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A Second Look at Problem Solving

Why the Liberal Arts?

By John Klinkhammer



As a third year mechanical engineering student I have taken numerous professional classes meant to prepare me for the working world. Integrated with these classes, the university requires all professional majors to take a few liberal arts classes. Many engineering students don't understand this requirement and can even be frustrated by it. Despite some students' objections, I have found that study of the liberal arts is necessary in the professional majors in order to expand creativity, challenge the problem solving mind set, and foster interactions with a greater variety of people and ideas.

As a young boy, I looked at the world with eyes wide open. My imagination was constantly running wild, creating new games of make-believe and imaginary friends with whom to play them. I wakenly dreamt of unseen places and worlds. I imagined myself being a fantastic person doing fantastic things. However, as I grew up, I lost that creative sense. People are constantly told as they mature that there are certain perspectives and realities in this life and if we waver from them

we may deserve to be punished. This is necessary in a child's growth in order to bring him or her into society; however, it often results in a loss of the creative faculty. In this standardization for acceptance, society loses the individual who inspires invention. Understandably, engineers spend the early stages of their life growing accustomed to a specific way of thinking and analyzing; however, once they begin their professional careers, employers demand that they envision things that, because their minds have been standardized, they can no longer see.

The liberal arts allow students to widen their scope and begin to move at least a little closer to the imagination and creativity that they had as children. This creativity is necessary in today's society where complex problems call for innovative thinking.

The one track thinking that society often promotes becomes even more focused in many professional majors. As an engineering student, I can see them in the technical class that I take. Professors teach their students to solve problems in a certain way to attain a specific answer. Students learn the way professors analyze problems and then mimic their method in order to attain their solution and earn a grade. This process teaches students that for every problem there is a specific answer and a specific way to get that answer.

However, in life there is rarely, if ever, one specific answer and one

specific path to any answer. Many times the best answer to a problem is found by someone who is not using the predetermined path to it. The liberal arts force students to analyze problems in different ways and from different points of view. They challenge students to forsake the problem solving mindset for a more encompassing and heterogeneous methodology. Liberal arts classes encourage the discussion of ideas and promote an understanding that there are various ways to view both a problem and a solution. In the liberal arts, students are asked to approach a problem with whatever insight they may have and then defend that position. This teaches students to analyze from different perspectives and to understand that there isn't always one answer to every problem.

With all of the struggles and problems of the day, people must be willing to be innovative thinkers. This type of thinking requires them to abandon their desire for a standardized method of analyzing problems. Instead, they must take a broader, more encompassing view of the situation and search for an answer in not only every probable avenue but also improbable ways. In more ways than they imagine, professional majors need liberal arts. ■

John Klinkhammer is an engineering student at Detroit Mercy.