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FRAMING SOCIAL JUSTICE IN EDUCATION: WHAT DOES THE ‘CAPABILITIES’ APPROACH OFFER?

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ABSTRACT: This paper develops a framework for conceptualising social justice in education, drawing particularly on Martha Nussbaum’s (2000) capabilities approach. The practical case for consideration is that of widening participation and pedagogical implications in higher (university) education in England. While the paper supports the value and usefulness of Nussbaum’s list of ten capabilities for developing a more radical and challenging language and practice for higher education pedagogies, it also argues that her approach is limited. Other ways of conceptualising social justice are also required in order to develop adjudicating theories which enable us to judge which practices take us closer to social justice. An argument is made for ‘bivalent’ theorising which integrates individual and institutional development and agents and social structures.

Keywords: social justice, capabilities, higher education

These are dark and shadowed times, and we need to live them, standing before one another, open to the world. (Maxine Greene)

1. INTRODUCTION

Philosopher Martha Nussbaum (2000) declares that matters of justice should take priority in our reflections on society (and its educational arrangements). It is emphatically not, she asserts, ‘what you mention when you have nothing else to say’ (2000, p. 33). Following Nussbaum, in considering education as/for human development and social justice, we would need to take into account how each and every person (or child) is enabled to flourish in education. But we arguably need more; while social justice must be for individual flourishing, it should also be for collective solidarities, the one with the
other. How, then, do we know what takes us closer to justice rather than further away?

This paper argues that without ‘big’ accounts of social justice we are left stranded without the conceptual tools to decide which of our actions take us closer to social justice, which of our actions contribute to fairer education, and how we then make judgements about the justice effects of our actions. We need a theory or principles of justice which enable us to adjudicate between our actions so that we can say with some confidence this action is more just than that. Patchwork actions, the individual pieces of cloth, however bright and lively, are just that, bits of cloth. Only when we stitch the pieces (our actions) together to make a quilt do the patterns emerge and transform the pieces into something new; we need to know what we are trying to make and to be able to judge whether we have made it well.

At issue is that education in the formal settings of schools and universities shapes lives. Our experiences in education build over time into inter-subjective patterns and shape what kind of girls and boys, men and women we recognise ourselves to be and what we believe ourselves able to do. For example, in apartheid South Africa, all children schooled under the grossly unequal system of bantu education were taught to see themselves only as unskilled labourers, with the ‘lucky’ few perhaps as teachers or nurses or factory workers. Their choices and aspirations were deformed in and through the tiny and big details of their everyday lives in school. This does not mean that education is merely a form of ‘social engineering’, mechanically implementing external demands for social change. Indeed, a social engineering approach would arguably never work for there will always be unintended consequences arising from the implementation of education policies. To take bantu education again, while in the long term its educational costs are now disastrously apparent, nonetheless, its unintended ‘good’ was a sophisticated student resistance movement which ultimately led to its official collapse, while also reinvigorating wider political struggles for democratic change.

Bantu education may be an extreme example, but nowhere is education an uncomplicated ‘good’; it produces both justice and injustice, equity and inequity and the issue is to understand why, when and how. Thus, as well as playing an essential role in the process of social reproduction, education is always, simultaneously, a major source of social transformation, providing learners with those critical and reflective forms of consciousness and understanding that will enable them to participate in the creation of an improved and more desirable form of social life than that which currently exists. It further means that answers to practical educational questions about
what, how and who to teach inevitably express judgements about which aspects of existing forms of social life ought to be reproduced and which ought to be transformed if learners are to be prepared for the world of the future. Conversely, broader political questions about how society ought to be improved and changed also find expression as educational questions about the kind of knowledge, attitudes and skills that participation in an improved and more desirable form of social life requires. A key concern is thus how we come to produce better, more convincing knowledge, which makes a difference in practice to the education of diverse children and adults and the educational conditions under which their learning takes place.

How, then, might Nussbaum’s (2000) capabilities approach in particular take us forward (or leave us stuck) in relation to understanding and working for a ‘fair bit of difference’ (Griffiths, forthcoming) in education; for both individual equity and structural changes under global and local conditions of difference and the contemporary hegemony of market driven economies? Nussbaum suggests a range of ten capabilities¹ which, in her view, are essential for an individual to have a flourishing life, a life which includes capacity for economic participation, but is much more than this in the focus also on personal and interpersonal development, and wider environmental, political and social contexts and interactions. While by no means the only conceptual framework we might use to establish how well we are doing educationally, it provides an interesting place to start. The attraction for education in the capabilities approach is fivefold. First, its emphasis on the flourishing of each and every person and hence a challenge, for example, to university ‘drop out’ statistics which say nothing useful about individual experiences of higher education, even while glossing success for the many. Secondly, the approach points to what ‘people are actually able to do and to be’ (Nussbaum, 2000, p. 5); as a social practice education is fundamentally about what we learn to be as much as about what knowledge we acquire. It is, above all, a domain of activity requiring thinking and judgement not only about what has been done but as a guide to future action. Thirdly, many if not all of the ten capabilities advocated by Nussbaum point at least in some way to educational conditions and practices. To which stories of educational practice might we point to show capability development (interruption, disruption, transformation) and capability deformation (reproduction)? Finally, this approach suggests a view of (higher) education as more than education for economic development, and incorporates an implicit view of education both as and for democratic citizenship, and understanding and solidarity under conditions of cultural difference and diversity.

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I take as a case study higher education and pedagogy, especially in relation to the problem of widening participation in university (higher) education in England. I focus particularly on the aspect of widening participation policy targeted at enabling more young women and men from working-class groups (defined in the UK by the Registrar General as including young people with parents in occupations IIIm ‘skilled manual’, IV ‘partly skilled, and V ‘unskilled’) to access higher education. Currently this stands at less than 20 per cent, compared to over 75 per cent participation by the sons and daughters of professional parents (see Archer et al., 2003). I draw my examples especially from the lives of young women in higher education for two reasons: one is Nussbaum’s own focus on women and human development; the second is the continuing and still deeply entrenched patterns of gender inequality in educational institutions and society, notwithstanding recent educational gains by girls and young women (see Arnot et al., 1999).

Here is the argument. In a class-stratified society widening participation is a matter of justice; it ‘speaks’ to the ethical as much as the economic purposes of higher education. Michael Apple (2001) usefully points to the particular kinds of morality which underpin these competing versions of (higher) education. On the one hand a ‘thick morality’ (or thick access and participation) is grounded in notions of the common good as the ethical basis for policy and practice; while a ‘thin morality’ (or thin participation and access) is grounded in competitive individualism and hierarchical divisions. We thus urgently need conceptual resources to produce a language of justice for higher education and society, precisely because there are competing possibilities to understand a pedagogy of/for widening participation – either as a matter of justice, access and transformation, or economically driven by the demands of the knowledge economy and the language of markets, choice, accountability and so on. We need a language which asks how power (pedagogical and institutional relationships) and resources (of opportunity and outcomes, knowledge, cultural capital, identities) are distributed to individuals and social groups.

Long term research by Goldthorpe and fellow sociologists at Nuffield College, cited by D. Walker (2001), demonstrates that despite an expansion of white-collar and professional employment since 1945, mobility in England has not grown in relative terms. The comparative chances of any one working-class child moving upwards, relative to the chances of a middle-class child, has not shrunk. Indeed,
studying two cohorts of children, one born in 1958, the other in 1970, researchers found that the earlier (1958) group had slightly more class mobility than the latter (also see Goldthorpe, 1986). Middle-class families produce and reproduce the kind of ‘cultural capital’ – knowledge, language and culture (see Bourdieu and Passerón, 1977; Bourdieu, 1997) – which enables educational success and appropriate educational decision making for their own children. Everything from school and university choice, to private tutoring and other after school activities provides a stock of valuable cultural resources and, crucially, a particular kind of confidence that works to produce the ‘good’ student. Middle-class parents thus invest all kinds of effort, including significant material resources, in developing the ‘social capital’ (see Bourdieu, 1997; Baron et al., 2000) in order to ensure their children’s success – appropriate networks, insider knowledge, educational resources, relationships and contacts.

In general, the school cleaner’s son or daughter has fewer educational chances than the doctor’s daughter. Nussbaum offers a robust statement of the problem:

The desire for a college education is not a brute fact of Nature but is shaped by what you think about yourself, what amount of self-esteem you are led to have by your society, what your society tells you about the opportunities that are likely to be open to you, and so on. (Nussbaum interviewed in Pyle, 1999, pp. 244–245)

As she points out here, and elaborates on in Women and Human Development, our preferences and choices are shaped and informed or deformed by society and public policy. Unequal social and political circumstances lead to unequal chances and unequal capacities to choose. These external (material as well as cultural) circumstances ‘affect the inner lives of people: what they hope for, what they love, what they fear, as well as what they are able to do’ (Nussbaum, 2000, p. 31). Thus in England, gender and social class are still persistent determinants of learner biographies, educational opportunities, and winners and losers (see Webb, 2001). Social class, even if rather more opaque than twenty or thirty years ago, continues to shape social identities and to influence actions and attitudes across society (Reay, 1998). This is to emphasise again that unequal contextual conditions in which people are having to act on the basis of what they take to be possible for themselves and hence to what they might aspire ‘construct differences in thought’ (Nussbaum, 2000, p. 31).
Opening the doors to higher education would indeed be necessary, but it would not be sufficient.

Nussbaum’s capabilities approach also challenges another language of ‘capabilities’, not unfamiliar in higher education (see, for example, Stephenson and Weil, 1992). This language of capabilities and its associated mantra of ‘key skills’ in UK higher education is a version of ‘thin’ rather than ‘thick’ morality (Apple, 2001). As it has emerged and been promoted in higher education, this discourse and its practices are instrumental, concerned more with what employers want from graduates than with what graduates might want for themselves or with what lecturers in higher education might see as educationally desirable. Nussbaum, on the other hand has a wider concern with producing an ethical framework for evaluating the ‘quality of life’ in development planning and public (including educational) policy. She proposes a ‘thick’ morality in the way she demonstrates that arguments about justice must connect to the practical concerns of public policy. The basic idea of the capabilities approach is to point to ‘what people are actually able to do and to be’, informed by the idea of ‘a life that is worthy of the dignity of the human being’ (Nussbaum, 2000, p. 5). Human flourishing for each and every person should be pursued. The implication is that pointing to any (limited) statistical successes in admitting and graduating non-traditional students is not enough. We need to know how each of those students has fared.

Nussbaum’s ten capabilities all point in some way to education, but some do so more directly than others. It is to these I wish to turn in order to argue that if such capabilities were to inform higher education pedagogy and curricula (teaching and learning) they would go a long way to ‘thick’ widening participation: of access and accessibility to knowledge, of ways of knowing, and participation and progression by non-traditional students once they enter higher education. Nussbaum points to two capabilities out of the ten, which she argues are of special importance – ‘practical reason’ and ‘affiliation’. The former capability involves ‘being able to form a conception of the good and to engage in critical reflection about the planning of one’s life’ (2000, p. 79). The affiliation capability concerns ‘being able to live with and toward others, to recognise and show concern for other human beings, to engage in various forms of social interactions; to be able to imagine the situation of another and to have compassion for that situation; to have the capability for both justice and friendship … having the social bases of self-respect and non-humiliations; being able to be treated as dignified being whose worth is equal to that of others’ (2000, pp. 79–80). Nussbaum explains:
Among the capabilities, two, practical reason and affiliation stand out as of special importance, since they both organise and suffuse all the others, making their pursuit truly human. To use one’s senses in a way not infused by the characteristically human use of thought and planning is to use them in an incompletely human manner. To plan for one’s own life without being able to do so in complex forms of discourse, concern and reciprocity with other human beings is, again to behave in an incompletely human way. To take just one example, work, to be a truly human mode of functioning, must involve the availability of both practical reason and affiliation. It must involve being able to behave as a thinking being, not just a cog in a machine, and it must be capable of being done with and towards others in a way that involves mutual recognition of humanity. (2000, p. 82)

For ‘work’ we could substitute ‘teaching and learning in higher education’. Both capabilities are especially significant in relation to widening participation and enabling pedagogies in higher education. They point to a holistic approach to ‘critical thinking’ which is more akin to Barnett’s (1997) conceptualisation of ‘critical being’, and includes the capacity to make appropriate and informed choices about one’s life. The capabilities of practical reason and affiliation are a more subtle and complex working out of teaching methods of ‘group’ or ‘teamwork’ to include values of empathy and mutual recognition, compassion, respect, dignity and meaningful relationships with peers. It would seem to follow that such practices would also require a mobilisation of other capabilities such as ‘senses, imagination and thought’ and ‘emotions’, and would take for granted ‘bodily health (learning while ill or undernourished is difficult) and bodily integrity (pedagogical encounters which are suffused with any kind of threat of harassment or gendered disrespect are not situations for effective or confident academic learning).

Nussbaum’s capabilities approach, if taken up pedagogically, should enable collective problem-solving through processes of critical dialogue, respect, inclusion of diverse perspectives and ‘reasonableness’, that is the willingness to listen to others whose views, histories, and experiences differ from one’s own (‘being able to live with and towards others ... to be able to imagine the situation of another ... having the social bases of self-respect and non-humiliation; being able to be treated as a dignified being whose worth is equal to that of others ...’). Nussbaum does not herself push affiliation in this possibly more overtly ‘political’ direction – arguably it would involve functioning (doing) and not just capability (development). But practising affiliation
as part of higher education pedagogy would tend towards deliberation which opens out a transformative space in which, through democratic dialogue with others different from oneself, we gain new ideas which enable our critical reflection on our own positions, prejudices or ignorance as women and men, working class and middle class, black and white.

Capabilities of affiliation, imagination, practical reason, emotion would further require the recognition of diverse cultural modes of expression and ways of life, not only the communicative practices of the socially privileged. ‘Dispassionate’ speech styles often correlate with social privilege, especially the culture of middle-class white men. The speech culture of women, ethnic minorities and working class people may well differ, be more expressive, more figurative, more exuberant. As bell hooks writes, reflecting on her own experiences of higher education as a black working-class woman at Stanford University: ‘Loudness, anger, emotional outbursts, and even something as seemingly innocent as unrestrained laughter were deemed unacceptable, vulgar disruptions of classroom social order. These traits were also associated with being a member of the lower classes’ (1994, p. 178). Or, as Beverley Skeggs explains about her UK university education:

My first real recognition that I could be categorised by others as working class happened when I went to university (an upper/middle-class university that often felt more like a finishing school) and I was identified in a seminar group as ‘oh, you must be one of those working class people we hear so much about’. I was absolutely mortified. I knew what this meant – I had been recognised as common, authentic and without much cultural value. The noisy, bolshy, outspoken me was silenced ... I did not want to be judged and found wanting. (1997, p. 130)

As she points out, it is middle-class standards and members of the middle class who instigate these judgements. Similarly Louise Morley, commenting autobiographically on her own educational experiences, writes that for working class women ‘becoming “educated” is a complex combination of achievement, struggle and betrayal. It means that wherever we are, there are vast reservoirs of experience and insights we must not speak’ (1997, p. 114). A ‘capabilities’ pedagogy would mean instead, seeing working class experiences as an important knowledge resource. As one student in Lynn Tett’s (2000) study of non-traditional mature students commented: ‘I bring my experience of being working class and knowing that I have something to offer ... being working class isn’t just about being “deprived” ’ (p. 189).
To enable capability development, higher education pedagogy would need to recognise and value the variety of difference and the cultural resources students bring to learning. Repeated encounters, with non-recognition, misrecognition, indifference and disrespect by the culturally dominant. Other produces ‘the hidden injuries’ of class/gender/race which work to imprison ‘in a false, distorted, reduced mode of being ... saddling people with crippling self-hatred’ (Charles Taylor, quoted in Fraser, 1997, p. 14). Thus recognition from others is essential to the development of a successful and powerful learning identity, to self-confidence, self-esteem and self-respect; such identities are always produced with and in relation to others. Experiencing these associational practices is crucial for the positive individual and collective development of students, especially women (and working-class women in particular) who struggle against already-gendered identities. Thus, in higher education, a pedagogy of/for/as ‘thick’ widening participation as a matter of capability outcomes, would involve processes of the educational development of individuals in participatory and inclusive learning communities in which gaining knowledge and constructing successful learner identities went hand in hand.

The capabilities approach offers a kind of scaffolding or design for just pedagogies which can be tested and adjusted empirically. Such a pedagogy (or pedagogies) would be characterised by ‘deep’ participation and ownership of knowledge. The outcome would be capability development under social conditions of learning in which widening participation students were active and valued agents able to participate in determining their own actions and educational trajectories, capable of ‘practical reason’.

Realising what are essentially democratic aspirations in pedagogical action is far from straightforward – indeed our practical efforts are likely to be imperfect where inequalities and relations of domination still prevail. Nussbaum’s theory does, however, offer a framework against which we might judge how well we are doing at widening participation as an ethical pedagogical practice beyond the numbers game. Her framework (or ‘list’) enables us to ask evaluative questions about which elements are present in higher education pedagogy and which are missing. Unlike utilitarian ‘key skills’ conceptions of ‘team work’, Nussbaum’s capabilities offer a nuanced and holistic understanding of a pedagogy of inclusion – developing the confidence to defend a point of view, while taking into account the perspectives of those who differ from oneself. It follows from Nussbaum’s capabilities that a ‘thick’ view of widening participation requires that students gain access to knowledge and the cultural and social resources of
higher education in a way which fosters deep participation and ownership. It would enable us at the same time to recognise the ways in which education and pedagogy might as easily generate capability ‘deprivation’, in other words alert us to the ways in which education produces both equity and inequity, belonging and exclusion, the latter highlighted by hooks, Morley and Skeggs.

Moreover, there is no reason to think that applying the capabilities approach to an evaluation of educational processes would not be of value in a variety of formal and informal educational settings, although such applications would need to be demonstrated empirically through thick description, life narratives and ‘little stories’ if they are to convince. Abstractions are important, but as Arendt reminds us, it is considered attention especially to particularity that accounts for ‘enlarged thought’ (cited in Taylor et al., 2002, p. 48).

3. WHAT ELSE DO WE NEED IN ADDITION TO NUSSBAUM’S CAPABILITIES?

What Nussbaum has in mind in outlining her approach is capability – not functioning (what people, having capabilities, choose to do) – as the key goal. Through (higher) education, students should be enabled to develop their capabilities, especially those of practical reason and affiliation. But what they choose to do with these capacities, in other words how they act or function, cannot be predetermined. This is helpfully illustrated by turning to Hannah Arendt (1977) who argues that education should not attempt to predict the needs of the future and to make education ‘relevant’ to the perspectives of government and employers. This would in Nussbaum’s terms lead to ‘preference deformation’. Instead Arendt was concerned to emphasise the unpredictability of the future and the possibilities of change, renewal and a better life through human agency coupled to educational processes in which no one ‘strikes from their [students] hands their chance of undertaking something new, something foreseen by no one’ (1977, p. 177). Her pedagogy works to lodge the future in the hands of the teacher’s students, rather than foreclosing that they can only be children of their times (under current conditions this would include consumerism, individualism and political disengagement). Pedagogy would be directed at capability development and outcomes – practical reason and affiliation, bodily health, emotions, imagination, and so on. Functioning (not just outcome) would involve students choosing how then to be active in the world, and this cannot be predicted (nor for Arendt should it be) by education; students may well choose consumerism.

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The issue rather is that the opportunity for understanding the past, present and future differently and of acting on the future differently is made available through Arendt’s pedagogical principle and Nussbaum’s capabilities approach. As Arendt explains: ‘The problem is simply to educate in such a way that a setting-right [of the world] remains actually possible, even though it can, of course, never be assured’ (1977, p. 192).

Yet Arendt’s argument also highlights the limits of a capabilities approach, at least in the field of education. The capabilities list provides a framework of principles whose implementation into action is not intended to be implacably uniform. Onora O’Neill (1996) highlights the significance of processes and not just achieved (equality) outcomes of capabilities. In pedagogical terms we would be asking what pedagogical processes have as their outcomes capabilities (of practical reason, and so on) which point to, or indicate more rather than less justice in the society. In her argument, a range of equalities (or capabilities in Nussbaum’s language) could be used as performance indicators for justice but would not themselves constitute justice. How do we make judgements about more rather than less justice developed in and through higher education; about which students have or will become the ‘children of their times’ (currently competitive individualism, rampant consumerism, environmental damage, ‘compassion fatigue’ in the West), and which will work for a different kind of human flourishing? For Nussbaum, the emphasis in the capabilities approach on the development of each and every individual is a useful corrective to broad development indicators. Her concern with the promotion of capacities which enable people to choose lives in accordance with their own thinking is important, but this focus on the development of individuals has limits both when we come to address the choices people make, and institutional and systemic exclusions in education, including gender injustices. This focus on individual autonomy risks individualising success and failure, and the social consequences that flow from personal choices.

To illustrate the argument, here are two cases from widening participation students, Jemma and Angela, both 20 years old. Both are daughters of single mothers; Jemma’s mother is a school cleaner, while Angela’s mother does clerical work for a local school. Their families live in rented accommodation, they attended ordinary state-funded comprehensive schools, which did little to encourage their aspirations to university education, but both their mothers were determined that their daughters should have access to the educational opportunities they themselves had missed. Both young women are in their second year of studying English Literature at the
University of Sheffield. Jemma finances her studies with a mix of her student loan and a cleaning job which she does for three hours every morning for the minimum wage; Angela does part-time waitressing. Both are clear that their university education will enable choices not open to most of their school friends in low paid work in the retail industry or call centres, or unemployment, for example. Both are developing their capabilities for practical reason, imagination, affiliation and emotions. Yet they also plan different life paths. For Jemma, making money holds little attraction, she wants to make a difference by working as a literacy teacher in an inner city school. Angela has her sights set firmly on a comfortable house in a prosperous suburban street, foreign travel, smart clothes, and something well paid and glamorous in ‘public relations’. Their choices embody different conceptions of the good life, and the point here is not to say that one conception is ‘better’ than the other. Rather it is to emphasise that both are able to form a conception of the good life, both are able to engage in reflection in planning their lives, both are capable of exercising practical reason and entering into meaningful relationships with people like and unlike themselves. They both have political and economic opportunities other than serving and obeying others (within some limits).

The point here is that different social groups, with different views about which aspects of society should be maintained through education and which should be changed, have different views about what and how schools should teach. Education is always the subject of disagreement and conflict between those holding rival views of what constitutes the good society. In this sense, education is always contested. Disputes about education ‘always reveal the ideological tensions occurring in a society as it struggles to come to terms with changing cultural circumstances and new economic conditions’ (Carr and Hartnett, 1996, p. 25). In contesting education and its purposes and values, we contest interpretations of social life. We must then ask, what kind of society should education foster? What kind of social, educational and political arrangements will best enable all members of a society to lead collective and individually fulfilling and worthwhile lives? The point is that the capabilities approach seems to offer little help in evaluating or adjudicating between particular conceptions of the ‘good’ life.

The capabilities approach does take us part of the way. It offers a robust language for describing and evaluating higher education pedagogy and, given that education is fundamentally a contested domain of activity in which human autonomy is central as a development goal, it may be that capabilities take us as far as is possible in
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terms of educational processes, as Arendt might argue. In other words, the capabilities list points to an awareness of and practices to develop practical reason, affiliation, senses and imagination, emotions, and so on, but as Arendt explains education should not prescribe a particular future. The limits of the capabilities approach are akin to the limits of education. But to evaluate education institutionally and systematically, beyond the development of each individual, we arguably do need a bigger theory of justice which addresses questions about the quality of relationships and the connections between and among people and women so that we have a debate about both individual flourishing and society and its values. We need to consider both changing our public institutions and the lives of individuals (while women comprise a majority of undergraduate students in higher education in the UK, for example, universities continue as resolutely masculinist institutions).

4. TOWARDS BIVALENT THEORISING

Iris Marion Young (2000) offers a deliberately political and social way forward from a concern with each and every individual and the potential trap of simply maximising self interest in a ‘runaway world’ of individualism, to a concern for communities. She is as concerned as Nussbaum with self-development as a key element of ‘democracy’ and social justice. Indeed, Young argues that, to be just, society must provide the conditions for all to learn ‘and use satisfying and expansive skills … to play and communicate with others and express their feelings and perspectives on social life in contexts where others can listen’ (2000, pp. 31–32). But she also argues explicitly for attention to connectedness and the inclusion of the dependent and vulnerable through the practices of ‘deliberative democracy’ which enables collective problem-solving by all those significantly involved in or affected by a decision, under conditions of dialogue which allow diverse perspectives and opinions to be voiced. Such practices provide ‘the epistemic conditions for the collective knowledge of which proposals are most likely to promote results that are wise and just’ (p. 30). This view of democracy resonates with Yuval-Davis’s (1997) idea of ‘transversal politics’, which draws from an agenda developed by Italian feminists. The two vital elements are engaging with others from one’s own situation (‘rooting’) but with open-mindedness to the views of others (‘shifting’). Applying these ideas in her concern for how peace is done, Cynthia Cockburn (1998) has produced a powerful empirical study which focuses on the spaces between selves, and the construction of individual selves.
("rooting") in relation to collective identities ("shifting") in situations of "deadly national enmity" (Northern Ireland, Bosnia and Israel/Palestine). In her study we see women struggling in/with an "agonistic" model of democratic process which does not obscure conflict and antagonism. In this model of "engaged struggle":

People of differing social positions or interests must struggle to raise issues because others may be threatened by those issues or they may simply think that different issues are more important. Once the issues that concern them are on the agenda, citizens must struggle with others over the terms in which they will engage the issue, they must struggle to get their views heard, and must struggle to persuade others. The field of struggle is not level; some groups and sectors are often at a disadvantage. Fair, open and inclusive democratic processes should attend to such disadvantage. (Young, 2000, p. 50)

Young points out that democratic struggle cannot wait for perfect conditions of dialogue and debate:

because disadvantaged and excluded sectors cannot wait for the process to become fair, because there are often so many contending interests and issues, oppressed and disadvantaged groups have no alternative but to struggle for greater justice under conditions of inequality. (2000, p. 50)

Such a political language and collective practices arguably push beyond Nussbaum's capability in which the individual has 'control over [her] environment'. We need arguments for solidarity and the irreducible plurality of our lives as central elements in a genuine politics – how people get on and make sense together, reach agreements (or have comprehensible disagreements); in short define their situation as a common situation, or fail to do so. How, across our differences can we deliberate and work together, not just how we develop 'affiliation' but how we do it, guided by what vision of justice. This is echoed by world views which differ from those of Western European thought and traditions, world views which say 'I belong, therefore I am', or notions of ubuntu in southern Africa which place human connection at the heart of what it means to be a person.

If the capabilities approach is to lay claim to being a theory of justice, there is a need to reconcile ethical concern, which Onora O'Neill (1996) argues 'is directed to a plurality of others' (p. 179) with the focus on individual flourishing. Employing her justice principle of rejection of injury she explains:
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It is because ethical concern is directed to connected others [author’s emphasis] that those who reject injury must reject activities, institutions and practices that gratuitously or systematically deceive, thereby destroying or fragmenting trust and social bonds and so indirectly injuring the connections between lives. (1996, p. 180)

Moreover, O’Neill is particularly concerned with principles of justice which offer a framework for the construction of institutions and practices. ‘Just institutions and practices’, she argues, ‘provide the specifications for judging the justice of particular acts or decisions’ (1996, p. 182).

Arguably we need to frame a ‘bivalent’ approach to capabilities, which like Fraser’s (1997) critical theorisation of recognition, would argue that both individual flourishing and structures must be included in the frame of our understanding. In her case, Fraser emphasises that culture (recognitional justice) and the economy (redistributive justice) work together to produce justice and injustice, and thus claims for both need to be integrated. In education, this would mean that our actions for justice need to correct both inequities in education and the structural frameworks that generate them, to change both individual lives and public institutions. Moreover, social conditions of trust and connection and sustainable (social) practices of communication, tolerance, recognition, participation, and so on (see O Neill, 1996, p. 202) sustain and ‘breathe life’ into the kind of individual capability outcomes Nussbaum advocates.

To return to young women in higher education, taking two law graduates, one middle class, one working class. Current social and economic arrangements in England ensure that the middle class student and the working class student would not be competing equally for opportunities in the workplace in the face of closed (middle class) networks which undoubtedly limit social mobility (see Reeves, 2001). Yet both young women would have developed their individual capabilities through higher education. These women have the legal right to free expression and political participation and the education to pursue professional careers; they have developed the capacity and courage to speak up. But structural relations of social class dis/advantage either limit or enable their ability to exercise these capabilities. And young women of whatever social class would be disadvantaged in relation to their middle-class male peers (and implacably gendered networks). Under conditions of structural inequality (national and global), particularly for poor women and girls, we need to see capabilities as fragile achievements, rather than as fixed certainties. The point is what can be done if capabilities have
been enabled but cannot be practised. (This is also not the same as the example Nussbaum gives of the person knowing about healthy diet who chooses to fast, or overeat. This is not about a choice not to be offered an opportunity in a legal firm.) Thus struggles around realising or implementing capabilities need also to be addressed. To put this more concretely, it is conceivable that the capabilities approach might disadvantage individuals and communities once claims are made (or exaggerated) for what they are able to do, as if they are no longer vulnerable say to the exigencies of national or global markets, or as if they no longer have a claim on special assistance to enable their functioning. In short, as if broader social and economic arrangements are not at stake, or as if structures of gendered (or raced or classed) power melt away in the face of capability outcomes.

O’Neill (1996) explains why we need abstract principles of justice (in her case the inclusive principle of ‘inflicting no injury’) and more specific ‘virtues’. In her argument principles of justice are embodied both in public institutions and in individual characters. This ‘both-and’ approach is important, given that institutions are never perfect or ‘knave-proof’; it therefore helps she says ‘not to have too many knaves around’ (p. 187). She explicates further:

Even when no injury is inflicted, capacities and capabilities for action can still be undermined and eroded in many different ways…. Just institutions can aim to avert and mitigate many of the injuries to which characteristic and persistent vulnerabilities lay people open, but cannot generally avert or mitigate activity that exploits individuals’ more variable and selective vulnerability. (1996, p. 192)

She offers a number of examples of how the social fabric and man-made and natural systems both create capabilities which strengthen and protect, while also generating further or new vulnerabilities, for example how marriage and family ties both support and demand, or how food aid both improves nutrition and creates dependence. ‘Connected lives’, she suggests, ‘become selectively, variably and sometimes acutely vulnerable lives’ (1996, p. 192).

On the other hand because institutions may not be just at all or not just enough, embodying justice in individuals (‘capabilities’, ‘virtues’) might mean, she says, that individual good might survive when broader justice does not (and here we might draw examples from a number of oppressive societies of solidarity with and solidarity among the subjected, such as apartheid South Africa). In this case, the ‘dispersed acts of solidarity’ by individuals might still have ‘cumulative public effects: this is the power of the powerless even in hard times’ (O’Neill, 1996, p. 201).
O’Neill’s focus on the implications of connectedness and vulnerabilities, institutions and practices enables us to judge the (in)justice of the experiences of the young female legal trainees. Her broad principles of justice and virtue are, in brief, ‘rejection of direct injury to others’ and ‘rejection of direct indifference to others’ (see p. 205). They hold individual character and institutions in the same frame of understanding and add, in my view, to what Nussbaum’s capabilities offer. Taken together with Young’s explication of ‘transversal’ practices, which are more likely to inflect towards wise decisions and deliberative democracy, we have more robust guidelines for doing (working for) and judging both individual and social change, or what we might consider a bivalent approach to social justice (in education). We are then better enabled to make some kind of judgement of what should be standards for all, that is the means to adjudicate between competing versions of the ‘good society’ realised as the ‘good enough’ society in particular times and particular places.

There is a further point. Nussbaum explicitly eschews any uniformity in the application of her capabilities list, and pays careful attention to cross cultural arguments. But there is the argument that the more detailed the universals offered, the more prescriptive their application is likely to become. This is a particular issue in circumstances where Nussbaum’s universals are deeply rooted in Western philosophy. There is then a delicate balance to be wrought both between abstract universal principles which enable rather than prescribe, and the identification of common human values across cultures while learning how to respect difference. As Raymond Tallis reminds us, not all human beings want the same thing (cited in Taylor et al., 2002, p. 53). But nor can we easily sanction cruelty or disinterest on the part of a dominant culture or community in the name and claim of difference. Like Nussbaum, Zygmunt Bauman (2001) argues that we must equally respect the rights of individuals to protection against choice-denying or choice-preventing communal pressures. Such dilemmas highlight the importance of ‘reflective equilibrium’, which Rawls describes as having been reached ‘when someone has carefully considered alternative conceptions of justice and the force of various arguments for them’ (2001, p. 31).

O’Neill further reminds us of the practical constraints of making a more just world – it has to be fashioned from the one that already exists (hence the importance of Arendt’s assertion that pedagogy keep open the space to make something new from the old). Individual change then will take us only so far, we need at the same time to reconstruct unjust institutions and practices ‘so they come to embody the specifications [for example capability outcomes] more
adequately and more reliably’ (1996, p. 183). Our abstract principles/frameworks should be of constructive (practical) use.

Yet, on the whole I think that we often prefer to describe or critique the world as it is and are less successful in thinking about how our actions today build an educational world of tomorrow – the struggle for social justice is hard work, but only through doing justice can we make justice. ‘We make the road by walking’, wrote the Spanish poet Antonio Machado. So social justice is and must be a verb (about doing and acting) as well as a noun (theoretical descriptions) (see Griffiths, 2001). At least when we try to act on our principles of justice (education for tomorrow) we are faced with the gap between our theories and our practices (trying to work in education as it is today). The gap is a hard one but also helps us to see the moments and possibilities for something different, more rather than less just. We need then a rolling dialectic of our theories and our practices, jammed up against each other. Thus when we link talk of development in relation to education and educational research we must address the world of action as much as the world of theories and theorising to understand what makes a difference to lives in education. Without action and practice talk about education is arid; without theories, talk about educational practice is impoverished. Capabilities offers a theory with practical outcomes to set us on the road, but it is an unfinished story. Our own reflective equilibrium of theory and action, supported by adjudicating theories of social justice in education, is needed for us to continue in pragmatically building a ‘good enough’ society.

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6. Notes

1 The 10 capabilities are: 1) Life, 2) Bodily Health, 3) Bodily Integrity, 4) Sense, Imagination and Thought, 5) Emotions, 6) Practical Reason, 7) Affiliation, 8) Other Species, 9) Play, and 10) Control Over One’s Environment (Nussbaum, 2000; see pp. 78–80 for her detailed explication).

2 Widening participation strategies are additionally aimed at the inclusion of more students from ethnic minority backgrounds, students with disabilities other than
dyslexia, and show a particular concern with participation by young working-class men. New Labour social inclusion strategies have emphasised attaining a 50 per cent participation in 'higher education' (that is higher education offered both in universities and further education colleges) by 18–30 year olds in England by 2010, from the current baseline of around 41 per cent. More recently, there seems to have been some moderating of this stance by the new Minister of Education, Charles Clarke, in favour of a greater emphasis on getting more state school educated and working class students into 'elite' universities. The general concern is with increasing and diversifying the numbers of students in higher education with effects for the knowledge economy/knowledge society in the UK. For a recent comprehensive account of widening participation policy, issues and debates in relation to social class, including the difficulties with hard and fast definitions of social class, see Archer et al., 2003.

In citing such experiences, I do not wish to present personal experience in an uncritical way as if experience 'speaks' an incontrovertible truth about higher education. Feminist researchers in particular have problematised experience as merely a valorisation of the individual psyche, while nonetheless using novels, life history and autobiography as a particularly rich genre for producing knowledge about the lives of women. At issue here is that these accounts of educational experiences relate to the structures of social (educational) life. For more on these issues see Cosslett et al., 2000 and Skeggs, 1997.

For a more extended development of this argument around widening participation and higher education also see Walker, 2003.

7. References


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