

# **Why Not the Humanities: Reclaiming Its Significance in Interdisciplinary and Holistic Education**

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## **Abstract**

*This paper analyzes why humanities is in crisis and proposes its interdisciplinary significance in holistic education. The analysis is based on a few relevant research reports about the prevalent conditions of universities and colleges and some reviews of a few important books by educationists and humanists regarding students, professors and funding in humanities. It uses the critical insights of humanist educationists, specifically envisioned by Plato, Rabindranath Tagore, Jiddu Krishna murti, John Dewey and Martha Nussbaum for their advocacy of holistic education. They conform to the power of human virtues that can change a brute animal into an empathetic human unlike a trained monkey and a mechanical mind. This paper argues that the education system remains dysfunctional if it fails to give humanizing education and produce critico-creative citizens. It raises a question why the humanities is in crisis despite its great undertaking of creating a complete human and examines what the principal causes are. Education is commodified, technologized and is concerned with producing skilled human resources. The focus is on the career prospect of education ensuring a promising future with the least regard to its humanitarian dimension. The corporate houses invest in and promote Science, Technology, Engineering and Management to cater to the choices and interests of parents and students who expect immediate returns. But the education system overlooks the crucial aspect that criticality, compassion and human values that humanities cultivates are more important skills of survival enabling the wise use of other skills than immediate returns. This study makes parents, students and other stakeholders of education aware of the importance of humanities in the overall development of students. It also helps mitigate the fragmentation and alienation caused by commodification of education..*

**Key Words:** Commodification, criticality, global citizenry, holistic education, humanities, interdisciplinary

## **Introduction**

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This research paper examines why humanities has undergone a crisis for the last two decades as compared with its popularity before. Some research projects on the issue have flashed out alarming reports regarding the investments, students' number, parents' choice and university professors' desperation related to the discipline. Regarded less practical but more a waste of time, its employment prospect is deemed very low and uncertain. Parents evaluate it in terms of its utilitarian perspective and choose not to train their children for something that has no promising career. Teachers and professors are drifting away from professional services and the number of students is dwindling. Student funding and the investment in humanities has declined. Instead, humanities faculties have turned into individual advancement facing low pay and poor rewards. Likewise, students are attracted to technical skills, vocational education and medical pursuits.

Responding to these demands, corporate houses invest on the sectors that reward them immediately and ignore humanities although that injects survival skills to move ahead at adversities. Even the education policies target on producing unquestioning and satisfied earners by promoting skill-based education because humanities produces critical citizens that decry and question the violation of humanitarian and democratic values and wrong practices. Moreover, capitalism has entered our educational institutions and the neoliberals have commodified education. Teachers are undervalued for their failure to keep up with the technologies and are gradually replaced by the mechanical IT-friendly classes. The students and parents play the part of customers in the market and the parents feel proud to produce their children able to fight for jobs in the global competitive market.

But, the growing trend in skill-focused education and the gradual erosion in humanities produce few questions regarding the humanistic pursuit of education. The concerned departments, institutions, universities and humanist educationists are showing grave concern on why education has derailed from its virtue of making learners a complete human but producing a commercial robot. Do the technical and vocational skills suffice to develop global citizenry that consists of a plurality of values, cultures, nationalisms and languages? Do the citizens not need criticality and creative minds to adapt to the contradictions and complexities of the modern time? Is material gain and technical enhancement the ultimate end of education? Does Medical Science have no limitations as with the unprecedented but emerging and reemerging

## **Why Not the Humanities: Reclaiming Its Significance in Interdisciplinary and Holistic Education**

pandemics like Covid-19 and the Plagues? What happens if the planet that we live with other companion species ceases to sustain life because of human-induced climate- crises and the loss of ecological equilibrium? What about the warfare, communal austerity, religious outrages and genocidal violence pervading even in democratic countries?

### **Objectives**

Humanist education plays a significant role to address these questions of modern times. The dominating education system has failed to humanize the citizens but promoted science and technology, capitalist cultures and individualized lifestyles that cause fragmentation and alienation. But mere material and technological success without integrity and unity fails to sustain societies long. The collapse of education is the collapse of society and the nation. A society with the human without humanity, criticality and moral virtues cannot address the existing conflicts and contradictions, and respect democratic values like freedom and equality. Hence, humanities education inculcates human values like compassion, empathy and critico-creativity in the learners that creates a complete human with a holistic perspective. It helps build a strong foundation of a nation. This research advocates humanistic education as an urge to fill the lapses and drifts caused in our relations, communities, societies, nations and the world. It calls for the formulation, implementation and retainment of interdisciplinary curricula in our universities, colleges and schools and promotes holistic education for the foundation of peaceful and sustainable societies.

### **Methodologies**

This research uses the ideas and theories of great educationists and humanist thinkers like Plato, Rabindranath Tagore, JidduKrishnamurti, Martha C. Nussbaum and John Dewey. Their contribution to humanist education and interdisciplinary approaches to teaching learning has great significance for holistic development of students and global citizenry. It also takes support of the arguments some professors, students and people from humanities, medicine, health and corporate sectors have put forth in their research articles. My own experiences as a teaching faculty in humanities for the last two decades also count in the argument as anecdotal references.

Great educators and philosophers from Greco-Roman time to the present have argued on the importance of education and the virtues it inculcates in us. Plato's dramatization of problems in dialogues between Socrates and his pupils like Phaedo emphasizes on the ability of questioning and arguing to decide the truth and form knowledge. This critical perspective produces people like Jacques Rousseau's character Emile who is socially estranged to allow learning from nature. Unlike the morality-bound priests or soldiers, he becomes a human to tackle any situation freely. Ruth O' Brien sums up Martha Nussbaum's idea of "human model of education" in Foreword of her book *Not for Profit*: "We think like Rousseau who knew that his Emile must learn to identify common human predicaments. He must see the world through the lens of many types of vulnerability, cultivating a rich imagination" (Nussbaum, 2010, p. x). She implies that profit-based education does not give quality to life. Human education must be free from the euphemism of religious virtues like morality. Nussbaum argues: "A democracy filled with citizens who lack empathy will inevitably breed more types of marginalization and stigmatization, thus exacerbating rather than solving its problems," (2010, Foreword, p. x). She promotes humanities that produce "globally minded citizenry." But what is contentious in her concept in reference to Rousseau's natural education is her isolating society and religion from education because a human cannot be detached from them in normal conditions. So, being critical is realizing and accepting co-existence and pluralities in democracy.

Similarly, Rabindranath Tagore has propounded "four fundamental principles of Education: naturalism, humanism, internationalism and idealism" (Thriveni, 2018) as his foundational philosophy of education of Shantiniketan School. The holistic approach is further justified by the claim given: "In Tagore's philosophy of education, the aesthetic development of the senses was as important as the intellectual—if not more so—and music, literature, art, dance and drama were given great prominence in the daily life of the school" (Singh and Rawat, 2013, p. 201). Tagore proposes that liberal arts, music and dance liberate people from the state of "the man with limited purpose" (as cited in Nussbaum, 2010, Foreword p. ix). Nussbaum restated Tagore who was conscious of the challenges India has faced at religious and ethnic level: ". . . he argues that India's most urgent challenge is to overcome divisions of caste and religion and the unjust, humiliating treatment of people because of their caste and religion" (pp 83-84). He suggests to rise above national politics to a global context

## **Why Not the Humanities: Reclaiming Its Significance in Interdisciplinary and Holistic Education**

and recommends the schools, colleges and universities of the world ". . . to cultivate in students the ability to see themselves as members of a heterogeneous nation (for all modern nations are heterogeneous)" (p. 80). Arguing against the communal and national arrogance that escalates revenge, violence, xenophobia and warfare, he urges:

How to be free from arrogant nationalism is today the chief lesson to be learnt. Tomorrow's history will begin with a chapter on internationalism, and we shall be unfit for tomorrow if we retain any manners, customs or habits of thought that are contrary to universalism. . . The best efforts of our sages were directed to the abolition of disunity. (as cited in Machwe, 1976, p. 81).

His vision of a good citizen that education should produce has a universal consciousness. Great educationist Jiddu Krishnamurti advocates for internal freedom that liberates a person from "a psychological world of sorrow, jealousy, pain, anger, envy and troubled relationships" (Awasthi et al., 2015, p.19). His concept of integrated human points at the humanistic aspect of education is what she claims: "The intention of education must be the inner transformation and liberation of the integrated human being who is free of fear, from only such people, society can be transformed into a place of peace"(p.19). His concern is with the transformational education to widen the worldviews and bring peace in the society. Nussbaum also does not object to science and technology for the development of nations when she says:

We should have no objection to good scientific and technical education, and I shall not suggest that nations should stop trying to improve in this regard. My concern is that other abilities, equally crucial, are at risk of getting lost in the competitive flurry, abilities crucial to the health of any democracy internally, and to the creation of a decent world culture capable of constructively addressing the world's most pressing problems. (2010, p. 7)

She contends the dominating exploitation of scientific and technological education if it is only at the cost of more precious values of democracy.

In addition to these views, John Dewey questions the bad norm of teaching that passive learning:

. we never saw the world as a world, never understood the dynamics of interaction among its component nations and peoples, never understood, even,

Shahid Kirti Multidisciplinary Journal (Vol.: 01, Jan, 2023)

how the products we use every day were produced, or where. How, then, could we ever think responsibly about public policy toward other nations, about trade relations, about the host of issues (from environment to human rights) that need to be confronted cooperatively in a way that transcends national boundaries. (as cited in Nussbaum, 2010, p. 87)

He regrets his school education that portrayed the western world but kept them under shadow about the Oriental reality. That norm lacks critical perspective to see the world and produces arrogance and inhuman treatment with “others.”

### **Findings and Discussions**

Regarding the ongoing xenophobia and bigotry around the world, what is alarming is the disappearing humanities despite its vitality in community building and empathetic togetherness. KhaledDiab, while discussing multilingualism in AL Jazeera, defends the need to grow cultural tolerance: “As fear of the “other” rises around the world, the importance of this cultural agility is only set to grow. In these increasingly troubled, divisive times, we need to tap into every ounce of sympathy and empathy we can muster” ( Diab, 2017, p. 18). The failure of Arab Spring Movements illustrates the decline in democratic and humanistic values, which calls for a larger worldview and acceptance of differences. The causes of the erosion are of great concern for humanities departments, colleges and universities, and academics. Martha Nussbaum resents this decline in the Foreword of her book *Not forProfit* (2010): “Parents are ashamed of children who study literature or art” (p. ix). A conflicting claim to this notion is made by Agnes Callard in an article entitled “What Do the Humanities Do in a Crisis?” as quoted below: “Humanistic academy is mocked as a wheel turning nothing even in good times” (Callard, 2020). The remark denotes the lack of practical strength of humanities.

In contrast to this hopeless perspective, Nick Hillman asserts the vitality of humanistic education: “The creative, empathetic side of human nature is harder to replicate with machines” (Cited in Reidy, 2021). The two remarks above moderate the two extreme thoughts about the value of humanities: the utilitarian perspective that values education from an employment prospect in an age of exploding technology and the humanitarian perspective which believes that creativity and critical thinking

## **Why Not the Humanities: Reclaiming Its Significance in Interdisciplinary and Holistic Education**

skills are now at the forefront of employers' minds. This signifies the need of interdisciplinary alliance of the two for a holistic approach in education.

About a decade ago, an international literary conference organized by LAN (Literary Association of Nepal) in Kathmandu had an issue under discussion: "Humanities in Crisis". The participants were from abroad and Nepal representing the literateurs, and professors of English. Most of the paper presenters in the forum pointed at the alarming decline in the number of students of humanities. The common convictions on the viable causes, as Paul Jay (2014) argued, in an article a few years ago, were people's (esp. parents and students) perceptions of college or university education as vocational training, and that they sought maximum value for the high cost of higher education and the value increasingly measured in utilitarian terms. As a backward-looking discipline, humanities could not cater to the utility-based output, vocational training and skills to address the demand of technological explosion and increasing corporatization.

Jay worries: "The dominating business minded executives over the boards of trustees in the educational institutions had a sort of bottom line on budget priorities for business (Jay, 2021, p.7). Against these push factors were the Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) that ascertained much safer scopes for jobs and career so were regarded as forward-looking fields of study. Consequently, the programs of Humanities began getting defunded. The parents and students, overly conscious of future career prospects chose the science subjects: ". . . all these seeming to portend the very end of humanities" (p. 7). More worrying was the absence of any voices or educational newspapers that decried the declining prestige of humanities and non-science subjects like social sciences, fine arts, literature and journalism. Few conferences and seminars focusing on the issue have been organized so far. The need of the central bodies to produce, manage and retain human resources in the countries around the world must be realized to save humanities from the decline..

Hence, the dwindling number of students of Humanities has left many classrooms empty, hitting hard on the teaching faculty and the investors to retain their income and profits. The very utility-oriented trend on viewing humanities

Shahid Kirti Multidisciplinary Journal (Vol.: 01, Jan, 2023)

astonishingly failed to realize the vitality of the humanitarian aspect of non-science subjects.

But, some years of saddening struggles are now leading up to a hope of revitalization of the aesthetic value of humanities. Nussbaum (2010) consoles us enumerating the attempts of reviving humanities in some countries outside the US: ". . . many nations whose universities do not include a liberal arts component are now striving to build one since they acknowledge in crafting responses to a public response of the problems of pluralism, fear and suspicion their societies face" (p.125). Her own involvement in the discussions about the issue in Germany, Sweden, India and Bangladesh justifies the growing concern with it. In the India Institutes of Technology and Management, she reaffirms: ". . . the instructors have felt the need to introduce liberal arts courses . . . , partly to counter the narrowness of their students, but partly . . . to cope with religious- and caste-based animosities" (125). The technological culture can flourish sustainably at the hands of imaginative and sympathetic minds that humanities produces.

Very recently, the covid-19 pandemic, though a crisis, further has experimented on its intangibly powerful dynamics at the prolonged uncertainty and inactivity of being shut up indoors. Tess Reidy in one of his articles in *The Guardian* presents an overview of improving trends of humanities in universities in the UK. He argues: "There's no doubt that these subjects will be vital in building the society we want to live in and the individuals are needed to shape the future" (Reidy, 2021). He reports on Saskia Janicki, a new Master's graduate in ethnomusicology at the University of Manchester who hopes that despite the arts sector flattened by Covid-19, it is definitely worth it. She rejoices how it is a research pursuit that she loves, more than a mere job. Reidy also quotes Hetan Shah, chief executive of the British Academy: "Arts and humanities graduates are flexible and have a wide skill set - communication skills, collaboration and teamwork, research and analysis, independence and creativity, specialist (in many cases) knowledge - high demand from employers" (2021). He cherishes the interdisciplinary impact of humanities and its complementary role in different fields of studies at operational level.

About two years ago, Ananda Sharma, a tenured professor of English Literature in Tribhuvan University, Kathmandu, speaking in a literary web conference presented a counter interrogation to the ongoing issue of "Why



## **Why Not the Humanities: Reclaiming Its Significance in Interdisciplinary and Holistic Education**

humanities!” by putting forth a slogan – “Why Not the Humanities!” The counter slogan proposed crucially and relevantly an answer to many questions about the gradual loss of interest in humanities. It urged its need at the moment of the crisis of Covid-19 and inactivity, mental disruption, increasing heinous crimes and even for keeping the daily home virtues intact. Nick Hillman makes an analogous remark to Shah: “The arts and humanities provide critical thinking skills, and this matters to employers” (Cited in Reidy, 2021). He observes: “. . . the expansion of technical-sector- industries is fueled by growth in high skilled, non-technical interpersonal roles as project management, marketing and branding, human resources, market research and data analysis. They rely heavily on skills developed in the Humanities and social sciences” (as cited In Reidy, 2021).

Along with the tech-sectors, the humanists are key players at the moments of passivity and the consequent mental health conditions. Musicotherapy, hopefully is under medical practices in many hospitals while medical science is coping with its limitations. Health Humanities also relates human health with socio-psychological paradigms beside the bodily ruptures. “Art and creativity is important for health and well-being, too” says Caroline Bithell, head of music at the University of Manchester (Cited in Powel, 2021). The pandemic of Covid-19, though a challenge to medical science at the moment, has still been a platform of crisis learning as well.

In the same line of thought, in an article “What Do Humanists Do in a Crisis?” Agnes Callard was highlighting the strength of humanities in stress management and the traumatic states of mind while the UK was fighting the looming pandemic with its people mentally derailed and inactive in many cases. Callard claims that humanists are usually the masters of inactivity. They must be well equipped with knowledge and psychological approaches to soothe the people in bereavement. They could put Horace or Aristotle in the web-classrooms to acknowledge the hardship of keeping the Coronavirus out of the room. In fact, the humanists embody hope; can fantasize differently so as to relieve the grieved souls. Relevant to the psychological healing of creativity, Joe Biden's inauguration is reported to have turned into a memorable and heavily charged episode with the performance of Amanda Gorman's poem “The Hill We Climb”. The strong and powerful delivery of hers captured the public moment well. Hope was personified by Gorman that helped the pandemic- ridden people a lot

Shahid Kirti Multidisciplinary Journal (Vol.: 01, Jan, 2023)

to respite from the grievances and bereavement. Grief keeps a different clock, so does poetry at the moment of mental hazards and trauma. Or take it the other way— in a somber mood, or when time disobeys logic, a quiet private poem can help. Urgent to bring into the spotlight is the intangible value of an education in history, philosophy, literature and the fine arts. To this course of action, there stands a question- has this realization been seriously manifested in our homes, societies, schools, colleges, educational institutions and the universities? Who is promoting the newly emerged slogan - Why not the Humanities!

Yes, there already are interdisciplinary courses running inside many of our colleges and universities that have inoculated more awareness and widened the worldviews in the concerned people and places. Education- curriculum of Tribhuvan University has incorporated literature and critical thinking that enhances the implementation of pedagogical knowledge of both the students and the teachers belonging to Education English. Louisiana University, just one out of many witnesses in this regard, has prescribed a 50-mark-literature-course for engineering students. Technical knowledge should be materialized for the welfare of humanity, not at the cost of human elements. More seminars and meets are working on the mission of making people, medical persons, corporates and techno-sectors aware of the importance of interdependence of different disciplines. Already set evidence is the technical industries flourishing at the skills of humanities-products. Hetan Shah reports: “English, Media Studies, Journalism, Librarianship and Information Management and History have been increasingly popular. For the creative artdesign, music, drama, art, film and creative writing are attracting a fair number of students in post-graduate level” (as cited in Powel, 2021).

He shows us a ray of hope by shedding light on its future prospects:

It is estimated that up to 900,000 new jobs could be generated in the creative industries in between 2013 to 2030 in the UK. The local economies are said to be growing their creative industries employment twice as fast as other sectors. The challenge lies in the digital transformation and automation hugely affecting the creative industries but the popularity of arts and humanities is still increasing. (as cited In Powel, 2021)

Along with these prospects of hope, the pandemic is demanding for psychology graduates for mental health. Powel (2021) further quotes Hetan: “It is

## Why Not the Humanities: Reclaiming Its Significance in Interdisciplinary and Holistic Education

shifting public attitudes towards mental health and has increased interest in studying psychology" (p.23). With the emerging and re-emerging diseases like Covid-19 and the Plagues, and the limitations of medical science to overcome them, humanities has played a significant role in coping with the unprecedented health challenges and resilience. Hence, the interdisciplinary mechanisms like Health Humanities, Medical Humanities, Digital Humanities and few similar bodies are already there in some hospitals and universities.

### Conclusion

To sum up, the mechanistically trained mind and technical knowledge can grow sustainably at the hands of the empathetic humanists, psychologists and creative brains. A society can get nurtured better and develop harmoniously to make a world of peace and prosperity with sincere regards to human values. To meet this end, we must launch interdisciplinary courses in the schools, colleges and universities which integrate the technical and vocational knowledge, humanities and arts. Hence, the education inculcates in the learners a holistic approach to life and the critical perspectives that can address the existing conflicts and contradictions of the modern world dominated by science, technology and commerce.

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Shahid Kirti Multidisciplinary Journal (Vol.: 01, Jan, 2023)

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