

The Declining Fortunes of ‘General Knowledge’: A Note on Why It Should Hold a Place in Every Classroom

Peter ROBINSON

The man of knowledge must be able not only to love his enemies but also to hate his friends.

Friedrich Nietzsche

Introduction

This brief opinion paper unapologetically advances a number of positive effects for critical thinking within the university system that would result from reinvigoration of the somewhat old-fashioned idea that ‘general knowledge’ inherently enhances the education environment, and is especially essential for language learning where understanding cultural contexts has been shown to improve language comprehension. What was once a key, almost universal aim of education in the Western Tradition has dropped to historic lows on lists of learning aims and outcomes, and has the potential to fall off these lists completely. In this preliminary attempt to explain the demise of the image of ‘general knowledge’ and to argue what is lost by this decline, the following paper offers a brief review of the fortunes of ‘general knowledge’, followed by an explanation for its dramatic fall from grace within the Academy and teaching circles, and finally, suggests why ‘general knowledge’ as a concept should return to the classroom as an integral and prominent feature of the learning landscape of students and be actively encouraged by educators.

General *versus* Specific Knowledge

The concept, and more importantly, the value of ‘general knowledge’ to individuals has been the subject of an interesting series

of fluctuations in the Western Tradition. Only relatively recently has the term acquired negative or derogatory significance, epitomized by the addition of the phrase 'master of none' to the popular English-language maxim, 'Jack of all trades', whereby the emphasis is placed on the 'general' (i.e. superficial) aspect of the individual's skills and knowledge, rather than his breadth of knowledge, or other accomplishments. Another variation of the negative critique of 'general knowledge' that emerged at the beginning of the twentieth century is its association with pedantry, or own-sakism. At best the term now attracts a complex series of reactions, similar to audience reaction to (and tacit approval of) long-running British television shows such as *Mastermind* (running since 1972), and *University Challenge* (on air since 1962). When watching such shows, members of the audience admire the incredible knowledge shown by the shows' participants, but nonetheless find such demonstrations irrelevant to their own lives and subconsciously label the individuals concerned 'boffins' or, less generously, 'anoraks'. Perhaps then, sentiments of ambivalence and confusion best describe current attitudes towards 'general knowledge'.

However, when tracing the genealogy of the concept, it rapidly becomes apparent that it is not accidental that it was only in the late nineteenth century that negative connotations of the concept of 'general knowledge' first began to adhere, with the back-drop of a wider movement towards specialization that eventually encompassed almost every facet of society, from academic disciplines to the design of dinner services. Within academia, this period is characterized by the growing tendency of disciplines to self-consciously project images of scholar-communities that are professionally guarded and procedurally fortified against interlopers and would-be cross-disciplinarians, a move that unsettled nearly five hundred years of unbroken and unquestioned polymathic hegemony. There is no better example of the codification and careful segregation of regimes of knowledge into divisions and discipline-specific practices than the German historian Leopold von Ranke's almost single-handed founding of the school of historical empiricism and reconstructive historical enquiry.¹ At the societal level too, the concretion of a 'separate spheres' ideology in Victorian Britain which ran with a highly gendered view of the sexes, positioning women as

'angels of the home' and men as exclusively occupying the 'public sphere', can be viewed as a form of specialization, embodying the idea of clearly defined roles.² In the design of horticultural implements too, specialization reigned with a tool for almost any horticultural dilemma, and on the dinner table a cornucopia of dinner plates and cutlery appeared, each designed for a specific serving: asparagus dishes, strawberry bowls, honeycomb trays, pickle forks and marrow knives are just some of the common but highly specialized accoutrements that adorned the tables of those wealthy enough to afford them. Unsurprisingly, knowledge itself did not escape this movement from the general towards the specialized.

Although much of the nineteenth century involved the movement from 'general knowledge' to highly specialized, expert knowledge, some rapprochement occurred between the two binary opposites within academic circles in the 1960s under the banner of interdisciplinary studies, although as Alison Hearn argues, there is a great difference between "'interdisciplinarity'" as an intellectual phenomenon and "'interdisciplinarity'" as it is currently defined and administered within academic institutions' (Hearn, 2003, 1). Discourse boundaries remain peculiarly entrenched, usually accompanied by their own lexicons and language structures, in what amounts to mankind's disturbingly successful creation of a second 'Babel'. The modern tertiary education sector in the United Kingdom also reflects the predominance of the philosophy of specialization, with central Government funded academies, or 'Specialist Schools' initiated in 2000 by the Blair government, and equipped with curriculum specialisms in adherence with the Specialist Schools Programme (SSP).³ They are in themselves based on the American system of Charter Schools, pioneered Ray Budde in the 1970s, which provided educators with the 'freedom to create a curriculum that respects the integrity of individual students' (Needham & Gleeson *et al*, 2006, 14). The English language teaching fraternity has not escaped this trend either; rather, it has embraced the concept *tout court*, turning its attention both scholarly and pedagogically towards discrete, targeted language teaching based on perceived user-end needs and utility. For more than thirty years English for Specific Purposes (ESP), and more recently English for Academic Purposes (EAP) has been the all-powerful mantra of EFL dis-

course, which, as Johns and Dudley-Evans have noted, offers discipline-specific courses with specially prepared materials (Johns & Dudley Evans, 1991, 3).

However, cultural skepticism regarding the value of 'general knowledge' (and generalization *per se*) that dogged the twentieth century and still tenaciously grips the twenty-first, is out of sync with its longer history, and so is, from the longer perspective, something of an aberration. The concept of 'general knowledge', despite its relatively recent devaluation—whether planned or subconscious—is actually built into the very marrow of Western civilization. At its most extreme, 'general knowledge' can be interpreted as the manifestation of an omnipotent deity—an all-seeing, all-knowing God. In classical Greek culture too, oracles were an integral part of convening with the gods, and their knowledge of the world expanded the notion of knowledge into the world of pre-cognition. In the Christian biblical tradition, the *Tree of Knowledge* connoted not only 'general knowledge', but the ultimate knowledge: a carnal knowledge of the other sex. Less all-pervasively, but nonetheless still on the vital end of the veneration of 'general knowledge' spectrum is the figure of the (usually venerable) polymath; a being that excels at a panoply of disciplines and tasks, often emitting an air of Castiglioneon *sprezzatura*.⁴ Indeed, one of the better definitions of the carefully cultivated and much-studied 'Renaissance Man' is of a knowledgeable person, a man of action, able to hold his own intelligently in a number of fields, and who embraces an 'interdisciplinary (even omnidisciplinary) world view, a universal gaze . . . ' (Evan & Greaves, 2001, editorial). Later in Europe, taking a cue from the Renaissance's preoccupation with the 'completeness' of an individual, the 'Grand Tour', at its zenith in the eighteenth century, was designed to prepare noblemen for public office, allowing them to perform their duties based on judgments formulated in consultation with a wide ranging experience and knowledge base, thereby cultivating civic virtue. A similar function can be attributed to continental ladies' 'finishing schools', especially popular in the nineteenth century, which produced 'rounded', accomplished young women (focusing for example on knowledge of deportment, etiquette, music, certain branches of literature, sketching) which was seen as crucial to securing a 'good marriage' in the upper echelons of society.

Though under severe threat, support for the concept of 'general knowledge' is not entirely defunct in the contemporary educational arena, although it tends to take the form of historical legacy. In the United Kingdom, the system of General Practitioners (GPs) in the medical profession emphasizes the concept of breadth of knowledge and its important adjunct concept, experience. There remain a number of preparatory and fee-paying schools which still attempt to produce well-rounded students, and unsurprisingly—however prone to satirization—the features of a true polymath closely resemble the qualities required of the politician. The disappearing last bastions where general knowledge is still prized are by no means exclusive to the institutional relics which schooled British Empire builders in the nineteenth century. The European Baccalaureate, a Europe-wide qualification equivalent to the A level in the United Kingdom, has long had breadth as its basic principle. In Japan too, the University of Tokyo's flagship Liberal Arts program for freshmen and sophomore students which goes under the banner of 'late subject specialization' can be interpreted as the desire to give due weight to the importance of acquiring a sound grounding in all areas of academic importance.

Naturally, there are reasons why it has become increasingly difficult to pursue the polymathic approach, not least because of the hyper-specialization of knowledge which is most pronounced in the sciences. Yet, to an extent, the collaborative nature of much scientific research, while necessary, at the same time acts as a powerful disincentive for straying beyond perceived discourse boundaries. With these real and practical limitations in mind, it is not necessary for students to seek to emulate the multi-faceted achievements of a Da Vinci, but nevertheless, acquiring a good 'general knowledge' of the world in all its manifestations will serve them well, academically. Students of language, where 'general knowledge' is neither expected nor apparently necessary, are especially vulnerable to comprehension black holes which result from a lack of the kind of cultural knowledge which is acquired subliminally by the native speaker.

The 'Digital Age' and the Decline of 'General Knowledge'

It has been suggested that the rise of academic disciplines in the context of late nineteenth century academic institutions set the conditions for the demise of 'general knowledge' as a key aim of education. However, it is the onset of the 'Digital Age' and in particular the accompanying revolution in the way information is presented, searched for, and consumed, that has placed 'general knowledge' in such immediate and existential peril. One of the greatest ironies of the information age is that although more information is currently generated, swapped, exchanged, bartered and sold, than at any time in the history of humanity—and we are quite literally saturated with information that is instantly accessible at one's finger tips (perhaps even drowning in its appalling swell), the perceived need for the accumulation of knowledge *within* a single person has all but evaporated. Students no longer find it necessary to go through the cumbersome and time consuming mental process of locating and digesting a wide range of sources, when the touch of a button brings forth 'relevant' information or data: the extra-cognitive repository *par excellence*, which can be jettisoned as easily as it can be called up. Mighty, teeming brains are no-longer as desirable, even within academia, where there is increasingly a premium placed on tightly 'clustered' publications. It is perhaps indicative of this shift that it now comes as a great surprise to new and attentive readers of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865) that its author, Charles Lutwidge Dodgson, was at one and the same time, author, mathematician, and Anglican deacon! Under digital conditions, not only is information (promotion to the accolade of 'knowledge' requires accumulation and concentration) absorbed extraveneously, but the very act of using a search engine deprives the brain of the mental stimulation of the search, which more often than not yields material that coalesces with our existing knowledge stock in new and meaningful ways. While the dangers of this control of information are worthy of greater expansion and comment, for the purposes of this paper it is the removal of the subliminal acquisition of knowledge in this process that is of most concern, because there is an implicit synergy in the building up of knowledge within an individual that can-

not be simulated by electronic means.

In the specific context of global communication, one might be forgiven for thinking that the established dominance of English as the language of intellectual (and lay) intercourse—the *lingua franca*—when combined with the internet, would permit the individual agglomeration of knowledge to a degree that is unparalleled, through a kind of trickle-down effect. This is a highly questionable proposition. Wikipedia for example, is without doubt the largest purposefully codified body of information in the history of thought, which in its scope and sheer enormity, dwarfs even the greatest Enlightenment enterprise, Diderot's *Encyclopédie*. The importance of Wikipedia as a store of information cannot be refuted, but ultimately it is only a repository of information; an aggregate of contributions, and not a mind in itself, and this has important implications for critical thinking. It is true that Wikipedia is subject to amebic growth in the form of new entries, revisions, and self-regulation, and that data is organized to aid retrieval, but to put it crudely, in essence, you get out what is put in. The database is incapable of reproducing or even simulating the mind of an individual, in which information and data ferment and improve in extraordinary and unpredictable ways, producing uniquely creative ideas, juxtapositions, concordances, and so forth. The internet leads to the (perhaps dangerous) generalization and codification of knowledge, but there is nothing to suggest that this leads to a concomitant expansion in the *individual's* 'general knowledge'.

Importance of 'General Knowledge' for Language Learning

A marked feature of the last decade of English language teaching has been the increasing emphasis placed on developing students' critical thinking (and writing) skills in partnership with language acquisition and more traditional components of language learning. The ability to think critically and to construct persuasive arguments has often been presented as a body of skills which are transferable between discourses and allow students to critically analyze and engage with a range of complex materials. In L2 learner conditions, students are required to engage with higher-order conceptual arguments with which

they may be completely unfamiliar or encounter culturally-specific references that simply do not resonate with them. While the ability to understand a range of positions and to formulate a critical response to them, arguing logically and persuasively, is something that should be encouraged in any learning context, having a good 'general knowledge' which straddles disciplines and periods is a very great boon to this endeavour. For while specific concepts or ideas can be looked up (and they are, much more frequently than by native speakers), going to a source with a very specific purpose in mind limits the potential uses of that source in future, and does little to enrich the stock of potential referents which may be the source of inspiration or creativity.

A sound 'general knowledge' is also essential in problem-solving tasks, because it allows students to draw upon a vast array of potentially applicable examples, from which the brain draws comparisons, equating newly encountered things with known things and producing understanding. While the onus must always remain with students to utilize the knowledge that they acquire in meaningful ways through the appropriate application of their analytical and critical thinking skills—you can bring a horse to water but you cannot make it drink—when used as a consort to lexical accuracy, grammatical competence, and improvement of generic thinking skills, the benefits of the active encouragement of 'knowledge acquisition' should become apparent to all.

Conclusion

The way that 'general knowledge' has been viewed and valued by society has changed over time. Once popularized by the ideal of the 'Renaissance Man' it has increasingly struggled for acceptance, in a world which celebrates and demands specialization, whatever the field. Extra-cognitive media such as digital encyclopedias with their portability and inherent usability have put the concept of 'general knowledge' under further duress. However, it has been suggested that such sources can never be adequate surrogates for the accumulation of knowledge in an individual because they preclude the gestation of ideas which enhances and drives critical and creative thinking capacities. Although the education sector and English language fraternity

have zealously pursued specialization and targeting in various forms, to do so at the expense of the acquisition of discrete knowledge in sufficient quantities to be called 'general knowledge' appears to be unfortunate, and to inadvertently stifle educational excellence and true language proficiency.

Notes

1. See G. Iggers & J. M. Powell, *Leopold von Ranke and the Shaping of the Historical Discipline* (1990).
2. For an interesting account of efforts to traverse this dominant ideology, see Rosalind Rosenberg's, *Beyond Separate Spheres: Intellectual Roots of Modern Feminism* (1982).
3. A very lively debate surrounds the introduction of Specialist Schools (Academies) in the United Kingdom in 2000. However, the debate tends to revolve around the involvement of private sector funding and student attainment, rather than philosophical consideration of early subject specialization.
4. *Sprezzatura* is a term of Italian origin, first coined by the writer Baldassare Castiglione, used to express the release of an air of apparent ease when accomplishing a difficult task perfectly; a kind of nonchalance.

References

- M. Evans & D. Greaves, 'A renaissance for the "sense of wonder"?', *Journal of Medical Ethics: Medical Humanities* (2001), 27: 1, editorial.
- A. Hearn, 'Inter-disciplinarity/Extra-disciplinarity: On the University and the Active Pursuit of Community', *History of Intellectual Culture* (2003), 3: 1, pp. 1–13.
- M. Johns & T. Dudley-Evans, 'English for Specific Purposes: International in Scope, Specific in Purpose', *TESOL Quarterly* (1991), 25: 2, pp. 297–314.
- C. Needham, D. Gleeson, B. Martin, & R. Rickford, 'Academy Schools: Case Unproven', report funded by Catalyst and Public Word (2006), <http://www.nasuwt.org.uk/consum/groups/public/@salariespensionsconditions>, accessed 20/12/2012.