

The Global Great Books Institute

By Thomas Ponniah, School of Liberal Arts and Sciences

For my undergraduate degree I had the privilege of studying in a “Great Books” program at Concordia University’s Liberal Arts College in Montreal. This Bachelor of Arts degree in “Western Society and Culture” is one of a hundred such programs in North America, Europe and Asia. The Concordia program was modeled on the Great Books movement which began at Columbia University in New York in 1921 and which now constitutes that university’s Core Curriculum. The Western version of a Great Books course of study was itself inspired by the medieval and Renaissance educational ideal of a liberal arts education, believed to be crucial to producing a well-rounded, free human being who had the moral and intellectual preparation for social and civic life. These programs understand that students need historical points of support, thinkers who have been interrogated for hundreds and even thousands of years, with which - and against which - they might formulate their own interpretations. This need for substantial philosophical and cultural traditions has become more apparent in our era when everything - employment, relationships, identities, and new technologies - have become more and more impermanent.

I am a believer in the importance of Great Books, but how does one teach them in a world characterized by globalization, and the belief - though not always the practice - of gender, racial, ethnic, and sexual equality? This is a question that I have been reflecting on as a professor in the School of Liberal Arts and Sciences at George Brown college. Contemporary colleges are wonderful - and demanding - places to work because they provide the instructor with the most diverse classroom in the world, each containing a variety of cultures as well as of languages, religions, ages, personalities, and educational achievement. I recently designed a course - which runs both as a diploma course and a degree course called “Ancient Great Thinkers” in which I teach the philosophers and writers of antiquity, not only from the West, but from around the world. Students receive the opportunity to learn not only about Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, and Sappho, but also Confucius, Lao Tzu, Sun Tzu, the Indian Brahmannical tradition, and the Buddha. I teach these thinkers from a perspective informed by numerous critiques - for example, we investigate how the texts construct and sometimes deconstruct sexual and gender roles and identities. The goal is to provide my culturally diverse classroom with the first semester of a global canon. In the ideal world, every student would receive a diploma or degree in “Global Great Books”, and

enjoy the shared collective inquiry that comes with it, before proceeding onto an education that was more immediately focused on employability.

Last semester the students were so happy with “Ancient Great Thinkers” that they asked me whether there would be a follow-up course. I told them that we had not yet constructed one but in the meantime I would be happy, once a week for one hour during the winter semester, to run an informal course – not for credit – in which I would teach some of the books, plays, and poems in our textbook (*The Norton Anthology of World Literature: Volume A*) that we had not had the chance to cover during the autumn semester. This winter six students have met with me every week and we have read and discussed works such as Sophocles’s play *Antigone*, Aristophanes’s *Lysistrata*, Homer’s *Odyssey* and poems by Sappho. The students: Danilo Alfaro, Tim Canner, Cemoy Durham, Emma Moygorodi, Chiara Pecora, and Karim Soliman, have said that our “Global Great Books Institute” has been “inspiring”, “helpful in terms of understanding their other course work”, and has “aided them in terms of life questions in general”.

The goal of a global great books education is to provide students with critical and creative thinking skills, developed through an encounter with some of the most influential minds in history, to help them deepen their ability to investigate the challenges and privileges of our era, while remaining informed by an understanding of our collective philosophical and cultural past.