

Great books for a liberal education

Reflecting on the world and life through literature

by Ana Moreno Salvo

INTERVIEW WITH JOSÉ MARÍA TORRALBA LÓPEZ

Could you explain briefly what liberal education is and how it came about?

The concept of liberal education is very old. It goes back to the Greco-Latin world, but the way it is used today is more modern, from the nineteenth century. A key figure is John Henry Newman (1801-1890), who wrote the book "The Idea of a University" (1852), in which he used the concept of liberal education.

A liberal education can be defined by contrast. That is, it is an education that is not pragmatic

or utilitarian in the sense that the purpose of education is to be useful. It is not about how what one studies can be useful to earn a living or be successful; rather it is the pursuit of knowledge, knowledge for its own sake. This sounds very utopian or philosophical, and in the best sense, it is. I like to say that it is not incompatible to talk about the value of education, the value of knowledge in itself, and its usefulness. It is true that the first question that young people and families ask themselves nowadays is utility: What is a degree or a science

or literature baccalaureate going to be useful for? From the perspective of liberal education, this is a mistake; it blurs the hierarchy.

The proper order defined by those who defend the tradition of liberal education is that the primary purpose of education is for students to grow as people, to cultivate their intellect, to mature intellectually. And as a secondary or parallel aim, obviously, it should serve you to earn a living and live in the world, because they are not incompatible. But this hierarchy is always borne in mind.

How did it come about? After John Henry Newman, there was an intellectual educational movement in this direction in the United States in the early twentieth century. A number of universities such as

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José María Torralba López (Valencia, 1979) is Professor of Moral and Political Philosophy at the University of Navarra and Director of the Civic Humanism Centre for studies on the character and ethics of the professions at the Institute for Culture and Society. He has served as director of the Core Curriculum Institute (2013-2022). He is on the board of directors of the Association for Core Texts and Courses and on the editorial board of the International Studies in Catholic Education. He advises universities in several countries on their humanistic education programmes. He is the author of "A Liberal Education. In Praise of the Great Books" (Encounter, 2022).

The classics help young people today to learn about other ways of understanding life

Columbia University, the University of Chicago and St John's College promoted this approach to liberal education, which took the form of what has become known as the 'Core Curriculum', which is synonymous with Great Books programmes or Great Books seminars. In other words, it means providing all students with a basic cross-disciplinary humanistic and scientific education, regardless of the degree they are going to pursue (be it physics, mathematics, engineering or law).

For many people, this type of education is more akin to Anglo-Saxon traditionalism or perhaps even somewhat outdated. To what extent is it currently applied at universities, especially at Spanish universities?

In general, the humanities seem old-fashioned, because any humanistic educational initiative nowadays has to overcome a series of prejudices such as that they are a thing of the past, they are pursuing an ideal in vain, they don't interest students, they are a waste of time or there is no place for humanistic education in the university system. I dare say that my experience is the opposite. I won't say that everything I mentioned at the beginning isn't real. There are certainly some obstacles, but students are actually interested in it. When students are given the opportunity to get a solid humanistic education, they enjoy it and become passionate about it. It seems to me that a good part of the problem, particularly thinking about the Spanish educational system, is that we educators are the ones who do not trust that this is possible.

At the University of Navarra, we have developed a Great Books

programme as part of the Core Curriculum. This programme is now ten years old and has been taken by 700 students. We recently conducted a survey on the educational outcomes of this programme among the students who had taken it. The responses were strikingly positive. It is a type of teaching that manages to awaken students' enthusiasm and ignite their intellectual spark.

My impression is that more and more institutions are joining this movement. Since 2015, a European conference called 'Liberal Arts and Core Curriculum' has been held every two years, and every congress has had 100 or more participants from different countries. I think this is remarkable and new. Plus, the first Latin American 'Core Curriculum' conference is currently being planned. In Spain, there is an educational group that is designing a pilot programme to implement the Great Books Seminars in schools. Although it is more difficult in secondary education because the curriculum is closely regulated, my experience is that if there are educators who believe in the project, there are ways to do it.

Why do you think a humanistic education is important in today's world? What does it give young people who have to deal with a future that is uncertain in so many ways?

Humanistic education is essential. I would go so far as to say that it is even more important now than in the past. We are at a time of cultural change. At times of change, points of reference and guidance are needed. And this is what young people need right now. The goal is not to show them the way or ignore their freedom, yet we should

also not abandon them to their fate.

The great human problems are not new. Through literature, philosophy and examples from history, one can learn from cultural tradition and thus gain experience and reference points. It is an effort to open the door to the cultural tradition through books. Why books? Because culture has been handed down to us largely through books. Also because from

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an educational standpoint, I think it is the most accessible way.

The main advantage of encouraging reading or awakening in them an interest in reading is that good books are not instruction manuals or self-help books; they are books where there is a moral and the aim is for the student to discover or conclude it.

reflect while reading and to talk to their classmates and reach conclusions about life, society and the future. And I think this is the path we should take today. In fact, the classics help young people today to learn about other ways of understanding life.

Could you tell us about the Great Books programme? What kind of books are included? Can you give us an example of how a book can impact a person's life?

In the Great Books programmes, the key concept is the seminar. By great books we mean good literature. We talk about the classics, but classics does not

mean ancient. Of course, there are classics from the Greek and Latin tradition, but there are also modern and contemporary classics.

The most important thing is the seminar, because it is the methodology in which the books are read or incorporated into the educational curriculum. The objective is different from that of an ordinary literature class, at both school and university. At school there is a Language and Literature curriculum that has to be covered with an academic, scientific, knowledge-based approach. This is

fine and necessary, but it is different from the approach and focus we use to read these same books. Why? Because in the Great Books Seminars the aim is not so much to analyse the work in a scholarly or historical way but to read it as an educated reader and to ask oneself: 'What does this work say to me?'

The context of the seminar is usually the overarching questions of human life. We don't ask how the book exemplifies a historical epoch or a certain literary style, but we ask challenging questions such as what is good, what is freedom, what is a fair society or what is a human person. This means that in the seminars, the conversation connects with people's lives and their most intimate or existential interests.

Another feature of these seminars is that they are held in small groups and via dialogue. The ideal number is 18 students, but at the University of Navarra we do it with up to 25 and it also works. Seen from the standpoint of the school, this is the typical number of students in a classroom, sometimes a little more, but up to 30 is possible. 'Dialogical seminars' means that the teacher plays a key role, which is to engage the students in a deep and relevant conversation that connects the book to the existential issues I mentioned above. The teacher is not merely a moderator. They are another participant in the conversation, one that is more qualified who tries to get the students to find answers for themselves. They are no more and no less than the vessel through which the 'Socratic Method' is implemented. The goal is not to cover a syllabus or prepare for an exam but to ask questions in order to awaken interest and

The context is often one of the big questions of human life, such as what is good?, or what is freedom?

The classics are always open-ended.

We live in a world where freedom is very important. It is a positive value that should be encouraged, but it shouldn't lead to people who are unable to find their way in the world. Reading allows readers themselves, in this case students, to

When talking about existential issues, it may be easier for an adolescent to talk about them with the help of books

critical thinking. The teacher helps to deepen and mature these ideas. And so an intellectual community is created, a high-level intellectual dialogue. It is very valuable and enriching.

Teachers have to have a clear methodology to generate a conversation where opinions are supported with reasons, positions are challenged and conclusions are reached. This methodology is also supported by writing essays or argumentative texts. In other words, in addition to reading, going to class and speaking, students have to write about the topic. Sometimes the topic will be determined by the teacher; other times it will be open-ended, although the students have to argue their point. This writing and arguing is important because it adds rigour.

You asked me for an example, and I'm going to give you one about "The Confessions of St Augustine". There were two reactions to this book. After working on it in class, I asked the students what they thought of it. A group of students who, based on what they said, held religious beliefs, said that they loved it: 'We identify with it because we see that St Augustine is one of us, or we are like St Augustine'. The reality is that someone who lived so many centuries ago, who is identified as a prime intellectual figure, had managed to challenge 18- or 19-year-olds with his story and words. On the other hand, there was another group of students who, based on what they said, not only didn't like the religious aspect but also somewhat rejected it, and they said: 'St Augustine is a great man; he is a genuine person whom I would have liked to meet and talk to'.

Some educational institutions have been offering a humanistic 'Core Curriculum' for a while now. To what extent can adolescents benefit from this training? How can it be made appealing so that it can have a real impact on their lives?

We are at a time I find propitious for humanistic education. There is increasing awareness of the need for it, perhaps in reaction to the technocratic world we live in, utilitarian approaches in education, approaches that are too narrowly focused on preparing for the job market or overvaluing what the market is asking for.

We live in a world where young people are forced to position themselves in life too early. I think it would be better to give them a little more time. Making tradition accessible to them can help them. There is an author I recommend, Karen E. Bohlin, who developed a classical Great Books education programme. She published a book a few years ago called "Character Formation through Literature", in which she talks about the Great Books and the power of reading in character formation and education. In other words, this approach helps students to orientate themselves in life and answer ethical and existential questions. The book says that it can be easier for adolescents to talk or think about ethical or existential questions if they do so through books and fiction, because they will not feel judged. There is a clear challenge, which is asking questions about one's own life. With books, one sees stories about good and evil, where adolescents can identify with or see situations or aspects that reflect their own lives.

Do teachers who teach this content receive any special training? What training would a secondary school teacher need?

The teachers who teach these contents have attended courses at universities in the United States that have this type of programme. We have done this through ACTC (Association for Core Text and Courses). This is an association that brings together some 100 universities from all over the world that are committed to this educational model. Any educator with teaching experience can readily understand this method, and although we can speak of a Great Books methodology, it is actually not a technique. What shapes the methodology of the Great Books Seminars are the basic elements of any educational approach, which is knowing how to speak, write and read. In this sense, there is nothing special about it, but it does help to learn by watching others.

I would say that the training a secondary school teacher needs is nothing special, but the content needs to be adapted to the age and educational level. At the University of Navarra, we have also organised a course where we share our experience. We offer it to university teachers, and when secondary school teachers come, it is just as useful.

