

Does Liberal Education Liberate?

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Received: August 20, 2024

Revised: October 29, 2024

Accepted: November 20, 2024

Abstract

The paper is based on the Keynote Lecture entitled “Liberal Arts Liberates?”, delivered at the 1st International and 8th National Conference on “Liberal Arts in the Role of Cultural Capital”, organized by the Faculty of Liberal Arts, Mahidol University, in Bangkok on 6 June 2024. The interrogative aspect of the lecture’s title represents a call to my audience and reader to embark on a collective search for the answer to this rather elusive problem besetting especially higher education of today. Nevertheless, there are two points on which I remain unequivocal: first, that liberal education is a way of thinking and a way of life that transcends any institutional attachment; and second, that it is ubiquitous. Instead of being preoccupied with definitional argumentation, numerous interpretations and analyses provide diverse examples of educational phenomena in the broadest possible sense, drawn from intellectual and cultural developments in the West as well as my home country, Thailand, and also from my own extensive experiences. These are subsumed under broad categories, namely: faith in humanity; the non-utilitarian quest for knowledge; the Humboldtian ideal of “*Bildung*”; dialogic culture; the evergreen past; learning how to learn; education without borders; mobility; and the upholding of ethics as the ultimate goal of scholarly life. The logical interconnectedness among these diverse phenomena is also presented in the form of a diagram. The urgency to combat the commodification of higher education and the overemphasis on utility-driven research cannot be stressed too strongly. The paper concludes with an optimistic note that there is sufficient cultural capital to support such a noble endeavour.

Keywords

Liberal education, ubiquity, higher education, research, ethics

การศึกษาเบิกปัญญาจริงหรือ

เจตนา นาควัชระ

ศาสตราจารย์เกียรติคุณ คณะอักษรศาสตร์ มหาวิทยาลัยศิลปากร

บทคัดย่อ

บทความนี้เรียบเรียงจากบทปฐกถาภาษาอังกฤษ เรื่อง Liberal Arts Liberates? ที่อาจารย์เป็นไทยได้ว่า “การศึกษาเบิกปัญญาจริงหรือ” ซึ่งนำเสนอเป็นปฐกถานำเสนอในการประชุมวิชาการมนุษยศาสตร์และสังคมศาสตร์ ระดับชาติและนานาชาติ จัดโดยคณะศิลปศาสตร์ มหาวิทยาลัยมหิดล (6 มิถุนายน 2567) ซึ่งของบทความแห่งคำถามของผู้เขียน เพื่อให้ผู้ฟังและผู้อ่านร่วมกันแสวงหาคำตอบต่อปัญหาของอุดมศึกษาในปัจจุบัน ซึ่งเป็นปัญหาที่มีลักษณะลืมเหลือ อย่างไรก็ตาม ในเนื้อหาของบทความ ผู้เขียนมั่นใจว่า จะเสนอประเด็นหลัก 2 ประเด็น ประเด็นแรก การศึกษาเบิกปัญญาเป็นวิธีคิดและเป็นวิถีชีวิต มากกว่าการจัดองค์กรทางการศึกษา ประเด็นที่สอง การศึกษาเบิกปัญญาเกิดขึ้นได้ในทุกภาคประเทศ อนึ่ง ผู้เขียนมิได้มุ่งที่การอภิปรายประเด็นว่าด้วยนิยามของการศึกษาเบิกปัญญา แต่ได้วิเคราะห์และตีความด้วยของประภากลางที่มีอยู่ในความหมายที่กว้างที่สุด ซึ่งเรียนรู้ได้จากพัฒนาการของอุดมศึกษาทั่วโลกตั้งแต่วันตกลงในประเทศไทย รวมทั้งจากประสบการณ์ส่วนตัว และนำประภากลางดังกล่าวมาถกเถียงในหัวข้อกว้าง ๆ 9 หัวข้อ ได้แก่ ความเชื่อมั่นในมนุษยชาติ การแสวงหาความรู้โดยไม่มุ่งผลกระทบประโยชน์ อุดมคติของวิลเลียม ฟอน ยูนโอลท์ว่าด้วยการปลูกปัญญาและบุคลิกภาพ วัฒนธรรมแห่งทิวทัศน์ อดีตที่ไม่มีวันสูญเสีย การเรียนรู้ การศึกษาไร้พรมแดน พลวัตแห่งการศึกษา และความสำนึกรักในจิตยธรรมในฐานะจุดหมายปลายทางของกิจทางวิชาการ การเชื่อมโยงประเด็นเหล่านี้เข้าด้วยกันได้แสดงให้เป็นแผนภูมิเพื่อให้เห็นภาพรวมโดยชัดเจน

ผู้เขียนเห็นว่าขณะนี้มีความจำเป็นอย่างยิ่งที่จะต้องเร่งกระบวนการต่อสู้กับการ
ทำอุดมศึกษาให้กลายเป็นการผลิตและจำหน่ายสินค้า และการให้น้ำหนักมากก็น
พอดีในการสนับสนุนการวิจัยที่เน้นแต่ประโยชน์ใช้สอย ในส่วนท้ายของ
บทความ ผู้เขียนแสดงความหวังว่าทุนทางวัฒนธรรมน่าจะแข่งแกร่งพอที่จะเป็น
แรงหนุนในการต่อสู้อันสำคัญนี้

คำสำคัญ

การศึกษาเบิกปัญญา, ปรากฏการณ์ที่เกิดขึ้นได้ทุกแห่งหน,
อุดมศึกษา, การวิจัย, จริยธรรม

Precautionary remarks

This presentation may sound personal. It is intentionally so. An octogenarian has seen much, and if he tries to reflect well on his multifarious experiences, he should be able to form some general observations that should be of interest to his colleagues. That does not mean that he has stopped searching and researching, for otherwise he would become merely opinionated. To strike a balance between objective facts and subjective interpretations has always been my method. Naturally the readers will find that I make few references and quotes, while often relating phenomena that I have encountered in real life which are relevant to the theme of this paper. I assume that you are prepared to count on the veracity and reliability of my statements.

There are limitations in the geographical coverage of the data used in the present investigation. I know Europe and North America well, but barely my Asian neighbors. I soon have to move on to my home country, whereby it is assumed that the experiences from my own “native soil” can be conducive to broader generalization. Please give me a chance. When talking about “global” issues, it is important to draw upon the authority of experts with the backing of rigorous international research. To obviate excessive abstraction, concrete *case studies* are used from which general principles, valuable insights, and common understanding can be derived. Case studies do constitute the central part of this paper.

As for the title of the paper, I have deliberately refrained from giving an overt definition of the term “liberal education”. The readers will certainly be able to observe along the way what I mean, which should possess a certain degree of cohesion and unity. As to the question whether liberal education “liberates”, the readers will also be able to judge for themselves the position which I have taken. The question mark that accompanies the title is a clue to the open-ended enquiry that is associated with liberal education.

As for the methodologies of the present keynote paper, I adhere to my usual practice of not identifying my methods with particular schools of thought or specific authorities, but would rather be content with commonsensical and experience-based explanations. In other words, methodologies will emerge of their own accord as the reading progresses. I offer several case studies that should illustrate the nature and dynamism of liberal education, thereby substantiating my belief in its ubiquity. I use what may be called a “vertical” approach by recounting significant milestones in the West as well as in my own country, and at the same time adopt a “horizontal” approach in allowing Western and Thai experiences to enter into a “dialogue” whose implications point in the direction of the universality of liberal education.

The current situation: What the experts say

I had the good fortune of encountering a most recent assessment of the situation in a lecture delivered on 15 February 2024 entitled, “The Three Dilemmas of Higher Education. The 2024 Burton C. Clark Lecture”, by Professor Simon Marginson, Director of the Centre for Global Higher Education (CGHE), Oxford University. Although the lecture bears the name of the speaker, it is based on the findings of research in higher education at the global level conducted under several CGHE research projects. Marginson covers a very comprehensive ground, both geographically and substantively, and with admirable lucidity makes his points with conviction, forcefulness and perspicacity. The three dilemmas are: *first*, the failure of massification to bring about equality and equity.



Note. <https://podcasts.ox.ac.uk/series/centre-global-higher-education>

Second, the priority given to economic policy at the expense of “cultural formation through immersion in knowledge” (Marginson, 2024, p. 17). The *second* point is certainly a critique of the undermining of “liberal education”. And *third*, a relapse from an international spirit to chauvinism: the mere uttering of two names, “Trump” and “Brexit”, almost takes on the allure of dirty words! He gives credit where credit is due and pays tribute to the leading minds of the University of California system towards the end of the 20th century both as thinkers and reformers of higher education. Marginson draws valuable lessons from the experience of UC in a way that might baffle the pundits of the present-day corporate university. The major feature specific to higher education is “knowledge: ever a mystery, central to university organizations, shaping identity and behaviour, endemically incomplete, the driver of continuing diversity”. (Marginson, 2024, p. 9) Our higher education of today would certainly reject such notions as “mystery” and “incompleteness” as a facile admission of defeat. Marginson endorses the UC’s conception of “a collegial higher education world of predominantly bottom-up elements, flatness, ambiguity, looseness and disorder in work organization and governance”. (Marginson, 2024, p. 8). Today we have departed quite a long way from that kind of ideal “collegiality” and “bottom-up” mode of operation with our comprehensive systems of governance and evaluation. To allow the university to be run by a “community of scholars” like in the old days would bring chaos and leave the new breed of university CEOs in limbo. I was present at the Meeting of World University Presidents in Bangkok, July 19-22, 2006, and recall vividly how the Keynote Speaker, Lord Chris Patten, Chancellor of Oxford University, gave a warning that a new type of university was going to replace the traditional university, whereby most decisions would be made “top-down”. He did not make any evaluative judgement of the coming transformation. Perhaps it was not yet clear 20 years ago whether the change would be constructive or not.

Significant milestones: Western

The thinking of Professor Simon Marginson analyzed above has roots that go back more than 800 years. The imperfections of a university “system” that allows scholars a certain degree of freedom to pursue their quest for knowledge can be considered as a form of inherent dynamism favourable to “liberal” education. Most manuals of higher education in the Western world describe the flowering of the *“artes liberales”* in the Middle Ages, and how these were divided into two groups with specific subjects. Naturally these are pitched against *“artes mechanicae”*, which were a training in practical skills, like agriculture or architecture. In fact, there was a bias for the “liberal arts” which were devoted to the cultivation of the mind and intellect. But medieval specialists know well that at another level of training conducted by the various guilds, a strong vocational education emerged that could sustain society right up to the modern age. Germany is a case in point, for it could recover so fast economically and otherwise after the Second World War partly due to the strengths of vocational/technical education, later to be strengthened by the technical university. Germany also attained great excellence in dual education. When all is said and done, any educational system that emphasizes a “liberal” quest for knowledge cannot go wrong. The dynamism of the medieval university in Europe rested on this “liberal” philosophy, although it had to fight centuries-long battles with papal dogmas. Medieval Europe can be commended for its initial approach to higher education: the thirst for knowledge induced scholars (e.g., Oxford) and students (e.g., Bologna) to group themselves into universities. Cambridge broke away from Oxford in search of greater freedom. I shall illustrate the point about the “mobility” of medieval universities by an anecdote.



University of Toledo, Spain

Note. dreamstime.com ID 63761712@Antonio Riberio

A young man from Norfolk, England, by the name of Daniel of Morley, went to study at Oxford around 1160 (Willinsky, 2018). He then moved to Paris, known to be a very lively place (the student life described by the Italian scholar and novelist, Umberto Eco [1932-2016], in his novel *Baudolino* [2000], being a good testimony. There he had a chance to engage in Arab Studies (*Doctrina Arabum*), and it is a known fact that ancient Greek culture was transmitted to Europe by the Arabs. Daniel was told that the best place to study this subject was Toledo in Spain; so he traveled there and was extremely well taught, until his friends requested him to come back home. In Oxford, he wrote his treatise, *Philosophia* (around 1175), in which he extolled the virtues of Arab scholarship. He came back from Spain “bringing a precious multitude of books with me” (Willinsky, 2018, pp. 8-9), and the richness of a medieval library was also an asset that attracted students and scholars to an institution. The surviving libraries of medieval monasteries and universities bear concrete testimony to the admirable “cultural capital” of the West. The story of Daniel confirms my belief as an alumnus of a German university in the practice of

changing universities encouraged by German academia. The Bologna Agreement was also designed to facilitate cross-border student mobility. The medieval legacy is not to be belittled! It has taught us that the best academia is borderless and that one can learn much from cross-cultural and cross-national encounters.

The discovery of the ancient civilizations of Greece and Rome was instrumental in the intellectual and scholarly awakening of the Western world, and the study of “Classics”, known as *Litterae humaniores*, consisting of Greek and Latin literature, history and philosophy, emerged. Until today a degree in classics is still considered to be the best intellectual training any undergraduate can have, and the self-confidence gained thereby often propels the graduates to become also political leaders in the United Kingdom. The depth and breadth of thought-provoking content offered by the study of the classics remains timeless.

It was to be expected that inculcation of knowledge in the civilizations of Greece and Rome would experience a blossoming in the Renaissance. Scholars were adept in navigating a harmonious coexistence with the teachings of the church, although there occurred serious dissensions at times, and in this respect some of the monarchs of Europe are to be congratulated for their conciliatory stance, resulting in the granting of “royal charters” to institutions of higher learning to allow a certain measure of freedom of inquiry as far as this could be achieved. In some extreme cases, in Catholic countries, new institutions were created, the illustrious example being the “Collège de France”, founded by the King of France, Francis I, in 1530, which engaged in studying subjects that the existing universities did not address or chose not to address. The spirit of innovation characteristic of the Renaissance has been maintained over the centuries and still distinguishes that institution in terms of scholarly and scientific leadership today. The Collège de France does not grant degrees and all its courses are free; and with the advent of digital technology, it disseminates online knowledge and wisdom world-wide, offering sometimes lectures in English, the lingua franca of our contemporary society. (I must admit that I have benefited greatly from those lectures which do not only represent the latest in research but are geared

towards an extremely large public and eminently thought-provoking.) It can be assumed that the “liberating” spirit of its origin has kept it alive, (*Annuaire*, n.d.) The professors, visiting professors and invited speakers address issues of multifarious kinds, employing multifarious methods, that liberate you from intellectual insularity.



Collège de France

Note. <https://parissecret.com/paris-le-college-de-france-met-en-ligne-plus-de-10-000-cours-gratuits/>

It is amazing how the legacy of antiquity could be such a great source of inspiration for Western nations. It is even more surprising to observe the fortune of one book on the arts of Greece and Rome that could be so influential; I am thinking of “*The History of the Art of Antiquity*” (1764) by the German art historian, Johann Joachim Winckelmann (1717-1768). (The French Romantic writer, Stendhal [1783-1842], admired Winckelmann so much that he adopted his pen name “Stendhal” based on the birthplace of Winckelmann, “Stendal”.) But the Age of Reason or the Age of Enlightenment was rich in ideas that might even surpass the Renaissance and classicism. Let us think of the monumental undertaking known as the “*Encyclopédie*” (17 volumes between 1751 and 1772) which, as emphasized the short article in the dictionary, *Le Petit Robert* 2, in its introduction, represents “efforts of the human spirit of all kinds” (*Le Petit Robert* 2, 2004, p. 691), whereby scientific and intellectual achievements are transmitted along with arts and crafts, thus eliminating the old dichotomy between “*artes liberales*” and “*artes mechanicae*”. Knowledge was to be accessible to the people (naturally adequately equipped with literacy) and

become a “liberating” mechanism to combat ignorance and prejudices. It should also be noticed that this gigantic project is of educational nature, furthering “public” education that should encourage the informal mode of self-learning. There is an implicit trust in the human spirit (which will be discussed in the final part of the paper in connection with Immanuel Kant’s *What is Enlightenment?*) We can perhaps emulate the highly respected humanitarian movement of today known as “Doctors without Borders” (Médecins sans frontières) by saying that liberal education is a form of “education without borders”. (L’éducation sans frontières)

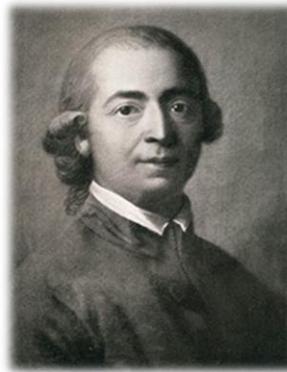
This project happened outside the universities, while these were still caught in the fight for greater “liberal” education, as exemplified in Immanuel Kant’s book, *The Conflict of the Faculties* (1798), in which he championed the Faculty of Philosophy, known then as the “lower” faculty, which remained the guardian of free expression, in other words, the protagonist of a “liberal” education, while the other “higher faculties”, namely theology, law and medicine, were ready to subject themselves to the authority of the church and/or the government (Kant, 1798). It would appear that the institutionalization and bureaucratization of higher education was (and is) always problematic and not supportive of the liberal pursuit of knowledge.



The highly disciplined philosopher, Immanuel Kant: The people of Königsberg set their clock according to his daily walk!)

Note. <https://mgonline.com/daily/detail/9640000044014>

The Enlightenment was also characterized by the spirit of cosmopolitanism that was favorable to new directions of intellectual enquiry. Egalitarian ideas and ideals that went into the American Constitution and the French Revolution also gave impetus to thinkers of the calibre of Johann Gottfried Herder (1744-1803) to abandon the old hierarchical thinking in order to embrace diverse peoples and cultures. Taking folk culture seriously was to yield fruits that enrich not only scholarly, and intellectual pursuits, but also artistic creativities. Herder's seminal work, *Ideas for the History of Mankind* (1784-1791), was inspirational and "liberating" in a positive way. Without Herder, there would have been no Bartók! It reaffirms the important idea that highly sophisticated works of art can be inspired by folk culture.



Johann Gottfried Herder

Note. https://www.journal-ethnologie.de/Aktuelle_Themen/Aktuelle_Themen_2004/Herder_und_die_Weltkulturen/index.html

The German romantics were to pursue further the pioneering spirit of Herder in concrete terms with their “criticism” of the arts of various nations. They were solid “classicists” who became medievalists and modern linguists. Their discoveries have had long-lasting effects on the intellectual life of the West. They discovered Dante, Shakespeare and the Spanish Golden Age, and their succinct evaluative criticisms were matched by their peerless translations. Even the English themselves acknowledged their debt in the understanding of Shakespeare to the criticism of August Wilhelm Schlegel (1797-1845), whose *Lectures on Dramatic Art and Literature* (1809-1811) were translated into many languages (Körner, 1929), the French version being particularly influential among the French Romantics. (Nagavajara, 1966) They were also distinguished theoreticians, particularly Friedrich Schlegel (1772-1829), and their theoretical thinking, for example on the aesthetics of incompleteness, can still be felt today! Their thirst for knowledge of distant climes took them as far as India, and August Wilhelm, who lived much longer than his younger brother Friedrich, laid a solid foundation in Sanskrit Studies and Indology (which had absolutely nothing to do

with colonial ambitions as severely censured by the postcolonialists!). (Paulin, 2016, pp. 415-520) All this represents a constructive effect of liberal education, for it gave to Europe the confidence that the great arts that rose from the European soil (for example, those of Dante and Shakespeare) could easily match the much-celebrated masterpieces of ancient Greece and Rome, while at the same time, it encouraged the belief in the human spirit that knows no nationality.



Mahanakhon Building, Bangkok

Note. [https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:MahaNakhon_by_kylehase_\(cropped\).jpg](https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:MahaNakhon_by_kylehase_(cropped).jpg)

On the educational front, the innovative thinking and reform of Wilhelm von Humboldt (1767-1835) arose in the turbulent period after the Revolution and during the Napoleonic Wars; he himself arrived in Paris two weeks after the storming of the Bastille and saw the carnage with his own eyes, which led him to realize that the fight against barbarism would have to be a long one, and that education would have to be instrumental in this process. With his own philosophical bent, his polyglotism, his first-hand experience of other countries and his acquaintance with the leading minds of Europe – either directly or through studying – he was determined to turn idealistic thinking into action. The friendship with the poet and philosopher, Friedrich Schiller (1756-1805), had a great impact on his thinking, especially the latter's ideal about “the aesthetic education of man” that combines aesthetics and ethics. (Nagavajara, n.d., p. 12) That we today speak of “art and culture” is unquestionably Humboldt's legacy. He knew that one has to start with self-cultivation at the individual level which can be brought into harmony with society. His concept of “*Bildung*” (cultivation) is unequivocal:



Wilhelm von Humboldt

Note. <https://www.dhm.de/lemo/biografie/wilhelm-von-humboldt.html>

“The ultimate task of our existence is to give the fullest possible content to the concept of humanity in our own person [...] through the impact of actions in our own life, (this task) can be implemented through the link established between ourselves as individuals and the world around us” (Nagavajara, n.d., p. 7).

As for the university, Humboldt emphasized the dual function of university professors in both teaching and research, for it is through research that the university can overcome antiquated knowledge and dogmas. The University of Berlin, established in 1810 and known today as Humboldt University, could recruit great thinkers and scholars, whose lectures were attended not only by students but also by interested people, including the Minister of Education named Wilhelm von Humboldt himself. When we speak of “research universities” today, we should know who fathered this important legacy (Nagavajara, n.d., p. 13). It was Humboldt who also propagated the idea of “learning how to learn”, that is to say, awakening a thirst for knowledge that encourages self and life-long learning, thereby creating a consciousness of one’s own potentials and methods. All this is “liberal education” in the best sense of the word.

It is quite clear that the Humboldtian university gives equal importance to both general and specialized education. American higher education has perhaps most seriously grappled with the Humboldtian legacy and come up with organizational, institutional and curricular arrangements with identifiable systems. Liberal arts colleges, born long before Humboldt’s times, have acquired a fair measure of confidence to “modernize”, while the large and mega universities have adapted well to the need for research. Humboldt accorded them more focus to pursue their noble aims, namely the pursuit of excellence in both teaching and research.



General Education at Tübingen University

Note. <https://www.tagblatt.de/Nachrichten/Das-Studium-Generale-beschaeftigt-sich-mit-Widerstand-in-diversen-Formen-369034.html>

It is to be noticed that German universities themselves absorbed Humboldt's liberal ideas without excessive formal, or structural reorganization. Naturally "Bildung" requires that a university education must be many-sided as well as specialized. The virtue of the *Studium generale* (general education) has always been recognized, but not institutionalized, nor made compulsory. "Bildung" is a continuous process of creating a liberal mind endowed with an inquisitiveness and buttressed by what I have called a "dialogic culture" (Nagavajara, 2016, p. 110). Members of the university learn by themselves to listen well to others and to engage in *dialogues*. The *Studium generale* might experience certain periods of flowering depending on the ability of the professors to inspire the students to think along, think further and think against. I am speaking of the golden age of the *Studium generale* in the latter part of the 20th century at my *alma mater*, Tübingen University, when two professors, one Professor of Greek and Rhetoric, Walter Jens (1923-2013), and the other Professor of Catholic Theology, Hans Küng (1928-2021), collaborated in putting Tübingen on the map as the bastion of liberal thinking. Küng countered openly some of the Vatican's strictures, and was stripped of his priesthood and

professorship in theology. Yet the University of Tübingen retained him as Professor of Ecumenical Theology and created a centre for this subject under his directorship. This is “academic freedom” that all universities should emulate. (This important ideal has spread far and wide, and is reflected in the motto of Stanford University, “Die Luft der Freiheit weht.”) He wrote *Christianity and the world religions: paths of dialogue with Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism* (1986) and became President of the Foundation for a Global Ethic in 1995. When I was invited to collaborate with the university in the project, “The World of Values”, from 2009-2013, I could witness how the students flocked into the biggest lecture hall at 8.00 p.m. to listen to guest speakers. On one occasion, a former President of the Republic of Germany gave a lecture to a full house, and afterwards entered into a heated debate with an African student on German foreign policy in Africa. I also had an opportunity to talk to a lady Nobel prize winner in literature who told me that she was always ready to accept an invitation from Tübingen, because “they recognized me when I was still nobody.” The *Studium generale*, without any formalization, remains strong today. Furthermore, distinguished scholars in the humanities and social sciences are happy to work at a technical university, for teaching students in the “hard” disciplines of STEM is a challenge that benefits their power of communication. Looking across the landscape of German higher education, one can see how “liberal” education in a broad sense has borne so many valuable fruits. One piece of useful information: several German universities of today have acceded to the demand by the students to incorporate a “civil clause” in their respective charters to the effect that no military research shall be conducted! Who follows whom in a university? A university, guided by the principle of liberal education, often listens to its students and becomes self-critical in a constructive way.



ADC Theatre, Cambridge

Note. [alamy.com/the-adc-theatre-in-cambridge-it-is-britains-oldest-university-playhouse-and-has-been-presenting-plays-on-this-site-since-1855-image329175459.html](https://www.alamy.com/the-adc-theatre-in-cambridge-it-is-britains-oldest-university-playhouse-and-has-been-presenting-plays-on-this-site-since-1855-image329175459.html)

The “informal” mode of learning, which at its best can engender the difficult art of learning how to learn, should be considered part an integral part of a “liberal education”, of university life. The British universities are exemplary in this regard. I saw for the first time in my life a performance of *Oedipus Rex* by Sophocles by the students of the Imperial College of Engineering, London University, while student theatre flourishes in a big way at Cambridge, where the students run their own theatre, the *Amateur Dramatic Club (ADC)*, which has gone to produce great amateur actors and directors who later successfully become professionals and internationally known. Some American campuses too are rich in student activities. At the University of California, Berkeley, student activities are extensively and intensively promoted, and a lively campus life characterizes the university, sometimes taking on political dimensions. This does not always happen everywhere in the

United States. I visited Harvard University in 1981 and had a long conversation with its leading comparatist. Before leaving, I expressed my interest in student theatre and received the answer that it did not exist. His comment was revelatory: “They don’t do anything. They just study.” And that coming from a professor!

Let us recall that Humboldt propagated the link between individual self-realization and the good of society. Venezuela has been a poor country – though not always as abject as now, but material poverty cannot stifle the awakening of the mind and spirit. A musician by the name of José Antonio Abreu (1939-2018) had ambitions other than musical and wanted to prove that music could be instrumental in rescuing children under destitute conditions to regain human dignity through the practice of classical music. Starting in 1975, with teaching sessions in local communities, the programme matured into the founding of symphony orchestras (and later, choirs), a nucleus of which presented itself to the world as the “Simón Bolívar Youth Orchestra of Venezuela” and won world-wide recognition because of its quality. The system (known as “El Sistema”) has in the meantime given impetus to similar programmes in many countries. In Venezuela itself there are now dozens of orchestras and over 700,000 students. El Sistema has gone beyond the ideal of “aesthetic education of man” that Humboldt adopted from Schiller. Education in music is liberating in this case because it contributes to the creation of world citizens through the uplifting experience of Western classical music. Let us listen to Abreu himself:



Sproul Plaza, UC Berkeley

Note. <https://pbs.twimg.com/media/C94uRUKUQAEloPK.jpg:large>

“No longer putting society at the service of art, and much less at the services of monopolies of the elite, but instead art at the service of society, at the service of the weakest, at the service of the children, at the service of the sick, at the service of the vulnerable, and at the service of all those who cry for vindication through the spirit of their human condition and the raising up of their dignity.”
(José Antonio Abreu’s TED Prize Wish)



Simon Bolivar Youth Orchestra of Venezuela

Note. <https://www.euroarts.com/tv-license/5621-dudamel-conducts-simon-bolivar-youth-orchestra-venezuela>

Significant Milestones: Thai

After that long excursion into such diverse arrays of experience with Western liberal education, I seek leave to return to my homeland of Thailand, once known as Siam. It is true that we have learned a great deal from various Western models, and in the domain of higher education in particular we have lapsed into a number of confusions as a result of our misunderstanding of the Western tradition, and worse still, of our ignorance of our own cultural roots. For example, there is confusion in equating the concept of “liberal education” with “liberal arts college”. Another weakness that has been besetting our education is an over-concern with institutional forms or structures, including governance, curricula, certification and regulatory patterns. Some “innovations” are directed by misunderstandings or even mistranslations, for example the concept of “moral sciences” which is originally borrowed from the French model of “sciences morales et politiques”, whereby the word “moral” in that context derives from the notion of “moeurs” (in French) or “mores” (in English) which is tantamount to customs or conventions. So, “moral sciences” are akin to the more modern notion of “social sciences”. Our pundits of educational innovation took these to mean “jurisprudence” (La-ongsri, et al, 2016, p. 78) probably mistaking it as being derived from the ancient Indic text, Dharmasatra, and started to innovate from there, thereby missing the mark. Some cheap imitations bore no fruit, like the creation of “the College of Arts and Sciences” after the American model at our oldest university, because the staff did not understand the concept and never worked together; so in the end, they separated into two separate faculties, namely Faculty of Arts and Faculty of Science. Each unit was a territory unto itself, for example, the French Department initiated its first-year students into French “civilization” together with a thorough knowledge of French Romanesque and Gothic architecture, while the students never learned anything about Thai classical architecture until their 4th year. My estimation of our present-day confusion and its effect on quality (the World University Rankings having all these years been extremely unkind to Thailand!) is that we do not know the Western system well enough and we do not know ourselves either.

The borrowing of the trappings of the “corporate university”, taken over from the West, has made things even worse. The commodification of higher education has become an oppressive force undermining all liberal initiatives here. (Nagavajara, 2014b, pp. 479-551)

One eminent Thai scholar writing in English for the *Journal of the Siam Society* in the early 20th century accidentally and ingeniously used the term “University in Stone” (Dhani, 1969, p. 34) to describe the “Stone Inscriptions of Wat Pho”, a monumental repository of traditional knowledge of the Thai people, which has since been registered by UNESCO as “Memory of the World”. Many people are inclined to take the word “university” in this context as a metaphor, and most histories of Thai higher education do not regard this phenomenon as the beginning of Thai higher education (Krueathong, n.d.). I am of the opinion that it was a kind of “open university” *avant la lettre*, for the public could have free access to it, provided that they were literate. Its creator, King Rama III (1788-1851), was a devout Buddhist who used his royal authority to combat the traditional practice of “hoarding knowledge” and firmly believed in the virtue of selfless giving of knowledge (*widyadana*). The range of standards and sophistication of the content of the inscriptions may vary, (which makes me think of the main lectures at German universities that have to cater to the various levels of learners), but it is certain that the masters of the various branches of knowledge who were asked by the king to transfer their treasure to the public domain must have given their very best, which befits the appellation of a “university” (*universitas litterarum*). I cannot judge the level of sophistication of other branches of knowledge, but in literature, the standard is extremely high indeed, giving examples of the best poetic masterpieces, lay and religious didactic works, and setting exceedingly difficult exercises in the form of poetic riddles. Rama III himself contributed a virtuosic poem that can be read forward and backward! (Traditional Thai literary study stresses more creative writing than poetics). The whole project can certainly be viewed as an education that liberates the people from ignorance. This is “Enlightenment” *à la thaïlandaise*.

Those engaged in university affairs, including self-anointed reformers of Thai higher education, more often than not, are blind to the true nature of traditional Thai education. Following is a typical stance: “Our educational system does not make people think. The entire educational system is that of rote memorization... (It) does not strive to cultivate critical thinking that encourages individual initiatives...” (La-ongsri, et al., 2016, p. 69) Well, those literary minds that went to Wat Pho to educate themselves by committing the best ever of Thai poetry to memory would possess a treasure trove of such magnitude that would enable them to think *instinctively* in poetic terms and become active as poets themselves. The same principle applies to Thai music, which does not rely on notations. The famous master of the ranad (xylophone), Bunyong Ketkhong (see also case study no. 5) had a repertoire of 20,000 tunes (according to the information given by the German theatre director, Gert Pfefferodt); so when he was performing, he could improvise instinctively and instantaneously such that each performance of the same work differed from each other. And it is not true either that those great masters did not think critically and would not teach their pupils to do likewise. If memory is a gift of nature bestowed on mankind, it would be foolish to think that rote memorization is the unavoidable consequence of the use of memory. Constructive use of memory is an indispensable component of all educational endeavour. Many Thai educators are an ignorant lot that do not know how to forge continuity with the past and easily become smug “importers of knowledge”. (I have elsewhere analyzed innumerable aspects of Thai traditional cultures that could benefit our present-day endeavours”.) (Nagavajara, 2004b, pp. 325-345)



The beginnings of the University of Moral and Political Sciences (1934)

Note. <https://pridi.or.th/th/content/2020/07/329>

The competitive world of today, governed by market mentality, often misuses evaluative mechanisms to construct a new hierarchical system that favours elitism, which then serves to promote a new type of marketability. The World University Rankings, operated by several business concerns, provide an excuse for highly ranked institutions to charge astronomical fees. Thai higher education was not born that way. The “democratic” spirit that informed Wat Pho was reflected in the thinking of the founder of our first university, King Rama VI, who expressed his determination to create a proper university (instead of a modernized Civil Service College), so that “it will be a *marketplace of knowledge* for the Thai nation and not a mere institution to support government service”. Beyond that, His Majesty was also thinking of university financing along the American land grant model: “The land to be granted by His Majesty will serve as the site of the university proper, with the rest generating income for the operation of the university. The arrangement will be in the form of a lease to perpetuity at the lowest possible rate” (Office of Art and Culture Management, 2021). The King, though an Oxonian, had no intention of creating an elitist institution, but was thinking rather of the free access model of the “University in Stone”. As for the property to generate income, he specified a lease, not a transfer of ownership.

Later legislation has altered all that, and the university is enjoying a grand time cooperating in long-term projects with rapacious business tycoons. The king, who was ruling as an “absolute monarch”, was paradoxically much more “liberal” than present-day university administrators. Let us face it: the idea of a “marketplace of knowledge” has its religious origin, the best “*dana*” (giving) being that of knowledge, thus harking back to the philosophy that underlined the creation of “the University in Stone”.

The leaders of the 1932 coup, who ushered in democracy had an educational mission in mind too. Since the intellectual mastermind of this group was French-trained, a new “University of Moral and Political Sciences” (later changed to “Thammasat University”) was created in 1934 to train a new cadre of professionals for the new democratic society. The idea of the “marketplace of knowledge” could have been taken over from the rationale elaborated by the leading thinkers around King Rama VI concerning the desirability of creating a university (very well documented and analyzed by Thanet Apornsawan in his paper “The Origin and challenge of the Liberal Arts in the Thai education system” of 2022), and the new creation gave the opportunity to many students who were already in employment and could not study full-time as regular students. Two more recent creations, Ramkhamhaeng (open admission, 1971) and Sukhothai Thammathirat (distance learning, 1978) built on the experience of Thammasat. Innumerable professionals and intellectuals of distinction were the product of this “open” system. It is not easy to explain how the second oldest university fulfilled the conception of the university of Rama VI and his advisers better than the oldest university. As with so many paradoxical phenomena associated with the history of Siam/Thailand, the thinkers and educators under absolute monarchy were sometimes more democratic and more liberal in spirit than their counterparts under a legally democratic polity, who vie with each other with “elitist” ambitions. One of Rama VI’s advisers gave a clear-cut recommendation concerning the entire educational system in a statement from the year 1919: “There is no need to create *devas*. If we elevate humanity as a whole, *devas* will emerge of their own

accord. Our verdict will be to choose the horizontal mode, that is to say, to espouse “national education” (Apornsawan, 2024, Section 2).



King Rama VI: An Oxonian who declared that the first Thai university should be “a marketplace of knowledge”

Note. <https://sutidate.wixsite.com/scouthai2/blank>

If our education is still stuck in the mire today, it may be because we have not heeded the wisdom of our elders and betters. The misunderstanding of the use of memory (which I quoted above) came from the same authority who introduced “liberal arts education” into Thai academia in a systematic way. The story about the struggle to restructure Thammasat University to make way for the liberal arts is of epic dimension, which according to Thanet Apornsawan, was impregnated with lofty ideals with the American model in mind, even Though Thailand at the time was under “authoritarian” rule that was undemocratic and hostile to liberal thinking (Apornsawan, 2024, Section 3). There is ample documentation on the Thammasat experiment (La-ongsri, et al., 2016, pp. 49-164), which is actually a *Festschrift* in honour of the founder of the Faculty of Liberal Arts), and I cannot help admiring the hard work and dedication on the part of the founding members of the faculty. The obstacles were obvious:

the reformers thought too much in terms of bureaucratic structural and curricular change, mistaking liberal education to mean the foundation years for the entire university. This was bound to be resisted by the existing faculties. Yet, what Thammasat achieved was no mean feat, and whether intentionally or unintentionally, the Thammasat experiment paved the way for the Ministry of Higher Education's decree that all universities were to set aside 30 credits of their undergraduate curricula for the "foundation courses", later to be renamed "General Education", the decree still being in existence, whose operation was only halfheartedly carried out by the universities. General education was centrally adopted by the Ministry also with the added inspiration coming from the reforms initiated by such an august institution as Harvard University in the mid-1970s in the form of the "core curriculum". (I myself was involved in this process and visited Harvard and other U.S. institutions in 1981, realizing full well that our intellectual resources were not up to the task. Nevertheless, I volunteered to teach the General Curriculum for almost two decades, and derived much pleasure and valuable experience from it.)

The present paper attempts to prove that liberal education cannot be fixed to any definite form and that its potential can be developed in innumerable ways. This paper is filled with concrete examples that bear testimony to the inexhaustible dynamism which is not just mere ideas, but a way of life, a culture. We in Thailand may not have captured its true essence, being too preoccupied with form, structure, i.e., its outer garb. The following section will highlight some highly informative case studies that should set us thinking further.

Case Study No. 1: *A “liberating” dictation course*

The school (Thepsirin) had just re-opened after the end of the Second World War. The liberating atmosphere was contagious. The grade IV class was noisy with the young boys and girls rejoicing at the opportunity to see each other again. The teacher entered and announced that there would be a big change in the dictation course: she was to read out the text without telling us where to pause (the Thai written language having no punctuations to mark the end of a sentence, a clause or a phrase). I remember vividly until today how I readily welcomed the new freedom: I had to decide by myself where to leave gaps in my writing. At the age of eight, I began to awaken to a “liberating act” inherent in my mother tongue, and later on found the indication of punctuation marks in foreign language dictations to be too much of a concession! Every time I hear the criticism that Thai education fails dismally in various international tests, such as PISA, with the accusation that we are not taught to think, I become furious. Our educators are simply too superficial by relying too much on extrinsic factors and are too lazy to seek out and exploit those intrinsic thinking mechanisms inherent in our way of life. For me “liberal” education began so early, at the primary school level.

Case Study No. 2: *A prodigy who aspires to liberate*

Every history of Western music of the 20th century mentions the story of the prodigy named Yehudi Menuhin (later Lord Yehudi Menuhin), who in his early teens could play the violin like a mature artist. In 1929 at the age of 12, Menuhin played three concerti in one concert in Berlin so superbly that it provoked Albert Einstein, himself an amateur violinist, to exclaim: “Now I know that there is a God in heavens!” Menuhin was to grow up to become a great musician, a great pedagogue and a peace activist, often defying Israel, though himself a Jew. Looking back over many decades, he confessed:

“As a small child playing the violin, my naïve dream was to be able, thereby, to heal the suffering heart, fulfilling thus the Jewish mission. Ever since I can remember, I have tried to relate the beauty of great music to the harmony of life. As a small child I even imagined that if I could play the *Chaconne* of Bach inspiringly enough in the Sistine Chapel under the eyes of Michelangelo, all that is ignoble and vile would miraculously disappear from our World” (Nagavajara, 2014a, p. 205).



The young Yehudi Menuhin and his teacher George Enescu

Note. https://www.facebook.com/yehudimenuhin/photos/a.1580241322255015/1758695157742963/?type=3&from_lookaside=1

Actual events in the world, and current events in the Near East and Eastern Europe tend to counter this noble aspiration, but the world survives because of such idealistic thinking, and this coming from a child confirms that great arts conspire to forge a liberating force that should constitute the foundation of all education. Mastering the violin up to a certain point can become an edifying formation that transcends the confines of the arts.

Case Study No. 3: *Liberation through non-instruction*

I always question the desirability and reliability of World University Rankings, but the results of the past two years of “QS Rankings by Subjects” have placed Cambridge as World No. 1 in Modern Languages. I cannot presume that the kind of education we had over half a century ago matched the present-day performance, but I am going to make a claim, as an alumnus, that a “liberal” foundation was being laid during my time there. Especially in German, every final examination paper in literature contained one compulsory question for which there was no formal instruction, dealing with philosophy, history, visual arts and music. As a music lover and amateur musician, I embraced that freedom with joy, because the cultural environment and extracurricular activities in Cambridge at the time equipped me well as an amateur. The final examination in 1961 contained a question on Robert Schumann, and I pounced on it with much pleasure, having played a second violin in the University Second Orchestra in Schumann’s *Symphony No. 1*, knowing it well from the many rehearsals and having done further reading on his life and work out of sheer interests. We often look at examinations as an intimidating compulsion, but an educational institution that knows how to induce its students to go in pursuit of free inquiry should understand what “liberal” education means. Looking back over half a century, I realize how much I owe to the Cambridge experience in terms of innovative experiments in learning and teaching.

Case Study No. 4: *Liberating socialization*

After an absence of more than 20 years, I went back to visit my college in Cambridge and was invited to have lunch with the fellows at the “high table”. We were no longer waited upon, but served ourselves from a buffet. I was observing my hosts sitting at the high table: they hailed from various disciplines and seemed to be enjoying the conversation over their daily lunch. I sat next to a lady fellow who was the University Professor of Russian. I learned much from her, and in exchange shared with her my experience of trying to

make German survive as a university subject. After lunch some of them retired to the Senior Common Room to continue their conversation. There were about 20 fellows, representing roughly 20 disciplines, many of whom must have been active for roughly 20 years. And of course, they had been conversing over lunch for about 20 years. This was an interdisciplinary group and what they had learned informally from each other must have been immense. The seemingly “formal” high table was an informal learning space that should be the envy of other institutions. I have earlier pleaded for the virtue of a “dialogic university”, and I am convinced that such socialization has an intellectually liberating effect.



The high table at a “dialogic” college

Note. https://www.wikiwand.com/en/High_table

Case Study No. 5: *The enigmatic pedagogy of Thai classical music and its German counterpart*

An American musician, Bruce Gaston, (Fry, 2025), came to Thailand as a young man and spent the rest of his life learning Thai classical music up to the point where he himself was recognized by Thai colleagues as a master. He had the good fortune of becoming a pupil of Master Bunyong Ketkhong, the foremost exponent of the “ranad”, or the Thai xylophone, as already mentioned earlier. One day the Thai master summoned the American pupil to him and asked: “Bruce, why haven’t you asked me for a new piece?” It took the pupil

some time to make out what the master meant, which was: “You have now reached the level at which I can pass on to you highly advanced and sophisticated works.” That means the pupil can now be given the freedom to be on his own, including exploring the art of improvisation. Thai tradition demands that the master has to be asked by the pupil to initiate him to the next level. (A Buddhist monk does not offer to give a sermon unless and until asked to do so.) In this process, the pupil has to be self-critical enough to be able to gauge his own abilities whether he is ready to go on to the next stage.



Bunyong Ketkhong, music master with a repertoire of 20,000

Note. <http://siammelodies.com/th/profiles/?n=8>

In this respect, I am reminded of my formative years at a German university in the golden age before the advent of Bologna. In the humanities and social sciences, students were encouraged to chart their own curriculum and to present themselves for the examinations at all levels when they considered themselves ready. So, students had to take full responsibility in conducting themselves, not being over-confident or unnecessarily self-deprecating. The Thai musical model as well as its German counterpart deserves to be called liberal education. It liberates you towards self-realization and self-reliance.

Case Study No. 6: *Education liberates: The case of the compassionate victor*

I seek leave to report on the fruits of my research on “The new beginnings of comparative literature in Germany 1945-1975: An outsider’s view” (Nagavajara, 2022, pp. 494-496). That Germany could rise again so fast after the war was due in no small measure to the non-vindictive policy of the Allies who had no intention of taking revenge on the atrocities perpetrated by the Nazis (The Nuremberg Trials had already taken care of that.) They knew that Germany was a treasure house of wisdom and knowledge that could be appropriately channeled to pave the way for a regeneration. They thought that education could be instrumental in this process. The German universities were to reopen as soon as possible and the process of “denazification” was to be accelerated such that German academics themselves should be able to carry through the new mission. The French were particularly magnanimous in the French-occupied zone of South Germany in helping the Germans to reestablish themselves, and the educational zeal on the part of the German youths returning from the war proved extremely encouraging. One particular subject was prioritized by the French occupation authorities, as it had experienced an immense blossoming in French academia between the two wars, namely comparative literature. Professorships were created in four Southern German universities, partly filled by German scholars, and partly by French Germanists and comparatists. Why comparative literature? Documentary evidence from the period points to the belief on the part of the compassionate victor that German scholarship, for example Romance philology, possessed a great potential to foster a genuine international outlook which is the guiding light of comparative literature. This is a reaffirmation of the faith in a “liberal” education, which should prove to be a corrective to intellectual chauvinism.

Case Study No. 7: *Accidentally postcolonial*

The Association of South East Asian Institutions of Higher Learning (ASAIHL) has been organizing its annual conference since its inception in 1956, of which the “ASAIHL Lecture of the Year” constitutes an integral part of the event. I was chosen “ASAIHL Lecturer of the Year 1982” and spoke on the theme, “Literary Study and Higher Education”, in which I gave a defense of the rightful place of the discipline in contemporary academia. I took a broad view of literature, including the important role of oral literature, which I regarded as a universal phenomenon, and not the privilege of a particular time and place. In this sense, it was necessary for me to combat the claim to primacy made by a well-known British literary critic and scholar who professed: “English literature is a great literature, certainly the greatest of the English arts, possibly the greatest of all literatures.” (Nagavajara, 1996, p. 31) And he went on to indulge in enumerating the weaknesses of other national literatures. I could not help countering such an apodictic statement by saying, “... his brand of evaluative comparatism can prove to be a cause for embarrassment. Either one makes a judgement like this, or one simply does not; and if one makes it, one usually does it when one is very young.” (Nagavajara, 1996, p. 32) The conference was taking place in Hong Kong, then still under British rule (until 1997). I was not deliberately contributing to the nascent movement of postcolonialism and had at that time not yet read Edward Saïd’s *Orientalism* (1979). Several colleagues from former British colonies came up to me after the lecture and congratulated me, furtively though, for my “courage”. Coming from a country which had never been a colony, it was a matter of course that I should endorse the caution made by the German scholar, Wolfgang Iser, (1926-2007) that “literary study is a science of texts and not of nations”. (Nagavajara, 1996, p. 32) Liberal education cannot admit of such divisive ideology.

Case Study No. 8: *Philology versus theology*

This case stems from a lecture organized by the Dahlem Humanities Center of the Free University Berlin. The speaker was a Moroccan professor who was discoursing on certain aspects of the history of Islam. His approach was informative as well as critical. The professor stated the known fact that the Holy Book of Islam was written down several hundred years after the passing of Muhammad. He went a little further, which to me was nothing radical at all, whereby he opined that certain practices by Muslims of today might not correspond exactly to what the Prophet had taught. The temperature in the lecture room heated up, and after the conclusion of the lecture, the professor was attacked left and right by devout Muslims (which I thought was understandable) and also by German students of Islam (who, in my opinion, should have been tempered by a more rational sobriety). I volunteered to umpire, and humbly sought leave to share with the colleagues experiences from the world of Buddhism. My deliberate civility and humility made the warring factions pause for a while, as I went on to say that Buddhists are well aware that what constitutes the Buddhist canon cannot lay claim to absolute authenticity, for it was written down 300 years after Buddha's death. Buddhism has branched off into various sects, and variants of the *Tripiṭaka* exist in abundance. Even within a sect, occasional councils have to be convened in order to improve upon the existent text. Liberal-minded Buddhists are content with whatever achievements could be attained in order to come nearest to what we assume to be Buddha's teachings, which should possess the credibility of perennial truth. I did emphasize that the textual defects that might exist are by their very nature a *philological* problem and not necessarily a *theological* one. In the final analysis, the best religious text is the one that guarantees the harmony of the human race whereby ethical consciousness becomes pervasive. I am inclined to think that the Buddhist stance as I presented in Berlin is the bedrock of a liberal education. Knowledge, appropriately reflected, can liberate us from ignorance and prejudice.

Case Study No. 9: *Confession of a breviloquent pupil*

44 years had passed since I took my doctorate's degree from Tübingen University when they decided to grant me an honorary degree in 2009. My contact with German academia had been kept alive thanks to the various research grants and residencies at German institutions which I received during the intervening years. I always felt, and do feel, a particular attachment to my *alma mater*, because I believe that a “liberal education”, once received and cultivated, stays with you for the rest of your life. Another factor that binds me to Tübingen is the attitude that the successors of my former professors have adopted towards me, namely that they take me seriously as a scholar who tries to build a bridge between two cultures.

The simple degree ceremony took place at the end of an international seminar under the theme “World of Values” in 2009 in an idyllic ambience by the river Neckar in the museum turned conference centre known as the “*Hölderlinturm*”. My mentor, Eberhard Lämmert (1924-2015), Germany’s foremost literary scholar and former President of the Free University Berlin, volunteered to deliver the laudation, which turned out to be a critical appraisal of all my writings in Western languages (Attaviriyayanupap, 2019, pp. 24-49). When I was requested to make a response, I contented myself with a very brief speech, which ran as follows:

“What I owed to my German teachers was scholarly conscientiousness. Back home, I tried to turn this into ethical rectitude. I have had difficult times, but I have survived. And that is why there is today” (Thailändischer Komparatist, 2009).



Hölderlinturm, Tübingen

Note. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/H%C3%B6lderlinturm>

Liberal education in this case becomes a liberating force that is potent enough to infuse scholarship with ethics. This is one dimension of liberal education that we should strive to cultivate.

Lessons from the Case Studies

The above episodes, though based on personal experiences, attempt to convey distinct messages or point to implications that may be of a more general validity. The interpretation of those phenomena can yield meaningful conclusions that bear upon the subject of the present lecture and the theme of the conference as a whole, where it was initially presented. These micro narratives are certainly supportive of the role of liberal education that can constitute an intellectual and even spiritual force in our contemporary society.

Starting from his native soil, the author tries to “read” meticulously his own cultural roots and soon becomes aware of a great potential in the educational practices or learning modes of his homeland. *Case Study No. 1*, dealing with primary school dictation exercises, substantiates the point about an inner force that can promote the thinking abilities of primary school children. Moving to the “enigmatic pedagogy” of Thai classical music in *Case Study No. 5*, one can appreciate the breadth of creative thinking ranging from childlike simplicity to highly sophisticated artistry. The passage from

Thai primary school to German higher education in the pre-Bologna era proves that the essence of “liberal” education that furthers individual freedom cuts across national boundaries as well as levels of intellectual maturity.

In this sense, the conditions that induce an independent pursuit of knowledge, in other words, self-learning, as expounded in *Case Study No. 3* concerning Cambridge Modern Languages, can go a long way in paving the way for the supreme art of “learning how to learn”. In this respect, social and educational environment may prove to be a “cultural capital” that an enlightened society, as a way of life almost imperceptibly builds up little by little in a continuous process until it reaches a level of inexhaustibility. Our present-day digitalized society must learn how to enhance it in appropriate ways and applies its “disruptive” power wisely. In a talk given at the Petroleum Institute Annual Dinner in Bangkok on November, 21, 1988, I already sensed what was coming and pleaded for the middle road in the espousal of technology, including IT. (Nagavagara, 2004, pp. 23-25)

As elucidated above by the great German philosopher and educational reformer, Wilhelm von Humboldt, the individual cannot go it alone and must learn to interact with society in constructive ways. My little story about those 20 academics hailing from 20 disciplines conversing over lunch for 20 years, as related in *Case Study No. 4*, would tend to support the kind of mutual intellectual enrichment that is the mainstay of what I have called “the dialogic university”, which the often superficial exchanges of messages via the social media of today can never supplant.

But the socializing academic community itself is by its very nature committed to the quest for knowledge, which, as we have seen above in the introductory section, was often obstructed by prejudices (whether radical or religious), intellectual myopia and at times bigotry. Liberal education has been combatting those inhibitive factors for centuries, with limited success. The fight for academic freedom has had to shift its focus and our enemy of today is invincible, for academia itself has fallen prey to cupidity, lust for power and self-delusion which are more difficult to fight than the

papal tyranny of yore. That a scholar hailing from a non-colony like myself had to take up arms against academic chauvinism and “accidentally” aligned myself with postcolonialism, as demonstrated in *Case Study No. 7*, should serve as a warning that the need to “liberate” will remain a challenging responsibility of education for a long time to come. The same could be said of the umpiring role that I felt compelled to perform to help resolve the internal conflict between the adherents of Islam, as reported in *Case Study No. 8*, should remind us that scholarship that is not always endowed with humility and tolerance would militate against true knowledge and intellectual awakening which represent the virtues of liberal education.

Transposed to the international level, the reemergence of the discipline of comparative literature in Germany after World War II, as reported in *Case Study No. 6*, should give us ample food for thought. The readiness to forgive on the part of the Allies needed an effective instrument to bring about a constructive reconciliation, and to use education for this purpose was a wise decision. But education is a very broad area of human endeavour, and specific choices, including methods and subjects, had to be made. It so happened that a discipline born and bred in the spirit of internationalism had been developed up to the point where it could function as a vehicle for intellectual and moral regeneration. (As a foreigner studying this subject at a German university and engaged in research in Franco-German literary relations, I could witness how the pursuit of knowledge, propped by a truly international spirit, could become a liberating intellectual force.) (Nagavajara, 2014a, pp. 337-354)

The story about the transcending of enmity between arch rivals, namely France and Germany, and the launching of an academic discipline (which is flowering today both in France and Germany) contains certain implications that I would not hesitate to identify as being of an “ethical” nature. In the final analysis, if liberal education is expected to perform a liberating function, it cannot overlook the ethical dimensions of the undertaking. At whatever level, in whichever field, ethics has a role to play. Why should the child Yehudi Menuhin, who had mastered the daunting art of violin playing beyond his years, end up thinking beyond music-making and

imposing upon himself such an ambitious mission, as recounted in *Case Study No. 2*? We sometimes speak of the innate goodness in man. But that cannot be taken as the general rule, as we can witness every hour and every minute today how people are butchering fellow human beings, and the arts, and even religions, are powerless. Yet there must be room for an expression of lofty ideals like those coming from the child Menuhin. It would appear that artistic excellence, if well nurtured, will give rise to deep reflections that can serve as a gateway to ethical aspirations. One case in hundreds, or in thousands, is better than none. It exemplifies what “liberal” education truly means.

And that brings me to my own experience in *Case Study No. 9*. Naturally I have attempted the liberating act at more than one stage. The German legacy itself was demanding enough in its own way, for scholarly conscientiousness requires hard work, determination and precision. Years of constant praxis, long after graduation, should equip one with what is vaguely called “intellectual honesty”, which becomes inevitably ethical in nature. But the long leap to the level of “ethical rectitude” is an audacious act, fraught with innumerable obstacles, and the best one can hope for is not to triumph, but to *survive*. I myself was content with the little that could be achieved, but the indebtedness to the initial “conscientiousness” is not thereby diminished. In my own small way, I have tried to contribute to the process of keeping liberal education alive.

How far and in what direction have we departed from the pristine innocence of the “child playing the violin” in the hope of cleansing the world of “all that is ignoble and vile”? Do we in the field of education still think in those terms, now that we possess potent tools like AI that can facilitate our desires and demands, alas, dictated by the smug self-satisfaction of the corporate university. The leading researchers of higher education at the global level whom I quoted in the introductory part of this paper did confess that we had failed dismally in spite of all our scientific achievements in making the present-day world an equitable and happy place for all. We should appreciate their honesty and readily admit that AI never will replace Yehudi Menuhin in violin playing and in humane thinking. (I had the

good fortune of hearing Menuhin live several times and also one of his rare lectures.) I have deliberately interpreted “liberal education” in somewhat radical terms as an education that “liberates” (us from *kilesa*, greed and lust, as Buddhists might say). We sometimes have to be aggressive in our fight for survival.

Epilogue

The present paper tries to demonstrate how a departure from the normal usage of the concept of “liberal education” can open up possibilities for alternative thinking and practice. The overused term “liberal” can be a little too passive. While retaining the adjectival form, the author chooses to emphasize the active and dynamic potential of the act of “liberating”.

To liberate presupposes a tension between two points: the starting point is to liberate *from*, and the end point is to liberate *towards*. An educational process begins with a premise that leads to a resolution. For example, liberal education can be a process of liberating us from preconceived ideas and propelling us to new creative ideas. As I have mentioned earlier, our academia of today, being an epigone of the world of business, has willy-nilly set up its own regulatory prison house such that it has become necessary to liberate it *from* all those self-imposed fetters in order to embrace a new freedom to search for creative and constructive experiences.

To illustrate this call for freedom *from* as well as freedom *towards*, allow me to return to *Case Study No. 9* concerning the transformation of scholarly conscientiousness into ethical rectitude. Scholarly conscientiousness is the supreme level of awareness or consciousness in the pursuit of truth. Those obsessed with procedural construction may think in terms of professional ethics, professional competence and good governance, while self-respecting scholars will try to glean wisdom from the acquisition of knowledge and to make public the fruits of their search (or *research*). *Intellectual honesty* is the intermediary attribute that distinguishes the product of an educational institution, which may be considered, in even broader

terms, as the achievement of *academic culture*. Allow me to quote a statement by the distinguished economist, Lord John Vaizy (1929-1984), who characterizes very lucidly how the “*Bildung*” at an educational institution can shape the attitude and behaviour of an individual.

Cambridge’s main contribution to the tone of intellectual life has been a ruthless, forthright intellectual honesty...I think that this intellectual ruthlessness has appalling effects on manners and emotions, but excellent results on the intellectual morals of the Cambridge young...I would have been a nicer but wobblier man if I had gone elsewhere. It is the wobblies who get on...Like other Cambridge men, and perhaps this is why so few of them become Prime Minister, I am perennially surprised at the hostility that friendly frankness brings. (*Cambridge Commemorated*, 1984, pp. 338, 340-341)

Today when we talk of “best practices”, we often link them to business or industrial enterprises, and consequently the “corporate university” will hasten to adopt the term. Can we move a little further than the utilitarian domain and describe professional honesty and scholarly conscientiousness as a form of “best practice”? Would these appear to be alien elements in the usual environment of today’s academia? The kind of order and system that an institution of higher learning needs is what is conducive to the blossoming of the mind. Liberal education is supportive of that kind of orderliness. Cultivating self-discipline (that does not become prohibitive) within the “community of scholars”, and offering the knowledge and wisdom that you have gained for the common good, not in the form of commodity, used to be the goal of academia, and that noble undertaking has ethical implications. So to elevate scholarly conscientiousness, via the cultivation of intellectual honesty to the level of ethical rectitude, is a logical process, not unrealizable daydreaming. I wish to recall at this juncture the idea that underpins “The Stone Inscription of Wat Pho”, the notion of the “marketplace of knowledge” of the founder of the first university in Thailand, and lately the fight of the scholars and scientists of the University of California for free access to their research, (Kell, 2021) which we

Buddhists would call “*widyadana*” (the word being a new coinage in the Thai language based on Sanskrit root, meaning “free gift of knowledge”). Liberal education is certainly a pursuit of knowledge and wisdom not restricted only to academia and assumes a more general validity akin to the ideals of the Enlightenment. It is a way of thinking that can become a way of life. Moral rectitude upholds the survival of human society. The challenge to the academic world is how to allow our “best practice” to mature into a way of life that is impregnated with ethical consciousness. An education that is not “liberal” enough will not be able to contribute to this process of maturation.

In connection with Western Enlightenment, it will only be fair to give Immanuel Kant an appropriate hearing. This is what he has to say in his famous essay, “What is Enlightenment?”.

“Enlightenment is man’s emergence from self-imposed immaturity. Immaturity is the inability to use one’s understanding without guidance from another. This immaturity is self-imposed when its cause lies not in lack of understanding, but in lack of resolve and courage to use it without guidance from another...

This spirit of freedom is expanding even where it must struggle against the external obstacles of governments that misunderstand their own function...the existence of freedom need not give cause for the least concern regarding public order and harmony in the commonwealth. If only they refrain from inventing artifices to keep themselves in it, men will gradually raise themselves from barbarism.” (Kant, 1992, pp. 1, 4).



Manuscript of the Buddhist Tripitaka

Note. <https://www.blockdit.com/posts/>

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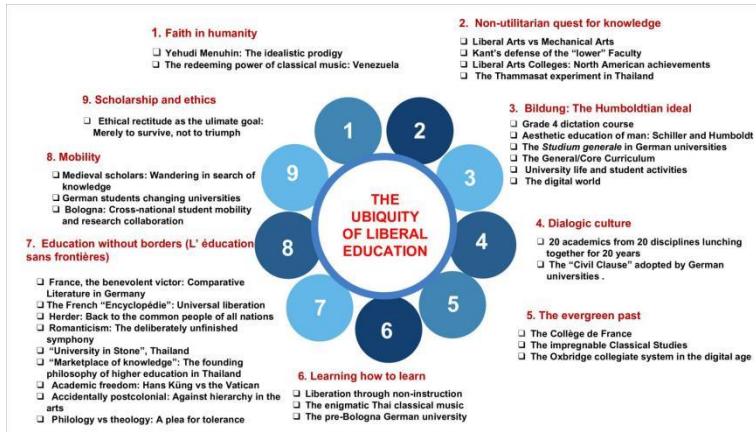
Kant: Was ist Aufklärung?

Note. https://www.deutsches-textarchiv.de/book-view/kant_aufklaerung_1784?p=17

It is amazing how Kant's argument is relevant to our endeavour to create a liberal society and, in our case, to make education liberal. The last sentence quoted professes an absolute faith in the innate capacity of man to free himself from ignorance and immaturity, which can at times degenerate into barbarism. Kant was living at least under an "enlightened" despot, but he and his colleagues felt it necessary to demand a fight against oppressive governments. We are less fortunate than Kant and his contemporaries because their enemies were identifiable, while ours are very elusive: we are compelled to fight a global force that places material gain above knowledge and wisdom.

I speak again as a Buddhist who wholeheartedly endorses Kant's faith in human freedom. We Buddhists appreciate Buddha's teaching that "one's refuge is within oneself" (*Attā Hi Attanō Nāthō*). Everybody is endowed with the power to create good "karma" and hence to better himself. Our present-day academia has overlooked such innate capacity and has imposed upon itself so many external rules and regulations under the understanding that these extrinsic mechanisms will guarantee excellence. They have proved to be counter-productive. That is why we shall have to continue to make education a liberating force. Does liberal education liberate? Sometimes! We should see to it that the exception becomes the rule.

N.B. in order to help the readers to see the interconnectedness of the various points made in the paper, a Summative Diagram is presented on the following page.



Acknowledgements

I would like to express my sincere thanks to the following colleagues for their valuable advice and assistance: 1) Prof. Gerald Fry, University of Minnesota; 2) Acharn Suvanna Kriengkraipetch, Former Director, Sirindhorn Anthropology Centre; 3) Assoc. Prof. Darin Pradittasanee, Chulalongkorn University, 4) Dr. Aurapin Khamson, TRF Research Project on Criticism.

As for the various **illustrations**, which may serve to enliven the paper, I have indicated their sources, and would like to confirm that they have been used for purely educational purposes.

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