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ARTICLE

Creating Global Citizens through Encounters with Asia—The Making of the Modern World Program at Eleanor Roosevelt College, UCSD

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This article describes the “Making of the Modern World” program, a liberal arts curriculum in a public university. Thirty years ago Eleanor Roosevelt College at the University of California, San Diego, developed a multi-disciplinary liberal arts core curriculum called the Making of the Modern World. The history and cultures of Asia were a major part of that curriculum. As one of the developers of the curriculum, I now reflect on the program both as a success story and cautionary tale. I will recount why we developed this kind of liberal arts curriculum, how we did it, how well it did or did not work, how it has changed over the years, and what lessons this experience might have for us today. I argue that liberal arts colleges can learn from our efforts at creating such a curriculum in a large research university, but all should beware of taking on our educational deficiencies.

Keywords: Liberal arts; Asian studies; Curriculum development; Integrated learning; Great civilized conversation

The basis for a liberal arts education in a university is increasingly dominated by scientific specialization and professional training. The University of California at San Diego (UCSD) is divided into six (soon to be seven) undergraduate colleges – living and learning communities that can provide students with a local home within a campus of 39,000 students. The colleges are distinguished from one another by different approaches to lower-division education. Three decades ago, I helped establish the core curriculum of the fifth college, later named Eleanor Roosevelt College (ERC). The name reflects the college's chosen mission: to educate for global citizenship. It was established at a time in the late 1980s when the university was undergoing rapid expansion and seeking to respond to an increasing awareness of global interdependence. The core curricula of the previous four colleges had focused on the classics of Western civilization and/or social scientific accounts of the problems of American society. We were the first to systematically compare Western civilization with the other great world civilizations and to invite reflection on the civic responsibilities necessary to sustain justice and peace within a multi-civilizational world order.

The core curriculum consisted of a two-year sequence of courses on The Making of the Modern World (MMW) which traced the development of the world's great civilizations from their origins down to the present. I was especially focused on the last part of the sequence, the twentieth century and beyond. One of my major academic specialties is the sociology of Chinese society. The director of the entire curriculum development effort was John Dower, a distinguished historian of Japan: a number of the other key developers were Asian scholars. Thus, the history and cultures of Asia were a major part of the curriculum.

Herein I would like to describe this program both as a success story and a cautionary tale. I will talk about *why* we developed this kind of liberal arts curriculum, *how* we did it, how well it did or did not *work*, how it has *changed* over the years, and what *lessons* this experience might have for us today.

How and Why

Why did we develop this MMW curriculum? Those of us on the planning committee were committed to the idea that along with and before preparing our students for

specialized careers, the university needed to help them understand the challenges of living responsibly in an interdependent world. This, I submit, is the traditional goal of a liberal education. Because of the vast expansion of global communication and commerce, we need to understand the traditional goal in new ways that would expand students' horizons, allowing them to engage with the similarities and diversities within the great historical traditions for living responsibility within diverse communities. The term "globalization" entered common academic parlance in the 1980s. Especially in the 1980s, as it became apparent that great new sources of wealth and power were developing in Asia, it seemed imperative that Asian traditions for living the good life be a major part of this MMW education. Educating toward a global perspective that included Asia was also, by the 1980s, becoming possible because our relatively young university (founded in 1960) had finally begun to hire enough Asian specialists to have the basis for vigorous Asian-studies programs.

With the support of Jamie Lyon, the founding provost of Eleanor Roosevelt College, John Dower insisted that the course be multi-disciplinary and multi-media. He included faculty from a wide range of humanities and social sciences departments and made provision for a library of slides and films pertinent to the course. Although we were a multidisciplinary group, we shared a common conviction that to understand the present, you had to understand where it came from. To understand how people think today, you have to know something about the classical exemplars that provide vocabulary and moral precedent for grappling with contemporary problems. But we also needed to know how all living traditions change over time in new social, economic, and political contexts. We also needed to know not only the histories of success but of failures: the blind spots they were afflicted with and the disasters they were complicit in. We needed to be aware of how the meaning of different traditions changes with different perspectives and how to appreciate the resources for critical reflection that can be provided by modern social sciences – as well as the limitations imposed. Such an education, as we saw it while developing the ERC curriculum, was not a preparation for success in any particular career but a resource for responding to the challenges of living well with any career that one might choose, especially in a California context that was becoming increasingly integrated into the Pacific Rim.

How did we approach this? We avoided the approach taken by several other UCSD colleges (and by Harvard in the early 20th century) to have students choose from a smorgasbord of introductory courses taught by various humanities and social sciences departments. We followed the approach advocated by the eminent China scholar and Columbia University professor Theodore De Bary, as described in his last published book, *The Great Civilized Conversation*.¹ The approach taken by Columbia produced an integrated core curriculum required of all students. We developed a sequence of six courses, each taught in three sections by three different professors with the aid of an array of teaching assistants. We wanted the course to be taught mostly by tenured professors, the more senior the better, so students could get to know and interact with leaders in the university. The course was mandatory for all students of the college, regardless of their major. The course content was directed toward three different kinds of knowledge (as later articulated by Martha Nussbaum in her book on *Cultivating Humanity: A Classical Defense of Reform in Liberal Education*).² These were factual knowledge, narrative understanding, and critical understanding

1. Factual knowledge – names, dates, and overall social context for when things happened – was given through textbooks of world history.
2. Narrative understanding was more important, and probably the most important part of our program. This understanding led students to empathetically step into the shoes of people in different cultural and historical situations, to appreciate the way others saw their world and to follow their quests for a good life. This was accomplished through assigning parts of primary texts, especially those considered classics in each major tradition. For China during the Warring States period, this included parts of the Confucian Analects and

¹ Wm. Theodore De Bary, *The Great Civilized Conversation: Education for World Community* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013).

² Martha Nussbaum, *Cultivating Humanity: a Classical Defense of Reform in Liberal Education* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997).

the Mencius, the Classic of the Dao and the Zhuangzi (we used the comic book version by Tsai Chih-chung), as well as part of the Sunzi and the Grand Historian's account of the Emperor Qin. We also used selections from the Bhagavad Gita, the Ramayana, and the Kama Sutra. The faculty used slides to bring to life material culture and the arts; music and film clips were also used to help make these studies real. For Asia in the 20th Century, for example, I included a story by Lu Xun, parts of the autobiography of Gandhi, the writings of Mao Zedong, a story by Mishima, oral histories of Japanese soldiers in World War II, a manifesto of Ho Chi Minh, testimonies of Chinese dissidents, a chapter from a novel about Indonesian dissidents, vignettes about Japanese salarymen, a movie by Sanyajit Ray, and parts of the Chinese film *River Elegy*.

3. The third component of the course, critical understanding, was supposed to be inspired by the professors' lectures, which tried to pull various pieces of the material together, and by the group discussions led by the teaching assistants every week in groups of 30. Besides participating in class discussions, students were to write a variety of critical essays – shorter for the freshmen, longer for sophomores– based on the material. As we passed through history, the course emphasized critical understanding of the interconnection of the classical traditions, whether via the Silk Road, the great maritime routes, or 21st century cybersphere. Especially in the segment on the 20th Century and Beyond, the main message was about global interdependence in triumph and tragedy. The lines between East and West, North and South, became increasingly blurred.

For each quarter in the sequence, the material was tied together by common themes. For example, the quarter covering the philosophies of the Warring States period and the unification of China under Qin, emphasized the philosophical visions which try to address old social order breakdown as well as the processes and consequences of empire building. We could thus ask students to compare the philosophical responses to social breakdown in ancient Greece with ancient China and compare the rise of

the Chinese empire with the rise of the Roman Empire. In the section regarding the 20th century, we discussed the breakdown of liberal ideals for creating a global order of justice and peace. In light of what they had learned, we asked students to write about the prospects for a sustainable and humane global order in the 21st century. This approach was the result of collaboration between historians and social scientists. The historians might have wanted to give a more comprehensive account of events in any given period. The social scientists wanted to focus on events that would give important lessons about common social and cultural processes.

These specific curricula were worked out through extensive group discussion among professors who planned the course and initially taught it. There were over twenty of us, led by Professor John Dower. We had a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities, which at the time was making a particular mission of enabling this kind of global education. (They provided some funding for course relief, summer salary for the planning process, and money for assistance in locating and gathering course material.) The meetings were sometimes exhausting and sometimes contentious because of different philosophical assumptions from faculty in literature, history, philosophy, sociology, anthropology, and political science. But meetings were founded on a real sense of common purpose and a high level of esprit de corps – the excitement of founding something new. As one participant reminisced, “It was inspiring.... I think this whole process made us all feel like we were doing something new and innovative (and long overdue) in putting the world at the center of a humanities/social science sequence rather than just the West. The challenge for all of us was not just to put the non-West in, but to contextualize the West so that it continued to matter but mattered in context of a true world history, so we could teach interactions between societies and cultures when the West was not even part of the conversation – like contact between India and China for instance. The main point for us was to make the rest of the world important even before the West ‘discovered’ it or conquered it or decided it mattered.”

Most of us were still fairly junior and still fairly idealistic. We really wanted to pioneer a new way of imagining basic liberal education, at least for our campus, but

with implications for American academia in general. We also found it rewarding to learn from each other. I felt responsible to give at least an informal education to colleagues who were not experts on China. I learned a lot about modern art and philosophy from a colleague in European literature and about international relations from a colleague in political science, and I think they learned some things from me. This mutual learning was important because we had to give integrative lectures that were very different from the courses we would give in our own specialties. In the first few years I often stayed up past midnight preparing the morning's lectures. They were a lot harder to prepare than my normal courses in sociology.

What Worked and What Didn't?

What did and didn't work? The first offering of the two-year Making-of-the-Modern-World sequence started with the first class in the fall of 1988 and concluded in the spring of 1990. I started teaching in the spring quarter of 1989 on the 20th Century, and continued teaching that course for 15 years until I became Chair of the Sociology Department and later a provost of ERC. A number of alumni from that first cohort returned for a dinner in 2013 on the 25th anniversary of the college's founding, and talked about what a profound impression the course had made upon them. It had, they said, given them a true global awareness and sustained their continuing interest in international affairs. They valued what they had learned about Asia even when their jobs did not directly concern Asian affairs.

The course created a common identity for the college and gave meaning to our professed goal of creating global citizens. The college rounded out the perspective created by the core course by instituting several other general requirements: a foreign language requirement with proficiency at the second year level; an area concentration requirement – three upper division courses from any department on a certain region other than the USA, such as Asia; and two courses in the arts, including one in a non-Western art. Courses on Asian art and music were especially popular. ERC became the place to go for students who wanted to develop a broad global perspective and perhaps go on to careers in international affairs.

The establishment of the college and its global mission helped stimulate continued growth in Asian-studies related faculty throughout the university. We now have a very rich array of upper division courses on Asia, including language courses, and these lead into a wide variety of Asia-related internships and study-abroad programs. We encourage our students to take advantage of our study-abroad programs, which have now expanded to include summer sessions, single semesters, and the traditional full-year programs. A higher percentage of ERC students take advantage of such programs compared to other UCSD colleges.

Nonetheless, one needs to be realistic about our accomplishments. Most UCSD students haven't especially wanted a career in international affairs and didn't especially desire a global perspective. UCSD is renowned for its STEM departments, and most students came in wanting to be STEM majors – until they found STEM courses too difficult. They then often switched to the social sciences, especially economics and management “science,” psychology, and political science. From the beginning, they found the ERC curriculum too demanding and too distracting from their career aspirations. (The first few years may have been partial exceptions, because Fifth College attracted students with a pioneering spirit who were attracted to its aspirations.) MMW became a course students loved to hate, though after graduation many nostalgically said it was their most valuable course.

Their parents sometimes shared this view. For a few years in the mid-1990s I became the director of the MMW program and wrote a brochure explaining the goals of the program, i.e. “to weave together different branches of knowledge and histories of different cultures to produce an integrated understanding that would help them become good global citizens.” The father of one student remarked that all the talk about weaving and integrating indicated that we were a women's college – at the time, in fact, more female than male students chose us, but now we have a more normal gender balance. He seemed to think that we would attract more high achieving male students if we focused more on how we would prepare them for competitive careers. Perhaps I should have changed the description to “penetrating, cutting edge knowledge that could help one compete in the arena of life.”

What Didn't

The faculty who created MMW bore responsibility for creating a curriculum that some students thought to be too burdensome and irrelevant. We were all research professors, specialists in our respective fields. In our eagerness to be comprehensive, we assigned too much reading in our areas of expertise. There were tensions, as I have mentioned, between historians and social scientists; instead of thoroughly resolving these, it was tempting to simply give each side too much of what they wanted. The photocopied readers for primary class documents weighed several pounds each – and were also expensive. Some of the alumni who returned for that 25th anniversary lugged copies of the readers back with them to laugh and marvel at how much they had had to read, or at least pretend to read. But perhaps it says something that they had kept them for all those years. It was too much reading for students to absorb, especially when they were presented with unfamiliar ways of discourse such as the Confucian analects, or for that matter, the writings of Mao Zedong. Even if we tried to unpack the meaning of the texts in lecture, there was often not enough time to do so thoroughly.

Another problem was with the teaching assistants who were supposed to lead discussions about the materials. Most of them had not studied much Asian history and philosophy, and they had their own difficulties in explaining the texts, or for that matter, keeping up with the reading during the amount of time specified in their teaching contracts. In the end, most did very well and brought inspiring creativity to presenting the material. But it took a lot of work to enable them to do that.

The purpose of a liberal education, as I see it, is not to stuff students with facts (many of which will be forgotten days after final examinations), but to lead them into mature reflection on diverse accounts from different – but interconnected – cultures of how people have tried and (often enough) failed to live good lives in good societies. Reflection can be inhibited by too much of the material that fascinates specialists. The challenge faced by those of us who began MMW was to get beyond our specialty, research-focused blinders and think more deeply about what it meant to be teachers for students who were just beginning on their paths. We were preparing

them not to become specialists like ourselves but to have the true beginnings of a global education. If MMW was hard for students to take, it was also hard for faculty to properly develop.

What Changed?

MMW has steadily changed under various pressures. The photocopied readers have gotten slimmer, the choice of readings more focused. We have developed greater skill in the training of our teaching assistants – and the teaching assistants have responded well. But change has not only been driven by the intentions of the faculty and students who were the original stakeholders, but also by external forces resulting from the evolution of the public research university.

As our university grew, it became more bureaucratized. Research became more specialized and departments more insulated from one another. Most of my own work was interdisciplinary, but that is much less the case for a younger generation of faculty. Moreover, an increasingly corporatized management has relied ever more heavily on “metrics” – especially, how many publications faculty have in journals in what ranking. The pressure on younger faculty is intense. There is less incentive for them to take time away from their specialties to develop any course that would force them to integrate realms of knowledge that are not directly relevant to their specialties, or to develop any course in a way that would create the foundation for a broad humanistic understanding rather than preparation for a specialized career. The new metrics also mean that departments are eager to increase their own enrollments and want their best teachers to teach introductory courses in their own departments rather than give time to a general education entity like MMW. Over the years, therefore, the composition of the MMW faculty has changed; now, there are almost no faculty from the social sciences.

There are still some regular faculty from history and literature in MMW. Because of declining enrollments in the humanities their departments are happy to lend them out to programs that increase per capita counts. One exception is the faculty in Asian history and literature who have their own introductory courses to teach to bring majors in their respective fields into their programs. But most teachers

in MMW are not ladder rank academic senate faculty. Rather they are contractual lecturers with no obligations to publish research. Thanks to unionization, however, some can get contracts that are almost equivalent to tenure, though with salaries that are considerably lower than those of research professors. They are generalist experts in teaching. Most of them are indeed excellent. There is one lecturer who is especially well versed in Chinese philosophy, literature, and history and exceptionally devoted to his students, who consistently wins the college's outstanding teaching award given during commencement. This was so consistent, in fact, that when I was provost, I changed the rules so that one could only receive the award once every three years – just to give other faculty a chance for the honor. Although the new composition of the faculty has not diminished the quality of teaching (it may have even improved it) it further separates the liberal arts component of the university from its missions for research and career development.

Another pressure comes from the governor and state legislature passing all the way down through the different layers of the University of California to us faculty, to reduce the time needed to obtain a degree. This happens while many pre-professional departments, especially in science and engineering, contend that they have to add courses to adequately train their students. Something has to give, and that is often general education and liberal arts courses. As a result, we have had to shorten the MMW sequence from six quarters to five, and we had to delete the requirement for one course in a non-Western art. We were under pressure to eliminate the language requirement – most of the other colleges at UCSD have already done so. However, we got around that by arguing that most of our students have taken enough AP language courses that they really don't have to take many in the university, so the language requirement doesn't slow their time to obtaining a degree. The position of the colleges within the university has been declining, and I am concerned that the distinctive MMW core curricula will be taken away in favor of a smorgasbord of department-centered introductory courses that will be easier and cheaper to implement than an integrated college curriculum like we currently have in ERC.

The university increasingly justifies itself in terms of its ability to get students started in lucrative careers. We get more questions from students and parents about

how humanistic courses that push students to contemplate the “Big Questions” are supposed to help their students’ career prospects. Though I dislike utilitarian arguments, I pointed out at a parent-student orientation that Steve Jobs achieved great success by combining high technology with elegant design drawn from his humanities background and his engagement with Buddhist philosophy.

Finally, the changing demographics of UCSD produce new opportunities and challenges for an integrative liberal education program like the one at ERC. A quarter century ago, when Eleanor Roosevelt College was founded, the campus was mostly white; Asian students were a small minority. Now, the campus is almost 50 percent Asian, including Asian Americans and international students. Only a little over 20 percent of students are white. This greater diversity brings a different confluence of interests and perceptions. Many of the Asian students think they know something about Asian cultures, although for the Asian Americans it is mostly about certain family customs, not the deeper religious and philosophical traditions behind them. As for the international students, especially from China, they have been taught political narratives about Chinese history that may not accord with what our faculty teaches. Also, because English is their second language, they sometimes struggle with the large amount of reading and English-language writing that a course like MMW imposes. Faculty are still struggling to adapt to these new realities.

Nonetheless, the changing demographic diversity of our student body provides good occasions to engage in creative controversy that leads to genuine mutual learning. This doesn’t necessarily happen in the classroom, however, because in the utilitarian atmosphere that now dominates higher education, classroom discussions tend to be determined by what students need to get good grades on their tests. But mutual learning can and does happen through informal conversation in our residential communities, in our many service-learning projects, or in the hundreds of voluntary student organizations the colleges support. This, perhaps, does not happen often enough. Extracurricular field trips that some faculty take students on are especially effective. For example, one teacher takes a group of students to the Torrey Pines State Park, where they sit on a hill overlooking the Pacific Ocean through

the beautiful pine trees and write haiku poetry. He also takes a group for a weekend visit to the Deer Park Buddhist Monastery near San Diego.

Lessons for Liberal Arts Colleges

What lessons does this hold for you in liberal arts colleges? One lesson is that many of us in big public research universities may have good ideals about maintaining the promise of a liberal arts education, and we may sometimes do innovative things to realize those ideals, but we are not very good at sustaining them. The ever-increasing pressures to specialize, to publish, and to bring in research grants, though based on the imperatives of modern scientific research, have colonized the social sciences and even humanities. Many professors genuinely want to be good teachers, but can't get tenure and promotion based on strong teaching only. Insofar as liberal arts colleges place more of an emphasis on creative teaching, they have a genuine comparative advantage over research universities – an extremely important role for liberal arts to play in American academic culture. They can learn from some of the good things we did in places like UCSD, but no one should be seduced into taking on our educational deficiencies. Research should be required; that is important for intellectual creativity. But aim for a better balance between research and pedagogical creativity. Perhaps place greater value on the kind of integrative research that can give us all a better glimpse of our place in the larger society, and that even hints of how we might work toward a common good.

When it comes to introducing Asia into the liberal arts curriculum, one lesson to be gained from our experience at Eleanor Roosevelt College is that most of the faculty who teach the curriculum don't have to be specialists on Asia. It is important to have some specialists, as we had when developing *The Making of the Modern World*, even though specialists tended to load the curriculum with more material than students could handle. The experts can teach the non-specialists, but the latter might help experts curb their enthusiasm and also give useful advice on how to integrate Asian materials into the comprehensive purposes of the course. That purpose is how to give students a vision of the similarities as well as differences

among the big questions about morality, society, and identity posed by the great traditions. This is what is necessary for initiation into the great civilized conversation that will be necessary for global citizenship in the 21st century.

Also, the smaller size of most liberal arts colleges may facilitate the deep collegial discussions needed to develop and maintain a liberal arts curriculum that integrates new understandings of Asia with the traditional teachings on Western civilization. A crucial aspect of developing such a curriculum at Columbia University, as Theodore De Bary tells us, was to generate a strong esprit de corps and common purpose among the faculty who initiated it. We had this among the several dozen faculty who created the ERC MMW curriculum. We were excited and hopeful about creating something new. But the excitement faded as the university grew; faculty scattered around the huge campus, and inevitably became necessarily preoccupied with advancing to the next stages in their careers. The esprit de corps faded. Even those faculty members formally affiliated with ERC rarely take part in its activities. The common purpose gets embedded in routines whose meanings get forgotten. There is now little time to take part in the common discussions among diverse faculty, which gave the original MMW its tension-filled coherence. The smaller size of most liberal arts colleges provides more opportunities to keep the sense of common purpose alive and to continually renew it. Even so, renewal takes constant effort. Smaller liberal arts colleges might also allow for more of a sense of common community among students and interaction between students and teachers, which would enable informal learning to take place.

For big universities and small colleges alike, there remains pressure from the job market on the ideals of a liberal education. Students and parents alike want to know how education will pay off with a good job. For us at UCSD, this has led to emphasis (by administrators and students alike) on majors like engineering that can lead directly to well-paying jobs. As more resources are put into these majors, general education programs with liberal arts ideals feel under siege. We may argue that the liberal arts can help develop the broader perspective that will make any job meaningful and, indeed, as the case of Steve Jobs shows, may lead to work that

is extremely successful. Especially on the West Coast, the rise of Asia is a palpable phenomenon, and it is easy to see that no education that neglects Asia can adequately prepare students for the future.

Even though they are greatly pressured by the demands of the job market, liberal arts universities have a rich tradition for making the case for a broad general education. Outside of the West Coast, however, away from this palpable feeling of being integrated into the Pacific Rim, faculties might feel less urgency to integrate studies of Asia into such an education. It may require some effort to convey to them that knowledge of Asia is critically important for any generally educated person, not just specialists. At this juncture, attention to the job market may stand us in good stead. Almost every major American corporation is deeply enmeshed with Asian markets either through imports or exports. All branches of American government and the military must constantly pay close attention to Asian affairs. Obtaining careers in any of these institutions will require at least some knowledge of Asian cultures and societies. For purely pragmatic reasons, every university should assist in providing graduates with entry to such career paths. And what begins with a pragmatic, utilitarian motivation can lead to – and in the long run has to be at least partially sustained by – a deeper appreciation of the intrinsic value of participating in the great civilized conversation with the cultures and societies of Asia.

We can all take heart from this conversation reported by a colleague: “After a lecture on Ramayana and (the) place of women in ancient Hindu and Indian society, I had a student come up and politely ask me why she and others needed to know all this. She really was quite polite and seemed earnestly curious. I said ‘Are you a biology major?’ She lit up and said ‘Yes – how did you know?’ I said – ‘Because I get a lot of biology majors asking that question and the reason you might want to know some of this is because you will no doubt be working in labs or clinics or other settings in which people from all over the world and from many cultural backgrounds will be present. So knowing how they see the world and what their cultural heritage is can help you be respectful and communicate with them.’ That was the best I could do at the time. Near the end of the quarter this student came to me after a lecture and said

‘Professor... I think I figured out what you are teaching us.’ So of course I said – ‘Great – what did you figure out?’ And she said ‘You are teaching us to think.’ I loved that.”

And it is indeed such thinking that is a necessary foundation for The Great Civilized Conversation.

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Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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