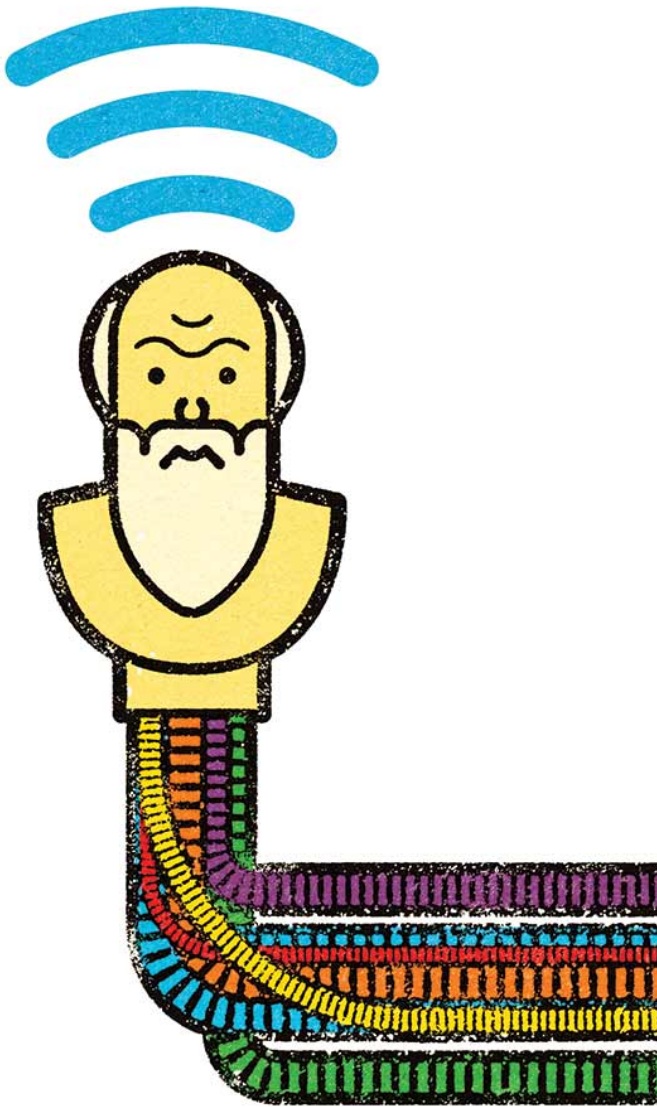


# Liberal Arts in the Data Age

by JM Olejarz

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ALEXEI VELLA

Scott Hartley takes aim at the “false dichotomy” between the humanities and computer science. Some tech industry leaders have proclaimed that studying anything besides the STEM fields is a

College students who major in the humanities always get asked a certain question. They’re asked it so often—and by so many people—that it should come printed on their diplomas. That question, posed by friends, career counselors, and family, is “What are you planning to do with your degree?” But it might as well be “What are the humanities good for?”

According to three new books, the answer is “Quite a lot.” From Silicon Valley to the Pentagon, people are beginning to realize that to effectively tackle today’s biggest social and technological challenges, we need to think critically about their human context—something humanities graduates happen to be well trained to do. Call it the revenge of the film, history, and philosophy nerds.

In *The Fuzzy and the Techie*, venture capitalist

mistake if you want a job in the digital economy. Here's a typical dictum, from Sun Microsystems cofounder Vinod Khosla: "Little of the material taught in Liberal Arts programs today is relevant to the future."

Hartley believes that this STEM-only mindset is all wrong. The main problem is that it encourages students to approach their education vocationally—to think just in terms of the jobs they're preparing for. But the barriers to entry for technical roles are dropping. Many tasks that once required specialized training can now be done with simple tools and the internet. For example, a novice programmer can get a project off the ground with chunks of code from GitHub and help from Stack Overflow.

If we want to prepare students to solve large-scale human problems, Hartley argues, we must push them to widen, not narrow, their education and interests. He ticks off a long list of successful tech leaders who hold degrees in the humanities. To mention just a few CEOs: Stewart Butterfield, Slack, philosophy; Jack Ma, Alibaba, English; Susan Wojcicki, YouTube, history and literature; Brian Chesky, Airbnb, fine arts. Of course, we need technical experts, Hartley says, but we also need people who grasp the whys and hows of human behavior.

What matters now is not the skills you have but how you think. Can you ask the right questions? Do you know what problem you're trying to solve in the first place? Hartley argues for a true "liberal arts" education—one that includes both hard sciences and "softer" subjects. A well-rounded learning experience, he says, opens people up to new opportunities and helps them develop products that respond to real human needs.

The human context is also the focus of *Cents and Sensibility*, by Gary Saul Morson and Morton Schapiro, professors of the humanities and economics, respectively, at Northwestern University. They argue that when economic models fall short, they do so for want of human understanding. Economics tends to ignore three things: culture's effect on decision making, the usefulness of stories in explaining people's actions, and ethical considerations. People don't exist in a vacuum, and treating them as if they do is both reductive and potentially harmful.

Morson and Schapiro's solution is literature. They suggest that economists could gain wisdom from reading great novelists, who have a deeper insight into people than social scientists do. Whereas economists tend to treat people as abstractions, novelists dig into the specifics. To illustrate the point, Morson and Schapiro ask, When has a scientist's model or case study drawn a person as vividly as Tolstoy drew Anna Karenina?

Novels can also help us develop empathy. Stories, after all, steep us in characters' lives, forcing us to see the world as other people do. (Morson and Schapiro add that although many fields of study tell their practitioners to empathize, only literature offers practice in doing it.)

*Sensemaking*, by strategy consultant Christian Madsbjerg, picks up the thread from Morson and Schapiro and carries it back to Hartley. Madsbjerg argues that unless companies take pains to understand the human beings represented in their data sets, they risk losing touch with the markets they're serving. He says the deep cultural knowledge businesses need comes not from numbers-driven market research but from a humanities-driven study of texts, languages, and people.

Madsbjerg cites Lincoln, Ford's luxury brand, which just a few years ago lagged so far behind BMW and Mercedes that the company nearly killed it off. Executives knew that becoming competitive again would mean selling more cars outside the United States, especially in China, the next big luxury market. So they began to carefully examine how customers around the world experience, not just drive, cars. Over the course of a year, Lincoln representatives talked to customers about their daily lives and what "luxury" meant to them. They discovered that in many countries transportation isn't drivers' top priority: Cars are instead seen as social spaces or places to entertain business clients. Though well engineered, Lincolns needed to be reconceived to address the customers' human context. Subsequent design efforts have paid off: In 2016 sales in China tripled.

What these three books converge on is the idea that choosing a field of study is less important than finding ways to expand our thinking, an idea echoed by yet another set of new releases: *A Practical Education*, by business professor Randall Stross, and *You Can Do Anything*, by journalist George Anders. STEM students can care about human beings, just as English majors (including this one, who started college studying computer science) can investigate things scientifically. We should be

careful not to let interdisciplinary jockeying make us cling to what we know best. Everything looks like a nail when you have a hammer, as the saying goes. Similarly, at how great a disadvantage might we put ourselves—and the world—if we force our minds to approach all problems the same way?

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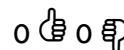
17 COMMENTS

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**Diane Sherry** 6 days ago

I totally agree but when will the market join in. My daughter, with a degree in English, is writing on the side while waiting tables and assisting in film production, gratis, as she is seeking funding for graduate school in literature. On the other hand her twin brother in materials engineering was offered full funding of his PhD plus a research stipend by 4 universities. The only corporate job offers she has gotten are administrative, not professional. He could have moved into several professional positions. She started in the sciences but switched to focus on the humanities and her career options have been reduced. I guess she is a little ahead of the game.

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