The following is a guest post by Paul Hanstedt, a professor of English at Roanoke College and the author of General Education Essentials: A Guide for College Faculty, which was published in May by Jossey-Bass/Wiley and the Association of American Colleges and Universities.

In 2009, Mr. Hanstedt received a Fulbright award to study the development of general education in Hong Kong. He is writing in response to The Chronicle’s special report on the growth of the liberal-arts education in Asia.

To fully understand the complexities of Asia’s efforts to develop liberal-arts programs, it helps to know two things:

• The design of liberal-arts programs is nothing compared to the challenges of implementation.

• Much of Asia is built upon a testing culture.

Whether you call it liberal arts, general education, or liberal education, designing a program that pushes students to study and integrate forms of knowledge beyond their major field of study is a difficult prospect. Faculty and administrators must agree what they mean by these terms, what the driving forces are behind any proposed change, and what the model itself should look like. This last one can be particularly challenging, of course, for it is here that the “turf wars” often begin, departments elbowing each other aside as they attempt to secure more classes—and thus more faculty lines and more power—for themselves. Sometimes it’s possible to read an old curricula much the way you do the sawed rings of a tree trunk: just by examining how many courses appear in a given field, you can tell who won what battles, whose lives have been hit by a flood and whose have been drought-stricken.

Oftentimes, though, the implementation of a program can be even more difficult than its design. For it is during implementation that the day-to-day effects of a new curriculum become visible. Suddenly all the traditional ways of doing things—multiple-choice tests, generic research papers—come into question. What if, for instance, my institution has put in place a curriculum that emphasizes the need for students to integrate learning from one area to another? If that’s the case, will that standard introductory text that I’ve always used work anymore? After all, it only deals with my field, treating my non-major students as though they were preparing to continue studying literature. And what about that old stand-by, the “choose-a-topic-of-your-choice” research paper? While such an approach might make perfect sense of students in my field—I want them to know how to find good scholarly sources in literary studies—does this make any sense for, say, the science major taking my course, or the economics majors?

Put simply, more integrative approaches to liberal education often require faculty to change the way they teach. Liberal-education courses have different goals than major courses—indeed, they are even very different from traditional, introductory-style distribution courses.

Which is where my second bullet above comes into play: if you think this is hard for the faculty (and it can be), consider what it’s like for a student raised on high-stakes testing. Take Hong Kong, for example. In the Special Administrative Region, only the top 18 percent of each year’s high-school graduates are allowed spots in Hong Kong’s eight publicly financed universities. The jockeying for these spots begins even at the pre-school level: waiting lists for the top kindergartens are sometimes 200 students long. And as a child gets older, the competition only increases: by the time a kid graduates from secondary education, her parents might have spent tens of thousands of dollars on afterschool lessons in English, art, and athletics—and even more on tutors. Indeed, tutors in Hong Kong are as famous as Cantonese-pop stars: you see their

Hong Kong skyline

http://chronicle.com/blogs/worldwise/when-introducing-the-libera...
faces on billboards, on double-decker buses. Their private lives get coverage in the gossip columns. By one estimate, Hong Kong parents spend more than $6-million a month sending their kids to “cram schools” in the hopes that they’ll be part of that 18 percent.

Consequently, the students who arrive in Hong Kong universities are very good at taking tests. Very, very good. To say they have it down to a science is to flatter science. Interestingly enough, this strong testing culture seems to be one of the drivers behind the move toward a liberal-arts system in Hong Kong. As Karin Fischer, who wrote the Chronicle’s special report, points out, Hong Kong employers have become frustrated with their university graduates: they seem inflexible, limited to the information they’ve memorized, and lacking the ability to solve problems creatively.

For our purposes, though, what’s noteworthy here is what happens to these students who are very good at taking tests and very good at writing a certain kind of formal research paper when they get arrive in a general-education classroom—particularly if the institutions liberal-arts program is more integrative in nature. Most of the time when my Fulbright colleagues and I—or for that matter, local scholars in faculty development—ran a workshop on “alternative” pedagogies, assignment designs, and/or assessments, faculty would be perfectly happy experimenting with forms and genres. Very often, though, at the very height of all that brainstorming and innovation, someone would raise a hand and say, “But if I do this, my students will be very unhappy.”

It’s hard to tell the degree to which a response like this is reality or just an instructor’s perception of reality. Most faculty in Hong Kong are on three-year renewable contracts, after all, which means they’re vulnerable when it comes to student evaluations—a few bad semesters, and they could find themselves out of a job.

And, it’s worth noting that, in my experiences in the United States, at least, the students who are less successful in the classroom are more open to nontraditional pedagogies. The kids with the higher grades, in contrast, generally seem to prefer “comfort pedagogies”: “I know how to do this,” they seem to say—and sometimes actually do say. “I’ve been successful at it for years. Don’t mess with it.” And in Hong Kong, of course, all university students were “successful” in high school, all of them are in that top 20 percent. They wouldn’t be at university if they hadn’t learned how to survive in the system.

That in mind, if some of the more worried faculty members are correct and the students won’t be happy, then shifting to new, more integrative approaches to course design and implementation will feel like a risky proposition for street-level instructors. Which means, to state the obvious, that the curricula themselves might be vulnerable. After all, it’s at the course level that theory turns into reality, where our conceptions of what students can or can’t do, should or shouldn’t achieve, become real. Or not.

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failed in careers BUT they were NOT rejected, they THRIVED not failed. Japanese, Chinese, and non-Asian employers LIKED their greater initiative, social skill, imagination, confidence, courtesy, breadth of learning, self-study habits, leadership habits of teaching others, event-based learning and fractal model structural cognition tools. This has been the happiest part of teaching here for 21 years—it works even in Asian contexts and terms. U of Chicago style humanists thrive at Mitsubishi Shoji, at Jaxa, at Ko sei shyo (the Welfare Ministry), and other staid traditional organizations. The parents like it, the students like it, the employers and bosses like it. IT CAN be done but I doubt that it can be done by people too compromisy—give an inch, erode a mile is the norm. I did NOT give an inch or a centimeter or a millimeter. When students complained about ANY aspect of my one hour exams, I gave them 3 hour exams much harder and NOT graded by any curve. Too bad for the whiners. I did not give a millimeter—it was top 3 global standards and nothing less and though we all worried in the beginning if it would work, it DID work for 21 years in a row at FOUR different top private universities in Japan and China. Liberated from rote and exam prep classes and readings, forced to read 5 books every week for my one class alone, everyone thrived. Forced to do team presentation every week for 30 weeks in a row, everyone thrived. See my 116 book required reading list for my undergrad seminar—one class alone, everyone thrived. Forced to do team presentation every week for 30 weeks in a row, everyone thrived. See my 116 book required reading list for my undergrad seminar—one class alone, everyone thrived.

Thank you, Professor Hanstedt, for this stimulating entry. Yes, to make liberal arts actually liberalize Asia on the ground, we indeed need perspectives and insights about the subject from student worldview.

Hayes Tang

Paul Hanstedt's report on test-taking culture applies here where I live in Japan, too.

For students to live in such a culture, the urge to ask questions dries up, because questions by their nature often come from left field. Analogies or at least possible analogies come from odd wondering going on in any person at any time, from lines of music one may have recently heard, dialogue in a film, or resonance lingering yet in some book or poem one for any reason may have read. Or maybe one's girlfriend or boyfriend raised some issue that marvelously impinges.

Joseph Brodsky called these magical tugs "loose ends." Language itself for him was a hallowed allowance for getting them to work, for getting us better to honor the echoes going on in us, around us, behind us.

So as Paul H. continues to mull over how to get ed more "integrative," and to account for too many youth subjected to test culture (rising in U.S., too), maybe the best resource we have is the teachers. Now, too many yet serve the ethos of departmentalism, specialization, where for one's best careerism one learns to shear oneself of odd references (anything from any other department). Too many learn to kill the fairies floating in from left field.

Maybe we can celebrate pros who are more human, who allow apt digression, who have literacy to fit subordinate clauses and still keep something larger going -- better fueled by further perspectives.

Students who see this will thrill to a humanity beyond that to which the test culture dooms them.

So please keep mulling, Paul H. Please keep remembering that some of our teachers in some of this vast archipelago of departmentalism may yet have some humanity and intellectual curiosity in them.