**The Twentieth International Conference on New Directions in the Humanities**

Rhodes, Greece, 20-22 June 2022

Theme 5: Past and Present in the Humanistic Education

**Integrating the Humanities into Undergraduate Courses in Social Sciences**

Dr. Bina Nir

Head, Department of Multidisciplinary Social Sciences, Max Stern Yezreel Valley College, Israel

**Introduction**

The late 1990s marked the beginning of a rapid decline in the number of students pursuing undergraduate and graduate degrees in the traditional humanities (Rinon 2014, 12; Frugel 2017, 93). Despite the immense value Western society places on the unique advantages of all humanistic disciplines, it appears that the vast changes we are currently witnessing in the humanities give rise to many ethical questions. These issues call for extensive and in-depth consideration, and few will argue against the vital necessity for the humanities in discussions determining how humanity will conduct itself in the complex world it has created.

The future damage to democracies whose young civilians choose to limit their knowledge of the cultural foundations of statehood is cause for extreme concern. Consequently, today universities encourage a humanistic education by way of a differential allocation of resources among (between) disciplines, employing artificial strategies to encourage students to turn to the humanities, developing interdisciplinary curricula, and incorporating liberal arts courses in existing study programs. Based on my extensive experience in the field, in this presentation, I will introduce the concept of “hybrid courses.” These courses incorporate the humanities within core courses in the social sciences from a multidisciplinary perspective.

To offer a certain “remedy” for the crisis, we first need to understand the processes leading to the devaluation of the humanities on two trajectories: the external – that is, processes occurring within the social-cultural realm that infiltrate the academic domain, and the internal, which involves the examination of this devaluation within academic institutions. In this context, I have chosen to focus on five particular external and internal sub-processes.

**First, the prominence of studies in fields geared towards lucrative careers**. Among other things, capitalist culture has contributed significantly to the increasing tendency among students to focus on fields that will prepare them for financially beneficial employment opportunities. However, contrary to the common perception that the race for financial success grew directly out of capitalism, the fact is that it merely bolstered and nurtured this drive to the point that it became the primary objective of life (Nir 2016). In his book, *The One-Dimensional Man* (1969), Herbert Marcuse claims that having become a manufacturer of diplomas, academia renders the student a passive consumer of knowledge rather than an active participant in the learning process. In a world in which advertising and marketing campaigns are dominant impetuses in the public sphere, academia is forced to cope with an aggressive market – and it is easier to market “profitable” disciplines and consequently downplay the importance of the humanities (Rinon 2914, 11-12).

**Second, the rise of “scientificity.”** With the growing perception that academia needs to be objective and scientific, the idea that higher education should be comprehensive has been neglected. In the 1880s, Friedrich Nietzsche expressed concern about the heavy price humanity may pay if its cultural development is shaped by a positivistic-scientific viewpoint. In Nietzsche’s words:

That a world-interpretation is alone right by which *you* maintain your position, by which investigation and work can go on scientifically in *your* sense (you really mean *mechanically*?), an interpretation which acknowledges numbering, calculating, weighing [...] – such an idea is a piece of grossness and naivety. (*The* *Gay Science*, 238)

According to Frugel (2014), the humanities are not weak sciences but weakened sciences. The appropriate approach to the humanities requires the development of intellectual reflection open to multidisciplinary thought. Thus, given that, in Husserl’s (1996) astute words, “merely fact-minded sciences make merely fact-minded people,” what is required is “existential contemplation” – that which constitutes a critical juxtaposition of science’s objective structures and the reality of human everyday life.

**Third, the digital revolution**. Yuval Noah Harari (2015) argues that the digital revolution threatens to annihilate the political environment. Indeed, while technology adds a new dimension, it at the same time takes something away, and while its contribution to our lives is always alluring, what it deprives us of is invariably obscure, if not imperceptible (McLuhan, 2003). In the context of academia, this inversion is evident in the availability and accessibility of abundant information, which in turn depletes the status of the teacher or professor on campus as a mediator of knowledge and narrows opportunities for profound inquiry and discussion. In *Phaedrus*, Plato describes the outcome of learning a text without the instruction of teachers or educators: “they [the students] will be hearers of many things and will have learned nothing; they will appear to be omniscient and will generally know nothing; they will be tiresome company, having the show of wisdom without the reality.”

**Fourth, quality of teaching**. Although teaching is one of the university professor’s major roles, little attention is paid to its development, nurturing, and evaluation. The professor’s advancement is contingent mainly on the quantity and quality of their research, not on the quality of their teaching. To significantly change the current status of the humanities, one necessary step, according to Delbanco, is to appoint more teachers in institutions of higher education for whom teaching is a key priority. The problem, he argues, is that faculty members engaged in highly specified areas of research offer narrow disciplinary content to young people in need of a more comprehensive education (Delbanco 2021). When the study of the humanities is viewed as both a scientific and educational endeavor, the professor fills the roles of both teacher and educator, in other words, they not only transmit objective knowledge but take responsibility for their student’s moral development. Education is not the authoritative inculcation of a particular worldview, but the nurturing of the students’ autonomous thinking and critical self-awareness along with inviting them to engage in free dialogue and liberal discourse that promotes self-actualization and a critical intellect.

Nietzsche (1978) proposes a model of learning for the sake of inspiration rather than for the sake of knowledge and understanding. “He must organize the chaos in himself by recalling in himself his own real needs. His honesty, his better and more genuine character must now and then struggle against what will be constantly repeated, relearned, and imitated” (1980, 64).

**Fifth, the economic model of learning**. The finance-based model of universities presumes full lecture halls – a situation where true dialogue is nearly impossible. While the shift to online learning during the recent Covid pandemic revealed the significant advantages of digital communication – or in Goodman’s words “Zoom ‘saved us’ in the crisis” (2021, 57), we must also not lose sight of its major disadvantages: less stimulating communication and less personable rapport between teachers and students. This vital foundation of the learning experience became sterile; content was transmitted, but the “energy” was not. Digital encounters facilitate connections but do not satisfy the human need for human contact (Turkle 2015, 59-78). Mendelsohn’s (2020), studies of communication through “Zoom” establish that the lack of eye contact diminishes the emotional quality of the connection, disrupts the ability to transmit information effectively, and causes “Zoom fatigue.” One of the challenges facing the humanities is the issue of how to encourage “dialogic” learning in an age of “digital” learning.

**Social Science Courses Incorporating Humanities**.

In order to integrate and assimilate humanities into social sciences study programs, I propose including “hybrid courses” in the existing social science curricula. These interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary courses will facilitate multidisciplinary reflection, critical thinking skills, and a humanistic perspective as part of the students’ basic training in the social sciences. They will integrate practical and theoretical approaches while developing what Husserl (1996) calls “existential contemplation,” instilling in the students the capacity for ethical and individual reflection about their future professional lives.

Today I will present, as a case study, one such multidisciplinary course – “Communication and Humanistic Thought” – to illustrate the integration of a humanities discipline (philosophy) into the undergraduate social sciences curriculum of the Communications department. This multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary course is designed to expose the students to models of critical humanistic thinking about media structures, public opinion, individual and “herd” mentalities, etc. Drawing on philosophical texts, the students analyze case studies from the domain of contemporary communication with the goal of expanding their theories and concepts beyond those classically taught in communication studies and fostering a broader and more critical approach to the field.

**Name of Course: Communication and Humanistic Thought**

**Background** (from the course syllabus)

The technological changes of recent decades have been so rapid as to sometimes give us the impression that our fundamental social communication patterns have changed. These changes have been particularly significant for mass media with the resulting social, cultural, and political ramifications. Reflection on questions about human nature and social structures and examining them in light of the technological changes is more important than ever before. In this course, the students will discuss the means of connecting and communicating in the community in dialogue and engagement with canonical texts of Western culture.

Reading these philosophical texts will provide students with the skills necessary to apply a comprehensive and discriminating examination of the communication platform in which the social discourse takes place, on the one hand, and the fundamental questions, on the other. This learning model will enable students to engage in in-depth discussions on basic questions related to the human condition, such as “is the inclination of the human heart evil from youth,” “what is free will,” “is loneliness an existential state of being,” “why do we continuously seek the approval of the ‘herd,’” “what is the art and purpose of life,” “what is liberty, and why do flee from escape it?” Spanning from ancient times till today, the great books pose fundamental philosophical questions pertaining to the human spirit – its nature and value – that continue to puzzle Western culture, despite technological developments and multiple communication platforms.

**Course Objectives:**

1. Provide students with a broad perspective with regard to the nature of the human community and the communication that is its basis.
2. Provide students with basic skills for engaging in a dialogue between canonical texts and relevant theories, models, and issues in the field of communication.
3. Introduce students to fundamental issues in the subject of human nature, human values, and human purpose by way of discussing contemporary topics of interest to the public and the media.

**Learning Outcomes:**

At the end of the course, the student will be able to:

1. Differentiate between the essence of the discourse and the platform on which this discourse is held.
2. Examine fundamental questions in their broad context.
3. Differentiate between basic social issues and specific social-political behaviors.
4. Analyze social issues in the contexts in which they occur.

**Teaching Strategies:**

The course includes fourteen frontal lectures and class-based discussions of relevant texts.

**Sample Lessons:**

*Lessons 1-2: From Plato to Today – The Cave as an Allegory for Media and Public Opinion*

The first lesson begins with a brief background on Plato and Socrates, followed by a reading of Plato’s Allegory of the Cave (*The Republic*, Bk. VII), his most famous text on the effect of education and its lack on human nature. Based on the text, we will discuss individual agency as the means to depart from the cave by way of a difficult ascent from one level of consciousness to the next. To succeed in this endeavor, the individual needs to overcome their adherence to what is normal or accepted (i.e., the restraints) and recognize that emancipation involves appropriating a new state of being.

Having read excerpts from the Allegory of the Cave, in Lesson 2 we will discuss how we may draw an analogy between Plato’s text and contemporary media. For instance, students will be encouraged to interpret the concept of “the cave wall” vis-à-vis television screens, or the cave dwellers as paralleling the notion of “public opinion” or the “spiral of silence” theory. We will draw lines between the shadows on the wall and theories from the world of communication, such as “Agenda Setting,” and between the figures behind the wall, the producers of shadows and sounds, and journalists. Examples will be drawn from neo-Marxist theories students are studying in their Mass Media course. Students will be prompted to interpret the darkness and light, followed by a discussion on possible ways to be liberated from the contemporary “cave” of superficiality, ignorance, fake news, and distorted truth projected onto the wall, and to search for the truth constituted in themselves as human beings for whom honesty and integrity are fundamental values, and as future journalists who need to resist the deceit and corruption that arises from falsifying the truth and to distinguish the original and essential from the hubristic and the shallow.

*Lessons 10-11: The Individual and the Herd: From Seneca to Nietzsche to Social Networks*

In these lessons, we will discuss the topic of “individual and the herd” in a contemporary context based on readings from two short texts. The first, Seneca’s Letter VII, which deals with the need to avoid “a mass crowd” (Letters, 41), its foolishness and cruelty, will be considered in terms of how it reflects the context of its production (for example, the cruelty in setting slaves against ferocious lions as a form of mass entertainment), and in terms of the poet’s subjective experience: “I, at any rate, am ready to confess my own frailty in this respect. I never come home with quite the same moral character I went out with” (Letters, 41). We will explore contemporary concepts relevant to this text, such as characterizing the social networks’ “masses,” and discuss positive aspects of social media, such as alleviating apathy and driving individuals to become active for the greater social good, as well as the negative repercussions of bullying, shaming, pornography, and harrowingly exploitive enterprises.

We will discuss the harm done to children via social media as an analogy to what Seneca wrote two thousand years ago – that the delicate soul must be kept away from the influence of the masses. We will draw comparisons between Romans ecstatically watching animals and men fight for their lives, and contemporary reality shows – even if the latter are less cruel. We will contemplate Seneca’s deliberation regarding the overwhelming nature of the masses – “when the assault comes from the world at large? You must inevitably either hate or imitate the world” (Letters, 43) and students will be asked to suggest answers based on the own lives. We will present Seneca’s middle course to join only those groups that I choose to be considered a member of them and discuss the relevance of this approach today. The points of commonality between “the herd” and social media platforms is raised, and students will be referred to my article on shaming as optional reading (Nir, 2018). By making such comparisons between Seneca’s ancient text and social media, the students learn that despite the vast changes in media over time, social conduct has hardly changed at all. “What has been will be again, what has been done will be done again; there is nothing new under the sun” (Ecclesiastes 1:9).

The second lesson on the topic of the individual and the herd focuses on an excerpt from Nietzsche’s *Thus Spake Zarathustra* “XVII. The Way of Creating the One.” Similarly to the text in which Seneca warns us to avoid the frivolities and cruelties of the masses, Nietzsche ponders the importance of isolating oneself from the masses for self-creation. Following a brief introduction to Nietzsche, we will read the text together. “Wouldst thou go into isolation, my brother? Wouldst thou seek the way unto thyself? Tarry yet a little and hearken unto me.”

Nietzsche is convinced that the way to an individual’s inner identity requires their distancing themselves from the “herd” – this is the path to individuality – and the students are asked to think about how they might “find the path to their self” today and to disconnect from the masses constantly coming at them from the screens of their smartphones, fueled by their fear of missing out (FOMO). We will discuss the media in this context – how huge media corporations compete for our attention and manage to change our habits and behavior. A new need has come into being – the need to always be connected. How have new forms of anxiety emerged, such as FOMO or the fear of being alone?

“Tarry yet a little and hearken unto me. ‘He who seeketh may easily get lost himself. All isolation is wrong’: so say the herd. And long didst thou belong to the herd.” When the individual wants to be alone, the herd accuses and criticizes them, gossips about them, ostracizes and shames them, ultimately making them feel guilty. Here, the discussion will turn towards contemporary conformity. “But thou wouldst go the way of thine affliction, which is the way unto thyself?” Finally, the topic of fearing loneliness in the era of social networks (Nir & Ariel, 2019) will be raised. Technology has caused human communication to thrive, while the internet tore down walls between people. Geographical and cultural distances have diminished. However, the individual feels alone, not despite their living in the digital age, but precisely because they live in the digital age.