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The ‘Learning Knights’ of Bell Telephone

By WES DAVIS

FIFTY-SIX years ago today, a Bell System manager sent postcards to 16 of the most capable and promising young executives at the company. What was written on the postcards was surprising, especially coming from a corporate ladder-climber at a time when the nation was just beginning to lurch out of a recession: “Happy Bloom’s Day.”

It was a message to mark the annual celebration of James Joyce’s “Ulysses,” the epic novel built around events unfolding on a single day — June 16, 1904 — in the life of the fictional Dubliner Leopold Bloom. But the postcard also served as a kind of diploma for the men who received it.

Two years earlier a number of Bell’s top executives, led by W. D. Gillen, then president of Bell Telephone of Pennsylvania, had begun to worry about the education of the managers rising through the company’s hierarchy. Many of these junior executives had technical backgrounds, gained at engineering schools or on the job, and quite a few had no college education at all. They were good at their jobs, but they would eventually rise to positions in which Gillen felt they would need broader views than their backgrounds had so far given them.

The sociologist E. Digby Baltzell explained the Bell leaders’ concerns in an article published in Harper’s magazine in 1955: “A well-trained man knows how to answer questions, they reasoned; an educated man knows what questions are worth asking.” Bell, then one of the largest industrial concerns in the country, needed more employees capable of guiding the company rather than simply following instructions or responding to obvious crises.

In 1952, Gillen took the problem to the University of Pennsylvania, where he was a trustee. Together with representatives of the university, Bell set up a program called the Institute of Humanistic Studies for Executives. More than simply training its young executives to do a particular job, the institute would give them, in a 10-month immersion program on the Penn campus, what amounted to a complete liberal arts education. There were lectures and seminars led by scholars from Penn and other colleges in the area — 550 hours of course work in total, and more reading, Baltzell reported, than the average graduate student was

asked to do in a similar time frame.

At the same time, the institute's curriculum provided for the sorts of experiences that were once the accidental concomitants of a liberal education: visits to museums and art galleries, orchestral concerts, day trips meant to foster thoughtful attention to the history and architecture of the city that surrounded the Penn campus, as well as that of New York and Washington.

Perhaps the most exciting component of the curriculum was the series of guest lecturers the institute brought to campus. "One hundred and sixty of America's leading intellectuals," according to Baltzell, spoke to the Bell students that year. They included the poets W. H. Auden and Delmore Schwartz, the Princeton literary critic R. P. Blackmur, the architectural historian Lewis Mumford, the composer Virgil Thomson. It was a thrilling intellectual carnival.

When the students read "The Lonely Crowd," the landmark 1950 study of their own social milieu, they didn't just discuss the book, they discussed it with its author, David Riesman. They tangled with a Harvard expert over the elusive poetry in Ezra Pound's "Pisan Cantos," which had sent one of the Bell students to bed with a headache and two aspirin.

The capstone of the program, and its most controversial element, came in eight three-hour seminars devoted to "Ulysses." The novel, published in 1922, had been banned as obscene in the United States until 1933 and its reputation for difficulty outlived the ban. The Bell students "found it a challenging, and often exasperating, experience," Baltzell wrote.

But, prepared by months of reading that had ranged from the Bhagavad Gita to "Babbitt," the men rose to the challenge, surprising themselves with the emotional and intellectual resources they brought to bear on Joyce's novel. It was clear as the students cheered one another through their final reports that reading a book as challenging as "Ulysses" was both a liberating intellectual experience and a measure of how much they had been enriched by their time at the institute.

At the end of the 10-month course, an anonymous questionnaire was circulated among the Bell students; their answers revealed that they were reading more widely than they had before — if they had read at all — and they were more curious about the world around them. At a time when the country was divided by McCarthyism, they tended to see more than one side to any given argument.

What's more, the graduates were no longer content to let the machinery of business determine the course of their lives. One man told Baltzell that before the program he had been "like a straw floating with the current down the stream" and added: "The stream was the Bell Telephone Company. I don't think I will ever be that straw again."

The institute was judged a success by Morris S. Viteles, one of the pioneers of industrial psychology, who

evaluated its graduates. But Bell gradually withdrew its support after yet another positive assessment found that while executives came out of the program more confident and more intellectually engaged, they were also less interested in putting the company's bottom line ahead of their commitments to their families and communities. By 1960, the Institute of Humanistic Studies for Executives was finished.

As the worst economic crisis since the Depression continues and the deepening rift in the nation's political fabric threatens to forestall economic reform, the values the program instilled would certainly come in handy today. We need fewer drifting straws on the stream of American business, and more discontented thinkers who listen thoughtfully to both sides of our national debates. Reading "Ulysses" this Bloomsday may be more than just a literary observance. Think of it as an act of fiscal responsibility.

Wes Davis is the editor of "An Anthology of Modern Irish Poetry."