitful for society only after combining such kind of knowledge.

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