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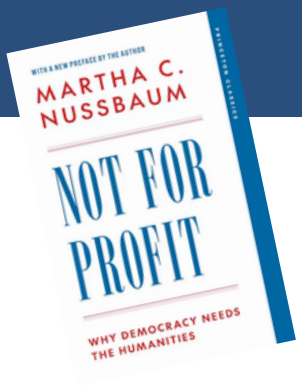
philosophy learning and teaching organization

30 YEARS 1996-2026

PLATO's 30th Anniversary Initiative:
The Purposes of Education

Professional Learning Community (PLC) Materials

A guide for discussing ***Not for Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities***
by Martha Nussbaum



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Discussion Guide

This discussion guide is designed for anyone interested in exploring the purposes and future of education. The book *Not for Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities* by Martha Nussbaum as our anchor text for our discussions. Our hope is that by gathering with others to reflect on the daily realities of teaching and learning, we will come away empowered to teach with deeper meaning and purpose.

The following guide outlines a five-meeting schedule that works through all the chapters of *Not for Profit*. This is intended to be very flexible: you can decide to hold fewer meetings or make any other adjustments that best meet the needs and interests of your community.

How to use this Guide

- *Keep it Small & Dialogical* – A small group of 5 - 12 people is recommended so that everyone has a space to be heard within the dialogue. If you are meeting virtually, keeping cameras on helps everyone stay present and engaged.
- *Keep it Low Stakes* – The atmosphere of these meetings should be informal. There is no requirement for a background in philosophy and no expectation that participants read the text. The selected quotes and guiding questions are accessible to everyone because they draw on personal experience.
- *Keep it Respectful* – Encourage participants to bring their real struggles and experiences into the discussion. This requires confidentiality and respectful disagreement.
- *Pause and Reflect* – Every now and then, pause the conversation to summarize the group's thinking. This keeps the discussion focused and provides a shared launching off point to continue dialoguing.



Session 1: What is the purpose of school?

To think about education for democratic citizenship, we have to think about what democratic nations are, and what they strive for. What does it mean, then, for a nation to advance?

-Not For Profit, page 13

Anchored Chapters: *Not for Profit* by Martha Nussbaum

- Chapter 1 (The Silent Crisis)
- Chapter 2 (Education for Profit, Education for Democracy).

1. The Big Idea

Modern schools are under immense pressure to focus solely on testable, technical skills that prepare students for financial success. Nussbaum warns that when we treat education as a mere tool for economic growth, we forget to educate the "soul" (which Nussbaum defines as "the faculties of thought and imagination that make us human and make our relationships rich human relationships"). This leads to the question, "What is the purpose of education?"

2. Silent Reflection

Before entering into group discussion, consider taking a few minutes for independent reflection and writing. There is no need to share answers out loud, as they are simply here to help frame our big question: What is the purpose of education?

- ***Curriculum:*** When you look at which classes are prioritized (and which get cut) in our schools, what does that tell you about what our system truly values?
- ***Assessment:*** Do you believe our current testing and grading methods measure real, human learning?
- ***Success vs. Failure:*** When you hear people say that "schools are failing our children," what standard of success or failure do you think they are using?

3. Reading Together

Take turns reading one or more of the core passages aloud in your group. As you discuss the passage, think about:

- What seems to be important in this passage?
- Can you give an example from your life or career of what Nussbaum means?
- Do you agree or disagree with Nussbaum's point of view on education?
- Is anything important missing? What might you like to add?

Passage A (page 2): "[A] world-wide crisis in education…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."

Passage B (page 6): "[W]e seem to be forgetting about the soul, about what it is for thought to open out of the soul and connect person to world in a rich, subtle, and complicated manner; about what it is to approach another person as a soul, rather than as a mere useful instrument or an obstacle to one's own plans…"

Passage C (page 9-10): "One way of assessing any educational scheme is to ask how well it prepares young people for life in a form of social and political organization that has these features. Without support from suitably educated citizens, no democracy can remain stable. I shall argue that cultivated capacities for critical thinking and reflection are crucial in keeping democracies alive and wide awake. 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. And the ability to imagine the experience of another—a capacity almost all human beings possess in some form—needs to be greatly enhanced and refined if we are to have any hope of sustaining decent institutions across the many divisions that any modern society contains."

4. Group Dialogue

These questions are flexible springboards, not a strict checklist—feel free to focus on the group's own questions, or to choose just one of the following and then follow where the group's interests take the dialogue. The goal is to reflect on our own daily classroom realities and develop a wider sense of what matters to fellow educators, parents, and students.

- Do you think there is a worldwide crisis in education? If so, how would you explain this crisis?
- What are the various tensions you see or experience within schools? How does this reflect the types of priorities people (teachers, students, families, leaders) have?
- How would you define critical thinking? How do you know when your students are engaged in it?
- What is the purpose of school? Would your answer to this question change if you were thinking about it "in an ideal world"?
- That is, if you were to explain to a student "the point of school" what would you say?
- Would your answer change if the student asked "why are we learning X?"

5. Closing Thoughts

As a closing activity, goaround in a circle and invite participants to share a closing one-minute thought (question or key takeaway). If you would prefer a specific prompt, use this:

- Think about your"elevator pitch" for the purpose of schools. If someone with only two minutes were to ask you"Why should students bother going to school (college) anymore?" What would you say?

Session 2: What types of beliefs/attitudes get in the way of mutual respect? What types of beliefs/attitudes should we be cultivating instead?

How do people become capable of respect and democratic equality? What makes them seek domination? To answer such questions, we must pursue the "clash of civilizations" at a deeper level, understanding the forces within each and every person that militate against mutual respect and reciprocity, as well as the forces that give democracy strong support.

-Not For Profit, page 29

Anchored Chapters: *Not for Profit* by Martha Nussbaum

- Chapter 3 (Educating Citizens)

1. The Big Idea

Even the most well-meaning people can behave badly if the context encourages or allows it. Nussbaum uses social psychology to show how school environments, when designed poorly, can reinforce behaviors that undermine learning and democratic citizenship. This leads to the question, "What types of beliefs/attitudes get in the way of mutual respect? What types of beliefs/attitudes should we be cultivating instead?"

2. Silent Reflection

Before entering into group discussion, consider taking a few minutes for independent reflection and writing. There is no need to share answers out loud, as they are simply here to help frame our two big questions: What types of beliefs/attitudes get in the way of mutual respect? What types of beliefs/attitudes should we be cultivating instead?

- ***Barriers:*** In your experience, what is one attitude that gets in the way of students being able to cultivate mutual respect?
- ***Structures:*** What types of school-based structures (rules, expectations, assignments, assessments) seem to reinforce anti-democratic attitudes?
- ***Possibilities:*** What is one change that could be made within schools that could address this anti-democratic attitude?

3. Reading Together

Take turns reading one or more of the core passages aloud in your group. As you discuss the passage, think about:

- What seems to be important in this passage?
- Can you give an example from your life of what Nussbaum means?
- Do you agree or disagree with Nussbaum's point of view on education?
- Is anything important missing? What might you like to add?

Passage A (page 43-44) on authority, conformity, and accountability: "So, we have to look at two things: the individual, and the situation…What structures are pernicious? Research suggests several. First, people behave badly when they are not held personally accountable. People act much worse under shelter of anonymity, as parts of a faceless mass, than they do when they are watched and made accountable as individuals… Second, people behave badly when nobody raises a critical voice…Third, people behave badly when the human beings over whom they have power are dehumanized and de-individualized. In a wide range of situations, people behave much worse when the "other" is portrayed as like an animal, or as bearing only a number rather than a name."

Passage B (pages 44-45) on what schools can do: "…[An] education process can strengthen the sense of personal accountability, the tendency to see others as distinct individuals, and the willingness to raise a critical voice. We probably cannot produce people who are firm against every manipulation, but we can produce a social culture that is itself a powerful surrounding "situation," strengthening the tendencies that militate against stigmatization and domination…What lessons does this analysis suggest as we ask what schools can and should do to produce citizens in and for a healthy democracy?"

4. Group Dialogue

These questions are flexible springboards, not a strict checklist—feel free to focus on the group's own questions, or to choose just one of the following and then follow where the group's interests take the dialogue. The goal is to reflect on our own daily classroom realities in order to gain insights into the types of attitudes that help or hinder true learning and the development of democratic citizens.

- What are some ways we as teachers can help foster the norm that making mistakes is a necessary part of the learning process (instead of a weakness)?
- What are some of the obstacles you experience that make it difficult to treat each of your students as complex individuals who deserve to be seen and heard with respect? What would be required to remove those obstacles?
- How can we reimagine teaching and learning so that respectful disagreement and questioning authority are experienced as vital to learning (rather than as socially risky or as a disruptive behavior)?
- What would a school intentionally designed for democratic citizenship need to prioritize?

5. Closing Thoughts

As a closing activity, go around in a circle and invite participants to share a closing one-minute thought (question or key takeaway). If you would prefer a specific prompt, use this:

- Think about the ways you can alter the design of your classroom to allow more space for making mistakes or asking for help? What makes this kind of vulnerability possible and what might get in the way?

Session 3: How might embracing student-centered discussions within classrooms help address the challenges of educating for democracy?

Our mind does not gain true freedom by acquiringmaterials for knowledge and possessing other people's ideas but by forming its own standardsof judgment and producing its own thoughts.

-Not For Profit, page 71 (citing Rabindranath Tagore)

Anchored Chapters: *Not for Profit* by Martha Nussbaum

- Chapter4 (Socratic Pedagogy)

1. The Big Idea

In many schools, learning becomes the passive acquisition and recitation of knowledge under a teaching model of adult as the "expert knower." Nussbaum argues that democratic schools must complement authority-driven instruction with active dialogue and questioning. This leads to the question, "How might embracing student-centered discussions within classrooms help address the challenges of educating for democracy?"

Before entering into group discussion, consider taking a few minutes for independent reflection and writing. There is no need to share answers out loud, as they are simply here to help frame our big question: How might embracing student-centered discussions within classrooms help address the challenges of educating for democracy?

2. Silent Reflection

- ***Questioning:*** What are some of the ways you convey the value of your day's lesson to students? How do you respond when a student asks, "Why are we learning this?" or "Why do we have to do it this way?"
- ***Dialogue:*** What does dialogue look like in your classroom? What types of questions are discussed, how is control shared (or not), and what is the goal of discussion?
- ***Constraints:*** When you imagine schools embracing more dialogue-based practices, what challenges or limitations come to mind?

3. Reading Together

Take turns reading one or more of the core passages aloud in your group. As you discuss the passage, think about:

- What seems to be important in this passage?
- Can you give an example from your life of what Nussbaum means?
- Do you agree or disagree with Nussbaum's point of view on education?
- Is anything important missing? What might you like to add?

Passage A (page 71): "The school Tagore founded was in many ways highly unconventional…Socratic questioning was front and center, both in the curriculum and in the pedagogy. Students were encouraged to deliberate about decisions that governed their daily life and to take the initiative in organizing meetings. Syllabi describe the school, repeatedly, as a self-governing community in which children are encouraged to seek intellectual self-reliance and freedom…Accounts of his practice report that he repeatedly put problems before the students and elicited answers from them by questioning, in Socratic fashion."

Passage B (page 73): "Philosophy for Children curriculum was developed… from the conviction that young children are active, questioning beings whose capacity to probe and inquire ought to be respected and further developed… [With the] view that children are capable of interesting philosophical thought, that children do not just move in a predetermined way from stage to stage, but actively ponder the big questions of life, and that the insights they come up with must be taken seriously by adults."

Passage C (page 76-77): "The aspiration to make elementary and secondary classrooms Socratic is not utopian; nor does it require genius. It is well within the reach of any community that respects the minds of its children and the needs of a developing democracy…Democracies all over the world are undervaluing, and consequently neglecting, skills that we all badly need to keep democracies vital, respectful, and accountable."

4. Group Dialogue

These questions are flexible springboards, not a strict checklist—feel free to focus on the group's own questions, or to choose just one of the following and then follow where the group's interests take the dialogue. The goal is to reflect on our own daily classroom realities and consider what role, if any, student-centered discussions have to play in educating for democracy.

- How much control should students have to deliberate and make decisions about their school experiences?
- How does learning to listen and reason collaboratively prepare students to navigate our interconnected world?
- If student-centered discussions are vital for democracy, why is it so rare in modern schools?

5. Closing Thoughts

As a closing activity, go around in a circle and invite participants to share a closing one-minute thought (question or key takeaway). If you would prefer a specific prompt, use this:

- Think about something you are teaching next week. How could you invite your students to critically explore through dialogue the "why" behind the topic?

Session 4: How can we support students in developing the genuine curiosity and self-awareness necessary for living in a global world?

Simple cultural and religious stereotypes aboundinour world… The way to begin combating these is to make sure that from a very early age studentslearn a different relation to the world, mediated by correct facts andrespectful curiosity.

-Not For Profit, page 81

Anchored Chapters: *Not for Profit* by Martha Nussbaum

- Chapter 5 (Citizens of the World)

1. The Big Idea

Too often, schools reduce global citizenship to a superficial checklist of facts and celebrations. Nussbaum argues that true global education requires students to engage in deep historical analysis, evaluate historical events, question their beliefs, and transform how they relate to others. This leads to the question, "How can we support students in developing the genuine curiosity and self-awareness necessary for living in a global world?"

2. Silent Reflection

Before entering into group discussion, consider taking a few minutes for independent reflection and writing. There is no need to share answers out loud, as they are simply here to help frame our big question: How can we support students in developing the genuine curiosity and self-awareness necessary for living in a global world?

- ***Cultural & Historical Awareness:*** When you were a student, how were other cultures and histories introduced to you? In what ways has this approach changed (or stayed the exact same) for students in our schools today?
- ***Critical Inquiry:*** Have you ever participated in (or led) a classroom discussion about biases or historical stereotypes? If so, what made that experience feel either socially risky, didactic, or intellectually transformative?
- ***Self-Examination:*** Think about a time you changed your mind about a deeply held belief or stereotype. What sparked that shift?

3. Reading Together

Take turns reading one or more of the core passages aloud in your group. As you discuss the passage, think about:

- What seems to be important in this passage?
- Can you give an example from your life of what Nussbaum means?
- Do you agree or disagree with Nussbaum's point of view on education?
- Is anything important missing? What might you like to add?

Passage A (page 86-87): "Education for global citizenship is a vast and complex subject that needs to involve the contributions of history, geography, the interdisciplinary study of culture, the history of law and political systems, and the study of religion—all interacting with one another, and all operating in increasingly sophisticated ways as children mature. And such education is also complex in its pedagogical demands. Dewey and Tagore rightly emphasized the importance of active learning for young children. As children grow older, although the connection to real life and activity should never be lost, understanding can become more theoretically sophisticated."

Passage B (page 89): "Even if the correct facts are presented to students, as was not the case here, history cannot be taught well if it is taught as a parade of facts, an all too common approach. Good teaching requires teaching children to see how history is put together from sources and evidence of many kinds, to learn to evaluate evidence, and to learn how to evaluate one historical narrative against another. Criticism also enters into classroom discussion about what has been learned; when a culture's history and economy are studied, questions should be raised about differences of power and opportunity, about the place of women and minorities, about the merits and disadvantages of different structures of political organization."

Passage C (page 94): "…[A] catalogue of facts, without the ability to assess them, or to understand how a narrative is assembled from evidence, is almost as bad as ignorance, since the pupil will not be able to distinguish ignorant stereotypes purveyed by politicians and cultural leaders from the truth, or bogus claims from valid ones."

4. Group Dialogue

These questions are flexible springboards, not a strict checklist—feel free to focus on the group's own questions, or to choose just one of the following and then follow where the group's interests take the dialogue. The goal is to reflect on our own daily classroom realities and explore how to cultivate self-reflection in our students.

- If history is messy, how should we support students when learning about it?
- How do we support students moving from knowing historical facts to developing critical historical thinking?
- What does it mean to be genuinely curious about, rather than threatened by, people with different perspectives or backgrounds from your own?
- How can we normalize genuinely changing your mind and being willing to entertain alternative viewpoints (arguments)?

5. Closing Thoughts

As a closing activity, go around in a circle and invite participants to share a closing one-minute thought (question or key takeaway). If you would prefer a specific prompt, use this:

- Think about how you might model being more open to new arguments and ideas. What else might you need to do to help normalize these dispositions in your classroom (or other contexts)?

Session 5: What would it look like for an education to honor "the unique soul" of students?

We do not automatically see another human being as spacious and deep, having thoughts, spiritual longings, and emotions... It is an achievement to see a soul in that body, and this achievement is supported by poetry and the arts.

-Not For Profit, page 102

Anchored Chapters: *Not for Profit* by Martha Nussbaum

- Chapter 6 (Cultivating Imagination)
- Chapter 7 (Democratic Education on the Ropes)

1. The Big Idea

Due to the pressures of global economic competition, students often treat learning as a means to an end. Nussbaum argues that educating for democracy instead requires developing narrative imagination, which can be done through a responsive, student-centered pedagogy that embraces the arts and humanities. This leads to the question, "What would it look like for an education to honor "the unique soul" of students?"

2. Silent Reflection

Before entering into group discussion, consider taking a few minutes for independent reflection and writing. There is no need to share answers out loud, as they are simply here to help frame our big question: What would it look like for an education to honor "the unique soul" of students?

- ***Humanities & the Arts:*** What do you like most about the humanities and the arts? Can you think of a text, film, or artwork that influenced how you connect with others?
  - How can teachers of all subjects incorporate narrative imagination in their classrooms?
- ***Honoring the Whole Person:*** What is one humanizing practice in your classroom that helps you and your students feel respected?
- ***Barriers:*** What gets in the way of teaching the whole student? What routines prevent you from making time for creative risk-taking and intellectual playfulness?

3. Reading Together

Take turns reading one or more of the core passages aloud in your group. As you discuss the passage, think about:

- What seems to be important in this passage?
- Can you give an example from your life of what Nussbaum means?
- Do you agree or disagree with Nussbaum's point of view on education?
- Is anything important missing? What might you like to add?

Passage A (pages 95-96) "[The narrative imagination] means 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."

Passage B (page 106-107): "Instruction in literature and the arts can cultivate sympathy in many ways, through engagement with many different works of literature, music, fine art, and dance…But thought needs to be given to what the student's particular blind spots are likely to be, and texts should be chosen in consequence…Works of art (whether literary or musical or theatrical) can be chosen to promote criticism of this obtuseness, and a more adequate vision of the unseen."

Passage C (page 134): "'Teaching to the test,' which increasingly dominates public school classrooms, produces an atmosphere of student passivity and teacher routinization. The creativity and individuality that mark the best humanistic teaching and learning has a hard time finding room to unfold."

4. Group Dialogue

These questions are flexible springboards, not a strict checklist—feel free to focus on the group's own questions, or to choose just one of the following and then follow where the group's interests take the dialogue. The goal is to reflect on our own daily classroom realities and explore what it means to honor the whole student.

- How can the humanities and the arts help students imagine the lives of people they might otherwise dismiss, fear, or misunderstand?
- In what ways do our school routines and systems make it difficult for us to see our students (and each other) as "spacious and deep human souls"?
- Is a teaching practice that values student individuality and creative expression compatible with our current educational system?
- Is cultivating narrative imagination and creativity in students essential for democracy? What are the best ways to do this?

5. Closing Thoughts

As a closing activity, go around in a circle and invite participants to share a closing one-minute thought (question or key takeaway). If you would prefer a specific prompt, use this:

- Think about a piece of art, literature, music, or poetry that you love but do not use in your classroom. How might you bring this back into your teaching?
- Whatever subject you teach, how do you (or could you) incorporate narrative imagination into your instruction?