

Reimagining the Roles and Responsibilities of Education in the Work of Human Development

What is the role of education in human development? This is a critical question, particularly today. I ask it from the perspective of a life lived within the contemporary American research university; in particular, one that attempts to educate within a Catholic and Jesuit tradition and seeks to integrate the demands of justice into the mission of learning and scholarship. In 1973, Father Pedro Arrupe of the Society of Jesus awakened a need to confront the links between education and the common good when he challenged anyone associated with Jesuit institutions of higher learning to *be on the side of justice*.

I answer his challenge by discussing three different perspectives on education:

- It is a basic human right.
- It must be understood and reimagined within the context of globalization.
- It must play a central role in the work of human development, or the continuous achievement of self-transformation and thriving required for an individual to live authentically and effectively in our world today.

Education Is a Basic Human Right

Most efforts in human development focus on education, if Article 26 of the United Nations' Universal Declaration of Human Rights is any proof:

Everyone has the right to education. Education shall be free, at least in the elementary and fundamental stages. Elementary education shall be compulsory. Technical and professional education shall be made generally available and higher education shall be equally accessible to all on the basis of merit.¹

This Article captures a profound truth about the importance of education. Two UN efforts to make real the promise of Article 26—the achievement of the six goals of its 1990 Education for All movement and of the Millennium Development Goals—are inextricably linked to education.

¹ UN General Assembly, *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, December 10, 1948, Article 26, available at: <http://www.un.org/en/documents/udhr/>, accessed February 13, 2012.



An Afghan pupil reads a poem to classmates at a girls' school in Kabul. During 1996–2001, the Taliban banned female education and work. Since their overthrow, millions of girls have returned to school, and many women now work outside the home. | AFP Photo: Patrick Baz

Education is the foundation for attaining basic human needs. That an education prepares us to make our way in the world is widely acknowledged as conventional wisdom in the field of development. In promoting the Millennium Development Goals, the United Nations Education, Science, and Cultural Organization cites these statistics:²

- One extra year of schooling increases an individual's earnings by up to 10%.
- 171 million people could be lifted out of poverty if all students in low-income countries left school with basic reading skills.

² *Education Counts: Towards the Millennium Development Goals* (Paris: UNESCO, 2010).

- A child born to a mother who can read is 50% more likely to survive past age five.

Educational attainment often correlates to a higher gross domestic product (GDP) for a country because it creates new economic opportunities, builds skills in individuals that can lead to better-paying and more dignified jobs, and promotes fuller participation in the democratic process. Additionally, an overwhelming body of research shows that investing in the education of girls and women is critical to creating economic growth in developing countries.³

³ See, for example, David Francis, "As Women Progress in Developing Nations, So Do Those Countries' Economies," *The Christian Science Monitor*, August 4, 2008, www.csmonitor.com/Business/2008/0804/p14s02-wmgn.html, accessed March 29, 2012.

Within this approach, education can best be understood as a basic *good* that enables one to be prepared to enter the economy. Education provides the skills necessary for participation in the economy. “Good” in this sense is instrumental—something that can be traded. But in another respect, understanding the kinds of skills needed to participate in the economy has become increasingly complicated. Viewing education as a tradable good is no longer sufficient; in fact, it imposes detrimental limitations both on the creators and administrators of educational content, and on the young women and men they educate.

Education Must Be Understood and Reimagined within the Context of Globalization

Globalization is the driving force in shaping our world today. This statement no doubt raises eyebrows, in part because it is never clear what we mean by the word. The word globalization is a “Rorschach test”—a term that is loaded with agendas and assumptions for any involved in using it to capture phenomena in need of explanation. For some, globalization captures the inevitable implications of a commitment to a neoliberal economic program that emerged in the mid-20th century with a group of economists associated with the Mont Pelerin Society. For others, it is an evil at the root of the inequalities that characterize our world today. Few are neutral when discussing the term. What is missing is a consensus as to what the word captures. We need to develop a vocabulary for working with the term.

Globalization captures the integration of economic, political, and social life that has become possible through new technologies: information, transportation, energy, and an array of others. Peoples, nations, and individuals have never been more closely connected than they are today.

Globalization has enabled us to all be connected to one another in ways that are unprecedented in history. This is by no means the first globalization. The Persian Empire of the fifth to third centuries B.C. and the “Republic of Letters” of the 15th and 16th centuries, capture two earlier examples of global connectedness. But the resources that are available to us through our globalization offer us opportunities to make distinctive contributions to the welfare of humankind. The defining question for us is whether we can harness these resources in ways that can enable us to have this impact.

We have never been more aware of the conditions under which the people of our world live. We have a deeper understanding of the systems that sustain these conditions. We understand the implications of our systems—the “externalities” that arise as a direct result of the systems and structures with breadth and depth. It is hard to hide from these realities. There is a transparency that emerges, and it is a responsibility of our institutions of education to engage this new understanding.

As part of this second approach, education must enable us to develop more than skills to participate in the economy. Education must help us to understand how the world works. Such an education will allow us to ask ourselves, in the spirit of the Universal Declaration, whether our political, economic, and social systems provide the conditions to respect “*the inherent dignity and... the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family...*”⁴

Do some of our practices and systems undermine this inherent dignity and deny these

⁴ UN General Assembly, *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, December 10, 1948, Preamble, available at <http://www.un.org/en/documents/udhr/>, accessed February 13, 2012.

inalienable rights? Do labor practices give lie to the protection against slavery and servitude as described in Article 4? Do our supply chains undermine any effort to ensure the sustainability of our environment for future generations? Are growing income inequalities between the top and bottom tiers of our societies understood as “inevitable or natural?”⁵ Or in the words of Katherine Boo, in her haunting account of life in a Mumbai undercity: “What is the infrastructure of opportunity in this society? Whose capabilities are given wing by the market and a government’s economic and social policy? Whose capabilities are squandered? By what means might that ribby child grow up to be less poor?”⁶

Answering these questions is the work of education. It is the work associated with our institutions of higher learning. John Henry Newman provides a framework for understanding this role of education. Newman delivered a set of lectures in the mid-19th century while acting as the founding rector of the newly established Catholic University of Ireland, which would later become University College Dublin. These lectures came to be called *The Idea of the University*, and they have provided an articulation of the purpose of an undergraduate education that still informs our understanding today.

For Newman, the “main purpose” of the university is “a real cultivation of mind,” a “habit of mind” capable of grasping “a comprehensive view of the truth in all its branches....” An Intellect... “properly trained and formed to have a connected view or grasp of things....”⁷

5 Andrew Hacker, “We’re More Unequal Than You Think,” *New York Review of Books*, February 23, 2012.

6 Katherine Boo, *Behind the Beautiful Forevers: Life, Death, and Hope in a Mumbai Undercity* (New York: Random House, 2012), 247–248.

7 John Henry Newman, *The Idea of the University* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1982), Preface and 77.

Newman captures a deep aspect of the purpose of learning. It is this comprehensive view of knowledge that enables us to contribute productively and meaningfully to the complex challenges facing our world. It is a type of learning that enables us to achieve a sense of human flourishing. Newman writes, “The perfection of the Intellect, which is the result of Education...to be imparted to individuals in all their respective measures, is the clear, calm, accurate vision and comprehension of all things....”⁸ For Newman, education is understood as its “own end” pursued for the purpose of cultivating the minds of our young. Newman rejects the notion of an education pursued for purposes of “utility.”

Education is the means through which we question and critique our existing systems and structures and the underlying assumptions that guide them.

Education Is Necessary for Self-transformation

There is still another approach to education that we must consider. As Amartya Sen has taught us, the goal of “development” is “freedom.”⁹ We need access to goods—food, shelter, clothing—in order to survive. Without these goods, we cannot meet our basic needs, and without meeting these needs, there is no capacity to develop further and define our distinctive identities. If we can assume we are meeting our basic needs, the potential of education is to equip us with the resources that allow us to be our most authentic selves. The “freedom” we are seeking is an interior freedom—an awareness of the blocks that prevent us from realizing our authenticity.

8 John Henry Newman, *The Idea of the University*, 105.

9 Amartya Sen, *Development as Freedom* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 3, 36–37, 75–76.



Afghan children and women attend a Koran reading class at an Islamic school in Kabul in September 2011. Women’s rights have improved since the end of Taliban rule, particularly access to education.

AFP Photo: Adek Berry

Ultimately, an education involves the transformation of one’s self and the capacity to engage in that transformational process throughout the course of one’s life. The Greeks had a word for this, *metanoia*, which captures the idea of moving beyond one’s current way of thinking. At its deepest level, education involves the profoundly interior work of appropriation that results from a lifelong commitment to achieving the most authentic realization of one’s self.

When exposure to this deeper conceptualization of education is demanded, when it involves encounters with a broader horizon within which to explore and create individual worlds, it is possible that our thinking about education can shift. We can begin to imagine how the fostering of individual authenticity through education can become the engine of the greatest contribution to

our thinking about human development to date: the capabilities approach outlined by Amartya Sen and further developed by Martha Nussbaum.

The capabilities approach seeks to address the underlying economic, social, and political conditions that enable each of us to fulfill our promise and potential. This is “an approach to development in which the objective is to expand what people are able to do and be...”¹⁰ It emphasizes individual freedom as the defining aspect of these conditions.

The animating concepts were established in the very first Human Development Report. Human development was defined as “both the process of widening people’s choices and the level

10 Séverine Deneulin and Lila Shahani, eds., *An Introduction to the Human Development and Capability Approach: Freedom and Agency* (London: Earthscan, 2009), 23.

of their achieved well-being.”¹¹ At the core, “... The purpose of development is to enhance people’s capabilities....”¹² What does Sen mean by “capabilities?” A capability is the “freedom to promote or achieve what [one] values[s] doing and being.”¹³ It is the freedom to engage in the practices and activities that one values doing and for which there is a value in doing. It is through these activities that one achieves “well-being” or “human flourishing.” The question that Sen asks and that is at the heart of the Human Development approach is: Do you have the capability to engage in the activities, the practices, what Sen calls the “functionings,” that matter most to you? Do the social, political, and economic structures provide you with the framework to achieve this capability?

For so much of the modern era we have considered our responsibilities to each other within the poles of utilitarianism and duty-based theories—between the poles of Mill and Kant. For so much of the modern era, in our understanding of political economy, this has translated into an exclusive focus on GDP. The Human Development and Capability Approach asks us to consider a different way. Again, in the words of the first Human Development Report: “The basic objective of development is to create an enabling environment for people to enjoy long, healthy, and creative lives. This may appear to be a simple truth. But it is often forgotten in the immediate concern with the accumulation of commodities and financial wealth.”¹⁴ This broader focus is lost with an exclusive focus on GDP, since indicators such as health and education—which the human

development approach includes—are not part of standalone measures of GDP.

This idea of human development deeply resonates with the ethos of the university.

It is within the context of the university that I believe we can find the resources for addressing the questions of moral responsibility. For it is the very ethos of a university that we can bring to bear on the challenges posed by globalization. I wish to recast the framing of globalization within the ethos of the university. By “ethos” I mean “the characteristic spirit” that animates the identity and purpose of the university.¹⁵ Our understanding of globalization is too limited, too constrained. I don’t believe our definitions of globalization should be simply economic and market-driven considerations. Instead, globalization should be understood as a force through which we can further advance the betterment of humankind.

This new understanding, and the dialogues that result, can be explored within the university. Animated by their ethos, universities can be leaders in reframing the meaning of “globalization” and in the work of deepening our awareness of, and responsibilities to, each other.

It would be invaluable if we could support efforts to expand an understanding of globalization that accepts this understanding of human development. But beyond that, could we imagine, in the exercise of our institutional agency, the university playing a deeper role in this work of human development? We can, and we must.

John J. DeGioia is President of Georgetown University. The views expressed in this essay are his own, and do not necessarily represent the views of the United States Agency for International Development or the United States Government.

11 United Nations Development Programme, *Human Development Report* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 10.

12 Séverine Deneulin and Lila Shahani, eds., *An Introduction*, 26–27.

13 *Ibid.*, 31.

14 United Nations Development Programme, *Human Development Report 1990* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 9.

15 *Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd ed., Vol. 5, “ethos.”