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Reflections on a liberal arts education: part II

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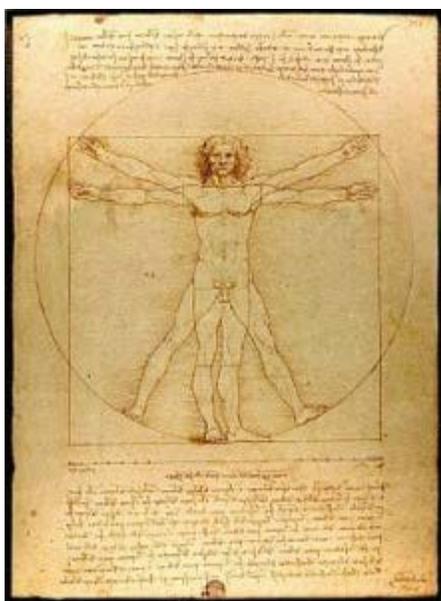
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Reflections on a Liberal Arts Education: Part II



Technology and the Liberal Arts

Technology and the liberal arts are sometimes characterized as being at odds with one another. (Though, of course, the liberal arts are more accurately called the liberal arts and sciences.)

STEM fields (science, technology, engineering and math) are often touted for their practical, vocational opportunities while the liberal arts, especially the humanities, are often caricatured for their supposed lack of applicability. “What are you going to do with a degree in philosophy, English, art history……?” (See

[here](#) , [here](#) , [here](#) and [here](#))

Such simplistic characterizations of STEM or the liberal arts are neither realistic or helpful when thinking about education either for individuals or society. A well-educated person needs to know something about both sciences and the humanities, almost regardless of their vocational choice. Society and the economy obviously benefit from all fields of knowledge and, maybe most importantly, from the interactions between fields.

I was reminded of this important point, among others, when reading *The Innovators* by Walter Issacson, a fascinating history of the digital revolution from Charles Babbage and Ada Lovelace to Steve Jobs and Google. (Issacson also wrote a recent biography of Jobs.)

At first blush, the digital revolution might seem to be all



about STEM, but Issacson's thoughtful and "tenderhearted history" **draws some important lessons** that are relevant for students and educators across all fields.

First, throughout the book Issacson considers the relative importance of lone wolf inventors/geniuses versus collaborations and teams in bringing about the digital revolution, and he comes down firmly on the side of the latter.

First and foremost...creativity is a collaborative process. Innovation comes from teams more often than from the lightbulb moments of lone geniuses. This is true of every era of creative ferment.

Furthermore, Issacson writes:

The digital age may seem revolutionary, but it was based on expanding the ideas handed down from previous generations. The collaborations were not merely among contemporaries but also between generations. The best innovators were those who understood the trajectory of technological change and took the baton from innovators who preceded them....The most productive teams brought together people with a wide array of specialties.

Second, Issacson also makes an interesting observation about how collaborations best succeed:

Even though the Internet provided a tool for virtual and distant collaborations, another lesson of the digital-age innovations is that, now as in the past, physical proximity is beneficial. There is something special...about meetings in the flesh that cannot be replicated digitally.

A lesson that residential educational institutions live out every day, with students working and

playing together.

Finally, Issacson concludes with the most important lesson of the digital revolution: even as computing machines get faster, more versatile and increasingly powerful, people bring an irreplaceable element to the human-machine symbiosis. Quoting IBM research director John Kelly, “The machines will be more rational and analytical. People will provide judgment, intuition, empathy, a moral compass, and human creativity.”

Humans think different. Issacson writes:

Human creativity involves values, intentions, aesthetic judgments, emotions personal consciousness, and a moral sense. These are what the arts and humanities teach us—and why those realms are as valuable a part of education as science, technology, engineering, and mathematics. If we mortals are to uphold our end of the human-computer symbiosis, if we are to retain a role as the creative partners of our machines, we must continue to nurture the wellsprings of our imagination and originality and humanity.

In 1959, English novelist and chemist C. P. Snow famously wrote of the divide between “Two Cultures,” the arts and the sciences. Issacson’s powerful history of the digital revolution reminds us of the continuing need to link those two areas of intellectual endeavor for the thriving of individuals and the betterment of society, which is what a great liberal arts education is all about.

By [Michael Hemesath](#) | February 2nd, 2018 | Categories: [Higher Education](#) | [0 Comments](#)

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