



HIGHER EDUCATION EXCHANGE



2011

NOT FOR PROFIT: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities

By Martha C. Nussbaum

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What are we teaching the next generation? This question has sparked pedagogical reforms and critiques in education around the globe. In her book, *Not for Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities*, University of Chicago Professor Martha C. Nussbaum explicates the necessity of humanistic inquiry and techniques to foster democratic citizens. Nussbaum characterizes the situation as more than just children being left behind. Instead, she alerts her readers to a developing “world-wide crisis in education,” one that she claims can only be solved through a renewed commitment to humanities-based education (p. 2).

She characterizes this crisis by the trend of schools moving towards technical skills and applied learning. Primary, secondary, and higher educational institutions are turning away from the humanities and arts, focusing instead on marketable skills that will—they believe—give students a competitive edge for job placement. This focus often involves the elimination of not only traditional humanities and arts classes, but also what Nussbaum calls the “humanistic aspects” of the hard sciences and social sciences: “the imaginative, creative aspect, and the aspect of rigorous critical thought” as applied to these subject areas (p. 2). Critical thinking is being eliminated from curricula, a pedagogical choice that has potentially devastating effects for democratic vitality. Instead, nations all around the world are relying more on what she calls “education-for-profit.”

The education-for-profit model relies on the assumption that economic growth in a nation—as embodied by its technically astute citizens—is the most important reason *for* education. Under this assumption, a nation educates its citizens to grow their earning potential, which in turn is expected to benefit the standard of living through growing the national economy. This method of education, however, does not explicitly address the concerns of democratic education, and at times works *against* democratic practices. To

increase the possibilities for national growth, education-for-profit focuses more on skills (cultivating a good worker) and less on critical thinking. In fact, the critical thinking that is so necessary for democratic citizenship is frequently absent from these for-profit systems. Education-for-profit also scorns the arts and literature, believing that these fields contribute little to a student's training, since "they don't look like they lead to personal or national economic advancement (p. 23)." As programs in the humanities are eliminated in favor of vocational and technical training, education-for-profit ultimately leaves students lacking the background for the active, critical, and sympathetic practices of democratic citizenship.

As an alternative to the profit model, Nussbaum argues that in its proper form, humanities education becomes education for democracy. This sort of pedagogy does not prohibit profitability, but grounds itself in education as a process of learning rather than skills acquisition. Students in the humanities learn to think critically using relevant information from the historical and contemporary contexts, imagining the possibilities for the future. Humanities education grounds a student in philosophical questions that will make them a better citizen for democratic life. Drawing on the writings of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Nussbaum argues that the primary way to transcend the tendencies of humans towards self-preservation, greed, aggression, and narcissism is to engage students in activities that demonstrate the fragility and inadequacy of *each* person, including themselves (p. 34). Humanistic education for democratic citizenship can develop students' capacity to see the world from the viewpoint of others, particularly those viewed by some as "least" desirable or lesser. It can foster feelings of compassion towards others; undermine tendencies of the majority to shrink from minorities and instead open dialogue; promote accountability by treating each citizen as a responsible, equal agent in a democratic community; and promote critical thinking and reasonable dissent towards authority.

But how do teachers begin to educate for democracy? Nussbaum acknowledges that the pedagogical practicality of humanistic education for democracy, especially in the primary and secondary settings, is often lacking. Most educators would be aided by a return to Socratic pedagogy, which aims to "stimulate students to think and argue for themselves, rather than defer to tradition and authority,"

and to explore and understand all sides of an issue. In the for-profit, testing-based education system of today, this pedagogy is under “severe strain (p. 48).” Socratic methods do not lend themselves to standards-based testing, as they often involve complex and lengthy explorations in argument. Furthermore, there are historic and contemporary skepticisms about the value of argument. After all, even in ancient Greece, political argument had a reputation for persuading the masses using reputation or false arguments; today, one only need turn on a cable news show to see the “talking heads” spouting their ideology at one another, rather than talking with each other about the possibilities surrounding public problems.

Still, Nussbaum insists that humanistic education can teach students how to argue and critique arguments in a manner appropriate for democracy. Educators must emphasize that political debate is *not* a competition to win, but rather an exercise in dialogue to understand all involved parties and discover the best possibilities. In this sort of instruction, students would learn the principles of argumentation in active settings, exploring issues relevant to their local, national, and global communities. They would be encouraged to have curiosity about multiple positions, and hopefully seek understanding and thus have respect for opposing parties. Students would also be encouraged to reevaluate, understanding that a solution may be applicable for a particular time and place, but may need alteration in the future. The “living tradition” of the humanities, Nussbaum writes, “uses Socratic values to produce a certain type of citizen: active, critical, curious, capable of resisting authority and peer pressure (p. 72).” Students trained in this Socratic, humanistic tradition of logical argumentation and critique would be more prepared to embody vibrant, active citizenship.

Ultimately, education for democracy stimulates the imagination of students by encouraging them to question, to consider what might have been and what could be, and to consider the plight of others. Nussbaum details how the study of literature prompts our ability to question, to reconsider, and to imagine. For example, she writes that reading about the narrator’s experiences in Ralph Ellison’s literary work *The Invisible Man* compels us to see the human situation with new eyes—to learn of the invisibility of certain races and classes in the United States. Our imagination, as developed by

humanities education, allows us to “develop our ability to see the full humanness of the people with whom our encounters in daily life are especially likely to be superficial at best, at worst infected by demeaning stereotypes (p. 107).” The learning objectives of humanistic education are not solely fact-based, but rather process-based. Democratic citizens, Nussbaum explains, need to come to an understanding of stigmatized positions—developing their inner eyes and inner hearts—so that they might better criticize poorly functioning aspects of society, and imagine solutions to public problems.

An interesting element of *Not for Profit* is that Nussbaum encourages humanities education for *global* citizenship. She draws on experience with the Indian education system to substantiate how different sorts of democratic nations all require the same humanistic foundations for healthy citizenship. In our globalized world, the tradition of inquiry and exploration fostered by the humanities becomes even more important. Nussbaum argues that each student graduating into their citizenship needs a pluralistic, globalized understanding of history, politics, economics (including historical inequalities of global trade), religion, and culture. Responsible global citizenship requires factual knowledge, but it also needs “the ability to assess historical evidence, to use and think critically about economic principles, to assess accounts of social justice, to speak a foreign language, to appreciate the complexities of major world religions (p. 93).” While she uses compelling examples from India and the United States to demonstrate why such pluralistic understandings are important for limiting mistrust and stigmatization in democratic societies, her analysis at times suggests an idealized public sphere, lacking personal, ideological commitments. Nussbaum embraces pluralism with open arms, failing to adequately address how citizens might remain grounded in their own religious or cultural traditions yet still be productive, vibrant members of a democratic community.

This book rings familiar—and true—to its friendly audiences: those individuals trained in and practicing humanistic education. Still, many colleges and universities connect their university mission statements to the preparation of students for the globalized world, and Nussbaum’s *Not for Profit* is a resounding reminder that this preparation must include the processes taught in humanities education

as well as the most vocational-based skills learning. The book offers compelling examples of the recent struggles and failures in the standardized testing, skills-based models of education, and argues for the potentials of the humanities and arts in educating democratic citizens. Nussbaum thus provides a dynamic rebuttal to questions of what courses in the humanities *give* to students. Her answer includes the processes of critical questioning and logical reasoning, understanding and weighing multiple perspectives, and creatively contemplating a better future.