

**The Liberal Arts and Business**  
**By David Creelman**  
**Edited for the web by Anna Katherine Montgomery**

Do the liberal arts matter to business? In Canada and the US there has been a long debate about the virtues of a broad education versus a practical one. The debate is fuelled not just by reason, but by powerful emotional factors. Traditionally, vocational training was for the lower classes while more academic subjects such as the liberal arts were the preserve of the upper class. Even today an argument in favor of the liberal arts is flavored with a sense of elitism. The other emotional driver is the sense that the world has become too dominated by business, and that this domination has led education to concentrate on training people to be good employees, shutting out appreciation of the more important aspects of being human.

But this divide is not necessarily an unbridgeable chasm. Advocates for the liberal arts do not deny the need for practical training, and business – at least to some extent – recognizes the value of the liberal arts.

Arie de Geus spent his career at Royal Dutch/Shell and in his book *The Living Company* he mentions a book he read forty years ago by German philosopher and psychologist William Stern. De Geus says, *“I cannot point to any specific decision that emerged from it, but it colored every decision I took and every move I made.”*

Advocates of the liberal arts know in their hearts that their education has made a huge difference to how they think and what they see.

### **Seeking Out Liberal Arts Graduates**

If businesses value the liberal arts you would expect companies to seek out graduates from these disciplines. University placement officers, who are responsible for helping students find jobs, believe that liberal arts students do have skills that businesses need. Dawn Legault, a placement officer at Carleton University in Ottawa says, *“Liberal arts graduates have valuable skills like research, writing, verbal communication, and critical thinking. Businesses seek graduates with these skills irrespective of their degree.”*

Paul Smith, a placement officer at Queens University in Kingston echoes these ideas saying, *“The Conference Board of Canada created an essential skills profile for new graduates and these mirror very closely the skills someone learns in the liberal arts.”*

There are some hiring managers who argue that a liberal arts education won't help students find a job. Jeff Leeth, International HR Manager at Raytheon in Saudi Arabia points out, *“Most employers want more than ‘well read’ candidates. They want specific skill sets.”*

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What is more interesting are the specific abilities managers attributed to liberal arts graduates, such as

- They are great systems thinkers
- They have passion
- They are trained to ask questions
- They have the ability and courage to think critically and independently
- They have learned to question what others say and use their own brains
- They can see the bigger picture
- They can deal effectively with complexity and ambiguity

John Madigan, President & CEO at Executive Talent Services in Connecticut said, *“I’ve recruited people into entry-level and trainee roles in insurance and specifically sought students graduating with liberal arts degrees. Judgment on the job was more important to me than ability to follow a protocol.”*

**The Liberal Arts in Management Development**

The liberal arts rarely appear in the normal curriculum of the leading business schools of North America, but there are a variety of professors and institutions that do bring liberal arts thinking to business. The most famous of these is the Aspen Institute which is dedicated to “Timeless values, enlightened leadership.” Philosopher Mortimer Adler set up a program to train leaders at Aspen in the 1950s which drew upon great texts from the humanities and employed a Socratic teaching method. Dr. Jim O’Toole, from the University of Southern California, ran Executive VP seminars from Aspen from 1993-97 using texts like Plato’s *Republic* and Aristotle’s *Politics*. O’Toole even got executives in his classes to perform Sophocles’ play *Antigone*.

Another famous management academic who used the liberal arts in business education is James March from Stanford University. To train leaders March uses the Spanish novel *Don Quixote* which was first published in 1605. He summarizes his rationale in a poem:

*Quixote reminds us  
That if we trust only when  
Trust is warranted, love only  
When love is returned, learn  
Only when learning is valuable,  
We abandon an essential feature of our humanness.*

**The Dramatic Arts and Hurricane Katrina**

Seemingly one step away further from business than the liberal arts is their companion subject, the dramatic arts. Can the dramatic arts help organizations be more effective? A good test of this came in the wake of Hurricane Katrina which smashed through New Orleans in 2005. The hurricane was not only a natural disaster, the inability of the US to provide effective relief made the citizens feel abandoned by their own country.

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After two years of heroically providing aid the Southeast Louisiana chapter of the American Red Cross was suffering badly. The staff was exhausted and disillusioned. The organization was in disarray. The centre was not holding.

The Red Cross called on Laura Olson, a research scientist from the Institute for Crisis, Disaster, and Risk Management from George Washington University, to help. Olson in turn brought in Carol Pearson from the University of Maryland to start a process of recovery. Pearson draws on the concept of archetypes, an idea from literature and psychology that there are certain standard roles we envision like “the wise old man” or “the mother figure.” Archetypes are a way humans make sense of the social world and their place in it.

Pearson found that most of the staff members were playing one of three archetypal roles:

- The servant/helper: someone completely dedicated, but lost in absence of Leadership
- The leader: a person playing an essential role, but who may try to exert too much control when faced with disorder
- The hero: the person who continues against all odds, even if there is no leadership

This approach helped the staff reflect on how they were acting. It helped them to understand how they were feeling. They began to feel hopeful. They could imagine moving past the disarray. Yet, helpful as this approach was, the organization still wasn't quite gelling. They needed to bring the recovery process to a close with some sort of capstone experience.

The Red Cross called on Creative Leaps International to work with Pearson to create a two-day Resilience and Renewal Retreat for the staff and volunteers, about 85 people. Creative Leaps International is a collection of performing artists and learning specialists who create events to attain specific organizational objectives. In the case of this retreat the idea was to draw the strands together, to build a positive sense of community, and move beyond hopeful confusion to get on track to better performance.

It's worth pausing for a moment to think how someone trained in finance or engineering would react to the mission of ‘creating a capstone experience’ or ‘moving beyond hopeful confusion.’ Those are concepts many business people would be uncomfortable tackling, but they are very natural ideas to someone trained in the arts.

Creative Leaps International opened the retreat with a “Concert of Ideas”. The session began with music, Aaron Copland's Fanfare for the Common Man, a widely recognized inspirational piece of music. Then professional singers, mixed in amongst the audience, starting singing Simple Gifts a song from the Shaker religious community. The concert

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proceeded with 90 minutes of poetry, stories, and other performance pieces.

John Cimino, the President of Creative Leaps International, said that for the first ten to fifteen minutes about 20 percent of the staff held back. You can imagine an employee's surprise at hearing songs instead of watching PowerPoint slides. Cimino said, "However, they soon saw it was relevant and joyful, and joined into the spirit of the event." Joyful? That's a concept that doesn't appear in a standard MBA program.

The concert of ideas focused on themes of courage, imaginative vision, compassion, community and leadership. The process calls on people to be introspective. As Cimino said, "What is happening on the stage is not the most important thing. What matters is what is happening in you. What you are remembering and thinking and what you are whispering to the person beside you."

After the concert of ideas the staff formed discussion circles and spent 90 minutes talking about what they had experienced.

The rest of the two day retreat included a variety of sessions including Creative Leaps International workshops with titles like:

- Inner Balance: Authentic Leadership Presence  
Mastering Your Physical, Mental and Emotional "Still-points"
- Top Form: Habits of Excellence  
Realizing Your Peak Potential through the Arts and Sports
- The Hero's Journey  
Exploring Our Archetypal Stages of Awareness through the Bach Chaconne

The last part of the two-day program began with a ceremony. Participants wrote down the things that had been blocking them since Katrina, things that had been causing pain, things that they had to get beyond. Then in beautiful ceremonial fashion, they dropped them into bowl where there were burned. In Cimino's words, "They were spending time together as a community in a sacred way."

The final activity, called 'a harvest of learning' focused on capturing what participants had learned. Instead of having the participants simply talk, the Creative Leaps International staff worked with them to create a concert of ideas based solely on what the participants said they had learned. Music, poetry and theatre were used to amplify their ideas, and many of the participants took part in the performance.

Laura Olson told Cimino, "Thank you for completing what we had started with such beauty and inspiration that so many people were lifted to a place of hope and peace that they had not dared to imagine for some 24 long months."

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This kind of success leads one to wonder if managers have made a mistake in thinking the arts were not relevant to the serious work of running a business. The arts draw on skills and concepts that most people trained in business lack. In the right hands these ideas can be used to great effect.

**A Deeper Theory**

Whether we look at hiring liberal arts graduates or sending managers on liberal arts training, the question remains as to what specific value a liberal arts education brings. Most people agree that a liberal arts education teaches you to think and communicate, but any university program should do that. Is there some fundamental way in which training in the liberal arts is different from training in physics or engineering or commerce?

Northrop Frye, the great Canadian literary critic, confronts this question in his 1963 book *The Educated Imagination*.

“For the past 25 years I have been teaching and studying English literature in a university. As in any other job, certain questions stick in one’s mind, not because people keep asking them, but because they are inspired by the very fact of being in such a place. What good is the study of literature? Does it help us to think more clearly, or feel more sensitively, or live a better life than we could without it?”

Frye’s answer is found in his title: literature educates the imagination; it enables us to understand and imagine the human world in a deeper way than we could without it. It trains us to see things in a certain way.

I believe that each discipline teaches a specific way of seeing the world. It teaches a method of approaching issues. It inevitably creates blind spots as well.

Engineering teaches people to be analytical and practical. These traits are valuable in a wide range of business careers. However, if an engineer asks what kind of car you bought and you say ‘a beautiful one’ he or she will think that’s a silly answer. They have been trained that issues of beauty are somehow not legitimate. They are also trained to dislike ambiguity, which is admirable if you are building a bridge, but a disadvantage if you are building a team.

Physics teaches people to think deeply about first principles and look for elegant, mathematical solutions—clearly wonderful traits. Ron Dembo, as CEO of Algorithmics, liked to hire physicists for advanced work in financial risk analysis; they had the capability to envision that arcane world and find novel solutions. However, physicists can be intolerant of the lack of rigour that necessarily exists in business. If ever you’ve seen someone describe humans in terms of equations like  $P = A \times M$  (performance equals ability times motivation) you are seeing someone trained in science attempting to understand the world using the tools of their own discipline.

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The liberal arts teach people to deal with ambiguity, emotion, complexity and interpretation. These are critical issues in business, particularly as you move higher in the organization. Northrop Frye writes, “The kind of problem that literature raises is not the kind that you ever ‘solve’”. This is exactly the kind of problem one regularly confronts as a manager. It’s also the mirror image of engineering or physics where students are only exposed to solvable problems.”

### **Implications for Society**

For students the recognition that different disciplines teach different ways of thought has a clear implication—they should study at least two different subjects. Dual disciplines provide some protection against blind spots—at the very least leading to a recognition that the blind spots are there. Furthermore, just as having a second language makes learning the third much easier, so too, someone accomplished in two disciplines will likely find mastery of a third comes much more naturally.

For organizations the implication is that they should make a point of hiring people from a variety of disciplines. Jan Basso, a placement officer at Wilfrid Laurier University in Waterloo, Canada notes that at least a few employers do precisely that “They say we don’t want to hire people only from one discipline.”

Organizations should also train employees to appreciate the different approaches people trained in other disciplines can bring. One professional at a finance company who has both an MBA and undergrad in philosophy, says “It can be a challenge to operate in an environment where you are the only one with a broad education.” He says, “You end up knowing a lot more than the people around you and sometimes that doesn’t help.”

Finally, for countries, Patrick Awuah’s caution that “Every society must be very intentional about how it trains its leaders” should be taken to heart. A deep training in the liberal arts can improve leaders’ abilities to understand the human world in all its complexity. But a team of leaders must be able to draw on the ways of seeing from many different disciplines.