

EDUCATION FOR LIFE: GREAT BOOKS SEMINARS AS A WAY TO PROVIDE TODAY'S UNIVERSITY STUDENTS WITH A PERSONALLY MEANINGFUL AND CIVICALLY RELEVANT EDUCATION

Emma COHEN DE LARA

University of Amsterdam / Universidad de Navarra

ecohend@external.unav.es

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Núm. ORCID: 0000-0001-6138-7032

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Abstract

There is a widespread concern that the performance culture at modern universities raises anxiety levels amongst students and generates individualistic, career-oriented graduates (Brooks, 2001; Deresiewicz, 2015; Sandel, 2021). In addition, modern democratic societies struggle with a lack of social cohesion, increasing polarization and anti-intellectual tendencies (Kakutani, 2019). Modern universities can be said to have three missions, namely, to provide professional education, scientific research and training, and liberal education. The main argument of the paper is that liberal education, defined as the development of the student as a whole person, complements a professional and scientific education and deserves more attention given the concerns about both today's students and societies. The paper provides a short history of liberal education and of great books seminars as one way of providing a liberal education. The paper then discusses practical-educational questions about text selection and the role of the teacher. In the final part, the paper offers an example of a text that could be read as part of great books seminars, namely, E. M. Forster's *Where Angels Fear to Tread*, which provides students with the opportunity to think about the relationship between friendship, self-knowledge and purpose.

Key words: liberal education, great books seminars, university, literature, intellectual virtues.

1. Introduction

In recent decades, a growing body of literature has voiced concern over the prevailing culture in modern universities, particularly the rise of performance metrics, competitiveness, and a narrowly instrumental approach to education. Scholars such as Brooks, Deresiewicz and Sandel have warned that these developments contribute to elevated levels of anxiety among students and foster a model of higher education that prioritizes individual achievement and career advancement at the expense of broader human development.¹ As higher education increasingly orients itself toward market logic —emphasizing measurable outputs, employability, and professional specialization— it risks neglecting its role in fostering reflection, ethical judgment, and civic responsibility.

These institutional trends occur alongside different societal challenges. Contemporary democracies are grappling with a decline in social cohesion, increasing political polarization, and rising skepticism toward intellectual authority.² Such conditions call for renewed attention to the formative dimensions of education, such as in liberal education³ and character education,⁴ both of which have aims that overlap.⁵ A formative education focuses not simply what students know or how employable they are, but who they become as a person intellectually and morally, and how they will engage as members of a pluralistic society. In this context, one of the missions of the modern university is more urgent than ever. While universities have traditionally pursued three major aims —professional education, scientific research and training, and liberal education—⁶ the third is increasingly marginalized. Liberal education, understood as the cultivation of the whole person through intellectual formation, is often subordinated to or overshadowed by vocational and technical priorities.⁷

¹ Cf. BROOKS, D. «The Organization Kid». *The Atlantic*. <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2001/04/the-organization-kid/302164/>; DERESIEWICZ, W. *Excellent Sheep. The Miseducation of the American Elite and a Way to a Meaningful Life*. Los Angeles: Free Press, 2015; SANDEL, M. J. *The tyranny of merit. What's become of the common good?* London: Penguin, 2001.

² Cf. KAKUTANI, M. *The Death of Truth*. London: William Collins, 2019.

³ Cf. TORRALBA, J. M. *Una Educación Liberal. Elogio de los grandes libros*. Barcelona: Encuentro, 2022.

⁴ Cf. JUBILEE CENTRE FOR CHARACTER AND VIRTUES. (2020). Character Education in Universities. A Framework for Flourishing. https://www.jubileecentre.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/Character_Education_in_Universities_Final_Edit-1.pdf; BRANT, J. BROOKS, E. and LAMB, M. *Cultivating Virtue in the University*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022.

⁵ Cf. TORRALBA, J. M. «Character and Virtue in Liberal Education». In PETERS, M. A. *Encyclopedia of Educational Philosophy and Theory*. Berlin: Springer Nature, 2020, pp. 1-5.

⁶ Cf. JOSÉ ORTEGA Y GASSET. (2014). *The Mission of the University*. Routledge.

⁷ Cf. KRONMAN, A. T. *Education's End. Why our colleges and universities have given up on the meaning of life*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007; BOK, D. C. *Higher Expectations. Can Colleges teach what they need to know in the 21st Century?* Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2020.