New Ideas:
Mini-Lecture: Embracing *Education*

You are learning many new skills and acquiring important knowledge as you pursue the early steps in your academic goals here at Cerritos College, steps that will lead you to achieve certificates or A.A. degrees in your profession, to transfer to universities, and to achieve your hopes and dreams. But are you also becoming *educated*?

In 1852, John Henry Newman, a Roman Catholic cardinal, delivered a series of lectures titled “The Idea of a University.” At the time, there were no such things as community colleges; they wouldn’t exist for another hundred years or so. But his thoughts apply to community college education just as they do to universities. In his lectures, he defined the difference between instruction and education. He wrote,

“And this is the reason, why it is more correct, as well as more usual, to speak of a University as a place of education, than of instruction… We are instructed, for instance, in manual exercises, in the fine and useful arts, in trades, and in ways of business; for these are methods, which have little or no effect upon the mind itself, are contained in rules committed to memory, to tradition, or to use, and bear upon an end external to themselves.”

Newman believed we all need instruction, because instruction delivers the knowledge and the skills necessary to complete a task or do a job. You and I want our nurses and doctors to receive adequate instruction in how to care for the sick, or our accountants in how to complete tax forms, or our auto technicians in how to repair an engine or design a vehicle. Instruction is important; it’s why you take final exams, write term papers, or complete projects, to receive a grade that indicates your instruction was successful.

But Newman believes that colleges and universities, while providing instruction, must also be about *education*, which he claims is different from instruction. He writes,
“But education is a higher word; it implies an action upon our mental nature, and the formation of a character; it is something individual and permanent, and is commonly spoken of in connexion with religion and virtue.”

When we’re educated, he claims, we don’t simply memorize a skill or fact; we alter our “mental nature,” we change the way we think, and maybe even what we believe and who we are. For Cardinal Newman, instruction, or what he calls “Useful Knowledge,” consists of the facts and skills acquired through instruction—the stuff we memorize and cram for final exams. If you take a piano class in the music department, you’ll memorize and practice to learn the basics of piano. That’s “Useful Knowledge.”

However, education, or what he calls “Liberal Knowledge,” is the real goal of higher education. “Liberal Knowledge” is what we discover that has no goal or end result but the broadening of our capacities to understand ourselves and our world. So when you listen to a Bach symphony and you begin to recognize emotions in the music that relate to experiences in your own life, you are practicing “Liberal Knowledge.”

“Useful Knowledge” equals memorizing and processing information to receive a grade.

“Liberal Knowledge” equals using our experience to revise and reconsider who we are, what values and morals we believe in, and who we want to be in the community.

All disciplines—humanities, sciences, arts, career technical education—provide both instruction and education. But students often imagine they only need instruction to advance.

All too often, we look at our schedule of classes as a hoop we have to jump through, and that’s especially true if our schedules are filled up with general education courses—courses outside of our planned majors. What we don’t often realize is that colleges and universities require that we take a broad array of courses in the humanities and social sciences, in the arts, in math and the sciences, to help us build “Liberal Knowledge.”

Ask yourself this: What can I know through “Liberal Knowledge”? How does my awareness of myself, my fellow human beings, my world, broaden and allow me new insight as a result of my discoveries? How might that English course, that math course, that art or history or psychology course, help broaden my awareness of who I am in the human community? How might that woodworking, automotive technology, or health occupations course help me better know myself and my community?

When we practice education, not just instruction, making connections between our majors and the general ed courses we take, the clubs we belong to, the cultural events we attend, the people we meet, then we begin to change our very identities themselves.