Valuing the humanities: What the reports don't say

AUTHOR:
Laurence Wright[1]

AFFILIATION:
[1]Institute for the Study of English in Africa, Rhodes University, Grahamstown, South Africa

CORRESPONDENCE TO:
Laurence Wright

EMAIL:
l.wright@ru.ac.za

POSTAL ADDRESS:
Institute for the Study of English in Africa, Rhodes University, PO Box 94, Grahamstown 6140, South Africa

KEYWORDS:
humanities; quality; consensus study; Charter for the Humanities; South Africa

HOW TO CITE:
Wright L. Valuing the humanities: What the reports don't say. S Afr J Sci. 2013;109(1/2), Art. #a002, 3 pages. http://dx.doi.org/10.1590/sajs.2013/a002

Two recent reports defending the social value of the humanities in South Africa and arguing for their renovation are premised on the notion of a crisis.[1,2] Johann Mouton[3] has challenged the correctness of this assessment and its basis, and I tend to agree with him, specifically on the evidence supplied in the two documents. His more measured subtitle, 'Cause for concern', sits more accurately with the facts. The notion of a crisis in the humanities is a worldwide phenomenon, going back at least to the 1950s. The literature on the subject is massive and multifaceted. But there is a telling omission in very many recent accounts of the humanities. This omission is so significant that it positively ensures that important public, government and civil society constituencies, worldwide, increasingly fail to respect or appreciate the humanities' most valuable contribution to the public good.[4-7]

The lacuna is spectacularly evident in the South African reports. They fail to give any account of the manner in which the study of the humanities works, or is meant to work, in undergraduate education. With no formal indication of how such an education should be carried out, or of its procedures and protocols, readers are completely 'in the dark' as to how the social value claimed for a humanities education is created. The matter is simply taken for granted. As a consequence, the reports cannot begin to address the critical issue of quality, specifically the quality of undergraduate education as South African students experience it today. It is quality alone which creates social value in a humanities education.

To put it candidly, tertiary education has two products: knowledge and people. (The 19th-century German distinction between *Wissenschaft* and *Bildung* is relevant.) If your defence of the humanities concentrates on knowledge-formation and its economic and cultural benefits – the research side – and fails signally to explain the role of the humanities in the social and intellectual formation of human beings, you will never persuade society at large that the human and social sciences are fully deserving of support. I say *explain*, not assert. Of course most defences of the humanities, including the recent South African ones, *assert* that humanities graduates are socially valuable. But they do not explain in any detail how a humanities education works, or should work, except in the most trivial way, and therefore they can only gloss over the core issue of educational quality. Quality is located squarely in the educational process, and it is that process which produces the social value. The quality issue is close to the heart of what is perceived, worldwide, as a 'crisis' in the humanities.

The South African reports never directly approach the issue of the 'nuts and bolts' of educational delivery, as these exist here and now, except in tangential observations such as 'There was a strong perception that graduates with basic degrees in the [Human and Social Sciences] were weak where they should be strong. Their writing, compositional and assessment capabilities were not very good'[8]. Or in the suggestion that improving first-year performance would require 'ring-fenced allocation of funding...to ensure a tutorial system with an automatic ratio of 1 tutor: 20 students everywhere'[9].

There are many helpful and thought-provoking suggestions in both of the South African reports, which are deliberately wide-ranging. The Charter is more 'visionary'; the ASSAf Consensus Study more informative, solid and methodologically adequate. But neither gets to grips with the possibility that quality deficiencies may currently infect educational delivery in such a way as to compromise the mission of the humanities.

How does a humanities education work? I would argue that a genuine education in the humanities begins by confronting the student with a series of challenging texts. By texts I mean not just titles, but coherent selections of discrete intellectual works arranged so that they speak to each other in significant ways about issues that matter. These 'texts' could be different musical modes, or philosophical arguments, or works of literary or visual art, or sociologies, or political theories or histories of architecture. The disciplines they fall under might be history, linguistics, philosophy, sociology, literature – or any other appropriate discipline that has reached a stage capable of supporting apprentice undergraduate learning. The texts should be selected not merely for their intrinsic intellectual interest, local appeal or contemporary relevance, but because they illustrate important approaches to vital human issues and problems. In a standard humanities programme (and of course there are valuable variations), students are first required to study these texts on their own, using their own skills and resources; they are subsequently offered lectures in which these texts are discussed by experts and related to the wider intellectual 'language' of which these texts form significant instances. Students are also prompted in small-group seminars to respond to these texts in person, from their own individual perspectives, and to debate and defend the values and attitudes involved in front of peers and with the help of a lecturer. The broad human problems they seek to address are continually foregrounded.

In an educational process of this kind, among other things, students become familiar with specific historical conjunctions and their long-term consequences, more alert to debilitating intellectual fallacies and their origins, better attuned to the implications of their own value frameworks and those of others, and so forth. They learn to follow compelling implicit and explicit judgements in complex matters and to challenge them in discussion with others. Finally, and above all, they are required to write about some of these 'texts' in a careful, considered way, providing evidence and justifying arguments, striving for some significant level of mastery of the content and defending their own assessments of it. Repeated over a range of material, in a number of different disciplines, and backed by important opportunities to enlarge their social skills and ability to organise and work with others in various sporting, social and community engagement activities, the result of an undergraduate university education in the humanities is much more than mere intellectual training, and much closer to the social formation of an educated human being. (The preceding two paragraphs are, of course, an inadequate and reductive sketch of a very complex educational process; see Wright[10] for a fuller account.)

Consequently, humanities graduates should be the kind of people qualified to contribute to the public sphere as it actually is, in all its fullness and ideological incoherence, and not merely to serve as skilled functionaries operating procedurally within the passive constraints of a particular commercial or industrial environment. Such graduates will not be an ideologically uniform 'product' – the very idea would be inimical to the aims of a humanities education, because eccentric 'outliers'[11] are often of more value to society than pliant conformers – and they will of course be experienced in the skills of intellectual life, such as describing circumstances accurately, comprehending complexity, empathising with 'otherness', judging logical coherence, substituting alternative contexts, predicting outcomes, discerning character, devising necessary sequences and choosing between alternatives.

None of these capacities is a matter of mere free-floating intellection. A humanities intellect should be grounded in a rigorous knowledge base, informed by actual historical and theoretical instances, and equipped with a creative drive and social commitment that speaks to a hard-won view of human life and its possibilities. This complex orientation makes humanities graduates more valuable, not less valuable, in the economy, because they are the kind of people, endowed with intellect, values and character, who are capable of steering civil and state enterprise in full awareness of humanity's looming problems, especially the four critical challenges currently facing us: the threat of ecological catastrophe, the ethical ambiguities of the techno-genetic interface, the dangers of privatising or suppressing what should be common intellectual and spiritual capital, and the failure to address multiple issues of injustice and exclusion (probably the most pressing). In other words, humanities graduates should be, and could be, the social leaders our world so desperately needs. (This need is even more pivotal in South Africa, where uneven capabilities in the civil service and parastatals, and in crumbling provincial and local government, threaten the country's future. An infusion of high-quality humanities graduates with courage and vision is desperately needed.)

It will not have escaped notice that the preceding paragraph is couched in prospective and normative terms. Their use is deliberate, because the crux of the so-called humanities 'crisis' seems to me to lie most centrally in the question of whether students actually receive the calibre of education that humanities' disciplines potentially afford and claim to deliver. I am fully prepared to debate the proposals put forward in the two South African reports, but none of these issues will make an iota of difference unless we get the fundamentals right. The fact that the current research literature (specifically the two South African reports, but also much of the research literature that informs them) places so little emphasis on how exactly a humanities education is supposed to work may, from an optimistic viewpoint, indicate that the performance of humanities' educators is so strong that this matter does not need to be raised. Alternatively, it could also suggest either that important contingent issues are being brushed aside in favour of tub-thumping 'in principle' affirmations, or that there is a purblind failure to even consider the possibility that grave weaknesses in the actual delivery of humanities education may exist, right where its champions assume unquestionable strengths.

Here is an important subset of questions related to the presumed quality of a humanities education:

1. Do students conscientiously read and think about their set 'texts' on their own? All students, some of them, or very few? Do we make the effort to find out?
2. Do lecturers ensure that their lectures relate the set text in detail to the wider 'language' it exemplifies: conceptually, historically, in relation to modern analogues? Are alternatives and rivals explored? Is the intellectual history in place? Is it up to date? In every set of lectures?
3. Does the character and historical situatedness of the lecturer's own intellectual formation limit what undergraduates are permitted to learn or think? Scholarship neither began with structuralism, nor will it end with neurohermeneutics: it is an interlaced conversation across ages and modes. Humanities teaching should reflect this depth.
4. In seminars, are students led to confront *in person* issues raised by the text, so that their own value framework is engaged? Are they encouraged to challenge the text and defend their position with evidence, to be articulate? Is their grasp of content checked by the lecturer? *All* students, or just the forthcoming ones?
5. Are students faced with challenging essay topics that demand a sure grasp of content, substantive background research, wide reading and the ability to mount an evidence-based argument? Do lecturers demand that the resulting essay be written in clear, assured expository prose and be properly documented? Do students receive detailed and helpful feedback on their efforts? Every time?
6. Is the entire humanities programme one which addresses live and debatable issues of lasting human import, so that even remote or arcane detail can be seen in its original relevance?
7. Is the assessment process (formative and summative) reasonably clear, informative, efficient and uniform?

If, hand-on-heart, humanities lecturers in any particular institution can affirm that these basic requirements for success are firmly in place most of the time, and the institution's quality-assurance process confirms this to be so, I have little doubt that the humanities in that institution will be delivering the kind of graduates society needs. However, I am also convinced that there is a cline of performance or non-performance in each of these areas in most universities, including all South African institutions, and that in some there is staggering weakness. Educational debility vesting in incompetent university educators and weak disciplinary programmes reflects directly in the intellectual weakness of their graduates, and it may well be that the prevalence of this kind of failure, seen in different social, industrial and governmental contexts, is what fuels the notion of a crisis in the humanities.

I would also argue that there is no quick fix for the situation. The Internet, various other forms of distance learning, good textbooks, and so forth, cannot compensate for the absence of excellent face-to-face teaching. Virtual schools, humanities Hubs, sharing facilities between institutions, the expansion of graduate programmes, and all the other innovations usefully contemplated in the South African reports, will prove of little value unless the fundamentals are in place. We need to be sure that the people teaching in humanities departments really are doing what is required, because in some cases, how many I cannot be sure, this seems doubtful.

Of course, defending such an assertion would require detailed empirical research to adequately probe educational performance within each institution. I make no claim to such knowledge, but there are significant straws in the wind. I have little doubt that colleagues could amplify the following brief list to turn it into a veritable haystack:

- Editors of South African humanities journals are regularly in receipt of submissions whose incompetence is all too manifest. I am not talking about those articles which are eventually published; I mean pieces *by academics* which have simply to be returned as not even potentially salvageable.
- I have taken to asking graduate students, when they mention their research topics in casual conversation, 'Why have you chosen to study that?' Worryingly, many have no answer. Some respond in terms of academic strategy (the latest 'hot' topic, their supervisor's interests, developing a successful Honours essay). Some mention the state of play in the discipline. Very few answer in terms of addressing an important question which is part of a fundamental human problem. Some seem to have no idea of the point of what they are attempting other than to score a university post or gain a qualification.
- Occasionally I see draft research proposals from students and staff members at different institutions, some of them endorsed by academics, the quality of which is simply abysmal – and the people concerned are seemingly unaware of this fact.

- Many supervisors either correct or rewrite their students' prose, or else they gloss over inaccurate, wrong or careless language because they feel sorry for those who produce it. Some cannot be bothered to insist on lucid, unambiguous expression: 'The content was all right', they say. (How can one tell, if the language is all wrong?) The inadequate performance of the South African school system is the root cause of this problem; but we cannot and should not make grand claims for the humanities in South Africa when tertiary institutions turn out graduates who cannot meet the ordinary requirements of a humanities degree.
- Universities are eager to retain the services of humanities lecturers who write regularly for the press. Public intellectuals are thin on the ground in South Africa. My own list would include Njabulo Ndebele, Mamphele Ramphele, perhaps Johnny Steinberg and a few others. Then there is a second string of regular public commentators, some of them affiliated to particular political parties, others just academics multitasking as contributing journalists. There is nothing wrong with this, except that one suspects that university managements sometimes regard this activity with relief, as justifying their investment in the humanities, and as a form of 'marketing with substance', because they themselves have little assurance of the contribution the humanities make to the public good, in the central form of undergraduate *Bildung* as I have described. My suspicion is that university managements do not trumpet forth what the humanities do in and for society because they themselves are none too sure. Perhaps I am wrong, but South African tertiary institutions are suspiciously reticent on the subject.
- I have seen several recruitment brochures issued by South African universities to market their humanities programmes, and they emphasise two things: employability, and the inculcation of essential transferable skills. The purpose of the academic study of the humanities receives no mention. To make matters worse, I know that in some cases these documents were drafted, not by communications personnel, but by humanities academics.

I could continue on these depressing lines, but I do not need to. Perhaps the situation is best described as one where complacency about educational fundamentals, in some instances at least, is reducing a critical human resource – the international legacy of the humanities – to the sloppy, uncertain reproduction of a strain of merely procedural learning. Look closely at the performance, not of the star students, but of the middle cohorts, and ask yourself if this is adequate to meet society's needs. Is the performance solid, informed, assured? Or is it uncertain, uneven, deficient in detailed knowledge and lacking in intellectual energy? I cannot answer the question in the abstract, but it is important that teachers in the humanities answer it honestly on behalf of those they teach.

When the ship is drifting, do not start with the paintwork, the tourist prospectus and the officer's uniforms. First take a long, penetrating look in the engine room.

Acknowledgements

Helpful comments by Attie de Lange and Nigel Bell are acknowledged with appreciation.

References

1. Academy of Science of South Africa (ASSAf). Consensus study on the state of the humanities in South Africa: Status, prospects and strategies. Pretoria: ASSAf; 2011.
2. Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET). Charter for the humanities and social sciences report. Pretoria: DHET; 2011.
3. Mouton J. The humanities and social sciences in SA: Crisis or cause for concern? S Afr J Sci. 2011;107(11/12), Art. #961, 4 pages. http://dx.doi.org/10.4102/sajs.v107i11/12.961
4. Bate J, editor. The public value of the humanities. London: Bloomsbury Academic; 2010.
5. Collini S. What are universities for? London: Allen Lane; 2012.
6. Harpham G. The humanities and the dream of America. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press; 2011.
7. Nussbaum M. Not for profit: Why democracy needs the humanities. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press; 2010.
8. Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET). Charter for the humanities and social sciences report. Pretoria: DHET; 2011. p. 39.
9. Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET). Charter for the humanities and social sciences report. Pretoria: DHET; 2011. p. 23.
10. Wright L. A research prospectus for the humanities. Shifting boundaries of knowledge. In: Marcus T, Hofmaenner A, editors. Pietermaritzburg: KwaZulu-Natal Press; 2006. p. 65–78.
11. Gladwell M. Outliers: The story of success. New York: Brown, Little and Co.; 2008.