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## Book Review: Democratic Education On The Ropes: Martha C. Nussbaum, NOT FOR PROFIT: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities

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# DEMOCRATIC EDUCATION ON THE ROPES

## Martha C. Nussbaum, *NOT FOR PROFIT: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities*

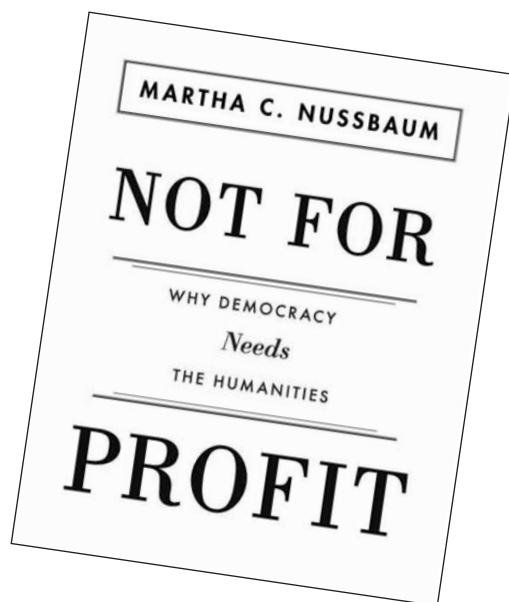
Princeton University Press, 2010. Pp. 158.

By James R. Kelly

There's no end of talk nor complaint about the state of education in the United States. In her *NOT FOR PROFIT: Why Democracy Needs The Humanities*, the highly regarded philosopher (educators will especially appreciate her *Upheavals Of Thought: The Intelligence Of Emotions*, 2001) Martha C. Nussbaum transforms the complaining talk into a more fruitful public conversation by adding, as philosophers are supposed to do, depth and scope. The current education talk – it's hardly a conversation – suffers from an over-belief in the quantitative mode of testing and from an operational economism narrowly tying education to national prosperity. No ivory tower recluse, Nussbaum disbelieves in neither quantitative tests nor economic growth. But when either and, typically, both dominate the talk about education they distort true learning and unwittingly undermine

an authentic national health, which is the proper and rational purpose of national wealth.

Nussbaum's major point is that what happens in the classroom doesn't stay in the classroom. Global interdependence, she insists, involves not merely comparative gross national products but also, at a minimum, wars, nuclear weapons, global warming, decent trade regulations, immigrants, and sex trafficking of minors and thus requires that nations deliberately aim to educate their students to become world citizens. While often including Western Europe, her examples focus on the United States and India. In chicken and egg fashion, the success of Nussbaum's far ranging and far reaching argument – late in the book she calls it a *manifesto* – requires the culture that she urges. But since the moral and the intellectual stakes – and for Nussbaum the conjoining of the intellectual and the moral and the imaginative comprises a humanistic education – are so high, we should not allow a mere paradox to derail us.



On page one we find Nussbaum's thesis *that we are in the midst of a crisis of massive proportions and grave global significance*, which is not the much publicized global economic crisis of failing states caused by failing banks and failing stock markets and morally failing financiers but one more like

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## Book Review



Dennis Hamm, S.J., professor of theology, meets with a student outside Creighton University's humanities building. ©2006 Geoff Johnson

## The unnoticed crisis is the steady erosion of humanities and the arts.

stay or become competitive in the global market. For Nussbaum, this *for profit* narrowing misses not only the point that the telos of education is an integrated human person but the fact that long-term economic vitality depends on the cultivation of imaginative, critical, and empathetic world citizens.

Nothing defeats the high-stakes trifecta of individual lifelong learning *and* national prosperity *and* global solidarity more than an emphasis on rote skills developed to meet the impersonal gaze of standardized testing. What is needed for citizens of the world, she writes, is the study of

al solidarity. In the early grades, music and dance and story reading and telling are the necessary foundation for the imaginative and critical thought fostered on the collegiate level.

# N

ussbaum locates her themes within a long tradition of humanistic educational traditions. Indeed, she recommends *that all colleges and universities should follow the lead of America's Catholic colleges and universities, which require at least two semesters of philosophy, in addition to whatever theology or religious courses are required.* She recalls a long line of humanistic predecessors to affirm that a critical mind unattached to a generous spirit (she even uses the term *soul*) is as likely to produce a narrowing egotistic rationality closed to dialogue and any expanding horizon of justice. Besides the perennials - Socrates, Rousseau, Dewey and Montessori - her sources include Donald Winnicott 1896-1971, Johann Pestalozzi (Swiss, 1746-1827), Friedrich Froebel (German, 1782-1852) Bronson Alcott (1799-1888), and, especially, the

a *cancer largely unnoticed.* The unnoticed crisis is the steady erosion of the humanities and the arts, increasingly considered by policy makers as frills, and the heavy emphasis on applied skills in pre-professional programs suited to the immediate and narrowly defined profit-making seen as necessary to

how the global economy works and of the role of colonialism, of multinational corporations and, by no means the least, an understanding of the world's religious traditions and of the traditions of justice. Facts and analytical skills are not enough. Empathy is required for student growth and national health and glob-

Indian polymath and visionary Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941).

Though this might surprise some readers, Nussbaum finds the American College and University system in better liberal arts shape than in Europe and Asia. But her last chapter rings a world-wide warning gong with the title *Democratic Education on the Ropes*. She chronicles the deep cuts in philosophy and religious studies and the short cuts of teaching large courses without sufficient feedback on student writing. The human growth model of education is labor intensive. She writes that learning to probe, to evaluate evidence, to write papers with well-structured argument, in classes where each student is known as an individual and who is expected to make an active and creative contribution to class room discussion, require small classes, or at least sections, where students discuss ideas with one another, get copious feedback on their frequent writing assignments, and have lots of time to discuss their work with instructors.

On the pre-college level, Nussbaum gives a wide and interesting array of innovative examples from both India and the U.S. In India she contrasts the unimaginative rote learning predominate in the national system with some non-government organizations which attract and retain poor students by their use of drawing, dance, and music and where they teach critical reasoning by involving students in mapping the power structure of their village and in reflecting about how they might get a better deal from the landlords for whom they work as sharecroppers. She lauds the *Model UN Program* and the *Future Problem Solving Program International*. For world history she recommends that students learn how to 'specialize' – to inquire in more depth into at least

one unfamiliar tradition, as she did in her own 5th and 6th grade reports on Uruguay and Austria, which she still remembers while long forgotten is her *in-general* learning about South America and Europe.

She recounts the history of the Chicago Children's Choir whose members are almost all below the poverty line. Being a member takes (and teaches) responsibility. The auditions and practices are after school, and then the challenges are successive. The program's three tiers include school-based choirs for grades 3-8 in 50 elementary schools, neighborhood choirs which give city and state wide concerts and, at the apex, *The Concert Choir*, which tours internationally, performing Bach to African American spirituals with symphonies and opera companies. Foreign language instruction at the earliest possible time is a humanities' no-brainer.

Though she spends little time on the topic, towards the end of the book, she flat-out says, *let's face up to the issue of money*. Arts, she encouragingly says, are relatively inexpensive; children love to dance and sing and to tell and read stories and to put on plays. Sure, imaginative teaching requires major changes

### Her last chapter rings a world-wide warning gong

in teacher training and would also require most school principals to change the ethos of their schools. In this sense, she concedes, humanities education is costly. But she characterizes them as transition costs. Once in place *they will perpetuate themselves...a type of education that gets both students and teachers more pas-*

*sionately involved in thinking and imagining reduces costs by reducing the anomie and time wasting that typically accompany a lack of personal involvement.*

**T**hough she acknowledges the essential role of the family in moral education, she does not mention the highly significant interconnections between family income and stability and educational success empirically documented in the 1966 Coleman Report (*The Equality of Education Opportunity*). And while Nussbaum encourages colleges and universities to follow the example of Catholic institutions and resist any paring down of their philosophy and comparative religion courses in the names of cost efficiency and pre-professional training, she does not mention such Catholic anchoring sources as Newman's *Idea of a University* or the *Ratio Studiorum*, nor does she examine any of the efforts at service learning courses in Jesuit institutions that give students and teachers the concrete experiences that challenge us to be a *citizen of the world*. In this spirit, perhaps Nussbaum's second edition will include *service learning* and the Coleman Report in its index. Junior professors would appreciate a large sized entry on how to get *tenure* as a teacher of citizens of the world. ■