

Excellence in Humanities Teaching

To improve standards in the humanities, students must acquire the spirit of excellence the Greeks called *arete*.

DIANE RAVITCH

Several years ago, my family took a vacation trip to Greece. Each day we traipsed across archeological sites or through museums, examining the remains of a once-magnificent civilization. On one of those days, our guide showed us a beautiful marble statue of a man on horseback that once stood on the top of a building. The museum guide pointed out that in its original setting, only the upper portion of the statue was clearly visible. Even though the sculptor expected that no one would ever see them, the hooves of the horse were exquisitely crafted. This display of workmanship and artistry for its own sake, he said, represented the spirit of *arete*, the Greek word for "excellence" or "virtue."

It is this spirit that should be our goal as we seek to improve standards of teaching in the humanities. The year 1983 has been marked by repeated calls for restoration of higher standards of teaching and learning and for excellence in education. If the pursuit of excellence means nothing more than harder tests, more homework, and longer vocabulary lists, then the reaction against this narrow concept will not be long in coming. If, however, the pursuit of excellence enriches and enlivens the common culture and enlarges the participation of all students in it, then we, too, may be able to bring a sense of *arete* into the classroom.

The Foundation of Humanities

When we speak of the humanities in schools, we refer to subjects like history, social studies, language, and literature.


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The foundation for these studies is laid in elementary school. It is there that students learn to use language carefully and well; it is there that attitudes toward learning are shaped, positively or negatively; and it is there that basic skills are honed.

Mastering the basic skills of communication and applying them is the central work of the early grades. Children should be encouraged to read out loud and to write with great frequency. For their part, teachers must respond to children's writing efforts promptly, giving both the encouragement and the correction that improve skills. In striving for excellence, though, teachers must not confuse busywork with good work. Instead, they should inculcate in children the desire to do well, whether in daily assignments or in special projects.

As their skills develop, children should read myths, fairy tales, and legends from many cultures; should create their own myths and tales; and should use them as material for student-made dramatics and projects. Myths, fairy tales, and legends are rich in possibilities for teachers: they are vehicles for literature, history, and language; and the recurrence of similar themes in different cultures enables the teacher to highlight both the universality of human aspirations and the special qualities of different cultures. In addition, they provide far richer educational substance than the usual unimaginative stories about the neighborhood or the community.

The enormous success of films like *E.T.* and *Star Wars* is evidence aplenty that children love fantastic and amazing narratives, a fact that Hans Christian Andersen and the Brothers Grimm long ago discovered. Furthermore, children who are steeped in mythic literature will be well prepared to understand the classic literature of high school, whose writ-



ers assumed that readers were familiar with such figures as Oedipus, Icarus, and Cassandra. Elementary-age children also love heroic tales; for instance, those about Joan of Arc, Frederick Douglass, George Washington, Christopher Columbus, and Galileo. Stories of greatness, courage, achievement, and leadership portray exemplary behavior and enliven important moments in history.

Presenting the Common Culture

At the secondary level, the pursuit of excellence means that schools must reassert their primary role as generator and transmitter of culture. At this level, however, the problem of presenting the common culture becomes more complex. For one thing, many high school teachers are themselves uncertain about its existence. Like it or not, we have a humanistic tradition, and to the extent that schools fail to teach it, the vacuum is filled by the symbols and images shaped by television and popular culture.

One reason for confusion about the common culture is a lingering notion that it belongs to white Anglo-Saxon Protestant males. This narrow conception belongs in the same dustbin as the idea that history consists of memorizing names and dates. White Anglo-Saxon Protestant males (like William Shakespeare and Charles Dickens) have contributed greatly to the common culture, but it is not confined to their works. By definition, the common culture belongs



Photo by Ann Marie Kelly

to all of us and should be shared by all of us. To paraphrase an advertising slogan, you don't have to be a white male to enjoy Dickens, or a black male to appreciate Ralph Ellison.

We cannot strive toward excellence in the humanities without teaching students how to participate imaginatively in the lives and cultures of other peoples and other times. Students should absorb history and literature as living reality, as invitations to travel through time and space to another part of the human experience. What was it like to uproot one's family from an ancestral village and to make the hard voyage to America? What were the conditions of life for the slave family before the Civil War, and what happened to them afterward? What did the Founding Fathers argue about in their meetings and in such documents as the Federalist Papers, and how have their ideas shaped our own lives? Confining students to studies of their own race or gender or ethnic group diminishes their capacity for imaginative empathy and teaches instead a particularistic narcissism. An important element of the Western humanistic tradition is the principle of universalism, the idea that any one of us can sympathetically experience the life of another human being, whose feelings, sufferings, joys, loves, and longings remind us of our common humanity. One who cares only about those who are of the same race, sex, religion, or ethnic group is bigoted and small-minded, certainly not worthy of emulation.

Rebuilding a Solid Curriculum

Those who care about the fate of the humanities must think seriously about how to rebuild a solid curriculum in place of the plethora of specialized electives that characterized many schools in the past decade or so. The return of basic subject-matter requirements and of an emphasis on general education for all students (as embodied, for example, in Mortimer Adler's *Paideia Proposal*) suggests that the public wants teachers to "cover" their subjects. It is expected, for example, that high school students will have a reasonably good understanding of the major events, individuals, and ideas that have shaped the nation and that they will have read some of the seminal works in Western civilization by the time they graduate. Good history teaching should, therefore, use a basic chronological organization as a framework within which the teacher can draw upon original source materials, biography, social science perspectives, and inquiry research.

In discarding the trendiness and laxity of the recent past, however, teachers should not throw out the innovative techniques that have motivated adolescents and enriched the curriculum. For example, in Maine, a group of teachers developed a Western history course that incorporates the drama of the trial as its theme: the trial of Socrates, the trial of Galileo, and the trial of Joseph K. In other places, teachers have used student participation as a learning tool; for example, some classes learn about the

history of American racial relations by acting out the trial that led to the *Brown* decision. Students read, think, and apply what they have learned while participating in these events.

One specialist on the Renaissance has helped teachers in the New York area stage grand festivals, with jousting, readings, plays, feasts, costumes, and other aspects of medieval life. In Boston, an inner-city teacher used *Oliver Twist* to great effect; students immediately understand the parallels between themselves and young Oliver. It should be emphasized, however, that many of the best teachers continue to use traditional didactic methods, taking advantage of their gifts as lecturers and stand-up dramatists.

The methods that teachers use are less important, however, than their recognition of their role as stewards of the nation's cultural heritage. Teachers not only transmit the common culture to the younger generation, but prepare young people to make their own contributions.

The Challenge of Excellence

To aim for *arete*—excellence—is a daily challenge for both students and teachers. Some students will pursue it eagerly; most must be encouraged, inspired, and led by talented teachers to reach higher, to ask new questions, to think critically and imaginatively, to read materials that stretch their minds, and to write with confidence. The task of the teacher of humanities is to strive for those magical moments when students understand something that was previously obscure (a short story, a novel, a work of art, a foreign language, a discovery of historical reality), or when students reach goals they thought were beyond their grasp.

The spirit of *arete* is both universal and democratic. Each of us has the potential for excellence, the potential for individual virtue. In the classroom, it is the special mission of the teacher to encourage the best that is in every student and to develop it fully. If we wish to improve standards of teaching and learning in the humanities, then we should incorporate the spirit of *arete* in the life of the classroom.

Realists might say that it can't be done, but teachers of history and literature, surely, know that new realities have been shaped by dreamers and risk-takers, by visionaries who believed in their mission, by artists who created beauty through their own sense of *arete*. □

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