Not for Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities

by Marsha C. Nussbaum

Academic Book Review

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The world of education is in the midst of a crisis proclaims Marsha C. Nussbaum, as most of the world democracies today are more concerned with promoting “Education for Profit” rather than “Education for Democracy.” This crisis is in full force; however we have yet to respond to it, nor fully considered how to effectively advocate for the importance of the arts and humanities. The United States and India are two of the world democracies who believe that science and technology education are essential to supporting an increase in health, business and profits worldwide. The governmental committees and political leadership that oversee education in these nations also believe that the arts and humanities are ‘useless frills’ that can be easily cut at all levels of schooling. Martha C. Nussbaum’s well-researched manifesto, *Not for Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities*, presents a very convincing portfolio of arguments and supporting evidence to support education for democracy. She argues first that the arts and humanities must be taught at the primary, secondary and post-secondary levels in order to teach the skills necessary for democratic citizenship: critical thinking, responsibility, stewardship and creative innovation (10). In addition, she argues that both “education for profit” and “education for democracy” require the humanities in teaching the skills for sustaining democracy and democratic nations (10). Furthermore, democratic nations must be aware of issues of access to education which are evidenced by significant disparities in urban/rural contexts, male/female and rich/poor (11). Nussbaum also calls upon her readers to recognize the value of arts and humanities and to support education for democratic citizenship.

Marsha C. Nussbaum is an important academic voice in this discussion about the value of the arts and humanities-based education and champions the model for liberal arts education.
She is a Professor of Law and Ethics at the University of Chicago. While Marsha Nussbaum is not a professor at a Faculty of Education, her extensive experience working as a research advisor at the World Institute for Development Economics Research, as a member of the Council of the American Academy of Arts and Science, as a recipient of over 40 honorary degrees from around the world (amongst many other academic honours), and finally her academic writing on philosophy, human development and education, give her credibility as a contributor to this critical scholarship on the current state of education. Her quantitative and qualitative research provides a wide array of examples as evidence to support her arguments and she demonstrates a firm understanding of educational issues and related concerns of societies and economies in world democracies. While the target audience of this book is not explicitly identified by the author, it is written in language that is both academic, yet accessible to a mainstream audience. This book also offers useful insights and suggestions to motivate policy-makers, government officials, ministries of education, as well as school administrators and teachers at all levels to respond and take action.

Nussbaum’s selection of case studies and examples from the United States of America and India, offer unique opportunities for comparative consideration and juxtaposition to illustrate the challenges of sustaining support for liberal arts, representing both Western and non-Western examples. While the education systems in both these countries are remarkably different than the models of education in Canada’s provinces and territories (which each determine their individual curricula and policies), Nussbaum’s work still resonates with some of the current educational issues in Canada and echoes the work of several professors and researchers worldwide, including: Ken Osborne, Lynn Davies, John Patrick, Sue Winton, Stéphane Levesque and Peter Seixas. These individuals are advocates for citizenship education and Seixas and Levesque specifically are promoting a shift in the teaching of history by
incorporating 6 historical thinking concepts (which are currently being implemented in the revised curriculum in Ontario, fall 2013). What is clear from Nussbaum’s research is that there are many important lessons to be learned from the case-studies, examples and suggestions that can inspire to advocate to sustain the arts and the humanities and to continue to promote the merits of democratic citizenship education.

Margaret Nussbaum’s book is divided into 6 chapters each focusing on a particular areas of research which support the importance of the arts and humanities. The First chapter focuses on the root causes “silent crisis” by highlighting 5 examples from different educational contexts. The second chapter identifies the ‘old’ and ‘new’ models of education in the United States and in India while considering the decisions and actions of school systems and educators relating to conceptions of “Education for Profit” and “Education for Democracy.” The third chapter considers how educators teach students about moral and anti-moral emotions and considers the influences of families, peer cultures and schools on student’s decisions. The fourth chapter provides a historical exploration of the great European, American and Indian thinkers who, inspired by Socrates, developed programs, experiments and schools which taught students using Socratic Questioning and Inquiry. Chapter 5 considers global citizenship education and underlines the value of teaching a combination of history, philosophy, religion and social justice curricula to teach students the skills necessary for democratic citizenship. Chapter 6 focuses specifically on the use of literature and the arts to develop imagination in students, which Nussbaum suggests will cause many educators to change their pedagogy and methodology in their classrooms (119). The final chapter, “Democratic citizenship on the ropes” revisits many of the case studies presented throughout the book and using additional quantitative data, reveals the potential impact of the decline in support for the arts and humanities. While it is evident to me that Nussbaum divided her research effectively into
specific foci to emphasis her overall advocacy for the importance of the arts and humanities, I believe that each chapter could stand on its own, independent of the full narrative. Therefore, I want to organize my critique and consideration specific issues of concern and contention in each chapter independently.

The first chapter, “The Silent Crisis” explains how world democracies are thirsting for ways of increasing their profits so much so that they are cutting arts and humanities’ programs at the primary, secondary and post-secondary level. Even the parents of the students in these institutions are convinced that applied learning in science and technology will be more beneficial in improving their children’s opportunities for employment and to increasing national economic gains. Nussbaum’s study considers 4 American and 1 Indian example to illustrate how this shift in goals of education is contributing to a loss in humanistic education. She cites how the American Spellings Report on the state of higher education reveals a limited concern for the replacement of the arts and humanities with “more useful disciplines” (3). Secondly, teachers at Laboratory School in Chicago (John Dewey) are feeling anxious about their teaching the Socratic Method because of parental pressure to have students equipped instead with more testable skills to pass standardized tests. Thirdly and fourthly, Nussbaum explains how two American universities have shifted their teaching foci to sciences and technology rather than supporting the arts thereby abandoning their former teaching of liberal arts-based education. Finally, Nussbaum focuses on the current state of the schools which formerly followed the philosophy of Rabindranath Tagore and are now government-run and do not support an arts-inspired based curricula. These examples support Nussbaum’s observation that the arts and humanities, which she believes are “crucial to the education of citizens” are in danger (7). Much of the content introduced in these examples is not new to the scholarship, but it is effective in showing how the arts and humanities are receiving a significant
demotion at multiple educational levels. Furthermore, the example in India clearly shows how shift in power and governance can very quickly eliminate a system that had previously experienced success for almost a century. Herein lay the concern about the impact of political decisions at the institutional and governmental levels which are contributing to the crisis in education. My criticism here is that Nussbaum needs to extend her analyses to consider the role of power structures and leadership responsible for decision-making around educational goals in the United States and in India to show the process which contributed to the shift educational foci.

The second chapter, “Education for Profit, Education for Democracy” explores the strong emphasis on the correlation between national growth and economic growth (as measured by the GNP). Nussbaum’s research confirms that there is support in the United States and in India to create infrastructure for economic gain and investment in job creation which are dominant components of the agendas for national policy makers on education. Nussbaum’s concern in this regard is that these actions and changes do not effectively correlate with improved quality of life. “Proponents of the old model sometimes like to claim that the pursuit of economic growth will by itself deliver the other good things... By now, however, examining the results of these divergent experiments, we have discovered that the old model really does not deliver the good as claimed” (15). What is disconcerting in reading about the Spellings Commission Report by the U.S. Department of Education on Higher Learning is the fact that with such an emphasis on education for economic growth, there is little concern for issues of discrimination, social equality, stable democracy, gender or race relations or improvements in quality of life (14). These are all contemporary issues that face teachers and students today in North American schools and without opportunities to address all stakeholders will potentially engage in greater conflict and contribute to an increase in social inequalities. Similarly, in India,
the government’s decision to finance the development of technical workers and to luring foreign investors takes money away from supporting health and education programs and fails to support the living conditions of the poor. Nussbaum argues that these are citizenship issues that need to be addressed. My main concern with this chapter is that Nussbaum only begins to scrape the surface in analysing how the power dynamics are influencing the decision-making process in support of education-for-profit in both the USA and India. More quantitative data which illustrates the impact of these decisions on the education system and the most marginalized would be helpful in assessing the overall impact of “education for profit.”

In addition, another issue of concern in this chapter is the fact that both the United States and India formerly supported a liberal-arts model of education, and due to economic hardship these countries have supported major cuts to programs and have refocused their educational goals. In the case of Tagore’s schools, developed in the early 20th century based on critical thinking and imagining, these schools are now government-run and teach literacy, numeracy, computer and technological skills to support students in regurgitating course material to achieve success on standardized examinations (19). To Nussbaum’s dismay, both the United States, and even more so India are focussed on agendas to support education for economic growth which minimizes the importance of critical thinking and Socratic instruction. Because of the desire to ‘create machines, rather than citizens’ (2), the teaching of critical thinking has been in fact discouraged; which in turn devalues the importance of education for democracy. The same issues are true in Ontario with the use of EQAO standardized testing for literacy in grades 3, 6, and 10 and for grade 9 mathematics. Furthermore, the implementation of curricula for Career Studies in Grade 10 and the promotion of Cooperative Education and Specialist High Skills Major programs, which allows students to connect their academic courses to their future career paths, are evidence of how Ontario is implementing programs to “educate for profit.”
The devaluation of the arts and humanities in favour of curricula that predominantly supports economic gains, I believe is the true tragedy in this education crisis. I suggest that Nussbaum provide additional examples of schools in both India and the USA which illustrate the impact of the decline and that she provide strategies as to how to influence and challenge governmental bodies to reconsider their programming choices.

In Chapter 3: “The moral and anti-moral emotions,” Nussbaum discusses the skills that students develop in the humanities classroom relating to moral and anti-moral emotions. Using Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s story *Emile*, Nussbaum explains how a good education helps students to combat stereotypes, gain a sense of their own individual importance, as well as develop a sense of empathy and reciprocity (37). She also explores how students gain an emotional education which allows them to identify with others and to see the world through their eyes using their imaginations. This confirmation of the value of empathy is supported by Nussbaum’s argument that “schools have an important responsibility in helping them to overcome their narcissism” (44). Nussbaum argues that moral and anti-moral development is part of a huge agenda in schools and that teachers must have a constant awareness of the local social circumstances, social problems and resources in their communities, and address these issues in their pedagogical decisions.

One aspect of this chapter that resonated well with me was Nussbaum’s question about what can and should schools do to produce citizens in and for a healthy democracy? I believe that Nussbaum’s response to this question offers practical, yet not new, suggestions to confirm the roles teachers can play in supporting the teaching of democratic citizens. First, teachers are to respect their students; second, create opportunities for students to develop their capacities for understanding the world from other people’s perspectives using critical thinking; three, teach attitudes toward human weakness and helplessness and to affirm that these attitudes aren’t
shameful; and four to teach authentic learning about different groups (racial, religious, sexual minorities and those with disabilities). Stéphane Levesque’s work on historical empathy supports Nussbaum’s research in identifying that “imagination, contextualization and moral judgement” are three useful contextual tools to address this concern (Levesque, What it means to think historically, 45). Nussbaum also explains the importance of holding students accountable for their actions and also in nurturing a sense of ‘general’ concern toward others. This message is very confirming to educators and researchers who like Sue Winton (2010), in her work evaluating the implementation of the Character Development Initiative expresses that “in implementing democratic citizenship we should encourage students to have openness to different points of view and look at issues in a variety of ways while considering differences positively” (Sue Winton, Character development and critical democratic education in Ontario, Canada). It is evident to me that with the state of multicultural schools and a strong Ministry of Education mandate on Equity Education that Nussbaum’s research provides convincing examples to justify the value of critical thinking and perspective-taking as part of education for democracy.

In chapter 4, Nussbaum considers the significance and use of Socratic Inquiry in the field of critical questioning. Nussbaum is a strong supporter of students studying philosophy and humanities courses because of how they stimulate student’s abilities to think and argue for themselves; a valuable skill for democracy (55). The use of Socratic questioning is in fact the basis of liberal arts education in both the United States and in India. The case study of student Billy Tucker illustrates how a student who didn’t believe he could achieve success by studying abstract and intellectual subjects, when studying philosophy and engaging in classroom debate, has a renewed sense of faith in the importance of philosophy (52). This example serves well to
justify how, even though many students don’t believe they have a capacity for Socratic learning, this can be beneficial to their overall schooling and academic experience.

In this chapter, Nussbaum also provides a useful historical exploration of the work Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Pestalozzi, Froebel, Alcott, Mann, Dewey and Lipman on the implementation of Socratic Inquiry at all educational levels. While in some cases the theorist’s work doesn’t fully capture the true essence of Socratic Inquiry, Nussbaum’s examples are useful to educators in identifying both the historical roots and useful strategies for implementation of this teaching and learning practice. It is clear that Nussbaum has done her research in carefully selecting examples from the works of these educators that support the aims of her manifesto. What is most interesting to me is the ingenuity and creative teaching methodology of Rabindranath Tagore which I believe provides a useful case study to demonstrate an effective model for the implementation of Socratic Inquiry and instruction. I believe that greater depth of research and analysis of Tagore’s work as a model for Socratic Inquiry would enhance the scholarship on this matter.

Nussbaum raises many issues about the challenge for implementing Socratic thinking citing the need for small class sizes, opportunities for students to be actively and creatively engaged in classroom discussion in a learning environment where opinions are respected and see as unfolding. Sadly, Nussbaum’s description illustrates the reality of most teachers and students across Canada and the United States. There are definitely limitations due to large class sizes, limited faculty resources and time to provide important descriptive feedback to support students. Nonetheless, Socratic thinking helps teach students to probe, evaluate evidence, write papers with structured arguments and analyze their responses in relation to other texts (55). Furthermore, the skills taught with Socratic Inquiry connect to Nussbaum’s overall argument that when taught in courses, they help to develop a student’s capacity for citizenship and
provide a venue for practising respectful political interaction. These justifications link well to Peter Seixas and Stéphane Levesque’s (2010) work on critical thinking and the 6 Historical Thinking Concepts. Levesque confirms this when he writes: “Growing research now indicates that students can learn, even at any early age, to engage in disciplinary thinking, provided they are introduced gradually and repetitively to doing history” (Stéphane Levesque, What It Means To Think Historically, 134). What is most concerning to me in this chapter is Nussbaum’s grim outlook on the continuance of the use of Socratic inquiry. She explains that “democracies all over the world are undervaluing, and consequently neglecting skills that we all badly need to keep democracies vital, respectful and accountable” (77). As a history, civics and drama educator, I am concerned about the decline of support for the arts and humanities; but I recognize that without support from the Ministries of Education and governance, we are moving towards challenging times for democratic and citizenship education and more advocacy work and dialogue must be done.

In chapters 5 and 6, focussing on global citizenship and use of literature and the arts in cultivating imagination respectively, Marsha Nussbaum challenges educators to rethink their pedagogical and methodological decisions. With regard to teaching for global citizenship, Nussbaum recognizes how this task is overwhelming yet she confirms that schools have a responsibility to help students to see how they belong, how they are connected to the outside world (interdependency) and to understand the histories and cultures of people around the world. Starting at an early age is critical in this endeavour to “creating in the classroom a sense of global curiosity and respect” (83). Students must have an awareness of how the global economy works, the history of colonialism, and an understanding of religious traditions and customs in order to dispel stereotypes and discrimination (83). Tagore and Dewey’s Laboratory schools provide concrete examples of this teaching in practice; incorporating active learning,
use of critical thinking, space for dialogue, learning a foreign language and opportunities for inquiry and transference of knowledge to understanding other parts of the world. Professor Lynn Davies (2006), from the University of Birmingham, would agree with Nussbaum that successful global citizenship education is based on a development of international awareness through participatory learning and engaging in holistic learning activities (“Global citizenship; abstraction or framework for action?”, 6). I concur with Nussbaum, that “a catalogue of facts, without the ability to assess them or to understand how a narrative is assembled from as evidence, is almost as bad as ignorance” (94). Therefore, the promotion of an active approach to teaching for democratic citizenship is ideal. Nussbaum’s viewpoints are also well supported by the work of Indian University Professor John J. Patrick (2003) on the 10 Essential Elements of Education for Democracy. He writes that “the maintenance and improvement of democracy in the United State of America or anywhere else will not happen unless there is good education for democracy in schools, which transmits to each new generation of children the basic knowledge, skills, and dispositions by which citizens make their democracy work.” (John Patrick, “Essential elements of education for democracy...”)

The use of literature and the arts in teaching for citizenship complements well with the skill development of critical thinking. Nussbaum’s reference to Winnicott’s research on play shows how students can develop a capacity for empathy, and a “potential space” to consider the concept of “otherness,” and connect “vulnerability and surprise to curiosity and wonder” (101). Tagore’s use of role-playing in his schools also cultivated sympathy and the development of the logical faculties, which enabled students to celebrate the rituals and traditions of other cultures using their imaginations (104). Nussbaum praises Tagore’s progressive work in music, dance and in the arts and explains how the arts not only promote democratic inclusion and respect, but promote greater understanding of their communities and the wider world (108).
The challenge Nussbaum raises again is the need to change teacher training and to change the ethos of their schools (119). Nussbaum argues that while this is costly, the intrinsic benefits far out way the finances. I concur with Nussbaum that while the arts continue to be devalued, it is through participation in art, dance, visual arts and music that students gain greater appreciation of culture and diversity in Canada and abroad.

Marsha C. Nussbaum’s fervent advocacy for the liberal-arts model of education is apparent in all chapters of this book; however it is clear from her evidence that its sustainability or conversely its implementation into education systems outside of the US will come at significant financial and pedagogical costs. What is even more disconcerting is that in the face of economic crisis and a movement in support of standardized testing, students are learning through rote memorization rather than with critical thinking skills. This will continue to have negative effects and implications on education for democratic citizenship. In addition, our schools will continue to “turn out useful profit-makers rather than thoughtful citizens” (142) which Tagore would describe as “suicide to the soul” (142). What is clear, however, from Nussbaum’s manifesto is that the crisis will become worse unless we make significant changes to teach for democracy with the humanities. In conclusion therefore in citing Nussbaum’s final call to action, the arts and humanities are far too valuable because they “make a world that is worth living in, people who are able to see other human beings as full people, with thoughts and feelings of their own that deserve respect and empathy, and nations that are able to overcome fear and suspicion in favour of sympathetic and reasoned debate” (143). With Nussbaum’s concluding phrases in her manifesto, we have been called to action; the challenges and strategies to be addressed clearly outlined here; but the fight will be an uphill battle as we attempt to avert further crisis and work to challenge the current agenda of “education for profit” by promoting alongside it a fervent cry to preserve “education for democracy.”