

Learning for Life Week 2 Summary

Topic: A Neuroscientist and a Humanist Walk into a Bar

Speakers: Indira Raman and Susan Phillips

Indira and Susan met while serving on a university committee. They soon realized, that despite their traditionally different disciplines of neurophysiology and medieval literature, they shared very similar views about teaching and the approach to answering the important questions we need to ask about what it means to be human. We were all lucky to witness the passion, emotion, and friendship between these two accomplished professors who shared their stories with us.

We learned that in early history, scholars made no distinction between science and literature, or science and art. Susan and Indira used examples like signaling in zebra fish larvae who are learning movement and historical versions of Hamlet to illustrate the point that in both the humanities and in traditional science, evidence and data are applied together to tell a story, and it is the story that has the impact and begins to address the big questions, not either alone.

The second portion of the presentation focused on their philosophy and approach to education. Both emphasized the importance of a broad liberal arts education which should be about teaching students HOW to think, rather than WHAT to think. A liberal arts education (rather than a pre-professional education) will foster the students' ability to build bridges between disciplines using dialogue- a critical skill at a time where ignorance and false ideas can be spread so easily through social media.

In a course they co-teach at Northwestern, they described how they each approached three texts, Hamlet, Sense and Sensibility and The Sound and the Fury from the perspective of their individual disciplines to illustrate the common ground between a scientific and humanistic approach to a subject. The theme of the importance of narrative was present again this week, as it was last week in Morty and Saul's presentation.

Take home messages:

1. Both the traditional sciences and the humanities use narrative and evidence. They are more similar than they are dissimilar.
2. We need to fight ignorance by making our disciplines accessible. That requires an ability to find the words that translate complex subjects into something that many can master.
3. An undergraduate education should be about teaching students how to think, how to harness empathy by exposure to a broad variety of subjects and ideas, and how to disseminate what they have learned. Then we can fight ignorance.