

The education crisis and the depletion of democracy

By Martha Nussbaum
ABC Religion and Ethics | 15 Feb 2011

We are in the midst of a crisis of massive proportions and grave global significance. I do not mean the global economic crisis that began in 2008. At least everyone knows that that crisis is at hand, and many world leaders worked quickly and desperately to find solutions. I mean a crisis that goes largely unnoticed, a crisis that is likely to be, in the long run, far more damaging to the future of democratic self-government: a worldwide crisis in education.

Radical changes are occurring in what democratic societies teach the young, and these changes have not been well thought through. Eager for national profit, nations, and their systems of education, are heedlessly discarding skills that are needed to keep democracies alive.

If this trend continues, nations all over the world will soon be fulfilling Rabindranath Tagore's dire prediction, producing generations of useful machines, rather than complete citizens who can think for themselves, criticize tradition and understand the significance of another person's sufferings and achievements.

"History has come to a stage when the moral man, the complete man, is more and more giving way, almost without knowing it, to make room for the ... commercial man, the man of limited purpose. This process, aided by the wonderful progress in science, is assuming gigantic proportion and power, causing the upset of man's moral balance, obscuring his human side under the shadow of soul-less organization."

The humanities and the arts are being cut away, in both primary/secondary and college/university education, in virtually every nation of the world. Seen by policy-makers as useless frills, at a time when nations must cut away all useless things in order to stay competitive in the global market, they are rapidly losing their place in curricula, not to mention in the minds and hearts of parents and children.

Indeed, what we might call the humanistic aspects of science and social science - the imaginative, creative aspect, and the aspect of rigorous critical thought - are also losing ground, as nations prefer to pursue short-term profit by the cultivation of useful, highly applied skills, suited to profit-making.

Consider these three examples.

(1) In the fall of 2006, the United States Department of Education's Commission on the Future of Higher Education, headed by Bush Administration Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings, released its report on the state of higher education in the nation: [A Test of Leadership: Charting the Future of US Higher Education](#). This report contained a valuable critique of unequal access to higher education. When it came to subject matter, however, it focused entirely on education for national economic gain. It concerned itself with perceived deficiencies in science, technology, and engineering - not even basic scientific research in these areas, but only highly applied learning, learning that can quickly generate profit-making strategies. The humanities, the arts and critical thinking were basically absent.

By omitting them, the report strongly suggested that it would be perfectly all right if these abilities were allowed to wither away, in favour of more useful disciplines.

(2) In the fall of 2009, in Britain, the Labour Government issued new guidelines for its [Research Excellence Framework](#) (REF), which will assess all individuals and departments in British universities. According to the new criteria, 25% of the grade for each researcher will be based on that person's "impact," meaning, basically, contributions to economic growth and success. The humanities and the arts will now be forced to become salesmen for a product, and they will be able to justify their contribution and their claim to funds only if they can demonstrate a direct, short-term economic impact. Since that time, several philosophy departments have been completely closed, some merged with social science, and all humanities programs severely curtailed.

(3) This fall SUNY Albany made drastic cuts in the humanities, completely closing classics, theatre, and some languages, and severely cutting others. This followed similar, though less highly publicized cuts at the University of Nevada and Arizona State.

Not to belabour the obvious, there are hundreds of stories like these, and new ones arrive every day, in the United States, Europe, India and, no doubt, Australia. Given that economic growth is so eagerly sought by all nations, too few questions have been posed, in both developed and developing nations, about the direction of education and, with it, of democratic society.

What I want to do here, and over the ensuing articles, is sketch the case for liberal arts education, in connection with democratic citizenship. Then I shall ask why the United States, so far, is in healthier shape in this regard than Britain and Australia, and make some suggestions about what might be done to address the crisis.

Let me begin my argument with reference to one of the documents in higher education that I most love, John Stuart Mill's [inaugural address as Rector of St. Andrews University](#) - partly because I want this wonderful document to be more widely known and partly because it suggests that the issues that concern me are not parochial American issues, but have been recognized as central to British higher education for a long time, even if in dissent.

In 1867, then, John Stuart Mill praised the Scottish university system for its commitment to a broad-based liberal arts education, which all undergraduates received in addition to specialized preparation in a major subject.

"Scotland," he said, "has on the whole, in this respect, been considerably more fortunate than England." Mill argued that education forms the mind for a life rich in significance and, not least, for active citizenship.

"Government and civil society are the most complicated of all subjects accessible to the human mind: and he who would deal competently with them as a thinker, and not as a blind follower of a party, requires not only a general knowledge of the leading facts of life, both moral and material, but an understanding exercised and disciplined in the principles and rules of sound thinking."

Some of the learning for which Mill praised Scotland, and whose absence he deplored in England, involved the sciences; but much, too, came from the humanities. The "principles

and rules of sound thinking" are learned, he argued, by the study of logic and of philosophical arguments.

He assigned particular value to Plato's dialogues, which teach the student "to accept no doctrine either from ourselves or from other people without a rigid scrutiny by negative criticism, letting no fallacy, or incoherence, or confusion of thought, slip by" - a disposition invaluable, he held, for the survival of republican institutions.

Scottish students also learned a great deal about the complicated world outside Britain: he praised the study of international law for its broadening effect, badly needed in an era of narrow nationalism, saying that this discipline too should be required in all universities.

And finally, Mill praised the way in which the imagination and the moral sentiments are cultivated and refined through the study of poetry and other works of literature.

Were Mill to return to the England whose narrowness he so often deplored, he would find that the principle of broad-based liberal education never did win acceptance there. England has always, like continental Europe, and by derivation Australia, focused on single-subject university training.

But now, in the latest assault on humanistic values represented by the REF, he would see a much deeper threat to the rich idea of learning he favoured. Even Scotland is affected, its erstwhile commitment to liberal education in tatters as a result of the homogeneities imposed by the [Bologna Process](#).

Mill would find a good deal of what he valued in the liberal arts colleges and universities of the United States, but he would see that those commitments to the shaping of the mind and heart are currently under great stress.

Indeed, the values in higher education that Mill rightly cherished are under threat, as we all know, all over the world - for a reason that never occurred to him.

To Mill, the enemy of liberal education was a stuffy form of elitist classical education, practiced mechanically and soullessly, without an eye to the formation of citizens or the enrichment of the soul. Today, the enemy is the relentless thirst for national economic gain that drives education policy in virtually every nation.

How could Mill even imagine a monstrosity like England's REF, in which fully 25% of the assessment mark given to each and every scholar will be awarded for the "impact" of that scholar's work - by which is meant, above all, impact on economic enrichment?

How could he have imagined that disciplines such as history, literature, classical studies and philosophy, would be valued only to the extent that they can sell themselves as tools of a growing economy?

To make my Milleian argument, which is focused on the needs of citizenship, I must begin by simply stating what I take the goal to be.

Let us stipulate, then, that *what we want is a nation that is not just a gain-generating machine, but one in which the people make laws for themselves, expressing their autonomy and their equality in so doing.*

Let us also stipulate that *this nation takes equality seriously, giving all citizens equal entitlements to a wide range of liberties and opportunities, and guaranteeing to all at least a threshold level of a group of key material entitlements.*

You will see here the outline of the "capabilities" or "human development" approach that my work in political philosophy pursues, but I leave the fine points deliberately vague.

What qualities of mind, what skills, would a nation need to produce in its citizens, in order to achieve and sustain a system of this sort?

It is perhaps more vivid to begin from the negative (as Aristotle always does, in writing about the virtues).

So, what qualities of mind would we need to produce if we were focused only on economic growth, and took that to be the indicator of what it is for a nation to advance, or to improve its quality of life? After all, this is the dominant idea of development to this day in development economics, although increasingly under challenge.

The goal of a nation, says this model of development, should be economic growth: never mind about distribution and social equality, never mind about the preconditions of stable democracy, never mind about the quality of race and gender relations, never mind about the improvement of other aspects of a human being's quality of life such as health and education.

One sign of what this model leaves out is the fact that South Africa under apartheid used to shoot to the top of development indices. There was a lot of wealth in the old South Africa, and the old model of development rewarded that achievement (or good fortune), ignoring the staggering distributional inequalities, the brutal apartheid regime, and the health and educational deficiencies that went with it.

Proponents of the old model sometimes like to claim that the pursuit of economic growth will by itself deliver the other good things I have mentioned: health, education, a decrease in social and economic inequality. By now, however, examining the results of these divergent experiments, we have discovered that the old model really does not deliver the goods as claimed.

Achievements in health and education, for example, are very poorly correlated with economic growth. Nor do political liberty and religious freedom track growth, as we can see from the stunning success of China.

So producing economic growth does not mean producing democracy, and it certainly does not mean producing democracies that show respect for the liberty and conscience of all citizens.

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, as recent events in many Indian states show.

In states such as Gujarat and Andhra Pradesh, we have seen the creation of increased GNP per capita through the education of a technical elite who make the state attractive to foreign investors; the results of this enrichment do not trickle down to improve the health and well-being of the rural poor, and there is no reason to think that enrichment requires educating them adequately.

That was always the first and most basic problem with the GNP/capita paradigm of development: it neglects distribution, and can give high marks to nations or states that contain alarming inequalities.

This is very true of education. Given the nature of the information economy, nations can increase their GNP without worrying too much about the distribution of education, so long as they create a competent tech and business elite. India has gone down this path too long.

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, such as Singapore and China - although, as we'll see in a later article, they have recently felt the need for a little more of this ability, in terms of the needs of business culture itself.

I focussed thus far on critical thinking and the role of history. But what about the arts, so often valued by progressive democratic educators? 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 favour of the cultivation of the technical.

Indian parents take pride in a child who gains admission to the Institutes of Technology and Management; they are ashamed of a child who studies literature, or philosophy, or who wants to paint or dance or sing.

But educators for enrichment will do more than ignore the arts; they will fear them, for 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.

Speaking of education in both India and Europe, Rabindranath Tagore said that aggressive nationalism needs to blunt the moral conscience, so it needs people who don't recognize the individual, who speak group-speak, who behave, and see the world, like docile bureaucrats.

Thus Tagore's school, based on the arts, was a radical experiment; it is deeply unpopular today with politicians aiming at national success. We'll later see that Singapore and China have been grappling with this issue in an utterly predictable fashion.

Pure models of education for economic growth are difficult to find in flourishing democracies, since democracy is built on respect for each person, and the growth model respects only an aggregate. However, education systems all over the world are moving closer and closer to the growth model, without much thought about how ill-suited it is to the goals of democracy.

Now let's look at the other model of the goal, the **"human development" model** that I've sketched.

According to this model, what is important is what opportunities, or "capabilities," each person has, in key areas ranging from life, health, and bodily integrity to political liberty, political participation, and education.

This model of development recognizes that each and every person possesses an inalienable human dignity that ought to be respected by laws and institutions. A decent nation, at a bare minimum, acknowledges that its citizens all have entitlements in these and other areas, and devises strategies to get people above a threshold level of opportunity in each.

In a highly general sense, this is the sort of goal Mill has in mind, when he speaks of the contribution of higher education to citizenship.

If a nation wants to promote that type of humane, people-sensitive democracy, one dedicated to promoting opportunities for "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness" to each and every person, what abilities will it need to produce in its citizens? At least the following seem crucial:

- the ability to deliberate well about political issues affecting the nation, to examine, reflect, argue and debate, deferring neither to tradition nor authority;
- the ability to think about the good of the nation as a whole, not just that of one's own local group, and to see one's own nation, in turn, as a part of a complicated world order in which issues of many kinds require intelligent transnational deliberation for their resolution;
- the ability to have concern for the lives of others, to imagine what policies of many types mean for the opportunities and experiences of one's fellow citizens, of many types, and for people outside one's own nation.

Before we can say more about higher 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. And it is these problems that we will examine in the next article.

Read Nussbaum's second article, "*Education and the internal clash of civilizations*" [here](#).

Read Nussbaum's third article, "*Education and American Exceptionalism*" [here](#).