

**WHAT DO I DO WITH MY DEGREE? THE VALUE OF STUDYING
IN THE HUMANITIES**

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Willemien Marais***INTRODUCTION**

What is the value of studying in the Humanities? I'm often confronted with this question by prospective students as well as current students in the Humanities. On some level, it seems that degrees in the Humanities are perceived to be inferior.

How it happened is not entirely clear. The one moment it was the domain of educated Ancient Greeks, schooled in rhetoric, politics and the essence of Man. The next moment it was the subject of disparaging jokes and songs; an academic qualification viewed by some as having less value than yesterday's perishables:

What do you do with a B.A. in English, / What is my life going to be? / Four years of college and plenty of knowledge, / Have earned me this useless degree. / I can't pay the bills yet, / 'Cause I have no skills yet, / The world is a big scary place. / But somehow I can't shake / The feeling I might make, / A difference, / To the human race¹.

However, that which is often dismissed as a so-called Mickey Mouse degree, could of course be seen as having origins as old as academic study itself. And the central area of this field of study is one where answers are not that easy to come by: the Humanities. Knowledge of the essence of what makes us human.

A student's first introduction to university and academia is often also his or her first introduction to the age-old strife between the different qualifications: BAs versus everything with a C in the abbreviation — B.Sc., B.Com., MB.Ch.B. B.Arch. — often viewed as more important and more difficult than the rest. The least scientific but most convincing evidence of this is people's reaction to fields of study such as biochemistry or astrophysics — "you must be very clever".

This discussion is not an attempt at muckraking — partly due to the old adage of "never argue with a fool... people might not know the difference".

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What should be brought to students' attention is that a B.A. degree — including those in the field of Communication — is, in all probability, the most difficult degree of them all. Not because of comparisons between numbers and letters or between chemical formulae or theories. A B.A. degree is certainly not the most difficult academic qualification to obtain. But that is only when the measure of success is based purely on a student's ability to remember information.

A B.A. degree is the most difficult degree to apply successfully. It is the most difficult degree to use. Not because the content does not compare a student sufficiently, but because students find it so difficult to apply that content appropriately. The title of this opinion piece is “What do I do with my degree?” — basically a rhetorical question. However, the answer is inherent to the question, as is one's success.

The second reason why a B.A. degree can be considered to be the most difficult degree is the presence of what discerns us as humans: choice. The ability to make a decision, to practise free will. In this case it is a practical choice. Most B.A. degrees allow much in terms of choosing which fields of study to add to the core modules of a qualification. One look at history and it becomes abundantly clear that our ability to choose — especially where the wrong option was chosen — has been instrumental in many of our problems. While most people are able to make a decision or choose an option, not everyone has the ability to choose wisely; to choose the option that would be sustainable in the long run.

Most university courses have prerequisites for admission. Some require specific school subjects as well as an acceptable result in those subjects. Others have additional admission examinations, tests and evaluations.

One prerequisite that could never become an official requirement for admission, but which is vital in determining a student's success is that student's ability to make an informed decision. And although decision-making abilities are important in all degrees and in all professions, it is nowhere more important and instrumental to success than in the Humanities.

Fortunately, students are not left to their own devices. A little-known fact of successfully studying for and completing a B.A. is the three complimentary yet unofficial degrees bestowed on graduation day.

ADDED VALUE

B.A. Critical Thinking

The Baccalaureus Artium Critical Thinking is awarded to a candidate that demonstrates that he/she has the clear, precise and purposeful mental capacity to solve complicated problems creatively, make informed decisions and is able to value the quality of his/her own thinking.

Being a former journalist², I've had personal experience of how the ability to think critically can add to your reporting skills and your ability to “get the story”. Of course critical thinking and its nephew, lateral thinking, are nowadays often over-used and under-utilised. It is one of those abilities — much as is the case with creativity — that

people often assume they have. And often the implication inherent to this assumption is a clear indication of the lack thereof.

In my experience, critical thinking is the most important tool a journalist — or anyone, for that matter — should have. Let's stick to the example of journalism: Of course you should be able to write well. But in most instances it is because of your ability to write well that you've chosen journalism as a profession. It is merely a case of applying that ability to the demands of reporting.

Critical thinking is not that easily explained, nor applied. A simple definition is that one should question all the facts and statements before you. Unfortunately, for most people that is where it ends — in the incessant stropy personality of the obstinate. Critical thinking goes beyond simply questioning everything. A critical thinker demonstrates a fair amount of healthy scepticism and intellectual humility.

Irrespective of which fields you study as part of your B.A. — communication science, political science, history, languages, anthropology, criminology, drama, philosophy, the fine arts — critical thinking will form part of it. And although an official module in the art of critical thinking is not (yet) taught, it is an ability that will develop and continue to develop as part of your exposure to all the different facets of the Humanities.

Again it should be stressed that a B.A. in Critical Thinking is one of the most difficult degrees to obtain because it demands so much from the student. Some students, it seems, register for a degree and then assume that they will become journalists, language practitioners, anthropologists or actors via — to use a term from the natural sciences — osmosis. The Faculty of the Humanities is a wonderful institution that offers the student access to information on and expertise in many fields, but that merely leads the horse to the water. The drinking is the student's own responsibility. Unfortunately, the drinking has also been the downfall of many a promising student... Which brings us back to the ability to make a decision and choose an option. Balance is the key, but balance is also one of the first abilities that disappears when one chooses to drink at the local watering hole rather than the fountain of wisdom.

B.A. Bigger Picture

The Baccalaureus Artium Bigger Picture is awarded to a candidate that demonstrates an awareness of the interdependence between the different fields – in the Humanities and other, seemingly unrelated fields.

The world is a very big place, but at the same time the world is very small. Nothing ever happens in complete isolation. An important breakthrough on the medical sciences (prolonging life) has implications for psychology (people might live longer), politics (people might live longer!), economics (how much will it cost to live longer?) and even the theatre arts or television (a new hospital series). Political decisions influence language and how it is managed. Nuclear physics enable us to heal people, and to kill people. And, of course, the journalist must be able to write about all of this.

An awareness of this interdependence and the insight to follow the rimpling effect of a decision is another ability acquired through a degree in the Humanities. One of the first lessons a young academic must learn, is to be an expert on one topic. Focus on one aspect of your field and learn as much as possible about that aspect. This might seem

to contradict the goal of seeing the Bigger Picture, but it is only when you know where your field of expertise fits into this picture that you could truly become a master of that field.

A B.A. degree is one of the few academic qualifications that enables a student to study other fields apart from the core modules of the degree. For example, a student in Media Studies could also study sociology or political science. As a communication expert, it is your responsibility to act as the link between these worlds, it is your knowledge of the Bigger Picture that determines your success, and it is a degree in the Humanities that provides you with the telescope and microscope to look for the Bigger Picture.

B.A. Better Person

A Baccalaureus Artium Better Person is awarded in extraordinary circumstances to an individual who understands that it is not about being better than others, but about the continuous betterment of yourself.

In all its different guises, the *Humaniora* remains the study of Man and by implication also of how to be a truly good person. Someone with exceptional communication skills, someone with an understanding of others, of their traditions and their culture. In short, it means providing someone with the necessary skills to become a well-read, well-rounded individual.

Critics will be quick to point out that someone with a B.A. degree seems to be someone who knows something about everything, but not everything about something. And if one does not make the right choices, this might soon be the case. Therefore, it is imperative that a student knows him/herself very well. He or she must know what they want. A student who does a broad, general B.A. without knowing what he/she wants, won't get anything from it.

This is, of course, a paradox: Few people aged 18 know what they want. A broad, general B.A. would therefore be the ideal way of getting to know yourself and the world. However, this is not practical, because this exploratory degree will have to be followed by another, more tailored degree. The best solution is to speak to as many people as possible, to evaluate your decisions constantly, and to adapt if need be.

What do I do with my degree? The question is what would you like to do with your degree? And the answer: Whatever you want to. The choice is yours.

Endnotes

¹ Lyrics from *What do I do with a BA in English?* from the Broadway play *Avenue Q* by Jeff Whitty (available at <http://www.lyricsandsongs.com/song/601684.html>). Another example of this apparent irreverence towards the Humanities is found in the lyrics of the song *Twentysomething* that appears on the album *Twentysomething* by Jamie Cullum: *After years of expensive education / A car full of books and anticipation / I'm an expert on Shakespeare and that's a hell of a lot / But the world don't need scholars as much as I thought* (available at <http://www.azlyrics.com/lyrics/jamiecullum/twentysomething.html>).

² Before joining academia, the author worked as a professional journalist in radio and print media. She still works as a freelance journalist for several publications.