

# THE GLOBE AND MAIL

Critical thinking

Teaching the humanities: Vital to society?



Martha Nussbaum Everett Collection

Acclaimed philosopher Martha Nussbaum argues it is. She's the latest sage to raise the alarm against higher education's growing obsession with knowledge you can take to the bank.

John Allemang

From Saturday's Globe and Mail Published on Friday, Jun. 11, 2010 4:45PM EDT Last updated on Saturday, Jun. 12, 2010 1:56PM EDT

University students worried about getting a job see the study of the humanities as a waste of precious time. Research funding (of the new \$200-million Canada Excellence Research Chairs, for example) overwhelmingly favour the useful sciences, politicians see technical skills as the key to global economic success and cultural commentators bash the liberal arts as a naval-gazing luxury. Times are hard for humanists.

But when economic growth becomes the focus of education, both democracy and human decency are in jeopardy. In her new book, *Not For Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities* (Princeton), acclaimed University of Chicago philosopher and legal scholar Martha Nussbaum argues that our culture of market-driven schooling is headed for a fall.

As the critical thinking taught by the humanities is replaced by the unexamined life of the job-seekers, our ability to argue rights and wrongs is silenced. In a society of unreflective, undiscerning yes-men and yes-women, politics becomes meaner and business can invite disasters such as the economic meltdown or the BP oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico.

As Prof. Nussbaum explains in this question-and-answer session from Chicago, our faltering democracies need the intellectual strength that only the humanities can supply.

## **Question: How can the study of the humanities improve our political system?**

Answer: The first thing you get from the humanities, when they're well taught, is critical thinking.

Philosophy in particular can play that role, not just in universities but in schools as well. Thinking about the logical structure of an argument is something we know children can do quite young.

The second thing you get from the humanities is a greater understanding of the world, its different groups of people, their histories, the way they interact.

The third thing you get is the training of the imagination.

You can't have a democracy when people don't learn to put themselves in the shoes of another person, who can't think what their policies mean for others.

**Yet the governments prefer to fund technical education – which tells me that practical, marketable skills are considered more valuable in our democracies.**

People may believe that, but they haven't thought hard enough. First of all, we badly need people who can think critically about authority and tradition.

And that's what democracy has always required, ever since the time of Socrates – not just accepting what's passed down from some kind of authority, but thinking critically about it, examining yourself and figuring out what you really want to stand for. And then having debates in that spirit of respectful critical inquiry with other people – you can't have a democracy that's run simply by sound bites and cultural authorities. And I'm afraid that's what we're increasingly slipping into.

Yes, we call our governments democracies, but I think they're functioning badly now. The atmosphere of vilification is so bad that good people steer clear of the political process. And if they get in, their lives are made miserable.

**Do you think there's something inherently anti-democratic about the study of science, technology, engineering?**

Not at all, if they're taught well with an attention to the basic structures of thought and inquiry.

But what we're getting now is the demand for a quick fix for economic problems using highly applied technical skills but without the focus on basic scientific education – learning about argument, scientific method. So it's that debased version of science that's particularly dangerous.

**Who's doing the debasing?**

It's a lot of people, starting with the politicians who are demanding a greater share of the global economy and are demanding more technical education. But I also see it in parents who want their children to get ahead – there's tremendous pressure to cut the arts and focus on useful marketable skills.

Their feeling is that we need to prune away useless frills to make sure our children remain competitive. Of course, it's very difficult to get into college now, and people equate that with a focus on narrowly marketable skills. But that's the wrong position to take because colleges want well-rounded people – people who excel in the arts are actually going to enhance their college profile.

**When you're advocating for the humanities, it seems that you always have to make a case for their applied value – what's wrong with art for art's sake?**

I think you do have to say what their role is in society, but I don't think you have to portray them as instrumental to some economic end. My gambit in *Not for Profit* is to say they have tremendous value as elements in a political culture.

Because even if people are not sold on the humanities and the arts intrinsically, they do value a healthy democracy. But of course the arts and humanities have value much more broadly in making lives that are rich in meaning, in illuminating aspects of the world like giving us an understanding of human sexuality, or giving us an understanding of racial differences. All of these things are humanly important quite apart from their contribution to political culture.

# critical thinking

the intellectually disciplined process of actively and skillfully conceptualizing, applying, analyzing, synthesizing, and/or evaluating information gathered from, or generated by, observation, experience, reflection, reasoning, or communication, as a guide to belief and action. In its exemplary form, it is based on universal intellectual values that transcend subject matter divisions: clarity, accuracy, precision, consistency, relevance, sound evidence, good reasons, depth, breadth, and fairness

**Do you really believe our leaders want us all to improve our critical thinking? Surely a servile populace suits the needs of many.**

For a while they can coast along in that belief, but something blows up in the end.

NASA, the space administration, is a good example of that. My colleague and I teach about NASA's experience in a course called Decision-making – how a culture of yes-people produced the disaster of the space shuttle Challenger:

You could see in the data that the O-rings were dangerous at a certain temperature, but no one was willing to point that out, and they packaged data the way they thought the leaders would want to hear it.

Now, NASA has reformed its culture and is much more encouraging of dissent.

People are saying BP and all the other oil companies should take a page out of NASA's book and reform their internal culture.

**It's graduation time, and the people who've spent their university years studying the humanities are going into the world. Do you feel obliged to prepare them for the big surprise when their values of critical thinking don't fit the needs of the workplace?**

I'm giving the graduation address at our law school, and I'm thinking of these wonderful people so full of critical ideas who are going to work for law firms. They'll be under great pressure to narrow themselves and do less of that searching. So our responsibility is to strengthen the side of the personality that wants to stay focused on that goal and help them fight the forces in life, including overwork, that militate against that need.

**And then prepare them to be fired from their law firm for doing so?**

You just have to figure out how you in your particular situation are going to do it. It might be through being a critical voice in your law firm. It might be by writing short stories if you can carve out a space. It might be through being a productive alum of your university. Or it might be by bringing up children who can think critically.

*This interview has been condensed and edited*