

## ON THE NEED OF HUMANISTIC PREPARATORY COURSES AT BUSINESS AND TECHNICAL SCHOOLS

**Dominika Boroń**

Maria Curie-Sklodowska University, Poland  
missborogne46@gmail.com

### **Abstract:**

The global tendency in education to separate the humanistic elements and humanistic approach from sciences has a visibly negative influence on young people's mentality, communication skills and personal development. There is an urgent need to fight against dangerous consequences of the anti-humanistic approach in all the levels of education. I view general humanistic preparatory courses as a potential positive influence not only on education methods, but possibly also on some worrying global trends our societies are undergoing. Students are having growing difficulty in expressing complex thoughts in words, which is a process related to the growing inability to read and interpret longer text, especially difficult ones. Consequently, conversation-based classes are becoming increasingly challenging both for teachers and students. The endangerment of fundamental communication skills is leading to a worrying simplification of communication between people, thus intensifying the crisis of satisfying social relations, the very base of our life in society as such. In my paper, I briefly define the anti-humanistic approach in education and the related educational crisis we are observing, as well as propose the academic course for students which will seek to build a foundation for:

- making one aware of and able to express personal interests and reflection;
- favoring multidisciplinary, contextual approach in knowledge;
- finding joy in individual solutions;
- favoring discussion rather than a statement;
- approaching a narrow specialization in a humanistic way.

*Keywords: humanistic education, culture, social responsibility, communication crisis, humanistic management.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Odo Marquard, in one of his beautiful essays “On the unavoidability of the Human Science”, recalls the words of his teacher, Joachim Ritter: “The modernization that is driven by the experimental sciences causes losses on the level of the life-world, losses for which human sciences help to compensate” (Marquard, 1991, p. 95). The statement itself seems reasonable and optimistic. Nevertheless, I see its matter of fact certainty as a sin of pride that all of us, humanistic teachers, have been guilty of over the last decade. Teaching philosophy and history of ideas on various academic levels and different majors, I do observe losses caused by the anti-humanistic approach related to modernization, but see no compensation coming recently from the humanistic sphere.

I recognize three global problems rising precisely from neglecting the humanistic approach in education( It is even more worrying that this neglect is usually not even a conscious process: it simply fits perfectly into the modern patterns of economic pressure and glorification of specialization). Those problems are: loss of verbal communication skills, inability to identify with social responsibilities and inability to efficiently function on the job market *in spite of* high quality education. Only the last problem is often discussed openly in the public sphere: the previous two are still mostly subject of academic discussion, usually purely theoretical.

About ten years ago I began to modify my conversation classes according to the project I called “Re-awakening the humanistic thinking”. It was based on growing certainty that most students need a strong humanistic preparation before they start the, more individually demanding, academic level of education. A preparation that would search for foundation for skills needed to define interests, interpret text, ask questions and identify with problems. Definitely a humanistic one. Eagerness expressed by the students, their enthusiasm after getting rid of initial shame as well as clear expression of realization how “humanistically mute” they had become and why, kept me more and more engaged in this activity. My research study is devoted to finding ways in which humanistic teachers can help solve those problems. Making use of the multitude of publications concerning the subject of humanistic approach in education and my own pedagogical experience (especially using interpretation of philosophy and literature fragments in conversation classes), I decided to focus on creating a practical course introducing basic humanistic skills to students. I am also working on a detailed textbook for the course.

In my paper I will shortly describe properties of the anti-humanistic and humanistic approach, show their roles in sculpting the personality of future young citizens and specify issues that are crucial for improving the process of education understood as developing individual personality and supporting positive self-evaluation. I see the above-mentioned processes related to the anti-humanistic approach as constitutive for modern societies. Therefore, my theoretical reflections are general and not related to any particular country or education system. I also perceive the problem of business and technical education as especially distinctive for my reflections. Arguing for introduction of humanistic preparatory courses in such schools is a crucial part of my project.

## 2. DANGERS OF ANTI-HUMANISTIC EDUCATION: RECOGNIZE THE ENEMY

The anti-humanistic processes that we observe in education are both partly the cause and the effect of the modern verbal communication crisis. The cause, as they accompany the growing inability to express complex thoughts that characterizes a growing number of young people. The effect as the majority of teachers assimilate the anti-humanistic approach, firstly, because they haven't experienced a different one themselves, secondly, because it is definitely more simpler, more mechanical and effortless. The basic components of the anti-humanistic approach are:

- Test evaluation of humanities ( learning is limited to passing the test understood as the goal of the learning process);
- Regarding humanities as less practical and less realistic, and thus less needed than other sciences;
- Developing single-answer mechanisms in thinking;
- Viewing doubt and curiosity as negative (redundant);
- Narrow understanding of the problems considered;
- Devaluation of individual judgment and interpretation;
- Devaluation of understanding in favor of memorizing;
- Favoring indifference and impersonal attitude towards problems.

Consequences of all of the aforementioned elements create a visible problem when young people enter the humanistic oriented courses at university. They clash with the sheer idea of conversation classes and the idea of individual interpretation, therefore, the conflict is conspicuous from the beginning and easier to deal with. Admittedly, the communication crisis is too deep to understand the phrase “easy to deal with” literally. The effects of the above-mentioned tendencies predominating in modern education are severe enough to worry teachers on every level. The problem in non humanistic schools is still different. The detailed technical contents of most of the courses create an unintended premise that humanist elements in education *are* indeed less practical and less realistic. Therefore, the problem in technical and business schools is less apparent and possibly more harmful to student's personal development. Thus neglecting the introduction of the humanistic thinking skills in non-humanistic schools should be perceived as an alarming and worrisome process, especially meaningful in our economically oriented societies.

The specialization era deludes us – and especially deludes students – with a certain perception of knowledge. In short: the narrower, more detailed and specialized it is, the better our social and financial perspectives are. Such delusion is very dangerous. It creates a perspective of justified detachment from social and moral responsibilities, a vision of personality alienated from society by the “useful” and profitable specialization.

This paradigm overlooks the ideas of togetherness, social responsibility and communication that were indispensable in the humanistic approach to education. Lack of communication skills that only humanistic conversation classes can successfully develop lead to an image of society of skillful workers who are useless as active members of social structures – and possibly easiest to manipulate.

### 3. THE HUMANISTIC APPROACH: GATHER WEAPON

As described by Gage and Berliner (1991) there are five basic objectives of the humanistic view of education:

- Promote positive self-direction and independence (development of the regulatory system);
- Develop the ability to take responsibility for what is learned (regulatory and affective systems);
- Develop creativity (divergent thinking aspect of cognition);
- Curiosity (exploratory behavior, a function of imbalance or dissonance in any of the systems);
- An interest in the arts (primarily to develop the affective/emotional system).

Before I elaborate on the particular need for humanistic courses in technical schools, I will single out several other objectives I find worth listing as proper to the humanistic approach:

- Broadening perspectives;
- Making one aware of and able to express personal interests and reflection;
- Using doubt and curiosity as positive factors;
- Favoring multidisciplinary, contextual approach;
- Searching for ethical aspects of problems;
- Respecting excitement and passion as deepening individual understanding;
- Finding joy in individual solutions;
- Favoring discussion instead of a statement;
- Approaching a specialization in the humanistic way: *Where* I can use it, *why* and *where* it fits and may prove fruitful.

Developing those thinking skills is necessary to create a responsible, independent, mature personality. Some of those aspects, although often neglected by teachers, appear to remain a part of philosophy or social sciences courses simply by being introduced by the interpretation process of classic literary texts, which, fortunately, are still a part of such education. We can still hope that the mind of an intelligent student will open at the “magic touch” of classical literature or philosophy – hopefully even lacking a devoted guidance.

But what if such “touch” is not a part of obligatory courses anymore? What if students never experience the joy of interpretation, of the creative puzzlement and open discussion? Can we hope their creativity will find enough stimulants in test-evaluated courses?

That is why I argue that technical and business schools in particular need humanistic preparatory courses – intended more to create a space for free personal development of critical thinking skills rather than to introduce literary text to the young.

The ideas of sculpting student’s identity and morality by education have been vivid in the history of culture since Socrates. For Jürgen Habermas the capacity to organize one’s own life as a biography was understood as the highest stage of moral development (Habermas, 1975, p. 87). W. Veugelers writes: “Contrary to what is often stated, education must not first and foremost pay attention to knowledge and skills also in the moral and cultural domain, but to the development of a personal identity – for giving meaning to life”(Veugelers, 2011, p. 19). The examples of theoretical research are plentiful and inspiring( compare Bruner, 1998 or Goodson, Biesta, Tedder & Adair, 2010). The practice is of utmost importance.

Considering education in non humanistic schools, we have to face a precise and essential problem: How to introduce humanistic skills I have enlisted above in an effective manner without undue increase of the humanistic subjects? How to introduce them in a synthetic, fruitful and interesting way?

I propose interpretation courses which could also be called workshops, that would link three basic goals modern business education should strive to achieve:

- Develop and support independent personality;
- Equip students with value-system that engages them morally in social life;
- Imprint the idea of business being an activity of serving people rather than to make money only.

Such courses would create educational space for the development of values and norms, while acquainting students with humanistic treasures of our culture. Consequently, it would also help to restore a language of cultural communication that was always serving as the bridge between generations. Therefore, with the humanistic education courses, we can take part in the most needed act of recreating a communication between generations which increasingly vanishes with the speed of technological changes.

#### 4. THE COURSE: GAME ON

The course itself is a conversation workshop based on the interpretation of the passages of texts taken from the classic literature and philosophy. It consists of three parts that shall be performed in following order: reading, speaking and listening. It should take a minimum of 60 teaching hours.

Each part will make use of different materials in order to approach different styles and authors from various periods and fields. I would suggest to start with literature and then proceed to philosophy after 30 or more teaching hours. Depending on the age of students I would suggest, for example, fragments of Plato, Lew Tolstoy, Friedrich Nietzsche, Søren Kierkegaard, Herman Melville, Fyodor Dostoyevsky, Thomas Mann, William James, Jean-Paul Sartre, Richard Rorty, Umberto Eco, Basho's haiku. Teacher's personal literary passions would probably make the best guidance for a successful conversation class.

Because the task has to be realized by means of text fragments, I would suggest writers who are challenging rather intellectually than formally. The fragments should be relatively small (from one page to three or four) and carefully chosen, not overwhelming with difficulty and yet challenging and interesting.

The first part is focused on exercises in reading skills, the second on conversation skills, the third on listening and performing the individual speech. Exercises include, *inter alia*:

- Learning how to read a chapter, a page, a sentence: interpreting and finding the meaning in each type of text;
- Learning to take notes;
- Recognizing difficult style, dealing with this difficulty, learning to find joy in interpretation;
- Learning to express doubt, confusion, puzzlement, surprise; embracing those reactions as positive and constructive;
- Learning to find out the reason for *not* understanding: placing the problem (Is it language? Is it the style? Is it the problem itself I don't understand and why?);

- Learning to embrace criticism, to accept differences in interpretations and to find variety of opinions as a beneficial element of study;
- Learning to recognize and define one's priorities and values within interpretation of the text;
- Learning how to listen to lectures of various duration - getting to know one's individual ability to listen and understand;
- Putting on stage a mini conference: each student gives a short presentation followed by discussion.

Such course is aimed to support the idea of humanistic and moral management, currently underemphasized by economic education. (Amann, Pirson, 2011, pp. 1 – 2). It also prepares young people to protect, reconstruct and develop further our civilization as well as to face its dangers, injustice and prejudices (Suchodolski, 1992, p. 2). A continuing democratization of society seems to give us the guarantee of the equal ability to participate actively in its dynamics. But it will remain a demagogic slogan without an education consciously supporting those needs.

## 5. SUMMARY: HUMANISTIC TEACHERS AS KNIGHTS OF THE LAST CULTURE ?

There is no other way to prepare young people for their active roles in society than by careful development of their conscious moral identification, ability to define their values and norms and, most importantly, *recognize* those values on the background of our cultural heritage. That is why education deprived of elements of literature and philosophy leads not only to unhappy “humanistic muteness” that precludes people from creating a sustainable relationships because of the lack of the conversation skills. It also leads to much more dangerous moral blindness and robotisation of society.

The humanistic approach to education recalls the importance of unalterable role of narratives in individual development (compare Gare, 2007, pp. 112–113) and can transfer this understanding to support humanistic management in business, as well as general motivation for social change that is a base of our responsible life as citizens. Gare writes: “It is individuals who utilize the inherent reflexivity of the narrative form to question the narratives they have been encultured by and socialized into, who consider alternative versions of these narratives, who begin to construct their lives as unfinished stories” (Gare, 2007, p.112). Accordingly, the notions of personal and social freedom are rooted in one's realization of the multiplicity of stories we live in. And the only source for such realization is being introduced to the world of literature and philosophy.<sup>1</sup>

We seem to forget that there is no shortcut to a moral contribution in society. No matter how fast we can communicate and how much we simplify our needs and silence our social conscience by blending into the speed of stupefying modern life, our responsibility for human dignity and communication with fellow human beings cannot be forgotten. Without those

---

<sup>1</sup> The relationship between narratives and personal identity has been explored by Ricoeur in the essays in *Oneself as Another*. trans. Kathleen Blamey, (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1992).



constitutive moral ideas economy and technology become oppressive instead of supportive. They become tools of desocialisation instead of being the bonding parts of the structure of modern society. The role of education is to imprint the duty of perceiving business through the perspective of moral contribution for society. Otherwise education loses its necessary link with the idea of building better societies and guiding the young to partake in such activity.

There are several important factors that make a general shift in approach to humanistic education an urgent problem. The most powerful and evident are: the global crisis of verbal communication, the need of multidisciplinary approach in sciences and the speed of growth of business and technical schools comparing to others.

Teachers have to realize that if we refuse to start acting practically on the educational level, promoting the obligatory courses that develop humanistic skills and encourage conscious, moral and social development of students, the immense part of our intellectual culture will become mute for the next generations. The consequences are hard to predict, but our history has already taught us: we forget easily and it is highly difficult to reintroduce the intellectual pleasures in the consumption era. The responsibility that teachers bear may be the heaviest it has ever been. Writers and other creators of culture of communication have long lost their influence on most of young people. Music and film, however vivid and inspiring, are not useful media of reintroducing the conversation and communication skills on higher level. Preservation and restoration of verbal culture lies in the hands of education.

## REFERENCE LIST

1. Bruner, J. (1998). *The culture of education*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press
2. Gage, N. L., & Berliner, D. C. (1991). *Educational psychology* (5th ed.). Boston: Houghton Mifflin.
3. Gare, A. (2007). The Primordial Role of Stories in Human Self-Creation, *Cosmos and History: The Journal of Natural and Social Philosophy*, 3(1).
4. Goodson, I. F., Biesta, G. J. J., Tedder, M., & Adair, N. (2010). *Narrative learning*. London: Routledge.
5. Habermas, J. (1975). Moral Development and Ego Identity, *Communication and the Evolution of Society*, London: Heinemann.
6. Marquard, O. (1991). *In Defense of the Accidental*. *Philosophical Studies*, New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
7. Pirson, M., & Amann, W. (2011). *Humanistic Management Education - Concluding Observations and Suggestions*. Retrieved from <http://ssrn.com/abstract=1730383>
8. Suchodolski, B. (1992). *The Tragedy of Humanistic Education*. Extract from "The 40th Anniversary of the UNESCO Institute for Education", UIE Reports No. 6.
9. Veugelers, W. (2011). A Humanist Perspective on Moral Development and Citizenship Education. *Humanistic Education: From Theory to Practice*, 35: *Education and Humanism. Linking Autonomy and Humanity*.