Research on the Nussbaum’s Humanistic Education Thought

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Abstract. Nussbaum has criticized utilitarian education and advocated the return of the humanities education, made the cultivation of the world's citizens the goal of education, and put forward three kinds of abilities that the citizens of the world must possess and even the cultivation methods of the abilities. Nussbaum's humanistic education thought has important referential meaning to the reform of quality education and the cultivation of core accomplishment in primary and middle schools and the reform of higher education system in China.

The Philosophical Basis of Nussbaum’s Humanistic Education Though

Martha C. Nussbaum is a famous American philosopher, ethicists and educator, whose humanistic education thought is based on her philosophy and ethics theory. Nussbaum was deeply influenced by the ideas of the ancient Greek philosophers Socrates, Aristotle, Diogenes and the Stoicism, among which the world thought of Stoicism was an important theoretical source of the humanistic education thought of Nussbaum. In Nussbaum view, people have universal and equal values and dignity. Nussbaum pays attention to the cultivation of human nature, she draws on Socrates’ reflection on Life, Aristotle’s reflection on the concept of citizenship, and the Stoic concept of Global Citizen to explain her philosophy and pedagogy. She believes these rethinking and philosophy can give people freedom of thought, keep people from the bondage of habits and customs, and give students characteristics of care, dexterity and sensitivity.

Fostering World Citizens with a Sense of World Citizenship

Nussbaum opposes the educational development mode oriented by economic development based on his philosophical theory, putting forward an educational model that attaches importance to humanistic ideal.

Nussbaum first criticized the utilitarianism trend of education, and she believed that at present, the education of utilitarianism lurks a great harm, and the education for the purpose of profit can only let us get people “who do not know how to criticize authority, useful profit-makers with obtuse imaginations,” [1] and can only produce “feed the forces that lead to violence and dehumanization and fail to feed the forces that lead to cultures of equality and respect.” [1]

Nussbaum, who is not opposed to science and technology education, admits that “science and social science, particularly economics, are also crucial to the education of citizens,” [2] and she opposes the shrinking of the arts and humanities, which she believes is abandoning the necessary skills to the survival of the democratic system. Without these skills, education will not create a complete citizen who can think independently, criticize tradition, and understand the meaning of the suffering and achievements of others, “values precious for the future of democracy, especially in an era of religious and economic anxiety, are in danger of getting lost,” [2] which will ultimately seriously erode the basic nature of the democratic system. She believes that only the humanities and art can create a world worth living in, and in which people can be created with emotion and thought,
respect and compassion. She therefore strongly advocated education in the humanities and called for efforts to restore the links between education and the humanities.

Therefore, Nussbaum insists that the most important thing about education is educating people, and she pointed out that education is not just about developing the quality of citizens, “It prepares people for employment and, importantly, for meaningful lives.” [3] Cultivating human nature, the universal sense of dignity of mankind and the equal idea of human values and dignity is the most important task of education. In this sense, she proposed to carry out humanistic education and cultivate world citizens who have a sense of world citizenship, which is the goal of the humanistic education thought of Nussbaum.

**Cultivating Students’ Critical Thinking Ability, Imagination Ability and Compassion**

Nussbaum advocated that education should be aimed at developing students “These abilities are associated with the humanities and the arts: 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.” [2]

Nussbaum believes that the three abilities are crucial today and in the future. She noted that In the context of economic globalization, the interaction between countries and groups is increasing and deepening, “The ability to think well about a wide range of cultures, groups, and nations in the context of a grasp of the global economy and of the history of many national and group interactions is crucial in order to enable democracies to deal responsibly with the problems we currently face as members of an interdependent world.” [3] Nussbaum also believes that enhancing and improving the ability to visualize the experiences of others is equally important for the maintenance of modern social systems.

Nussbaum do not think people must make a chose between increasing profitable and fostering good civic qualities, arguing that “A flourishing economy requires the same skills that support citizenship.” [3] The problem is that the idea that education serves economic growth should be subordinate to the view that education promotes the stability of democratic systems.

**Ways to Cultivate the Citizens of the World**

Nussbaum also put forward concrete methods to cultivate the above three kinds of abilities.

One is to develop critical skills by learning Socratic’s method of debate. Nussbaum thinks that in Socratic debate, “Class, fame, and prestige count for nothing, and the argument counts for all.” [4] And the attitude towards interlocutors should be the same as the attitude towards oneself, and all are equal before the point of view. “This critical attitude can indicate everyone’s position; in the debate, finding common ideas and consistent views helps fellow citizens to come to a common conclusion.” [4] Nussbaum advocates that in the early stages of children’s education, they should be encouraged to think in a Socratic way to develop the autonomy of juveniles, so that they can truly rely on their intelligence in the world, rather than relying on others or authority, which is the key to become good citizens.

The second way is to carry out diversified education and attach importance to history and language learning. The world is pluralistic, so the cultivation of the world’s citizens must also offer a pluralistic curriculum, so that students can regard themselves as members of a multicultural country to have a general understanding of the history and characteristics of various groups of people in the world. Students need to understand the history to judge the historical evidence and understand complex issues about different countries, institutions and religions. Students also should be encouraged to learn foreign languages, by learning foreign languages, students can “Seeing how another group of intelligent human beings has cut up the world differently, how all translation is imperfect interpretation, gives a young person an essential lesson in cultural humility,” [5] so that students know how to consider their culture in a humble manner. At undergraduate level, students also need to have a solid understanding economics and the fundamentals of global economy, and learn courses about
globalization and human values, social justice and global justice, all of which will help students grow their understanding of other communities, countries, and so on. All of these will not only broaden their horizons, but also improve their understanding of other cultures.

The third is to use art and literature to cultivate students’ imagination ability. According to Nussbaum, literature and art require students to look at the relationship between human beings with a standard point of view, which means treating others as equal to themselves who with dignity, inner world and value. This imagination can help students to understand the feelings and the inner world of others, which can develop the ability to empathize, eliminate stubborn cultural blind spots to cultivate students’ empathy ability and eliminate the stubborn cultural blind spots.

In general, Nussbaum’s humanistic education thought attached great importance to practice, the thought is not purely academic, but realistic and specific. Nussbaum criticized the harm of the marketization of education, emphasized the importance of humanities education to the democratic system and the world, but also deal with the relationship between science and technology and humanities education in a brilliant way. Nussbaum focused on the affective education and the free development of students, putting forward the qualities that humanities education should cultivate and how to cultivate these qualities, which also have strong implementation for the development of education in all countries of the world. The marketization of education is the general situation of the development of education in the world at present, and China’s education is also faced with such similar problems. Nussbaum’s humanistic education thought provides a helpful reference to the reform of quality education and the cultivation of core accomplishment in primary and middle schools and the reform of higher education system in China.

References