

MARTHA C. NUSSBAUM

# Education for Profit, Education for Freedom

FEATURED TOPIC

EDITOR'S NOTE: *Most of the author's development work has been conducted in India, and she provides an analysis of Indian educational issues in The Clash Within: Democracy, Religious Violence, and India's Future (Harvard University Press, 2006). The full manuscript from which the following article was adapted also includes discussion of several examples from India that, regrettably, have been omitted here due to space limitations. The issues examined here are treated at greater length in Not for Profit: Liberal Education and Democratic Citizenship, which will be published by Princeton University Press in 2010.*

EDUCATION IS OFTEN DISCUSSED in low-level utilitarian terms: how can we produce technically trained people who can hold onto "our" share of the global market? With the rush to profitability, values precious for the future of democracy are in danger of getting lost.

The profit motive suggests to most concerned politicians that science and technology are of crucial importance. We should have no objection to good scientific and technical education. But other abilities—abilities crucial both to the health of democracy and to the creation of a decent world culture and a robust type of global citizenship—are at risk of getting lost in the competitive flurry.

I shall make my argument by pursuing the contrast between an education for profit-making and an education for a more inclusive type of citizenship. This contrast is related to another, familiar in discussions of global justice and global citizenship, between two conceptions of development: the old narrowly economic conception of development, and the richer more inclusive notion of "human development." The analysis of education used even by the best practitioners of the human development approach tends to focus on basic marketable skills. It neglects the humanistic abilities of critical thinking and imagining that are so crucial if education is really to promote human development, rather than merely economic growth and individual acquisition. What would an education for human development look like, and how would it differ from an education for economic enrichment?

## **Education for economic enrichment**

What sort of education does the old model of development suggest? Education for economic enrichment needs basic skills, literacy, and numeracy. It also needs some people to have more advanced skills in computer science and technology, although equal access is not terribly important: a nation can grow very nicely while the rural poor remain illiterate and without basic computer resources.

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**What would an education for human development look like?**



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Given the nature of the information economy, nations can increase their gross national product without worrying too much about the distribution of education, so long as they create a competent tech and business elite.

After that, education for enrichment needs, perhaps, a very rudimentary familiarity with history and with economic fact—on the part of the people who are going to get past elementary education in the first place, who are likely to be a relatively small elite. But care must be taken lest the historical and economic narrative lead to any serious critical thinking about class, about whether foreign investment is really good for the rural poor, about whether democracy can survive when such huge inequalities in basic life chances obtain. So critical thinking would not be a very important part of education for economic enrichment, and it has not been in states that have pursued this goal relentlessly. The student's freedom of mind is dangerous, if what is wanted is a group of technically trained docile technicians to carry out the plans of elites who are aiming at foreign investment and technological development. History might be essential, but enrichment educators will not want a history that focuses on injustices of class, caste, gender, and ethno-religious membership, because that will prompt critical thinking about the present.



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What about the arts and literature? An education for enrichment will, first of all, have contempt for these parts of a child's training, because they don't lead to enrichment. For this reason, all over the world, programs in arts and the humanities, at all levels, are being cut away in favor of the cultivation of the technical. But educators for enrichment will do more than ignore the arts: they will fear them. A cultivated and developed sympathy is a particularly dangerous enemy of obtuseness, and moral obtuseness is necessary to carry out programs of enrichment that ignore inequality. Artists are never the reliable servants of any ideology, even a basically good one. They always ask the imagination to move beyond its usual confines, to see the world in new ways. So, educators for enrichment will campaign against the humanities and the arts as ingredients of basic education.

#### **Education for human development**

Education for human development is a very broad idea. It includes many types of cultivation that are pertinent to a student's personal development. It is not simply about citizenship, even when citizenship is broadly understood. In what follows, however, I shall focus on the goal of producing decent world citizens who can understand the global problems to which this and other theories of justice respond and who have the practical competence and the motivational incentives to do something about those problems. How, then, would we produce such citizens?

An education for human development as responsible global citizenship has a twofold purpose. First, it must promote the human development of students. Second, it must promote in students an understanding of the goals of human development for all—as goals inherent in the very idea of a decent, minimally just society—and it must do this in such a way that when they are empowered to make political choices, they will foster these capabilities for all, not only for themselves. Such an education will begin from the idea of equal respect for all human beings and equal entitlement of all to a range of central human opportunities—not just in one's own nation, but everywhere in the world. It thus has a profound egalitarian and critical component from the start. Education will promote the enrichment of the student's own senses, imagination, thought, and practical reason, for example,

and it will also promote a vision of humanity according to which all human beings are entitled to that kind of development on a basis of equality.

Before designing a scheme for such an education, however, we need to understand the problems we face on the way to making students responsible democratic citizens who might possibly implement a human development agenda. What is it about human life that makes it so hard to sustain egalitarian democratic institutions, and so easy to lapse into hierarchies of various types—or, worse, projects of violent group animosity? Whatever these forces are, it is ultimately against them that true education for human development must fight.

Any account of human bad behavior has two aspects: the structural/institutional and the individual/psychological. There is a large body of psychological research showing that average human beings will engage in bad behavior in certain types of situations. Stanley Milgram showed that experimental subjects have a high level of deference to authority. Most people in his oft-repeated experiments were willing to administer a very painful and dangerous level of electric shock to another person, so long as the superintending scientist told them that what they were doing was all right—even when the other person was screaming in pain (Zimbardo 2007). Solomon Asch, earlier, showed that experimental subjects are willing to go against the clear evidence of their senses when all the other people around them are making sensory judgments that are off target. His rigorous and oft-confirmed research shows the unusual subservience of normal human beings to peer pressure (Zimbardo 2007). Both Milgram's work and Asch's have been used effectively by Christopher Browning (1993) to illuminate the behavior of young Germans in a police battalion that murdered Jews during the Nazi era. So great was the influence of both peer pressure and authority on these young men, he shows, that the ones who couldn't bring themselves to shoot Jews felt ashamed of their weakness.

Still other research demonstrates that apparently normal people are willing to engage in behavior that humiliates and stigmatizes if their situation is set up in a certain way, casting

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them in a dominant role and telling them that the others are their inferiors. One particularly chilling example involves schoolchildren whose teacher informs them that children with blue eyes are superior to children with brown eyes. Hierarchical and cruel behavior ensues. The teacher

then informs the children that a mistake has been made: it is actually the brown-eyed children who are superior, the blue-eyed inferior. The hierarchical and cruel behavior simply reverses itself: the brown-eyed children seem to have learned nothing from the pain of discrimination (Zimbardo 2007).

We have to consider both the individual and the situation. Research does find individual differences, and it also is plausibly interpreted as showing the influence of widely shared human psychological tendencies. So we need, ultimately, to look deeply into the psychology of the individual, asking what we can do to help compassion and empathy prevail in the clash over fear and hate. But situations matter too, and imperfect individuals will no doubt act much worse when placed in structures of certain types.

What are those types? Research suggests several things (Zimbardo 2007). First, people behave badly when they are not held personally accountable. People act much worse under shelter of anonymity, as parts of a faceless mass, than they do when they are watched and made accountable as individuals. (Anyone who has ever violated the speed limit, and then slowed down on seeing a police car in the rearview mirror, will know how pervasive this phenomenon is.) Second, people behave badly when nobody raises a critical voice. Asch's subjects went along with the erroneous judgment when all the other people whom they took to be fellow experimental subjects concurred in error; but if even one other person said something different, they were freed to follow their own perception and judgment. Third, people behave badly when the human beings over whom they have power are dehumanized and deindividualized. In a wide range of situations, people behave much worse when the "other" is portrayed as an animal or as bearing a number rather than a name.

We must also, however, look beneath situations to gain some understanding of the forces in the human personality that make decent citizenship such a rare attainment. Understanding what the “clash within” is all about requires thinking about human beings’ problematic relationship to mortality and finitude, about the persistent desire to transcend conditions that are painful for any intelligent being to accept. The earliest experiences of a human infant contain a jolting alternation between blissful completeness, in which the whole world seems to revolve around its needs, and an agonizing awareness of helplessness when good things do not arrive at the desired moment and the infant can do nothing to ensure their arrival.

Infants are increasingly aware of what is happening to them, but they can’t do anything about it. The expectation of being attended to constantly is joined to the anxiety, and the shame, of knowing that one is not in fact omnipotent, but utterly powerless. Out of this anxiety and shame emerges an urgent desire for completeness and fullness that never entirely departs, however much the child learns that it is but one part of a world of finite needy beings. And this desire to transcend the shame of incompleteness leads to much instability and moral danger. The type of social bad behavior with which I am most concerned here can be traced to the child’s early pain at the fact that it is imperfect and unable to achieve the blissful completeness that, in certain moments, it is encouraged to expect. This pain leads to shame and revulsion at the signs of one’s own imperfection. Shame and revulsion, in turn, are all too often projected outward onto subordinate groups who can conveniently symbolize the problematic aspects of bodily humanity, those from which people would like to distance themselves.

The other side of the internal clash is the child’s growing capacity for compassionate concern, for seeing another person as an end and not a mere means. One of the easiest ways to regain lost omnipotence is to make slaves of others, and young children initially do conceive of the other humans in their lives as mere means to their own satisfaction. But as time goes on, if all goes well, they feel gratitude and love toward the separate beings who support their needs, and they thus come to feel guilt about their own aggression and real concern for the well-being of another person.

As concern develops, it leads to an increasing wish to control one’s own aggression: the child recognizes that its parents are not its slaves, but separate beings with rights to lives of their own. Such recognitions are typically unstable, since human life is a chancy business and we all feel anxieties that lead us to want more control, including control over other people. But a good development in the family, and a good education later on, can make a child feel genuine compassion for the needs of others and lead it to see them as people with rights equal to its own.

The outcome of the internal clash is greatly affected not just by situational structures, but also by external political events, which may make the personalities of citizens more or less secure. In writing about religious tensions in the United States, I have documented the way in which specific periods of political and economic insecurity lead to increasing antipathy—and even, at times, violence—toward religious minorities who seem to threaten cherished stabilities (Nussbaum 2008). Such insecurities make it particularly easy to demonize strangers or foreigners, and, of course, that tendency is greatly augmented when the group of strangers is plausibly seen as a direct threat to the security of the nation. Educators cannot alter such events; they can, however, go to work on the pathological response to them, hoping to produce a more balanced reaction.

### **Three abilities of citizenship**

Now that we have a sense of the terrain on which education works, we can say some things—quite tentative and incomplete, but still radical in the present world culture—concerning the abilities that a good education will cultivate. Three values are particularly crucial to decent global citizenship. The first is the capacity for Socratic self-criticism and critical thought about one’s own traditions. As Socrates argued, democracy needs citizens who can think for themselves rather than deferring to authority, and who can reason together about their choices rather than simply trading claims and counterclaims.

Critical thinking is particularly crucial for good citizenship in a society that needs to come to grips with the presence of people who differ by ethnicity, caste, and religion. We will only have a chance at an adequate dialogue across cultural boundaries if young citizens

know how to engage in dialogue and deliberation in the first place. And they will only know how to do that if they learn how to examine themselves and to think about the reasons why they are inclined to support one thing over another—rather than, as so often happens, seeing political debate as simply a way of boasting, or getting an advantage for their own side. When politicians bring simplistic propaganda their way, as politicians in every country have a way of doing, young people will only have a hope of preserving independence and holding the politicians accountable if they know how to think critically about what they hear, testing its logic and its concepts and imagining alternatives to it.

Critical thinking is a discipline that can be taught as part of a school's curriculum, but it will not be well taught unless it informs the entire spirit of a school's pedagogy. Each child must be treated as an individual whose powers of mind are unfolding and who is expected to make an active and creative contribution to classroom discussion. If one really respects critical thinking, then one respects the voice of the child in the planning of the curriculum itself and the activities of the day.

Let us now consider the relevance of this ability to the current state of modern pluralistic democracies surrounded by a powerful global marketplace. First of all, even if we were just aiming at economic success, leading corporate executives understand very well the importance of creating a corporate culture in which critical voices are not silenced, a culture of both individuality and accountability. Leading business educators with whom I've spoken in the United States say that they trace some of our biggest disasters to a culture of yes-people, where critical ideas were never articulated. But our goal is not simply enrichment. Human beings are prone to be subservient to both authority and peer pressure; to prevent atrocities, we need to counteract these tendencies by producing a culture of individual dissent. Asch found that when even one person in his study group stood up for the truth, others followed. One critical voice can have large consequences. By emphasizing each

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person's active voice, we also promote a culture of accountability. When people see their ideas as their own responsibility, they are more likely, too, to see their deeds as their own responsibility.

The second key ability of the modern democratic citizen is the ability to see oneself as a member of a heterogeneous nation—and world—and to understand something of the

history and character of the diverse groups that inhabit it. Knowledge is no guarantee of good behavior, but ignorance is a virtual guarantee of bad behavior. Simple cultural and religious stereotypes abound in our world, and the first way to begin combating these is to make sure that from a very early age students learn a different relation to the world. They should gradually come to understand both the differences that make understanding difficult between groups and nations and the shared human needs and interests that make understanding essential.

This understanding of the world will promote human development only if it is itself infused by searching critical thinking that focuses on differences of power and opportunity. History will be taught with an eye to thinking critically about these differences. At the same time, the traditions and religions of major groups in one's own culture, and in the world, will be taught with a view to promoting respect for one's fellow world citizens as equals, as equally entitled to social and economic opportunity.

In curricular terms, these ideas suggest that all young citizens should learn the rudiments of world history and should get a rich and nonstereotypical understanding of the major world religions. They should then learn how to inquire in more depth into at least one unfamiliar tradition, thereby acquiring tools that can later be used elsewhere. At the same time, they ought to learn about the major traditions, majority and minority, within their own nation, focusing on an understanding of how differences of religion, race, and gender have been associated with differential life opportunities. All, finally, should learn at least one foreign language well. Seeing that another group of intelligent human beings has cut up

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the world differently, and that all translation is interpretation, gives a young person an essential lesson in cultural humility.

An especially delicate task in this domain is that of understanding differences internal to one's own nation. An adequate education for living in a pluralistic democracy must be a multicultural education, by which I mean one that acquaints students with some fundamentals about the histories and cultures of the many different groups with whom they share laws and institutions. These should include religious, ethnic, social, and gender-based groups. Language learning, history, economics, and political science all play a role in pursuing this understanding, in different ways at different levels.

The third ability of the citizen, closely related to the first two, is what I call "narrative imagination." This is the ability to think what it might be like to be in the shoes of a person different from oneself, to be an intelligent reader of that person's story, and to understand the emotions and wishes and desires that someone so placed might have. The cultivation

of sympathy has been a key part of the best modern ideas of progressive education. The moral imagination, always under siege from fear and narcissism, is apt to become obtuse unless it is energetically refined and cultivated through the development of sympathy and concern. Learning to see another human being as a full person, rather than a thing, is not an automatic achievement. It must be promoted by an education that refines the ability to think about what the inner life of another may be like—and also to understand why one can never fully grasp that inner world, why any person is always, to a certain extent, dark to any other.

Instruction in literature and the arts can cultivate sympathy through engagement with many different works of literature, music, fine art, and dance. Thought needs to be given to what the student's particular blind spots are likely to be, and texts should be chosen in consequence. All societies at all times have their particular blind spots—groups within their culture as well as abroad that are especially likely to be dealt with ignorantly and

obtusely. Works of art can be chosen to promote criticism of this obtuseness and to help develop a more adequate vision of the unseen. Through the imagination, we are able to attain a kind of insight into the experience of another group or person that is very difficult to attain in daily life—particularly when our world has constructed sharp separations between groups, and suspicions make any encounter difficult. Through carefully crafted instruction in the arts and humanities, we need to bring students into contact with issues of gender, race, ethnicity, and cross-cultural experience and understanding. This artistic instruction can and should be linked to the “citizen of the world” instruction, since works of art are frequently an invaluable way of beginning to understand the achievements and sufferings of a culture different from one’s own.

There is a further point to be made about what the arts do for the spectator. By generating pleasure in connection with acts of subversion and cultural criticism, the arts produce an enduring and even attractive dialogue with the prejudices of the past, rather than one fraught with fear and defensiveness. Entertainment is crucial to the ability of the arts to offer perception and hope. It’s not just the experience of the performer, then, that is so important for democracy; it’s the way in which performance offers a venue for exploring difficult issues without crippling anxiety.

### **Democratic education on the ropes**

How are the abilities of citizenship doing today? Education of the type I recommend is doing reasonably well in the liberal arts portion of U.S. college and university curricula. By contrast, however, the abilities of citizenship are doing very poorly in the most crucial years of childrens’ lives, the years known as K–12. Here the demands of the global market have made everyone focus on scientific and technical proficiency as the key abilities; the humanities and the arts are increasingly perceived as useless frills that we can prune away to make sure our nation remains competitive. To the extent that they are the focus of national discussion, they are recast as technical abilities to be tested by quantitative multiple-choice examinations, and the imaginative and critical abilities that

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lie at their core are typically left aside. In the United States, national testing has already made things worse, as national testing usually does. The first and third abilities of citizenship are not testable by quantitative multiple-choice exams, and the second is very poorly tested in such a way. (Moreover, nobody bothers to try to test it even in that way.) Across the board, the curriculum is being stripped of its humanistic elements, and the pedagogy of rote learning rules the roost.

Democracies have great rational and imaginative powers. They also are prone to some serious flaws in reasoning as well as to parochialism, haste, sloppiness, and selfishness. Education based mainly on profitability in the global market magnifies these deficiencies, producing a greedy obtuseness and a technically trained docility that threaten the very life of democracy itself—and that certainly impede the creation of a decent world culture. If the real clash of civilizations is, as I believe, a clash within the individual soul—as greed and narcissism contend against respect and love—then as they feed the forces that lead to violence and dehumanization, and fail to feed the forces that lead to cultures of equality and respect, all modern societies are rapidly losing the battle. If we do not insist on the crucial importance of the humanities and the arts, they will drop away because they don’t make money. They only do what is much more precious: the humanities and the arts make a world that is worth living in, people who are able to see other human beings as equals, and nations that are able to overcome fear and suspicion in favor of sympathetic and reasoned debate. □

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