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# Good and Risky: the Promise of a Liberal Education



Tim Cook for The Chronicle Review

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On the very first page of her slim new book, *Not for Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities*, the philosopher Martha Nussbaum warns, "We are in a crisis of massive proportions and grave global significance." She's not talking about a calamity caused by climate change, nor is she referring to nuclear proliferation, global

poverty, or unchecked population growth.

No, the worldwide crisis that frightens Nussbaum is the decline of a model of liberal education based on the arts and humanities. Although a liberal-arts education has never been common in most of the world, she thinks that this decline puts contemporary industrial societies at risk of "producing generations of useful machines, rather than complete citizens who can think for themselves."

On the final page of Diane Ravitch's new book, *The Death and Life of the Great American School System*, the historian of education notes, "At the present time public education is in peril. Efforts to reform public education are, ironically, diminishing its quality and endangering its very survival."

Both Nussbaum and Ravitch see a crisis in education brought on in part by an emphasis on testing and corporate-management techniques. For both, the crisis in our education systems is a crisis for our democracy.

For several years now, Martha Nussbaum has argued for a mode of understanding human beings (and some other animals) that emphasizes holistic cultivation of diverse capacities. Critical of philosophical perspectives that pay attention to only one mode of understanding or to a narrow band of cognition, she has advocated an approach to philosophy that takes emotion seriously, and an approach to understanding that is more open to literature and the arts than analytic philosophy has typically been.

Diane Ravitch's career as a historian of education has taken her into the highest reaches of policy making. Having documented the failure of well-intentioned efforts at decentralization in the 1970s, she became an advocate for accountability and school choice

during the Clinton and Bush administrations. Her new book, however, is severely critical of the methods of tracking school performance, and of the unintended consequences of forcing an ethos of consumer choice into the public realm of the local school.

Both *Not for Profit* and *Death and Life* argue that it is an educational and political disaster to continue the retreat from broad humanistic study in favor of rote learning that can be evaluated in multiple-choice tests. Although significant differences exist between their approaches to education, the two authors' rejection of the corporatization of learning allies them with the work of the cultural-literacy advocate E.D. Hirsch.

Ravitch and Hirsch have been strong critics of the Bush-era school reforms whose spirit of hollow but well-financed accountability persists in the Obama era. In *Death and Life*, Ravitch shows in detail how efforts to save our public schools through market-based policies and supposedly data-driven decision making have succeeded only in further degrading our ability to offer a high-quality education to American youngsters. The "No Child Left Behind" emphasis on accountability was supposed to give states the ability to identify problems and tackle them in measurable ways, but instead it created a culture of strategizing for tests and of blaming teachers.

Ravitch had once supported opening school districts to market forces like parental choice and visible performance data, but now, like Nussbaum, she worries that those reforms have taken the joy and purpose out of learning. As Hirsch and others have pointed out, instead of giving students the opportunity to have strong emotional and cognitive encounters with well-told stories, we have drilled them into thinking that effective reading is a technique with measurable outcomes, to be evaluated on standardized tests.

The antidote to rote learning and narrow skill-building is the cultivation of curiosity through active learning. For Nussbaum, that means a reflexive, Socratic pedagogy emphasizing the critical examination of oneself as well as what is taken for granted in the opinions of others. For Ravitch, it means developing a vision of broadly practical educational purpose and a curriculum "responsible for shaping character, developing sound minds in healthy bodies, ... and forming citizens for our democracy." Hirsch opts for a more direct approach to identify the knowledge base that all citizens should have: "Giving everybody more knowledge makes everybody more competent, and creates a more just society. Since knowledge is the great equalizer, the schools have a huge opportunity and responsibility to provide more equal life chances for all students, no matter where they come from."

Nussbaum's orientation is toward process rather than content, and she draws on the work of theorists like John Dewey and Friedrich Froebel, who emphasized "children's own activity as the source of their learning," she writes. Education creates autonomy, preparing citizens for political participation. That means learning to abandon passivity, as Dewey said, changing from a position of "inert reciprocity and restraint to one of buoyant outgoing energy." Hirsch is at the other end of the education-reform spectrum. He doesn't want to depend on the buoyant energy of children to dictate what the curriculum should look like;

he wants us to reach some consensus on what we think is important for our compatriots to know. Ravitch agrees that standards for content are crucial for educational reform, and that a discussion of what we consider essential knowledge is healthy for our common culture.

Although Nussbaum, Ravitch, and Hirsch have different views of what goes into a liberal education, they do agree that such an education is crucial for a polity of citizens rather than of subjects. The goal, both reflexive and pragmatic, is for students to become independent thinkers and autonomous subjects whose independence and autonomy are not compromised by interaction with others. Kant's notion of enlightenment as "emergence from self-imposed immaturity" suits their views very well. Education should prepare students to become citizens capable of civil disagreement. On the one hand, that purpose seems like common sense, but these days it also seems utopian, given what passes for discourse in our decidedly uncivil public sphere.

Nussbaum's optimistic view of liberal education doesn't just aim to produce civility; it winds up having a specific political content. It seems fair to say that if we cultivate a Socratic spirit of argument and reflexive self-examination, the result will be better thinkers and citizens able to advance their individual projects even as they contribute to progress toward the common good. But she goes on to claim that if we cultivate a rich experience of the arts, the result will be men and women who are more caring, who have the imagination to understand the dilemmas and opportunities of others and will therefore work to support more opportunity for everyone. A skeptic might sum up the argument this way: A good education based on the liberation of a child's capacity for action and an innate aversion to seeing others suffer just happens to produce people who resemble contemporary American liberals, people much like Nussbaum herself. This is not, we are told, an education with the crass goal of producing individuals who can succeed economically; that's why her book is called *Not for Profit*. This is not, we are told, an education focused on content. But this supposedly process-oriented education would in the United States produce individuals with political views that ensure that they will vote with the center-left section of the Democratic Party.

Not all defenders of a broad education equate learning with developing cosmopolitan liberals exhibiting great sensitivity to suffering. Peter Berkowitz, who recently published the op-ed essay "Why Liberal Education Matters" in *The Wall Street Journal*, bemoans the infringement of speech on university campuses stemming from a fear that one might offend a group on the lookout for insults to its identity. He has argued elsewhere that "our students and faculty need to learn to be less sensitive. ... The cultivation of sensitivity sharpens antennae for hurtful words and ideas, and encourages complaining whenever they sting." For Berkowitz, politically correct sensitivity can be a weakness as well as a virtue. A senior fellow at Stanford's Hoover Institution, he thinks it essential that citizens study the great works of literature, philosophy, and religion, and that they acquire a sense of both the capacity and limitations of the sciences. Although he disagrees with Nussbaum about the type of citizen a liberal education produces, he does emphasize that such an education "represents the culmination of a citizen's preparation for freedom."

With regard to teaching art to produce the right kind of sensitivity, Nussbaum seems to realize that one will have to censor the content of the art that the students encounter: "The imaginative component of democratic education requires careful selectivity." Indeed, she puts scare quotes around the word "literature" when she uses it to refer to those books that just don't teach the right kind of activity or play. Rousseau, an author she is fond of quoting, was also sensitive to that selectivity, but he was clear about the illusions that his *Émile* would have to swallow in order to become a good citizen and not just an educated individual. In other words, Rousseau acknowledged the tension between the flourishing of the person and the formation of the citizen. That is a tension missing in many of those who defend the positive political import of liberal education. Ravitch writes that "a democratic society cannot long sustain itself if its citizens are uninformed and indifferent about its history, its government, and the workings of its economy." Nussbaum, Berkowitz, Ravitch, and Hirsch all seem convinced that if you just teach the correct version of the truth, and the correct version of art, then education will lead to "responsible citizenship" without personal (or philosophical) loss.

I wish this were so, for I, too, am a strong advocate of the potentially positive social outcomes of a liberal education. I, too, believe that the liberal arts have pragmatic import, and that an education in the humanities, arts, and sciences is healthy for modern representative democracy because it creates citizens more capable of making thoughtful decisions about their representatives or about key issues. But we must also recognize that even though education may be salutary for a republic, it doesn't follow that all those who are educated will become defenders of the educator's policies. Cosmopolitanism can be stimulated through active learning, but so can nationalism; partisans of equality can mount their arguments more strongly because of their liberal education, but so can defenders of hierarchy. It is at best disingenuous (and probably counterproductive) to defend a liberal education because it will produce people whose opinions the defender finds congenial.

The humanities are rightly seen as the heart of a liberal education, and in recent years many observers have bemoaned their decline at the university level. The rise of interdisciplinarity has not diminished the hyperspecialization in the academy, and the resultant pursuit of status through esoteric language has deepened the gulf between humanists and the public. Advanced work in literature, the arts, and critical theory—although it may reject profit and standardized testing—has certainly not promoted the education of citizens for responsible participation in representative democracies. The ironic sophistication that ruled universities in the 1990s and early 2000s and the development of theoretical "posthumanism" today aren't especially fertile soil for planting trees of freedom and responsible citizenship.

Notwithstanding their theoretical and ideological differences, the scholars cited here all urge that we not abandon the humanistic foundations of education in favor of narrow, technical forms of learning intended to give quick, practical results. It's an important and timely plea because the pursuit of so-called useful educational results continues apace, and because the threats to humanistic education are indeed profound. But "uncritical groupthink," to use Nussbaum's phrase, isn't to be found only among the test designers evaluating No Child Left Behind statistics. Groupthink can also be found in humanities

departments. As Louis Menand has recently noted, our system of graduate education, though it pays lip service to critical thinking, "is not reproducing itself so much as cloning itself." Don't let the verbal iconoclasm fool you: "Academics don't want to appear to be conformists: their success depends on it."

An honest defense of liberal learning must be prepared to acknowledge the extraordinary variety of ways in which the arts and sciences can be taught or put to use. We cannot promise specific political and social results without undermining our credibility as humanists (or even posthumanists) willing to critically examine our own presuppositions. A pragmatic, reflexive approach to liberal arts (including the sciences) would be open to political irrelevance as well as to making a contribution to the public good. A pragmatic, reflexive approach would allow for profit as well as for self-examination—for practical, measurable success at specific tasks as well as for self-consciousness and empathy. A pragmatic, reflexive approach to education would enable students to discover what they love to do, to get better at it, and then to be able to explain why what they love to do might be of interest to somebody else.

That approach to education might not produce either compassionate, cosmopolitan liberals or practitioners of what the Hoover Institution calls "the virtues of a free society." But a pragmatic, reflexive approach to the liberal arts would give us an enhanced opportunity to experience the world without undue reliance on unquestioned authority, while creating an opening through which we can share that experience with others. That still sounds like "emergence from self-imposed immaturity" to me.

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