



The Liberal Arts Endeavor

A New General Education

In 1869 the *Atlantic Monthly* published an essay by Charles Eliot entitled “The New Education.” In it, he sought to chart a new course for education in the United States in the wake of the Civil War and the industrialization that was reshaping the lives of citizens and the world in which they lived. Eliot’s essay praises the reforms that had been adopted in 1862 by the Yale Scientific School, which, in addition to establishing a postgraduate Doctor of Philosophy degree, had introduced a “general course of studies” that embraced a broad liberal arts curriculum from mathematics to literature and from the physical sciences to history and commercial law. Eliot emphasized that to this general course of study, there was added “a large elective element in the last two years,” which had a “distinctly practical or professional turn.”¹ These visionary reforms aligned the emerging curriculum at Yale with the ideals set forth in the Morrill Act of 1862, which explicitly sought to “promote the liberal and practical education of the industrial classes in the several pursuits and professions in life.”²

Soon after the publication of “The New Education” essay, and largely because of the vision it articulated, Eliot was named the twenty-first, and at thirty-five years old, the youngest, president of Harvard University. During his forty-year tenure at Harvard, Eliot shaped much of what we have inherited as the American system of higher education. From the articulation of majors and minors to a curriculum regulated by student credit hours, from the establishment of highly specialized graduate programs to the adoption of general education undergraduate programs rooted in the liberal arts, Eliot’s reforms have had a lasting effect.³ In 1909, Eugen Kuehnemann celebrated Eliot’s legacy by calling the standard he set the “embodiment of the American conception of education.” Kuehnemann went on to clarify the contours of this American education this

way: “It enthroned ideal in the place of utilitarian considerations, it aimed at seriousness and depth of genuine education independently won instead of the hurried acquisition of mere practical accomplishments. All of this was attained by just one decisive move: the introduction of the spirit of true education, the spirit of liberty and independence, in place of traditional routine.”⁴ Although it idolizes a free and independent subject, degrades the value of tradition, and segregates ideals too rigidly from the practices in which they must be embodied, nevertheless this passage suggests the extent to which the “arts of liberty” have long animated the spirit of American education.⁵

In her book *The New Education*, Cathy Davidson articulates the enlivening and limiting dimensions of the legacy Eliot has handed down to us as we discern how best to create an education for the digital age. What industrialization was for Eliot and his generation, the Internet is for Davidson and ours. She captures the signature of the Internet’s impact this way: “Overnight, anyone with access to an Internet connection could communicate anything to anyone else in the world who had access to an Internet connection. This is an almost unimaginable extension of the human reach.”⁶ Although our reach, as Robert Browning reminds us, should always exceed our grasp,⁷ the excesses of a global network of communication have reshaped the world; transformed the dynamics of our social, political, and economic interactions; and placed urgent demands on us as educators. As Davidson suggests, educators “must take responsibility and begin to think seriously about how to remake the university to equip students to thrive in this murky and often polluted new atmosphere that we now all breathe.”⁸ In remaking the university, Davidson advocates for a student-centered active-learning approach that empowers students to advance knowledge within the rich contexts in which they find themselves, drawing upon the expertise they have cultivated in the information-rich world they inhabit.⁹ The virtues of a liberal arts education gain in urgency in the wake of the creation of the Internet, as students attempt to chart meaningful lives in a world in which information is widely accessible but its significance remains ambiguous and elusive.

In this fraught and vital context, our attempts to remake the American university would do well to draw upon the deep commitment to general education and the liberal arts that has long animated the spirit of American education. In so doing, we might articulate the contours of a new general education, one rooted, however, in two very ancient ideas. The first is associated with our understanding of what is “general” about general education, and the second concerns the manner in which this sort of education engages the world.

Let us turn first, and briefly, to what precisely is “general” about general education. When Eliot praised the “general course of studies” established by the Yale Scientific School in 1862, he contrasted it with a “special” course of

studies that focused on skills required for a specific discipline or profession. In distinguishing between what is “general” and what is “special,” Eliot drew on the ancient dichotomy between two perspectives: one that understands a topic or phenomenon generally, or as the Greeks said, *katholou*, “according to the whole,” and one that understands each thing *kath’ hekaston*, “according to what is proper to it.”¹⁰ In attending to this ancient way of speaking about the general as distinct from what is proper to each individual discipline, we are able to discern a deeper implication of “general” education; for this education is not general because it is the most universal or because it is abstracted from what is particular but because it teaches us to take on a *holistic* perspective so that we might understand how the special disciplines are integrated and woven into the fabric of a complex, textured world.

By connecting general education to the cultivation of such a holistic engagement with the world, we already anticipate the second ancient dimension of a new general education, the rhetorical manner in which education is always enacted. John Poulakos has articulated a definition of rhetoric that is helpful in orienting us in this regard: “Rhetoric is the art which seeks to capture in opportune moments that which is appropriate and attempts to suggest that which is possible.”¹¹ Drawing on the ancient concepts of the *kairos* (the opportune moment), the *prepon* (what is appropriate or proper), and the *dynaton* (what is possible), this definition of rhetoric at once calls us back to the ancient practices of rhetoric even as it points us forward to ways of using language and engaging one another in the world that are capable of shaping a better future.

As Andrea and Karen Lunsford’s comparative study of writing suggests, student writing in the Internet age demonstrates a facility with the ancient capacity for *kairos*—the ability to discern the proper words for the moment capable of moving the audience addressed.¹² However, if this “new literacy,” which is also a very ancient literacy, is to be capable of shaping a more just and better future, it must be attuned to and engaged with the complex, interconnected global world we now inhabit. Wendy Hesford suggests the degree to which our traditional understanding of *kairos* must be reimagined against the dynamic geopolitical context of the twenty-first century: “To view *kairos* through a transnational lens is to recognize transnational publics not as static but always in the process of becoming, and audiences as waxing and waning as publics form and disperse.”¹³

Cultivating capacities to respond in fitting ways that will create and advance more just and thriving communities in such a complex, dynamic, interconnected world is the daunting responsibility of a new general education. This will require a holistic approach that affords students experiential learning opportunities through which they can learn how to engage the world in which they will need to thrive. Such a new general education will need to integrate the insights

and strengths of multiple disciplines to offer students a wide diversity of perspectives and resources on which to draw in redressing the most intractable problems of our times. And it will need to be student learning-centered and accessible to young citizens from the widest diversity of backgrounds possible.

If Eliot's new education gave students choice by adopting a "considerable elective element," a new general education should affirm this commitment to exploration through active student learning experiences that invite students to weave their values into the world. But if Eliot's new education instituted a more regimented system of standardized structures to facilitate assessment and national rankings, a new general education should take advantage of more dynamic and diverse ways of assessing learning oriented toward and shaped by core educational values.¹⁴

Each situation requires something of us, and the current situation requires us to create general education a new, for this dynamic, interconnected world and for the students who will need to thrive in it. Because each generation must articulate an educational approach capable of doing justice to its moment, we invite submissions here to the *Journal of General Education* that seek to advance a new general education rooted in the arts of liberty and capable of opening new possibilities for a more promising future.

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NOTES

1. Charles W. Eliot, "The New Education," *Atlantic*, February 1869, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1869/02/the-new-education/309049/>.

2. Act of July 2, 1862 (Morrill Act), Public Law 37-108, which established land-grant colleges, 07/02/1862, Enrolled Acts and Resolutions of Congress, 1789-1996, Record Group 11, General Records of the United States Government, National Archives, Washington, D.C. Although Yale was the original land-grant college for the state of Connecticut in 1863, by 1893, the state legislature had shifted the land-grant designation to Storrs Agricultural College, now known as the University of Connecticut.

3. See Cathy N. Davidson, *The New Education: How to Revolutionize the University to Prepare Students for a World in Flux* (New York: Basic Books, 2017), 4.

4. Eugen Kuehnemann, *Charles W. Eliot: President of Harvard University (May 19, 1869-May 19, 1909)* (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1909), 9.

5. For a discussion of the habits associated with the "arts of liberty," see Christopher P. Long, "The Liberal Arts Endeavor," *Journal of General Education* 65, no. 1 (2016): v-vii, doi:10.5325/jgneeduc.65.1.v. The meaning of liberty in this context is not dependent upon the independence of the neoliberal subject but, rather, recognizes the degree to which, in practicing freedom, we remain always embodied and embedded in communities that sustain, resist, and nourish us.

6. Davidson, *New Education*, 5.

7. Robert Browning, "Andrea Del Sarto," Poetry Foundation, October 12, 2017, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/43745/andrea-del-sarto>.
8. Davidson, *New Education*, 6.
9. Davidson provides a good example of this sort of engaged, student-centered pedagogy by pointing to the translingual learning model used by Professor Joshua Belknap of the Borough of Manhattan Community College. Professor Belknap invites multilingual students to learn about their native language and asks them to share their research with their peers. See *ibid.*, 57.
10. For a discussion of this distinction in Aristotle and how it relates to the role of imagination in responding to the world we encounter, see Christopher P. Long, *Aristotle on the Nature of Truth* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 151–59.
11. John Poulakos, "Toward a Sophistic Definition of Rhetoric," *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 16, no. 1 (1983): 36.
12. Andrea A. Lunsford and Karen J. Lunsford, "'Mistakes Are a Fact of Life': A National Comparative Study," *College Composition and Communication* 59, no. 4 (2008): 799. Davidson, echoing Clive Thompson, suggests that Andrea Lunsford's studies intimate that "this generation is unusually adept at *kairos*, a rhetorical term meaning the ability to assess your audience and shape your style, tone, language, and technique for that audience." See Davidson, *New Education*, 92. Clive Thompson emphasizes this too in his essay in *Wired* on the "new literacy." See "Clive Thompson on the New Literacy," *Wired*, August 24, 2009, accessed October 12, 2017, <https://www.wired.com/2009/08/st-thompson-7/>.
13. Wendy Hesford, "Cosmopolitanism and the Geopolitics of Feminist Rhetoric," in *Rhetorica in Motion: Feminist Rhetorical Methods and Methodologies*, Pittsburgh Series in Composition, Literacy, and Culture (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2010), 62.
14. For a discussion of how Eliot's new education adopted the practices of quantifiable measurement associated with the scientific management of labor in an industrial age, see Davidson, *New Education*, 36–46.