

Interior of Al Azhar. The Mohammedan University. Egypt. Students at work.



SAILING INTO A UNIVERSE OF KNOWLEDGE

Liberal arts education has major benefits for student growth and transformation as exemplified by the United States' university system and Al-Azhar University's original learning model

By Tarek Osman

Few first-year university students preparing to study, say, chemistry, are required to read the “Grand Inquisitor” chapter in Fyodor Dostoyevsky’s *The Brothers Karamazov*. Yet, this is one example of the appealing options presented to students by the liberal arts educational model.

◀ Students at work in the courtyard of the Al-Azhar Mosque, a part of Al-Azhar University in Cairo, Egypt. *Chronicle/Alamy*

Some students are bewildered; they do not see the logic of a literature course on Dostoyevsky or a history course on the viceroyship of Muhammad Ali—especially if they are paying huge fees to be in classrooms of this or that renowned university. The students (and their parents) assume going to such universities will open up doors to lucrative jobs. As such, they want to maximize the return on their investment in money and time. For most of them, that return is tangible: specific courses and research in their chosen area of study.

Some first-year students get the logic, though not entirely. They understand a liberal arts education makes them well-rounded persons, versed in literature, history, as well as marketing and science. Still, many request that such *interdisciplinary-ism* be kept to a bare minimum. They stress that having a well-rounded character does not give them a leg up in the competitive job market after university.

Domains of the Liberal Arts Student

Indeed, liberal arts education is about “the well-roundedness of character”. However, this goes wider and deeper than many think. It extends to several domains, but three are key.

The first is transition. University marks a rite of passage from childhood to adulthood. For many students worldwide, going to university is the moment they leave home: the

◀ American University in Cairo (AUC) students at work in the AUC library. *Audrey Lodes/Cairo Review*

birds flying the nest. This is arguably the moment of a young adult's first true test: being on one's own. This attempt at adulthood may entail financial self-responsibility to some degree—even if students continue to be reliant on their parents' (or others') financial support. For many, going to university is the moment they, willingly or not, get beyond the parameters of life which their parents have drawn.

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Old cultures used to mark this transition ritualistically. Amazonian tribes would force the “new man” to undergo an acutely difficult situation without being able to draw on the support of his

elders. His success or failure was not what mattered; it was the experience itself that supposedly ignited in him a novel understanding of himself, of his own capabilities, as well as the wants, desires, fears, and inhibitions that were independent from how he saw himself previously.

This transition separates the person (on his/her own) from the person who, previously, was dependent on his/her parents or elders. This is why several old cultures looked at this moment as a rebirth: of the adult from the child.

All university educational systems are built on a question students must answer: what do they want to study? Yet, liberal arts education puts forward another question: how do you want to study what you want to study?

The liberal arts model gives students a set number of courses they must take and yet compels the students to take classes in other fields, such as in the humanities if they are in the sciences, and vice versa. Also, students can develop minors in other subjects they find interesting. So on the whole, the students at a liberal arts institution are able to craft—often confusingly so—their own education.

Students then benefit from an array of counsellors, from the experiences of older students, from hanging out in the student union or the lounges of several social clubs and listening to views and insights. And while they might have done their homework properly in high school before enrolling, their educational experience boils down to data points that they must process into information, into inputs in their own decision-making process. They are not told where to go in their course of study; they are given options, paths, routes, that they must analyze, think about, and decide upon. Studying a liberal arts education forces them to explore not only what is on offer in terms of curricula, but also their inner world and how to personally connect with what they are learning.

This self-exploration is the second component of education in the liberal arts model. The process of having to make interconnected decisions with known

consequences unfolding in the near future is linked to each student's ambitions and aspirations. For example, if students are forced to take a course in art, they must ask themselves: would they choose a history of renaissance painting course or the theory of music 101? Most probably students know virtually nothing about either. Yet, subconsciously each student has an inkling, a subtle attraction to one versus the other, or a curiosity about one as opposed to a complete lack of interest in the other. To know which course a student wants to take, they then must read a little bit about the two (or many more) offered courses and ultimately intuit which of the two courses they would find most useful for their own growth.

Inherent in that process is the idea of change. The more students see different disciplines and briefly engage with them, the more doors open inside their minds, the more they understand about their own self, and the more transformations occur in their own views, wants, and ultimately the direction of their lives. It would be quite surprising to see students highly persistent in their worldviews and preferences after the first year or two in a liberal arts educational system. That is because the interactions between the internal and the myriad of external factors that the system engenders stimulate new thinking. The process leads, almost inevitably, to the creation of new ideas.

It is not surprising then that some education theorists (especially those hailing from psychology backgrounds) consider liberal arts education a great expression of the "pursuit of happiness". By forcing young students in their late teens and early twenties to look into their wants, aspirations, likes, and dislikes, liberal arts education instills in them the value of their own satisfaction. A significant part of higher education becomes a reflection of their general interests, hobbies, passions, and not only the areas they think— at that tender age—are the paths to riches and glory. As such, the more students learn to pay attention to what they truly want, the more they will respect themselves. This is crucial to being truly happy.

The third component the liberal arts model champions is creation. By taking responsibility to forge one's own path and by making that path incorporate some of one's interests, a student becomes the creator of their own university education. Ultimately, students curate what they expose themselves to, what to internalize, all within the overarching scheme that ensures that they acquire the necessary knowledge needed for the degree they are pursuing. This is real-life curating, where one makes choices based on one's desired objectives as well as the inhibitions and fears we all experience. This early experience prepares the mind for the reality of what will follow after the student leaves the protected milieu of his/her university education.

These forms of transition, internal exploration, and creating through curating

reflect an education system as it was developed hundreds of years ago. After all, the etymology of the word “education” is derived from the verb “educere”, which in its original usage denotes “extracting from within”. This means that, in its earliest forms, true education was about getting students to both extract from their own self-knowledge while acquiring knowledge from their external courses.

If one needs more convincing of the crucial importance of this aspect of looking internally to gain knowledge, one needs only to understand the true meaning of the word idea. Idea comes from “idein” or “ide’in,” which is Greek for “see”. Plato famously used to instruct his disciples to “look at their thoughts” as if from outside their own brains. This looking from outside of oneself matches the liberal arts education model and its interaction between external knowledge and reflective internalized self-development.

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Liberal arts education is generally associated with the U.S. college system. And indeed the American system, over two centuries ago, adopted the liberal arts model as a way to scope and structure higher education in the United States. But liberal arts education is *not* confined to America.

Reasoning in the Al-Azhar Model

The underlying philosophy upon which Cairo’s Al-Azhar University education was developed almost a thousand years ago shares a lot with liberal arts thinking. The idea was that a student comes to Al-Azhar having memorized the Quran and dozens of sayings of the Prophet Mohammad, and has learned the basics of arithmetic and a bit of history and geography, yet is without any other exposure to further knowledge.

Al-Azhar was supposed to graduate that student, a few years later, as a scholar, whose main job was expected to entail “reasoning” in people’s lives. This process of reasoning was typically employed in the judicial system, in education, and for a few, in the advisory councils of local rulers. Some of the brightest thinkers who developed in the Azharite educational system saw the road to reasoning through *al-tabahor*. This word literally means “going into the sea” or “sailing”. Al-tabahor symbolized the student’s need to go into the vast unknown, exert effort and spend time, and crucially use his intellect and sharpen his wits, so as not to get lost, and then finally to arrive at a harbor of knowledge.

Azharite students were expected, in their first few months at the university, to roam the “pillars” of the grand mosque, which was the primary campus where sheikhs typically lectured twice a week. Students would learn about

jurisprudence, theology, history, language, poetry, rhetoric, and logic. They were expected to find a place in a *ruwaaq* (alley) where students with different interests would gather. In the evenings, especially on the weekends, an Azharite student in the Middle Ages was encouraged to go to *majalis al-ulamaa* (the councils of the scholars) where Al-Azhar's prominent scholars held court and exchanged views with visitors and attendees, typically blending the past with the present, the sacred with the secular. After their first few months, the new students would then be expected to declare their area of specialization.

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Interestingly, in the earliest days of Al-Azhar, a student was not required to declare an area of focus. Being a general student who had developed reasoning skills was seen to be enough to graduate. However, as the university began to develop more distinct pillars or disciplines, students were expected to focus their study around one area. And so a student developed a deep understanding in one or two fields, finding what we would call in modern parlance a major and a minor.

Throughout his studies—which typically lasted three to five years—the student transitioned from the confined mental space of mere memorization to a more open milieu of education in which he had to take ownership of decisions he made on where to go, what to listen to, and for how long. Throughout this journey, the Azharite student explored the universe of external knowledge and at the same time understood his own internal, curated preferences. By the end of his university study, the student became a scholar who was able to reason, as opposed to the passive memorizing child who had entered Al-Azhar University a few years earlier.

The Widening of Collective Consciousness

In modern American universities as well as in Al-Azhar's original system, the liberal arts educational model has been, at its core, about one objective: preparing the student and guiding him/her in crossing that invisible line between intellectual dependency and independence, between merely passively receiving information as opposed to thinking about and processing knowledge. This is why, hundreds of years ago, graduation from Al-Azhar University was referred to as achieving *al-alameya*, that is, “sailing into a universe of knowledge”.

Part of this crossing from narrowness to universalism entails what in education theory is referred to as emotive responses. This is the tumult that occurs in the young person accustomed to the passivity and dependency of receiving

information as they then move to thinking, making decisions, curating, and creating. Not unlike other emotional transformations, this one starts with a sense of loss. The comforts of being taken care of here fade as the students realize they are dependent only on themselves.

This process initially can be emotionally challenging, which is why liberal arts-based universities truly deserving of their designation offer students not only curricula, counselling, and guidance, but more importantly, a vibrant faculty–student interaction through which the fresh students know and feel that they are empowered, not abandoned. The students then take ownership of their education; they grow; they cross internal barriers; they sail into seas of knowledge, all in a safe environment, where they are expected to stray, to make mistakes, to get lost, and to fail. Going through this, the fear students initially feel dissipates, and gradually in its place an educated confidence emerges. This self-confidence is a key emotive outcome in liberal arts education.

Those who have thrown themselves into the liberal arts model believe that the journey to graduation is the real education. A chemistry student in a liberal arts university will of course get the same education as a non-liberal arts student of chemistry. However, students who go to a liberal arts university will become, over time, more self-aware than when they had enrolled in the university. Consequently, their prospects in today’s competitive job market are markedly higher than those who studied merely a single discipline. While the liberal arts model is usually expensive, the student, upon graduating, is vastly richer both intellectually and emotionally. Yet, the true value of the journey goes much deeper. In the end, the liberal arts education model immensely widens a student’s mental cosmos and consistently deepens an entire civilization’s collective consciousness. ©