

# Humanities: Essential Component of Continuing Education

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**I**N RECENT years, the need for revitalization in secondary and continuing education has become increasingly apparent. Abraham Maslow noted in *The Farther Reaches of Human Nature* that the world is changing and that we must prepare a different type of person for tomorrow's world. The mere teaching of facts, he believed, would not accomplish this. Instead we must help each individual become more fully self-actualized.<sup>1</sup>

As a nonformal, multicultural approach to learning, humanities education, by its very nature as an interdisciplinary study, provides many opportunities to meet today's pressing needs and facilitate personal growth in the Maslowian sense.

The importance of humanities as an essential educational component has not been understood. The conventional way of thinking about humanities as an "arts," or frivolous addition to a curriculum, demonstrates a clear necessity for rethinking and restructuring previous ideas and programs. Too often in high schools, humanities courses are viewed as language, history, or cultural lessons supplemented by slides and music.

Charles R. Keller, former director of the John Hay Fellows Program, feels that "to as great an extent as possible education should

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*Can humanities help bring wholeness to human beings in a largely fragmented world? School people, with society's backing, can help to form an affirmative answer to this question.*

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be interdisciplinary. There is now too much fragmentation—in subjects, teachers, time, and space. Turning fragmented students out into a fragmented world makes no sense."<sup>2</sup> As an integral, person-oriented study, humanities cuts across traditional subject fields. Its focus on people as creators, inventors, thinkers—as facing the challenges of a particular geographic, social, or economic situation—is vital to education today. It is a field that can most purposefully serve education and yet has too often been overlooked in favor of traditional subject areas both in secondary schools and in new designs for continuing and informal education. It is apparent that humanities education warrants the attention of educators as the point at which revitalization of our schools can begin.

<sup>2</sup> Charles R. Keller. "And That's the Way School Ought To Be." Unpublished address delivered at the Massachusetts Humanities Conference in Hyannis, Massachusetts, October 31, 1974. p. 3.

<sup>1</sup> A. H. Maslow. *The Farther Reaches of Human Nature*. New York: The Viking Press, 1971. p. 58.

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## Where To Begin

One of the basic problems in humanities education is the lack of consensus about the scope of the field. To begin planning an effective program, educators must first come to a basic agreement about what might well be viewed as basic foundational underpinnings. Essential in such an effort is the generation of a basic philosophy, goal statement, or rationale (as "an introduction to our cultural heritage" or "understanding the relationship of the environment to social development") reflecting what the staff believes is important.

This basic premise for the humanities curriculum component ought then to be developed into clearly planned themes and activities which allow for maximum opportunities for participation and personal development. This array of potential experiences includes field trips, involvement with the arts—visual and performing—and functional crafts, interaction with resource personnel and guest artists which will broaden the lesson and provide a richer, firsthand experience. In addition, there should be ample time for group interaction, for guided independent study, for reflection, maintenance, and renewal. There should be equal teacher and student input to provide a forum for pooling ideas and to assess the progress of the program.

For a humanities program to be accepted in a school system, cooperation with the community is crucial. Local resources (industries and personnel, historic sites, museums, cultural events) and additional needed facilities such as auditorium space and work areas should be identified and made available. In return, a community should have access to a school program that would permit participation in the form of planned activities or continuing education. Expanded in this direction, humanities education offers myriad opportunities for both school and community that would be enhanced by mutual cooperation.

Perhaps the most pressing educational problem in planning a humanities curriculum is staff preparation. An interdisciplinary

humanities program warrants, in addition to individual field specialists, teachers fluent in cross-field discussions. Teacher preparation, however, continues to be basically "single discipline oriented." High school humanities programs, as a consequence, are usually composed of English, Social Studies, and Arts teachers. For the development of a humanities program, the New York State Department of Education lists as a credo that "the teacher should be a generalist as well as a specialist—

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besides expertness in one discipline, the teacher should have achieved functioning competency in literature, dramatics, music, and the visual arts, and some minimal competency in history, philosophy, and science."<sup>3</sup> To this end, some schools have begun to offer workshops to train their prospective humanities teachers. These programs have involved qualified resource personnel, lectures in museums, and audiovisual workshops. In effect, the preparation of qualified humanities teachers has been a function of in-service education.

## A New View Is Needed

This provides a beginning; however, much more is needed. For humanities programs to function more effectively in the redesign of education very different approaches to teacher preparation are essential. Involvement of teachers and students in a study of humanity and in the individual arts activities requires a teacher who views his

<sup>3</sup> William R. Clauss, editor. *Humanities Is . . .* Albany, New York: State Education Department, Division of the Humanities and the Arts, 1969. p. 152.

or her role differently. What are some of these differences?

First, experience with interdisciplinary subject matter and methods is essential. There is a need for generalists who can provide a similar coherence to a course of study, for example, as Bronowski did in his scientific-humanistic *The Ascent of Man* and as Sir Kenneth Clark did in the culturally historic *Civilisation*. Second, personal involvement in the arts for development of heightened perception, awareness, and sensitivity is necessary for teachers involved with people as creators, inventors, and thinkers. Firsthand experience with literature, music, dance, theatre, and the visual arts will enhance and cultivate an individual's imagination. This list of differences could be expanded but these two components are basic.

It is essential that we, as educators, begin to reconceptualize education. Clearly, traditional subject-oriented curricula have not served education well. Evidence abounds to support this conclusion. Humanities, as a nonformal, interdisciplinary, person-oriented study provides the opportunity for individual development through involvement in creative, intellectual, and skill activities. Educational improvement calls for a reconceptualization of curriculum that recognizes the central core values of the humanities.

In one of the last essays, Maslow expressed a similar view this way:

I think that the arts are so close to our psychological and biological core, so close to this identity, biological identity, that rather than think of these courses as a sort of whipped cream or luxury, we must let them become basic experiences in our education.<sup>4</sup>

In effect, Maslow saw the humanities as a model for other curriculum components. Any serious attention to overall curriculum design for informal and continuing education could well focus on Maslow's claim, for it is supported not only in psychology but also in every other foundational area that might give direction to such effort.

<sup>4</sup> A. H. Maslow. "Peak Experiences in Education and Art." *A Regeneration of the Humanities, Theory into Practice* 10 (3): 153; 1971.

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