

Maia Shukhoshvili (Tbilisi)

## FOR ANCIENT AND MODERN MEANING OF LIBERAL EDUCATION

The humanity began to search ways and methods of knowledge transfer in very ancient times. From ancient times until today different educational systems were founded, some of which continued to operate and the others became part of history of pedagogic. One of the unique educational systems indisputably is so called Liberal Education, which takes its origins from Antiquity and, in particular, from Ancient Greece. The aim of report is to discuss several aspects related with ancient and modern meaning, concept and goals of Liberal Education. What did mean Liberal Education for ancient Greeks and what it means for people of the 21<sup>th</sup> century?

The principles of Liberal Education first are introduced in works of ancient Greek philosopher Plato. Plato still is considered as a founder of concept of Liberal Education. So I'll shortly represent the basic concept and goals of Liberal Education in Plato's works. Plato describes education as an art to make perfect man. When Plato speaks about education he means liberal education.<sup>1</sup> Liberal education is education the end of which is man himself. When men are trained vocationally we may expect better products, but we have no right to expect better men in the wide sense of this term. That's why this product may not be useful for society. The key for Plato's system of education is the Greek term *μουσική*, which had very specific meaning in ancient Greek and included within its comprehension of seven liberal arts. Greek mythology personified seven liberal arts making each one of them a Muse.

---

<sup>1</sup> Maluf F. M., Plato and Liberal Education, from IHM School:  
<http://ihm.catholicism.org/2008/12/plato-and-liberal-education-part-one/>.

Plato organized educational plan - curriculum, which was designed for four epochs. 1. The first twenty years are concerned mainly with the body and the organic faculties. The children as early as age of three were introduced to mythology and then gymnastics, reading and writing, poetry, music and mathematics. From the eighteenth to the twentieth year military training was recommended. In the first epoch factual knowledge was not so important, but only skill of distinguishing good from bad and formation of right senses. 2. The second period, extending from the year twenty to the year thirty, is concerned with the sciences of geometry, astronomy and harmony. The fundamental knowledge transferred in this period prepared the way for philosophy. 3. The third period occupied the years thirty to thirty-five and is concerned with the arts of dialectics. 4. The fourth period, requiring fifteen years of life and terminating at the age of fifty, is a period dedicated to real experience in the world.<sup>2</sup>

After Greek philosophy reached full flower in the 4<sup>th</sup> century BC scholars and teachers sought to establish curriculum to prepare students for the higher and more difficult studies. The outcome of this model is ἐγκύκλιος παιδεία (educational circle). A first century BC scholar and statesman Marcus Terentius Varo codified this curriculum into nine disciplines and introduced it to Rome. This model became common for Roman "encyclopedists". The next development of this curriculum is so called "canon of seven liberal arts", which were adopted in Christian tradition (the architecture and medicine of Varo were dropped out).<sup>3</sup>

In the context of liberal education the term "liber" doesn't refer to politics. It is derived from Latin word "liber" and means "free". Thus in classical epoch liberal education is education which is appropriate for free human beings. In Classical epoch seven liberal arts formed the cycle of Trivium and the cycle of Quadrivium. The Trivium consisted of: Grammar, Rhetoric and Logic. The Quadrivium consisted of: Arithmetic, Geometry, Music and Astronomy (Cosmology). The share to philosophy is possible only after training in these seven liberal arts. The system based on Trivium-Quadrivium cycle considered that human being needs not to know technical skills, but to teach him "how to learn". Each technical skill and experience can be used fair and unfairly. Liberal education teaches how to use technical knowledge fair. That was the concept and main goal of liberal education in classical epoch.

---

<sup>2</sup> Maluf F. M., Plato and Liberal Education, from IHM School:  
<http://ihm.catholicism.org/2008/12/plato-and-liberal-education-part-one/>.

<sup>3</sup> DNP Materials, Artes Liberales.

With historical development of liberal education change its concept and goals. The medieval scholars of Paris and Bologna founded the first universities between 1100 and 1200 AD, where the seven liberal arts were taught. After 1800s the reformers of higher education decided that higher education must answer the problems based on the specific subjects and this was the principle of German model. In the middle of 19<sup>th</sup> century many American colleges and universities adopted the German model. Traditional liberal education became a much smaller part of the educational area.

At the beginning of 21<sup>st</sup> century the great part of society rejected liberal education and subject-based education was established. The very small part of society recognized the importance of liberal education to frame cultural well-educated people.<sup>4</sup>

From the 21<sup>st</sup> century liberal education has new defenders, but the concept and goals of liberal education are the same: to prepare human being to live responsible, productive, and creative, to be ready for lifelong learning. The liberal education means that we understand foundations of knowledge and inquiry about nature, culture and society, that we master core skills of perception, analysis and expressions, that we recognize the importance of historical and cultural context and that we explore connections among formal learning, citizenship and service to our communities.<sup>5</sup>

We must underline that when we speak about modern liberal education, first of all we mean American model of education. The American tradition is incorporated in some European countries with more or less success. The main purpose of the liberal education which is established by the U. S. model is to promote more employment and to enhance academic and student mobility.

In the modern statement on liberal education it is said that: liberal learning is not confined to particular fields of study, but it is rigorous methodology. The spirit and value of liberal education are equally relevant to all forms of higher education and to all students. Because liberal education aims to free us from the constraints of ignorance and myopia, it is global and pluralistic by its nature. It embraces the diversity of ideas and experiences that characterize the social, natural and intellectual world.

---

<sup>4</sup> Conor W. R., *Liberal Arts Education in The Twenty-first Century*, New York 2008, 49.

<sup>5</sup> Conor W. R., *Op. cit.*, 72.

The modern liberal education includes the disciplines of humanities, natural, social and political sciences. The curriculum of American liberal education is based on Trivium-Quadrivium cycle and includes propedeutical courses of arts and sciences.

A. Bloom believed that when we discuss the concept of modern liberal education, the main misunderstanding is that we cannot derive modern equivalent of liberal education from the “classics”. We mustn’t search the essence of the problem in past, but in present.

What, then, is the modern equivalent of a liberal education? A. Bloom’s suggestion is notable point: to be liberally educated one does not need to master the whole range of modern learning. This is why it is dangerous to compare closely ancient and modern models of liberal education.<sup>6</sup> The key for curriculum of liberal education is curriculum which doesn’t bombard student with facts. The liberal education curriculum ought to adopt only this structure. Liberal education curriculum tells a story to the student and then gives him chance to make conclusions. After this story student ought to try to dig deeper into the psychological dynamics of this story. The curriculum which is designed by connection of syllabi structured in this way creates the model for liberal education curriculum.

What is common for ancient and modern models of liberal education? The common is that liberal education has always been to aspire to personal characteristics, critical thinking, skills and learning opportunities for future development. The main difference is that liberal education in the classical era was more accessible to small groups – free people, and in our era it is considered for wide range of people.

And finally it is fairly notable one similarity between ancient and modern models of liberal education, which is covered by the essence of liberal education itself, but isn’t declared neither by ancient nor by modern theorists of liberal education. The liberal education will be successful only in that case if it is combined with specific subject-based field. The liberal education considers this important and necessary. The liberal education is propedeutic and introduction for future learning. It prepares student to learn specific subject-based field and develops skills for such type of learning. Thus, the real outcome of liberal education will be useful and fruitful for society only after combining such kind of knowledge.

---

<sup>6</sup> Bloom A., *The Closing of the American Mind*, New York: Simon & Schuster 1987, 44-51.