

## Liberal Arts in An Age of Technology

Terence T.T. Pang  
Assistant Professor  
Department of English  
Lingnan University

### 摘要

博雅教育，於此資訊科技時代，有特殊使命。政府談論終身教育，往往重功利，複製既定社會型態。博雅教育反其道，平衡公私兩方面，公者包括法律、會計、及經濟等應用科目，私者則是美學、文學、哲學及批判語言學等學科。跨學科亦是另一出路。

現代人崇拜資訊科技，工作娛樂，都對着屏幕。屏幕前的虛擬空間使人迷惘，暴力色情令生命力失控。資訊工程師致力研究監察用者的一舉一動，剝奪自由。

全人教育，以人為本。IQ、EQ 將人性分割得體無完膚，取而代之，是因材施教，指出學生的長處，加強信心；提出質疑，以啟發思考。

科技革命，不可抗拒，學生要學習批判，游戈於浩瀚的資訊汪洋，明辨方向，掌握資訊，勇往直前。

媒介就是訊息，然也。倚賴電子工具教學，令師生疏離。軟件會打分數，但就是不善於和學生交流切磋，更枉說面授機宜、因材施教。然而，電郵、聊天室等卻可促進文化交流。

評核學習，將各種表現量化為數字，美其名為「品質控制」，實則以人當物。捨本逐末，莫此為甚。

博雅教育，講求誠信、悲天憫人、反操控、反異化，說到底就是反樸歸真，還我本性。

The present SAR government's education policy, including that for lifelong education, is based mainly on manpower considerations. While this is understandable given the present economic climate, the long term implications of such policy on the personal welfare and quality of life of individuals need to be addressed.

Perhaps I should start with a distinction between the private and public domains of education. The public domain consists of areas that focus on institutional and bureaucratic aspects of society. Such disciplines require the student to approach them with an objective and detached standpoint. Law, Accounting, Economics and many disciplines with the adjective 'applied' in front of them may belong to this domain, while the private domain refers to areas that focus on the individual. Such disciplines do not make any pretenses as to their subjectivity in interpretation. Literature, Art, Music, Critical Discourse Analysis, certain branches of Philosophy belong to this. However, it does not mean that the individual would be treated in isolation like a maggot

in a cocoon. Paradoxically, advances in educational technology may unwittingly produce such side effect.

The emphasis on computer literacy even in continuing education, stemming perhaps from financial considerations, could have undue effects. Working with computers can cause individuals to confine themselves to tiny cubicles called work stations during work and handy machines called play stations during play. Social life like 'clubbing' is quickly withdrawing and has become mainly a gerontocratic activity, the privilege of the few who could enjoy a comfortable material life upon retirement. Far from enlarging the social and discourse spaces of the individual, cyberspace and virtual reality induce people to escape into the delusive world of windows on the screen. Reliance on and addiction to electronic hallucinogens result in a dependency on software which their inventors, writers and suppliers may not have intended. Most software either smack of materialistic elements like 'rewards' or scientific positivism glorifying the power of virtual technology and weaponry, and as a result, the almightiness of electronic technology. **If alienation refers to the removal of humans from nature, cyberspace is the latest and a very potent form.** Such was the caution I gave myself when I wrote the interactive version of the video *Cashing In On Language* for teaching pragmatics. In resistance to materialism and positivism, the human element must supersede the material and materialistic elements. That's why for pedagogical purposes, chatrooms, noticeboards and conferencing offer interesting opportunities for intercultural exchanges. A colleague once commented on the humanizing effect of the email: "New technology redefines social groups, restricted heretofore by geographical propinquity. Now one can feel closer to someone at the ends of the earth than to someone next door. There is an intimacy in e-mail (easily, of course, faked and exploited) that is very powerful."

The saying that the medium is the message certainly applies to computerized learning experiences. While powerpoint presentations encapsulate the learning experience of students to a predetermined lineal schemata, hyperlinks often cause them to get lost in a matrix-maze. The prevalence of sex, violence and propaganda produces a form of control realized through the exercise of bio power (the control of the mind and even the heart and soul) as well as institutional power resulting from the panoptical managerial gaze. Computer engineers are keen on inventing software that can track user, including students, actions and movements. Software often effect asocial or even anti-social experiences, both in terms of isolating users from the real world, or in their gaudy content far removed from reality. The affective dimension of education is often either absent or twisted in the electronic medium. **Virtual reality is not even surreality. Unlike the vicarious experience**

**offered by literature, which renders the reader 'more' human, the incoherence and inflated dimensions of virtual reality often leave the user derelict and delirious.** The educational implication is that such experiences and control would probably turn out passive, unimaginative and subservient individuals, ultimately resulting in the production and reproduction of a faceless and nameless mediocrity.

In terms of methodology, the resistance to such dependency, some of us may opt for a return to traditional chalk and talk classroom (at least there is some 'personal' touch like the students can see the teacher's handwriting), or the dialogical mode favored by Plato and Confucius. The phatic communion of conversation fosters close teacher-student relationships. Some of my best time at Lingnan is spent on having breakfast or sipping coffee with students in the canteen. A heuristic approach which emphasizes the problematization of givens and commonsense, and a resort to collaborative learning are effective tools. Having said that, I must caution colleagues as such approaches may not be popular with some students given that they are used to 'learning' by rote, and they prefer answers to questions/problems, certainty to ambivalences, though I'd rather take risks and leave them thinking and pondering as they leave the lecture hall or seminar room.

A return to the private domain is warranted if we are serious in our commitment to the betterment of life through education. This has far-reaching implications for curriculum design and funding application. **There has been too much emphasis on the instrumental aspects and the public domain in business and law, and some applied social sciences disciplines.** Ethics, aesthetics, literature, critical literacy and oracy (including but not confined to critical linguistics and critical discourse analysis), history, sports and courses related to the family etc. should feature prominently in the degree structure. Even leisure studies, not emphasizing materialistic pleasures or encouraging hedonism which is already dominant in Hong Kong, can be entertained. A Year 3 English major just walked into my room and remarked succinctly that there are not enough courses on all our degree programs which employ a truly interdisciplinary approach. As a liberal arts institution, I believe it's about time for us to transform some of our programs, making allowances for interdisciplinary courses and even entire degrees. It's true that recently we have opened up our degree structures somewhat, giving our students more options and more minor programs to choose. A limitation of this is it that may result in haphazard hodge-podge degrees. In a way, interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary studies provide viable alternatives, incorporating some coherence as well as breadth of investigation and depth of analysis.

Computer literacy is a fact we have to live with and even live by. It must incorporate an element of wisdom, wisdom in selecting software and sites, wisdom in steering through the hypertextuality of cyberspace, and wisdom in turning data into information, information into thoughts, and thoughts into reflexion and ultimately praxis. There is a merit in inundation rather than scarcity of information as it forces the student to be selective. The computer can indeed be a useful tool for collecting data for interdisciplinary studies and exchanging ideas and cultures.

Another form of resistance is to say no to quantification disguised as quality assurance. The normalizing gaze of auditing subjects people to bureaucratic control. Instead of judging performance in terms of outstanding qualities and shortcomings which often balance out each other, hence not giving a whole, not to say real picture, the educational administrator needs to delve into the merits and demerits on a case by case basis. The absurdity of some statistical approaches to assessment is fully revealed in the paradox of standard deviation (How can deviation be standard? In a small and beautiful environment, sane as us, we don't need to negotiate meanings on normality. Instead the focus should be on excellence). If we are serious about the whole person approach, then it would make a lot of sense to resist recent positivist advances borrowing from medicine paradigms to compartmentalize a person's 'attributes' in terms of all kinds of funny quotients, IQ, EQ etc. Let's adopt a really holistic approach in evaluating our students and ourselves. In a small 'family' situation, we can converse (I hate 'communication' for all its positivist connotations) freely and talk about what we like and dislike unpretentiously. Didn't Confucius give specific advice on each of his student's conduct and disposition based on his observations on their personalities? Assessment and evaluation should therefore be open, dialogic, and instead of being unilateral, bi- or multi-lateral, even dialectical. Each individual should be regarded in her own merits instead of subject to arbitrary norms and standards. I must also stress the importance of a meaningful written assessment by a respected teacher in getting a job. An anonymous A is not worth half as much as a personable B. The kind of personal knowledge we have on our students based on rapport is a strength derived from having small student numbers, both in the classroom and on campus. Self- and peer evaluations make a lot of sense in our liberal arts environment. We have to be honest with our students, appreciate their strengths (many of them still lack confidence) and encourage them to face up to their weaknesses (they may also lack realism). Above all, they have to reinvigorate qualities latent in us all, virtues like honesty, resistance to domination, compassion and the desire to reduce suffering in the human condition.