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## REDEFINING AND ASSESSING THE PEDAGOGY OF HUMANISM

BY JAMES J. DAVIS

President's Address Delivered at the Fifty-Seventh  
Anniversary Convention of the CLA in Durham, North  
Carolina, April 15, 1994

Each year at its fall meeting, the executive committee of this association ponders over the question of what should be the theme of the upcoming annual convention. The theme is not arbitrarily chosen. The committee concerns itself with issues that have entered into the dialogue on our profession—that of teaching the humanities, i.e., language, literature, and culture. In addition to the professional dialogue, it considers the unique role and goals of the College Language Association. What should we talk about this year? After several rounds of suggestions, someone comes up with the perfect idea. After several editing sessions in which we decide what should come after the colon or if there should be a colon, we ponder on the “mots justes”—the right words. *Viola*. We have a theme!

That we chose “Language and Literature of the Twenty-First Century: Redefining Theory, Practice, and Pedagogy” for this year’s convention means we have placed some value on the importance of *redefining* some of what has been theorized, practiced, and taught. Inherent in that concern is that there is a call for not only a redefinition but also a call for *redirection*. To merely redefine is not enough. To act upon the redefinitions is far more important! What I will share with you today are some comments and observations of what I perceive to be the directions in which we must redirect ourselves in our noble profession. I will elaborate on two areas: curriculum revision and curriculum assessment. The CLA constitution requires that the president deliver an address at the annual meeting on a topic of general or professional interest to the members. Somewhere along the way, someone said that the address should be provoking and stimulating. I guarantee nothing, but to express my hopes I summon the words of a predecessor president of this association, Darwin T. Turner, who in his 1964 presidential address stated, “If my remarks provoke controversy, then I shall have succeeded in stimulating a necessary re-examining of the humanities.”<sup>1</sup>

I shall begin my comments today by culling from my own experiences as an undergraduate student. I graduated with a degree in English and Spanish from Virginia State University in the seventies. For the Spanish major curriculum, like the English major curriculum, I had to complete the required thirty hours beyond the general education requirement. These, of course, included the requisite canonical survey courses in English and American literatures and Spanish and Spanish-American literatures. I never really challenged what was expected of me in course requirements, research papers, examinations, and other assessment activities. Well, once I did challenge an instructor’s com-

<sup>1</sup> Darwin T. Turner, “The Status of Humanists and Humanities,” *CLA Journal* 8.1 (1964): 1.

ment about some aspect of Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*. I was just not so gullible after listening to one of his interpretations of some aspect of Gulliver and his travels. Based on my interpretations of his facial gestures, the instructor did not approve of my "challenging" question and reinterpretation. Ladies and gentlemen, I received my first grade of "C" in an English course, the omnipotent and "omnirequired" Survey of British Literature I. After that incident, I made every attempt to edit carefully my responses to teacher questions and interpretations.

After almost two decades of teaching and administering in language and literature programs, however, I dare question the undergraduate and graduate curricula in the humanities at my institution as well as at other institutions. It is my strong conviction that we must move away from curricula that, as one writer put it, stress "encyclopedic knowledge" to ones that stress "knowledge as technique and method,"<sup>2</sup> in other words, curricula that require an in-depth study which will allow our students in the humanities the time to analyze and interpret the varying ways of knowing in this complex world in which we labor to survive.

I wish to make it abundantly clear that I do not suggest that the "traditional" humanities curriculum is comprehensively ineffective or inappropriate. I do postulate, however, that one of the major deficiencies of the curriculum is that it does not genuinely assess students' skills or knowledge of the major focus of the humanities. The bare truth is that in the 1990s we are confronted with a new set of challenges, a new set of students, and indeed a new set of texts from which to choose. There must be, in my opinion, a redefinition and revision of curriculum in both format and content. The revised curriculum of which I speak shifts away from the traditional pattern of covering everything that has been

<sup>2</sup> Patricia R. Schroeder, "Covering the Waterfront Versus Taking the Plunge: Curriculum Revision in a Liberal Arts College," *ADE Bulletin* No. 104 (Spring 1993): 37.

and is. In that curriculum, we, as teachers of the humanities, must do an improved job in controlling the time spent on items and materials that will probably not have a significant impact on our students' lives. As classroom humanities practitioners, we should be able to take a particular text and teach it with such depth that students would be motivated to read similar works which espouse the same or opposite philosophies. Humanities educators (and others too) are generally so accustomed to modeling their own courses on those that they took as students. This is often done even when we propose and implement "new humanities courses." The content is different, but the approach is generally the same. We read and discuss the selected texts, assign six short essays in or out of class, give four hourly exams, four quizzes, require a course paper, evaluate, assign a grade, and prepare for the next academic term. More than often, in such courses, little time is given to absorb and reflect thoroughly on any given ideas or ideals.

There has to be a constant challenge of the *status quo*. The "great works" of Western civilization have to be challenged. This is not to say that their value should be lessened, but that their value should be recontextualized in today's world, where time constantly hangs in the loom as our greatest enemy. As we travel down the formidable, yet inviting, information highway, thousands of books and critical works on those works are being hurdled from publishing houses every moment of the day. Dare I ask the following rhetorical question? Should we dedicate a *required* undergraduate three-credit-hour course solely to Shakespeare or to Cervantes or to Goethe? Does a dead man require that much time? Does a writer have to die before he or she deserves a course? In how many institutions of higher learning does the living, Nobel Prize-winning, African-American female, Howard University graduate Toni Morrison have a course dedicated solely to her works? I ask the same question about Derek Walcott and his *Dream on Monkey Mountain*. I ask the same question about Manuel Zapata

Olivella and his *Changó, el gran putas*. Where are the courses on Nicolás Guillén, Edouard Glissant, and Maryse Condé? I insist on answers about countless others, including Paule Marshall, our banquet speaker for this convention.

In the revised curriculum we might consider a three-hour course on *Do the Americas Have a Common Literature?*—to use the title of a book edited by Gustavo Pérez Firmat.<sup>3</sup> In such a course one could feasibly select three to four texts from the United States, Haiti, Dominican Republic, Puerto Rico, Trinidad, or any other American nation to explore this notion. This would indeed satisfy those who argue for greater emphasis, in the humanities curriculum, on cultural diversity and similarities among world peoples. In such a course, one could explore issues related to literary criticism, language use, cultural icons and patterns, and other concerns with which humans constantly battle irrespective of race, gender, color, or creed.

My second major concern is that of assessment. Please understand that when I speak of assessment, I am moving beyond the traditional course examinations. I am speaking of an assessment of the total curriculum. As teachers of the humanities and language usage, we do well in writing course descriptions and course requirements. A comprehensive assessment program should have as its central objective the enhancement of the quality of a program. There is often, in my view, a mismatch between a program's expressed goals and its assessment program. Let us examine briefly some examples of our stated curricular goals. The following were taken from bulletins of several English and foreign/second language programs at a random selection of historically black colleges and universities:

1. To help students develop the ability to read, think, and write clearly and critically.

<sup>3</sup> Gustavo Pérez Firmat, ed., *Do the Americas Have a Common Literature?* (Durham: Duke UP, 1990).

2. To help students understand and appreciate good writing and literature.

3. To help students become aware of the truth, beauty, and wisdom of our culture to the extent that they are able to make value judgements about the society in which they live.

4. To teach the student the fundamental skills of speaking, reading, and writing in the foreign language.

5. To help the student to develop an understanding of and an appreciation for another culture.

6. To give the student an awareness and appreciation of the aesthetic and intellectual history of the target culture and of its present-day manifestations.

7. To provide students with the skills to analyze, appreciate, evaluate, and respond to a wide range of literature.

8. The Program of Study in Languages is designed to give majors reasonable fluency in the language and a knowledge of and an appreciation for the literature and culture of the countries using the language.

9. The student completing the major in English is required to have a knowledge of the nature of literary genres, the nature and development of the English language, the development of British and American literature (including works by minority writers), and selected literature of significance from non-Western cultures.

You will encounter in the above program objectives an uncanny repetition of a form of the verb "to appreciate." How do we assess appreciation? I digress here, with another undergraduate experience, to illuminate my point. When I studied in Madrid, Spain, I took a Spanish art appreciation course. For the final examination, the instructor showed the class twenty slides of famous Spanish painting. Students were given three to four minutes to write down (1) the name of the artist, (2) the name of the painting, (3) the date of birth and death of the artists, (4) the name of the artistic period in which they painted, and (5) a few statements which described the artists' distinguishing

characteristics.

Colleagues, that final examination assessed absolutely nothing about my appreciation of Spanish art. In fact, after the examination, I did not want to see another painting for at least a year. The time I spent memorizing birthdays could have been spent more wisely in reflecting on how a particular painting spoke to me as a human being. A humanistic discipline should somehow measure the humanistic content of the curriculum. This will indeed require different types of assessment and evaluation tools.

It is imperative that we do a better job in assessing the humanistic elements derived from our courses. We must consider the question of personal values and emotions. In literature courses, our assessment program should have an authentic "humanistic component." Rhetorically, I ask: Do we really test the humanism in our students with the scientific evaluation instruments—paper and pen—that we so commonly use? I refer to the well-known examination which includes five short answer items, ten identification items, and one essay item. Might we become more intrepid as to integrate the use of a series of short-term practicums in humanism as a part of our "testing/assessment" programs? I recognize that some of us are already doing innovative things along these lines, but I believe that more are needed.

The following assignment might be considered. Direct students to an elementary or secondary school or to some institution where you would find young people. Have the humanities students discuss with them a short story, an essay, or a novel that they have recently read. The students decide what they will discuss, but they should focus on the humanistic ideas, ideals, and concerns set forth in the text. Request that students report to the class how such an activity affected them emotionally. Their report should include a description of what they tried to convey to their younger counterparts. They should explain why they chose to explore the topics or themes that they selected. As humanists,

I emphasize, we must attempt to reach the affective—the emotional—component of our students' psyche. While the job of those of us who teach the humanities has always been important, the current human condition dictates that our task be redefined and elevated. Given the changing face of our local and global society, we must somehow teach our students as much about how "to be human" as we teach them about how "to interpret the humanities." As humanists, how do we or should we respond to the pervasive violence and societal destruction which will affect us all in the long run? Our profession, through CLA and similar institutions of humanistic teaching, must do something to respond to the lack of positive humanistic acts that permeates our world communities.

A humanistic discipline should measure the humanistic content of its curriculum. This will necessarily require different types of assessment/evaluation tools. I know that some of you will disagree with me because you strongly believe that your tests measure what you want them to measure. However, the use of teacher-made (and many standardized) tests as the major instrument for program assessment can be deemed ineffective if they do not truly assess the overall objectives of the instructional program. Writing about assessment of foreign language programs, Grant Henning warned that "there is continuing need to integrate tests with the curriculum. If there is no concerted effort to subordinate testing with explicit curricular goals, there is an ever-present potential danger that the tests themselves with all their inherent limitations will become the purposes of the educational encounter by default."<sup>4</sup> If we seriously matched our written expressed goals against what we actually do in our classes, many of us might be disappointed to discover that we have failed our own examinations as educators.

<sup>4</sup> Grant Henning, "Priority Issues in the Assessment of Communicative Language Abilities," *Foreign Language Annuals* 5 (1990): 380.

Colleagues, I challenge you to employ the pedagogy—the art and science of teaching—of humanism to explore the varying ways, systems, thoughts, and actions that humans employ to survive in a world that is unfortunately losing “random acts of humanistic deeds.” Thelma B. Thompson, my immediate predecessor, aptly noted that the “ethical charge to us, to universities, and to colleges is to help reshape the vision of our students, to anticipate the freedoms that will define their lives and work and to prepare them to select and to reject accordingly.”<sup>5</sup> I readily admit that I do not have all the answers for you. In fact, as one of my colleagues often remarks, “I certainly do not have all the questions.”

I am proud that CLA is doing and has done noteworthy work to redefine the texts and theories traditionally thought of as the only teachings. A review of this year’s program will clearly demonstrate that CLA is redefining and reshaping the thinking on American literary and cultural scholarship. That we have presentations on writers, cultures, and issues that have not been treated in detail or at all heretofore attests to this revelation. To recapitulate my thoughts, I simply share that the pedagogy of humanism must include explicit instruction and assessment of what it is to be human.

In 1937 Dr. Hugh Gloster, our founding father and first president, probably did not realize that he was creating the prestigious association and American legacy called “CLA” today. I conclude my second and last CLA presidential address by expressing that I have the greatest esteem for this association and its members and friends. I thank you for allowing me to serve you in one of the most significant jobs of my life!

*Howard University  
Washington, D.C.*

<sup>5</sup> Thelma B. Thompson, “Character Education for the Twenty-First Century: Possibilities of a Humanistic Curriculum,” *CLA Journal* 35.3 (1992): 273.