

“Education for growth” and the fate of liberal arts education: Is there a substitute for teaching the canon in “taking care of the world”?

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Martha Nussbaum¹, argues that we are in the midst of a global crisis in education that threatens the stability of democracies. Globally, education systems are increasingly adopting a model of “education for growth” in which the liberal arts are under assault. Further, the humanistic aspects of science and the social sciences are also undermined. The proponents of education for growth seem to believe that we need to choose between their method and the notion of “education for good citizenship,” as if economic interests themselves do not require us to draw on the humanities and arts. Nussbaum warns that if the present trend continues, in twenty years the world will be “a scary place to live in” with people being nothing more than “useful machines” who “don't know how to criticize authority” and “useful profit-makers with obtuse imaginations.”

In Sri Lanka too liberal arts education has come under attack since the early 1970s, initially from the Left which believed that unemployed graduates in the humanities and arts were the main reason for the '71 insurrection. Since then a mismatch perceived between education and employment has been the guiding idea for reforms that shifted the focus of education to a more practical, work-oriented one; to “learning” as opposed to “teaching”. The generally accepted objective of education now is the goal of preparing people for the workplace.

While acknowledging the necessity of focusing on the employability of undergraduates under the prevailing socio-economic conditions, this paper follows Nussbaum and Hannah Arendt among others in arguing that sacrificing the value of liberal arts education for economic growth can have far reaching consequences on the long term stability of our society.

Educators elsewhere have begun to address the challenge posed to the future of human society via the model of “education for growth” by broad basing liberal arts education and recommending it for all instead to limiting it to an elite. This paper takes the position that the place of the canon is central to any discussion on the future of humanities and the arts and any effort to make them contemporary and relevant requires us to remind ourselves that the very essence of a liberal arts education lies in the “spirit of free inquiry undertaken without concern for topical relevance or vocational utility.”²

This paper discusses the value of a canon based liberal arts education in the hope that it will serve to generate discussion on the urgency of recognising the immense significance of the humanities and arts in maintaining the stability and the decency of collective life under democracy and thereby highlight the role it plays in what Arendt has called “taking care of our world.”

¹ Martha C. Nussbaum “The Liberal Arts Are Not Elitist,” *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, February 28, 2010.

² Report of the Task Force on General Education, Harvard University. 2007.