

Provenance of Western Literacy:
Origins and Continuities of Humanism in Education

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In a speech at the 2009 TED Conference, Elizabeth Coleman, Bennington College President, spoke of her experience in reforming the liberal arts tradition in higher education. Speaking from her experience reforming a small liberal arts college, Coleman was critical of the state of the valuable and venerated model of education. She spoke broadly about the American educational methodology, “once a model for the world,” failing its purposes and historical precedents, now “most noteworthy for its failures.”¹ Other rhetoric, wh

academy or from the podium of politicians and educational advocates, reflects discord between the intent of the liberal arts education and the reality of its achievements and implementation. Coleman notes in the same speech that “genuine” liberal arts education as we envision it now “no longer exists;” rather there exists only an initial survey in liberal arts in order to direct students towards a focus, empowering the “expert” while trivializing the generalist.²

While so much discourse focuses on the current status of the denotation “liberal arts,” a far smaller and less sensational body of work attempts to analyze the historical precedents for our current educational system and culture of literacy, whatever perversion or perfection of its ancestor it may be.

Literacy as it is known widely--the ability to read and write--is so much an integral part of life in the United States and other prosperous Western nations that it does not often occur to students that the very foundations of their education and the very substance of the society they form and participate in is a product of ideological and intellectual movements centuries past. Literacy as we know it popularly is in itself a definition inherited from the humanist tradition of education, of which liberal arts educational programs are a descendent. Western society, particularly in light of political developments and a broad shift towards democratic forms of

¹Elizabeth Coleman. “Liz Coleman's call to reinvent liberal arts education.” Speech, Long Beach, CA, February 7, 2009. http://www.ted.com/talks/liz_coleman_s_call_to_reinvent_liberal_arts_education.html

² Ibid.

government, has long been reliant upon literacy for the perpetuation of a civil discourse. It is a social construct that values order and aligns itself with those ideologies critical to the continuation of democratic government.

With these realities in mind, especially the pressing debate over the emphases of the American education system and the continually shifting definition of literacy, participants in contemporary educational society might better understand the realities of their educational culture and environment by discerning the origins and evolution of Western education and literacy. To this end, this work will conduct a brief case study of Casa Giocosa in Mantua, including the historical precedent for education and literacy, and those ways in which this school and its head, Vittorino da Feltre, changed the concept of education in Renaissance Europe. By creating a narrative, admittedly limited by necessity in scope and detail, the work will then attempt to address the current climate of educational reform, highlighting continuities through the evolution of liberal arts curriculum. Part of this narrative lies in the present state of American education, and last, this research will draw conclusions as to whether the aforementioned critique of liberal arts might, in light of historical evidence of its origins, be proven accurate, and to what extent American education warrants being diverted from its roots in humanism.

Education and Literacy in the Early Italian Renaissance

Italy of the 13th century was in the midst of cultural and socioeconomic change. Receding feudal influence from foreign powers and a history of alternative methods of rule, whether it be oligarchy (as in Florence and Venice), theocracy (as in Rome) or, as found in many smaller, more autonomous regions in Europe, rule by lesser lords or nobles, created a climate fertile for the cultivation of new ideas--or rather, new interest in very old ideas. Perhaps the most

important factor in establishing this climate was proximity to the ruins of ancient Rome, to the remnants of texts from antiquity still left in Rome or in nearby Greece, even as far as Egypt or North Africa. Along with this geographic proximity was an immediacy of culture, an awareness perhaps less prevalent in other regions of Europe more distant from what was left of the disintegrated Roman Empire. Though separated from the gradual event by centuries, the inheritors of the Roman tradition present in such urban centers as Florence, Venice, Padua, and Mantua were at least closer to the idea of antiquity than their Northern European counterparts.

Perhaps this proximity might account for the fervor that drove early Renaissance thinkers towards the ideas of antiquity and the traditions of reason, rhetoric, law and philosophy inherited, in turn, by the Romans from the Greeks they conquered. The most notable early Renaissance scholars were notable not for creating a body of work drawing on classicism. That feat had been accomplished, to some degree, for centuries by the tradition of scholasticism as sponsored and maintained by Church structures, with a decidedly theological bent. They were not remarkable, either, simply for the depth or ingenuity of their thought. Scholars such as Augustine or Thomas Aquinas generated criticism and Christian philosophy and theory even during the supposed “Dark Ages.” Other traditions of education and the promotion of literacy, of course, far predate any scholastic or Renaissance movement. Notable for this discussion are the development of literacy and education for “civic purposes,” the advent of public schools in the Roman Empire, and “expanded uses of literacy” in the 13th century, including the “development of lay education.”³

With these developments in consideration, early humanist scholars’ desire for knowledge and their willingness to pursue existing texts and bodies of work and improve upon them by

³Harvey J Graff. *The Legacies of Literacy : Continuities and Contradictions in Western Culture and Society* (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1987).

comparison, critical reading, and scholarly discourse might be noted as their most remarkable trait. Still, the simple fact that discussion of literacy and education in early Renaissance Italy revolves around a select group of privileged scholars is revealing as to the extent to which education and the promotion of literacy were isolated or remarkable. For all the references of early attempts at education and literacy, the fact remains that these instances are isolated, limited in their distribution and effect by socioeconomic and geographical constraints. Early Italian humanists are remarkable not for their efforts to promote education or literacy, but rather for their pursuit of those ideals for their own sake, and for the increase of knowledge and understanding. Oddly, such values are paramount to both the tradition of humanism influential in later educational trends in Western society and to contemporary liberal arts curriculum, yet they were never prevalent except amongst the most privileged class of academics in the Renaissance.

One such privileged and influential scholar was Francesco Petrarch, a correspondent with other such early Renaissance scholars as Boccaccio.⁴ Petrarch's fascination with classical works and scholars led him to produce a great many works dedicated to classical heroes of thought, most notably two critical letters to Cicero, and one to Homer.⁵ Petrarch's dialogue with such classical scholars laments the state of his present days, remarking in his closing to the second letter to Cicero, "If you were to hear of our condition to-day you would be moved to tears."⁶ Petrarch's criticism of his generation's academic innovations continues in letters to his peers. To Boccaccio he remarks upon the familiar and infuriating "widely distributed and vulgar set of men who live by words," an insinuation directed towards those of lower class or means who, by way

⁴Francesco Petrarch. "On the Italian Language and Literature, To Boccaccio" In *Petrarch: The First Modern Scholar and Man of Letters*, ed. James Harvey Robinson, New York: G.P. Putnam, 1898. Hanover Historical Texts Project.

⁵ Francesco Petrarch. "To Marcus Tullius Cicero 1&2" In *Petrarch: The First Modern Scholar and Man of Letters*, ed. James Harvey Robinson, New York: G.P. Putnam, 1898. Hanover Historical Texts Project.; "To Homer."

⁶Ibid, "To Marcus Tullius Cicero 1."

of literacy and academic discourse, hoped to gain reputation and ascend the social ladder. Petrarch's response, charged with offense and unease at these men of "great industry ... but greater audacity" is a telling summary of the function and extent of propagation that literacy and scholarly discourse experienced in the Renaissance's early stages. Much as it had been for the past millennia, it remained in Italy during the 13th century a tool of power and a mark of privilege, accessible to the few and jealously guarded. The perception Graff identifies of "unbridled, untempered literacy" by existing European power structures as a "potential threat to social order" seems, by Petrarch's time, to still hold true.⁷

Some humanist scholars, though, speaks at least to the ideological value of the humanist education, if not for its application and usefulness to members of all social distinctions. The work of Petrus Paulus Vergerius, a contemporary of da Feltre's and influential sometime after the death of such early humanists as Petrarch, might represent the beginnings of a shift towards extending the notion of educational capability to men and boys outside isolated socioeconomic groups. What little progress this may represent when set on a global chronology, it is a significant step from the snobbery found in early humanists' work, as this work attempts to construct, towards the commoner's interest in acquiring literacy and humanist education. Vergerius, in his treatise on education written for the son of a nobleman of Padua (the document's origin itself a telling insight into the actual distribution of educational resources, whatever ideology may argue to the contrary) at least makes mention of the implications of poverty and accessibility of education, admitting that it is "not seldom ... that a finely tempered nature is thwarted by circumstances, such as poverty at home," yet in his reckoning "poverty is

⁷Harvey J Graff. *The Legacies of Literacy : Continuities and Contradictions in Western Culture and Society*. Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1987, 14.

less dangerous to lofty instincts than great wealth.”⁸ The significance of Vergerius’ words lie not in so much in his dismissal of poverty as an impediment of education- poverty is sometimes the key factor in motivating students to rise from their lower station to a better life. Some of the most compelling cases for the transformative capability of education are seen in individuals who lift themselves from poverty into success and significant contributions to the improvement of society; precisely because they initially lack the resources they need to better themselves, their drive is all the greater to succeed. Such examples are profuse in Mike Rose’s *Lives on the Boundary*, including the autobiography of the author’s experience in higher education.⁹

Rather, the significance of Vergerius lies in his recognition of the possibility, however remote it may be in reality, that outside of the aristocracy there may exist a “finely tempered nature,” a commoner capable of not only understanding the aspects of a humanist education, but thriving from exposure to them. Vergerius seems, in as impartial a tone as is possible, considering the sponsor and recipient of his treatise’s position in society, to suggest that great minds are not cultivated from excess, but from scarcity. Most significantly, Vergerius recognizes the innate possibility of the unformed human mind, without specifying the distinction between noble or common thinkers. Only in “exceptional cases,” Vergerius asserts, do “those who give early promise fail in subsequent fulfillment.” The reader is left, thus, to logically conclude that most minds of purpose and interest in learning succeed, to some degree at least, in bettering themselves through study in the humanist curriculum.

Perhaps the closed-minded emphasis of class distinction in conjunction with a seemingly unfounded sense of prestige garnered from the study of Greek and Roman scholars did something in the early Renaissance to push a counter-culture into the spotlight. As humanism

⁸Paulus Vergerius Petrus. *On the New Education*. ed. Paul Hassal. Hanover Historical Texts Project.

⁹Mike Rose. *Lives on the Boundary. The Struggles and Achievements of America's Underprepared*. (New York: The Free Press, Macmillan, Inc., 1989).

itself was a step away from the isolated knowledge and truth studied only by the elite of the monastic and church hierarchies in scholasticism, it is logical that a progression within humanism might lead to a more open concept of man's ability to learn. Vergerius' statements are indeed typical of the developing humanist perspective on the ability of man to fashion himself, within the confines of God's laws and world, into something finer and higher than previously thought possible. From this overarching idea of individual capability, Italian Renaissance scholars and intelligentsia shaped a curriculum designed to improve upon the virtue and capability of man--studies "worthy of a free man" by which the educated might "attain and practice virtue and wisdom," an education to develop "those highest gifts of body and of mind which ennoble men."¹⁰ Something of the language of Vergerius suggests, even as its words contradict the notion, that such knowledge is attainable only for the cultured and privileged. While no doubt explained in part by the audience to whom he wrote, the intriguing document represents a cross section only of the type of education and literacy rising among the upper class in Italy- the other, perhaps better populated section was on the rise simultaneously.

The concentration of population in urban centers previously noted had, in the 13th century, the additional effect of creating a class of professionals, bureaucrats, merchants, and businessmen not unique to Italy, but perhaps unique in their level of power and influence at that point in European history. Outside of the academy or the Church a drive for marketable education was sweeping Italy. The demand for "professional training" was concentrated not in the heights of socioeconomic status, but in the middle and lower classes where more was to be gained from an investment in education. For this emerging class, "literacy proficiency was essential." Out of this initial need grew larger applications for education, at least to a basic level of literacy and proficiency. While not all literate men might achieve the self-awareness and

¹⁰Paulus Vergerius Petrus. *On the New Education*.

wisdom Vergerius proscribes, many could at least make their voices heard, part of a new “practical application of learning to civil life.” Such an idea was not new--indeed, it harkened back at a more basic level to Greek and Roman traditions--but its implications far overshot the conventions of antiquity. The effects of a literate populace’s interaction in a civil discourse, on such a wide scale as was present in early Renaissance Italy, is highly significant to this study, despite its isolation. It applies to the wider Western society idea of “school as an approach to social problems,” noted by Graff as a “novelty” in the 13th century, but a powerful force in later European history. Apparent, as established previously, mostly in the middle and upper classes, the potential for the expansion of education into lower ranks of society was nonetheless suggested, even encouraged, and “in time ... filtered down the social structure.”¹¹

The Contributions of Vittorino da Feltre

Such a top-down approach might prove largely ineffective were it not for the efforts of educators and scholars concerned with the education of the masses, not only the sons of their richest patrons. Otherwise education--especially of the humanist tradition--would remain firmly entrenched in the aristocracy. From necessity, much of the educational reform and progressive methodology present in Renaissance Italy emerged from a desire in middle class and members of the aristocracy to utilize the liberal arts curriculum to more firmly entrench themselves in their new rank or to rise higher than their current station. Exceptional individuals motivated by a progressive synthesis of Christian morality, humanist ideology, and civic duty represented peculiarities within this broader manipulation of knowledge as a tool of social mobility.

¹¹ Harvey J Graff. *The Legacies of Literacy : Continuities and Contradictions in Western Culture and Society*, 55.

One such progressive educator, noted by an admiring biographer as a “Prince of Teachers” was Vittorino da Feltre-- a scholar, tutor, and schoolmaster born in 1378.¹² The circumstances surrounding da Feltre’s family bespoke not privilege, but a legacy of ruined prestige, of fallen nobility. Still “held in high respect,” da Feltre’s family benefited little in any way but pride from their former legacy. Their household “lacked even the bare necessities of life” on no few occasions, and da Feltre was unsurprisingly raised without an extensive education or a glut of resources to squander or seize.¹³ Vittorino’s father, Bruto di Rambaldoni, was a member of a rising class of notaries, educated to a level that made him proficient for his trade but hardly a scholar of any sort. Even a limited education on this father’s part, however, might do something to account for the early interest of young da Feltre in education and self-improvement. Vittorino’s admiring biographer, an unnamed sister of Dame, while undoubtedly embellishing the details and sanctity of da Feltre’s life and work, takes pains to note the details of success, as the youth mastered Latin, basic notation, music, and the like. In his early education at a Cathedral school, da Feltre received little in the way of a liberal arts education. Mathematics, according to the biographer, was little acknowledged and Arabic numerals were treated as heresy.¹⁴ Yet what he did receive, he consumed with eagerness and fascination. Whatever little reliable evidence there may be gathered as to da Feltre’s own youthful education (Woodward professes to know “practically nothing” of his youth, only speculating that Feltre’s home “could offer little in the way of masters or books”¹⁵) points to his avid interest in bettering himself, perhaps an influence of his family’s former glory and more recent poverty. Whatever the

¹²A Sister of Dame. *A Prince of Teachers: Vittorino da Feltre* (London: Burns Oates and Washbourne Ltd. 1920).

¹³William Harrison Woodward, *Vittorino de Feltre and Other Human Educators: Essays and Versions*. (Cambridge: University Press, 1897).

¹⁴A Sister of Dame. *A Prince of Teachers: Vittorino da Feltre*, 3-5.

¹⁵William Harrison Woodward, *Vittorino de Feltre and Other Human Educators: Essays and Versions*.

influences, da Feltre was sufficiently driven and proficient in his education to attend the University of Padua by 1396.

This university city, a true metropolis compared to the tiny village of his birth, was “very much under the influence of the ‘new education,’” in this case referring to humanist “emphasis on classics.” The school remained, at its core, “medieval,” yet had significant interactions with the wider world (especially Greece) by way of Venetian students, who accounted for a large percentage of the school’s population. Additionally, Petrarch, shortly after his death in 1374, left a significant portion of his collection of books to the university.¹⁶ On to this stage came da Feltre, a poor student paying for his education by tutoring younger classmates among what was no doubt a crowd of middle-class and aristocratic classmates. Da Feltre studied the “typical” curriculum of “Latin grammar and literature, philosophy, rhetoric, and canon law,” and graduated by 1411 with his doctorate. Through the necessity of his tutoring work, da Feltre seemed to have gained a talent and a passion for teaching. Immediately after his graduation, he remained in Padua as a teacher to younger students, brushing only for a year with teaching at the university level, and studying those subjects in which he felt deficient, especially mathematics.¹⁷ While in Padua, da Feltre undertook the not unheard of, yet remarkable, philanthropy of providing education for “any talented boy” by “subsidizing” their tuition, charging a higher rate to the surplus of wealthy, privileged sons of the upper class and from the excess creating a scholarship fund for the underprivileged. Operating from within the social conventions and economic realities of his time, da Feltre was able in this way to extend educational opportunities to those who shared his background of poverty or disadvantage.

¹⁶Glenn L. Smith, Joan K. Smith, and F. Michael Perko. *Lives in Education: A Narrative of People and Ideas*. New York: St. Martin's, 1994.

¹⁷ Ibid.

While it must be emphasized that such philanthropy was possible only with the support of wealthy backers, da Feltre elected to forgo a higher profit (surely, if he replaced those disadvantaged students with more wealthy patrons, he would benefit fiscally) in order to educate those otherwise unable to better themselves in this way. Such altruistic behavior, along with other verifiable accounts of da Feltre's simplicity, such as his decision to forgo the ring and robes of his degree in favor of a more lowly appearance, testify to a man driven by purpose and conviction, not, as Vergerius' might identify, the desire to "ennoble" himself.¹⁸ Da Feltre extended his simplicity of lifestyle to his students, at least at Casa Giacosa in Mantua, insisting that "even his wealthiest students live simply." Whether this simplicity extended to mirroring the wearing of "rough wool clothing" and "sandals, even in the winter," by da Feltre's students is not specified, but it is reasonable to assume by the role as an "extra parent" da Feltre played, living among his students and helping them both in scholarly pursuits and problems with family or the trials of adolescence, his students might well have emulated his austere lifestyle even to the point of self sacrifice.¹⁹

These values were most mature both in da Feltre and in his academy at Mantua in 1423. He had nearly the ideal employment, both in aspects of his salary, which he determined himself, and also in control over his educational curriculum and the body of his students' work.²⁰ The only limitations to da Feltre's new employment were his obligations to his sponsor, Marquis Gianfrancesco Gonzaga, at least to the extent of the education of five children from the court. This one obligation, however, allowed da Feltre to take in a great variety of other students, "from

¹⁸ A Sister of Dame. *A Prince of Teachers: Vittorino da Feltre*, 43.; Glenn L. Smith, Joan K. Smith, and F. Michael Perko, *Lives in Education: A Narrative of People and Ideas*, 98.; Paulus Vergerius Petrus, *On the New Education*.

¹⁹ Glenn L. Smith, Joan K. Smith, and F. Michael Perko, *Lives in Education: A Narrative of People and Ideas*, 100.

²⁰ *Ibid*, 99.

prominent Matuan families,” or from families of his friends. In the fashion he had crafted in previous schools, da Feltre utilized both the sponsorship of the Marquis and the tuition of his students of more wealthy families to subsidize the education of an even greater number of poor students: seventy in the first class at Mantua.²¹

In doing so, da Feltre was employing methodology and traditions typical of Renaissance education. The distinct school form that da Feltre, and many other educators, established, an “independent school” was reliant solely on its master for its success or failure. In this respect, even a notably virtuous man such as da Feltre was on some level obligated to practice good business, in order to preserve his school and continue to be able to provide education to a wide variety of students. Charity, similar to da Feltre’s though not as extensive, was in fact quite typical. Most communities of any size in northern Italy “ordered the municipal schoolmaster to instruct a handful of poor students gratis.”²² The important difference difference between such common gestures of charity on the part of civic governments and the charity of the sort that da Feltre practiced lies in quantity, a seemingly shallow yet crucial factor, and intent.

Instruction by government mandate of poor students was of “religious and charitable” intent, rather than of any substantive belief that such education might actually better the community or the individuals: a publicity stunt with the favorable side effect of educating a few underprivileged students for a few years. In fact, “universal free education” as generally understood in contemporary terms was practically nonexistent in Renaissance Italy, either in the case of independent schools such as Casa Giacosa or municipal, community-centered establishments. Education was treated as a limited resource, and thus primarily spent on educating “future civic leaders in wisdom and virtue,” investing in those best equipped by their

Comment [1]: Ellen Smith:
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²¹Ibid.

²²Paul F Grendler. “Schooling in Western Europe” *Renaissance Quarterly*. 43.4 (1990), 776-777.

social station to prosper and return benefits to the community. The “majority” of students for schools which served communities were “the sons of prominent citizens.”²³ Da Feltre, however, seems to have constructed his schools almost entirely with the intent of allowing for the education of the highest number of underprivileged students. Moreover, given the high level of control da Feltre exercised over his school and the remarkable amount of time and interest he invested in all his students, his intent was clearly not simply to educate out of a sense of guilt or charity, but to instill a love of learning in all students, regardless of class distinction, and help them to better themselves with this newly acquired knowledge and set of skills and resources.

This intent became solidified, and the means to achieve its goals most mature and fully developed, at Casa Giacosa. While never a scholar on the level of Petrarch or Boccaccio, never “destined to achieve intellectual greatness,” da Feltre’s talent and skill for which he is best remembered is instilling a love of learning in an entire generation of humanist thinkers.²⁴ Da Feltre perfected this skill at Casa Giacosa, where he remained from its onset in 1423 until his death in 1446. The significance of da Feltre’s life, in terms of continuities in education and literacy, originates at Casa Giacosa, but is not limited in its scope to Northern Italy, or to the Italian Renaissance. Naturally, though, that is where its effects were most fully manifested. Da Feltre’s system at Mantua, in some ways typical of an independent school of the time, was atypical in its student population, methodology, and influence in the development of Western education.

A mix of “princes and poor men” populated the “pleasant house” at Mantua, as formerly noted, but the significance of this population lies not only in its quantity--a significant number of students coming from underprivileged backgrounds, if not a majority--but also in the way in

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Glenn L. Smith, Joan K. Smith, and F. Michael Perko. *Lives in Education: A Narrative of People and Ideas*, 100.

which a community formed out of this heterogeneous population. Da Feltre's methodology and the environment he constructed in terms of social stratification were highly sophisticated for his time, and by all accounts, highly effective for both the sons of nobles and the poor. Such notable scholars from a privileged background as Lorenzo Valla emerged from da Feltre's tutelage to become men of civic virtue and academic rigor.²⁵ While it is harder to find reference in historiography to the accomplishments of the sons of poor men, and while it must be acknowledged that even da Feltre's ready willingness to educate and bolster the efficacy of the underprivileged could not change the overarching class constraints still inhibitive to social mobility in the Renaissance, it is reasonable to assume that as a result of their education, students at Casa Giacosa might have experienced a higher degree of social mobility, if only from the lowest levels to the emerging middle class.

While the separation of these distinct bodies seems too readily apparent, the goal was homogeneity in learning and community, not a distinction between rich and poor. Most large cities had distinct centers of learning either in Latin for the upper class, the aristocracy, or the middle class attempting, by education, to penetrate the upper echelon and vernacular schools for the sons of craftsmen and merchants.²⁶ These educations were physically and theoretically distinct, taking place in different locales and mediated by different instructors. Partially an indicator of the emerging gap between the practical vernacular for use in business, and the Latin of the scholars and aristocracy (increasingly one and the same), such separation also indicates a definite divide in social structure--a divide that da Feltre was willing to openly oppose.

It takes some imagination from the historian to recreate what reaction to this breach in social etiquette might have created, and how da Feltre might have handled the fallout. Charity

²⁵Ibid.

²⁶ Paul F Grendler, "Schooling in Western Europe" *Renaissance Quarterly*. 43.4 (1990), 783.

was not unheard of, but an intentional combination of highly separate class structures into one largely secular body was likely unprecedented in the region. Given the lack of evidence from any student of da Feltre's save those in the higher echelons of Italian society, the historian is left, based on the overall impression of da Feltre and his legacy, to speculate upon the effects of his tutelage on lower income students individually. Given the longevity of his school's reputation and its impact on Western education, particularly the ideas of individualized instruction, and the educational qualities of a teacher-student relationship, it is no overemphasis or exaggeration to recognize da Feltre's work at Casa Giacosa as a significant influence on the Western tradition of humanist education and even contemporary trends in progressive educational theory.

Evolution, Continuities and Developments

The evolution of Western education is still underway, and has in its extensive and cross-cultural makeup many divisions, offshoots, and transformations. Education as contemporary Western societies, especially the United States, recognize it, is unequivocally an inheritance of the humanist tradition. As da Feltre's work and educational methodology were a large influence on both curriculum and method, his life, work, and most importantly, school, are a major influence on the widespread popularity and conventions of the liberal arts, as adapted from humanist curriculum. Da Feltre "changed education," even as larger social movements towards urbanization and an emerging middle class changed social expectations of what education could accomplish. Education, especially of that secular, humanist sort that da Feltre propagated, "responded to new requirements" handily, meshing something of the practical education of vernacular schools with the admittedly more influential humanist curriculum in Latin, grammar, rhetoric, law, and theology.²⁷ The inheritance of this gradual synthesis is apparent in

²⁷Sangalli Maurizio, "Colleges, Schools, Teachers: Between Church and State in Northern Italy (XVI-XVII Centuries)," *Catholic Historical Review* 93 4: 817 (2007).

contemporary educational systems and theory, by no means achieved solely by da Feltre or other Renaissance educators, but certainly influenced heavily by their work.

In order to more accurately trace the continuities apparent in contemporary education, it is pertinent first to examine developments in education and literacy more immediately following da Feltre's time. While far from exhaustive, such an examination will better clarify the connections between humanism as the strong, unifying ideology and educational system of Europe for hundreds of years, and the American education system, its distant descendant. The exportation of the Renaissance from its traditional origins in Italy was gradual, hampered by social and political factors in a highly fractured European continent. Its spread, despite these factors, is a mark of humanism's appeal to Europeans and its fortitude as an ideological movement. Humanism's appeal and far-flung implications might rest primarily with its universal nature--that is, universal to most Europeans and students of the Western tradition. As the "great achievement" of the humanist education was to "impart a standard classical Latin education to the upper ranks of European society," such curriculum and values had to appeal at least to the nobility of cultures considerably different from one another, even across only minimal geographical boundaries. Such "practical literary skills" and "civic values" would readily apply to the Renaissance in France, Central Europe, and England, though in each locale, different values and knowledge were emphasized over others.²⁸

The movement of the Renaissance from Italy to France was perhaps one of the more fluid transitions. The cultural context for the Renaissance in France was admittedly quite different than the dense, urban-centered structure of Italy, lacking the emphasis on civic duty and participation in government that so heavily influenced the development of humanism in Italy. France, too, was much more intricately tied to the evolving feudal system. For these reasons,

²⁸ Paul F Grendler. "Schooling in Western Europe" *Renaissance Quarterly*. 43.4 (1990), 783.

Comment [2]: Ellen Smith:
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very little of the ideas of education for the sake of improving the community or for the purposes of civic participation were instilled successfully in the French Renaissance. Only those values applicable to the elite of French society were readily taken up in the exchange of ideas and ideology. This trend, of course, is true to some degree of all the European countries that adopted the Renaissance. The most noted scholars in historiography were nearly always in some way influenced by the authorities of their host nation. In the case of France, the seat of the greatest French scholars and artists was at the court of Francois I. Across the country, however, the Renaissance gradually altered the nature of education, shifting curriculum and direction from a scholastic, church influenced system to secular systems, as “bishops lost control of Latin schools to town councils.”²⁹ Despite the readily apparent divisions in class on which the Renaissance fractured, some dissemination of humanist values occurred in French society over the course of the 15th and 16th centuries, likely because of the influence of nearby Italian states and intellectual centers.

Italy and France together comprised the epicenter of the European Renaissance, especially in its earlier stages. All across Europe, the Renaissance, while not necessarily increasing levels of education and literacy in every respect, did instill learning, teaching and scholarship with a new “prestige.” France and Italy hosted the “first class of professional teachers in the West,” and a more rigorous, intentional organization of methodology and curriculum.³⁰ The Renaissance, however, was not limited strictly by political boundaries. Though slower to spread to central and Northern Europe, its integration into intellectual culture and educational methodology and theory in Germany and England was profound and yielded a variety of influential scholarship, ideology, and literature.

²⁹ Ibid, 778.

³⁰ Harvey J Graff. *The Legacies of Literacy : Continuities and Contradictions in Western Culture and Society*, 59.

Some early evidence of educational structure and literacy can be found in Germany through church schools, though largely focused on educating clerics and church officials. Popular literacy in Germany, as was demonstrated in Italy, arose primarily from the rise of education in vernacular languages. By the 12th century, “vernacular literature from the oral tradition” appeared in written form, and later, though still before significant Renaissance influence, schools designed to “instruct the laity in secular subjects” appeared throughout Germany.³¹ Much like Italy, the development of a more advanced and extensive educational structure to serve those outside of the nobility would primarily emerge from economic stimulus and the emergence of the middle class of merchants, businessmen, and guildsmen. Some “three centuries later,” however, Germany would emerge as a leader in scholarship and literacy and would maintain a reputation of rigorous secondary and higher education through the 21st century.

In England, a legacy of literacy was to some degree present through church schools, in many of which “boys learned to read, write, and sing.”³² Church influence remained significant in what educational system existed in England up to urbanization, commercial development, and an “increasing scale of urban government,” all of which created an increased demand for secular educations of the humanist tradition, while the church still held a “commanding” influence over education at both the elementary and university level.³³ Even with the restriction of Church influence, this gradual development of educational systems encompassed many schools similar to institutions in Italy, independent schools operated by scholars and schoolmasters, in addition to grammar schools that served communities of a variety of sizes and populations. The literacy

³¹ Ibid, 62.

³² Paul F Grendler. “Schooling in Western Europe” *Renaissance Quarterly*. 43.4 (1990), 778.

³³ Harvey J Graff. *The Legacies of Literacy : Continuities and Contradictions in Western Culture and Society*, 69.

rates in England were impressively high given their geographic distance from the Renaissance's epicenter and the population distribution of the country: as high as "20% of English males and 5% of English women" might have been literate during the height of the English Renaissance, during the reign of Elizabeth I.³⁴

Amidst this limited tradition of education and literacy, such notable educators as Erasmus and John Colet spurred scholarly study in England. The court of Henry VII, and later the court of Elizabeth I, hosted a variety of prestigious scholars, philosophers, and teachers. The English Renaissance added to an already extensive tradition of humanism the notable Christian Humanism, an intriguing synthesis of the secular and the faith-based as propagated by Erasmus and Thomas More. These sub-creations from the basic ideology and curriculum of humanism were perhaps most significant in their exportation, some centuries later, to the Americas. While an exhaustive chronology of this transition is not practical within the limited scope of this work, evidence of increasing literacy in the whole of the Western world during the following centuries and contemporary trends and the educational curriculum of the United States as it is in the 21st century suffice for evidence of the influence of humanism on the American identity and the education system which perpetuates such an identity.

Contemporary education in the United States is very much an inheritance of humanism. The debate surrounding the liberal arts, whether its failings, usefulness, or necessity testifies to the ongoing developments in an educational environment still deeply influenced by a tradition hundreds of years old, and radically different than its original state. Moreover, the survival of the liberal arts curriculum, core values of its ideology and many aspects of its curriculum, testify to a universal applicability even in contemporary American society. Indeed, education is to a large extent the very means by which we perpetuate our identity as Americans. An influential part of

³⁴ Paul F Grendler. "Schooling in Western Europe" *Renaissance Quarterly*. 43.4 (1990), 779.

that identity is directly connected to the humanism of the Italian states: literacy for the sake of civic involvement and responsibility. The idea implicit in the United States' Declaration of Independence is one of a literate, informed populace participating in the selection of their governing body and the laws which shape their society.

Educational trends across the history of the United States have moved towards a more comprehensive educational system and higher rates of literacy. Recent educational movements, especially those addressing the challenges of educating the underprivileged and marginalized, have adopted a methodology and theoretical framework in many ways reminiscent of the systems employed by humanist educators such as da Feltre. An important development that in some basic ways had its origins in the emergence of humanism itself is the theory of multiple intelligences. This influential theory has shaped many other trends in education and allowed for the integration and teaching of students from a wide variety of backgrounds. Recognizing multiple intelligences levels the field of education and helps to make learning more accessible to individuals with skill sets not typical of the upper class, that is, literacies outside of the typical reading, writing, and reasoning sort. Given the vast variety of literacies demanded of contemporary students, this theory is "the most effective platform upon which to develop educational and instructional methodologies for the classroom of the 21st century."³⁵

Recognition of multiple intelligences, in a less sophisticated form, might be noted even as early as Vergerius, who recognized the abilities of his student Ubertinus in a wide variety of topics and praised him for not applying himself strictly to one discipline, though recognizing that some abilities came to him more naturally.³⁶ Similarly, the more recent trend recognizing the value of differentiated instruction has revolutionized the classroom environment in the United

³⁵Donovan A, McFarlane. "Multiple Intelligences: The Most Effective Platform for Global 21st Century Educational and Instructional Methodologies." *College Quarterly* 14.2 (2011).

³⁶Petrus Paulus Vergerius, *On the New Education*. ed. Paul Hassal. Hanover Historical Texts Project.

Comment [3]: Ellen Smith:
If you get a chance for your Capstone, will you please, please talk about Horace Mann? He's really important.

States and many Western schools. Such methodology requires direct, focused instruction by the teacher with regard to the students' intellectual strengths and weaknesses, similar to that which da Feltre applied to his students.³⁷

Larger ideological premises governed humanist education. The whole of the humanist ideology points to the potential of man, though limited in its own time by both gender and socioeconomic status. Contemporary Western education has attempted to extend this potentiality to every individual regardless of sex, ethnicity, or class. While the failure of American education to sufficiently accomplish this goal is widely debated (an argument for another day), the very presence of this ideology as an underlying framework for educational theory testifies to the vestiges of humanism still shaping our educational policy and views of literacy.

Another significant connection of this sort to the methods of da Feltre is the emphasis at Casa Giacosa on relationship as a tool of instruction. This concept, hardly original yet only recently recognized formally as a theory, has emerged in American education as an influential and effective strategy when paired with a smaller, less formal learning environments and a smaller population of students. Such an environment, it should be noted, was precisely the sort of school da Feltre established at Mantua. The construction of relationships with students, generally known to be a positive factor in education, is being studied now as an effective way of addressing common problems in Western education, such as retention.³⁸ The formation of a student-teacher relationship was a more practical and common occurrence in Renaissance education given the smaller, more connected nature of schools and educational facilities. Tutors

³⁷ A Sister of Dame. *A Prince of Teachers: Vittorino da Feltre*, 43.; Glenn L. Smith, Joan K. Smith, and F. Michael Perko. *Lives in Education: A Narrative of People and Ideas*, 98.; Paulus Vergerius Petrus. *On the New Education.*; ASCD EDge Team. "No. 2 Trend for 2011: Differentiated Instruction." http://edge.ascd.org/_No-2-Trend-for-2011-Differentiated-Instruction/blog/3187587/127586.html (accessed November 19, 2012.)

³⁸ Julie Bergeron, Roch Chouinard, and Michel Janosz, "The Impact of Teacher-Student Relationships and Achievement Motivation on Students' Intentions to Dropout According to Socio-economic Status," *US-China Education Review B* no. 2b (2011): 273-279.

often resided at their host families' house, or as in the case of Casa Giacosa, lived alongside their students in a community. It is thus much more difficult to facilitate relationships in the much larger, more formal institutions of education common in the Western structure now, but far from impossible. Research and methodology such as Bergeron's illustrates the persistence of relationship as a means of more effective education.

In a broader sense, American education legislation of the past decade in itself illustrates a certain humanist ideology. The recent No Child Left Behind Act, a law of some controversy and debatable effectiveness, is built on the premise that every American child deserves an equal education and should be measured by equal standards. Addressing the "achievement gap," the ages-old discrepancy between the education and achievement of distinct socioeconomic groups, the law intends to right this discrepancy with "accountability, flexibility, and choice."³⁹ While the law has undergone some revision since its passing under the first Bush administration, the core ideology remains unchanged: an equal education for all, an ideology introduced in an abstract sense by humanism, and centuries later, acted upon by its' ideological descendants. In this and many other respects, American education is both a debtor to and a beneficiary of Italian humanism, adhering to traditions and structure established hundreds of years ago, both to its benefit and to its frustration.

Adapting Traditional Methodology

Adapting these methods to an educational system committed to comprehensive and quality education for a much larger and more diverse society presents serious challenges, and raises questions, as noted in the introduction, as to the effectiveness of the liberal arts tradition in serving the needs of American students. Recalling the educational milieu of the 13th century,

³⁹Various authors. "Elementary and Secondary Education."
<http://www2.ed.gov/policy/elsec/leg/esea02/index.html> (accessed November 19, 2012.)

with aristocratic and middle class educational ideology and values in tension amidst a wider era of socioeconomic transformation, it is surprising how little the debate has changed after over seven hundred years. Continuities persist not only in method and goals with regard to educational outcome, but with also in the tensions and debate over education's purpose and usefulness. Much the same hierarchal division established in the Renaissance persists in American education, the depths of its division admittedly tempered by a social structure more consciously committed to equality.

University education remains a marker both of achievement and status, but this reality is not new. Predating the 15th century, excerpts from the liberal arts had already been established as the norm of European higher education at the bachelors of arts level, focusing on the "trivium" as a foundation on which students might build more specialized study of "natural philosophy" and the "old quadrivium."⁴⁰ Utilizing education as a means of social mobility, both "new classes" of students and the traditional students of privilege, "young aristocrats" established themselves through education and sought preparation for "new kinds of employment."⁴¹ Drawing parallels to the history of American education, this time of social mobility through education might be comparable to the spike in university and collegiate attendance following the return of veterans from World War II and the passing of the Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944, which provided financial backing for approximately 8 million veterans to attend college, doubling the number of degrees awarded by American colleges and universities, and helped create a new professional class during the 1950s and 60s.⁴² A crucial difference in this

⁴⁰ Charles G. Nauert, "Humanist Infiltration into the Academic World: Some Studies of Northern Universities." *Renaissance Quarterly* 43, no. 4 (1990): 799-812, pg. 800.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² An act to provide Federal Government aid for the readjustment in civilian life of returning World War II veterans, June 22, 1944; Enrolled Acts and Resolutions of Congress, 1789-1996; General Records of the United States Government; Record Group 11; National Archives.
<http://www.ourdocuments.gov/doc.php?flash=true&doc=76>

comparison, however, is the result of such an influx of individuals seeking education. While in both cases, increased attendance of institutions of higher learning and the professions that ensued helped generate widespread economic stimulus and a burgeoning middle class, the expansion of higher education for the American populace has been so immediate and extensive (at least in majority demographics) that it seems to have produced a back-swing — traditional university systems, established on liberal arts curriculum, remains a marker of status, but one increasingly without the payoff students expect in the form of profitable and timely employment.

Economic demands, in the last half of the 20th century have placed an emphasis, according to many assessments, on “vocationalism” and the “expansion of research activities.”⁴³ This trend has continued to an extent, even, that Martinez and Salkever announce the widespread “reconsideration of the value and purpose of liberal arts education,” while Pace and Connolly remark that the liberal arts “may now be an endangered species.”⁴⁴ Such evaluations and rhetoric in influential scholarship indicates a movement already underway to reevaluate the effectiveness of the liberal arts curriculum in preparing students for roles in the job market and in society, and research exists regarding the evolution of curriculum from origins in humanism. Only the conversation between these two studies seems to be lacking. Liberal arts is surely not worthless, as extreme proponents of vocational education might claim, but neither is it practical as the only educational preparation for students of varied backgrounds, each individual seeking to gain something different from their education. Granting that a liberal education continues to be useful to some extent to “all forms of higher education and all students,” it remains to differentiate those aspects of the liberal arts curriculum which remain relevant and necessary in

⁴³ Robert C. Pace, and Mark Connolly. "Where are the liberal arts?." *Research in Higher Education* 41, no. 1 (2000): 53-65.

⁴⁴ Ana M. Martínez Alemán, and Katya Salkever. "Mission, multiculturalism, and the liberal arts college: A qualitative investigation." *The Journal of Higher Education* 74, no. 5 (2003): 563-596.; *Ibid*, 563.

American society in the 21st century from those aspects of liberal arts curriculum that persist mainly from the peculiar sacredness granted them due to age and origin, practices and emphases that might benefit from revaluation in light of historical knowledge and educational theory.

A notable quality of liberal arts education that lends itself naturally to a variety of student needs and interests is its sheer breadth. While liberal arts as American students experience it represents a considerably trimmed assortment of disciplines from humanism as it was in the Renaissance, it still encompasses many of the important subjects of the trivium. Math, science, language arts, history, government, music, and art remain in public schools and institutions of higher education as a legacy of humanist interest in well-roundedness. Yet this breadth demands an enormous amount of investment in time, thought, and work of its students and teachers, and practicality rules that in order to cover such a great breadth of material and subjects, the education of a student of the liberal arts, both at the secondary and university level, must be partial, even at times superficial. The sheer body of knowledge available to students at liberal arts institutions, or in public schools, seems to carry unrealistic expectations of students, expectations still prevalent from the intellectual and cultural ideal of the “Renaissance man.” In this respect, the liberal arts might be regarded as an overtaxing curricula, and increasing trends towards “materialism” and higher enrollment in professional programs in order to secure financial success might be better understood.⁴⁵

Still, grounding in liberal arts remains the gateway even to specialized professional trades. Students cannot so thoroughly remove themselves from society as to function only in their professional reality, and liberal arts education serves not only to provide basic proficiency in core subjects, but also to provide a relational identity within community, bridging differences

⁴⁵ Robert C. Pace, and Mark Connolly. "Where are the liberal arts?." *Research in Higher Education* 41, no. 1 (2000): 54.

in “lived experiences” and often “fragmented college communit[ies]” through common knowledge, language, and literacies.⁴⁶ In the face of rapidly diverging specializations and ever more removed subsets of disciplines, the communal experience in liberal arts offers “shared purposes” and ideally, trains students capable of engaging in a “critical examination” of issues, in addition to voicing their responses or additions to issues in “reasoned argumentation.”⁴⁷ Thus, liberal arts does much to engender productive and thoughtful conversations between disciplines, academic ideology, and modes of thought in academic environments by providing some common background and language, and can theoretically provide such an intellectual community with a common purpose while still allowing students to approach the goal from their respective fields.

Lacking this common purpose, however, and further complicated by the increased heterogeneity in terms of student population, the communal identity of the liberal arts students begins to falter, as Martinez Aleman and Salkever detail.⁴⁸ This failure of liberal arts curriculum to address pluralistic educational society effectively stems from the very same historical precedents which endow it, in most academic circles, with certain sacredness. Organized around “a-historic, a-contextual and antrelational principles,” liberal arts is not by its methodology ethnocentric, or purely objective, or at least in its contemporary form is no longer these things, but in its implementation remains limited to a Western worldview. This need not always be the case, as the case Martinez and Salkever make argues, but as long as tenets of the Western liberal arts tradition are perpetuated without critical revaluation, they will doubtless remain unchanged, and in many respects, outdated or irrelevant. Educational dogma which has existed as common

⁴⁶ Ana M. Martínez Alemán, and Katya Salkever. “Mission, multiculturalism, and the liberal arts college: A qualitative investigation.” *The Journal of Higher Education* 74, no. 5 (2003): 563-596.; *Ibid*, 564.

⁴⁷ *Ibid*, 566-567.

⁴⁸ *Ibid*, 568.

practice for generations beyond reckoning to most of the educational community is unlikely to be realities questioned, by merit of its apparent omnipresence.

While such outdated methodology and pedagogy may be as specific subject, practice, or pedagogical approach, most current educational research is attempting to sort out the effective from the ineffective in terms of specific practices and subjects. More critical, yet harder to address for its enormity and its level of abstraction, is the isolation of the liberal arts curriculum from real-world applications. While Martinez and Salkever present data pertaining mainly to the inability of liberal arts to reconcile “communal aims of liberal education” with “multicultural aspirations,” this body of work suggests that community denotes larger implications than a sense of connectedness among the university environment.⁴⁹ Community, based both on contemporary cases and the early precedents at Casa Giacosa, should be understood not simply as an adjustment to diverse ethnic makeup, but also as an assimilation of varied learning styles and backgrounds which influence the way students learn, and their capacity to do so without extra assistance. It is this respect, in addition to the accommodation of multiculturalism, that liberal arts often fails to meet student’s needs at both the secondary and university level.

Mike Rose’s autobiographic account of his time at UCLA is riddled with references to the diversity of his student’s needs and life experiences, and higher education’s inability to meet those needs in many cases.⁵⁰ Programs such as those that Rose participated in, directing tutoring services, and continuing research such as that which Rose conducts at UCLA offer encouraging evidence for the adaptation of the liberal arts to meet student needs, especially with appreciation of the effects of socioeconomic status on educational outcomes. However, even this work strives

⁴⁹ Ibid, 570.

⁵⁰ Mike Rose. *Lives on the Boundary. The Struggles and Achievements of America's Underprepared*. New York: The Free Press, Macmillan, Inc., 1989; See work with Veterans, pg. 133, Contrast between students with no “history of failure,” and those who “suspected their math or English needed improvement” (pg. 173).

mainly to help students bridge the gap between the reality they have known and the new academic moors they must accept as a superior mode of thinking and living. While in many cases this is beneficial, helping to remove students from troubled home lives, for example, or encouraging them to explore ways of bettering themselves through education, it also threatens to trivialize the reality in which students have been living and depending on for self-identification for their entire lives. Often the source of this tension is found in the supremacy of the individual in the liberal arts curriculum. This individual, “unmarked by culture and bodied experience” should, according to typical humanist dogma, be capable of “objective inquiry.”⁵¹ Yet student’s education is in many respects utterly dependent on students being immersed in “bodied experience,” both in the classroom and in their daily lives. Privileging objective inquiry and theoretical studies over real-world applications of knowledge is not foundational to the liberal arts curriculum, but given the very early distinctions between the education of the aristocracy and the middle class present in the Renaissance, it is not surprising that such hierarchies within educational methodology and pedagogy still trouble the effectiveness and flexibility of the American educational system.

Conclusions

The contemporary education system of the United States is an unique and informative example of the best and worst of the humanist ideology and curriculum. Its connections with the humanism of the European Renaissance, specifically the work of Vittorino da Feltre, are numerous and encompass both ideology and specific methodology. While humanism has evolved radically from its origins to a form of education more commonly acknowledged as liberal arts, such adaptation and reorganization does not remove the governing ideology of self-improvement

⁵¹ Ana M. Martínez Alemán, and Katya Salkever. "Mission, multiculturalism, and the liberal arts college: A qualitative investigation." *The Journal of Higher Education* 74, no. 5 (2003): 563-596.; *Ibid*, 568.

by scholarship and diverse interests. The ideal of the “Renaissance man,” while gendered in language and concept, is still alive and well in contemporary Western society. Even such an abstract and intangible ideal is a powerful guiding social principle by which contemporary scholars and educators shape their work. Even in broader social terms, the mantra of “be the best you,” persists in democratic societies in the West. This notion is both formative and destructive to American students. It sets up expectations shaped by social and cultural norms built on precedents of the Western European tradition of education, precedents which not all students in an increasingly heterogeneous population of learners can live up to.

The work of humanists like da Feltre, instrumental in creating an educational environment in which humanism might be applied with success, persists in its relevance to contemporary education, both as an early example of progressive methodology, and as an illustration of those class dynamics which still trouble educational outcomes. The standards that Da Feltre set as an educator have influenced expectations for teachers in the 21st century, and recognizing the methodology and ideology da Feltre employed may be helpful in combating persistent educational challenges in American secondary and university environments. The proliferation of humanism into Western society was achieved through educators like da Feltre — educators willing to invest in their students regardless of social standing, and to do so with passion and a commitment to discerning the unique learning abilities of each student. These educators are still present in American education today, guided by the principles of the liberal arts education. If educators can, like da Feltre strove to, prioritize student needs over the prevailing educational norms and be willing to enrich their methods with real world applications, liberal arts can continue to adapt, as it has in the past, to the changing needs of its students and educators.