COMMENTARY

What are universities for?

From medieval seminary to the consultancy campus, universities have served the needs of society – but those needs go beyond economic success or technological advance

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In these pages last week Martha C. Nussbaum pointed out the dangers to democracy of a worldwide crisis in education; specifically, the threat posed to the humanities by funding cuts and what she called "education for profit". In Britain, it has become obvious during the past few months that the present rate of public provision for universities will not be sustained. Higher education, it is said, must take its share of the unavoidable cuts in public expenditure. The grant to the universities has already been reduced by over half a billion pounds. Over the next four years, the reductions are likely to be very much greater. All universities will have to curtail their activities. Some may cease to exist altogether.

In these circumstances, painful choices have to be made. The Labour government's priorities were clear. What must be defended at all costs, it said, are the so-called "STEM" subjects (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics). They are the most important, by virtue of their contribution to the "knowledge economy". All publicly funded research at universities should have an identifiable "impact" on our economy and society. In a document entitled *A Vision for Research*, the Prime Minister's Council for Science and Technology recommended that "universities should seek to professionalise their capabilities and structures . . . so that they operate more like consultancy organisations".

University vice-chancellors also have their priorities. Faced by the prospect of financial disaster, they naturally choose to keep those activities which are profitable and discard those which are not. Academic subjects which do not attract numerous students and large research grants are vulnerable. In the unlovely words of a memorandum in King's College London, it has become necessary to "create financially viable academic activity by disinvesting from areas that are at subcritical level".

In practice, this means the humanities. At King's, the first posts to be proposed for abolition included Britain's only professorship of Palaeography. At Sussex, there will in future be no courses in European history before 1900; this in the University where Peter Burke once taught Renaissance history, and where Asa Briggs pioneered the social history of the nineteenth century.

Unsurprisingly, these developments have aroused furious protest, originating in the Commentary and Letters columns of the *TLS* (see Stefan Collini, November 13, 2009, *et seq.*) but now extending worldwide. Equally vehement has been criticism of such other features of the modern academic scene as the expensive and time-consuming regime of audit and accountability; the pressure on academics to publish continuously, whether or not they have anything new to say; the requirement that they should contribute to the financial resources of their universities by applying for outside research grants, regardless of whether they really need them; the diminishing esteem attached to teaching as opposed to research; the replacement of collegiality in university government by hierarchy and "management"; the high salaries paid to vice-chancellors and other university administrators; and the barbarous prose in which they and government agencies announce their latest diktats. In the *New York Review of Books* (March 10), the great American scholar Anthony Grafton notes with sorrow that British universities, once the envy of the world, now face a crisis of mind and spirit.

There is nothing new or unreasonable about the government's demand that academics should contribute to society at large. Universities have existed in Britain for 800 years. For most of that period, their social function was to transmit to a select band of students the knowledge and intellectual skills that would qualify them for the service of Church and State. In the medieval universities (Oxford, Cambridge, St Andrews, Glasgow and Aberdeen), the arts curriculum (which included mathematics and natural science) was envisaged as a preparatory course that would enable students to move on to one of the three higher faculties of Theology, Law and Medicine, all of them vocational subjects. In medieval Oxford, academics made original contributions to logic, physics and theology, but their essential role was to sustain the Christian religion and to supply graduates for ecclesiastical and royal administration. In the words of the medievalist Sir Richard Southern, "No single cause had so much influence on the development of higher studies as the demands of government".

Employees at the University of Glasgow protesting against potential job cuts, April 2010

After the Protestant Reformation, the desire for religious conformity led to frequent state intervention in university affairs. Purged of Catholic dissidents, the universities were expected to produce a learned ministry who would provide ideological justification for the new regime. Like a modern research council, the Church of England had its "thematic priorities", to which academics were expected to direct their studies. The BA course shifted from its medieval emphasis on logic to a greater concern with rhetoric and classical literature. Oxford and Cambridge increasingly attracted students who had no intention of taking up a clerical career, but who studied the classics because they contained a wide range of useful knowledge, and because a literary and rhetorical education developed the writing and speaking skills needed by the governing elite of gentry, lawyers and royal servants.

During the seventeenth century, the use of Latin in daily life diminished and the technical knowledge offered by classical authors became increasingly obsolete. Pressure to modernize the curriculum mounted. First to change were the Scottish universities, who in the eighteenth century excelled in medicine, science, law and philosophy, and pioneered economics and historical sociology. Oxford and Cambridge stagnated, but remained impregnable because of their importance as seminaries for the Anglican Church. They also provided the political class with a cohesive, classically based culture.

Until the mid-nineteenth century, the universities continued to regard their main purpose as the provision of appropriate mental training for an intellectual and social elite. Although Oxford and Cambridge occasionally produced notable scientists and scholars, the advancement of learning, as opposed to its transmission, was not an essential activity for academics, most of whom anyway spent only a few years in the university before moving on to a church living. Save in Scotland, most vigorous forms of intellectual activity took place outside academia altogether. Gibbon, Macaulay, Faraday and Darwin did not work in universities.

The German conception of a university as a place where teaching was accompanied by original research was exemplified by the University of Berlin, founded in 1810. The idea did not take root in England until the later nineteenth century, when the notion of the university as a knowledge-producing institution strongly appealed to those who believed that Britain's industrial and military success required a vigorous scientific culture. From 1850 onwards, the State repeatedly intervened to reform Oxford and Cambridge by royal commissions and Acts of Parliament. The Anglican monopoly was broken; the celibacy requirement abolished; new honour schools were founded; and "learning and research" became an official academic objective.

By the end of the century, there had emerged in Britain a recognizably modern academic profession. The torch of literary culture, previously carried by the metropolitan man of letters and the serious Victorian periodical, was taken over by the professor and the learned journal. In the provinces, the forerunners of the civic universities appeared, all of them located in industrial cities and, initially at least, much concerned with the application of science to the world of business and manufacture, though also giving a high status to the humanities.

There was another royal commission after the First World War, but thereafter, the universities were allowed to develop in their own way, supported by state financial aid, but largely free from governmental interference. In 1919 the University Grants Committee (UGC) was set up to distribute the Treasury Grant, in accordance with its own criteria. The universities were expected to engage in scholarship, to advance knowledge

and to train young minds in a non-vocational way. As J. M. Keynes put it in 1927, "Their business is to develop a man's intelligence and character in such a way that he can pick up relatively quickly the special details of the business he turns to subsequently". After the Second World War, an increasing volume of public funding was devoted to enabling students to attend universities regardless of their means. In retrospect, it seems a golden age of academic freedom.

In the 1980s, the relationship between the universities and the State changed dramatically. Though favouring deregulation in the economic and financial sphere, Margaret Thatcher's government was strongly *étatiste* when it came to the universities. Convinced that anti-entrepreneurial attitudes among academics were responsible for Britain's economic decline, it abolished the UGC and replaced it by Funding Councils, which, instead of acting as a buffer between the government and the universities, as the UGC had done, took their orders direct from the Secretary of State. In 1987, in a letter to the *TLS*, a junior minister, Robert Jackson, announced that "the apparatus and ethos of the self-regarding academic producer must be dismantled". In order to eliminate what Jackson called "the latent corruptions of the parson's freehold", tenure was abolished and the idea of an academic market warmly encouraged. Universities had to compete against each other for staff and research funding, as well as for students (or "consumers"). Flexibility replaced standard salary scales, thus enabling universities to emulate football clubs in vying to buy "star" professors who would improve their performance in the newly devised assessments of academic "output", which determined how much research funding they would receive. Universities were encouraged to exploit their intellectual property by taking out patents, forming business partnerships and creating science parks and "spin-off" companies. No one talked any longer of the free movement of ideas, or recalled the medieval adage that knowledge was a gift of God which should not be sold.

Thus was born the modern entrepreneurial university, an imitation of the American model, pioneered by Stanford and MIT, in which universities seek research contracts from industrial, pharmaceutical and military concerns, and encourage their members to act as consultants to outside businesses. Universities took on more functions, building large-scale hotel and catering facilities for meetings and conferences, staging concerts and sporting events, collaborating with the regional economy, developing overseas campuses, and (in the case of Oxford and Cambridge) becoming major international publishers. The traditional university, made up of teachers and students, gave way to what Clark Kerr, in his classic *The Uses of the University*, called the "multiversity": a pluralist amalgam of different functions, serving different constituencies and lacking any single purpose.

The management of these often huge institutions became increasingly bureaucratic, not least because of the government's increasing demands for data of every kind. Universities ceased to be governed by communities of academics. Instead, there developed a managerial class, led by vice-chancellors who saw themselves as thrusting business executives rather than self-effacing ancillaries, and paid themselves accordingly, typically three or four times as much as a professor.

These changes coincided with the shift from elite to mass higher education. In 1939 university students in the UK were still a tiny minority: 3 per cent of the relevant age group. In 1963 the Robbins Committee recommended that there should be places for all qualified applicants who wanted them. New universities were founded and by 1979 the participation rate had risen to 12.4 per cent. In 1992, the polytechnics, which had originally been intended to provide a vocational and technical education, were permitted to turn themselves into universities. This altered the statistics dramatically.

Today there are nearly 170 universities and institutions of higher education in the UK, with over 179,000 academic staff and nearly 2.5 million students. At the most recent count, the participation rate is 43 per cent. Going to "uni" has ceased to be the aspiration of a select few and become a rite of passage. Despite the fiction of "parity of esteem", it is obvious that when Coketown College of Further Education turns overnight into the University of Loamshire, its academic objectives will not be those of Warwick or Imperial College. With their emphasis on teaching rather than research and their vocational courses in anything from garden design to football studies, many of the post-1992 universities exemplify what is euphemistically called "diversity of mission".

This huge expansion gives modern universities an economic importance which their medieval predecessors never possessed. By 2008 the higher education sector employed more than 1 per cent of the UK's workforce and generated 2.3 per cent of GDP. Unsurprisingly, the present government has transferred responsibility for higher education to the Department of Business, Innovation and Skills.

History thus shows that the universities have repeatedly changed (or, more often, been made to change) their nature in order to meet new social needs. To their original function of advancing the Christian religion, they added that of educating a governing elite. Subsequently, they embarked upon the advancement of knowledge; and in the late twentieth century they began to provide mass education to the citizens of a democracy. Now that this vast edifice of higher education has become harder to sustain, do they need to change their nature yet again?

Individual institutions will certainly have to show collective self-restraint. They must thin their administrative structures, concentrate resources on teaching and research, and ensure that any peripheral activities are profitable. It is better that stipends should be voluntarily reduced than that highly trained academics should be made redundant. Nothing would do more for internal morale than to see all vice-chancellors following the example of their colleague at Bristol, who has returned a portion of his salary to the University.

A new government will have to resolve the conundrum of how to allow universities to make up their deficits by charging higher tuition fees, while at the same time ensuring that students are not debarred from university education through inability to pay. This task has already been remitted to a committee chaired by Lord Browne. Meanwhile, a new government must above all have a clear view about what the purpose of universities is.

In 1997 the Dearing Committee said that higher education had four aims: to enable individuals to develop their capabilities to their highest potential; to increase knowledge and understanding, both for their own sake and for the benefit of the economy and society; to serve the needs of a knowledge-based economy; and to shape "a democratic, civilized, inclusive society".

These continue to be acceptable objectives, though the Labour government has distorted them by giving pre-eminence to the third and dismissing education for its own sake as, in the words of a recent Education Secretary, "a bit dodgy". The increase of knowledge and understanding is currently measured in an unduly crude fashion. Both the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) and its successor, the Research Excellence Framework (REF), rest on the assumption that continuous publication is a sign of academic health. Yet some of the scholars who have had the most enduring intellectual influence on their subjects published remarkably little in their lifetime: from the Oxford of my youth, I recall the medieval historian K. B. McFarlane and the philosophers J. L. Austin and H. P. Grice. The initial RAE undoubtedly jogged some academics into getting on with that book they always intended to finish sometime, but the repetition of the process has generated much superfluous publication which no one has time to read, while inhibiting the composition of major works of scholarship whose gestation is too long-drawn-out to fit the prescribed time period.

The RAE has also enhanced scholarly introversion by giving no marks to academics for spending time on talking to schools, writing textbooks for students or addressing their work to the general public. Particularly damaging has been its effect on university teaching. Only a minority of academics can hope to achieve any real advance in their discipline, but all have the possibility of making an enduring "impact" on the minds of their pupils. Yet the present system encourages them to spend as little time as possible on teaching by applying for research leave, negotiating reductions in their lecturing and tutorial hours, and competing for research fellowships and professorships to free them from students altogether. Since research, not teaching, brings in the extra money, faculty members everywhere are under orders to devise expensive (and often unnecessary) projects in the hope of securing outside funding. Success in raising money is absurdly equated with academic worth.

It is right that the REF should give applied scientists the opportunity to claim credit for work that brings immediate economic benefit. It is also right to encourage academics to contribute to the social and cultural needs of the wider community. But before that is made a precondition of future research funding, the way of measuring "impact" has to be much more carefully formulated.

Meanwhile, the position of non-STEM subjects is seriously threatened. In this country, the arts and humanities are allocated only 2.8 per cent of the national science and research budget. Across the globe, the situation is even more alarming. A third of the world's learned articles in arts and humanities come from the UK. In many other countries the humanities have scarcely any place. In the developing nations, subjects like law, medicine, information technology and business studies attract the ambitious student. It is in

The Power

Forget all of that end-of-the-pier
palm-reading stuff. Picture a seaside town
in your head. Start from its salt-wrack-rotten smells
and raise the lid of the world to change the light,
then go as far as you want: the ornament
of a promenade, the brilliant greys of gulls,
the weak grip of a crane in the arcades
you've built, ballrooms to come alive at night,
then a million-starling roost, the opulent
crumbling like cake icing . . . .
Now, bring it down
in the kind of fire that flows along ceilings,
that knows the spectral blues; that always starts
in donut fryers or boardwalk kindling
in the dead hour before dawn, that leaves pilings
marooned by mindless tides, that sends a plume
of black smoke high enough to stain the halls
of clouds. Now look around your tiny room
and tell me that you haven't got the power.

PAUL FARLEY

science and technology that the universities of China aspire to lead the world; and the much-cited Shanghai Jiao Tong World Ranking of Universities is based on criteria which take no account of the humanities at all.

Humane scholarship is a vital activity, for without it we would quickly relapse into ignorant solipsism, with no knowledge of the past or comprehension of other languages and cultures. We need scholars to resist the annihilation of our intellectual inheritance, to expose myths and to remind us that there are other ways of thinking and acting than those with which we are familiar. Not all such work can be described as "research". When scientists do research, they aim to find out things which have never been known. But much activity in the humanities is concerned to rediscover and re-interpret what once was known but has subsequently been forgotten. A better word for this is "scholarship", with its emphasis less on new knowledge than on fresh understanding.

The new government should affirm its commitment to the notion of universities as places of humane scholarship as well as of scientific research. This involves investment in the postgraduate courses necessary to ensure a future supply of scholars and the continuation of a research element in the block grants to universities. But the primary purpose of mass higher education should remain the formation of men and women with the intellectual skills, independence of mind and mental flexibility needed by a rapidly changing society. It might be possible to reduce some courses in vocational subjects from three years to two. But if further cuts have to be made, then, rather than slashing the number of student places, it would be preferable to reduce the sums made available to the research councils, not least by ceasing to attach "full economic costs" to project funding, a practice which encourages universities to make excessive applications for grants because they are so profitable.

Students have always regarded university education as a route to a better job; and curricula have repeatedly changed to suit new circumstances. But the present economic crisis has not made the humanities irrelevant. On the contrary, linguistic sensitivity, the capacity to evaluate an argument, an understanding of the past and an awareness of cultural difference remain indispensable for any kind of public activity. In a multi-ethnic Britain and a troubled world, a liberal education is a precondition of intelligent citizenship and international understanding. The new government should be concerned that in the secondary schools, GCSE History is attempted by less than a third of students, and that many of those who take the subject further know nothing of what happened before the twentieth century. It should be worried that Classics survives only in some independent schools and that the decline in the study of modern languages has been spectacular.

The humanities offer an indispensable antidote to the vices which inevitably afflict a democratic, capitalist society. They counter the dumbing down of the media by asserting the complexity of things; and they challenge the evasiveness and mendacity of politicians by placing a premium on intellectual honesty. They also, as Martha Nussbaum emphasized, foster critical thinking about all forms of authority. Soviet Russia and modern China remind us that obsessive concentration on science and technology can be accompanied by indifference to human freedom.

Universities have always served the needs of society and should continue to do so. But those needs go beyond mere economic success. Until the last century, learning was advanced by cultivated members of the leisured class and by those scholars and scientists who managed to obtain some form of patronage. Some original scholarship still takes place outside academia, notably in the field of biography. But the universities have become the chief promoters of that quintessentially human activity, inquiry for inquiry's sake. They cherish science and mathematics as life-enhancing pursuits, regardless of any practical application they may have; and they nourish the humanities, which, by increasing our understanding of art, literature, music, history, religion and philosophy, make our existence more intelligible, more meaningful and more enjoyable.

Governments are right to devote resources to ensuring the people's economic prosperity and physical health. But those goods are not ends in themselves. As Sir Joshua Reynolds once remarked, "Commerce is the means, not the end of happiness or pleasure: the end is a rational enjoyment of life, by the means of arts and sciences". Or, as A. E. Housman wrote: "A life spent, however victoriously, in securing the necessaries of life is no more than elaborate furnishing and decoration of apartments for the reception of a guest who is never to come". We cannot determine the purpose of universities without first asking, "What is the purpose of life?".

COMMENTARY

Skills for life

Why cuts in humanities teaching pose a threat to democracy itself

MARTHA C. NUSSBAUM

We are in the midst of a crisis of massive proportions and grave global significance. I do not mean the global economic crisis that began in 2008; I mean a crisis that goes largely unnoticed, but is likely to be, in the long run, far more damaging to the future of democratic self-government: a worldwide crisis in education.

Radical changes are occurring in what democratic societies teach the young, and these changes have not been well thought through. Thirsty for national profit, nations, and their systems of education, are heedlessly discarding skills that are needed to keep democracies alive. If this trend continues, nations all over the world will soon be producing generations of useful, docile, technically trained machines, rather than complete citizens who can think for themselves, criticize tradition, and understand the significance of another person's sufferings and achievements.

What are these radical changes? The humanities and the arts are being cut away, in both primary/secondary and college/university education, in virtually every nation of the world. Seen by policymakers as useless frills, at a time when nations must discard all useless things in order to stay competitive in the global market, they are rapidly losing their place in curricula, and also in the minds and hearts of parents and children. What we might call the humanistic aspects of science and social science – the imaginative, creative aspect, and the aspect of rigorous critical thought – are also losing ground as nations prefer to pursue short-term profit by the cultivation of the useful and highly applied skills suited to profit-making.

We are pursuing the possessions that protect, please, and comfort us – what Rabindranath Tagore called our material "covering". But we seem to be forgetting about the faculties of thought and imagination that make us human and make our relationships rich human ones rather than relationships of mere use and manipulation. When we meet in society, if we have not learnt to see both self and other in that way, imagining in one another inner faculties of thought and emotion, democracy is bound to fail, because democracy is built on respect and concern, and these in turn are built on the ability to see other people as human beings, not simply as objects.

Science and social science, particularly economics, are also crucial to the education of citizens. When practised at their best, though, these disciplines are infused by what we might call the spirit of the humanities: by searching critical thought, daring imagination, empathetic understanding of human experiences of many different kinds, and understanding of the complexity of the world we live in – a world in which people face one another across gulfs of geography, language, and nationality. More than at any time in the past, we all depend on people we have never seen, and they depend on us. The problems we need to solve – economic, environmental, religious, and political – are global in their scope. None of us stands outside this global interdependency. The global economy has tied all of us to distant lives. The world's schools, colleges, and universities therefore have a large and urgent task: to cultivate in students the ability to see themselves as members of a heterogeneous nation (for all modern nations are heterogeneous), and a still more heterogeneous world, understanding something of the history and character of the diverse groups that inhabit it. Knowledge is no guarantee of good behaviour, but ignorance is a virtual guarantee of bad behaviour.

Does global citizenship really require the humanities? It certainly requires a lot of factual knowledge, and students might get this without a humanistic education – for example, from absorbing the facts in standardized textbooks (assuming these are correct). Responsible citizenship, however, requires a lot more: the ability to assess historical evidence, to use and think critically about economic principles, to compare differing views of social justice, to speak a foreign language, to appreciate the complexities of the major world religions. A catalogue of facts without the ability to assess them, or to understand how a narrative is assembled from evidence, is almost as bad as ignorance. The ability to think well about a wide range of cultures, groups, and nations and the history of their interactions is crucial in enabling democracies to deal responsibly with the problems we currently face. And the ability to imagine the experience and needs of another – a capacity almost all human beings possess in some form – has to be greatly enhanced and refined if we are to have any hope of sustaining decent institutions across the many divisions that any modern society contains.

Socrates proclaimed that "the unexamined life is not worth living for a human being". In a democracy fond of impassioned rhetoric and sceptical of argument, he lost his life for his allegiance to that ideal of critical questioning. Today his example is central to the theory and practice of liberal education in the Western tradition, and related ideas have been central to ideas of liberal education in India and other non-Western cultures. One of the reasons people have insisted on giving all undergraduates a set of courses in philosophy and other humanities subjects is that they believe that such courses will stimulate students to think and argue for themselves, rather than simply deferring to tradition and authority – and that the ability to argue in this Socratic way is, as Socrates proclaimed, important in any democratic society. It is particularly important in societies that need to come to grips with the presence of people who differ by ethnicity, caste, and religion. 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.

Socrates and his students, from "The Better Sentences and Most Precious Dictations" by Al-Moubacchir (thirteenth century)

The Socratic ideal, however, is under severe strain because we are bent on maximizing economic growth. The ability to think and argue for oneself looks dispensable to many people, if what we want are marketable outputs of a quantifiable nature. Furthermore, it is very difficult to measure Socratic ability through standardized tests. To the extent that standardized tests become the norm against which schools must be measured, then, Socratic aspects of both curriculum and pedagogy are likely to be left behind. The economic growth culture has a fondness for standardized tests, and an impatience with teachings that are not easily assessed in this way. If personal or national wealth is the focus of the curriculum, then, Socratic abilities are likely to do badly.

Why does this matter? Think about the Athenian democracy where Socrates grew up. In many respects its institutions were admirable, offering all citizens the chance to debate measures of public importance and insisting on citizen participation both in voting and in the jury system. Indeed, Athens went much further towards direct democracy than any modern society, in that all major offices, apart from the commander of the army, were filled by lot. Even though participation in the Assembly was to some extent limited by labour and residence, with urban and leisured citizens playing a disproportionate role – not to mention the exclusion of non-citizens, such as women, slaves, and foreigners – it was still quite thinkable for a non-elite male to join in and offer something to the public debate. Why did Socrates think that this thriving democracy was a sluggish horse that needed to be stung into greater wakefulness?

If we look at political debate – as portrayed, for example, in Thucydides' *History of the Peloponnesian War* – we find that people did not reason together very well. Rarely if ever did they examine their major policy objectives, or systematically ask how all the things they valued might fit together. So the first problem with lack of self-examination is that it leads to unclarity about goals. Socratic examination does not guarantee a good set of goals, but it at least guarantees that the goals pursued will be seen clearly in relation to one another, and crucial issues will not be missed. Another problem with people who fail to examine themselves is that they often prove all too easily influenced. When a talented demagogue addressed the Athenians with moving rhetoric but bad arguments, they were all too ready to be swayed, without examining the argument. Irresolution is frequently compounded by deference to authority and peer pressure. Socratic critical inquiry, by contrast, is utterly unauthoritarian. Only the nature of the argument counts, not who is making it. Teachers of philosophy betray Socrates' legacy if they cast themselves as authority figures. What Socrates brought to Athens was an example of truly democratic vulnerability and humility: class, fame, and prestige count for nothing.

Nor does the peer group count: the Socratic arguer is a confirmed dissenter, because she knows that the numbers of people who think this or that make no difference. Someone trained to follow argument rather than numbers is a good person for a democracy to have, the sort of person who would stand up against the pressure to say something false or hasty. A further problem with people who lead the unexamined life is that they often treat one another disrespectfully. Socrates' attitude to his interlocutors, by contrast, is exactly the same as his attitude to himself: everyone needs examination, and all are equal in the face of the argument.

Socratic thinking is a social practice. Ideally it ought to shape the functioning of a wide range of social and political institutions. It is also a discipline that can be taught as part of a school or college curriculum. It demands a great deal from faculty, depending as it does on intensive exchange with undergraduates, but its rewards are often correspond-

ingly high. Still relatively common in the United States, with its liberal arts model, it is difficult to find in many European and Asian countries, where students enter university to read a single subject and do not have liberal arts requirements in the first place, and where the normal mode of teaching involves large lectures, with little or no active participation by students and little or no feedback. Yet the aspiration to make even elementary and secondary classrooms Socratic is not utopian; it is well within the reach of any community that respects the minds of its children and the needs of democracy.

Starting in the eighteenth century, thinkers in Europe, North America, and, prominently, India began to break away from the model of education as rote learning and to pursue experiments in which the child was an active and critical participant. European progressive reforms – those of, for example, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Johann Pestalozzi and Friedrich Froebel – had a large and formative influence in the US through the work of Bronson Alcott and Horace Mann in the nineteenth century, and of John Dewey, undoubtedly the most influential and theoretically distinguished American practitioner of Socratic education, in the twentieth. Unlike his European predecessors, Dewey lived and taught in a thriving democracy, and the production of mutually respectful democratic citizens was his central goal. Dewey's experiments have left a profound mark on early education in America, as has his emphasis on the interconnectedness of the world and his focus on the arts.

History offers us a living tradition that uses Socratic values to produce a certain type of citizen: critical, curious, capable of resisting authority and peer pressure. But what is happening today? In many nations in Europe and Asia, and in India, Socrates either never was in fashion or went out of fashion long ago. The US is somewhat better off, because Dewey and his Socratic experiments have had widespread influence. But things are rapidly changing, and we are close to the collapse of the Socratic ideal.

Citizens cannot relate well to the complex world around them by factual knowledge and logic alone. The third ability of the citizen, closely related to those two, is what we can call 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, to understand the emotions and wishes and desires that someone so placed might have. The cultivation of sympathy has been a key part of the best modern ideas of democratic education, in both Western and non-Western nations. Much of this cultivation must take place in the family, but schools, and even colleges and universities, also play an important role. If they are to play it well, they must give a central place in the curriculum to the humanities and the arts, which activate and refine the capacity to see the world through another person's eyes – a capacity that children develop through imaginative play.

According to the British paediatrician and psychoanalyst D. W. Winnicott, play takes place in the space between people – what Winnicott calls a "potential space". Here, first children, then adults, experiment with the idea of otherness in ways that are less threatening than the direct encounter with another may often be. The presence of the other becomes, in play, a source of delight and curiosity, and this curiosity contributes towards the development of healthy attitudes in friendship, love and, later, political life, as Winnicott often emphasized. Democratic equality brings vulnerability. As one of Winnicott's patients perceptively remarked, "The alarming thing about equality is that we are then both children and the question is, where is father? We know where we are if one of us is the father". Play teaches people to be capable of living with others without control: it connects the experiences of vulnerability and surprise to curiosity and wonder, rather than crippling anxiety. In the adult's sophisticated response to a complex work of art, Winnicott saw a continuation of the baby's delight in games and role-playing, and he saw the primary function of the arts in human life as, above all, that of nourishing and extending the capacity for empathy.

Progressive educators realized early on that the most important contribution of the arts to life after school was that of strengthening the personality's emotional and imaginative resources, the ability to understand both self and others. The most elaborate development of the arts as linchpin of early education, however, awaited the twentieth century and the theoretically sophisticated experiments of Tagore in India and Dewey in the US. Dewey insisted that what is important for children is not some contemplative exercise in which children learn to "appreciate" works of art as things cut off from the real world; nor should they be taught to believe that imagination is pertinent only in the domain of the unreal or imaginary. Instead, they need to see an imaginative dimension in all their interactions, and to see works of art as just one domain in which imagination is cultivated. For Tagore, the primary role played by the arts was the cultivation of sympathy, and he noted that this role for education had been "systematically ignored" and "severely repressed" by standard models. The arts, in his view, promote both inner self-cultivation and responsiveness to others. The two typically develop in tandem, since one can hardly cherish in another what one has not explored in oneself.

All societies at all times have their particular blind spots, groups both within their culture and abroad that are especially likely to be dealt with ignorantly and obtusely. Ralph Ellison, in a later essay about his great novel *Invisible Man*, wrote that a novel such as his could be "a raft of perception, hope, and entertainment" on which American culture could "negotiate the snags and whirlpools" that stand between us and our democratic ideal. Through the imagination, he suggests, we are able to develop our ability to see the full humanness of people with whom our encounters in daily life are likely to be superficial at best, at worst infected by demeaning stereotypes – particularly when our world has constructed sharp separations between groups, and suspicions that make any encounter difficult. His novel, of course, takes the "inner eyes" of the white reader as its theme and its target. The hero is invisible to white society, but he tells us that this invisibility is an imaginative and educational failing on its part, not a biological accident on his.

In Ellison's America, the central challenge for the "inner eyes" was that of race, a stigmatized position almost impossible for the conventional white reader to inhabit. For Tagore, a particular cultural blind spot was the agency and intelligence of women, and he ingeniously devised ways to promote a fuller curiosity and respect between the sexes. Both writers claim that information about social stigma and inequality will not convey the full understanding a democratic citizen needs, without participatory experience of the stigmatized position, which theatre and literature both enable. Their reflections suggest that schools and colleges that omit the arts omit essential occasions for democratic understanding. We need to cultivate students' "inner eyes". In other words, the role of the arts in schools and colleges is twofold: they cultivate capacities for play and empathy in a general way, and they address particular cultural blind spots.

The cultivation of imagination is closely linked to the Socratic capacity for criticism of dead or inadequate traditions, and provides essential support for that critical activity. One can hardly treat another person's intellectual position respectfully unless one at least tries to understand the outlook on life and the life experiences that generated it. But there is something further that the arts contribute. The arts, by generating pleasure in connection with acts of understanding, subversion and cultural reflection, produce an endurable and even attractive dialogue with the prejudices of the past, rather than one fraught with fear and defensiveness. That is what Ellison meant by calling *Invisible Man* "a raft of perception, hope, and entertainment". Entertainment is crucial to the ability of the artist to offer perception and hope.

The national interest of any modern democracy requires a strong economy and a flourishing business culture. A flourishing economy in turn requires the same skills that support citizenship, so the proponents of what I call "education for profit" or (to put it more comprehensively) "education for economic growth", have adopted an impoverished conception of what is needed to meet their own goals. But, since a strong economy is a means to human ends, not an end in itself, this argument is less important than the argument concerning the stability of democratic institutions. Most of us would not choose to live in a prosperous nation that had ceased to be democratic. Yet what is on everyone's lips is the need for an education that promotes national development in the form of economic growth. Such an education has recently been outlined by the Spellings Commission Report of the US Department of Education, focusing on higher education. It is being implemented by many European nations, as they give high marks to technical universities and university departments and impose increasingly draconian cuts on the humanities.

The United States has never had a purely growth-directed model of education. Some distinctive and by now traditional features of our system positively resist being cast in those terms. Unlike virtually every nation in the world, we have a liberal arts model of university education. Instead of entering college/university to study a single subject, students are required to take a wide range of courses in their first two years, including courses in the humanities. This model of university and college education influences secondary education. Nor is the emphasis on

The Reach

On a reach of the Thames, late afternoon,
The sun made clear what was in the air:
Flies and seeds, dust and thistledown.
Better to be there, I thought, than anywhere.

That shine on the water shouldn't go to waste.
It was short-lived eternity; I went with it,
Its sky-struck presence, ambling water-paced,
Meant lightlessness wouldn't overtake me yet.

Plenty of others had the same idea as me
To side with a shining and not ending thing,
To measure or be gauged by its authority,
Their kids excited, dogs occasionally jumping in.

They liked that border between wet and dry,
River-herbs, slanted and out-reaching trees
And the way its courses passed them by,
A courier of bits and darks and leftoffs of the breeze.

Of course, light overtook us, as it said it would,
Families receded, not to be caught
In the dark by the river, losing neighbourhood.
Before I went my towpath way, I thought

Of sky and river trying to interlock:
Then, for a moment, my thought couldn't be stopped
Until it reached a western spot, the rock
Down which the first bead of the river dropped.

LEE SANDS

the liberal arts a vestige of elitism or class distinction. From early on, leading US educators connected the liberal arts to the preparation of informed, independent, and sympathetic democratic citizens. The liberal arts model is still relatively strong, but it is under severe stress now in this time of economic hardship.

What sort of education does the old model of development suggest? Education for economic growth needs basic skills, literacy, and numeracy. It also needs some people to have more advanced skills in computer science and technology. Equal access, however, is not terribly important; a nation can grow very nicely while the rural poor remain illiterate and without basic computer resources, as recent events in many Indian states show. This was always the first and most basic problem with the GNP/capita paradigm of development. It neglects distribution, and can give high marks to nations or states that contain alarming inequalities. This is very true of education: given the nature of the information economy, nations can increase their GNP without worrying too much about the distribution of education, so long as they create a competent technology and business elite.

Here we see yet another way in which the United States has traditionally diverged, at least in theory, from the economic growth paradigm. In the US tradition of public education, ideas of equal opportunity and equal access, though never robust in reality, have always been notional goals, defended even by the most growth-focused politicians, such as the authors of the Spellings Report. No system of education is doing a good job if its benefits reach only wealthy elites. It has long been a shameful feature of the United States, a wealthy nation, that access to quality primary/secondary education and especially access to college/university education is so unequally distributed.

After basic skills for many, and more advanced skills for some, education for economic growth needs a very rudimentary familiarity with history and with economic fact – on the part of the people who may turn out to be a relatively small elite. But care must be taken lest the historical and economic narrative lead to any serious critical thinking about class, about race and gender, about whether foreign investment is really good for the rural poor, about whether democracy can survive when huge inequalities in basic life-chances obtain. So critical thinking would not be a very important part of education for economic growth. The student's freedom of mind is dangerous if what is wanted is a group of technically trained obedient workers to carry out the plans of elites who are aiming at foreign investment and technological development. Thus educators for economic growth will not want a study of history that focuses on injustices of class, caste, gender, and ethno-religious membership, because this will prompt critical thinking about the present. Nor will such educators want any serious consideration of, say, the rise of nationalism, of the damages done by nationalist ideals, and of the way in which the moral imagination too often becomes numbed under the sway of technical mastery.

What about the arts and literature, so often valued by democratic educators? An education for economic growth will, first of all, have contempt for these parts of a child's training, because they do not look as if they lead to personal or national economic advancement. But educators for economic growth will do more than ignore the arts. They will fear them. For a cultivated and developed sympathy is a particularly dangerous enemy of obtuseness, and moral obtuseness is necessary to carry out programmes of economic development that ignore inequality. It is easier to treat people as objects to be manipulated if you have never learnt any other way to see them. Aggressive nationalism needs to blunt the moral conscience, so it needs people who do not recognize the individual, who speak group-speak, who behave, and see the world, like docile bureaucrats. Art is a great enemy of that obtuseness, and artists (unless thoroughly browbeaten and corrupted) are not the reliable servants of any ideology, even a basically good one – they always ask the imagination to move beyond its usual confines, to see the world in new ways. So, education for economic growth will campaign against the humanities and arts as ingredients of basic education.

Yet, as with critical thinking, so too with the arts: we discover that they are essential for the goal of economic growth. Leading business educators have long understood that a developed capacity to imagine is a keystone of a healthy business culture. Innovation requires minds that are flexible, open, and creative; literature and the arts cultivate these capacities. Where they are lacking, a business culture quickly loses steam. Again and again, liberal arts graduates are hired in preference to students who have had a narrower pre-professional education, precisely because they are believed to have the flexibility and the creativity to succeed in a dynamic business environment. If our only concern were national economic growth, then, we should still protect humanistic liberal arts education.

The arts, it is said, are just too costly. We can't afford them in a time of economic hardship. Yet the arts need not be expensive to promote. Storytelling, music and dance, drawing and theatre: these are powerful avenues of joy and expression for all, and it does not take much money to foster them. I would argue that a type of education that gets both students and teachers more passionately involved in thinking and imagining actually reduces costs, by reducing the *anomie* and time-wasting that typically accompany a lack of personal investment. As Harvard's President, Drew Faust, put it recently, "Human beings need meaning, understanding, and perspective as well as jobs. The question should not be whether we can afford to believe in such purposes in these times, but whether we can afford not to".

How is education for democratic citizenship doing in the world today? Poorly, I fear. It is still doing reasonably well in the place where I first studied it, namely the liberal arts portion of US college and university curricula. This part of the curriculum, in institutions such as my own, still attracts generous philanthropic support, as rich people remember with pleasure the time when they read books that they loved, and pursued issues open-endedly. During the recent economic crisis, we have even seen an increase in commitment, as charitable donors who value the humanities dig deeper in order to preserve what they love.

It is possible to argue, indeed, that the liberal arts portion of college and university education in the US now supports democratic citizenship better than it did fifty years ago, when students learnt little about the world outside Europe and North America, or about minorities in their own nation. New areas of study, infused into liberal arts courses for all students, have enhanced their understanding of non-Western nations, of the global economy, of race relations, of the dynamics of gender, of the history of migration and the struggles of new groups for recognition and equality. Young people these days rarely leave college as ignorant about the non-Western world as students of my own generation routinely were. Similar changes have taken place in the teaching of literature and the arts: students are exposed to a far wider range of materials, and their "inner eyes" are cultivated by being exposed to the experiences of people of many different types, both within their own nation and abroad.

We cannot be complacent, however. Despite continued support from donors, the economic crisis has led many universities to make deep cuts in humanities and arts programming. Other areas have also had to make cuts, to be sure. But the humanities are widely perceived as inessential, so it seems fine for them to be downsized, and for some departments to be eliminated completely. Even where cuts do not threaten whole departments, they threaten the health of departments, since they mean that vacancies are not filled, and faculty who remain become overworked and unable to do their job well. In Europe, with different traditions of higher education and no strong encouragement, through tax incentives, of humanistic philanthropy or private endowment, things are far worse. The pressure for economic growth has led many European political leaders to recast the whole of university education – both teaching and research – along growth-oriented lines, asking about the contribution of each discipline and each researcher to the economy. (Stefan Collini presented a devastating analysis of the situation in the United Kingdom in these pages: November 13, 2009.) In India the denigration of the humanities began long ago, with Nehru's emphasis on science and economics as the linchpins of the nation's future. Despite his own deep love for poetry and literature, which informs every corner of his political analysis, Nehru concluded that modes of emotional and imaginative understanding must take a back seat to science and technology, and his views prevailed.

The abilities of citizenship are doing very poorly, in every nation, in the most crucial years of children's lives, up to the age of twelve. Here the demands of the global market have made everyone focus on scientific and technical proficiency as the key abilities, while the humanities and the arts, to the extent that they are the focus of discussion, are recast as technical abilities themselves, to be tested by quantitative multiple choice examinations. The imaginative and critical abilities that lie at their core are typically left aside. Whether a nation is aspiring to a greater share of the market, like India, or struggling to protect jobs, like the US, these abilities look like useless paraphernalia. Curricular content has shifted, away from material that focuses on enlivening imagination and training the critical faculties, towards material that is directly relevant to preparation for tests. Along with the shift in content has come an even more baneful shift in pedagogy: away from teaching that seeks to promote questioning and individual responsibility towards force-feeding for good exam results.

The Obama administration has a chance to change the current modus operandi, promoting a richer conception of education and a richer, more qualitative conception of testing. President Obama's own personal values would seem to lead towards supporting such changes: he is famous for his interest in hearing and sifting the arguments on all sides of an issue, and he declares his great interest in "empathy" as a characteristic pertinent to an office as high as that of Justice of the US Supreme Court. In his speeches on education, the President rightly emphasizes the issue of equality, talking about the importance of making all Americans capable of pursuing "the American Dream". But the pursuit of a dream requires dreamers: educated minds who can think critically about alternatives and imagine a large goal – preferably not just the goal of personal or even national enrichment, but goals involving human dignity and democratic debate. President Obama has so far focused, however, on individual income and national economic progress, arguing that the sort of education we need is the sort that serves those two goals. Even more problematically, he repeatedly praises nations of the Far East which, in his view, have advanced beyond us in technology and science education. And he praises such nations in an ominous manner: "They are spending less time teaching things that don't matter, and more time teaching things that do". A life of rich significance and respectful, attentive citizenship is nowhere mentioned among the goals worth spending time on. It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that those "things that don't matter" include many of the things that this essay has defended as essential to the health of democracy. Recently the President has shown a willingness to rethink the nature and content of national testing. Let us hope that this rethinking continues and deepens.

During the era in which people began to demand democratic self-governance, education all over the world was remodelled to produce the sort of student who could function well in this demanding form of government: not a cultivated gentleman, stuffed with the wisdom of the ages, but an active, critical, reflective, and empathetic member of a community of equals, capable of exchanging ideas on a basis of respect and understanding with people from many different backgrounds. Today we still maintain that we like democracy and self-governance, and we also think that we like freedom of speech, respect for difference, and understanding of others. We give these values lip service, but we think far too little about what we need to do in order to transmit them to the next generation and ensure their survival.

This is an edited extract from Martha C. Nussbaum's forthcoming book Not For Profit: Why democracy needs the humanities.