

THE GREAT IDEAS ONLINE

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Archivist's Note: Dr. Adler had been critical of American education, beginning back in the 1930s. In about 1980 a group formed called the Paideia Group. It consisted of 22 people primarily from the educational world. They believed that in order to turn out to students who could read, write, analyze, and speak critically and coherently, the methods by which they were schooled must be dramatically changed.

Central to the group's recommendations was a weekly Socratic Seminar in which students discussed age appropriate original material.

Their work resulted in a 1982 book authored by Adler to which all members of the committee agreed called *The Paideia Proposal: an Educational Manifesto*. What follows is the outline Dr. Adler used when he gave a presentation about the book in 1983.

Ken Dzugan

THE PAIDEIA PROPOSAL: ITS SIGNIFICANCE FOR ENGLISH TEACHERS

Presentation by Dr. Mortimer Adler

October, 1983

I. *The Paideia Proposal*

A. Five related errors—widely prevalent—that the Paideia Proposal attempts to correct:

1. That only some, not all, are educable and have a right to aspire to become truly educated human beings...
2. That the process of education is completed in our educational institutions—during the years of basic schooling or in advanced schooling after that...
3. That teachers are the sole, primary, or principal causes of the learning that occurs in students...
4. That there is only one kind of teaching and learning—the kind that consists in the teaching lecturing or telling and the student learning what he hears said or finds in textbook assignments...
5. That schooling, basic or advanced, is primarily preparation for earning a living and will not hold the attention of students unless that is manifestly so...

B. *The three dedications* (Mann, Dewey, Hutchins) *and the even larger background* (Ortega, Mill, Newman, Loyola)

C. *The title*:

1. *Paideia*: Humanitas: general, human learning
2. *Manifesto*: a revolution—and what is involved in the accomplishment of the reform proposed
The ideal as a goal to be aimed at and achieved by a series of cumulative steps in the right direction
-- a change of direction: from down to top
-- every step in the right direction is progress
3. Much easier to state principles and policies than to implement them.
4. Two supplements forthcoming
 - a. *Paideia Problems and Possibilities*
 - b. *The Paideia Program*

D. *What the proposal is not*—

Not simply a return to “basics” in the popular sense: that, of course, but much more than that

Not a return to the classics (in the sense of going back to antiquity): but yes, in the sense of preserving permanent and abiding values and the traditions of our culture.

Not just an appeal for improvement in quality -for some, not all

Not elitist, since *for all*—and if elitist because of the high quality called for, then democratic elitism.

E *The distinguishing characteristics of the proposal*

1. That it takes democracy seriously and the commitment of a democratic society to a high quality of basic schooling for all the children—one track; the same objectives for all.
2. That it is concerned with all twelve years of compulsory schooling as an integrated unit, not just with secondary schooling or with elementary schooling, etc.
3. That, with the same objectives for all, the means must be the same, required curriculum for all.
4. That it calls for the elimination of all electives in the upper six years of schooling, and the elimination of all specialized job training throughout.
5. That it does not prescribe a curriculum for the whole country, but presents instead a framework within which any sound curriculum must be constructed in different ways by different school districts, etc.
6. That it regards basic schooling as preparation for continued learning, either in higher institutions or in adult life. To become an educated person is an accomplishment of one's mature years when all schooling, basic and advanced, is completed.

F. *The Seven Sentence Summary*

1. *Equal educational opportunity requires the same quality* of schooling for all the children; *not just* the same quantity.
2. That quality must be *general*, not specialized; *liberal*, not vocational; *humanistic*, not technical—thus fulfilling the meaning of the words *paideia* and *humanitas*—the *general learning* that should be in the possession of every human being. (Here comments on “humanitas” and “liberal”).
3. The objectives of basic schooling should be the same for all because all have the *same three elements* in their future—the *duties* of citizenship, the *demands* of work, and the *obligation* of each to make as much of himself or herself as possible.
4. These three common objectives can be achieved *only* by a *completely required* course of study with just *one* required elective—a second language.
5. The curriculum or courses of study is to be constructed within the framework of the three columns set forth on page 23: however it is constructed in detail it must include all *three kinds of teaching* and learning, integrally related to one another.

6. Individual differences, especially inequalities in natural endowment and natural background, call for compensatory efforts in the form of pre-school tutelage for those who need it and remedial instruction for those who need it.
7. Every school must have a principal who is truly the principal teacher in that school—its educational leader and not merely its administrative or clerical head.

II. *Two Important Comments on the Foregoing*

A. *Comment on “liberal” and “humanistic”*

1. These two words, currently used in a sense that they acquired only in the 20th century, conceal their original and traditional meanings—*from the Greeks to the end of the 19th century*.
2. Liberal in two uses traditionally
 - a. *Liberal education: liberal vs. vocational* for the sake of learning itself vs. for the sake of *earnings* (thus carpentry may be component of education, IF; but chemistry is not, if it is solely to become a chemical engineer, and thereby earn.) Also technology both ways
 - b. *Liberal arts: here liberal vs. non-liberal* (fine arts, not being useful arts, are not liberal arts)
 1. The seven liberal arts are the trivium and quadrivium
 2. Translated into contemporary terms these are the linguistic and the mathematical arts.
 - c. The gross misuse today—as when we speak of a liberal arts curriculum, in which the liberal arts may not be taught at all, and most of the other elective components in that curriculum are either *not arts* (*not skills*) or if arts, they are *literature* and *other fine arts*, *not the liberal arts*.
3. *Humanistic* vs. the humanities as currently referred to.
 - a. A humanistic education is simply a general education, not a specialized one:

in the Greek lexicon: *paideia* vs. *episteme*

in the Latin lexicon: *humanitas* vs. *scientia*
 - b. It is in this meaning of *paideia* that we get *encyclo-paideia*
 - c. But *paideia* or *humanitas* in this traditional sense—as also in *encyclopaedia*—includes mathematics, all the sciences, natural and social, just as much as it includes history, philosophy, and the fine arts.
 - d. The current corruption of that basic term occurs when we, in the 20th century, use the word “humanitas” not for what is truly *paideia* or “humanitas”, but only for certain highly specialized branches or scholarship or learning in fields other than mathematics and the sciences.

—The point is that both are equally specialized, and so do not belong to *paideia* or *humanitas* at all

—Whereas when all these subjects are approached from the generalist point of view, they all belong.

B. *The curricular framework: the three kinds of teaching and of learning:* (explication of the diagram on page 23.)

—fats, carbohydrates, and proteins

—degeneration of didactic teaching when not integrated with coaching and Socratic teaching.

III. *The Consequences for English Teachers*

A. Let me begin by reporting to you an event that took place in 1940 at a meeting in Chicago of The National Council of Teachers of English.

1. I. A. Richards and I were together on the same platform. Richards was an author and proponent of what was then called “basic English.”

2. This prompted me to entitle my address “What is Basic about English?” (It was published in *College English* in April, 1941.)

B. Permit me to quote from the opening section of that 1940 address, as published.

1. The history of the teaching of English reveals, I think, the gradual decay of the liberal arts and the progressive degradation of the curriculum to its present state.

2. On the one hand, the teacher of English is the most indispensable man on any faculty, for he is the only one left who is at all concerned with the liberal arts as the disciplines which train a mind for the most characteristic function of human life—communication.

With the progressive decomposition of the curriculum under the shattering impact of the elective system and the insidious encroachment of the sciences, especially the social sciences, upon the field of humane letters, the English teacher has become the last defender of the faith that something can be learned from books. I mean books -not textbooks; I mean great literature—not current journalism about current events.

3. On the other hand, and paradoxical though it seems, the very reasons which make the English teacher the indispensable man are the reasons why English departments and English courses should be completely abolished as such.

It is precisely because the English teacher is the last—and often a very frail—vestige of the liberal tradition in our education, it is precisely because he still cherishes literature and the liberal arts—though his devotion (under dire threats) is often secret and uncon-fessed—that the English teacher should commit academic suicide.

4. I am not recommending suicide as an empty gesture of despair. I am thinking of a militant martyrdom.

a. My simple thesis is that English—its courses, teachers, and departments -should be abolished in favor of the restoration of a truly liberal curriculum in secondary and collegiate education.

- b. The English teacher should cease to be a separate academic entity, only on the condition, of course, that every other teacher would become a teacher of English, or, to say more precisely what I mean, a teacher of liberal arts.

My main point is that what the English teacher is now trying to do, often half-heartedly, often unwittingly, and almost always inadequately, should be done by the whole faculty in a curriculum which is not atomized into courses or made chaotic by departmental prerogatives.

- c. Only if it is thus done can what the English teacher is trying to do be well done.

C. To which I would like to add excerpts from the closing section of that same address.

1. Discourse is heterogeneous, but the liberal arts are unified, and therefore all kinds of reading and writing must be done together and not under existing departmental separations.
2. If the aim, in teaching reading and writing, is not simply the ability to write or read a sentence or at most a paragraph, but rather a whole work, then the teaching of writing and reading must be undertaken by a comparative study of all the different types of works, for otherwise the student will lack the rhetorical distinctions and principles necessary for guiding him in the use of grammatical and logical or poetic techniques.
3. For the same reason that many English teachers now realize that it is necessary to acquaint the student with every poetic form—with regard to his skill in writing as well as his skill in reading—they should also see the general principle which is here involved.
4. If it is true that the student has not learned to write well or read well, from the point of view of imaginative compositions, if he can read only lyrics or only plays then it is more generally true that to possess the liberal arts of reading and writing, without qualification, he must be able to do every sort of writing and every sort of reading—at least every sort of reading.
5. Now this cannot be accomplished if English teachers restrict “literature” to belles-lettres; or, if when they extend their assignments to include other materials, such as philosophical essays or scientific works, they treat them all as if they were belles-lettres.
6. The liberal arts cannot be well taught unless in the teaching of them every different sort of book is read in the context of books of every other
7. I conclude, therefore, that as books are now read in most high schools and colleges—even if they were the great books, as unfortunately in many cases they are not—the reading of them is not done in a way that facilitates the major aim of liberal education, the development of liberal artists, the production of disciplined, as well as cultivated, minds.

D. When the Paideia Proposal’s differentiation of three kinds of teaching and of learning is fully understood, it transforms the role of the English teacher at the higher or secondary level—the departmentalized level—of basic schooling.

1. At the lower or elementary level, *all* classroom teachers should be, according to The Paideia Proposal, *unspecialized* English teachers.
 - a. That is, all should engage in coaching students in the development of all the language arts—the skills of reading and writing, speaking and listening.
 - b. And all should be Socratic teachers, conducting seminar discussions of books read—not just books written in English or the classics of English literature in poetry and prose, but books of every sort, in English or translation.
2. At the college level, where specialized elective courses predominate, the English teacher is a specialist who gives didactic instruction in the history of English literature or about the classics of English or comparative literature.
3. But at the higher or secondary level of basic schooling, the so-called English teacher has two special services to render, services not performed by other teachers at this level.
 - a. One is to give advanced coaching in all the language arts.
 - b. The other is to conduct seminars in the Socratic fashion by conducting discussions of books read—books of every variety and written in English or translated into English.
 - c. The phrase “English teacher” is an inappropriate name to designate these two teaching functions. It would be much more properly applied to those who teach English to foreigners as a second language, just as “French teacher” applies to those who teach French as a second language.
 - d. This is more than a matter of mere name-calling, which, it may be thought, would leave the English teacher, by any other name, smelling just as sweet.
4. The labels we use for certain subjects, and the expectations behind those labels accrued over the years, tend to confuse or obscure matters.
 - a. The word “English” as used in such phrases as “English course,” “English teacher,” or “English department” is treacherously ambiguous. It sometimes refers to coaching writing and reading skills, and less often to the correlative skills for speaking and listening. When “English teacher” refers to a teacher of skills, it should mean coaching in all basic skills of the language arts, not just writing.
 - b. An “English course” sometimes means a course of didactic instruction in the history of English literature, and sometimes it passes from that into a discussion of important literary works in the English language. It seldom becomes a Socratically conducted discussion of all forms of literature in all fields of subject-matter—not merely poetry or imaginative literature, but also significant books in history, in philosophy, in mathematics, in natural science, and so on.
 - c. Only when “literature” stands for books of every variety, some written in English or some in other languages, does the reference to literature in

Column One relate didactic instruction there to Socratic teaching concerned with the reading and discussion of books in Column Three.

- d. Only when “language” stands for both English and a foreign language and only when the language arts include all four of the basic operations—reading as well as writing, listening as well as speaking—does the reference to didactic instruction in language in Column One relate to coaching the language arts as prescribed in Column Two.

IV. *Concluding Remarks*

- A. I hope that what I have said about the significance of *The Paideia Proposal* for English teachers makes you enthusiastic about and proud of the contribution you can make in the future, to the restoration of the liberal arts and of general, humanistic learning at the level of basic schooling.
- B. If English teachers make that contribution by becoming mainly Column Two coaches and Column Three seminar leaders, then they should have no qualms or regrets about expunging from the vocabulary of our high schools such misleading terms as “English department,” “English courses,” and “English teacher.”

THE END



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