Cultivating the Sympathy

In chapter IV “Cultivating Imagination: Literature and the Arts” of her book, *Not for Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities*, Martha Nussbaum discusses how the arts develop the sense of sympathy. She argues that sympathy is the key factor, which connects people to one another. It is the element that allows people to “see the world through another person’s eyes” (Nussbaum, 2010, p. 96) therefore motivating them to act more fairly, just, and compassionately with others. In support of this perspective, Nussbaum cites Donald Winnicott’s findings on imaginative play and Rabindranath Tagore’s use of role-playing (dance and theater).

English psychoanalyst and pediatrician, Donald Winnicott studied children development and came to the conclusion that play was a healthy and necessary aspect of growth. Play teaches children to experiment with “otherness” through what Winnicott called it *potential space*, which combines the world imagination and reality (1971, p. 41). In this manner, children are able to become familiar with the strange and different concepts in a comfortable and secure environment, therefore preparing them for future encounters with different people and cultures (Winnicott, 1971). Furthermore, play develops the child’s sense of wonder and curiosity. When playing, children often place themselves in the shoes of other characters (parents, soldiers, animals, and etc.). This teaches them how to explore the natural world as well as the different cultures and traditions. For example, the nursery rhyme, “Twinkle twinkle little star” can inspire an interest in space, while playing cowboys
and Indians may stimulate an interest in American History or Native American culture.

As a result of play, children become less reluctant and more eager to experience the new and different. Thus with regards to cosmopolitanism, play is a necessary component of life. Since cosmopolitanism’s goal is to combine the new and the known in order to improve the individual’s and humanity’s current situation (socioeconomic, educational, emotional, and etc.), learning how to accept the new is of the utmost importance. Most often, people are told to simple acknowledge and accept differences, but the process of this acceptance is typically ignored and even forgotten. Therefore, it is important to teach children and adults that it is necessary to exercise their creative and imaginative skills, for without them a cosmopolitan lifestyle is impossible.

Likewise, Rabindranath Tagore, Renaissance man of modern India, argued that experience and action is a very important aspect of education. Tagore argued that physically exploring and experiencing nature taught students self-discovering and free creation (Tripathi, 2011, p. 107). It gave them the chance to grow and mature according to their own means and speed as well as taught them that world works in tandem with everything within it. Knowing that the world is simply one giant symbiotic relationship, teaches the individual that likewise, society must act as such. People rely upon one another and for that reason no man is better or worse than the next. They are all equal and must therefore be treated as such. This belief thus translates into Tagore’s support for role-play, for only through physical
interactions, can one learn about social relationships and understanding. Through
dance and theater, Tagore used role-playing to explore controversial issues such as
religion, sexism, racism, and more.

By forcing his student to physically embody and characterize something
completely foreign to their native perspectives and beliefs, Tagore was able to teach
them sympathy for others (Nussbaum, p. 104). Role-playing requires the individual
to step outside of his comfort zone and ignore feelings of shame and self-
consciousness. This ultimately makes the individual more compassionate,
appreciative, and understanding of others; he no longer views the world from a
single perspective but from multiple ones. Furthermore, it teaches one that
ultimately everyone is equal. For, by experiencing another's world through role-
play, the individual discovers that everyone has fears, strengths, weaknesses, goals,
and dreams. These differences are what make each individual unique, and a
community strong. Alone, people are vulnerable due to their particular weaknesses,
regardless of their strengths. However, (a democratic) community eliminates this
vulnerability since these weaknesses are supported and protected by the strengths
of other (Tripathi, 2011, p. 107). It is in this manner that issues of social injustice,
such as poverty and ignorance, can be addressed and solved.

Regarding Nussbaum’s claims about teaching and implementing the arts and
humanities, I believe that she is slightly naïve and optimistic. If her suggestions are
to work, they must be implemented from an early stage of learning and the students
and parents must completely understand the value of the arts. If not, there will
always be conflict and disagreement. Though many people enjoy the arts, there is still a considerable percentage that views it as being irrelevant and a waste of time. Thus it is crucial to convince those that it is not. This however is not likely to happen. Furthermore, it takes a certain degree of skill and talent to perform dance, theater, music, and produce artwork and creative writing and some people do not possess this talent. Therefore, participating in the arts may become frustrating if not demeaning to these people. Though the arts teach people how to be less self-conscious, it is unlikely that students will be fully rid of their insecurities. Therefore, even though I fully agree with Nussbaum’s analysis and support for the arts and humanities, I believe that it won’t have much of an effect on the current and future progress and implementation of education.

This chapter focuses on cultivating sympathy, the key factor in connecting people and has obvious connections to cosmopolitanism. Without the ability and interest to explore the new and strange, it is impossible to encounter new cultures and people. Cosmopolitanism relies upon the relationship between people on a local and international scale. Therefore it is completely reliant upon the methods and manners in which people learn how to interact with others. For this reason, playing and the arts are in fact very necessary parts of a cosmopolitan education. Without either, one would be incapable if not scared of having new experiences. This would subsequently support localism and nationalism and ultimately create more violence and oppression. Therefore it is crucial that play and the arts are emphasized and respected in today’s society.
Appendix 5c Honors student Essay - considered excellent work
H205 McCarty
4/28/2012

References


Appendix 5 a Instructions on Honors Students Project

H205 Honors Students Project - Spring 2012
Honors students who expect to get honors credit for this course are required to complete an extra project. In our case, it means participating in a presentation and writing a short research paper. You can gain a maximum of 10 points, 5 for the presentation and 5 for the paper. This honors assignment counts for 10% of your course grade. You will receive an individual presentation and paper grade.

1) Presentation on Wednesday, April 18

The presentation centers around Martha Nussbaum’s book Not for Profit. Each of you will be responsible to present a chapter or article– see below. Try and make the whole experience a little interactive for your peers so that it is not just a straightforward lecture on the book. You have the whole class period and this should include some Q & A at the end. You should also provide some kind of outline, either PowerPoint, or handout for your peers.

Here is the outline of the presentation:

Ch. I and II – Griffin
Ch. III – Jordan
Ch. IV – Karaline
Ch. V – Steve
Ch. VI – Aela
Ch. IV – Kaitlynn
Nussbaum article - Dan

On youtube, under the topic “The Examined Life” you can find an interview with Martha Nussbaum on the capabilities approach that is also the reading for that day for the rest of your classmates. You don’t have to include this clip, it is just a suggestion. There is also a dvd in the main library when Nussbaum was on campus last year and gave several talks. Dan has agreed to present on the article that is posted on Oncourse.

2) Research Paper Due on Friday, April 27

You have to write a short research and reflection paper of 3 – 4 pages in length (= 750 – 1000 words) that is based on the topic of your chapter that you are presenting. Nussbaum’s major argument is that a liberal education/the humanities are “… essential for creating competent
democratic citizens.” In our classroom we have also contemplated what it means to be a cosmopolitan citizen and how cosmopolitan education can contribute to a notion of global citizenship.

In your research, please take up two central ideas or arguments that Nussbaum presents in your chapter and follow up with a deeper inquiry. For example, in Ch. IV Nussbaum recommends a pedagogy inspired by Walter Lippman and Gareth Matthews who have written on Philosophy for Children. Find out more about these two authors and explain what their position is and why Nussbaum recommends them. The idea is that you take up two points and find out more about them, describe, explain and justify the significance of these points for Nussbaum’s argument in your chapter. You may but do not need to reference two different authors. It might be two issues. In the above example, it could also be reference to Socratic teaching. I want you to come up with one point of critical evaluation of Nussbaum’s claims. Pick out one issue that you find challenging and present a critical assessment (can be both positive or negative) to demonstrate your ability to think critically.

Lastly, I would like you to reflect how the content of your chapter contributes to our thinking about cosmopolitan citizenship or cosmopolitan education. Here I am expecting a paragraph or so.

Please be sure to cite your additional sources that you are using. Do not quote Nussbaum excessively. I want to hear what you have to say.

3) My evaluation

I will use similar criteria as outlined for the regular research project.

For the presentation I will evaluate comprehensiveness and correctness of content, clarity, complexity of content, and how well you performed/taught.

For the paper I will evaluate the quality of your description and understanding of the chapter content, how well you explain two issues in greater depth and your justification of the significance for Nussbaum’s main argument in this chapter. I will also judge the quality of your critical assessment and your discussion of cosmopolitanism. Lastly, I will take off points if you do not cite your other sources or if your writing is poor.

Let me know on Monday in class if you have questions about this assignment.