



Applied Humanities: A 21st Century Solution

Bernie Cantens, PhD - September 15, 2019

In spring 2019, a young first-year student from my Introduction to Logic course came to my office hours for advice on selecting her courses for the following year. As she was enthusiastic about philosophy and displayed excellent reasoning skills in my logic course, I asked her whether she had decided on a major, hoping that she might consider philosophy. She mentioned that she was considering nursing or health sciences as possible majors. I noticed her near exclusive focus on a clear and secure path to employability. When I suggested that she would make an excellent philosopher and began to list some ways a philosophy major could benefit her, she interrupted me and confessed that she could never tell her parents that she decided to major in philosophy. “You’re out of your mind,” they would say. “How could you ever expect to get a job with a degree like that?”

Regrettably, I have encountered this kind of reasoning in my students semester after semester. And I suspect many other humanities professors have had similar experiences with their students. This tired yet widespread assumption that an education in the humanities contributes little to one’s employability and is thus a frivolous pursuit is one reason many colleges have downsized or eliminated programs in the

humanities. The programs that remain struggle with financial pressures and dwindling resources and find themselves having to constantly justify themselves to students, parents, and administrators. A recent article in *U.S. News and World Report* informs that “enrollment in history, philosophy, literature and other majors considered to come under the umbrella of the liberal arts has been falling for decades. Colleges are shedding liberal arts programs and faculty. Small liberal arts colleges are closing” (The Hechinger Report 2018). In a time of changing expectations, mounting financial pressures, and increasing precarity in the workplace, how can the humanities remake themselves to better adapt to a modern world?

In the philosophy department at Moravian College, with the generous financial support of the Gladys Kriebel Delmas Foundation, we have created a new project model called [Humanities for the Professions](#), which attempts to provide a more creative and functional role for the humanities. We call it *applied humanities*. Applied humanities courses tailor humanities content to the specific concerns of and issues within a particular professional program. Moreover, applied humanities courses have a strong component in which students apply theory to a variety of professional situations.

Why expend so much effort trying to save the humanities? Despite the unfortunate trend of the downsizing of humanities programs, prominent leaders of higher education have argued that humanities are needed now, more than ever, for those pursuing professional education. Humanities, they argue, equip students to know what the right questions are as well as how to resolve them within the broader context of human experience. For instance, in her 2018 National Endowment for the Humanities Jefferson Lecture, the Harvard-trained physician and English literature PhD Rita Charon said,

I am here to suggest that there is much beyond the fixable that doctors must learn to see. . . . Beyond the bleeding and the seizing, we need to see the complex lived experience of the person facing a health problem. If we don't, we miss the very reasons that persons visit us—their symptoms, their fears, their awareness of fragility. I am convinced—with evidence to support my conviction—that study and practice in the humanities is the most direct means to enable doctors to see the suffering that surrounds them. (quoted in Jaschik 2018)

Other prominent leaders in the professions have persuasively argued that the liberal arts foster the kind intellectual rigor and critical thinking that primes students to succeed in their professional careers. For instance, Howard Gardner (2018), professor of cognition and education in the Harvard Graduate School of Education, writes, “If I were the czar of higher education that is not explicitly vocational, I would require every undergraduate to study philosophy. And if I were both czar and czarina, I would require all students to take two philosophy courses—one in their first year and another just before graduation. . . . The goal: to equip graduates with a philosophical armamentarium they could draw from—and contribute to—for the rest of their lives.” If professional leaders in and outside of academia feel so strongly about the importance of the liberal arts, why then are we cutting back on liberal arts programs?

One response might be that we lack the right models for the proper integration of the liberal arts with professional programs. The Humanities for the Professions project is intended to serve as such a model. The philosophy department at Moravian College has created several experimental courses on Aristotelian virtue ethics that are designed to be taught within professional programs. My colleagues Drs. Arash Naraghi and Carol Moeller and I have been designing humanities courses specifically tailored for the unique objectives, goals, and problems of a given profession. These new courses will integrate Greek philosophical views on virtue ethics within the context of the goals of the specific professional disciplines of business, nursing, and rehabilitation sciences. Moreover, we will explore how virtue ethics works in professional life and how can we apply it to the specific problems that arise in the areas of nursing, business, and the rehabilitation sciences. In other words, our project's pedagogical strategy consists in the intentional systematization of humanities courses within professional programs, with emphasis on *applied*

humanities. I have been teaching philosophy courses for over 20 years, and most have been humanities courses for the humanities. Starting this fall, we will be teaching humanities courses for the professions.

We anticipate that this project will have a significant impact on our campus and its curriculum. We expect seventy-five students (of a total undergraduate population of 2,000) will enroll in three new courses: Business and Virtue Ethics, Virtue Ethics and Social Political Justice in Bioethics, and Virtue Ethics in Nursing. Moreover, we hope that the current support we have received from the professional programs will eventually translate into more permanent curricular changes, making some of these courses an essential part of the curricula for professional degrees, and thus the humanities an indispensable element of professional development.

To be clear, the nature of the disciplinary and curricular integration we seek between the humanities and professions goes far deeper than the mere juxtaposition of separate disciplinary content; instead, borrowing from John Dewey, it is the genuine connection of theory with practice or knowledge with *doing*. Breaking down the walls that separate intellectual and practical knowledge is an issue that stretches back to the inception of philosophical thought. It is one of the central philosophical concerns of American pragmatism and, in particular, John Dewey. Dewey writes:

What is the cause and the import of the sharp division between theory and practice? Why should the latter be disesteemed along with matter and the body. . . . What forces are at work to break down the division? What should the effect be if the divorce were annulled, and knowing and doing were brought into intrinsic connection with one another? . . . What modifications would ensue in the disciplines which are concerned with the various phases of human activity? (Dewey 2008, 5).

In this light, we hope that our Humanities for the Professions project will begin to break down the division between theory and practice. As these walls are dismantled and the humanities integrated into the professional disciplines, we also hope to discover what modifications will ensue in these disciplines.

The purpose of our project, therefore, is to create an innovative and sustainable model that unites the humanities and professional programs. In my view, to do so will only enhance the humanities, weaving them into the fabric of our society's practical professional disciplines. We intend the project to be a prototype that other departments and institutions around the country can emulate, making parts of the theoretical humanities explicitly *relevant* to practical disciplines such as business, nursing, athletic training, occupational therapy, and physical therapy. I am not claiming that this is the only way, or even the best way, to integrate the humanities with professional programs; instead, I am proposing one model that some humanities instructors or departments at some institutions might find promising.

One way to express and demonstrate our belief in the importance and value of the humanities is by creating more applied humanities courses in which art, music, philosophy, literature and history play a key role in the concrete, everyday practical issue of the professions. I hope to see many more such courses in the future.

References

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Bernie Cantens, PhD is professor and chair of philosophy at Moravian College. Most recently, he is the author of A Critical Introduction to the Ethics of Abortion: Understanding the Moral Arguments (Bloomsbury Academic). Cantens teaches a course on virtue ethics for Moravian's nursing program.
