How Robots Will Save Liberal Education

By Eboo Patel | FEBRUARY 05, 2017

I grew up in an Indian-American immigrant family that viewed higher education as a path to the practical. When I went off to the University of Illinois in 1993, my mother pleaded with me to get a business degree along with my sociology major. She was convinced that the former would land me a secure job in the financial sector while the latter was simply a useless, if enjoyable, luxury. But sociology, I argued, was what I loved. "That stuff is for people whose parents have the connections to get them a job despite their worthless degree," my mother would wail. "People like us with dark skin and ethnic names have to play it safe."

I am now 15 years into running a thriving organization that works with colleges on religious-diversity issues, one that I envisioned precisely because of my sociology major and the humanities courses that surrounded it. Both my own story and a growing body of research indicate that there is a powerful alignment among liberal education, personal enrichment, good citizenship, and secure employment.

For starters, let’s take the recent report on automation and employment by the consulting firm McKinsey and Company: "Where machines could replace humans — and where they can’t (yet)." It turns out that, after having devastated employment in the manufacturing sector, robots have set their sights on many industries that people like my parents considered safe and practical. "The financial sector has the technical potential to automate activities taking up 43 percent of its workers’ time," the report’s authors note. This goes for both entry-level jobs and positions paying north of $200,000.

And technology is not going to stop there. Other researchers have argued that much of the "technical expertise" held by doctors, lawyers, accountants, and engineers can be replicated by robots and computers. This includes legal research done by associates at law firms and complex surgeries performed by highly trained medical specialists. In other words, the kind of employment that is generally viewed as "safe," and is also well compensated, is likely to go the way of the typewriter.

So which skills cannot be replaced by technology? According to the McKinsey report, two types in particular stand out — work that involves managing and developing people, and work that emphasizes applying expertise to decision making. In other words, jobs that rely on human interaction, creativity, and judgment will continue to be done by actual human beings.

The sectors of the labor market where such skills are most central are growing. The report specifically mentions health care and education, but related sectors like community development and social services qualify as well. An earlier McKinsey Global Institute report found that from 2001 to 2009, jobs involving human interaction increased by 4.8 million.

As Geoff Colvin, the author of Humans Are Underrated, puts it, "we are hard-wired to connect social interaction with survival. No connection can be more powerful." He explains that while robots can perform complex medical surgeries far more efficiently than human surgeons can, "we want to hear our diagnosis from a doctor, even if a computer supplied it, because we want to talk to the doctor about it — perhaps just to talk and know we’re being heard by another human being."
In a powerful *New York Times* essay, Danielle Ofri illustrates that point by highlighting how conversation can actually be an effective treatment for several health problems. She cites a recent study of patients with chronic back pain that found that patients who had doctors who took the time to talk with them about their experience reported a greater reduction in pain than those who received electrical-stimulation treatment.

A computer can undoubtedly give you the right pill for pain, and a robot can provide electrical-stimulation treatment, but for the interaction, creativity, and judgment that a therapeutic conversation requires, a particular kind of human being is needed. Where are we going to get these knowledgeable and caring "relationship workers"? Thankfully, America already has a robust institutional infrastructure that nurtures them: colleges that value liberal education.

The hallmarks of a liberal education — building an ethical foundation that values the well-being of others, strengthening the mental muscles that allow you to acquire new knowledge quickly, and developing the skills to apply it effectively in rapidly shifting contexts — are not luxuries but necessities for preparing professionals for the coming transformation of knowledge work to relationship work.

It could well be that the 15-student seminar discussing Plato’s relevance to contemporary situations turns out to be better preparation for the jobs of the future than working through problem sets alone for a science or engineering class. The seminar requires you to master a knowledge base, listen carefully to classmates with diverse identities and points of view, synthesize both the original knowledge base and the multiple perspectives, fashion your arguments in response, communicate effectively at a time and in a manner in which you are most likely to be persuasive, deal with the disappointment of being ignored, and refashion and recommunicate a stronger argument. All of the above happens in the space of a few minutes in an actual room with actual people. The problem set can be done in a split second by a computer.

It is important to note that education, health care, community development, and social services are not only fields where liberal-education graduates get jobs. They are also essential for human flourishing and democratic life. And they are the sectors where the growing ethnic and religious diversity of America is felt most intensely, precisely because interaction is so central in these institutions. Colleges, for example, help young people from a range of backgrounds discover their gifts and develop their identities through everything from academic courses to arts programs and athletics, activities that serve in turn as key sites for broader civic community building.

Robots may well perform medical operations and process our financial transactions in the not-too-distant future, but they are unlikely to replace pastors in pulpits, teachers in classrooms, nurses in hospitals, or coaches on the basketball court. The reason is simple: People need interaction with other people to become better people, better citizens, and better employees. We have long relied on liberal education to produce such people, and all indications are that we will need it for many more years to come.

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