

Student

Professor Kuhn

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The Purpose of an Education

Introduction to Characters

Alan Chapman: Grew up in the United Kingdom and Studied at Kings College London, a Christian liberal arts college in London, where he graduated with a history degree. Alan moved to the United States and is now a professor at Westmont College, a liberal arts college in Santa Barbara, California. Alan believes that the purpose of an education is to live a fuller life and he argues that the liberal arts education is the best type of education because it provides individuals with a solid understanding of all the subjects that are essential to live a fulfilling life. Alan is passionate about making the liberal arts education more affordable and accessible to everyone, believing that education is a natural right. Alan is concerned about the prioritization of the STEM fields in the United States, believing that it is missing the point of a college education because, according to Chapman, a college education should not be about specializing in a trade but rather about teaching one how to use their mind so that they can lead a more purposeful life.

Scott Butler: Grew up in San Francisco California, in an upper-class neighborhood. Both of Scott's parents are software engineers and as a result Scott has learned about the importance of technology from a young age. Scott graduated as a double major in mathematics and computer science and is working in Data Analytics for Microsoft. Scott believes that the purpose of an

education is to advance society. Scott supports the prioritization of the STEM fields in the United States highlighting the fact that needs to innovate more to remain globally competitive. Scott believes that everyone should have access to education but that the brightest students should be offered the best access to a STEM education.

Emily McBride: Grew up in a middle class white family in Seattle Washington and studied English at a liberal arts university near her home. Emily is working as a college president at a community college, where she is passionate about helping all students gain an education. Emily believes that the purpose of an education is to gain a set of transferable skills and that one can do this by studying within the STEM fields or the liberal arts.

Roman Smith: African American who comes from a lower-class family living in Long Beach California. Roman attended community college and then transferred to USC to complete his degree in Biology. Roman is working as a Research Scientist and has used education as a tool to bring himself out of poverty and into the middle class. Roman believes that the purpose of an education is to get a profitable job. Roman believes the focus on STEM fields in America because technology is good for the economy. Roman believes education should be accessible to everyone, not just the rich.

Madhu Gapita: Grew up in a middle-class family in Mumbai India. Growing up Madhu witnessed the extreme contrasts between the rich and the poor in her country and saw how lack of education for the poor was a major cause for the wage gap. Madhu studied international relations at Wheaton college in Boston. Madhu believes that the purpose of education is to empower people and argues that education is the answer to the world's problems. Madhu believes that it necessary for everyone to have equal access to education. Madhu rejects the focus

that is placed on the STEM fields within the United states, believing that the humanities and sciences are equally important.

Setting:

Alan, Scott, Emily, Roman and Madhu are all professionals with a college education who have just met at a conference on the topic “The State of Education in America.” The professionals are discussing what they believe to be the purpose of a college education. Other topics that arise during the discussion include: what type of education is most effective at achieving the purpose of an education and who should receive an education.

Debate:

Alan: I believe that the purpose of an education is to allow individuals to live fuller lives. A liberal arts education is the best type of education because it allows students to study the humanities and philosophy.

Scott: I disagree. I believe that the purpose of an education is to insure the prosperity of the future of America. Therefore, I believe the best type of education is a technical education because “innovation grows America’s economy” (Conard).

Alan: Scott, do you know that the liberal arts were originally for the “free people” in society and the trades were for the slaves (Samuelson)? I think that “we should strive to be a society of free people not simply one of well-compensated” technicians (Samuelson). Individuals who specialize in a single field, such as technology, are robbed from an education that allows them to live a full life. A technical degree is not transferable to all aspects of human life. Individuals

need to be well versed in the humanities and philosophy to be prepared to think well about all the challenges that life will present them with.

Scott: But how can people be free, if they do not have a job? Unemployment is a pressing issue and “high-tech jobs create nearly five jobs in the local economy, more than any other industry” (Conard).

Alan: Scott, I understand your point. You believe that society is better off when unemployment is down and the way to decrease unemployment is to steer students into the STEM fields, but I think that “measuring the benefit as a social cost or gain does not quite get the whole point” (Diablanco). “The reason to care about college – who goes, and what happens to them when they get there – is not what it does for society in economic terms but what it can do for individuals, in both calculable and incalculable ways” (Delbanco).

Roman: Alan I must disagree. I support Scotts point because I believe that the purpose of an education is to provide “engines of social mobility in American life” and right now a liberal arts education is not offering students the best opportunities for upward mobility (Delbanco).

Alan: I agree with you that there are various issues surrounding the financial pressures including: “the steady evaporation of full-time teaching positions, the overuse and abuse of adjunct professors, the slashing of public funding, the shrinkage of course offerings and majors in humanities disciplines, (and) the increase of student debt” that are discouraging students from studying liberal arts and gaining a humanities degree (Saluelson). However, I do not believe that that these reasons are enough to ignore the benefits that studying the humanities provides.

Scott: The examples you give above highlight my point that if more students study the humanities rather than STEM unemployment in our country will rise. What benefits of humanities could possibly be worth sacrificing the economy for?

Madhu: My answer to your question is democracy. You argue that a well-functioning economy with the lowest number of unemployment will create the greatest opportunity for human flourishing and freedom, but what is a strong economy without democracy? “The current education emphasis on teaching math and science is, in fact, antidemocratic and potentially harmful in the long run” because the methods used to think in science are not transferable to all areas of life (Slouka). While science and math are about computing concrete answers, democracy is about learning how to think through issues that involve multiple possible answers based on individuals varying values and belief systems. To preserve democracy in America we must continue to value the humanities.

Emily: Madhu, I do not agree with your argument that a STEM education is antidemocratic. In college, regardless of the major, one learns to “assimilate and organize large complex bodies of information, analyze that information to create outcomes that have value to others; and express (their) ideas in clear, purposeful language” (Rotella). I believe that these skills prepare one to think well about the world around them and contribute to the democratic society.

Alan: Emily, the transferable skills you describe above sound like the skills one would gain only at a liberal arts college. You studied at a liberal arts college and I think that your experience is shaping your perspective. Although those who study at a liberal arts university, regardless if they study STEM or the humanities, tend to be well prepared to effectively engage in society because the liberal arts education teaches all of the basic subjects that one needs to think well about the

world around them, including philosophy and the humanities, many other schools do not give their students this basis and I reject the claim that students who study a STEM field education at a non-liberal arts institution have all of the skills to think well about the world around them.

Scott: Alan, you believe that everyone should gain a liberal arts education but I do not think that it is practical or efficient. “It is clear that most jobs in the future will require a basic understanding of math and science” and that “innovation leads to new products that sustain our economy” (Eberly). I propose that the best allocation for students within the higher education system should be reached. In this allocation the less academically strong, in math and science, will continue to study the humanities within school and the brightest will specialize in STEM.

Alan: Scott, I am worried that you don’t understand all the benefits that come with a liberal arts education. Research that has examined the impact of liberal arts education reveal that “liberal arts experiences (has) a positive effect on four of six liberal arts outcomes, including intercultural effectiveness, inclination to inquire and lifelong learning, well-being, and leadership” (Seifert). I do not believe those who are the best at math or science should be deprived from these benefits.

Roman: Alan, but how do you expect someone from the lower class to have access to this type of education? It seems to me “that our ‘best’ colleges are doing more to foster than to retard the growth of inequality in our society” (Deblanco). I believe that an education should allow one to improve their economic situation rather than function as a “system for replicating inherited wealth” (Deblanco). For this reason, I support the non-liberal arts colleges that allow individuals to specialize in a profitable STEM field. I am not sure you understand that the type of education you describe is inaccessible for most the American population. Not only because the schools are

outrageously expensive but also because the highest paying jobs require a highly-specialized STEM degree.

Alan: I agree that “It is a nightmare society that affords the chance to learn and grow only to the wealthy, brilliant, or lucky few” and that “an American college is only true to itself when it opens its doors to all the rich, the middle, and the poor – who have the capacity to embrace the precious chance to think and reflect before life engulfs them” (Deblanco). I must acknowledge that the current education system does not always achieve this and that many colleges do not open its doors to everyone and I believe that this is a problem that needs to be solved. Until it is solved I still encourage all students from all economic backgrounds to study the liberal arts, even if it means going into debt, because I believe that it is better to be poor with an interesting mind than rich with a mind that is blind to philosophy and the humanities.

Emily: Roman, I understand your financial concerns about a liberal arts education and I agree with you that all education needs to be affordable and accessible to everyone but I don’t think you understand that “Prospective employers frequently don’t care what you majored in” (Rotella). I do not think that a specialized STEM degree is necessary to achieve upward mobility.

Scott: I believe that this was true in the past but today the demand for highly skilled STEM graduates is higher than ever and it is true that the best way to ensure employment is to gain a STEM degree.

Madhu: Scott, I am not sure you understand that the demand for highly educated humanities grads is also high, even if society fails to recognize the need these fields. I agree with you that “there are many things ‘math and science’ do well, but there are some they don’t” (Slouka). I think that it is important to acknowledge that neither the STEM nor the Humanities can do it

alone. Society needs both the sciences and the humanities to maintain the best social structure. For this reason, humanities and science need to ‘receive equal attention and respect’ (Slouka).

Scott: Madhu, I am not sure that you understand the economic state of our country. Right now there is a high risk of unemployment increasing in the future if Americans do not gain more technical skills. “One study after another shows American students ranking behind their international counterparts in the STEM fields—science, technology, engineering and math. Business people such as Bill Gates warn that this alarming situation puts the United States at a serious disadvantage in the high-tech global marketplace of the twenty-first century” (Drew). It is without doubt that America’s future “is linked directly to the quality of educational systems” and people in China and India are starving for our jobs (Drew). If Americans do not have the knowledge to fill those jobs then the jobs will go abroad, leaving more Americans, specifically those with humanities degrees, unemployed.

Madhu: I am worried about what the state of America will become if all the focus is on the STEM fields and the humanities become ignored. I have seen how “there are two powers in this world; one is the sword and the other is the pen” (Yousafzia). Education allows us to fight without violence, when it teaches us how to think and respond well to the opinions of others. I do not believe that a specialized STEM education provides students with these skills and this worries me deeply.

Alan: I completely agree with Madhu and this is one of my main concerns with the specialized degrees of the day. “Residential liberal arts colleges cultivate a moral and civic character in students in terms of both their individual choices and their contribution to the common good”

preparing them to think and respond well to other philosophies and ways of thinking (Chopp). If students are taught this moral character, there will be less violence in the world.

Roman: Okay, so I see the benefits that the liberal arts offer, but reform needs to be made before someone like me would be able to attend this type of school. Since we are at a conference on the state of education in America let's consider what reforms we think need to be made to improve the state of education in America. After this conversation, I still believe that the purpose of an education is to get a good job. However, if an education could help one earn a good job, be a better citizen and think better about the world, that would be fantastic. Therefore, I think that if liberal arts colleges offer STEM degrees and can be affordable to everyone that this would be an improvement to the current state of education.

Alan: I still disagree that the purpose of an education is to help one get a better job but I am glad you can see the benefits of a liberal arts education. I agree that the best reform to the current system is to make the liberal arts more affordable to everyone.

Madhu: I think that this is a move in the right direction. I propose that the best reform to the current education system is to make college more affordable and remove the emphasis on the STEM degrees allowing students to choose what they want to study.

Scott: I disagree that we should remove them emphasis on the STEM fields, but I will support reforms to lower the cost of education, especially those that lower the cost for those trying to enter the STEM fields.

Emily: I think that this conversation has proven for me that it does not matter what you major in. I still believe that any college education prepares people to think well about the world around them and engage in effective dialogue. I believe that the best reform to the current education

system is to remove the emphasis on the STEM fields and continue to make education more affordable.

Madhu: I am so glad that we could have this conversation and I think that we should continue to have more democratic conversations like this to help each other make the education system and world a better place.

end of debate

Conclusion: Personally, I believe that all majors contribute to democracy in our country. After all, isn't the choice that we all have grounded in the fact that we have freedom in this country? There will always be enough STEM majors because many students will choose those fields. If too many students are forced to do STEM majors, the competition for jobs would be even greater than it is now, so we need some students in the Humanities fields to fill those jobs in society. Students should be able to study what makes them happy and not be forced into a major simply to make money. Success is not only defined by one's bank account. Success also means having a dream job, one that you are proud to go to every day.

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