
The Role of the Humanities in Education as a Cornerstone of Democracy, with a Special Emphasis on Environmental Issues*

Martha C. Nussbaum

<https://doi.org/10.7440/res91.2025.10>

I am extremely honored to accept this honorary doctorate from your distinguished university and very grateful to all who made this day possible.

I. The Silent Crisis

We are in the midst of a crisis of massive proportions and grave global significance. No, I do not mean the coronavirus pandemic. At least we all knew that this was a terrible crisis, and one that we had to deal with. No, I mean a crisis that goes largely unnoticed, like a cancer; 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. Thirsty 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 producing generations of useful machines, rather than whole citizens who can think for themselves, criticize tradition, understand the significance of another person's sufferings and achievements, and address the world's acute environmental problems. The future of the world's democracies, and their ability to grapple with urgent environmental problems, hangs in the balance at a time when both democracy and the environment should be central concerns for us all.

What are these radical changes? 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, and also 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.

* Lecture for an honorary doctorate, Universidad de los Andes, Bogotá, Colombia. December 4th, 2024.

This crisis, in my own nation and in many others, is caused by a lack of reflection about what a democratic nation is and what it strives for. The education problem is connected to a paradigm that treats economic growth alone as the index of a nation's progress, rather than, what we ought to prefer, a paradigm that focuses on human equality, and on the ability of each person to choose activities that they have reason to value. I have long referred to this as human capabilities, abilities inherent in the idea of a life worthy of human dignity.

Nothing could be more crucial to democracies that pursue human capabilities than education. Through primary and secondary education, and later at university, young citizens form habits of mind that will be with them all through their lives. They learn to ask questions or not to ask them; to take what they hear at face value or to probe more deeply; to imagine the situation of a person different from themselves or to see a new person as a mere threat to the success of their own projects. They learn to think of themselves as members of a homogeneous group or as members of a nation, and a world, made up of many people and groups, and indeed also of nonhuman animals, all of whom deserve respect and understanding.

The standard way of assessing the progress of a nation is economic growth, measured by GDP per capita. That crude paradigm, of course, neglects distribution, and can give high marks to nations like Colombia or the US where inequality is great and even increasing. It also fails to recognize the fact that the quality and dignity of a human life is plural and not single: it requires focus on health, on political inclusion, on employment, on animals and the environment—in short, a long list of separate rights and opportunities, which is what Amartya Sen and I have long called Capabilities.

The growth paradigm suggests to many educators that applied science and technology are of crucial importance for the future health of their nations. We should have no objection to good scientific and technical education, and I shall not suggest that nations should stop trying to improve in this regard. Indeed, basic science, oriented to truth and not just to profit, is often a strong ally of the humanities in the struggle against educational impoverishment. My concern is that other abilities, equally crucial, are at risk of getting lost in the competitive flurry.

These abilities are associated with the humanities and the arts: the ability to think critically; the ability to transcend local loyalties and to approach world problems as a “citizen of the world”; and, finally, the ability to imagine sympathetically the predicament of another person. If we do not cultivate these abilities, our democracies may be undermined from within, in a process that the great Indian educator Rabindranath Tagore called “a gradual suicide by shrinkage of the soul.”

II. Education for Freedom: Three Abilities

Three capacities are essential to the cultivation of democratic citizenship in today's world— especially in nations that are trying to overcome persistent inequalities and aspire to greater empowerment of all citizens, while thinking well about environmental problems.

First, then, is the capacity for critical examination of oneself and one's traditions, for living what, following Socrates, we may call “the examined life.” This means a life that accepts no belief as authoritative simply because it has been handed down by tradition or become familiar through habit, a life that questions all beliefs, statements, and arguments and accepts only those that survive reason's demand for consistency and for justification. Training this capacity requires developing the ability to reason logically, to test what one reads or says for consistency of reasoning, correctness of fact, and accuracy of judgment. Testing of this sort frequently produces challenges to tradition, as Socrates knew well when he defended himself against the charge of “corrupting the young.” But he defended his activity on the

grounds that democracy needs citizens who can think for themselves rather than simply deferring to authority, who can reason together about their choices rather than just trading claims and counter-claims. He compared himself to a gadfly on the back of the democracy, which he called a “noble but sluggish horse”: he was stinging the democracy to wake it up, so that it could conduct its business in a more reflective and reasonable way. Modern democracies, like ancient Athens, but even more so, given the nature of modern media, are prone to hasty and sloppy reasoning and to the substitution of angry rhetoric for real deliberation. We need Socratic teaching to fulfill the promise of democratic citizenship.

Socratic 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, class, and religion, and in which group membership leads to unequal life-chances. 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 rather than 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 if they know how to think critically about what they hear, testing its logic and its concepts and imagining alternatives.

Students exposed to instruction in Socratic thinking learn, at the same time, a new attitude to those who disagree with them. In our polarized societies young people often grow up seeing a dispute as like a wrestling match, with winners and losers, where the aim is to defeat and even humiliate the other side. But a good class in Socratic argument will ask students to reconstruct the arguments for positions that they do not agree with—learning, in the process, that the other side does in fact have arguments, and that the two sides may even share some important beliefs.

It is possible, and essential, to encourage critical thinking from the very beginning of a child’s education. But it can take a more mature form in the liberal arts portion of an undergraduate university education, if there is one, through required courses in philosophy, aimed at people who are not seeking to become philosophers, but rather to lead the Socratic “examined life” as democratic citizens.

Let me spend a moment on this point. In most of the world, there is no such liberal arts portion for all university students. That system exists in the US, South Korea, Scotland, and Jesuit universities in many parts of the world. In those nations, students spend roughly two years in general preparation for citizenship and life, the other two in a major subject. Where this system is absent, it’s either no philosophy or all philosophy, no history or all history. Clearly, training young citizens needs this liberal arts element: the time when young people enter university, and often move out of their family’s home, is a crucial time to form independent ideas and skills.

But now to the second part of my proposal. Citizens who cultivate their capacity for effective democratic citizenship need, further, an ability to see themselves as not simply citizens of some local region or group but also, and above all, as human beings bound to all other human beings, and to non-human animals as well, by ties of recognition and concern. They have to understand both the differences that make understanding difficult between groups and nations and the shared human needs and interests that make understanding essential, if common problems are to be solved. This means learning quite a lot both about nations other than one’s own and about the different groups that are part of one’s own nation, as well as about our shared environmental problems.

In the absence of a good grounding for international cooperation in the schools and universities of the world, however, our human interactions are likely to be mediated by the thin norms of market exchange, in which human lives are seen primarily as instruments of gain.

This aspect of education requires a lot of factual knowledge that students who grew up even thirty years ago almost never got, at least in the U. S.: knowledge about the varied subgroups that comprise one's own nation, their achievements, struggles, and contributions; and similarly complex knowledge about nations and traditions outside one's own. We must also teach the facts of climate change and the situation of the world's animals, who suffer greatly at our hands. 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: for example, the facile equation of Islam with terrorism. The first way to begin combating these is to make sure that from a very early age, and continuing through university, students learn a different relation to the world, mediated by correct facts and respectful curiosity. Young people 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, if common problems are to be solved.

The task of teaching intelligent world citizenship seems so vast that it is tempting to throw up one's hands and say that it just cannot be done, so we had better stick with our own nation. Even understanding one's own nation, of course, requires a study of its component groups, and this was rarely done in my own nation in previous eras. It also requires understanding immigration and its history, and that study leads the mind naturally to the problems—including environmental problems—that lead people to migrate.

Consider what it takes even to understand the origins of the products we use in our daily lives: our soft drinks, our clothing, our coffee, our food. In earlier eras, educators like John Dewey, who focused on democratic citizenship, insisted on taking children through the complicated story of the labor that produced such products—as a lesson in the way their own nation had constructed its economy and its menu of jobs, rewards, and opportunities. Today, however, any such story is of necessity, a world story. We cannot understand where even a simple soft drink comes from without thinking about lives in other nations. When we do so, it makes sense to ask about the working conditions of these people, their education, their labor relations, and the environmental depletion often caused by these industries.

And when we think of the plastic bottle that soft drink is sold in, we must also think about our oceans, where whales are choking on plastics. What can we do about that huge problem? All this is global education, and it can begin when children are very young, later to return in the liberal arts portion of university education in a more complicated form.

Young children love animals, so no time is too early to introduce stories of their suffering—from plastics in the ocean, from the cruelties of the factory farming industry, from habitat depletion, through air and water pollution. We share this globe with many other sentient beings, and those other beings suffer greatly from our domination and from the climate change that our often-heedless choices have unleashed. Already in schools, a humanistic approach, combined with correct scientific facts, can begin to nourish a sense of truly global justice and responsibility.

As time goes on, this learning too becomes more sophisticated. I have created a new course for advanced university students and law students (in the US, law is a postgraduate degree) about animal ethics and law; there are other related classes on climate change and the environment, but my ethical and humanistic approach supplies an essential core of value and philosophical theory that steers factual knowledge in a productive direction.

This brings me to the third part of my proposal. Citizens cannot think well on the basis of factual knowledge alone. The third ability of the citizen, closely related to the first two, can be called the narrative imagination. This means the ability to think what it might be like to be in the shoes of a person—or animal—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. As Tagore wrote, "We may become powerful by knowledge, but we attain fullness by sympathy... But we find that this education of sympathy is not only systematically ignored in schools, but it is severely repressed."

The narrative imagination is cultivated, above all, through literature and the arts. Reliance on the arts was the most revolutionary aspect of Tagore's and Dewey's proposals, which used theater, dance, and literature to cultivate the imagination. Through the imagination we may attain a kind of insight into the experience of another that it is very difficult to attain in daily life—particularly when our world has constructed sharp separations, and suspicions that make any encounter difficult. And we also learn what we do not know, and how difficult any understanding of another human being or nonhuman animal is, including one's own understanding of oneself.

The arts and the humanities complement one another. Students study the texts of world literature, art, and music. And they should then have, in addition, opportunities to explore these works (or to create new works of their own) through performance. The arts offer students opportunities to learn through their own creative activity, something that Dewey particularly emphasized. Learning, including learning about hardship and discrimination, enters the personality at a deeper level.

The arts are also crucial sources of both freedom and community. When people put in a play together, dance together, make music together, they have to learn to go beyond tradition and authority, if they are going to express themselves well. The arts teach independence and autonomy.

Finally, the arts are great sources of joy, and this joy carries over into the rest of a young person's education. The mother of my longtime collaborator, Nobel Prize-winning economist Amartya Sen, was a pupil in Tagore's school (as he was later), and she wrote a wonderful book about Tagore as dance teacher and choreographer, aptly entitled *Joy in All Work*. The book shows how all the "regular" education in Santiniketan, which enabled these students to perform very well in standard examinations, was infused with delight because of the way in which it was combined with dance and song. All classes were out of doors, so that children could also study nature and the environment from the very beginning of their education. Children do not like to sit still all day; but they also do not automatically know how to express emotion with their bodies in dance. Tagore's expressive, but also disciplined dance regime was an essential source of creativity, thought, and freedom for all pupils, but particularly, in that case, for women, whose bodies had been taught to be shame-ridden and inexpressive. And this education was continued at a more complex level in Tagore's university, aptly called *Visva-Bharati* or "All the world" university.

There is a further point to be made about what the arts and humanities do for the spectator. As Tagore knew, and as artists have often emphasized, literature and the other arts, by generating pleasure in connection with acts of subversion and cultural criticism, produce an enduring and even attractive dialogue with the prejudices of the past, rather than one fraught with fear and defensiveness. The great African-American writer Ralph Ellison, for example, called his novel *Invisible Man* "a raft of perception, entertainment, and hope" that could help the American democracy "negotiate the snags and whirlpools" that stand between it and "the democratic idea." The image of the raft is taken from Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn*, where Huck (who is white) and Jim (who is Black, and enslaved) have a subversive adventure traveling together on a raft—and the fun they have together leads

to friendship. That friendship ultimately leads Huck to discard the beliefs about racial hierarchy on which he was raised. Entertainment is crucial to the ability of the arts to offer perception and hope. Ellison's novel announced its aim at the outset: it was to work on the "inner eyes" of the reader. Ellison's African-American narrator tells us that he is invisible to the white society around him: but his invisibility is not the result of "a chemical accident to my epidermis." Rather, it results from "a certain deficiency" in the "inner eyes" of society's members, those eyes that look out at the world through their physical eyes. The surreal humor and the linguistic virtuosity of Ellison's novel are crucial to its attempt to woo, and thus to alter, the inner eyes. The novel finds its natural home in the liberal arts portion of a university education, since it is too difficult for younger students.

At the heart of all three of the capacities I have investigated is the idea of freedom: the freedom of the student's mind to engage critically with tradition; the freedom to imagine citizenship in both national and global terms, and to negotiate multiple allegiances with knowledge and confidence; the freedom to reach out in the imagination, allowing another person's experience into oneself—and also imagining vividly the experiences of nonhuman animals in the world we humans have created for them. It is only this bold idea of critical and imaginative freedom that offers democracies lasting strength, as they face an uncertain future.

III. The Three Abilities and Colombia Today

An education rich in the humanities has a great deal to offer my own country, which is sorely in need of all three of these abilities. I think it can also offer a lot to Colombia, as both a diagnostic tool and a roadmap for progress. When I visited your country first, in 2016, I discussed the humanistic philosophical approach to development that I and others have developed—the Capabilities Approach—with the Mayor of Medellín while visiting a new housing project outside the city. The project was designed to provide property rights, education, and access to employment to economically deprived citizens. It was also a place of joy and communal hope, all part of our approach's emphasis on affiliation and the creative use of leisure. I was asked to speak about the approach, but I said and felt that much of what it stands for was already being realized, and they could speak about it better than I.

And when, later, I shared the stage with Sergio Fajardo, discussing the reconciliation process and the emotions of citizenship, in front of an audience of 350 eager people with wonderful questions, I also felt deeply encouraged about the progress that was taking place. Now, however, as I am aware, the nation has entered a period of doubt and uncertainty. Let me return to the virtues of education, which can be realized in schools, in universities, but also in public discussions of many types that can be organized to bring people together to debate the nation's future.

Socratic reasoning is always valuable in democracies, but never more so than when people are anxious and uncertain: for then they tend to become polarized and to substitute rhetoric for argument. This is the situation in my own country, so all of us who care about civil and respectful argument are struggling to keep going and to impart these norms to our students. In Colombia too, polarization must not be permitted to corrupt political discourse. Occasions for deliberation and public debate can be organized, much like my conversation with Fajardo and that audience, which was set up by the University and Parque Explora.

World citizenship is a critical value in all these discussions. Issues such as climate change and biodiversity affect us all and must be addressed cooperatively, if any solution is going to be found. The environmental and legal situation of the nation's animal population also requires informed Socratic discussion. Indeed in the remarkable case of the hippos

imported by Pablo Escobar, a creative legal solution was found, and now Colombia has become one of the first nations in the world to give legal standing to animals, meaning the right to take their grievances to a court of law, represented by an advocate for their rights. Instead of being killed, those hippos have now been transferred to other places in need of more biodiversity. Colombia is increasingly mentioned as a leader in animal law but, of course, a good idea needs consistent and energetic implementation.

But it is perhaps my third ability, the narrative imagination, that is most urgently needed: a cultivation of the imagination that renders us capable of seeing one another not as units of a growth-based calculus but as whole human and nonhuman individuals, each with an inalienable dignity and each with a distinctive point of view on reality. The humanities enrich the imagination and keep it flexible and mobile, and are essential parts of democratic conversation, both in schools and in culture at large. As Ralph Ellison said: they offer a cultivation of our “inner eyes.”

IV. Democracy in the Balance

To what extent has education for freedom, as I have described it, become a reality in the world today? The influence of the radical ideas of Dewey and Tagore has spread worldwide. In every primary school in the U. S., and in many other nations that are aware of Dewey’s influence and of the related influence of Paulo Freire, one will see at least some of Dewey’s ideas realized, as young children learn by doing rather than by rote learning, as they use drama and literature to probe difficult historical and global issues. NGOs the world over use such ideas very creatively, knowing that their task is not to stuff their pupils with facts but to produce minds that seek out learning on their own. The fact that NGO education is purely voluntary makes them seek out techniques that arouse curiosity.

Still, in government schools, and in post-secondary education, applied science and technology are increasingly seen as the prestige subjects—not even basic science but applied skills—easily converted to profit-making strategies. Applied science and technology are important, and nations are surely right to focus on the prosperity that they promise to bring. It would be disastrous, however, if the other parts of a liberal education were short-circuited in the process, producing nations of smart engineers who have little capacity for empathetic imagining and for critical thinking. Such impoverishment of mind would nourish the politics of obtuseness and hatred, all over the world. Furthermore, when my three abilities are cultivated, both pupils and teachers come to school eager for the day when the day is spent in lively interaction, rather than rote learning. Thus, Socratic education holds out hope of stemming the tide of teacher and pupil absenteeism, a chronic problem in schools in most nations, and of pupil indifference, which is a chronic problem in universities in all nations.

I do not believe that Socratic education works only in the presence of a charismatic leader like Tagore. The imagination is a hardy plant. When it is not killed, it can thrive in many places, as I’ve seen it thrive in development projects all over the world, but especially in India, where much of my work with Sen has focused. If NGOs that have no equipment and no money, only heart and mind and a few slates, can accomplish so much, there is no excuse for schools and universities the world over to lag behind. I can best summarize my wish for the future of education in both of our nations with a poem of Tagore’s, addressed to his country:

Where the mind is without fear
And the head is held high,
Where knowledge is free;
Where the world has not been broken

Up into fragments by narrow domestic walls;
Where words come out from the depth of truth;
Where tireless striving
Stretches its arms towards perfection;
Where the clear stream of reason
Has not lost its way into the
Dreary desert sand of dead habit;
Where the mind is led forward
Into ever-widening
Thought and action –
Into that heaven of freedom,
Let my country awaken. (from Gitanjali, translation by the author)

Martha C. Nussbaum

American philosopher. She is the Ernst Freund Distinguished Service Professor of Law and Ethics, appointed in the Department of Philosophy and Law School, University of Chicago, United States.

