

“The Humanities and Education in Focus”

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THE THEME OF THIS VOLUME OF THE *QUALITY EDUCATION FORUM* (QEF) brings the many disciplines in the humanities at the UWI to centre stage. The intention is to underline the indispensable role that the humanities have played since the time of the ancient Greeks and Romans, in helping individuals to understand human existence, experiences and situations. Indeed, all the disciplines in the humanities – those regarded as classics such as literature, philosophy, history, languages, religion, architecture, linguistics, drama, film, music, art – and disciplines that may also be classified as social sciences – anthropology, psychology, law, communication studies, cultural studies, library studies, gender studies, museum studies – are all central to equipping student with a well-balanced education.

In our local context in at the UWI, the humanities matter as we aim to help our students to grapple with and understand various ethical issues, the value of understanding our Caribbean cultures, and the importance of studying other languages and cultures, so as to be able to tolerate other cultures, and communicate with other people.

Scholars in the humanities at the UWI are committed to the agenda of producing students who are up to date, and proficient in the use of digital tools, who have developed strong research skills and sharp critical and analytical skills that are important for understanding, assessing and articulating human experiences, encounters, ideas, conflicts and agreements and broad philosophies of life. Scholars in the humanities at the UWI, as well as in international situations, have had reason to be concerned about declining numbers in the

humanities in the last ten years. Many explanations have been offered for this decline, but in our local context we are inclined to believe that we should address two concerns. The first, is that we have not made a strong enough argument in highlighting for our students who are less naturally inclined to choose to study in our fields, the importance of the humanities in preparing them for life. The second, is that we probably have not helped to dispel their fears that they are less likely to secure good jobs after graduation.

We highlight here the position taken by Benjamin Schmidt from Northwestern University in an article entitled “The Humanities Are in Crisis” (2018). Schmidt admits that the declining numbers in the humanities are not new, but have been witnessed among men and women, in small and large institutions, especially in liberal arts colleges and elite colleges for a number of decades. He maintains, however, that the main reason for the decline in the United States is the belief that job prospects with a humanities degree are less likely to be obtained. He claims, “They’re fleeing the Humanities and related fields specifically because they believe they have poor job prospects. If the whole story were a market response to student debt and the Credit Recession, students would have read the 2011 Census Report numbering psychology and communications studies [located in the humanities at the UWI] among the fields with the lowest median earnings and fled from them. Or they would have noticed that biology majors make less than the average college graduate, and favored the physical sciences” (Schmidt 2018).

Our discussions with some of our own students have confirmed that many of them hold a similar perception and are misguided in their assessments that other fields are more glamorous and lucrative than all disciplines in the humanities. Perhaps our students need to be provided with statistics about who is more readily employed on the job market. Our students do need to be encouraged to be pragmatic about fields that are in need of dedicated people such as teaching, research, librarianship, conservation archaeology and to embrace the need to serve their countries in these areas.

It was in recognition of the need to meet both these two agendas that the faculty at Mona decided to publish a series of articles in the *Gleaner*, titled “The Humanities in Action”, to draw attention to the various ways in which the humanities can help students to find answers to many questions about life and

human existence. We, the editors, made a selection of articles from among those written in the first two years of the project which is now in its third year. Some of the articles have been written by faculty members and articulate the value of their respective disciplines. Some were written by past students who are happy with the decision to study various disciplines in the humanities which have allowed them to find employment in areas that have brought great satisfaction to them.

This collection of articles provides deep insight into the power and transformative attributes of the humanities. They offer the reader the unique opportunity to view from different perspectives and contexts, the interplay of related sub-disciplines and their role in influencing social outcomes while contributing significantly to producing the ideal graduate: “a critical and creative thinker; an effective communicator with good interpersonal skills; IT-skilled and information literate; innovative and entrepreneurial; globally aware and well-grounded in his/her regional identity; socially, culturally and environmentally responsible; and guided by strong ethical values” (*UWI Strategic Plan: 2012–2017*).

Faculty Speak: The Word, History, Logic

It is hoped that through these articles readers will gain a deeper appreciation of the breadth and depth of a humanities education and continue to support its longevity within the academy. The role of the humanities in the holistic development of the individual is attested to in the first four articles and strongly support the aforementioned desired attributes of the ideal graduate. The articles appear in the following order: “The Humanities in a Local Context: Developing Critical Thinkers for a Diverse World”; “The Relevance of History in a Digitalised World”; “Potent Words, Unique Voices”; and “The Relevance of Philosophy”.

In the first article, Paulette A. Ramsay draws attention to the important role of the UWI humanities programmes in enhancing writing skills and inculcating critical thinking and analytical skills in students, while fostering empathy and equipping them to become “excellent employees, leaders, and citizens who can

investigate and debate issues, analyse language, and organise writing in a coherent manner”. In a similar vein, Anthea Morrison discusses, in the second article, critical thinking skills as one of the benefits of literary studies as it hones students’ ability “to use language creatively and effectively”, while offering a “compelling example of the breadth and inclusiveness which should be characteristic of a humanities degree”. She also invites us to view the classroom as possessing “productive intimacy” and as a space that both nurtures and empowers students.

Matthew J. Smith, in discussing “The Relevance of History”, generates excitement and wonder at the concept of discoveries and the “charging sparks of history” that entice students to encounter “new findings” that “fuel fresh and multiple interpretations”. He counters the pervasive view that “discoveries of the past are finite and exhaustible”. Failure to do so, he opines, will lead to outmoded ways of viewing our experiences and inability to make the necessary connections between past, present and future events. He strongly suggests focus on history as well as implementation of “a systematic approach to learning in which the humanistic disciplines are called upon as crucial, not optional” as one way of counteracting “superficiality, myths, distortions, and, even worse, factual inaccuracies”. Lawrence Bamikole presents a compelling argument for the inclusion within the academy of “The ethical dimension of reflective thinking”, via the medium of philosophy as it “enables us to weigh and consider the probable consequences of our intended actions”. He considers this reflective/ethical approach to be the *sine qua non* of a civilised society as it spans cultural, social, political and personal dimensions. This approach is entirely consistent with one of the desired attributes of the UWI’s ‘ideal graduate’ as someone who “is guided by strong ethical values”.

Former Students Reflect

The following articles, “A Lifelong Career in Library Science”; “Beyond Bookish Knowledge”; “How Foreign Languages Paved My Career Path”; and “How the Humanities Opened the Window to the World”, attest to transformative role of the humanities in the personal and professional life of students.

For instance, Cheryl Peltier-Davis is of the firm belief that success in her career is closely linked to her academic choices as an undergraduate and postgraduate student in the Faculty of Humanities and Education at the UWI, as these laid the professional foundation for gaining entry into the real world of work and engaging in a lifelong career in librarianship that has spanned over twenty-two years.

Cornel Bogle attests to being unphased by friends and family who questioned the feasibility of a degree in Literatures in English, especially given the greater promise of professional degrees. Rather, he was emboldened by the knowledge that the “humanities have always had, and will continue to have, an impact on how we think about the major problems that face the world”, by providing students with “the necessary skills to have meaningful lives within and outside of the world of work”.

Camille Isaacs-Morrell, who pursued a BA in Language and Linguistic Studies, within the then Faculty of Arts and Education, asserts that not only did she master the skills of critical, innovative thinking, and effective communication, but her experiences as a student in this Faculty led to her “immersion in a sea of intercultural experiences”, through which her mind and those of her colleagues “were opened to diverse political thought and philosophies”. Although she eventually gained an MBA, she truly believes that “her foundation in the arts, more specifically the degree programme at the UWI, contributed to her success in being able to operate in a variety of areas that include “the creation of multilingual marketing communication programmes, international trade finance and credit-risk assessment”.

Similarly, Dave Rodney who also pursued a degree in Modern Languages, and currently works in the area of marketing, claims that his study of foreign languages has brought him “untold opportunities” as he has utilised these skills to “create a reggae programme in French for a radio station in Montreal, Canada” and other radio stations. He firmly believes that there are no limits to opportunity and entrepreneurship, and that the multifaceted education that he received from pursuing areas within the humanities at UWI was for him “an excellent springboard for taking on all sorts of exciting challenges in the outside world”.

Faculty Speak: Innovation, Creativity, Entrepreneurship, Technologies

The articles “Humanities Education for Freedom and Socioeconomic Development in Postcolonial Societies”; “Literature Education in the Service of Popular Culture”, “Jamaican Archaeology and High-Tech Human Stories”; “Digital Technology Media in the Humanities”; “Mastering the Arts and the Sciences of Animation”; “Critical Thinking and Career Choices in the Creative Industries”; and “Using Films to Study the Past, to Contemplate the Future”, feature both the interface of students with various technology types as well as the impact of critical thinking on growth and transformation, academic performance and career potential.

In his article, “Humanities Education for Freedom and Socioeconomic Development in Postcolonial Societies”, Waibinte E. Wariboko cautions developing postcolonial societies against relegating the humanities and social sciences to the background in their educational system, in favour of STEM education. He further contends that disciplines within the humanities and social sciences must inform “the national discourse for true education that is capable of promoting the practice of freedom and socioeconomic development”. Aisha Spencer, in “Literature Education in the Service of Popular Culture”, draws attention to the transformative nature of literature in offering students ample opportunity to question and critique events and emotional states of being in any given text. Such opportunities, she believes, enable students to become empowered and productive participants in the growth and development of society.

Zachary J.M. Beier highlights the nexus of archaeology and technology as one that is particularly relevant in the Jamaican context because of its potential to provide information on “populations that have been ‘silenced’ in popular histories through European colonialism”. The impact of technology is also the focus of Yvette Rowe’s article which highlights the effect of digital technologies on our lives, while sharing ways in which she encourages her students to interface with these technologies by engaging in careful, critical and comprehensive thinking on the effect, benefits, challenges that they have with

Caribbean ways of life. She stresses that the importance of understanding how to manipulate digital tools.

David Soutar provides vital information on the potential for the growth of yet another type of technology – that of the animation industry. He looks at ways in which this industry may be expanded in Jamaica, and points to the need for a “diverse and highly skilled workforce” in order to create a sustainable animation sector. Ray Hitchins, in his discussion on the connection between critical thinking and the creative industries, indicates that far from being a ‘hands-on’ vocational programme, the ECEM degree, focuses on a “specific range of creative industries and through academic engagement, provides understanding of the complex ways in which they operate and function”.

In her article entitled “Using Films to Study the Past, to Contemplate the Future”, Rachel Moseley-Wood addresses the manner in which the local film industry is linked to the history of the UWI. She cites a film about the UCWI as being one of the first films to be produced by the early Film Training School that was established by the British Colonial Office in 1950. The article points to the fact that the University has always been at the forefront of innovation and national creativity.

The Open Campus Speaks

The last article, written by Glenford D. Howe and Halima-Saadia Kassim, was not part of the newspaper series, but was done as a standard research paper. We, the editors, included it for its very valuable insights.