

Education for world citizenship needs to begin early

An interview with Martha Nussbaum

Martha Nussbaum is the Ernst Freund Distinguished Service Professor of Law and Ethics at the University of Chicago, USA. She is the author of numerous influential works including Upheavals of thought: The intelligence of emotions, which includes an account of how young children develop, and Cultivating humanity: A classical defence of reform in liberal education, in which she champions the Greek philosopher Diogenes's idea of thinking of all people as 'citizens of the world' – that is, not being defined by their local origins and group memberships.

As one of the highest-profile philosophers writing today, Professor Nussbaum is noted for grappling with contemporary issues – including her work with Nobel Prize-winning economist Armatya Sen on international development. Her most recent book is *Frontiers of justice: Disability, nationality, species membership*, to be followed in the spring by *The clash within: Democracy, religious violence, and India's future* and in 2008 by *Liberty of conscience: In defense of America's tradition of religious equality*.

In *Cultivating humanity*, Professor Nussbaum writes: "Education for world citizenship needs to begin early. As soon as children engage in storytelling, they can tell stories about other lands and other peoples." With her ideas clearly having so much relevance to the Foundation's agenda on respect for diversity, ECM was keen to explore further Professor Nussbaum's thinking on issues related to young children.

ECM: In Cultivating humanity, you discuss how children's moral faculties develop when their parents start telling them stories, as their narrative imagination leads them to wonder what it's like to be someone else. As they grow older, they draw the lesson of compassion: "That might have been me, and that is how I should want to be treated." This chimes with the way in which many of the Foundation's diversity projects use techniques such as story-telling, theatre and 'persona dolls' among young children growing up in socially diverse environments. Is it ever too soon for the lesson of compassion to be made explicit following

a story? To put it another way, at what age might we realistically engage children in moral philosophy?

Martha Nussbaum: I think that this varies with the child, and so it is those who know the child best who will make the best judgment about it. But it should not be assumed that young children are simply not interested in talking about compassion, and it should especially not be assumed that little girls have more interest in it than little boys. There's some research showing that when girls ask their mothers questions about feelings, they get longer and fuller answers than the boys do, because there is an assumption that girls are interested in feelings and boys not.

I think that children as young as 3 or 4 can be engaged in at least some conversations about how their behavior affects others and why it is bad to do things that hurt others. As time goes on, those conversations can become more general, and children can begin to understand why teasing children because of certain traits they have is very hurtful, and why mockery based on race or disability inflicts great harm.

So many good books for children stress these things, so discussion can easily begin with a story. Because I love elephants and read everything about them that I can, I've recently been reading a fine book for children around ages 4 or 5 about a baby elephant who is teased by the other animals because he is so large and clumsy, and how hurt he feels,

and how his parents and teachers work to solve the problem. (The other children learn that it is quite advantageous to have a long trunk, which can do quite a lot of things, and they start not focusing on his bulk.) Well, this story has an obvious moral, but it is very charming and the pictures are extremely well done, so small children begin to learn things about ostracism and inclusion.

The Foundation's diversity work with young children includes elements of all three things you touch on: introducing new curricula, training educators and reaching out to parents. What do you think that the balance between these three should be?

In undergraduate college or university education, it is wise to focus most on curriculum, since faculty resent any imposition of teacher training programs, and would rather approach teaching issues as the autonomous creators of a curriculum. But of course release time needs to be given for faculty to do this kind of creative planning. Parents can be expected to go along with anything that is working well, because higher education has such prestige in our country at present. With younger children, all three assume, I'd think, a more or less equal importance.

One part of training teachers is getting them ready to approach the school's particular curriculum, and if they are well trained they will be creative agents in the curricular process. So there's a lot of synergy between the first two approaches. Anything that shows respect for teachers as imaginative and creative people is to be applauded, since our country has done such a bad job of showing teachers the respect they deserve. But of course at this level parents need to be very much a part of the process, and it is important to talk with them and get them involved all along the way. I don't think I have anything to say about this that you haven't thoroughly worked through already.

In Upheavals of thought, you note that human infants cultivate from early on capacities for curiosity, cognitive interest, wonder and joy at stimuli around them. You also identify disgust, developed through toilet raining later in childhood, as a root cause of hatred for other groups: a 'ubiquitous reaction' to the realisation that one's own body produces substances that are disgusting is, later in life, a

'magical projection' of this outwards onto some other group who appear different. You suggest some countermeasures: "a type of toilet training that does not encourage a hypertrophy of disgust", and teaching children "that it is wrong to single out a group as the disgusting ones, because we are all equally moral and animal".

Can you expand on the practical implications for parenting and early childhood programmes of recognising the power of disgust and both the necessity and difficulty of attempting to discourage children from projecting it onto an out-group?

I don't think we ought to try to get rid of disgust utterly. It would be quite difficult to do, and probably rather counter-productive. Although disgust does not perfectly track what is dangerous, it is a pretty useful heuristic for the dangerous in daily life, when we don't have time to check things out more thoroughly. If the milk smells disgusting, throw it out! So I don't think that parents should discourage their children's disgust at bad smells and at feces, although they should not reinforce it greatly either. Parents who encourage children to play with their feces are not helping them lead healthy lives, but parents who focus obsessively on disgust in the toilet training process are inculcating pathologies that may eventually cause deep problems.

The main thing that parents need to focus on, though, is the ubiquitous tendency of children to move from disgust at 'primary object' (feces, corpses, etc.) to what I call 'projective disgust', in which an out-group is held to be disgusting (smelly, vile, and so forth). Children love to do this: hence the widespread game of the 'cootie catcher', in which children make paper devices that allegedly catch 'cooties', disgusting bugs, off other children who belong to some out-group. Teachers and parents really need to be on the lookout for this sort of thing, and they need to step in immediately, saying that there is nothing disgusting about that child or those children, and that this game is profoundly hurtful. If it happens in a race or gender context, then it is even worse, and teachers and parents really need to be vigilant lest disgust-stereotypes enter into the conceptions children form of the female, or the African-American, or the Jew, or whatever. In addition to being vigilant, they can also convey

positive images of these groups in the classroom, to counter the disgust images that are out there.

One general problem is the spirit of narcissism that characterises so much of American society. So long as children are brought up to think that the ideal life is one in which they have everything they want, they will continue to see other people merely as agents of their own satisfactions, and they will never learn a form of mutual dependency that is essential for a compassionate culture. Narcissism is an unstable position, because the self is very vulnerable and never has all it needs. So, if the expectation is that narcissistic desires will be gratified, that expectation will constantly be frustrated by reality, and then a kind of reactive aggression takes place, as people try to blame someone else for what they lack.

The demonisation of 'out-groups' has a lot to do with this. People surround themselves with others who make them feel good and they project disgust onto the outsiders. The remedy for this must lie in learning that a good life is not one in which you have everything you want, it is a life in which you are interdependent with others, giving and receiving, acknowledging both shared needs and shared abilities.

You reject the notion of cultural relativism and argue that world citizens can and should criticise, as long as they have first made the effort to respect and understand. We're interested in exploring to what extent you believe compromises should be made with respect to raising young children. For example, an academic who is currently studying children of immigrant families in a five-country study sponsored by the foundation recently reported to us that "some immigrant parents are not comfortable with the way gender difference and modesty issues are handled in their children's preschools. Preschool staff members tend to view the immigrant parents' positions as being backwards and not in the best interest of children." He believes there should be a 'cultural negotiation' over girls' equal right to education.

Another example is where you tell the story in Cultivating humanity of Anna, an American woman who went to work in Beijing: she adopted a Chinese baby and was appalled by how the Chinese

nurse she employed deprived the baby of mental or physical stimulation. You attribute Anna's initial negative reaction to the failure of the American education system to expose her to alternative norms of childrearing, and relate with approval how she came to realise that this was a cultural difference over which she should compromise with the nurse.

These are wonderful examples. In addressing the first, I want to begin by making a distinction between goal and strategy. Even if our goal is to get people to accept the fully equal rights of girls, we won't achieve this result unless we begin by listening to people and engaging them in dialogue. Confronting people over gender roles produces defensiveness, and usually entrenches resistance.

So, one should have an open dialogue – but, even more effectively, one may want to bypass the issue altogether and focus on incentives that will move people to change their attitudes. I've done a lot of work with women's development programs in India, and the most successful are not ideological, they are economic. They set up something desirable, whether a loan or an education program or a work program, preferably all three, that focuses on the role of women and girls, and that gives the women and girls both more power and more prestige in their community. I've seen men sitting around the edges of a women's group that some NGO has established, looking curiously on, as their wives or daughters are drawn into greater control over their daily lives. The men find this interesting, not threatening, because it seems to make the whole village richer than it was before. If those same NGO people had walked into the village saying, "We are here to change your gender roles," they would have had massive resistance. Through the sort of work I describe with the rural poor, India has now reached a point, according to recent surveys, where parents support equal education for girls.

So that is strategy, and I believe very strongly in strategies that do not confront and threaten, but that provide economic incentives and reinforce female agency. This really works, and the Nobel Prize to Mohammed Yunus was extremely well justified. Where goal is concerned, however, I don't think there should be any compromise in the area of education, which is such a key to life opportunities



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across the board. In general I believe that adults should be free to decline opportunities and to live a traditional life, if they have first been given fully equal education and political and employment opportunities. But that point is not reached unless education is free, mandatory, and equal for boys and girls.

About Anna, I can only say that I was treating the example as one involving a neutral difference, one that would not have a profound impact on the person's ability to lead a meaningful life. But I agree that this is not clear. There is too little information contained in the example. I think that American parents probably go to excess in the direction of encouraging agency and autonomy, in the sense that they tend to encourage the perception that a real adult lacks need and dependency on others. Children then learn to be ashamed of their needs for others, and to denigrate people who are obviously needy. And it may be that Chinese parents can err in the direction of reinforcing passivity and the type

of narcissism associated with being catered to in a passive way. We need good studies that compare child-rearing practices across cultures for their effect on personality development, but so little work has been done in this area.

Your chapter in Cultivating humanity entitled “Socrates in the religious university” discusses the tension that can exist in higher educational institutions between a religious remit and encouraging a Socratic determination to question. A report in the uk last year expressed concerns from the viewpoint of future social cohesiveness about a dramatic growth in faith-based preschools, notably Jewish and Muslim. In The end of faith, Sam Harris argues: “Once a person believes – really believes – that certain ideas can lead to eternal happiness, or its antithesis, he cannot tolerate the possibility that the people he loves might be led astray by the blandishments of unbelievers. Certainty about the next life is simply incompatible with tolerance in this one.”

Can faith-based preschools realistically be expected to set children on the path towards becoming world citizens? How can they be encouraged to do so?

I don't know Sam Harris's book, but if I didn't know that he was a contemporary writer I would think that that sentence was written in the early seventeenth century. That was indeed the standard belief then, both in Europe and in America, and on this basis horrible religious repression was defended. But what happened next was that people argued against this sort of view, showing that it was possible to live on terms of mutual respect and reciprocity with people whom one believed to be religiously in error. In Britain, John Locke made this argument forcefully in 1689, but in America Roger Williams made it earlier and even more forcefully, in two books that he wrote in 1644 and 1652 as counterblasts to John Cotton of Massachusetts, who took the Sam Harris position about religion.

Roger Williams not only published one thousand excellent pages on these topics, he also founded a colony, Rhode Island, that put these beliefs to the test, and he proved that Puritans and Anglicans, Roman Catholics and Quakers, Baptists and Native Americans, could all live peacefully together, although they all thought that the others were wrong. (Indeed only about fifteen percent of Americans at the time of the Revolution belonged to any recognized church, religious though most of them were, so you can see that there were very many who, like Williams himself, thought that everyone they saw around them was wrong.) The spirit of Rhode Island and, later, the similar spirit of Pennsylvania impressed people from more repressive states: James Madison's best friend at Princeton was from Pennsylvania, and he is constantly observing how much better life is in Pennsylvania, compared to the orthodox and repressive Virginia. The spirit of Rhode Island is the spirit in which this nation was founded, and we have had lots of problems, but on the whole I think it has been clearly shown that people of different religious convictions can live well together. India is another case of this, despite religious violence fomented by an angry Hindu minority who prefer to be top dog in everything.

When Roman Catholics immigrated in large numbers in the late nineteenth and early twentieth

centuries, this made Americans panic: for this was the first time that faith-based schools were widespread, and many Americans believed that these schools would undermine democracy. In 1949, Paul Blanshard's enormously popular book *American freedom and Catholic power* said that Catholic schools were as big a threat to our country as global communism. But that alarm has proven utterly groundless, and now it is often the parochial schools who pick up the tough job of educating children in the inner city when the public schools have collapsed and the suburban public schools want no part of the problem.

So yes, faith-based schools can do very well in training citizens. The government is fully empowered to set curricular requirements for faith-based schools as well as public schools, and they ought to do so, including world history, the history of minorities in the USA, a robust understanding of the nation's different religious traditions, and the practice of critical thinking. About all of this you won't have complaint from Catholics, though you may from some evangelical parents. Those parents should be told (as they were told by the Tennessee Supreme Court in *Mozert v. Hawkins*) that their children live in a pluralistic nation and that it is the job of the schools to prepare citizens to function effectively, and respectfully, in such a nation.

The Foundation's diversity work is part of an emerging Joint Learning Initiative on Children and Ethnic Divisions. Its working hypothesis is that "Interventions in early childhood make an important contribution to addressing ethnic divisions and creating more integrated and socially cohesive societies." Would you agree?

Absolutely!