The Role of Education in Taking Care of the World: The Value of the Liberal Arts and Humanities[1]

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History has come to a stage when the moral man, the complete man, is more and more giving way, almost without knowing it, to make room for the ...commercial man, the man of limited purpose. This process, aided by the wonderful progress in science, is assuming gigantic proportion and power, causing the upset of man's moral balance, obscuring his human side under the shadow of soul-less organization.
Rabindranath Tagore, Natioanlism 1917, cited in Martha Nussbaum, 2010

.....for the true humanist, neither the verities of the scientist nor the truth of the philosopher nor the beauty of the artist can be absolutes.
Hannah Arendt, "Crisis in culture" in between Past and Present

'This earth and its vegetation are yours. But they should be protected not only for your benefit but also for the benefit of future generations.'
—Mahinda Chinthana

1. Introduction

In the post-war era of Sri Lanka, the desire for rapid economic growth and 'development' has resulted in a strong focus on the discourse of the knowledge economy. Making Sri Lanka the miracle of Asia by doubling its per capita income in half a decade is now a shared vision in our society, and one of the main means to this end is said to be the development of a knowledge economy via, among other things, a rapid increase of student intake to universities.

The Sri Lankan discourse on 'education for economic growth' is derived from a contemporary global discourse within which knowledge is taken to be the engine of growth in the current era. It is believed that the knowledge economy will propel us along the path of 'development'. Naturally, education is taken to be the means of developing a knowledge economy. The university is expected to play a major role in a global system that is increasingly based on information and its speedy exchange worldwide.

The prevailing discourse on the knowledge economy and 'development' in Sri Lanka requires us to address issues such as the specific characteristics of 'development' and how they would affect the well-being of different segments of the populace, how the prevailing avenues of income generation in the country would fit into the idea of a global knowledge economy, to what extent our universities are equipped to offer opportunities for students to become innovative so that they can contribute to a knowledge economy, and what measures should be taken to retain innovative knowledge workers within the local economy.

The object of this essay is to explore the consequences of tying education to economic growth in the manner proposed by the knowledge economy discourse that is prevalent today. Specifically, it focuses on the possible ramifications that adopting a policy of education for economic growth will have on the future of arts and humanities education and its impact on the human society. This study will trace the place of arts education in Sri Lanka, and will delineate how the perceived non-innovativeness of the liberal arts education is now being questioned and how such an education is once again being considered valuable by the business sector itself.

This paper also argues that preserving arts and humanities education is valuable to the nation for several reasons. Firstly, it helps develop capacities of citizens which are central to the sustenance of democracy, which in turn maintains the stability of our society, especially given its diverse character. Secondly, the university was traditionally the place set apart for the study of things which are central to human existence. There is a need to preserve a space for basic research focused on arts and sciences, the value of which cannot be measured by mere relevance to contemporary needs. Finally, education, as opposed to professional or vocational training, is how civilisations traditionally introduced the world to the young in a manner that would preserve both the world and the civilisation.

In the following section of the paper, a brief discussion of the status of arts education in Sri Lanka is undertaken as a prelude to an examination of issues that are common to the status of liberal arts education in general.

2. Arts Education in Sri Lanka

The system of education in Sri Lanka, as we know it today, originated in colonial times. The British imposed on us a liberal arts model of sorts. Under this system, students had a general education

in arts and sciences at the primary and secondary levels and specialisation into streams came at the end of this, what was then considered basic education. Often, the final stage of this general education was conducted at the university, and the faculties of Arts and Humanities in the State universities in Sri Lanka have, until now, followed a rudimentary form, the same liberal arts model originally introduced by the British.

In Sri Lanka, arts and humanities education has come under scrutiny since the early 1970s where the perceived mismatch between education and employment was the guiding idea for reforms. These reforms have shifted the focus of education to a more practical, work-oriented one from a previously academically-focused discipline, to "learning" from the previously emphasised method of "teaching", as if learning without teaching can be properly called education. The generally-accepted objective of education is now the preparation of the young for the workplace.

The traditional idea of education based on a carefully-selected curriculum taught by teachers whose authority came from their expertise of subject matter has been sought to be replaced by training in skills aimed at helping the students to qualify for employment.

In the primary and secondary educational sector, the emphasis, in terms of policy, has shifted from the traditional "rote learning and didactic teacher-centred teaching, to student-based-learning" centred on activities and projects, where at the primary-level policy change in practice turned out to be one where "children learnt through play." At the secondary level, the traditional academic orientation has been simplified in curriculum reforms with a strong emphasis on learning English and Information Technology (IT) skills (de Mel, 2007a; de Mel, 2007b).

As Hannah Arendt argues, the pragmatic approach of substituting 'doing' for 'learning' is based on the assumption that "you can know and understand only what you have done yourself," the object of which is "not to teach knowledge, but to inculcate a skill" with the result that institutes for learning are transformed into vocational institutions" where making "the children acquire the normal prerequisites of a standard curriculum" is no longer sought. Given the liveliness of the child "The child's characteristic activity" was thought to lie in play, and "learning in the old sense, by forcing a child into an attitude of passivity which compelled him to give up his own playful initiative" is abandoned in favour of play. "The very thing that should prepare the child for the world of adults, the gradually acquired habit of work [study] and of not-playing, is done away with in favour of the autonomy of the world of childhood" (Arendt, 1968).

Producing an employable graduate

In the prevailing discourse on university education in Sri Lanka, for over two decades, the focal point has been reforms aimed at producing a graduate who could be employed by the private sector. Today, the employable graduate has assumed the form of a 'knowledge worker.'

The priority of higher education is now "to improve the employability of university graduates where the graduate unemployment rate is high among those who followed arts, humanities, general sciences, and external degree programmes." Therefore, education is urged to be geared to improve soft skills such as; the ability to work in teams, industriousness, entrepreneurship and good communication of the undergraduates," in addition to IT and English Language skills (The Island, 2010).

The arts and humanities are expected to make their education relevant, which in today's context is taken to be responding to the demands of the market.

Surprisingly, the view that lack of knowledge in information technology and competency in the use of English language is the reason why our Arts graduates do not find employment in the private sector retains currency despite its apparent lack of credibility given that education cannot be a substitute for entrepreneurship in generating employment.

3. The Global Scene: Liberal Arts under Attack

A similar shift has been taking place globally as well with regard to liberal arts education. With the focus of education shifting to the provision of training necessary initially for professions and then vocations, the demand for subjects outside arts and humanities has been steadily on the increase among parents and students[2].

With the advent of the knowledge economy, the market gives preferential treatment to types of knowledge that favour economic growth. As nations and corporations compete for profit in this difficult economic climate, investments in education are increasingly directed to science and technology programs, leading to cuts in the liberal arts and humanities (Nussbaum, 2009; Nussbaum 2010a; Nussbaum, 2010b; Faust, 2010).

The focus is on applied learning for the benefit of short-term national economic gain through training the young in skills considered more useful than arts and humanities subjects. The outcome has been that the liberal arts education is considered as useless, and it is being cut back at all levels of education.[3]

However, this neglect of liberal arts can be misguided even in judging them as useless in training the

young in skills necessary for a knowledge economy, as several studies which compare the impact of education in arts on the ability of students to become creative and innovative in the sciences and in professional education show.

The response: 'humanities teach innovativeness'

Edelstein (2010), disputes the idea that arts education is 'not innovative.' It has been argued that "training in humanities lends itself to developing innovativeness and originality" and that the similarities between the training one gets in sciences and arts are striking. It has been found that similar cognitive processes are at work in learning both humanities disciplines and their scientific counterparts. In humanities, students are required to practise innovative thinking earlier on in their studies, and will be exposed to these processes more often than in science or engineering training. The mental capacities developed in learning the humanities can help develop learning capacities in non-arts subjects, including professional activities. Training given in "the humanities play a determining role in producing not only the specialists in their own fields, but also the entrepreneurs, engineers, and designers".

Sociologist, Mary Godwyn, has "emphasised the commonalities between the goals of the liberal arts and of entrepreneurship" where she argues that "entrepreneurship is a tangible, practical manifestation of a liberal arts sensibility" (Godwyn cited in Edelstein, 2010). It has also been argued that "Innovation ... requires the attributes of the humanities found in right-brain thinking: creativity, artistry, intuition, symbology, fantasy, emotions." Another study found measurable gains for medical students who spend more time in the exercise of right sides of their brain by attending art classes (Edelstein, 2010).

The value of the liberal arts for employment

"Employers, the constituency that today's students want to please," "overwhelmingly endorse the kinds of capabilities —such as writing, analytical skill, and global knowledge—that a liberal education is supposed to provide," reports 'Liberal Education and America's Promise' a programme coming under the Association of American Colleges and Universities (2007).

In a survey carried out by the Association of American Colleges & Universities (AACU, 2010), 89 percent of the employers surveyed said, they wanted more emphasis on "the ability to effectively communicate orally and in writing," 81 percent asked for better "critical thinking and analytical reasoning skills" and 70 percent were looking for "the ability to innovate and be creative" all of which have been identified as skills imparted by a liberal arts education.

Leading business educators in the Unites States have recently emphasised that liberal arts education is a part of what keeps business culture healthy and dynamic. They have stressed "the importance of the humanities in developing the imagination, and the importance of critical thinking in producing a business culture" that has the ability to be critical itself. Nussabum (2010b) argues that "Economic interest....requires us to draw on the humanities and arts, to promote a climate of responsible and watchful stewardship and a culture of creative innovation".

Thomas Vargish, a professor of English who is also a visiting professor in the MIT Programme for Senior Executives, in presenting the case for the value of humanities in executive development argues that given that "the special province of the humanities" being "the study of *values* in their most basic and potent forms," "humanities offer unique and intelligible benefits to the practice of management." "Assigning liberal arts courses a practical, immediate" purpose " would undermine its real value" (Vargish, 1991). It is "the humanities that tell us how people deal with what they most deeply feel and believe in their most intense expressions- in their art and science, in their ethical choices and moral lives" (Vargish, 1991). While "courses in liberal arts can never pretend to produce better people" (Vargish,1991), they can guide people to reflect on in choosing not only between ethicality and utilitarianism but also from among several ethical choices when available. It is Vargish's conclusion that liberal arts are "essential to serious executive education" and that "in order to deliver their special benefits," they "must remain free from the constraint of predefined practical objectives" (Vargish, 1991).

In the context of the above views on liberal arts and humanities, it is pertinent to consider the claim that arts graduates in Sri Lanka do not have the skills that the private sector is looking for. Does the problem lie with the arts and humanities education per se or perhaps in the manner in which such education is carried out in Sri Lanka?

4. Liberal Arts: the Essential Value

Developing human capacities to sustain democracy

The main argument of this paper is that the value of liberal arts education lies in more substantive reasons than in its ability to develop skills that are relevant for innovativeness, entrepreneurship or even to making ethical decisions in management. In the following section, we begin an examination of these reasons, starting with what Martha Nussbaum (2009, 2010a, 2010b) calls developing human capacities that would sustain democracy in the modern world, a point that would be applicable to Sri Lanka as well.

According to Nussbaum (2010 b), the most significant contribution of an arts and humanities education is that, in today's world, it prepares citizens for the sustenance of democracies. Nussbaum argues that a humanities education essentially develops three main capacities in human beings which are central to keeping modern liberal democracies healthy: the capacity for critical examination of oneself and one's traditions, the capacity for seeing oneself as a citizen of a global community of humanity, and the capacity for narrative imagination and thereby the ability to see things from the perspective of others in a world comprised diversity. Neglecting the liberal arts under the dictates of the market economy is a move that endangers democracies around the world. "If this trend continues, all over the world, we will soon be producing generations of useful machines, rather than complete citizens" (Nussbaum, 2010 b) .

Nussabum's fear that our democracies will atrophy if we do not preserve a strong place for liberal arts and humanities education in our societies seems to be justified when we listen to her argument that our democracies, like ancient Athens, are—

> full of hasty and sloppy reasoning, and to the substitution of invective for real deliberation. With the decline in newspapers and the increasing influence of a talk-radio culture of sound bites, we need Socrates in our political culture more urgently than ever. Critical argument gives people a way of being responsible: when politicians bring simplistic rhetoric their way, they won't just accept it or reject it on the basis of an ideological commitment, they will investigate and argue, thinking for themselves, and learning to understand themselves. And when argument, and not just partisan feeling, takes the lead, people will also be able to interact with one another in a more reasonable way. Instead of seeing political disputes as occasions to score points for their own side, they will probe, investigate; they will learn where the other persons' argument shares common ground with their own; all this conduces to respect and understanding (Nussbaum, 2010 b).

University: a sphere of tranquillity in a sea of stimulation

While clearly sharing the concerns of Martha Nussbaum in the role of liberal arts education in fostering critical thinking and cultivating humanity, Harvard President Drew Gilpin Faust fears that when we define higher education's role primarily as an enabler of economic development and solutions to immediate social concerns, "we risk losing sight of broader questions, of the kinds of inquiry ....from which our profoundest understandings so often emerge." Focussing too narrowly on the present can come at the expense of the long view that looks to a past and future "that has always been higher learning's special concern" and, the ability to "imagine a world different from the one in which we live now" (Faust, 2010).

Faust argues that while "economic growth and scientific and technological advances" are goals of any university, these should not make up the entirety of the university's vision. In the realm of science, "universities have a distinctive obligation to nurture and fulfil the deep human desire to understand ourselves and the world we inhabit and inherit" (Faust, 2010.)

Nussbaum fears that education for economic growth would turn citizens into docile machines with "obtuse imaginations". Faust seems to agree with Nussbaum when she argues that running a university on an 'overly instrumental' model completely disregards its true capabilities and ignores the sphere of tranquillity, a higher education institution creates in a world that is otherwise bent on providing stimulation. Faust argues that making the university a training school of sorts undermines its role as an 'asker of fundamental questions' and instead leaves students to adopt the attitude toward the world which is primarily focused on fixing its most immediate problems. The university's primary task is letting students to develop their thinking, and it is clear that in her model this is more important than training them to solve urgent problems (Faust, 2010).

The essence of university: making meaning through interpretation

Faust draws our attention to an ability that is central to human understanding and which is "at the heart of the liberal arts and fundamental to the humanities—and indeed central to much of scientific thought," that is, "the capacity for interpretation, for making meaning and making sense out of the world around us." Education measured only as an instrument of economic growth neglects "the fact that we are all interpreters; it ignores that some things are not about "facts" but about understanding and meaning" (Faust, 2010).

Faust cites the example, that judges do not "decide cases simply by viewing facts objectively and reading fairly," "they have to choose, not on the basis of measurement, but of meaning." In the realm of economics, "In all fields we are tempted to over-apply our models, when our desire for certainty runs past our understanding." However, in situations like, in understanding the recent economic crisis, "markets, ...demand a certain level

of interpretation" and "economists themselves have come to recognise that humans do not necessarily act rationally—in terms of perceived and unambiguous advantage" (Faust, 2010).

According to Faust (2010), understanding that comes through interpretation,

> lies at the essence of a university. Meaning is about interpretation. It is about understanding the world and ourselves not only through invention and discovery, but also through the rigors of re-inventing, re-examining, reconsidering. .....Meaning is about remembering what we have forgotten, now in a new context; it is about hearing and seeing what is right in front of us that we could not before hear or see; it is about wisdom that must be stirred and awakened time and again, even in the wise.

Liberal arts and the ethical foundations of society

Developing one's abilities and talents through education without simultaneously developing a sense of ethical responsibility for the world can lead people to assume positions that are destructive to the world. The need to sustain liberal arts education gains significance worldwide because we are living in a time, when ethics are scarce in public life, from business to politics to sports.

As W. Salters Sterling, the former Academic Secretary of Trinity College, Dublin, argues, sustaining the ethical foundation of collective life assumes significance in the face of behaviour in all areas of professional life that undermine one's responsibility towards the world. Liberal arts and humanities help to create and sustain the ethical foundations a society needs, ethics understood as "the constant reflection on what constitutes right behaviour, right relationships and right understanding in perpetuity." An understanding of what ethics is, emerge out of constant reflection on the idea of the good and the right thing to do. For the pursuit of such knowledge, experience in a variety of disciplines is essential. Hence, "Any government worth its salt must be every bit as concerned with the humanities as with the technologies," given that it is a continual conversation not only among different disciplines and professions but also between university and society and the political classes, that lay the "ethical foundations that are essential to a commonwealth of prosperity and happiness" (Salters, 2010).

The issue of ethicality in collective life is relevant not only to the recent economic crisis, but also to the role that scientists play in advancing the scientific research and products while lacking a sense of responsibility towards the world in which they carry out their activities.

As Nussbaum (2010 a) points out, if the idea of making all areas of education relevant to economic growth succeeds, human purposes will be subordinated to scientific advances and technical progress. While one cannot object to a good scientific and technical education, especially as science and technology assumes an important place in economic growth and education for profit, it is important to note that even the humanistic aspects of the sciences and social sciences are being neglected in the rush for profit.

Without the imaginative and creative aspect and the aspect of rigorous critical thought which the liberal arts help cultivate, even the sciences and social sciences can be mere tools for advancing the market at the expense of the world and humanity. Putting ourselves in the place of the others, and thereby seeing things from different perspectives helps us to reflect upon how our desire to intervene in the world – our inventions, our commerce, the imposition of our theories, ideologies and plans, can affect the world itself.

The issue of scientific research not governed by a sense of ethicality is also raised in relation to the possible outcome of many new frontiers of scientific development such as cloning and genetic engineering (Canovan, 1998). Similarly, ignoring the biological impact of the potential health hazards generated by cellular phone technology [4] is an area which has drawn the attention of scientists and thinkers who are concerned about the negative impact of these newly-emerging technologies on the well-being of humans.

It was argued in the above section of the paper that developing a sense of ethical responsibility toward society is part of the substantive value of liberal arts and humanities education. In the following section of the paper we turn to Hannah Arendt to derive a broader understanding of education as the process of renewing civilisation, an understanding that encompasses what the arts and humanities essentially mean for the world.

The Role of Education in Taking Care of the World : the Arendtian View

In Arendt's view ("The Crisis in Education") education, as opposed to professional or vocational training, is how civilisations traditionally introduced the world to the young in a manner that would preserve both the world and civilisation. Education introduces the new ones to the world to prepare them for public life. This exposition involves a notion of the citizen as someone whose new voice is added to the public conversation. When proper education prevails, the new ones will show themselves within the

limits of 'worldliness,' the in-between, the plurality that comes into being whenever citizens in the public realm engage in discourse in the common world and act.

The world is renewed by the entry of new ones, without whose arrival, it will die a natural death. The new ones enter the world and seek to appear in action and speech and assert their unique individualities. In turn, change comes from their desire to enter into and intervene in the world. The 'function of the school is to teach children what the world is like and not to instruct them in the art of living' (Arendt, 1968).

In an Arendtian reading of the value of liberal arts and humanities education, the new can develop a unique character only in relation to the existing world which is the outcome of its past and traditions. The task of education is to teach the past in a manner that will enable the new to make something new out of the past, and in doing so, illuminate the present. This does not mean binding the young to tradition by teaching them the canon as if their character can be moulded according to the canon. Nor can the canon instruct the new how to live their lives properly.

It is those who are introduced to the world properly that have the potential of becoming citizens. To be capable of becoming a citizen is to know one's world, and understand that the world has a history and traditions that need to be renewed. The newness of the new can be preserved only by introducing the new to what the old, the very best of tradition. We can thus conserve the world, enabling the new ones to form themselves in the light of tradition so that tradition takes new forms and lives through them. Introducing them to the past and to tradition also gives the young ones a sense of their place in history related to the space in which they are located, or what we could call 'their world'. A young person can find one's own voice only in the light of the world presented to him in education.

What constitutes the world in terms of the discourses that we presently inhabit and how they developed in history and came to pass in the world, the conceptual world of ideas with independent voices resounding in it – both these need to be understood to be able to add one's voice as a new voice to the conversation in any meaningful way.

The education is to introduce the new ones through their past and tradition to the conversation found in one's common world so that the new ones will understand the plurality of perspectives through which the world presents itself to us. The common world we inhabit will go to ruin unless we preserve its plurality with the introduction of new voices into the conversation, and a 'citizen making' education is needed for such voices to take shape. This is what was traditionally meant by education, and it is the liberal arts and humanities that serve the purpose of such an education.

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Footnotes:

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[2] See, for example The Economist, 2010, February 25th, and Faust, 2010.

[3] See, for a discussion of concerns emanating from the academia with regard to the present status of liberal arts education, for example in, Reisz, Matthew, 'The core connection,' *The Times Higher Education*, 7 January 2010.

[4] see, *Bio-initiative Report*,http://www.bioinitiative.org/

Abraham Lincoln's letter to his son's Head Master

Respected Teacher,

My son will have to learn, I know, that all men are not just, all men are not true, but teach him also that for every scoundrel there is a hero; that for every selfish politician, there is a dedicated leader... Teach him that for every enemy there is a friend.

It will take time, I know, but teach him, if you can, that a dollar earned is far more valuable than five found...

Teach him to learn to lose...and also to enjoy winning.

Steer him away from envy, if you can.

Teach him the secret of quiet laughter. Let him learn early that the bullies are the easiest to lick...

Teach him, if you can, the wonder of books...but also give him quiet time to ponder over the eternal mystery of birds in the sky, bees in the sun, and flowers on a green hillside.

In school, teach him it is far more honourable to fail than to cheat...

Teach him to have faith in his own ideas, even if everyone tells him they are wrong...

Teach him to be gentle with gentle people, and tough with the tough.

Try to give my son the strength not to follow the crowd when everyone is getting on the bandwagon...

Teach him to listen to all men...but teach him also to filter all he hears on a screen of truth, and take only the good that comes through.

Teach him, if you can, how to laugh when he is sad...Teach him there is no shame in tears. Teach him to scoff at cynics and to beware of too much sweetness...

Teach him to sell his brawn and brain to the highest bidders, but never to put a price tag on his heart and soul.

Teach him to close his ears to a howling mob...and to stand and fight if he thinks he is right.

Treat him gently, but do not coddle him, because only the test of fire makes fine steel.

Let him have the courage to be impatient...let him have the patience to be brave. Teach him always to have sublime faith in himself, because then he will always have sublime faith in mankind.

This is a big order, but see what you can do...He is such a fine little fellow, my son!

http://www.citehr.com/48490-values-abraham-lincolns-letter-his-sons-teacher.html