

BA Conference 2017 – Patrick Begley Speech

Thank you for having me and thank you to Deanne for inviting me.

Today, I would like to start off with two quotes. The first quote is from the French philosopher Simone Weil, who was describing post-Renaissance Europe.

She writes of “a culture which has developed in a very restricted medium, removed from the world, in a stove-pipe atmosphere - a culture very strongly directed towards and influenced by technical science, very strongly tinged with pragmatism, extremely broken up by specialisation, entirely deprived of both contact with the world and, at the same time, of any window opening onto the world beyond.”

The second quote is much shorter. It came in the form of graffiti I once saw on a toilet door in the SS and H library which said “Studying Arts is like being unemployed except your parents are proud of you”.

Taken together, I think those two sum up a lot about our present society as well as its attitude toward the Arts degree, although perhaps some parents would not be so proud.

Now, today I would like to talk about how the Arts degree has helped me in my job as a journalist and also how we might defend the value of the degree, both intrinsic and practical. But first I thought I would read to you what I wrote 10 years ago now for the Courier-Mail, as I was just beginning my arts degree. I can't quite remember what provoked this, probably the prospect of earning a few hundred dollars, but at the time QUT had recently announced it was planning to scrap its Arts degree, while the University of Melbourne, through its new Melbourne model, was giving Arts much more of a place in its revised undergraduate studies. And as a new undergraduate, the degree was suddenly part of my identity.

So this is some of what I had to say: *To view the article, click here*

So, I wrote that just a few months into Arts and I stand by pretty much all of that, with one small reservation.

Probably around about the same time that I wrote this I then did what a lot of first years do, and began to reassess my priorities in life and spent even more time drinking coffees at Merlos coffee shop or beer at the Red Room. I quit my dual degree and spent 18 months working in call centres, mostly doing market research and political polling.

I can tell you, if you ever want to recapture your motivation an excellent motivation to return to study, call centre work is an excellent place to start. So I effectively began again, dropping the law and really relishing my Arts studies, first in literature but then mainly philosophy. So I had chosen to focus on what is seen by many as the most useless subject in a useless degree. I endured the questions about whether I would ever find a job, and also the persistent one about whether in philosophy you could just “make it up.”

The course at UQ, though, I found to be rigorous and stimulating, especially the honours year, where I wrote a thesis on personhood and dementia and whether so-called “living wills” should be honoured.

I considered doing a PhD but was afraid of writing for a very small academic audience so I then did journalism for a year and a half.

I had gone straight from a 10,000 word theses to a 250 word news brief. Most of my days now are spent doing property and company searches, trying to piece together some network of unsavoury characters.

News editors, I would venture, do not put much stock in an Arts degree. They are notoriously sceptical of journalism degrees too, preferring that you had studied economics or science or law.

But I think they're making a mistake if they write off Arts. Without my degree, I would have come out narrower and more cynical.

Both literature and philosophy have helped me in journalism.

For one, there is so much bad writing in journalism, so many “explosive revelations”, “extraordinary attack” and “heartrending scenes”, I think it helps to have studied some really good writing, especially when it comes to writing longform. Philosophy also made me much more comfortable with abstraction, seeing things in formal terms. Today, if I feel like I am this close to a story and can't stand back from it properly, I often sketch the relationships in a much more formal way, stripping away the names and detail so I can understand it myself.

Whether studying ethics makes you more ethical, I cannot say. I remember hearing about research suggesting ethicists are simply better at justifying whatever they wanted to do in the first place. When the author of this research presented a paper on it, mentioning that philosophy books are stolen more regularly than any other type of library book, someone in the audience replied “but stealing a book is life's most beautiful crime.”

Philosophy has certainly taught me to beware false dichotomies.

I thought of these false and philosophy once when I was writing a court story about a young man on trial for killing his passenger in a drink driving accident. And his defence was that he could not remember anything, even whether he was in the driver's seat, and there was nothing forensic to say where he and the young woman who died girl were sitting before the car flipped. Because he had pleaded not guilty, I went to write the corollary, that he was "maintaining his innocence", but of course he wasn't. He was simply saying to the jury "I do not know whether I am guilty, and neither can you". The easy dualism of guilt and innocence didn't apply here, at least not in a legal sense. I think philosophy really encourages you to find these strange territories between what we think of a stable, neat categories.

Now, in the Courier-Mail piece I read before, I mentioned the mining engineer who studied philosophy at Oxford and the thinking skills he said he developed. I feel like my Arts degree has given me skills I can use in my new job, too.

But we also need to be cautious in justifying Arts as an instruction in critical thinking skills that can then applied to lots of other domains.

In a recent article, the philosopher Neven Sesardic rails against arguments used by many American university departments, which suggest philosophy can improve your reasoning across disciplines. Sesardic points to what he says is a lack of empirical evidence about so-called global thinking skills. I'm not an expert in the literature here but it's worth thinking about. Then there are the many departments that point to philosophy students achieving better performances in medical school tests than other undergraduates. But Sesardic notes that this commits that classic logical error of finding causation where there may only be coincidence. Perhaps philosophy attracted better students in the first place.

Arts departments run into these kind of problems when they lean too heavily on straightforward instrumental justifications. But the advertising line - do Arts so you can then be better at something else - has another fault: it devalues the humanities themselves.

As Simone Weil says "the desire to learn for the sake of learning, the desire for truth has become very rare." The Arts degree probably contains more discussions of intrinsic value than any other degree, in religious studies and philosophy but also cultural studies and sociology. It is ironic then if Arts should neglect the concept of intrinsic value in justifying itself.

But arguments from intrinsic value can often feel pretty thin, more like mere assertions. To study something simply "for its own sake" can so easily come across as indulgent.

I think then that to defend and exalt the Arts degree we need to look between the straightforwardly practical and the intrinsic. Because there is so much to talk about besides job readiness, on the one hand, and "learning for learning's sake" on the other. There are all the benefits of a humanities education that might be hard to quantify but nourish us, as individuals and as a society.

Arts is where we learn our history and new languages. Arts is where read books properly, going beyond book club discussions about likeable characters and plausible plots. Arts is where we consider not just the ethical dilemmas of some profession but the assumptions and foundations of an ethics.

Without Arts, economics becomes more like just another branch of mathematics and therefore less open to criticism and change. Without Arts, we can watch tragedy or comedy but cannot talk about it except to say "that was tragic" or "that was funny". We deny our mortality by not looking at death in history and literature, instead keeping it confined to the provinces of medicine, law and risk analysis.

Without Arts, we are more monolingual and monocultural, more ignorant of our past and therefore more arrogant. We lack the humility that comes with realising that we are only one people in one land at one time.

Studying Arts, we become more aware. It's an awareness that can help philosophers, journalists - in fact, anyone curious about the world.

And that awareness can be good in and of itself, while also offering many practical benefits beyond anything to do with career.

Because studying Arts is not just about being employed. And it is not just about learning to learn.

It is, however, something of which your parents should be proud.