

*General Education with a Purpose:
Theme-Based Approaches for Academic Literacy in English*

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Abstract

While internationalizing education is important for preparing students for the employment opportunities that globalization has brought to Thailand, it is also about instilling cross-cultural values in a globalized world such as humanism and cosmopolitanism. Many international programs are geared more to the former goal of internationalization rather than to the latter, resulting in more emphasis on major and specialization courses, which this author argues is contradictory to the goals of a “general” education. The author of this paper and presentation calls describes the ongoing debate at his college about the future of the General Education program and argues for the development of academic literacy through exploration of themes that are not tailored to industry, but instead emphasize critical thinking and humanism that is crucial to the twenty-first century.

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“I think we really should feel ashamed of being branded a corrupt nation... The worst problem of the nation is people of the same nation cheating one another... This has been highly embarrassing for many years” (Privy Council President, Prem Tinsulanonda cited in Nanuam, Mar. 13, 2016).

Introduction and Context

This conference paper and presentation describes an ongoing debate happening at my university about the future of our liberal arts education. It is an international college that offers a curriculum program modeled largely on liberal arts programs pioneered in the United States. The thinking behind this is that students enter their majors after first completing a significant number of courses in General Education (GE) designed to introduce them to an array of experiences across the disciplines, and thereby equip them with foundations for critical thinking and knowledge transferability across learning and life. The mission statement published on the website boasts of an “international liberal arts education and selected professional fields in order to prepare global citizens for the 21st century and transforming knowledge for the benefit of society through sustainability” (Mahidol University International College, 2016). These kinds of knowledges and values would seem of particular importance in a time and in a country that is struggling to develop both economically and socially because of reasons reflected in the opening quotation to this paper from Privy Council President, Prem Tinsulanonda, the highest ranking member of the Royal Palace, the most respected and revered institution in Thailand. However, there is a movement now to significantly cut the GE program to bolster the majors, which for many is a highly concerning development.

Students at this college typically come from the privileged families of Bangkok, and this is significant as Thailand is a highly unequal society and moreover is a country at a political cross-roads, currently under military rule, with political factions marked starkly along class lines. As admittedly reductionist this characterization is, the political complexities are beyond the scope of this paper, but it is nevertheless important for contextualizing this paper. An international education (as opposed to a local “Thai” education) is a mark of sophistication as well as class in Thai society, and an international program like that at our college is not as focused on attracting international students as it is on alluring middle and upper class Thai families (Lavankura, 2013; Lao, 2015).

Since a new administrative team took over, the liberal arts focus has come under scrutiny. People in the more vocational major programs and by far the largest and most popular programs, namely *Business Administration* and *Tourism and Hospitality Management*, have voiced resentment of the liberal arts focus, seen by some to take undue focus away from the major programs and to over-emphasize Humanities subjects that do not clearly contribute to the pursuit of employability. This sentiment was expressed in one comment from one individual in the executive team: “If we ever had a liberal arts soul, we've long sold it for more registration fees to the college,” alluding to the aggressive marketing and successful recruitment of students to the vocational programs as well as the competitive salaries offered to faculty at the college. All of this said, the debate introduced here is not a new one, but I argue that it is becoming a very salient one in developing areas like Thailand where employability

and economic interests are winning out against the more humanistic goals of education.

Aims of Education

The debate over the aims of education presented here is framed primarily according to two different points of view. On one hand, an *international* education is aimed at helping students take advantage of the economic opportunities brought to Thailand by processes of globalization (Lavankura, 2013). Burke (2014) describes how organizations must respond to shifts in the external environment, compelling “senior executives and their constituents to consider what to change about their organization to meet the new challenges and to survive as an organization” (p. 168). Globalization has required businesses to internationalize in order to remain competitive, and so many students come to our college specifically to boost their employability in the international job market. The point here is that international education is thought of through an economic framework, and much research reflects this by describing education in terms of *investment* and *returns* in employment and income (see Moenjak and Worswick, 2003; Hawley, 2003; Meer, 2007; Sukboonyasatit, et al., 2011). On the other hand, an *international* education is thought to instill in students values and worldviews such as cosmopolitanism and humanism that are foundational to living in a globalized world (Seritanondh, 2013; Tran and Nguyen, 2015). Many see education as a moral enterprise and that in fact, most education systems as they were developed in the 19th and 20th centuries were outgrowths of religious institutions that saw expansion of character and consciousness as the primary aim (see Green, 2013; Waree, 2016).

Dewey was arguing in 1916 for a generalized education that “stimulates one to take more consequences (connections) into account” (p. 109). The aim of an education, according to Dewey, was to identify the intersections of different knowledges; in other words, knowledge is not restricted to specific disciplines but instead it the one who can make the connections between knowledges is one we can call educated. Cremin (1961) described the unfortunately named “life adjustment movement” (p. 333) in post-WWII United States that emphasized specific and employable skills to meet the workforce demand of the post-war boom. What curriculum-designers behind this movement failed to recognize was industry’s eventual demand for problem-solving and critical thinking manpower. Milton Friedman (2002), considered by many the grandfather of free market economics (Klein, 2007) and harsh critic of government spending, says in a section entitled “General Education for Citizenship” that government subsidization of specialist programs “cannot be justified on the same grounds as elementary schools or, at a higher level, liberal arts colleges” (p. 88). People in a democracy, Friedman says, must have access to a general education of math and literacy in order to participate fully in society. Later, Hirsch (2007) bemoans the poor instruction of basic literacy as reading, she argues, is key to being an informed citizen in a democracy. Reading must be exercised in broad areas of knowledge, and “the only thing that transforms reading skill and critical thinking skill into general all-purpose abilities is a person’s possession of general, all-purpose knowledge” (p. 12). Finally, in a report by Hart Research Associates (2009), they cite that 78% of American colleges and universities “say that they have a common set of intended learning outcomes for all of their undergraduate students” and their administrators say that “general education has increased as a priority” (p. 1).

Not unlike the post-war economic boom seen in much of the West, I argue that the rapid economic development in countries like Thailand as a result of accelerated globalization has seduced curriculum-reformers to retrench to the disciplines and specializations that are in high demand and are economically attractive. I also argue that this narrowing focus of education is short-sighted as “global citizens of the 21st century” will need to be problem-solvers like never before. The breakdown of democracy in Thailand and widespread corruption in Thai business and politics are indicative of a citizenry that is struggling to adopt the humanistic values that an international education is well-equipped to provide, and instead is lured more by the economic and self-interested opportunities that an international education is also well-equipped to facilitate.

Perceptions of Other Stakeholders

In this section, I will describe my conversations with two colleagues who are also engaged in the debate over the proposed changes to the GE curriculum at the college. The first participant (Participant #1) is a teacher of Spanish. *Foreign Languages* currently makes up 8 credits (2 courses) of the GE program, and these will be cut under the new proposal, categorizing all language courses as free electives. The second participant (Participant #2) is a teacher of *Philosophy, Music Appreciation, and Ethics*. Under the new proposal, the number of required credits in this program will be reduced to 8 credits (2 courses) from 12 (3 courses). Both participants were purposefully selected because of their direct stake in this change. I met with them individually at their offices for approximately 30 minutes. They were asked three open-ended questions to allow for a more conversational and free-flowing interview.

The three questions are the following:

1. According to your understanding, what is precipitating the move to change GE?
2. In your view, is a so-called *liberal arts* education still relevant?
3. How do you envision the curriculum with respects to the role of GE?

Both participants were informed that the data collection was for a conference presentation and paper and that they would remain anonymous.

What is often lost in these debates are the voices of students. In my academic writing class, I employ a theme-based approach to instruction where we study a particular area to inform the topics that we read and write about for assignments. The theme for this edition of the course was *Education*. As part of the students' participation requirements, they were asked to respond to a weekly online blog about the readings and discussions in class. On this particular week, we read a chapter from the book *Outliers* by Malcolm Gladwell (2009) called the *10,000-hour rule* that popularized the apparent phenomenon that says it takes 10,000 hours of dedication, practice, and obsession to become elite at a particular skill. On the blog, I asked the students if this phenomenon challenges the way we think about general education. It is important to note that the students did not know about the internal politics and proposals that are the subject of this paper. Students were informed that some of their comments may be used as part of my own studies, and if they did not want to participate, they could e-mail their responses to me privately instead. Only public postings on the blog would be considered for this paper (see the blog at <http://muicadvancedenglish.blogspot.com/2016/02/journal-blog-6-10000-hour->

rule.html). However, firstly I shall share the perspectives from Participant 1 and Participant 2.

Perspectives From Participant #1

He expressed frustration that there had been little explanation for why GE had to change. According to him, it does not appear that there are any external pressures like from the university or from the Ministry of Education (as had been previously argued by the executive team some months prior). When I probed him further for a more direct answer for why GE had to change, he simply shrugged his shoulders. With regards to the second question, he said:

I think the liberal arts are very important. The college keeps talking about 21st century skills, but it's like they know what skills will be needed in ten or twenty years. They don't. But we do know that art and culture and philosophy have been important for centuries, and I think that learning more languages is a 21st century skill.

For the third question, again he had trouble answering, but he did express worry: *“It doesn't look good, and the maddening thing is that good reasoning or argument doesn't work. They don't answer the arguments.”* However, what he did expect is that some of the smaller foreign language programs such as French and German may disappear due to less demand and more competition if they are grouped in a free elective category. He continued: *“Chinese and Japanese are the vocational languages. English is the language of academia; Chinese and Japanese are the languages of business; and Spanish is the language of football [soccer].”*

He added that over the last decade, lecturers in all of the languages have worked very hard to make relationships with overseas institutions and businesses to strike agreements to host our students for short-course study programs and internships abroad. Under the new proposal, enrollment in some of these programs will fall and he feared these special arrangements developed over many years would also fall apart.

Perspectives From Participant #2

“They have no idea what they're doing,” cried Participant #2 in response to the first questions. *“I can't believe how thoughtless and cavalier they are with all of this GE stuff. They really haven't thought about this through very carefully.”* Participant #2 was more focused on the administrative or structural changes that would, in his view, need to happen to make this drastic change in the curriculum work. He continued:

I don't know if programs will be maintained? Will divisions keep their current shape? Will the college install a GE division? If this is the case, what will be its structure? These questions seem urgent, particularly if one looks at the recent proposal for cross-divisional GE groupings under broader Humanities and Social Sciences umbrellas.

Here he is alluding to a rumor or leak that there is a plan to have a General Education Center. In other words, GE courses would be run by a centralized division and would not be the charge of different disciplines.

When I asked him if he believes that a liberal arts education is still relevant, he said:

"Yes. Maybe more. You know that most of our students are doing what their parents want them to do. Most of them will go on to work in their family business and university is just a step to doing that, so while they're here they should learn to open their minds and see something outside of their world."

Again, here Participant #2 is alluding to the privileged lives of most of our students. *International Business* is the largest program at the college (accounting for 51% of total enrollment), and the majority of those students have family businesses that they are expecting to inherit and run.

Perspectives from Students

Here I want to re-iterate that students were free to express themselves honestly and openly without power-over pressures from the teacher. While it is likely that my biases for GE are clear, this blog post happened on Week 8 of the course, so by that time a level of trust and safety was established in the class to share opinions and arguments freely without fear or judgment. The only direction leading to these responses was the reading from Gladwell and my lead-up and instructions on the post, which in part reads: *"What do you think about this 10,000-hour rule argument? Does it challenge the way you think about how an education should be designed?"* Following are excerpts from four student responses, who will heretofore be referred to as Student #1, Student #2, Student #3, and Student #4.

Student #1.

Of course, it is ideal that we excel at the things we do, but perhaps, just perhaps, not everyone was meant to become a 'genius'. In my view, sometimes it is better to have a spectrum of knowledge about the world we live in rather than dwelling into one specific focus (and in the process undermine other aspects?)...Education to me has always meant a general approach to learning. Through general education, I can discover and learn topics in different areas other than my major course of study. I feel that this gives me a much wholer view of the world, and has got to be more interesting than just learning a specific area of knowledge.

Student #2.

Primarily, while reading Gladwell's argument, I leaned towards his opinion as it also included the luck that goes along with the hard-work. Upon further reflection though, I would say the Liberal Arts approach towards education is still what I would promote. While the 10,000 Hour rule can work miracles when it comes to polishing up a skill, it is very narrow and offers a "limited specialisation", i.e specialised skills in a single area. This might be more tempting for those of us with an intense obsession towards a field but I believe that a whole range of abilities are required in order to be successful, and general education offers vital tools for this.

Student #3.

Granted it takes 10,000 hours to master a skill, to truly become an expert at something, I don't think it is the education system's role to provide those hours. There is a spectrum or career paths out there, some that require vigorous training (athletes, musicians), and others that demand transferrable skills and holistic skill sets (researchers, teachers, etc). I personally believe that education systems should generally serve the purpose of allowing people to explore their interests, figure out strengths and weaknesses, and promote critical thinking. This means, it also allows people to figure out the one thing they are willing to spend 10,000 hours on. Maxwell [sic] makes a strong argument in showing us that hard work is the key to true mastery, but he also argues that institutions should work better to provide opportunities. This is true, education systems ideally should be able to provide equal opportunity to all citizens, but practically that is not possible.

Student 4.

I choose to promote the Liberal arts (GE) approach based on my own individual circumstances. Truthfully, I'd like to devote my 10,000 hours in a lab, but it's simply not possible. Who would fund it? Which university would support it? and would I even be able to come across that possibility? I'm not a risk taker, so I'm going to keep my choices open. GE allows its students to do just that.

Discussion

In this section, I will highlight some key observations from the data collection. I will also work to identify overlapping ideas expressed in the comments made, and also see where they may diverge. One clear observation to make is that the views expressed in the data collection are very one-sided in favor of liberal arts and general education, and for Participant #1 and Participant #2, against changes in GE. The reasons for this one-sidedness will be considered later in the *Synthesis* section of this paper, but first of all, I shall discuss the convergent themes in the data collection.

Convergent themes

The most striking parallel between Participant #1 and Participant #2 is the general confusion about why this change is needed. They both express frustration about the lack of communication. According to the participants, they do not necessarily believe that there is not a clear or complete plan, but in fact they think information is being withheld or only being released one phase at a time in order to control the change and stifle dissent. Participant #2 was particularly conspiratorial about the future of the division. Kotter and Cohen (2002) say that: "Trust is often missing in senior management teams, although top managers are loath to admit this in public... People will think of themselves or of their subgroups first and be protective and suspicious" (p. 50). Due to the lack of communication or clear rationale for the GE reform, the comments of Participant #1 and #2 are reflective of this kind of suspicion. Protectiveness is also clear as they feel threatened and forced to defend their programs.

More than that, it is a challenge to their identity as scholars and practitioners. The downgrading of liberal arts and the elevating of the vocational majors is also a value judgement on the type of knowledge in which they have invested their careers and personhood. Participant #1's touch-in-cheek comment that *Spanish is the language of football* is a sarcastic spat at the fact that soccer is hugely popular among Thai people, and since Spain won the World Cup in 2010 and teams like Barcelona and Real Madrid have risen over recent years in the Thai consciousness, interest in the Spanish language program has spiked (and not because Spanish is the third-largest language group in the world after English and Mandarin). Chinese and Japanese, on the other hand, are the vocational languages, and as Participant #2 said, many of the Thai family businesses have Chinese and Japanese connections, and therefore, the Chinese and Japanese language classes are mostly populated by business students.

The comments of the students reflect a highly sophisticated awareness and appreciation for GE. Even though one student said she would like to devote all of her time to the lab, she wants to keep her options open and GE allows students to do just that. This idea of exploration was a common theme among the students, which is reflected in comments like "*discover and learn topics in different areas*" (Student #1) and "*education systems should generally serve the purpose of allowing people to explore their interests*" (Student #3). Student #2 emphasized that knowing different skills other than one specialization is "*required in order to be successful.*" While all three students acknowledged the examples cited in Gladwell's description of the 10-000 hour rule, they also noted those examples as remarkable exceptions that do not refute the goals and benefits of a liberal arts education.

Divergent Themes

Between Participant #1 and Participant #2, there are two differences to highlight. The first difference is one of focus. Participant #1 was more concerned about his program and the survival of the less popular languages (French and German). Under the new proposal, he could see those programs fading away. There was a sense that the faculty of the *Foreign Languages* program had built something, and this reform would destroy it. For Participant #2, he did not directly mention survival of the program, although it was implied by his concern for the structural make-up of the university in general. He was more trying to anticipate the true motivations and goals of the administrative team, and so for him there were too many unanswered questions, which goes back to the issue of trust discussed in the previous section.

The second difference is more generally an observation of tone and attitude. Burke (2014) says that "with resistance to change is not necessarily a bad thing. Apathy is worse. At least with resistance, there is energy, and the person cares about something" (p. 111). It is not my intention to characterize Participant #1 as apathetic and uncaring. He certainly does care. However, there was a sense of powerlessness and fatalism when he said that "*good reasoning or argument doesn't work,*" suggesting that minds were already settled. Most of his comments expressed a kind of sadness and imminent loss, and maybe even fatigue over talking about it. On the other hand, Participant #2, while sharing many of Participant #1's fears, did not seem apparently worried as he did not think the reform could work under its current structure as proposed.

With regards to the students' comments, the obvious difference has to do with focus and knowledge. The students were not aware of the more political situations that Participant #1 and #2 were addressing. It is useful to note that the more salient bias for Participant #1 and #2 were more professional and organizational than educational. While they certainly have strong educational opinions about the value of a liberal arts education, their responses spoke to the viability of their jobs and the future of the division. For the students, their responses were more personal and about education because they were working to, in part, display what they had learned from the readings as well as share their own points of view for the class discussion.

The other notable difference was one of tone and sophistication. In my view, the students' responses show a mature thoughtfulness and level of care with regards to how they negotiate their own particular interests with the requirements of a general education. There is also an optimism in their comments as they show a clear interest in learning other subjects and a wariness of being too focused on one specialization. This seems to me in stark contrast to the views expressed by Participant #1 and #2 who express sadness, ambivalence, frustration, and distrust. Again, the different biases mentioned informs this difference in tone; however, I believe if the students had a louder voice in this debate in the organization, it would potentially raise the level of discourse beyond politics and conflicts of interest to more idealistic educational goals.

Synthesis

The internationalization of education programs and institutions in Thailand, according to Lavankura (2013), was due to external and domestic forces. She says that "demands for market liberalization" are in part why Thailand needed to become more international (p. 664). She goes on to say that the Thai government promoted the internationalization of education in pursuit of "economic rather than political or social development, and it perceived higher education as contributing solely to economic development" (p. 665). This focus is echoed in commentary by Carter (2015): "Administrators in Thailand have a tendency to focus on maximizing profitability with short-term goals" (p. 36). In fact, economic development and wealth generation would seem to be natural goals for a developing country like Thailand that is working to gain prominence and legitimacy in the world, and the development of higher education has been a strategy for achieving such goals (Lao, 2015). While it is beyond the scope of this paper, it is worthwhile to note that internationalization in Thailand has generally meant westernization (Ferguson, 2011; Green, 2013) as a cultural marker of civilization, and economic development has over-shadowed social development in pursuit of this goal.

The interview data expressed by Participant #1 and Participant #2 represents an ongoing exasperation with this emphasis on economics and market demand in contrast to broader educational aims once stated by Thailand's Ministry of Education in 2002 explained here in Waree (2016):

The ultimate aims of education are to transform Thai citizens into perfect human beings, having good health, wholesome minds, intelligence, knowledge, morality, good behavior and cultural life. (p. 124)

While I do not believe anyone is minimizing the importance of employability, but there is deepening concern about the ever-narrowing myopia on vocational ends. There is a call here for balance as it is not an either/or proposition. Green (2013) calls for emphasis on *not only* as the goal of a liberal arts education. He says that education is about teaching “one to think and learn, but also to see things as a whole, to enhance wisdom and faith... *Not only* is the emphasis on strong, transferrable intellectual skills, but also on developing a sense of community and social responsibility” (p. 373). In the end, the interview data expresses a yearning to not only sell employability and support corporate interests, but also to give students a more complete educational experience that explores a variety of disciplines.

Before moving on to the conclusion, I shall address the weaknesses in this data collection, which renders this synthesis incomplete in some important ways. As mentioned earlier, this data collection has produced one-sided results. The biases of Participant #1 and #2 are clear, and they are both colleagues of mine, so the discussions represented in this paper are mere extensions of much longer and often more heated conversations about the role of Humanities and our place in the curriculum and college. I am not an unbiased researcher. In the critical theory tradition, the researcher is not only an observer but also a participant in the research and makes his or her positionality central to the claims about the phenomenon (Ponterotto, 2005). In this case, I share in my colleagues’ dismay about the proposed changes to GE, for both political and philosophical reasons. It is also reasonable to critique the responses from my students as it is possible that their posts are shaped at least in part by their teacher’s bias. I have also alluded to the small sample of students represented in this field study, and a larger one would surely include provocative arguments against GE and a liberal arts education for students who are driven towards clear professional goals.

Conclusion

“My predictions are probably as good as yours. What is clear in hindsight is that globalisation, consumerism, extravagance, dishonesty and immoderation have led to management failures in both government and business” (Former Prime Minister of Thailand, Anand Panyarachun, cited in Panyarachun, Mar. 24, 2016).

This remark from former PM Anand Panyarachun was in response to the question of what the “new normal” will be for Thailand, long considered by many as the one reliable democracy in Southeast Asia. While globalization has brought enormous wealth and opportunity to Thailand, and is the reason behind the internationalization of education in general, it has also bred extraordinary levels of corruption and dishonesty as reflected in the opening remarks cited in this paper by Privy Council President, Prem Tinsulanonda. It has also intensified economic inequality and class strife that led to intractable protests and the eventual military take-over. Now in the country, there is a sense of pensive reflection about where we have come from and where we are going. However, the problem of practice outlined in this field study highlights an important university organization that continues to, in the words of our own Assistant Dean, “sell its liberal arts soul,” while under-selling the other dimension of an international education, the promotion of cosmopolitan and humanistic values that have been central to the GE program to date.

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