Few today argue against the improvement of mathematics, science, and technology instruction as a key component of education reform in the United States. After all, good scientific and technical education will help the United States compete in the globalized economy. Martha Nussbaum, Ernst Freund Professor of Law and Ethics in the philosophy department, law school, and divinity school at the University of Chicago, argues that although this approach to education reform addresses one area of concern, it neglects the development of equally crucial abilities that help ensure the health of all democratic societies and the creation of a decent world culture. 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. Nussbaum maintains that an education grounded in these capacities cultivates human beings and their humanity and makes the world worth living in.

The idea of “liberal education”—higher education that cultivates the whole human being for the functions of citizenship and life in general—has long been widely accepted in the United States. 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. All young citizens should learn the rudiments of world history and gain a rich and nonstereotypical understanding of the major world religions. They should become proficient in at least one foreign language. They ought to learn about the major traditions—majority and minority—within their own nation. We can and must produce students whose moral and political beliefs are not simply a function of talk radio or peer pressure and who have gained the confidence that their own minds can confront the toughest questions of citizenship.
Liberal Education

The idea of “liberal education”—higher education that cultivates the whole human being for the functions of citizenship and life in general—has long been widely accepted in the United States. Indeed, our democracy has based its institutions of higher learning on this idea to a degree unparalleled in the world. Yet this noble pursuit has not been fully realized in our colleges and universities. Some, while using the words “liberal education,” subordinately the cultivation of the whole person to technical and vocational education. Even where education is ostensibly “liberal,” it may not achieve the Stoic’s notion of liberating the mind from the bondage of habit and custom to produce people who can function with sensitivity and alertness as citizens of the whole world.

A nation’s shift to a democratic society entails far more than free elections. A society that is going to overcome traditional barriers of race, class, and wealth must, according to Dewey, “see to it that its members are educated to personal initiative and adaptability.”

In my view, three abilities are crucial for citizenship in a pluralistic, democratic society enmeshed in a globalized world:

1. The capacity for Socratic self-criticism and critical thought about one’s own traditions

Although some parents may object to this sort of teaching—as they have since the time of Socrates, who lost his life on the charge of “corrupting the young”—we may give them Socrates’ own answer: 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. Rabindranath Tagore, the influential Indian poet, novelist, and educator who won the Nobel Prize for literature in 1913, was animated throughout his life by a hatred of dead convention and a love of independent thought. Most education, he said in a lecture in 1933, is “a mere method of discipline which refuses to take into account the individual . . . a manufactory specially designed for grinding out uniform results.” He strongly encouraged independence of mind and questioning of convention, particularly for women, who at the time were largely encouraged to be passive receptacles of tradition. In a 1936 lecture, Tagore urged women to “open their hearts, cultivate their intellect, pursue knowledge with determination. They have to remember that unexamined blind conservatism is opposed to creativity.”

John Dewey, the leader of democratic education reform in the early 1900s, explicitly connected the importance of critical thinking to the health of democracy in his path-breaking book, Democracy and Education (1916). Democracy, Dewey stressed, “is more than a form of government; it is primarily a mode of associated living, of conjoint communicative experience”—a noteworthy distinction, particularly so in today’s geopolitical environment. A nation’s shift to a democratic society entails far more than free elections. A society that is going to overcome traditional barriers of race, class, and wealth must, according to Dewey, “see to it that its members are educated to personal initiative and adaptability.” Criticism of custom, which Dewey saw as being at the heart of democracy since its inception in ancient Athens, is a linchpin of this formation of citizens. In ancient Athens, he noted, “custom and traditioinary beliefs held men in bondage.” People were led to think Socratically, with a focus on rational argument, by the evident inadequacy of tradition for democratic life. Education then and now must support “the struggle of reason for its legitimate supremacy.”

In short, the examined life produces freedom in the mind and, hence, vigor in the nation; conversely, unexamined life threatens the health of democratic freedom.

2. The ability to see oneself as a member of a heterogeneous nation and world

Students should develop an understanding of the history and character of the diverse groups that inhabit our world. For Dewey, this was not a major focus, but it followed from his insistence that education must produce flexible citizens who can adapt their thought to the nature of the current reality. Tagore was perhaps more focused on this cosmopolitan idea, given his work on developing a universalistic “religion of man.” His school cultivated this idea by inviting faculty from all over the world to teach about their nation’s groups, problems, and traditions and by having students learn about all the major religions—even celebrating their holidays.

Today, given the nature of global interdependence and the fact that many of our interactions as global citizens are mediated by the impoverished norms of market exchange, we need this second ability more than ever. All young citizens should learn the rudiments of world history and gain a rich and nonstereotypical understanding of the major world religions. They should learn how to inquire in more
depth into at least one unfamiliar tradition, thus acquiring tools that they can later use in other realms. They should become proficient in at least one foreign language. 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.

Becoming citizens of the world demands that students step away from the comfort of assured truths, from the nestling feeling of being surrounded by people who share one’s convictions and passions. If one begins life as a child who loves and trusts his or her parents, it is tempting to want to reconstruct citizenship along the same lines, finding in an idealized image of nation or leader a surrogate parent who will do our thinking for us. Through cross-cultural inquiry, students may realize that what they have taken to be natural and normal—and therefore what they are most comfortable with—is merely parochial and habitual. Fostering a greater knowledge of the world and its peoples will develop students who can operate as world citizens with greater sensitivity and understanding.

3. The ability to sympathetically imagine the lives of people different from oneself

This third ability of the citizen, closely related to the first two, can be called the narrative imagination. This means the ability to imagine 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, wishes, and desires that person might have. The cultivation of sympathy has been a key part of the best modern ideas of progressive education. Both Dewey and Tagore gave it major emphasis. Dewey argued that the arts—drama, dance, literature, music, the fine arts—were modes of intelligent perception and experience that should play a crucial role in education, forming the civic imagination. He protested against the usual sort of education in which “achievement comes to denote the sort of thing that a well-planned machine can do better than a human being can.” Similarly, in India, Tagore wrote about the role of the arts in his school: “We may become powerful by knowledge, but we attain fullness by sympathy . . . We find that this education of sympathy is not only systematically ignored in schools, but it is severely repressed.” Both Tagore and Dewey felt that the cultivation of imaginative sympathy was a key prop to good citizenship and that children naturally had this ability, but it had to be made more sophisticated and precise through education.

The arts are crucial sources of both freedom and community. When people put on a play together, they have to learn to go beyond tradition and authority if they are going to express themselves well. The sort of community created by the arts is nonhierarchical, a valuable model of the responsiveness and interactivity that a good democracy will also foster in its political processes.

Finally, the arts are great sources of joy for children and for adults. Participating in plays, songs, and dances fills children with joy, and this joy carries over into the rest of their education, enlivening their imaginations in a way that continues long after all specific learned facts are forgotten. Disciplined study of the arts elevates them well above just a kind of distracting fun and games. Yet the education of sympathy is being repressed once again today, as arts and humanities programs are increasingly being cut back in schools in many nations in favor of a focus on technical and scientific education, which is seen as the key to a nation’s financial success.

Democratic Education on the Ropes

How are the abilities of citizenship faring in the world today? Very poorly, I fear, although education of the type recommended here is doing reasonably well in the liberal arts portion of U.S. college and university curricula. Outside the United States, many nations whose curricula have not historically included a liberal arts component are now striving to build one because they acknowledge its importance in crafting a public response to the problems of pluralism, fear, and suspicion their societies face. Whether reform in this direction will occur, however, is hard to say: liberal education has high financial and pedagogical costs. Teaching of the sort I recommend needs small classes, or at least sections, where students get copious feedback on frequent writing assignments.

We cannot and should not hope to produce a nation of students who can write excellent papers about Socratic arguments, although this is a sensible goal for some institutions. But we can hope to produce a nation full of students who have examined their beliefs Socratically and who have mastered some techniques by which they can push that inquiry further. We can and must produce students whose moral and political beliefs are not simply a function of talk radio or peer pressure and who have gained the confidence that their own minds can confront the toughest questions of citizenship.

With regard to developing world citizens, contemporary debates about the curriculum frequently imply that the idea of a “multicultural” education is a new fad, with no antecedents in long-standing educational traditions. In fact, Socrates grew up in an Athens already influenced by such

This spirit of multiculturalism and the goal of producing world citizens should not be confused with—and indeed is profoundly opposed to—identity politics, which holds that one’s primary affiliation is with one’s local group, whether religious or ethnic or based on sexuality or gender.

ideas in the fifth century B.C. This spirit of multiculturalism and the goal of producing world citizens should not be confused with—and indeed is profoundly opposed to—identity politics, which holds that one’s primary affiliation is with one’s local group, whether religious or ethnic or based on sexuality or gender. Under the label of “multiculturalism,” identity politics sometimes has led to a new antihumanist view that celebrates difference in an uncritical way and that denies the very possibility of common interests and understandings that take one outside one’s own group. In addition to avoiding this serious pitfall, careful consideration needs to be given to texts chosen for study so that they address students’ particular blind spots. All societies at all times have their blind spots—groups both within their culture and abroad that are especially likely to be dealt with ignorantly or obtusely. This is not political correctness but, rather, the cultivation of humanity.

Progress in terms of developing students’ narrative imaginations and sympathy is decidedly mixed as well. At one time, Dewey’s emphasis on learning by doing and on the arts would have been second nature in any American elementary school. Now it is under threat even at the Dewey Laboratory School in Chicago. As usual, national testing has made things worse in the United States: at least the first and third abilities described above are not testable by quantitative multiple-choice exams, and the second is very poorly tested in such ways. (Moreover, nobody bothers to try to test it, even in that way.) Whether a nation is aspiring to a greater share of the market, such as India, or struggling to protect jobs, such as the United States, the imagination and the critical faculties are often seen as useless paraphernalia, and people have increasing contempt for them. Thus, the humanities are turned into rapid exercises in rote learning, often packaged in state-approved textbooks, and the political debate comes to be focused on the content of these textbooks, rather than on the all-important issue of pedagogy.

We need to cultivate our students’ “inner eyes,” and this means carefully crafted instruction in the arts and humanities, which will 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, because works of art are frequently an invaluable way of beginning to understand the achievements and sufferings of a culture or group different from one’s own.

Conclusion

Democracies have great rational and imaginative powers. They also are prone to some serious flaws in reasoning, parochialism, haste, sloppiness, and selfishness. Education based mainly on profitability in the global market magnifies these deficiencies, producing a greedy obtuseness that threatens the very life of democracy itself. We need to listen, once again, to the ideas of Dewey and Tagore, favoring an education that cultivates the critical capacities, fosters a complex understanding of the world and its peoples, and educates and refines the capacity for sympathy—in short, an education that cultivates human beings and their humanity, rather than producing generations of useful machines. 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. But they do something far more precious than that by generating vital spaces for sympathetic and reasoned debate, helping to build democracies that are able to overcome fear and suspicion and, ultimately, creating a world that is worth living in.

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