Education and Democratic Citizenship: Capabilities and Quality Education

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Abstract Public education is crucial to the health of democracy. Recent educational initiatives in many countries, however, focus narrowly on science and technology, neglecting the arts and humanities. They also focus on internalization of information, rather than on the formation of the student’s critical and imaginative capacities. This article argues that such a narrow focus is dangerous for democracy’s future. Drawing on the ideas of Rabindranath Tagore, the paper proposes a three-part model for the development of young people’s capabilities through education, focusing on critical thinking, world citizenship, and imaginative understanding.

Key words: Education, Citizenship, Democracy, Tagore, Capabilities

[T]he object of education is the freedom of mind which can only be achieved through the path of freedom — though freedom has its risk and responsibility as life itself has. (Tagore)

Education: two contrasting pictures

I begin with two descriptions of education in India. First, a typical example of education for the rural poor, as conducted by one of the countless non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that work on this issue — the Patna-centered NGO Adithi, created and run by the dynamic activist Viji Srinivasan, before her tragic premature death in 2005. Infrastructure in Bihar is so bad that it took us two days, even in a jeep, to get to this district near the Nepalese border. When we arrived, we found very meager facilities. Teaching mostly went on outside on the ground, or under the shade of a barn (in which rats ran around, occasionally across our feet). Students had very little paper, and only a few slates that were passed from hand to hand. Nonetheless, it was creative education. The literacy program for adult women, called ‘Reflect,’ began the day by asking the 20 or so women to draw (on a large sheet of rough wrapping paper) a map of the...
power structure of their village. We then discussed the map together, as the women identified possible points of intervention that might change the deal they have from the landlords for whom they currently work as sharecroppers. Everyone was animated; the prospect of criticizing entrenched structures of power had obviously led these women to attach great importance to the associated task of learning to read and write. At the end of the meeting we all joined in a song that is a staple of the women’s movement here. It began, “In every house there is fear. Let’s do away with that fear. Let’s build a women’s organization.” It went on to sing the virtues of education, as an antidote to fear.

Next I visited the literacy program for girls, housed in a shed next door. The girls of the village, goat-herds by day, were beginning their school day around 4 p.m. About 15 girls in all, age 6–15, come to this single ‘classroom’ for three hours of after-work learning. There are no desks, no chairs, no blackboard, and only a few slates and bits of chalk. Nonetheless, it all seemed to work, through the resourcefulness and passion of the teachers, themselves poor rural women who have been assisted by Adithi’s programs. Proudly the girls brought in the goats that they had been able to buy from the savings account they have jointly established in their group. Mathematics is taught in part by focusing on such practical issues. After that, the girls performed for us a play that they had recently performed for their village. It was about dowry, and the way this institution makes female lives seem to be of lower value to parents than male lives. Playing both male and female roles themselves, the girls told a story of how one young woman refused to be given in marriage with dowry. Her parents were shocked, and the father of the prospective groom became extremely angry. After much discussion, however, including a description of the way in which dowry is linked to the malnutrition and death of girls and the murders of adult women, the groom himself decided to refuse a dowry. He stood up proudly against his father — and the tall girl playing the groom stood up all the more proudly. Eventually, even the two sets of parents agreed that the new way is better. The marriage took place, and no money changed hands. Teachers told us that the whole village came to the play, and they think it did some good. Meanwhile, the girls giggled with pleasure at the subversive entertainment they had cooked up.

There are many points of interest in this scene, which I have seen replayed with small variations in many different parts of rural India (Nussbaum, 2004). But let me mention a few only: first, the close linkage between education and critical thinking about one’s social environment; second, the emphasis on the arts as central aspects of the educational experience; third, the intense passion and investment of the teachers, their delight in the progress and also the individuality of their students.

Now I turn to another generic story, a story of government schools. This is a story I have heard again and again, in many different regions: from West Bengal’s Pratichi Trust (organized by Amartya Sen), which has done
an extensive study of primary education in several districts of West Bengal (Pratichi Trust, 2002); from the rural activists whose non-governmental work I have just described, as they contrast their work with government schooling; from students in Indian universities, when I asked them about their prior education; from parents who send their children to government schools; and from many Indian-Americans, when I ask similar questions. It is not a universal story. But it is depressingly common (Nussbaum, 2005).

First, teachers often do not show up to teach at all. Second, when they do show up, they often do little real teaching, because they are waiting to offer ‘private tuition’, when the richer families hire them for after-school instruction. This lucrative employment would be drastically undercut if they really did good teaching in the classroom. Third, my central concern in this lecture, even when responsible teaching is done in the classroom, it is still primarily focused on rote learning, as students are crammed with facts and routinized answers for the various examinations they are going to sit. Students report that the experience is quite deadening. It stimulates neither imagination nor critical thinking. Students who have gone on to have some independence of mind typically credit this achievement either to an elite private school (but many of these also stress rote learning) or to a family that worked to keep the mind alive and growing. The one exception is science and technology, where national self-interest has produced generally high-quality education.

Nothing could be more crucial to democracy than the education of its citizens. Through primary and secondary education, young citizens form, at a crucial age, 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; 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, all of whom deserve respect and understanding. So it is not surprising that education has been so emphasized in recent political debates in many developing and developed countries.

Much of this debate, however, has been taking place on a very narrow terrain, that of basic literacy and numeracy, and that of scientific and technological education. To the extent that other subjects, such as history, are vigorously debated, the debate typically focuses on the content of required textbooks (Nussbaum, forthcoming 2007). There is no doubt that scientific and technological education is important, and there is also no doubt that good textbooks are important. It is indeed important that young people read a complex and nuanced version of Indian history, one that stresses the agency and interaction of many different groups and presents an accurate picture of these interactions — as opposed, for example, to the simplistic picture of Hindu purity and Muslim rapacity purveyed by some educators on the Hindu right. In the light of the whole
huge question of how to develop the minds of young children who are going to grow up to be democratic citizens, however, the twin emphasis on technology and textbooks seems extremely narrow. Not only India, but many other modern nations, are ignoring issues of great urgency. I shall argue that abilities connected with the ‘humanities’ and the ‘arts’ are crucial to the formation of citizenship. They must be cultivated if democracies are to survive, through educational policies that focus on pedagogy at least as much as on content.

Education for freedom: three abilities

Let me begin with the model of education for democratic citizenship that I elaborated in my book Cultivating Humanity (Nussbaum, 1997). It has affiliations with the ideas of the progressive educationists John Dewey in the United States and Rabindranath Tagore in India.

Three capacities are essential to the cultivation of democratic citizenship in today’s world. First is a capacity stressed both by Tagore and by Jawaharlal Nehru (whose daughter Indira attended Tagore’s Santiniketan school): 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 capacity 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 with a gadfly on the back of 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, much as ancient Athens — but even more so, given the nature of modern media — are prone to hasty and sloppy reasoning and to the substitution of invective for real deliberation. We need Socratic teaching to fulfill the promise of democratic citizenship.

Critical 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, caste, and religion. 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 to it.

Students exposed to instruction in critical thinking learn, at the same time, a new attitude to those who disagree with them. Consider the case of Billy Tucker, a 19-year-old student in a business college who was required to take a series of ‘liberal arts’ courses, including one in philosophy (Nussbaum, 1997, ch. 1). Interestingly enough, his instructor, Krishna Mallick, was an Indian-American originally from Kolkata, familiar with Tagore’s educational ideal and a fine practitioner of it. Students in her class began by learning about the life and death of Socrates; Tucker was strangely moved by that man who would give up life itself for the pursuit of the argument. Then they learned a little formal logic, and Tucker was delighted to find that he got a high score on a test in that: he had never before thought he could do well in something abstract and intellectual. Next they analyzed political speeches and editorials, looking for logical flaws. Finally, in the last phase of the course, they did research for debates on issues of the day. Tucker was surprised to discover that he was being asked to argue against the death penalty, although he actually favors it. He had never understood, he said, that one could produce arguments for a position that one does not hold oneself. He told me that this experience gave him a new attitude to political discussion: now he is more inclined to respect the opposing position, and to be curious about the arguments on both sides, and what the two sides might share, rather than seeing the discussion as simply a way of making boasts and assertions. The following year he took another course from Mallick, not part of his requirement, on Gandhi and the philosophy of non-violent resistance.

This transformation is precisely what Socrates, and Tagore, had in mind. The idea that one will take responsibility for one’s own reasoning, and exchange ideas with others in an atmosphere of mutual respect for reason, is essential to the peaceful resolution of differences, both within a nation and in a world increasingly polarized by ethnic and religious conflict. Tucker was already a high school graduate, but it is possible, and essential, to encourage critical thinking from the very beginning of a child’s education. The girls in Bihar had this experience. Their entire education developed their critical and self-critical capacities. This freedom is of particular urgency for women, who are so often encouraged to be passive followers of tradition.

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 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.

The international part of this ability is particularly difficult to cultivate in the United States, since Americans are so resistant to serious learning about any other country. Because of America’s size, wealth, and power, they feel perfectly able to go through life without this learning. People in most other nations are less likely to sustain a comparable degree of ignorance. A non-US teacher begins with an advantage; but that is not to say that a great deal of work does not have to be done to make understanding of other nations and cultures complex and nuanced, rather than based on fear and prejudice.

Still more delicate, perhaps, is the related task of understanding differences internal to one’s own nation. An adequate education for living in a pluralistic democracy must be a multicultural education, by which I mean one that acquaints students with some fundamentals about the histories and cultures of the many different groups with whom they share laws and institutions. These should include religious, ethnic, social, and gender-based groups. Language learning, history, economics, and political science all play a role in pursuing this understanding, in different ways at different levels. Awareness of the history of cultural, economic, religious, and gender-based differences is essential in order to promote the respect for another that is the essential underpinning for dialogue. There is no easier source of disdain and neglect than ignorance and the sense of the inevitable naturalness of one’s own way.

This is where good textbooks are indeed important. A good textbook will convey fact in a balanced and accurate way and will give all the narratives their due. It will reveal the complexity of the nation, both past and present, and it will help students understand the internal complexities of groups (Muslims, Christians, the rural poor) that might easily be viewed in too simplistic and monolithic a way. This task includes showing students how and why different groups interpret evidence differently and construct different narratives. Even the best textbook will not succeed at this complex task unless it is presented together with a pedagogy that fosters critical thinking, the critical scrutiny of conflicting source materials, and active learning (learning by doing) about the difficulties of constructing a historical narrative.

This brings me to the third part of my proposal. As the story of the dowry play in Bihar indicates, 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 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” (Tagore, 1961, p. 219).

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.

The arts offer children opportunities for learning through their own creative activity, something that Dewey particularly emphasized. To put on a play about dowry (or a play about racism in the United States) is to learn about it in a way that is likely to seem more meaningful to a child than the reading of a textbook account. 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 on a play together, they have to learn to go beyond tradition and authority, if they are going to express themselves well. And the sort of community created by the arts is non-hierarchical, a valuable model of the responsiveness and interactivity that a good democracy will also foster in its political processes. When I talk to Amita Sen, who danced in Tagore’s dance-dramas, first in Santiniketan and then in Kolkata, I see the revolutionary nature of what Tagore had done for young women in particular, urging them to express themselves freely through their bodies and to join with him in a kind of profoundly egalitarian play. The scandal of this freedom, as young women of good family suddenly turned up on the Kolkata stage, shook convention and tradition to their foundations. So too with the dowry play: to have young teenage girls get up in front of their entire village to perform that play was a deeply subversive act of social criticism.

Finally, the arts are great sources of joy — and this joy carries over into the rest of a child’s education. Amita Sen’s book about Tagore as choreographer, aptly entitled *Joy in All Work*, 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. Children do not like to sit still all day; but they also do not know automatically 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 for women, whose bodies had been taught to be shame-ridden and inexpressive (Amita Sen, 1999).

There is a further point to be made about what the arts do for the spectator. As Tagore knew, and as radical artists have often emphasized,
the arts, by generating pleasure in connection with acts of subversion and cultural criticism, produce an endurable and even attractive dialogue with the prejudices of the past, rather than one fraught with fear and defensiveness. The great African-American artist Ralph Ellison, for example, called his novel *Invisible Man* “a raft of perception, hope, and entertainment” that could help the American democracy “negotiate the snags and whirlpools” that stand between it and “the democratic idea” (Ellison, 1992, Introduction) Entertainment is crucial to the ability of the arts to offer perception and hope. Similarly, the village in Bihar found the girls’ dowry play delightful, rather than deeply threatening.

At the heart of all three of the Tagorean capacities is the idea of freedom: the freedom of the child’s mind to engage critically with tradition; the freedom to imagine citizenship in both national and world terms, and to negotiate multiple allegiances with knowledge and confidence; and the freedom to reach out in the imagination, allowing another person’s experience into oneself. Many politicians the world over do not like educational freedom: they seek the imprisonment of children within a single ‘correct’ ideology. This fearful curtailment of freedom can be found in recent attempts by India’s Hindu right to ‘saffronize’ the curriculum; it can also be a property of Left-wing conceptions, which sometimes also prefer solidarity and correctness to the possibility that someone might choose another way. It is only the risky idea of critical and imaginative freedom that offers democracies lasting strength, as they face an uncertain future.

**The bird nobody noticed**

These ideas have roots in many traditions, old and new. But there is no more wonderful depiction of what is wrong with an education based on mere technical mastery and rote learning than Tagore’s sad story ‘The Parrot’s Training’.

A certain Raja had a bird whom he loved. He wanted to educate it, because he thought ignorance was a bad thing. His pundits convinced him that the bird must go to school. The first thing that had to be done was to give the bird a suitable edifice for his schooling: so they build a magnificent golden cage. The next thing was to get good textbooks. The pundits said, “Textbooks can never be too many for our purpose.” Scribes worked day and night to produce the requisite manuscripts. Then, teachers were employed. Somehow or other they got quite a lot of money for themselves and built themselves good houses. When the Raja visited the school, the teachers showed him the methods used to instruct the parrot. “The method was so stupendous that the bird looked ridiculously unimportant in comparison. The Raja was satisfied that there was no flaw in the arrangements. As for any complaint from the bird itself, that simply could not be expected. Its throat was so completely choked with the leaves from the books that it could neither whistle nor whisper.”
The lessons continued. One day, the bird died. Nobody had the least idea how long ago this had happened. The Raja’s nephews, who had been in charge of the education ministry, reported to the Raja:

“Sire, the bird’s education has been completed.” “Does it hop?” the Raja enquired. “Never!” said the nephews. “Does it fly?” “No.” “Bring me the bird,” said the Raja. The bird was brought to him, guarded by the kotwal and the sepoys and the sowars. The Raja poked its body with his finger. Only its inner stuffing of book-leaves rustled. Outside the window, the murmur of the spring breeze amongst the newly budded asoka leaves made the April morning wistful. (Tagore, 1994)

This wonderful story hardly needs commentary. Its crucial point is that educationists tend to enjoy talking about themselves and their own activity, and to focus too little on the small tender children whose eagerness and curiosity should be the core of the educational endeavor. Tagore thought that children were usually more alive than adults, because they were less weighted down by habit. The task of education was to avoid killing off that curiosity, and then to build outward from it, in a spirit of respect for the child’s freedom and individuality rather than one of hierarchical imposition of information.

I do not agree with absolutely everything in Tagore’s educational ideal. For example, I am less anti-memorization than Tagore was. Memorization of fact can play a valuable and even a necessary role in giving pupils command over their own relationship to history and political argument. That is one reason why good textbooks are important, something that Tagore would have disputed. But about the large point I am utterly in agreement: education must begin with the mind of the child, and it must have the goal of increasing that mind’s freedom in its social environment, rather than killing it off.

Democracy in the balance

To what extent has education for freedom, as I have described it, become a reality in the world today? Tagore’s actual influence has not been widespread. Several reasons can be found for this: the relatively narrow reach of the Bengali language and the poor quality of many English translations of Tagore’s work; Tagore’s own personal charisma and artistic distinction, which made it difficult to convert Santiniketan into a mass movement; and his distaste for bureaucracy, which meant that, unlike Dewey (who was not a creative artist but who was a capable entrepreneur), he did not try to have a mass movement. Even in Santiniketan today, education is routinized; even the dance performances contain little creativity. Dewey, by contrast, has had widespread influence. In every primary school in the United States, and in many other nations that are aware of his influence, 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 enliven curiosity.

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. Progressive education — emphasizing critical thinking and imaginative learning — exacts higher financial and human costs than education that allows rote learning to dominate in history and the humanities. One cannot teach my three abilities with a pupil/teacher ratio of 50/1, which was what Amartya Sen’s Pratichi Trust found in primary education in West Bengal. But its importance for the health of democracy is out of all proportion to these costs. Furthermore, both pupils and teachers come to school eager for the day when the day is spent in lively interaction, rather than rote learning: thus progressive education holds out hope of stemming the tide of teacher and pupil absenteeism, a chronic problem, also well documented in Sen’s report.

I do not believe that Tagore’s experiments work 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 it thrives in Bihar, as it thrives in similar projects I have observed in other regions. 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 government schools the world over to lag behind. I can best summarize my wish for the future of education in today’s world 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
By thee into ever-widening
Thought and action –
Into that heaven of freedom,
My Father,
Let my country awake. (From *Gitanjali*, translation by the author)

References


