

MOTIVATIONAL SPEECH AT LIMURU GIRLS HIGH SCHOOL, KIAMBU COUNTY, SATURDAY, JUNE 15TH 2013

THE RELEVANCE OF HUMANITIES IN EDUCATION WITH PARTICULAR EMPHASIS ON GEOGRAPHY

INTRODUCTION

The Deputy Principal, staff, invited guests, students, ladies and gentlemen,

On behalf of the Chairman of the Department of Geography and Environmental Studies of the University of Nairobi Dr. Samuel Owuor, on behalf of my two colleagues here present (Dr. Stella Mukhovi and Ms Parita Shah both of the Department of Geography & Environmental Studies) and on my own behalf, I would like to express very sincere gratitude for your kind invitation and very warm reception. We are very thankful for the singular honour and privilege bestowed on us.

Ladies and gentlemen,

The daunting task facing curriculum experts, policy makers and education planners in Kenya and the whole world is how to make education relevant to the society in the 21st Century. This is particularly so given that the reality of this century is that, we tend to judge the quality of our education (including university education) by how successful its graduates turn out to be. This has generated heated debate in some quarters as to the relevance of Liberal Arts or Humanities in the School and University curricula. In my motivational speech, I will endeavour to illustrate the relevance of Humanities not only in education system but also to individuals. So, let us now examine the relevance of Humanities in education.

WHAT ARE THE HUMANITIES?

The humanities explore what it means to be human: the words, the ideas, the stories or narratives, the art and artefacts that help us understand our lives and our world. They introduce us to people we have never met, places we have never visited, and ideas that may never have crossed our minds. By describing how others have lived and thought about life, the humanities help us decide what is important and what we can do to make our own life and the lives of others better. By connecting us with other people, the humanities point the way to answers about what is ethical and what is true to our diverse heritage, traditions, and history. They help us address the challenges we face together as families, communities, and nations.

At the University level, Humanities are characterized by specific areas of scholarship which include:

- Archaeology, History and Anthropology that study human, social, political, and cultural developments
- Literature, Languages, and Linguistics, Journalism and Communication: Explore how we communicate with each other, and how our ideas and thoughts on the human experience are expressed and interpreted.
- Philosophy, Ethics, and Comparative Religion that consider ideas about the meaning of life and the reasons for our thoughts and actions.

- Geography: Studies places on earth and their relationships with each other. The study of geography begins with one's local environment and expands as the learner gains more experience. Thus, geography provides a conceptual link for learners between home, school and the world beyond.

However, today the universities and colleges around the world that value the Humanities as a central part of their programs are becoming increasingly fewer. This is mainly because university authorities have buckled under the pressure of having to adapt to the technology revolution of the 21st century.

Ladies and gentlemen,

It is my contention that education models or systems that focus on intellectual property have tended to reduce the value of the Humanities. They revolve around what are called vocational majors/specialisations.: These specialisations serve the purpose of training students to be active participants in their communities by bringing expertise to particular trades such as medicine, dentistry, pharmacy, nursing, business, the natural sciences (e.g. Biology, Chemistry), and Social Sciences (Economics, Sociology). Students pursuing these disciplines acquire a set of very specialized skills. They then carry those skills into the workforce and use them to the benefit of their employers. So when a university or college is brought up during discussions, thoughts about how effectively it will impart specialized trade skills, teach students how to network, score internships in preparation for future jobs and careers, are typically the first that come to mind. The looming fear of having to choose what to do in the "real world" after graduation weighs heavily upon students, who in response, select majors/specialisations that appear to have the most practical value and most apparent rewards.

Students and higher education authorities should not forget that both society and individuals can benefit from education models or systems that value the humanities. Individuals sufficiently educated by the Humanities will live more fulfilling lives, gain a broader perspective of the world, and have a higher resistance to the addiction of superficial pursuits. Thus, if future generations were to gain a deeper understanding of our dependency on others, they may be able to avoid inhumanity such as war, genocide, hate, violence, and dishonesty. An education that is wide in scope will lead to a higher likelihood of interacting with fellow human beings. To say the least, a harmonious society will make it easier to solve our societal problems both on the national and international level. It is imperative; therefore, that higher education brings the change that we want.

IMPORTANCE OF LEARNING HISTORY

There is an old saying that History teaches us nothing. If this is the case, then what is the justification of leaching and learning the subject in schools? So what is History? Why do we study History? History is the study of the past in order to understand the meaning and dynamics of the relationship between cause and effect in the overall development of human societies. It is very important for any community to learn and preserve its history. We need to understand where we have come from and possibly where we are going.

We need to understand how world civilisations such as the Assyrian, Egyptian, Greek, Roman, Chinese, Indian, Mayan and Incas civilisations developed. What lessons can we learn from them? Why did they collapse? For example, it is well documented that the very first University in the world was the University of Alexandria in Egypt. What was taught there? Who were some of its first students and professors? When the Romans destroyed this famous university, where did they take some of its books and other learning resources? Is it possible to recover some of them from Rome today? How did the Egyptians construct their pyramids which are intact 5,000 years later? What lessons can our modern engineers learn from the ancient Egyptian engineers? Who built what are today referred to as the Mwenemutapa Ruins in modern Zimbabwe?

Indeed, Africa is a continent with a very rich history and cultural heritage. This rich heritage can be exploited for the development of cultural tourism which could earn respective countries a lot of foreign currency and also help alleviate poverty. There is urgent need to train modern historians who are critical and who will be able to provide insights on our rich but poorly documented cultural heritage. You have that opportunity now.

Students of History are well positioned to get rewarding careers in public life. These include: teaching in schools and universities: working in diplomatic service (ambassadors or high commissioners), political leaders, administrators and lawyers among others. Thus, historians too, have numerous career opportunities after successful completion of university education.

IMPORTANCE OF LEARNING RELIGIOUS STUDIES

Religious Studies is concerned with all aspects of religion, with all religions, and with the integral part they play in human culture. It is based on the principle that religion gives meaning to human life and influences most other human efforts: artistic, social, political and for the good of all. It explores many phenomena: belief systems, rituals, mythology, spirituality and ethics. The importance of having people in a society with virtues such as righteousness, honesty, integrity and fairness cannot be overemphasised. The study of Religious Studies helps to inculcate such virtues to our students. Religious Studies teaches us to fear and respect the Almighty God. It teaches us to respect and love other members of the society. Do you remember the doctrine of Love your neighbour as you love yourself?

Our society needs leaders who are honest and of integrity. We need leaders who are selfless and hard working to move our country forward. Such leaders need training in humanities and especially Religious Studies. Therefore training in Religious Studies prepares students to become dependable leaders of tomorrow Students of Religious Studies can also obtain gainful employment as teachers, university professors, lawyers, evangelists and so on.

RELEVANCE OF GEOGRAPHICAL EDUCATION

Geographical education makes us better citizens. Through the study of geography, we are able to make informed decisions regarding the best use of natural resources such as

water, forestry, fisheries and so on. Geographical knowledge also helps to ask important questions about policies that lead to changes in landscape and land use. Geographically informed students will be effective leaders for the country including counties. This argument is supported by the following quotation: ‘As educators, we have a unique opportunity and clear responsibility to help prepare our students to be responsible citizens in the future. The fate of our planet and all its life forms lie in their hands’

The UN Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (UNDESD) 2005-2014, sees education for sustainable development (ESD) contributing to “a world where everyone has the opportunity to benefit from quality education and to learn the values, behaviour and lifestyles required for a sustainable future and for positive societal transformation” (<http://portal.unesco.org/education/>). Nearly all of the “action themes” highlighted in the UNDESD, including environment, water, rural development, sustainable consumption, sustainable tourism, intercultural understanding, cultural diversity, climate change, disaster reduction and management, biodiversity, and the market economy, have a geographical dimension.

This Declaration proposes that the concept of sustainable development should be integrated into the teaching of Geography at all levels and in all regions of the world- Sustainable development of the “Human-Earth” ecosystem as a paradigm for the 21st century. At the Rio Earth Summit 1992 nearly all countries of the world agreed to accept sustainable development as a goal. Article 36 of Agenda 21 describes the importance of education for sustainable development. The Johannesburg Summit 2002 broadened and reconfirmed this paradigm. We should all appreciate that we occupy one planet- the mother Earth. What we do to it affects others, and what others do to it affects us, as never before. To recognise that we are all members of a world community and that we all have responsibilities to each other is not romantic rhetoric, but modern economic and social reality.

At the university level, geography is an attractive major. The discipline provides marketable skills and broad perspectives on society, environment and economy. It provides training in geospatial technologies such as GIS, Computer assisted cartography and Remote sensing. Geospatial technologies represent a high growth industry and one with a lot of potential for employment.

Other possible career opportunities available to geography students include:

- Physical Planners
- Natural resource managers
- Environmental managers
- Ecologists
- Transport economists
- Traffic managers
- Policy-makers
- Market researchers
- Aid and development experts

Ladies and Gentlemen,

In concluding my speech, let me tell you a short story that will give you more determination and hope as you pursue your studies in Humanities now and in the future. In one country, people organized a competition for frogs. As you have already read in your biology lessons, frogs have webbed feet that make them better suited to swim in water but certainly ill-equipped to climb steep places on dry land. The task assigned to frogs was to climb a 100m tall tower, a tall order for such organisms. Before the contest commenced, the organizers were overheard talking dismissively about frogs climbing a tower. They said openly and loudly that no frog whatever its size and experience would scale such a great height. Anyway the referee blew his whistle and the contest began in earnest. As expected, the casualties were many. One frog after another tumbled and either died or was badly injured. Few reached 2 or 3 metres before giving up. But, to the amazement of people, there was one highly motivated frog that found the assignment extremely easy and exciting. It kept on climbing the tower without even bothering about what happened to others. It reached half way mark and looked very energetic. It reached the 75th metre mark and still looked strong. Finally, it reached the top amidst applause.

What was the secret to success of this frog? The answer is simple: it was deaf. Students, in pursuit of your humanities education, you will meet many obstacles/challenges. I can assure you that the road to success will be bumpy and uncomfortable. But, do not give up. Borrow a leaf from the successful frog. Since the frog was deaf, it could not listen to discouraging remarks from the organisers. It kept going and succeeded. How many times do we hear other students say Geography or History is wide and difficult? Pretend to be deaf and keep reading and you will succeed. Do not be discouraged and lose hope. A famous quote from Thomas Edison is appropriate here: ‘Many of life’s failures are people who did not realize how close they were to success when they gave up.’

Dear students, once you choose hope, anything is possible. Never, ever give up hope even in studying Humanities. All you need is hard work and focus like the determined deaf frog!

Therefore, it is my sincere hope that after listening to my speech this afternoon, you are convinced that Humanities are as important as any other field of study and that they too, contribute to the advancement of the cause of humanity.

Thank you for your attention and God bless.

Prof. Evaristus M. Irandu, PhD.

Guest Speaker