

New Frames for New Futures: Translators as Metaphor for the Value of a 21st Century Liberal Arts Education

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THE LIBERAL ARTS and, by extension, the humanities have in recent years endured significant criticism in public discourse. At the core of this criticism is the inability of liberal arts graduates to get jobs and concern as to how, or whether, the academy needs to help these graduates do so. This narrative is found in articles such as “5 Ways Liberal Arts Grads Can Actually Get Jobs,” which leads with the cynical statement: “you might not be as in demand as engineering grads, but you don’t have to regret your liberal arts degree” (Vanderkam). A more negative take is perpetuated in the headline of the *Forbes* article “New Study: Is No Degree Better than a Liberal Arts Degree?” For students, parents, and other key audiences with a significant stake in higher education, the dominant narrative that emerges as a result of repeatedly reading these headlines and articles is that the liberal arts seem to be worthless and impractical, especially in terms of employment. Many factors have perhaps contributed to this deficit narrative (economic anxiety, rise of STEM education, increasing tuition costs), but one area that deserves more consideration is how proponents of the liberal arts might develop alternative stories that push back against this tale of the liberal arts’ irrelevance in the 21st century employment landscape.

Clearly, liberal arts need a new narrative communicating what they offer students. As education journalist Kevin Kiley explains, “for the past few years, liberal arts colleges and the idea of liberal education have been losing the message war about the purpose of a college education, what a good education looks like, and how education should fit into the fabric of a nation.” Winning the message war, however, will require more than small changes or tweaks to these arguments. Rather, as Georgia Nugent, president of Kenyon University, suggests, liberal arts advocates “have to radically reimagine how we tell our story” (Kiley). In this paper, I imagine a new narrative for the liberal arts that is

both radical and traditional, constructed on the idea that a humanities-based liberal arts education prepares students for dynamic, meaningful careers in teaching them to be translators. As translators, graduates of the liberal arts develop a critical 21st century ability; through deep knowledge and experience of how language works, they know how to meaningfully communicate complex ideas and messages to different audiences. This idea, that the liberal arts prepare students to be translators who can use language powerfully and effectively across a range of audiences and purposes, forms a new story for the liberal arts, one which I propose here.

However, before we examine this concept of translator, it is necessary to delineate my argument and define the term “liberal arts,” especially its relation to the term “humanities.” Although, within academia, it is clear that the liberal arts and humanities describe two similar, though different kinds of educational tracks, in public discourse the terms are often used interchangeably to refer to areas of study that are not pre-professional majors (e.g., business, engineering, or other STEM fields). In a way, the liberal arts and humanities function semantically in the public arena as umbrella terms for study that has no clear connection to jobs beyond college. I use the term “liberal arts” to specifically describe a curriculum that requires students to develop both specific and broad-based knowledge as the result of taking courses across multiple subjects. At the core of this liberal arts curriculum are humanities courses such as history, English, philosophy, classics, theology, and modern languages. Thus, when I employ the term “liberal arts,” I am referring to an undergraduate curriculum comprised of multiple courses, the majority of which are located in the humanities. In arguing for the liberal arts, I am at the same time defending the humanities and its key role within that broad, multi-disciplinary curriculum.

Having established the definition, the next step is to examine the kinds of stories and arguments that have historically been made in defense of the liberal arts. One prominent story that is told is that the liberal arts promote critical thinking. This explanation for the liberal arts is found across the media landscape of higher education and is the language that colleges and universities use to explain what their liberal arts curriculum offers. On the academics portion of its website, Hamilton College states that its graduates will leave its liberal arts curriculum with strong “foundations in creative and critical thinking, writing and speaking.” The president of Gettysburg College, Janet Morgan Riggs, argues: “A liberal arts education teaches students how to think critically, communicate effectively, analyze information and solve problems” (Riggs). Jessica Kleiman, a liberal arts graduate and PR professional, writes in *Forbes* how her liberal arts experience “strengthened [her] critical thinking and writing skills” (Kleiman). Critical thinking, it is clear, is frequently deployed across multiple contexts as an explanation for the value of the liberal arts.

While perhaps used less frequently, the other story told about the value of the liberal arts can be characterized as “the pursuit-of-knowledge-itself” argument. This argument is illustrated by the educational historian, Paul Hirst, who contends, “Whatever else a liberal education is, it is not a vocational

education, not an exclusively scientific education [and] not a specialist education in any sense”; rather, it is “an education based fairly and squarely on the nature of knowledge itself” (qtd. in Scheuer). Donal Mulcahy underscores Hirst’s view with the observation that “proponents of traditional liberal education...have been contemptuous not only of utility but of the practical as a defining characteristic of education” (Mulcahy 179). For proponents of the “knowledge-itself” argument, the liberal arts are important because they encourage students to embrace the life of the mind.

To be sure, these two stories (critical thinking and “knowledge-itself”) about the value of the liberal arts are valid and compelling. What we need to consider, however, is whether or not these arguments meaningfully speak to the beliefs students and parents harbor regarding what is valuable in a college degree. Cognitive linguist George Lakoff’s theory of values-framing illuminates these rhetorical gaps between the two arguments for the liberal arts. Additionally, his theory aids in conceptualizing how new persuasive frames of the liberal arts might be generated. In his 2014 work *Don’t Think of an Elephant! Know Your Values and Frame the Debate*, Lakoff outlines his definition of framing and its significance in attempting to convey meaning to audiences:

Frames are mental structures that shape the way we see the world. As a result, they shape the goals we seek, the plans we make, the way we act, and what counts as a good or bad outcome of our actions. In politics our frames shape our social policies and the institutions we form to carry out policies. To change our frames is to change all of this. Reframing is social change. (xx)

Lakoff’s theory demonstrates that how we assign meaning to a story or message is significantly determined by the degree to which that story frame aligns with our values. When the values activated by a frame coalesce with our own, that message could be said to fit, or work. On the other hand, if a framing conveys values that do not fit with those that comprise our own worldview, the story fails to have any real meaning for us as individuals.

In politics, framing is ubiquitous. George W. Bush’s No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001 is one such example of how political framing is developed. The NCLB was created to establish common educational standards and measurements in the hopes of generating significant, nation-wide education reform. As is clear from its name, attempts to achieve buy-in from state and local governments, Congress, and the American public involved strategic framing. The short, easily recalled phrase “no child left behind” conveys values and beliefs that are tightly aligned with the values and beliefs of the American public. The language “no child left behind” reframes education reform as a patriotic act, casts the current education system in binary terms of a war between good and bad, and deploys imagery of innocent children who have been injured. Because of this framing, to vote against No Child Left Behind implies that one is anti-American and anti-children. Who, within this framing of the NCLB, could vote in favor of leaving a child behind in war?

What Lakoff's theory of values-framing and the NCLB example make clear is that language matters. As noted before, the framing in contemporary public discourse associates the liberal arts with notions of wastefulness and irrelevance and, it could be argued, presents the liberal arts as anti-technology. These negative images, depictions, and understandings of the liberal arts are consistently and repeatedly conveyed in the media. In addition to the examples already provided, this framing also appears in Tim Worstall's 2012 *Forbes* article, "Should We Abolish Liberal Arts Degrees? Quite Possibly, Yes," and in Patricia Cohen's 2016 *New York Times* article, whose headline ("A Rising Call to Promote STEM Education and Cut Liberal Arts Funding") illustrates the frequent comparison between the skyrocketing value of pre-professional majors and the falling stock of the liberal arts. Another example that activates the association between the liberal arts and lack of utility is Kentucky Governor Matt Bevin's likening of the liberal arts to a drag on taxpayer money. According to Bevin, "All the people in the world that want to study French literature can do so, they are just not going to be subsidized by the taxpayer" (Beam). The cumulative effect of these stories is that they become the only frame, or "mode of understanding" (Lakoff 33), through which the story of the liberal arts can be understood, and that story is clearly that the liberal arts are more or less useless.

In the face of this dominant narrative, what is needed for the liberal arts is a reframing, which Lakoff describes as the process of "accessing what we and like-minded others already believe unconsciously, making it conscious, and repeating it" (34). Over time, this new frame creates an alternative path of meaning through which the liberal arts can be understood.

Reframing the liberal arts, however, involves first identifying the kinds of values and beliefs students and parents bring to their understanding of college, and then imagining a new narrative of the liberal arts that can meaningfully align with those beliefs. Recent research indicates that parents and students both view college in terms of how it will help students get a job. According to a 2014 survey by the Cooperative Institutional Research Program at UCLA, roughly 85% of freshman responded that getting a better job was a major reason for attending college (Eagan et al.). Additionally, six in ten took into account a college's ability to help its graduates obtain good jobs when deciding where to attend. A 2014 survey by *Inside Higher Ed* and Gallup indicates that parents' perceptions of why their children should go to college echo the results of the student survey. Thirty-eight percent of parents responded that the most important reason for going to college was to get a good job. Clearly, the economic prospects are a prominent variable in how students and parents understand and perceive the role of higher education. An argument that attempts to persuade students and parents of the value of the liberal arts through promoting critical thinking is likely to fail, because the term "critical thinking" does not evoke any associations, ideas, or conceptual links to jobs or careers. There is clearly a conceptual distance between the values of students and parents and the values indicated by the critical thinking argument. This same distance characterizes the ineffectual nature of the pursuit of knowledge

argument, which promotes the idea of living the life of the mind but has little resonance with employment and jobs. To be sure, it is valid to argue that the liberal arts cultivate these passions and critical abilities in students. However, that the liberal arts do so is not helpful insofar as these abilities have no meaning in the frame, beliefs, and values that students and parents associate with what they must obtain from a college degree. Subsequently, to be persuasive, a new framing of the liberal arts must avoid the misalignments that characterize previous arguments and explanations and, instead, must develop language that addresses the notions of utility, economics, and value that are important to students and parents. The term “translator” has the potential to accomplish this alignment in offering answers to the concerns over future job prospects in the form of a concrete metaphor—the translator. The construct of the translator highlights a key ability that the liberal arts have always cultivated in students but whose articulation has not always been clear or robust—that as translators, students know how language works and know how to make language work. A deep understanding of the relationship between language and power, combined with knowledge of how to translate ideas and beliefs for multiple, diverse audiences to successfully negotiate a rapidly changing, globalized 21st century world, will be in high demand.

How, though, do the liberal arts develop understanding of language, its mechanism, and its potential uses? In a liberal arts curriculum, students will be exposed to multiple ways of knowing and thinking in humanities courses, yet in all of these courses they will invariably confront the complex processes through which humans create meaning through language. In their history, literature, English, and philosophy courses, students will learn how human meaning, activity, and understanding is structured and shaped by words, books, texts, speeches, and other myriad forms of discourse. In a classics course, a student might compose a paper comparing 18th and 19th century interpretations of Hellenistic poetry. That student’s encounter with the complexities of language in a classics course could be enacted, though in different form, in a history course, where she might be required to develop her own argument regarding the evolving nature of Americans’ collective memory of the Civil War throughout Reconstruction. In English, a literary review on the early decades of the discipline’s Canon Wars would allow this same student to see how debates over texts are bound up in larger discourses of education, class, race, gender, and sexual orientation, among others. This emphasis on the significance of race, class, gender, sexual orientation, and language might cross over into a course in rhetoric, where the student might be tasked with composing an op-ed for the school newspaper on transgendered students and bathrooms, acknowledging different voices in this debate. Although this liberal arts student is being exposed to specific disciplinary knowledge of classics, history, and English, she is at all times immersed in language, in both the study and use of it. Over four years, the result of a liberal arts student’s repeated examination and enactments of language is the development of a stable repertoire that can analyze, approach, and effectively fulfill many varied situations through language. She has become a translator, equipped with an

acute sensitivity for communicating knowledge and meaning in different contexts and domains.

How, though, might students and parents see this ability as a translator important to getting a job and forging a career? There are two realities of the 21st century workplace that explain why graduates must know how to use language effectively, be able to develop persuasive arguments, and explain complex issues clearly to different audiences. The first reason that the ability to communicate powerfully is critical to 21st century work is that people will switch jobs frequently. According to a 2015 article in *Fast Company*, the “median employee tenure for workers aged 25 through 34 is just 3.2 years now—which is 1.4 years less than the median tenure for all employees” (Hoffman). That most people will change jobs every three to four years is significant; over a lifetime, an individual might have more than ten jobs. The liberal arts focus on writing, communication, and language prepares students for this new mobility, which will require graduates to be able to effectively persuade each new potential employer that their background and experience is the right fit for that company. Liberal arts graduates will be able to translate how their skill set and knowledge aligns with the needs of the new employer, and their ability to do so will determine to a significant degree whether they get a job. Yet, it is not only in securing a job where the translator’s facility with language is vital. Upon securing a position at a company, the student’s ability to use and understand language as a way of becoming a valuable member will be critical. The new employee must adapt to quickly assimilate the communication practices and conventions unique to that organization. They will determine the company’s core values and how those values are manifested in the company’s e-mails, sales pitches, white papers, RFPs, and other forms of communication. A liberal arts graduate, as a result of crafting and developing complex arguments and messages in different humanities courses, has the knowledge and experience to draw upon the communication requirements for a new position or field, and to thrive. To be able to communicate effectively is a significant advantage for graduates today. Recent evidence reveals that companies across nearly every industry are finding communication skills wanting in their employees. According to the College Board, a panel created by the National Commission on Writing, top businesses are spending up to \$3.1 billion on writing training each year, the bulk of which goes to training for existing employees. The liberal arts translator already knows how to communicate and use language strategically, and this will be critical in helping her find new jobs and also in succeeding in those jobs once hired.

What makes this emerging mobility in the workforce even more complex is that automation and technology are increasingly rendering certain jobs obsolete while at the same time continuously creating new ones. Within this flux, how colleges conceptualize their role in preparing students for life beyond college becomes even more challenging. What kind of learning, experience, and knowledge prepares students for careers that might not yet exist? As Peter Cappelli, professor of management at the University of Pennsylvania’s Wharton School, notes, “nobody can predict where the jobs

will be—not the employers, not the schools, not the government officials who are making such loud calls for vocational training.”

While much is unknown about what kinds of specific knowledge will be valuable as new fields and jobs emerge in the next 10, 20, and 30 years, what is known is that language will continue to function as a central organ through which technology and industry evolve and transform.

If the aim of proponents of the liberal arts is to persuade the general public that a liberal arts education is the optimal education to effectively navigate a complex, mercurial 21st century workforce, we will need inspired and powerful framing that effectively demonstrates how liberal arts accomplish that. Not developing new stories and frames through which the liberal arts are seen as important and valuable in public discourse is to watch while others develop increasingly cynical stories and frames that mischaracterize what the liberal arts actually offer. If, however, the frame of translator and other similar stories can be deployed, repeated, and circulated, what can happen is that new understanding, value, and beliefs regarding the liberal arts become more pervasive. Perhaps it may one day be normal for a student in a liberal arts curriculum to respond to the perennial college question, “What are you going to do with that?” with a clear, persuasive response—that she will be a translator, a knowledge worker drawing upon rich discursive experiences from English, history, philosophy, classics, and modern language courses to navigate the always language-saturated challenges and complex conditions of contemporary life and work.

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