The Liberal and the Technical in Teacher Education – Revisited

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Abstract: This essay revisits the liberal/technical dialectic in teacher education, identified by Merle Borrowman in 1956, in light of Martha Nussbaum’s more recent observations concerning the attack and marginalization of liberal education occurring in the United States and around the world. Nussbaum refers to this as a silent crisis, and this paper explores the implications of this silent crisis on our work in teacher education. Building on the work of Borrowman, Nussbaum, John Dewey and others, the essay argues for the importance of liberal education in professional preparation of teachers.

One might well argue that the defining dialectical tension in teacher education concerns the relative value placed on the practical and the theoretical. Historical analysis amply confirms this. One hundred years ago, John Dewey gave a talk to the Indiana State Teachers’ Association concerning what he regarded to be the fundamental dualism in the education of teachers. The talk, later published as “The Educational Balance, Efficiency and Thinking,” advanced a recurring theme in Dewey’s work about the need to balance the liberal and technical aspects of teacher education. Forty years later in 1956, educational historian Merle L. Borrowman offered a sweeping analysis of this essential dialectic shaping the education of American teachers from the early 19th century through the middle of the 20th century: The orientation to teacher education growing out of the ancient liberal arts college on the one hand, and the more technically focused approach largely associated with the normal school movement on the other. In Deweyan fashion, Borrowman advocated for a compelling model of synthesis between these two critically important themes in teacher preparation. For the past sixty years those of us in teacher education in New York State have worked in a regulatory environment that has in various ways sought to integrate the liberal and the technical strands at both the programmatic and institutional level. To be sure, this integration has not always been successful, or even well defined, but in no small way it provided the framework and justifications for our labors.

Today, however, this model of integration has been seriously challenged as we face a new iteration of narrowly driven regulatory pressures and instrumental standards in teacher education, coupled with an unprecedented market assault on the value of liberal education. We are in the midst of what philosopher Martha Nussbaum has aptly called a “silent crisis.” At all levels of schooling, the purpose of education has been reduced to preparing workers, and education has been increasingly constricted to those technical skills assumed to be economically profitable in the short term. Vocational education, in its most narrow meaning, is insurgent everywhere one seems to look today, as the notion of social progress is reduced to the single measure of Gross

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1 An earlier version of this paper was presented at the annual meeting of the New York State Association of Teacher Educators and New York Association of Colleges for Teacher Education, 21 October 2016 (Saratoga Springs, NY).
National Product. Educational policy follows suit by valuing only the kind of learning regarded to be quantifiable and measurable as reflected in so many accountability schemes. “We see its’ shadow in the relentless focus on ‘basic skills’ in K-12 [schooling],” writes William Deresiewicz, “as if knowledge were simply an assemblage of methods and facts. In the move to ‘Informational’ text in English classes, as if the purpose of learning to read were to understand a memo. In our various testing regimes, as if all learning could be quantified. In the frenzy of the MOOCs [Massive Open Online Courses], as if education were nothing more than information transfer. In the tables that rank colleges and majors by average starting salary, as if earning power were the only thing you got from school.”

Increasingly devalued, marginalized and lost are all those largely intrinsic ways of learning and knowing that we associate with liberal education, which is to say “liberating education,” an education whose primary purpose is to make us free: “free from the dictates of passion and prejudice, free from the natural limitations of an untutored mind and free from the pressure for immediate production of goods and directly marketable skills.” Moreover, liberal education, especially as it is manifested in the arts and humanities, is necessary for the creation and maintenance of a democratic and just social order. These ways of knowing humanize us; these ways of knowing make us more fully human. Thus, for Martha Nussbaum their demise in American culture and around the world represents a crisis of the first order. She writes: “Radical changes are occurring in what democratic societies teach their 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 machines, rather than complete citizens who can think for themselves, criticize tradition, and understand the significance of another person’s sufferings and achievements. The future of the world’s democracies hangs in the balance.”

In what follows I revisit the liberal/technical dialectic in teacher education in light of Nussbaum’s observation of our silent crisis. I take as my starting point the view shared by both Dewey and Borrowman that the integration and synthesis of this dichotomy is both possible and essential. I also share their view that teaching is a highly practical art, mostly learned in the actual practice of it, but that teaching fundamentally resists attempts to be taught and learned formulaically. No one today seriously argues against the critical importance of the development of practical teaching skills, and thus the “technical” dimension of teacher education is firmly ensconced. The same cannot be said, however, of the “liberal” dimension of teaching. Apart from maintaining that teachers should have some satisfactory knowledge of the subject matter they are called upon to teach (sometimes referred to as their liberal arts and sciences major or general education core), the “liberal” dimension of teaching is only dimly recognized and supported. Moreover, the liberal dimension of teacher education shares the same declining status

\[\text{7 Nussbaum, Not For Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities, 2.} \]
of liberal education generally today, as witnessed by the increasing marginalization of foundational study in our programs.⁸

I will briefly explore Dewey’s view (actually, merely one aspect of his view) while leaving the rich larger social and intellectual history unexplored. For this I apologize, but my intention here is to focus our attention on a problem that has both individual/local as well as social/structural relevance. I want us to consider the implications of the attack on liberal education on the preparation of teachers, and to ask how this attack is reflected in certain current tendencies in teacher education. I also want us to ask how our work in teacher education thus exacerbates the crisis. In this instance, it seems to me, we are more than simply the canaries in the coal mine, and that we bear some responsibility for producing the carbon monoxide that is killing us. Finally, many of us teach at institutions where the liberal arts and teacher education are both under considerable duress, owing in part to shared enrollment decline which itself reveals our symbiotic relationship and linked fortunes. I want us to consider the situation as it appears on our own campuses, and to ask what opportunities this crisis affords. How might we establish new forms of collaboration with our colleagues in the liberal arts and sciences? What elements of our teacher education programs are liberally oriented, even if they are largely moribund, and how might they be resurrected? How might this crisis provide opportunities for new transformative program development in teacher education? Before getting to these questions, however, it is necessary to further develop Nussbaum’s argument and to explore how it relates to Dewey’s plan to synthesize the liberal and the technical in the education of teachers.

Nussbaum refers to her 2010 book, Not For Profit, as a manifesto, and indeed it has this style and feel. Here she engages in forms of inquiry familiar to those of us in educational foundations: She brings a sociological and historical perspective to bear in investigating the dominant purposes of education, drawing heavily from psychoanalytic theory, and she adopts a philosophical perspective to ask how we might critically re-imagine these purposes. As noted, she is highly opposed to the worldwide movement to reduce the purpose of education to the mere technical preparation of competent workers. While certainly not opposed to technical, skill-based, learning per se (such, of course, has an important place in our technologically complex world), she is very much concerned when this becomes the dominant and only purpose that animates our schools. We need to recognize ourselves as manifesting a culture, and not simply an economy. She advocates replacing the prevalent (and increasingly destructive) Economic Growth Model that guides so much of our thinking and policy formation, with the Human Development paradigm, which is oriented around a much-expanded notion about what constitutes social progress. This Human Development Model would necessitate the inculcation of those ways of knowing we associate with liberal education: “The ability to think critically; the ability to transcend local loyalties and to approach world problems as a ‘citizen of the world’; and finally, the ability to imagine sympathetically the predicament of another person.”⁹ The humanities and the arts must be restored to a central place in the curriculum because it is precisely these disciplinary experiences that encourage the development of this kind of needed understanding and sensibility. Moreover, liberal study provides us with the capacity to

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⁹ Nussbaum, Not For Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities, 7.
imaginatively transcend our narrow functional milieus so that we might understand the meaning and purposes of our activities and to redirect these purposes when needed.

The Economic Growth Model, on the other hand, values efficiency, continuous expansion, and inherent social inequality. In this way, the Economic Growth Model tends to prize and reward certain unseemly human attributes and more or less unconsciously directs our educational efforts to these ends. For instance, the Economic Growth Model actually encourages a kind of insensitivity to our fellow humans — what Nussbaum calls “moral obtuseness” — and discourages people from thinking critically and seriously about themselves or their world. Insofar as the arts and liberal education increases our capacities for empathy and critical thinking they are regarded as anathema to the Economic Growth Model and considered dysfunctional to the efficient operation of the system. Nussbaum writes: “Educators for economic growth will do more than ignore the arts. They will fear them. For a cultured and developed sympathy is a particularly dangerous enemy of obtuseness, and moral obtuseness is necessary to carry out programs of economic development that ignores inequality. It is easier to treat people as objects to be manipulated if you have never learned any other way to see them.” Moreover, while educators for economic growth might support the teaching of history in a non-liberal way, they “will not want a study of history that focuses on injustices of class, caste, gender, and ethnoreligious membership, because this will prompt critical thinking about the present.”

10 Seen in this light is there any reason to wonder why liberal education is being marginalized throughout our K-16 schools?

The competitive ethos of the Economic Growth Model also provides soil fertile for the unchecked growth of narcissism and the closely related and derivative anti-moral emotions: Racism, homophobia, classism, sexism, etc. Narcissism is widely seen as a universal aspect of the human condition, which is most pronounced during the early childhood years when we begin to become aware that we are not omnipotent but rather helpless, highly dependent, and incomplete creatures. Narcissism is our psychological attempt to deny this reality and this human fragility by exaggerating our worth through dominating others. Many, perhaps most, of us mature beyond the more acute forms of narcissism, but we need look no further than the top of our political, corporate, and educational institutions to find examples of how our society quite literally promotes this narcissism. While it may be true that we can never fully transcend this fundamental narcissism, it is certainly possible to mitigate it through the educational experiences we provide to the young and through regular replenishment of these experiences throughout our lives. Indeed, as Erich Fromm has noted, the softening (if not full eradication) of this narcissism is seen as a primary project of all the great religious traditions. 11 Left unchecked, however, this narcissism takes the form of “projective disgust” against people who are regarded as different and who are stigmatized for being so. In its most virulent forms this group animosity is codified in laws, established in social hierarchies, and manifested in violence.

Nussbaum argues that liberal education, centered as it is in engagement with the arts and humanities, needs to serve as a major antidote to these trends. Schools are not all-powerful institutions and they cannot do everything needed to create healthy citizens for a healthy democracy. Nevertheless, schools have much to contribute if their efforts are explicitly directed toward this goal and if their curricula and pedagogy deliberately reflect these goals of liberal

10 Nussbaum, Not For Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities, 23 and 21, respectively.
education. She advocates for the adoption of seven things that schools can and should do, which, of course, cannot be quantifiably assessed:

- Develop students’ capacity to see the world from the viewpoint of other people, particularly those whom their society tends to portray as lesser, as “mere objects”
- Teach attitudes toward human weakness and helplessness that suggest that weakness is not shameful and the need for others unmanly; teach children not to be ashamed of need and incompleteness but to see these as occasions for cooperation and reciprocity
- Develop the capacity for genuine concern for others, both near and distant
- Undermine the tendency to shrink from minorities of various kinds in disgust, thinking of them as “lower” and “contaminating”
- Teach real and true things about other groups (racial, religious, and sexual minorities; people with disabilities), so as to counter the stereotyping and the disgust that often goes with them
- Promote accountability by treating each child as a responsible agent
- Vigorously promote critical thinking, the skill and courage it requires to raise a dissenting voice.  

Nussbaum goes on to explore how through the utilization of Socratic pedagogy, richly culturally diverse curricula, and serious and playful engagement with the arts and imaginative literature, these values can foster a reconceptualization of the purpose of education to meet the needs of a democracy.

Most importantly, these liberal ways of knowing help to foster in students what she terms “the narrative imagination,” a way of thinking about the role of the imagination which, we will see, has significant implications for how we should think about teaching and teacher education. This kind of imagination is not to be confused with the imaginary or with fantasy. Rather it refers to “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, and to understand the emotions and wishes and desires that someone so placed might have.”  

Nussbaum notes accurately that the cultivation of this kind of narrative imagination, this kind of basic and refined sympathy and understanding, can be spotted throughout our educational history, in both Western and non-Western cultures.

Nussbaum acknowledges that her chief intellectual precursors in this matter are the great Indian educator Rabindranath Tagore, and, of course, John Dewey. Early in the 20th century both Tagore and Dewey recognized the importance of liberal study as a foil to the increasing instrumentalism associated with our burgeoning technological system. Both feared that without this liberalizing influence we were doomed to become more bureaucratized and mechanized and

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12 Nussbaum, Not For Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities, 45.
13 Nussbaum, 95-96.
dehumanized. Both remained hopeful, however, that educators would respond. John Dewey also brought these concerns to the education of teachers, the topic to which I now return.

Dewey treated the relationship between the liberal and the technical in the preparation and work of teachers in several key educational writings, including his “My Pedagogic Creed” (1897), “The Child and the Curriculum” (1902), “The Relation of Theory to Practice in Education” (1904), and *Democracy and Education* (1916). Perhaps his clearest, if not most concise, statement can be found in his aforementioned 1916 talk “The Educational Balance, Efficiency and Thinking.” His opening statement, written though it is in Dewey’s notoriously difficult style, is worth quoting verbatim:

> There are two traits which have to go together and which have to be balanced with each other in order that we may get an adequate and rounded development of personality, and for that reason there are two factors which have to be constantly borne in mind in all teaching and borne in mind in such a way that we do not first tend to one and develop one, and then, forgetting that, develop the other, but that we keep the two balanced together all the time.

> I call those two factors efficiency and thought.

Efficiency, or skill in execution and good, orderly, effective method and technique of doing things which is under control. The other, thinking or the recognition of the meaning of what we do, having a definite, well-thought-out and comprehensive plan or purpose in our actions.

Dewey explored how this dualism was revealed in other vocations as well, and he argued for the need for ongoing and continual synthesis across these vocations in order to conceptualize their full promise. The effective business person, the effective physician, the effective lawyer, the effective chemist, the effective mathematician, as well as the effective manual trades person, were all required to strike a balance between liberating thought and the development of technique appropriate to their particular function. Possession of both liberal and technical understanding makes possible recognition of the meaning of what one is doing and exercise of the ability to thoroughly and purposely plan the activities in which one is engaged. Each varied practitioner needed to have an “education which enables him to see within his daily work all there is in it of large and human significance” and not simply a form of schooling that will adapt or adjust them to the prevailing order. To put this still another way, Dewey was arguing for development of capacities both to develop habits and to break habits. All practitioners needed to have the capacity to strike a balance between the ability to acquire necessary routinized habits in order to respond to that part of one’s domain that was static and fixed with the ability to break...

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with habitualized and routinized ways of apprehending and engaging their particular domain. A constantly changing world demanded such a stance, and it was a needed antidote to the tendency to develop people as machines or automatons on the one hand, and ineffectual and groundless dreamers on the other.

Having developed his argument regarding the essential capacities of all practitioners (professional or otherwise), Dewey turned his focus to why teachers needed to be educated toward this balance. As he had done in earlier writings he asks us to compare the classroom teacher with the visual, literary, musical, and performing artist. He encourages us to envision the accomplished artist who possesses both artistic skill as well as artistic insight and sympathy, the artist who has honed the skills of expression and also expresses with meaning and purpose. Without the capacity to strike the necessary balance, “the artist might have a fine technique with the instrument and yet the use of that instrument would not move people, would not affect them on any very deep level, because there was no feeling back of it or because there were no ideas expressed in it.”17 Similarly, a teacher might be trained to utilize the techniques of effective teaching, and yet s/he would not be able to truly move students without the capacity to see within her teaching the liberalizing view of “all there is in it of large and human significance.” Dewey writes:

Now, there is a technique of teaching, a technique of the management of the schoolroom, keeping order, treating children, of asking questions, even of giving out, assigning lessons; assigning the different school work and so forth, is just as much a part of the art of teaching as the particular technique of the artist is a part of the calling of the artist, but over and above that is the need for that sense of the purpose of meaning of it that results in sympathy with a development of the life of the children, what is going on not in their more outward motions, in the things they do, but what is going on in their feelings, their imagination, what effect the schoolroom is having on the permanent disposition, the side of their emotions and imagination, without which the teacher cannot be an artist, no matter how complete and adequate the teacher’s command is of the technique of teaching, that is of the various forms of outward skill which are necessary to make the successful teacher. The teacher as an artist needs to be one who is engaged in getting the pupils as much as possible into the attitude of the artist in their relations in life . . . to get that unity with certain affections and desires and sympathies and with power to carry out intellectual plans.”18

Dewey was writing at a time when the polemics between the liberal and the technical in teacher education were raging. On the one hand, a strong contingent in the liberal arts and sciences claimed that the structure of the disciplines contained the knowledge of how to teach them, that the act of thinking in the disciplines provided a model for how they should be taught. To be an expert in a particular field conferred on one the authority and skill to teach that subject matter field. On the other hand, a growing body of normal school educators were preparing teachers to teach in the burgeoning schools by emphasizing the role of instructional

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18 Ibid., 45.
methodology, often at the expense of subject matter knowledge and mostly without regard for the consideration of the larger social purposes of education. An effective teacher, seen from this perspective, is capable of teaching nearly anything to nearly anyone.

Dewey was highly critical of both views, though he also thought that each view contained an element of truth. He abhorred those subject matter experts who wore their knowledge as mere adornment and as evidence of their class and status. The kind of teaching that followed from this attitude was typically stifling and inert and ultimately mis-educative. Nevertheless, he was well aware that some disciplinary experts were transformative teachers even without formal training in the methods of teaching. Moreover, the curriculum, accurately understood, represented the historical record of how our species has solved its problems. The curriculum as a map for our problem solving was the key concept here, and deep and expansive curricular knowledge was thus essential for all teachers.

Likewise, Dewey was certainly sympathetic to the need for teachers to develop the techniques of their craft. But he recognized that there was so much more needed in order to connect with what Dewey referred to as students’ “inner attention.”

As every teacher knows, children have an inner and an outer attention. The inner attention is the giving of the mind without reserve or qualification to the subject in hand. It is the first-hand and personal play of mental powers. As such, it is a fundamental condition of mental growth. To be able to keep track of this mental play, to recognize the signs of its presence or absence, to know how it is initiated and maintained . . . is the supreme mark and criterion of a teacher. It means insight into soul-action, ability to discriminate the genuine from the sham, and capacity to further one and discourage the other. 19

Instructional methods and classroom techniques, learned in isolation from a sympathetic understanding of the students’ psychological and social circumstances and without reference to the meaning and purpose of what is being learned, tended to address merely a students’ shallow “external attention.” While such technique might have the immediate and apparent effect of keeping classroom order or of producing superficial learning, it was not likely to lead to further growth or an intrinsic desire for further learning. Unfortunately, so much technique driven teacher education associated with the normal schools seemed to have this effect.

Dewey was searching for a way to synthesize the liberal and the technical in teacher education. He was searching for a language to illuminate the unique and profound knowledge required of the teacher, knowledge both shared with, and yet divergent from, the subject matter expert and the teacher as technician. In so doing, he gravitated toward the liberal ideal of deepening and extending one’s understanding of what it means to be human. It was a perspective that, like Nussbaum’s notion of the “narrative imagination,” was based on a heightened sense of sympathy for the needs of others. A teacher must have an acute sensitivity to the inner world of the learner; a teacher must be able to grasp how other people are experiencing the world, and how these others are contending with the particular problems with which they are (in the very nature of things) confronted. Moreover, the teacher must be able to relate this sympathetic


human understanding to a deep and dynamic understanding of the curriculum and to imagine the relationship between the “inner” dimension of the learner and the subject matter to be learned. The primary task of the teacher, Dewey wrote in his essay “The Child and the Curriculum,” is to see the subject matter “as representing a given stage and phase of the development of experience. His problem is that of inducing a vital and personal experiencing.”

The teacher’s function is to connect the learner to the record of the known, the curriculum, the record of how as human beings we have solved our problems in the past. But for Dewey this was neither a mechanical, nor simply technical, enterprise. And it certainly could not be developed by fixing one’s attention only on the “external” dimension: The sources of data, the standards of effective instruction, the learning outcomes, the professional behavior rubrics, and so on. Rather it also required the cultivation of all those ways of knowing and experiencing that we have historically come to associate with liberal education, those speculative and liberating arts that enable us to transcend our immediate and narrow milieus and to experience the world from another person’s vantage point.

John Dewey died in 1952 at the age of 93. Among his many legacies was this contribution to the framework of how we should think about the liberal/technical dialectic in teacher education. His was a view that demanded balance, integration, and synthesis. There is no question but that he would be thoroughly dismayed, if by some freak, he was able to survey our situation today. He would recognize immediately how fundamentally out of balance we have become. He would certainly agree with Martha Nussbaum that the attack on liberal education has led to a pervasive silent crisis, the consequences of which will spread well beyond the school. He would remind us, too, of the need to think of this crisis in relation to teachers and their education. As we know, the education of teachers has rippling effects; if we ignore the need to balance the liberal and technical in teacher education it will surely redound to other educational and social domains as well. Machines can only produce more machines. If teachers are taught only to adapt to existing circumstances, to only serve as technically competent tools for the prevailing social order, these narrow instrumental qualities will surely prevail in other domains as well.

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