

Nussbaum, M.C. (2010). *Not for Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Review by Deborah E. Bordelon

What is the true purpose of an education? Is an educated, well-rounded populace necessary for a democracy to succeed? What role should higher education play in promoting critical thinkers? Martha C. Nussbaum addresses these important questions in *Not for Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities*, inviting us to take a critical view of the impact that educational policies and initiatives have on democratic society. Nussbaum argues that the humanities are an essential component of education; through the humanities, individuals are able to develop critical thinking, creativity, and, most important, empathy. When a large segment of the population lacks these key components, society suffers and enters into a pseudo-democracy governed by those with the most appealing sound bites and those perceived to have the most authority.

In recent years, educational policy from preschool through higher education (P-20) levels has focused on education as a means for individuals to increase their employability in an ever more competitive job market. As Nussbaum points out, when the humanities are diminished in this process, individuals are prepared for a particular job at a particular point in time, but are ill-prepared to evolve and persevere, given the changing nature of the economy and their respective skill sets. This is a result of an educational curriculum stripped down to the information deemed appropriate for passing a test.

Throughout the book, Nussbaum uses exemplars that highlight the components of an education that promotes the critical use of knowledge and incorporates the arts in learning content. She references the work of John Dewey and the Laboratory School at the University of Chicago, Rabindranath Tagore's schools in India, and Bronson Alcott and the Temple School in Boston. Nussbaum posits that nothing short of transformative efforts at the federal, state, and local levels are needed to move the current educational system in the direction exemplified by these schools. The costs of not rethinking and restructuring P-12 and higher education institutions are dire and will affect all aspects of society.

Preparing individuals to be actively involved in their communities and societies may start at home, but is reinforced and

expanded through outside entities such as schools and community agencies. Being able to logically question decisions that you and others around you make, and understanding *how* to question them, are key components of a liberal arts education. Nussbaum advocates the Socratic method to teach logical thinking and promote the deeper understanding of information. The true challenge is moving from the overemphasis on standardized tests that are easy to administer, yet limited in what is measured, to assessments that are more complex and not easily implemented, but more focused on meaningful abilities.

Nussbaum examines the humanities in education through the lenses of profit orientation, democratic ideals, Socratic pedagogy, critical thinking, creativity, and globalization. She stresses that heavy emphasis (and sometimes sole emphasis) on the type of job or income level promised by a given college degree does a disservice to students by not preparing them to be good stewards of their society and to face the challenges of the future. If individuals are not prepared to examine and critically review information fed to them by the media, politicians, and other societal venues, they will be prone to blindly follow the latest propaganda. Focusing solely on the education for economic growth model results in diminishing democracy, though as Nussbaum points out, many education systems worldwide are moving toward this model. Nussbaum touts a human development model that focuses on an individual's ability to holistically and critically think through issues (especially those political issues that affect the nation), values each individual as a worthy member of society, and incorporates the arts to provide a well-rounded citizen with a stronger worldview.

Nussbaum looks to numerous studies that investigate what can happen to a society when individuals do not question the actions or authority of others. In this context, she emphasizes the importance of examining goals for educating a diverse population. Is an education viewed solely as a means of achieving economic success, or are the goals broader but harder to measure, such as supporting active, productive, and empathic citizens?

This trend to limit and diminish diverse perspectives in the rhetoric is apparent in recent elections and the rise of ultraconservative political factions. Some media venues too often portray a global perspective and empathy for societies outside the United States as weaknesses and unpatriotic. These narrow views may be found at all levels of education, from kindergarten to college. But as Nussbaum points out, the attacks on education, regrettably, are coming from all sides and political affiliations. Over the

past decade, the No Child Left Behind legislation has emphasized test performance and focused on the academic areas, particularly reading and mathematics, with social studies and science virtually ignored. If it is not measured by the test, it is omitted from the curriculum. Higher education has not escaped this undue emphasis on skills rather than the power of knowledge and thinking. Pursuit of a liberal arts education has been dismissed as impractical and not useful in achieving career goals. In higher education, this has been particularly evident in the preparation of teachers. As state regulations and outside entities shape teacher education through required courses within a limited number of available hours, curricula become too restrictive to accommodate humanities courses that do not fit in the prescribed program of study. This has hampered students' opportunities to grow and expand beyond the teacher preparation program. Fields such as business, health sciences, and other professions face similar dilemmas.

Education must have a goal beyond the mere development of skills to be used in a workplace. Otherwise, marginalization of the humanities in the curricula across universities means that higher education risks producing students with college degrees, but without the ability to act as critical consumers of information and effective thinkers.

Anyone passionate about the power of education at all levels will welcome the discussion resulting from Nussbaum's argument that democracy needs an educational system that values and promotes the humanities in order to have productive members of society. As Nussbaum states, "Knowledge is no guarantee of good behavior, but ignorance is a virtual guarantee of bad behavior" (p. 81). Education, especially higher education, must actively engage in the battle between education for profit alone and education that advances democracy. The results of complacency are dire. The survival of the United States as a democracy depends upon an educational system that actively prepares future generations to be critical thinkers—adaptable and well-informed. The humanities and the arts provide the venue for achieving these goals. *Not for Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities* provides a strong foundation for moving forward with these transformative efforts.

About the Reviewer

Deborah E. Bordelon is dean of the College of Education at Governors State University in Illinois. Her research interests include literacy education, quality teacher preparation at the traditional and alternative levels, recruitment of teachers in special education, underrepresented populations in gifted

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