

Liberal Education: A Medium of Cultural Understanding and Acceptance

Lisa Zondlo

University of Wisconsin – Eau Claire

English Literature Major

University of Wisconsin – Eau Claire Address:

105 Garfield Avenue/P.O. Box 4004

Eau Claire, WI 54701

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Many uninformed citizens are regrettably intolerant of other cultures and ethnic groups. History provides endless amounts of evidence that support this claim, as it is filled with tragic occurrences of racially-driven violence and oppression. Pop culture is polluted with films and literature that reinforce the classification of certain ethnicities as “superior” or “inferior” while upholding stereotypical myths that negatively portray minorities. Communities across the country are greatly affected by cultural intolerance because many citizens (usually unknowingly) contribute to the bigotry by making uninformed assumptions about those they do not understand.

The only way to dissolve socially-constructed cultural barriers is through knowledge. A liberal education teaches students to welcome diversity because it gives students the opportunity to learn about different cultures’ histories and beliefs. The benefits of a liberal education cannot be fully obtained unless students learn to think from different cultural perspectives because diverse perspectives inspire creative and critical thinking, increase the effectiveness of interpersonal communication, and instill a sense of social responsibility. As students progress in their academic journey, they learn to appreciate diversity rather than fear that which is unbeknownst to them, and their respect of other cultures makes them valuable, ethical citizens.

History is an interpretation of the past that varies depending on cultural perspective, and a liberal education ensures that students get the opportunity to encounter history through different worldviews. American citizens need to know both the benefits and the consequences of world affairs so they can understand current foreign relations and become more open towards culturally diverse citizens. This task is not easily accomplished because the prevailing ruling class distributes only their interpretations of historical events which eventually become accepted as social truths while other interpretations of historical events are either overlooked or forgotten. For example, Western history attempts to justify imperialism and colonization by describing

them as righteous acts of the white man whose duty was to tame the exotic and Christianize the spiritually misled. This historical interpretation is present in most textbooks, but it tends to overlook the traumatizing consequences imperialism had, and continues to have, on the targeted victims of colonization.

Viewing history from different perspectives and being exposed to foreign realities is important because students gain tolerance as they learn the origins of social injustice. Liberal education helps students understand that political maneuvers based on racial superiority, such as imperialism and colonization, enslave native inhabitants while forcing them to completely abolish their ways of life. This knowledge humbles students by making them realize that their previous notions of Western ideology were flawed and by allowing students to sympathize with the unjustly abused and oppressed. Students' exposure to culturally diverse historical perspectives also generates intense sentiments of passion that inspire students to become actively involved in the worldwide campaign for human rights by either volunteering their time or by simply sharing their knowledge with their misled peers.

Learning of foreign countries' religious customs along with their history helps students familiarize themselves with cultures they mistakenly fear. Diverse knowledge is especially relevant during times of war when people tend to demonize those who resemble their enemies. This unfortunate reality is currently observable in the United States as hostilities rise against citizens of Middle Eastern descent; these negative sentiments are a direct result of US involvement in Iraq and Afghanistan and could be possibly be avoided with the aid of education. Students who take required religious studies courses in liberal colleges learn of different belief systems, and this allows them to familiarize themselves with the sacred convictions of non-Christian faiths and customs. The religious and historical backgrounds of foreign countries are

relevant to every citizen because wars are started when ideologies conflict and past animosities ignite. Most citizens of the United States know that Al Qaeda is on a religious crusade against the West, but many of them do not realize that the Muslim extremists are also the extreme minority of Muslims. The cultural diversity requirements of liberal colleges guarantee that students are presented with this type of vital information. Human beings need to learn that generalizing specific occurrences and formulating conjectures based solely on preconceived stereotypes unnecessarily exacerbates racial tensions while recklessly inducing fear and antipathy. Students become more welcoming of other cultures after they realize the dangers of profiling, and their appreciation of cultural diversity makes them respectable members of society who set good examples for others.

While exploring various forms of religion, students are given the chance to make a spiritual connection between themselves and a culture that was previously unfamiliar to them. They may find that they agree with certain philosophical ideals or that some aspects of religious culture are not as unfamiliar as they originally thought. For example, a student who initially thought of Islam as a strange and foreign religion might appreciate knowing that it originated from the same text as the Christian religion – the Old Testament. Finding similarities like this makes students more comfortable with foreign beliefs because they realize that different cultures are not as disconnected as they previously thought. Students may also come to appreciate certain philosophical ideals, artwork, music, literature, or customs that were either created or inspired by non-Christian religious practices.

Understanding the unjust treatment of minorities is another topic that is critical to becoming an ethical citizen, and a liberal education provides students with various courses that view racial discrimination from different social perspectives. Cultural diversity classes allow

students to grasp the entirety of historical tragedies, such as slavery and the holocaust, by dissecting the occurrences at different levels. Students learn the history, origins, and truths of racially motivated abuses by investigating personal narratives as well as historical documents and biographies. This allows students to make an emotional connection with the material they are learning which, in turn, makes the information breathtakingly real. Along with historical instances of racism, students also discuss present-day racial injustices. Knowledge of current racial abuses is crucial because social problems need to be identified and fully comprehended before they can be repaired. Students who choose to act on their knowledge of the unjust treatment of minorities make reputable citizens because they seek to improve their communities, and the world, by seeking racial equality.

Valuable citizens appreciate cultural diversity because they are able to disregard the malignant, socially-constructed racial hierarchy that places value on stereotypical assumptions rather than personal conduct and character. A liberal education teaches students to become respectable citizens by teaching them to welcome and respect cultural differences rather than fear or avoid them. Students are encouraged to enlighten themselves with knowledge that can only be obtained through multicultural studies and interactions, and they utilize this knowledge by inspiring others to become socially sensible. Culturally conscious citizens realize that offering respect to other cultures and embracing racial tolerance allows people of the world to respect and embrace each other – this is not only socially beneficial, but beautiful.