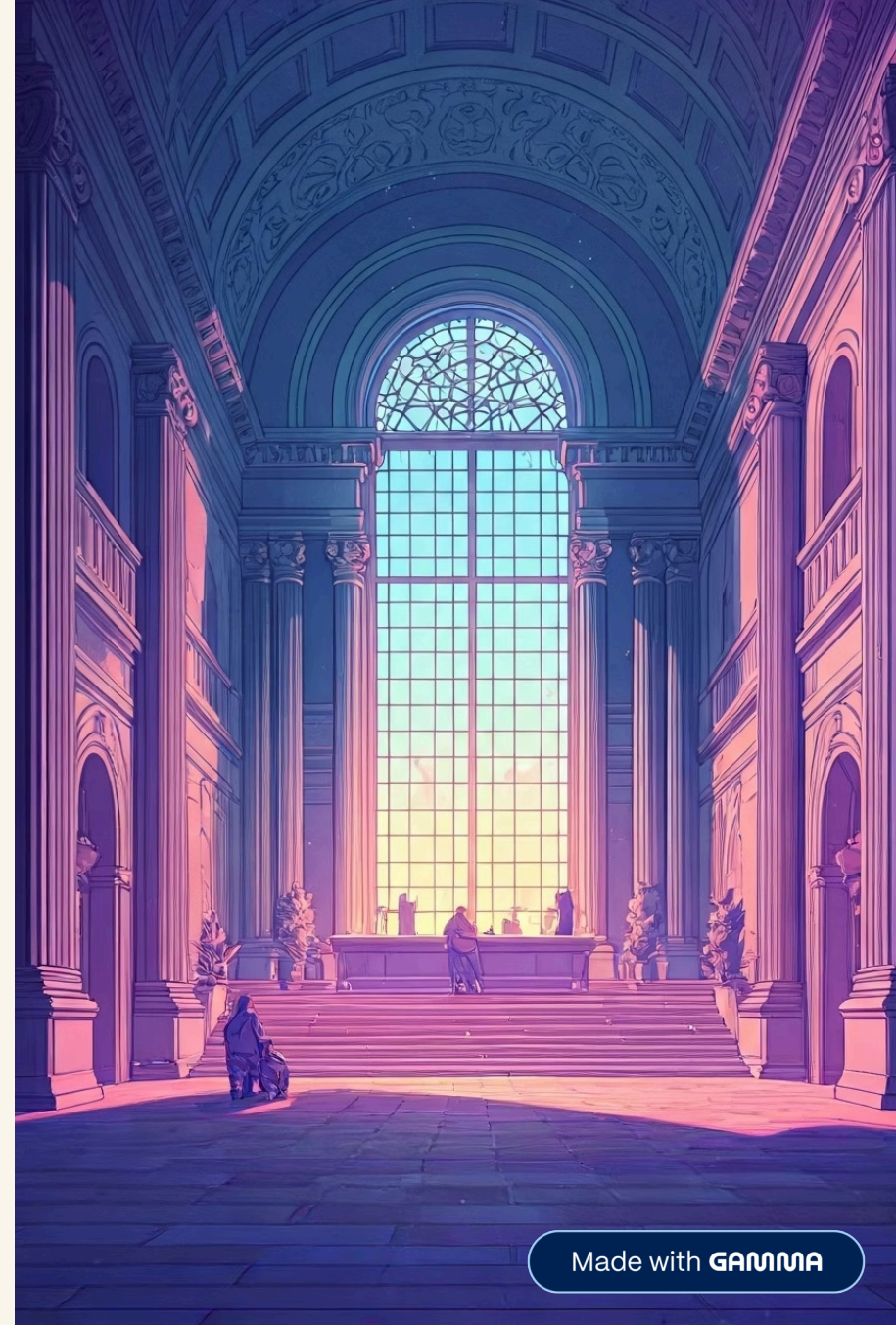


Revisiting Humboldt's Bildungs-ideal in the Age of Competence-Based Education

Humanistic ideals meet measurable outcomes: exploring a central tension in contemporary education — and how revisiting Humboldt's vision may offer a way forward.

Benjamin Heurich - Re-Formation of Higher Education CoP - Inaugural Webinar 2025



Introduction: A Personal Starting Point

Problem: Today's educational discourse prizes skills, metrics, and rankings. Yet something essential is absent: a vision of who learners become. *Bildung* once named intellectual depth, cultural engagement, and self-reflection - ways of *being*, not merely *functioning*.

- **Introduction** – Who was Wilhelm von Humboldt?
- **Humboldt's Bildungsideal** – Foundations & humanistic philosophy
- **Competence-Based Education** – Paradigm shift & challenges
- **Bridging the Two** – Translation issues & contemporary perspectives
- **From Ideal to Practice** – Integrative Design



Who was Wilhelm von Humboldt?

(1767-1835)

Key Information

- Prussian philosopher, diplomat, linguist, and educational reformer
- Brother of naturalist Alexander von Humboldt; friend of Goethe and Schiller
- Enlightenment polymath, proficient in philosophy, linguistics, literature, and politics
- Created modern public education system in just 18 months (1809-1810)
- Founded the University of Berlin (now Humboldt University)
- Advocated individual freedom and limited state intervention
- His "Humboldtian model" emphasizes research, academic freedom, and the unity of teaching and research



Bildung

Humboldt's Concept of Humanistic Education

1

Self & World

Bildung arises in the dynamic interplay of "Ich und Welt" through language, science, art, and culture.

2

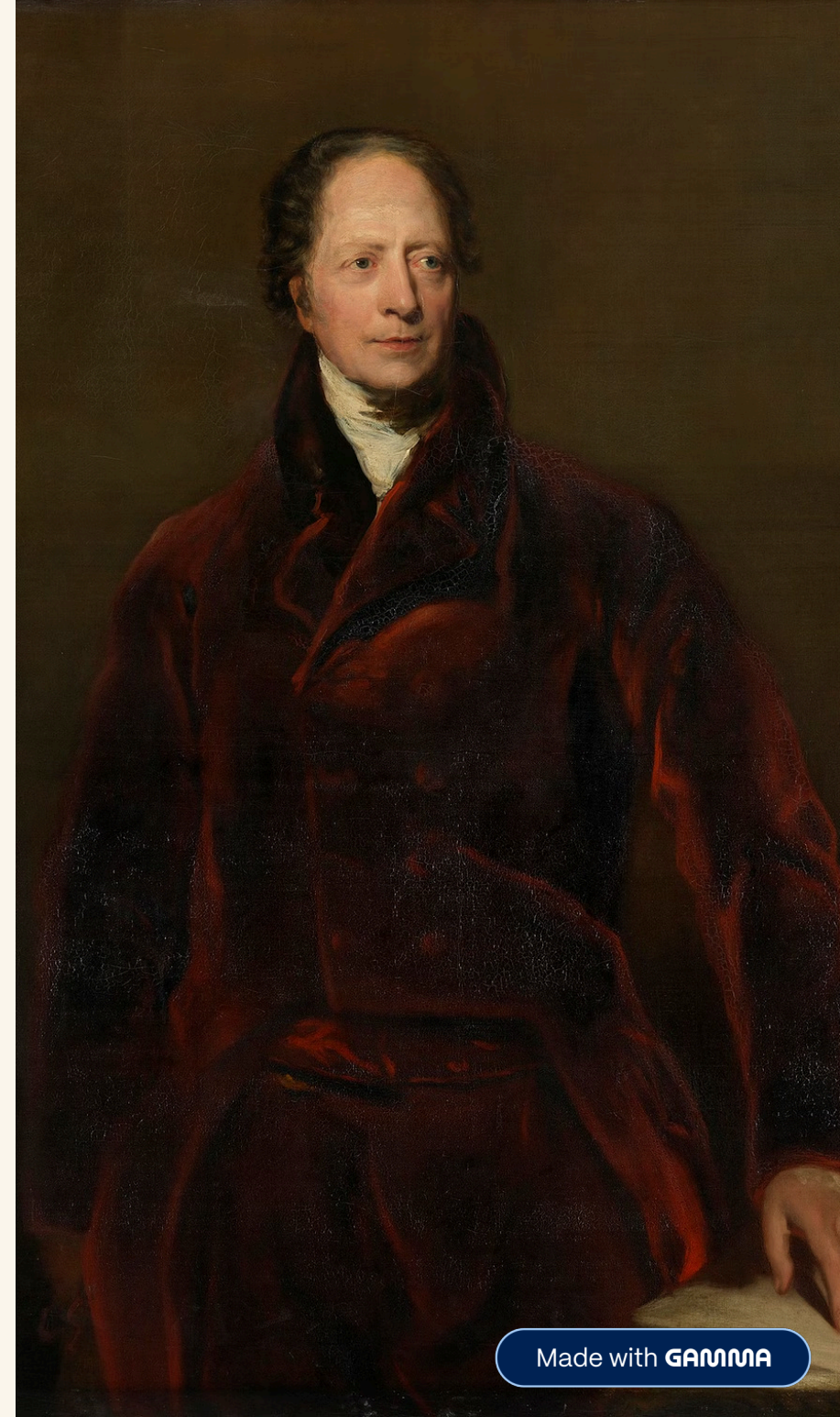
Autonomy & Freedom

Education cultivates inner freedom and reflective agency; the human being is a project, not a product.

3

Intrinsic Value

Learning holds value in itself — it is not merely a tool for practical use. It provides the foundation for democratic judgement and ethical living.



Competence-Based Education: Promise and Perils

Rationale

Standardization, accountability, and comparability (e.g., OECD/PISA) drive outcome-focused design.



Risks

What is measurable dominates; ethical, cultural, and reflective aims recede from view.



Strengths

Clarity for curricula; equity via transparent expectations; alignment with labor market needs.

Where is the human being in this tension - between the promise of clarity and comparability and the peril of losing Humboldt's vision of education as ethical, cultural, and self-formative development?



Why Humboldt Matters

Bildung as Growth

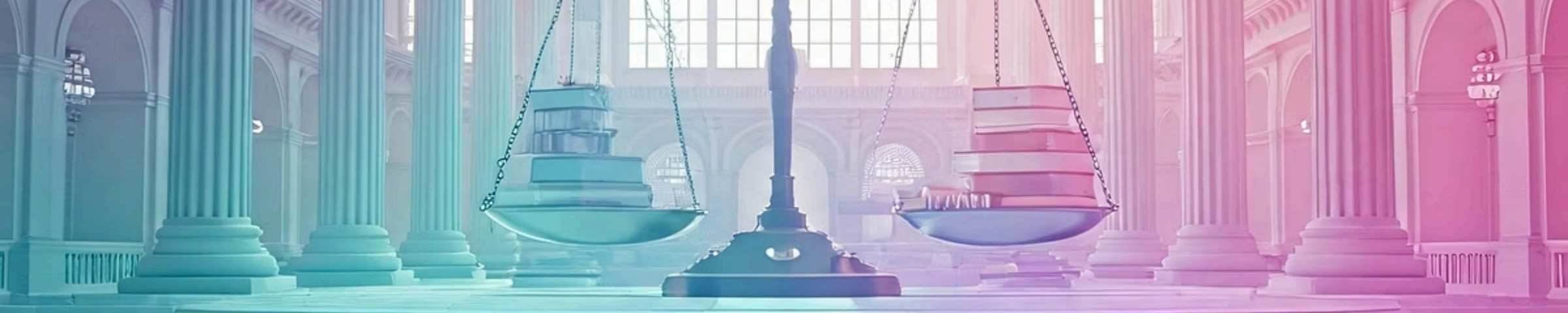
Humboldt conceives of education as the **roots** of personal and cultural growth - an intrinsically valuable process of self-formation that nurtures autonomy, critical reflection, and active participation in culture.

The Competence Paradigm

Contemporary frameworks prioritize measurable skills and labor-market alignment, aiding **branches** to standardization yet narrowing aims. Externally specified by society.

Integrative Thesis

Re-engaging *Bildung* alongside competences can cultivate both **strong roots and flourishing branches**, producing skilled, reflective, and responsible democratic participants.



Tension or Complementarity?



Different Levels

Bildung: formative, ethical, emancipatory horizon. Competences: functional, operational categories.



Pragmatic Synthesis

Use competences to structure learning while safeguarding Bildung's autonomy and critique.



Design Principle

Teach toward who learners become - then verify what they can do.
→ Rethinking what it means to teach.

Contemporary Debates and Hybrid Realities

European systems often blend competence-based curricula with humanistic rhetoric. In practice, testing regimes overshadow formation, even as teachers foster critical thinking and personal development.

- International rankings drive standardization
- Accountability narrows curricular horizons
- Teachers juggle depth with assessment demands
- Project-based or creative subjects are reduced
- Formative goals are subordinated to summative metrics

Despite the humanistic language in policy, these practices remain largely rhetorical, prioritising measurable outcomes over the deep ethical, cultural, and self-formative development at the heart of Humboldt's Bildungs-Ideal.



From Ideal to Practice: Integrative Design



Curriculum

Anchor courses in big questions and cultural works; map outcomes to competencies without reducing inquiry.



Pedagogy

Socratic dialogue, research studios, community projects—cultivate judgement and transferable skills.



Assessment

Combine performance tasks, portfolios, and reflection logs with targeted competency checks.



Policy

Accountability that values formation: sample-based audits and qualitative indicators alongside metrics.

Personal Reflection: Moments That Form

"The ultimate task of our existence is to give as much substance as possible to the concept of humanity in ourselves."

Wilhelm v. Humboldt

Competence frameworks should be designed to support the development of deeper educational substance. This aligns with the idea of *Bildung* as a selfdriven process, in which individuals actively participate in shaping their own intellectual and personal growth.



Becoming

Education as self-formation through encounter and reflection; identity grows beyond utility.



Enabling

Competencies scaffold transfer and transparency, while leaving space for wonder and critique.



Thank you!

And now, let's look forward...
...to your questions and comments.