CHAPTER 6

Diversifying the Liberal Arts Curriculum in an Asian Context

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INTRODUCTION

The liberal arts approach to undergraduate education has three basic components. It assumes that learning in breadth across the curriculum is still important at the undergraduate level, and that specialization in a discipline or profession is only part of what should be accomplished in the classroom. It also encompasses learning outside the classroom, in a residential setting—it is commonly claimed that what students learn outside the classroom, by living with one another and through organizing student activities, is as important as what happens within the classroom. And the pedagogical approach favors independent thinking, in the form of individual and group projects, writing assignments and discussion, rather than,

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C. S. Sanger and N. W. Gleason (eds.),

Diversity and Inclusion in Global Higher Education,

https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-15-1628-3_6

or in addition to, high stakes examinations.¹ As this philosophy of teaching spreads across the globe, the residential aspects and the pedagogical aspects have roughly similar issues to what have been faced in American colleges and universities, where this ethos has been in place for over a century. But the implementation of a liberal arts curriculum, in particular the trade-offs and challenges associated with the breadth curriculum, can look very different in Asia and other parts of the world.

The depth component of the curriculum typically consists of a major in a discipline or well-defined interdisciplinary area, comprising approximately half the course work for the degree, often culminating in some kind of large senior project. There is little disagreement on what a major looks like—the program of a typical Physics major or Economics major looks much the same from institution to institution. Approaches to curricular breadth, by contrast, vary widely from one liberal arts institution to another. In many cases they take the form of *distribution* requirements, in which students are asked to take a certain number of courses from particular categories (science, humanities, writing, arts, etc.) without regard to the specific content of the particular courses. The precise definition of the categories, and the number of courses required in each, is subject to revision and change in this model, and the rules vary across different institutions.

The principal argument in favor of the distribution system is that it generates faculty and student satisfaction with the classes. When faculty are allowed free rein over what they teach and how they teach it, they teach to their passions and generally do it very well—significantly better than if they are obliged to teach to a set curriculum. When the students can choose from a range of classes that satisfy a particular distribution

¹The history of the liberal arts approach in the United States is sketched in Andrew Delbanco, *College: What It Was, and Should Be* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), which also provides a critique of the current situation. A thoughtful defense of the liberal arts is offered by the current President of Wesleyan University Michael S. Roth, *Beyond the University: Why Liberal Education Matters* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014). There have also been many fierce critiques of higher education in the United States today. Two of the most influential are Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1987); William Deresiewicz, *Excellent Sheep: The Miseducation of the American Elite and the Way to a Meaningful Life* (New York: Free Press, 2014). Interestingly, neither of these critiques attacks the concept of a liberal arts education as such—both argue, in different ways, that the approach itself is good, but has been perverted and betrayed by current educational practices.

requirement, they pick the instructors and the subject matter they prefer and are generally happy with their choices.

But there are some serious disadvantages to the distribution system. Most notably, there is no way to generate a coherent curriculum. The courses taken by students outside their major are items selected from a smorgasbord of offerings and do not generally build on or relate to each other. Students also often pick courses they are already comfortable with, whether the comfort zone pertains to subject matter, to instructional style, or (as is often the case) the identity of their fellow students. Within the social sciences, for example, one tends to end up with courses in gender studies taken almost exclusively by students who are already committed feminists, and investment strategy courses selected largely by (predominantly male) future financiers, where the liberal arts ethos might suggest that the opposite would be preferable. Thus, the distribution system often segregates students rather than bringing them together, and narrows and reinforces rather than broadens their intellectual horizons.

But distribution systems are not the only choice for the “breadth” part of a liberal arts education. There is also a tradition of a “core” curriculum—a series of classes which all students take together. This tradition lives on in some American institutions, notably at Columbia and Chicago universities, where all undergraduates take the “core.” In the Directed Studies program at Yale, which is an option selected by about 10% of the students, students also pursue a core curriculum.

The advantages of a core curriculum, as practiced at these institutions and others, are many. First, it generates a shared experience among the students. This is particularly valuable when the students come from a wide range of backgrounds, as the tendency to fall into silos—linguistic, disciplinary, ethnic, or cultural—is mitigated when everyone is reading the same books at the same time, thus providing something to talk about across boundaries. At residential liberal arts institutions with distribution systems, students are generally not in the same classes as each other, so there is surprisingly little conversation between students about academics, and thus the valuable shared living experience does not extend to intellectual matters. In a core curriculum, students can be assigned to small classes or discussion sections in an intentional way, mixing cultures, previous background, academic interests and so on, so that they realize the full benefit of a diverse population in the classroom. This results in students finding themselves both in situations where they are more knowledgeable than their classmates and in situations where they are relatively ignorant or

poorly prepared. If handled correctly (a significant pedagogical challenge that requires thought and sensitivity from the faculty), this can be used to instill both humility and confidence. Another advantage of a mandated common curriculum is that faculty advising can go deeper than simply a discussion of what courses the student should elect. This is sometimes disconcerting to the faculty: I recall one colleague asking plaintively what he was supposed to talk to the students about if they already knew what courses they would take.

The fact that students are all taking the same courses provides an appealing format, which many institutions use. All students attend weekly lectures—these supplement the readings that all students are doing, providing a shared experience for the students. It also provides an avenue through which the faculty showcase their expertise and enthusiasm. Each faculty member gives one or two lectures per semester, which can be more carefully prepared than if they were giving a whole semester of lectures, and the students get an early opportunity to sample the style and expertise of a large swathe of the faculty. But the bulk of the teaching is done in small seminars, which typically meet several times per week, each taught by a single member of the teaching team. It is in the seminars that the primary teaching and learning is done, through a discussion led by the faculty member. Since the faculty members cannot be domain experts for most of the readings, they can present themselves as guides and mentors, rather than as authorities, throughout the semester. In this way the liberal arts focus on independent creative thought is not just requested of the students, but is modeled by the faculty.

The teaching teams are themselves an important positive consequence of this type of course design. Through their colleagues, faculty members become acquainted with areas of scholarship somewhat distant from their own, which can be particularly useful when those areas are culturally relevant to groups of students within the institution. The teaching teams also function as pedagogical workshops, in which the faculty can exchange ideas and techniques about teaching in a more organic way than through events sponsored by teaching and learning centers or otherwise initiated by the administration. The teams can also serve as personal support groups for the faculty, particularly for new and young members of the team, and as incubators for new ideas for the institution as a whole.

Despite these advantages, there is a profound complexity to core curricula, which is why they have largely (although not entirely) been abandoned in American undergraduate liberal arts programs. That is the basic

question of what should be in the core. The stakes could hardly be higher: every student at the institution will experience whatever is part of the core; many students will not encounter anything that is not in the core and outside their major. As the intellectual and cultural worlds of modern university have become increasingly diversified, faculty views on what every student should know and do have fragmented. This question has also become enmeshed in larger issues of diversity and inclusion within higher education and throughout society.

An interesting example of the disputes over core curricula in the United States is the recent controversy at Reed College in Oregon USA over their “Humanities 110” course.² This is a year-long course, taken by all first-year students, which serves as the centerpiece of their breadth curriculum. For many years, Humanities 110 featured an in-depth study of the ancient Mediterranean world, considered to provide the underpinnings of modern culture. Recently, students’ groups and some faculty have mounted increasingly vehement protests against this curriculum, accusing it of a racist overemphasis on the foundations and achievements of white European civilization. Students held silent protests during lectures, causing considerable consternation among sympathetic faculty giving the lectures, and more radical groups insisted on being given time during the lectures to present their views, which the faculty and administration rejected. The argument that the concept of “white” was an anachronism in relation to the ancient Middle East was not persuasive, and a planned re-examination of the curriculum was moved forward. In the end, the first semester continued to be focused on the ancient Middle-East and on Athens, but the second semester was divided into two modules, one on the evolution of Tenochtitlan/Mexico City from Aztec

²This controversy was covered extensively in the press. See Colleen Flaherty, “Diversifying a Humanities Course,” April 12, 2018, <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2018/04/12/responding-student-criticism-its-foundational-humanities-course-too-white-reed>; Vimal Patel, “Students Said a Keystone Course Was Racist: Here’s What Professors Did About It,” April 11, 2018, <https://www.chronicle.com/article/Students-Said-a-Keystone/243095> for reports from higher education journals. For a relatively polite version of the more caustic view typical of conservative news media, see Katherine Timpf, “Campus Activists: Humanities 110 Course Should Not Include White Authors,” May 8, 2018, <https://www.nationalreview.com/2018/05/campus-activists-humanities-110-course-should-not-include-white-authors/>.

to Spanish to modern Mexican civilization, and the other on the aesthetics and politics of the Harlem renaissance in the early twentieth century.³ This has not satisfied the student activists, who are now campaigning for the addition of a unit on African civilizations, for the emphasis on Athens in the first part of the course to be replaced by a focus on Jerusalem or Cairo, and for the module on New York City to be broadened to include Motown and other influences.⁴

It is a fascinating dispute, from curricular, cultural, and behavioral standpoints. But it contains a giant hole: *where is Asia?* Over half the world's population seems to be completely missing from the conversation. Africa vs "the west." Cairo vs Athens. Detroit vs New York. But no mention whatsoever of anything from Mumbai to Tokyo to Jakarta. It is of a piece with American demographic categories, which are typically divided into "white," "black," "Hispanic," and "Asian." Of these categories, "white" is considered the dominant culture, while "black" and "Hispanic" are "underrepresented minorities" for which fierce arguments are being made for increased representation, in the curriculum, in the student body, and in the ranks of the faculty. But "Asian" is a category of ambivalent valence which is generally not included either in efforts to support "traditional values" or in efforts to increase diversity.⁵

³For the current and past reading lists and syllabi of the course, see Reed College, "Humanities 110," <https://www.reed.edu/humanities/hum110/>.

⁴For a statement of activist student reaction to the new curriculum can, see Reedies Against Racism, January 31, 2018, <https://www.facebook.com/reediesagainstr4cism/posts/this-morning-nigel-nicholson-dean-of-faculty-and-libby-drumm-chair-of-humanities/1619940544751479/>.

⁵There is currently a legal case being pursued against Harvard University on behalf of Asian-American students who the suit claims have been discriminated against in the admissions process. See Katie Reilly, "As the Harvard Admissions Case Nears a Decision, Hear from 2 Asian-American Students on Opposite Sides," *TIME*, March 12, 2019, <https://time.com/5546463/harvard-admissions-trial-asian-american-students/>; Eric Hoover, "At One Final Hearing, Harvard and Students for Fair Admissions Squared Off: Here's What Happened," February 12, 2019, <https://www.chronicle.com/article/At-One-Final-Hearing-Harvard/245695>. But it is interesting that the originator of the suit, Edward Blum, was previously prominent in suits arguing against affirmative action for black and Hispanic students, as discussed Matthew J Johnson, "How the Latest Front Attacking Affirmative Action Might Backfire Against the Harvard Case", *Slate*, April 26, 2019, <https://slate.com/news-and-politics/2019/04/affirmative-action-harvard-case-edward-blum-university-of-california.html>. I am among those who believe that this suit is a stalking-horse for anti-affirmative action arguments, rather than a good faith effort on behalf of the Asian-American students.

In the United States, neither the “traditional” core curricula, nor the proposed revised versions feature Asian literature, history, art, philosophy, or politics in any significant way. The Reed controversy perfectly demonstrates the situation. The curriculum has gone from a full year on the foundations of western civilization, to half a year on those foundations, and a quarter each focused on the African-American experience in New York, and on the development of Hispanic culture in Mexico. And the ongoing controversy is on whether Africa is sufficiently represented. Asia is simply not part of the conversation at all, either of the traditionalists or the reformers.

So, I would argue that the concept of “diversity” as it is discussed and disputed in American universities, is itself in drastic need of diversification. It is hard to accept a definition of “diversity” that excludes over half of the world’s population, or flattens an extraordinary range of cultures and experiences into the single category of “Asian,” and then either puts that category to the side or uses it as a proxy in battles between “traditional values” (represented by white European and American cultures) and “diversity and inclusion” (focused on black and Hispanic cultures). In what follows, I will recount one particular effort to include Asia in a core curriculum, and draw some lessons for others who might wish to make the attempt.

THE YALE-NUS COLLEGE COMMON CURRICULUM

Yale-NUS College is a liberal arts college located in Singapore, developed jointly by Yale and by the National University of Singapore (NUS). The institution was formally founded in 2011, began operations in 2013, graduated its first class of students in 2017, and is now in a steady state of operations, with a student body of 1000 (50% Singaporean, 50% from the rest of the world) and a faculty of over 100, most on long-term or tenured contracts. The institution offers 14 majors across the full range of liberal arts and sciences, and a number of joint and double degree programs with schools within NUS and Yale. The faculty are an autonomous group, selected especially for Yale-NUS (although tenured faculty also hold tenure through NUS) augmented by frequent visitors from the two founding institutions.

It was decided early on that Yale-NUS would have a “common” curriculum that all students would take, rather than a distribution system similar to those of its parent institutions. In this way, it was hoped that a

coherent curriculum, encompassing “Asia and the world” could be implemented, and the culturally diverse student body and faculty could be brought together. During an “incubation” year prior to the arrival of the first cohort of students, three dozen faculty members and administrators worked together to devise this curriculum. In the course of this work, a founding document was produced⁶ describing and explaining the choices that were made. Here I will discuss only the parts of the Yale-NUS common curriculum that pertain to the humanities, and are thus parallel to the “core” curricula in the United States, but it should be noted that the common curriculum also covered the social and natural sciences, an interesting curricular experience in itself.

I had the honor to serve as the inaugural Dean of Faculty of Yale-NUS College, which meant that I led the faculty hiring process, and was one of the leaders of the development of the curriculum. These two activities were interestingly entwined—we devised an outline of the common curriculum, which prompted us to hire faculty covering the areas in which we expected to need expertise; those new colleagues refined and advanced the curriculum, prompting more hiring, and so on. Throughout, we concentrated on hiring faculty who were excited to develop and teach this new curriculum. Our hiring process featured workshops involving candidates for positions across the disciplines, who were asked to discuss curricular matters with each other and current members of the faculty, and were evaluated on their enthusiasm and effectiveness in this situation. By hiring with the explicit understanding that the common curriculum would be at the center of activity for all faculty, we managed to avoid some (but not all) of the difficulties of creating a new common curriculum posed by the increasing diversity of faculty background and expertise.

I am in an unusual and somewhat awkward position in discussing the development and execution of the humanities part of the common curriculum. My scholarly expertise lies far from the humanities: I am an astrophysicist. My personal background is firmly rooted in the west—I had never even visited any part of Asia prior to the age of 40. Thus, I have neither personal nor professional expertise in many of the crucial issues, and indeed for most of my life I have myself embodied

⁶The report, entitled *Yale-NUS College: a new community of learning*, contains a detailed discussion of the goals and philosophy of the new curriculum. See Bryan Garsten, Rajeev Patke, Charles Bailyn, Jane M. Jacobs, Kang Hway Chuan, and Bryan Penprase, *Yale-NUS College: A New Community of Learning* (New Haven: Yale University, 2013).

the American neglect of Asia that I discussed above. So, I approach these questions not from any position of expert knowledge or understanding, but from the perspective of a well-meaning but admittedly naïve administrator trying to organize the best learning experience for a globally diverse student body.

The overall structure of the Yale-NUS common curriculum involved a four-semester sequence of courses, in which the fraction of the students' coursework occupied by the common curriculum, as opposed to electives and courses in their majors, gradually diminished. In the first semester, all the courses were common; in the second semester three courses were common and one was elective; in the third semester there were two common courses, and in the fourth semester one course—the major was selected during the fourth semester.⁷ The humanities portion of the common curriculum consisted of two courses in the first year, one entitled “Literature and the Humanities” (abbreviated LitHum) and one entitled “Philosophy and Political Thought” (abbreviated PPT). Together, these courses comprise half of every student's course of study in their first year. Both were structured with one lecture in common each week, and two weekly seminar meetings with 15–18 students in each seminar. Given the student population, which started with 150 students per year and evolved to 250 in steady state, there were between 10 and 14 sections in each course. Some instructors (but not all) taught two sections, which resulted in teaching teams of between 6 and 10 different instructors. The basic learning goal of both first-semester humanities courses was to present students with a global curriculum in the humanities that lived up to the vision statement of the new College which references “in Asia,

⁷There were also two courses in the “common” curriculum that were to be taken in the third and fourth year, chosen among a list of options (and in this way more like a distribution requirement). The system has since been modified to eliminate the common curriculum course in the fourth semester and one of the courses in the last two years. This was done in part because the sequencing for the majors proved to be too cramped, and in part because of difficulties associated with some of the common courses themselves. However, the humanities courses discussed here have been retained, although their content continues to evolve. The current version of the Yale-NUS common curriculum can be found here. Yale-NUS College, “Common Curriculum,” <https://www.yale-nus.edu.sg/curriculum/common-curriculum/>.

for the world.”⁸ Thus, the outlook would be global, with a particular focus on Asia.

The concept of “Asia” is of course problematic in itself. In cultural terms, there isn’t really any such thing. One can perhaps identify a coherent culture and history associated with China, or Japan, or India, or the Islamic middle east, or various other regions and polities. But by lumping all of these together into “Asia,” one broadens the category so much that it becomes hard to identify any unifying characteristics or cultural coherence at all. At first glance, one might as well go all the way, and talk about “the world” without specifying “Asia” as a particular focus. But Yale-NUS is situated in Singapore, which serves as an entrepot for a large fraction of the geographical region generally denoted as “Asia.” Chinese, Malay, and Tamil cultures and languages are all regarded as native and are bound together inside a historically British city. So, the attempt to formulate a curriculum that really did represent Asia in some broad sense was necessary in a way that might not be true of an institution located in China, or India, or Japan, or the Gulf States. We could not fall back on a particular culture as a center of our curriculum, or even, as the new Reed curriculum does, as a center with strongly centrifugal elements attached to it. We needed to face up to the challenges of a curriculum without any specific cultural center at all.

As we considered how such a curriculum might work, a key first move was to escape from the idea of a “canon”—a group of works thought to be the best and most important works that could be studied. This idea of a canon is the basis of the traditional western core curricula, as well as offshoots like Norton anthologies and libraries of great works, and so on. But when one is exploring a range of different cultures, with none more central to the endeavor than the others, the concept of a canon is profoundly problematic, as it results in an inescapable valuation of particular works and the cultures they emerge from as superior to others, which is precisely what needs to be avoided. So, it’s important to view the works selected as representative of their cultures, rather than being in any sense “the best.” With this approach, one could choose works based on the enthusiasm of the faculty members who comprised the teaching

⁸The vision statement of the new college took a form similar to a haiku: “A community of learning / Founded by two great Universities / in Asia, for the world.” This vision was strongly reinforced throughout the early days of the college, to the extent that the first student rock band adopted the name “Community of Learning.”

team, and in so doing harness the passions and teaching excellence that are the best features of the distribution system.

The same principle applied to the different cultures under study. As the students and faculty at Reed College have discovered, there is simply no way to incorporate every culture that merits inclusion into a one-year syllabus. Deciding what texts to read based on who “merits” inclusion is a recipe for divisive cross-cultural antagonism. We briefly contemplated subcourses focused on China, India, the West and so on, but this was clearly unworkable, simply in terms of available time. And even if it were feasible, the goal cannot be to include everything—the world is simply too big, and if nothing is left out, then everything will be addressed so superficially as to be worthless.⁹ Rather, an appropriate goal might be to encompass a broad enough range so that every student (and perhaps every faculty member) is faced during the course with something that is profoundly strange to them.

These considerations argue strongly against a curriculum that is fixed from year-to-year. The exclusion of particular texts, and even of whole cultures, can’t be justified as a permanent feature of the curriculum. A multi-cultural setting in the modern world must have some commitment to inclusivity—students, faculty, and outside sponsors and observers will insist upon it. The small number of texts that can be read in a single common curriculum course cannot fully manifest such inclusivity. But a rotating series of works over many years can come much closer. Of course, a given student only takes the course once. So considerable effort has to be taken to convey that the reasons that particular works and cultures are studied in a given year are not a reflection of a valuation of the intrinsic worth of the texts and cultures selected. This can be a hard message to get across since students expect to be shown “the best.” So, it needs to

⁹An interesting example of this problem is presented by the “World History” advanced placement course available in many US high schools. This course became so diffuse that the decision was recently made to eliminate the ancient world, and start the curriculum in the Renaissance. This brought immediate objections that the choice of the late fifteenth century as a starting point was profoundly Eurocentric, so the start date was moved back to the twelfth century (see CollegeBoard, “AP World History,” <https://apcentral.collegeboard.org/courses/ap-world-history/course/updates-2019-20> for a description of the new version). This new version, entitled “World History: Modern” will be introduced in the 2019–2020 academic year, so it remains to be seen how it will work out. But any restriction on time or place will be more appropriate for some cultures than for others, so in a sense “world history” is impossible, as it must contain either contain everything, or some aspects of “the world” will be favored over others.

be continually reinforced by the faculty and the administration, both in discussions on a particular set of readings in a given semester, and across time.

An advantage of choosing from a wide range of works that cycle through the curriculum is that one can choose a selection of works associated with key issues in the culture and in the lives of the students. In the case of the Yale-NUS common curriculum, the PPT course started with Confucian thought, and the LitHum course started with the Ramayana. These choices had the advantage that they highlighted two different Asian traditions at the start of the courses. But there were other advantages, associated with the specific content of these works. One of the key aspects of Confucian thought is the question of what an “educated gentleman” ought to know, and how such a person ought to behave. This is a question of immediate import for students embarking on a liberal arts education within a society that has traditionally valued more instrumental forms of education. The ideas can be directly connected to what the students are experiencing as first-year college students, and are thus less abstract than, for example, the issues of reality and illusion associated with Plato’s Cave. The Ramayana is an interesting place to start the discussion of epic, since, unlike Homer, it remains an oral tradition in many parts of the world, and thus the transition from an oral to a written culture can be explored directly.

But changing the curriculum year-to-year presents a problem from the faculty perspective in terms of time commitment and preparation. Preparing to teach a whole new set of texts each year would be a monumental effort, and would likely result in weaker teaching overall. So much of the course should persist from one year to the next. It is also the case that faculty members will likely rotate in and out of the teaching teams, to accommodate departures and arrivals, study leaves, the need for a full slate of advanced courses in the majors, and so on. Since the need for continuity and change applies both to the faculty and to the curriculum, it seems wise to associate them. That is, new faculty in the teaching team will bring with them new works to read and discuss, replacing those associated with faculty who are no longer part of the teaching team. This also ensures that faculty are able to present the works and issues that most concern them in the lectures.

Two examples of works that featured in the first version of LitHum, but subsequently rotated out, were the sixteenth-century-Chinese novel “Journey to the West,” and a selection of Persian ghazals. Journey to the

West seemed like a natural choice—it features stories that are still widely known in local cultures, serves as a foundation of the modern novel, and uses the term “west” to mean India, a welcome change of perspective for those like myself whose life and thought are centered in Europe and the Americas. We paired this with Cervantes’ “Don Quixote,” which plays a comparable role in the development of the European novel, and is often featured in western core curricula. But the combination of these two works proved to be too much reading for the time available, and without the pairing, *Journey to the West* seemed less crucial, and other works were substituted. The ghazals relied on the scholarly expertise of a particular faculty member, and when she left the institution, the use of these particular works proved to be hard to maintain. Thus, shifts in the reading list can come about for reasons of course coherence, and specifics of the faculty teaching team, as well as from deeper considerations of relevance to the educational mission.

One general anxiety was whether there would be anything to connect the different works from different cultures. Within a single culture—China, India, the West—different works speak to each other because the later authors had in fact read the earlier authors. Thus, Virgil reads Homer, and Dante reads Virgil, and Milton reads Dante, and so on down to the beginning of the twentieth century when things start to get complicated. No such chain of influences exists when one switches cultures—at least not until the European imperialists imposed western culture on the rest of the world, an interaction which presents problems of its own. So we considered various ploys to try to make sure the texts studied were not isolated from each other—we considered organizing by themes (“justice” and “family” for example) as we were doing with the common curriculum course in the social sciences; we considered sequences within one culture: mini-courses on China, on Islam, on the West, and so forth.

We needn’t have worried. The faculty and the students brought their own sensibilities to bear on the works, and made the connections themselves. What connected the works was that they were being read in this particular place, by these particular people, together. The common curriculum not only used joint study of specific works to bind together the community of learning—it used the community to unify the works.

Two examples can stand-in for a whole host of connections that cropped up as these courses were being taught. First was a moment during the LitHum course, during the study of the ancient Greek classic,

Homer's *Odyssey*. The lecturer was discussing Odysseus's universal characteristics—he has attributes of male and female; god and mortal; Greek and barbarian. The lecturer then pointed out the relevance of the work of the fourth-century-Chinese Philosopher Mengzi on questions of taxonomy and the “rectification of names” in the Confucian tradition. Since everyone in the lecture hall had been reading Mengzi in Philosophy and Political Thought, the other first-semester humanities course, a connection was forged, not just between two traditions, but between all the students and faculty present for the lecture. Mengzi and Homer had, of course, no direct link between them—but the connection is real, even though it was created in a twenty-first-century classroom.

Another example came in another LitHum lecture on Greek literature, this time about the great female heroes Antigone and Medea. The first forty minutes of the lecture could have been lifted directly from a Directed Studies lecture at Yale, focused purely on a close reading of aspects of the works themselves. But then at the end, the lecturer moved to the early twentieth century and described the circumstances of one of the first translations of the ancient Greek dramatist Euripides into Chinese. The translator (a woman) had apparently also written a forward, in which she noted the emasculation of China by the Japanese occupation, and urged Chinese men to adopt the same kind of heroism as the female protagonists of the plays. A better example of the applicability of enduring literary themes to situations unanticipated by the authors would be hard to come by.

As noted, one consequence of the greater range of the material is strain on the faculty, who must all become familiar with texts far outside their fields of expertise, and that in some cases they may not even have heard of before. This is particularly difficult for the junior faculty who have less teaching experience, and who are often already troubled by issues of authority in the classroom. At Yale-NUS, we were fortunate to have an “incubation year” in which planning for the curriculum and for the institution took place for a year before the students arrived. This was essential for the development and delivery of the common curriculum. For example, the faculty recruited expert colleagues who created a six-week reading

course on Chinese philosophy, an area of the curriculum that was particularly unknown to many of our philosophy faculty, who had generally been trained in American departments focusing on analytic philosophy.¹⁰

One difficulty we encountered was the incorporation of specific skills into common courses that were conceived of as focused on content areas—on texts and analysis. Where in the common curriculum did one learn a foreign language? Practice writing and speaking skills? Learn statistics? In LitHum and PPT, the key question was writing—while communication is an essential skill in all disciplines, the textual basis of study in the humanities necessitates a focus on reading and writing, so these skills are often associated with study in the humanities. This connection may be too narrow. There are many kinds of communication crucial to the modern age that are remote from the traditional academic essay. For example, YouTube videos and PowerPoint presentations are key forms of communication across the globe today, and there is much that can be taught and learned about effective use of these modes. Nevertheless, argumentative writing remains a crucial skill, and at Yale-NUS, the place we sought to teach this skill was in the humanities courses.

Embedding writing within LitHum and PPT presented some difficulties. First, the level of preparation and enthusiasm among the teaching team for skills-based teaching varied significantly. Given the preparation necessary to teach the texts as such, additional preparation for the pedagogical challenge of teaching writing was difficult to fit in. We standardized the number and length of the required essays, but in the first iterations of the course, there was great diversity in the level of focus on the craft of writing. We considered courses or submodules on writing as such, and also outsourced some of the specific work of counseling students to the Writer's Center. But the results were uneven, and it has taken considerable effort to build effective writing instruction into the common

¹⁰ Philosophy presents particular problems for an Asian-oriented curriculum in terms of training for faculty members. Two prominent American scholars of Chinese philosophy (both of whom have been part of the Yale-NUS faculty) wrote in the *New York Times* that the absence of non-western philosophy in American and European departments was so severe that the departments should be renamed "European Philosophy." This prompted comments, including some who argued strongly that Asian philosophy should indeed not be included within "Philosophy," but rather in "Religious Studies" or "Asian Studies." This in turn prompted one of the authors to expand the arguments in favor of greater inclusion of Asian philosophy into a full length book.

curriculum. This effort continues today—Yale-NUS has recently restructured aspects of the Writer’s Center and its relationship with the common curriculum, so this piece of the curriculum remains a work in progress. It should be noted that the relationship between skills and content is a perennial problem in breadth curricula—whether it is better to have specialized skills courses, or to embed the skills across the curriculum is a subject of considerable dispute. And the problem extends beyond writing within the humanities—the crucial skill of effective visual and oral presentation of technical material has similar issues.

The question of writing leads to issues relating to the other arts. The first semester of both LitHum and PPT focuses largely on literary and philosophical texts, as is common in “Great Books” curricula, regardless of the cultural orientation. But the second half of the courses, with their focus on more recent times, provided opportunities to study visual and performing arts alongside written texts. The study of forms other than written texts provided both opportunities and challenges. Clearly, a focus on breadth education is enhanced by the study of music, theater, and art, which are the focus of a considerable amount of student extra-curricular activity—indeed, some distribution systems have an explicit “arts” requirement distinct from other humanities. It is also the case that adding units on the arts enabled faculty in those areas to participate in the common curriculum on equal terms with their colleagues in literature and philosophy. Given our commitment that every faculty member should have the opportunity and obligation to participate in the common curriculum, and the use of the common curriculum as a showcase to students for the range of faculty interests, this was a plus. But adding units on the arts exacerbated other issues with the common curriculum. In particular, units focused on material not in textual form made it even harder for the faculty to master the range of material they were required to teach, and it made it harder to embed writing as such into the curriculum. The optimum way to include visual and performing arts in a core curriculum is thus not clear, but it is a question that must be addressed.

CONCLUSION

In all of the above, there is a constant theme. Devising and revising such a curriculum is a *constant and ongoing effort*. It is not the case that one can invent a core curriculum, and then declare the job done and focus solely on delivering the course to the students. This approach—that a

well-designed course is timeless and deserves reconsideration no more than once a generation, if at all—contributed strongly to the downfall of the “western civ” core courses. Without opportunities to review and renew the courses, the deepest concerns of the community of faculty and students, and of society more generally, diverged further and further from what was being taught. Since there was no way to adjust on the fly, this divergence eventually resulted in painful high-stakes overhauls that generated conflict well beyond the specific discussions about the pedagogical and curricular issues directly involved. It would have been much better if these courses could have moved slowly, year-by-year, with the times. Such an evolution is difficult when the curriculum is presumed to be canonical—but in the absence of the assumption of a canon, it is not just possible, but necessary.

But curriculum reviews are time-consuming efforts. They take hours of discussion and negotiation and considerable organizational effort. If the curriculum is to be reviewed and renewed, on a regular, perhaps a continuing basis, the required effort must be built into the expectations for and of the faculty. In this model “teaching” is more than delivering courses to students. It is also a matter of reconsidering the courses, revising them, and putting in the hard work needed to master new texts and works, as well as new pedagogical approaches to skills and content. For this process to be successful, the institution must support it by providing the faculty with the time necessary to fully engage with curriculum development. The faculty must support it by being willing to reconsider cherished texts and pedagogical techniques and master new approaches and material on an ongoing basis. Only with these commitments can we ask our students to open their minds and hearts to an education that explores the true breadth of the world they inhabit.

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