# When to List, Who Should List, and How:
## The Capabilities Approach, Democratic Education, and Inclusion

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Tony DeCesare undertakes an important project in his essay by conceptualizing a possible "middle ground" capabilities approach that intersects with the goals of democratic education. It is in light of his concern for social discussion and "the work of public reasoning" that he looks to Amartya Sen's express avoidance of a prescribed and fixed capabilities list; to list, we understand, is to universalize and impose a view of the good in educational contexts that demand a much more localized and context-specific account of valued ends and thus capabilities.

Because I support DeCesare's ultimate project of finding an intersection between education and the capabilities approach that is consistent with the latter's emphasis on a plurality of valued lives, I offer some potential challenges to this project that arise in my reading of the essay and that I believe warrant further consideration. First, DeCesare believes that a fixed list of capabilities — such as Martha Nussbaum's — imposes universal values on specific cultural contexts and, in doing so, undermines the role of social dialogue in forming such a list. There are two considerations here: the first is a worry about imposing values, the second a worry about the centrality of social discussion in conceiving of equality. To illustrate these potential challenges, it will help to consider these two points separately.

Sen's opposition, as DeCesare points out, is to a "fixed forever" list of capabilities and not, importantly, to a list itself.[1] Nussbaum, I believe, concurs. Although we might agree with DeCesare that Nussbaum is not "genuine" in her emphasis on her own list's open-endedness and incompleteness, the dispute is not really, in this case, about whether "to list or not to list," but rather about *when* to list, and who should list and how. One way, then, to understand the difference between Sen and Nussbaum's positions is that they disagree on whether one can develop even localized capabilities lists without reference to a prior understanding of what should be included — we might say a sense of universally held or implied understanding of what is required to live valued lives. Nussbaum, I think, believes that we cannot or perhaps that we should not. She notes an inconsistency in Sen's thinking on this point, namely that while he eschews a preformed list, his understanding of "freedom" presupposes a view of valued life:[2] Sen does argue, for example, that the value of democracy "is not regional in character."[3] To say, then, that an alternative to Nussbaum's so-called imposed and universalized list is needed seems to suggest that these localized lists would be formed without any reference to universal values. But DeCesare seems to assume that the process of democratic deliberation is universally applicable and necessary. How, importantly, does he propose to defend the value of democratic deliberation — and the development of its associated functionings — as a universal one? Can we assume that all people will value or will have reason to value participation in democracy or the democratic process itself? Certainly some

feminists have argued that the liberal democratic tradition has been formed out of exclusions: liberal values prescribe notions of freedom, agency, and citizenship that presuppose a view of the subject as individual and independent, and as an able-bodied white male. In other words, the democratic process has been understood as far from equal or desirable.[4] Therefore, despite my own clear commitment to persons' equal participation in democracy, I am unconvinced that this commitment itself stands without need for argument. We might ask, then, what difference there is between the imposition of the democratic process and the imposition of valued lives on a given social context.

DeCesare's preference for Sen's approach is based in this desire to safeguard what Sen calls the "productive role of public discussion, social agitation, and open debates."[5] The "middle ground" position with which DeCesare concludes therefore argues that our educational aims should be to produce adults who have developed the functionings necessary to engage in deliberating democratically and to partici-pate in the process of developing context-specific capabilities lists. But perhaps we cannot too quickly overlook the central reason that Nussbaum gives in defence of a list, notably that it acknowledges a plurality of valued ends while also safeguarding against exclusions that arise in differing social and cultural contexts. An important concern, then, is whether ensuring that all children develop these functionings likewise ensures their formal participation in that deliberative process. Sen's approach does not allow us to account for how social exclusions at the level of local context will determine who is included in this process; some children may be excluded from education on the basis of their being deemed uneducable and some may be excluded later, at the level of participation in forming capabilities lists. Each society or list-making context will surely have its own conception of who is eligible for democratic participation and this virtually guarantees differences in terms of who will participate and to what extent. DeCesare's conclusion, then, regarding the aim of education is significant but inadequate to ensure even formally inclusive democratic participation. What Nussbaum's approach might offer *through her defence of a list* is a way to evaluate and assess the relative inclusivity of that democratic participation.[6] So when DeCesare writes, "There is more value in the process of developing capabilities than there is in adopting a prescribed list," I argue that this is certainly true, but only if that process is itself inclusive.

I share Lorella Terzi's view that the capabilities approach should address, as a matter of justice, how the design of social contexts determines who is included and excluded — who is considered a participant in society.[7] Importantly, a central element of the capabilities approach is a consideration of "conversion capacity:" the recognition that social context determines to a great extent how one translates a good — like education — into good living — in this case, participation in democracy. Consider, for example, a social context in which girls are considered to be unequal to boys. Within that context, where the educational aim is to produce adults who can engage in democratic deliberation, girls and boys may develop the same functionings, but this in no way ensures that their participation will be equal or even that social norms or customs will necessitate a minimum threshold of formal participation by

girls and women. A parallel example can be given in relation to the education and social participation of individuals with disabilities in the United States. In many American social contexts, individuals with disabilities have not been considered equal citizens and not granted equal participation in political or democratic deliberation. While we might envision educational contexts in which children with disabilities develop *functionings* for deliberation alongside their nondisabled peers, we can also imagine that absent a minimum threshold of adequacy for such participation — a level below which they cannot properly be called participants — that these individuals' *capabilities* for democratic participation would be undermined by their exclusion from social life. I suggest that guarantees of formal inclusion — adequacy levels — matter greatly when social beliefs, norms, and attitudes might work against inclusion.[8] But how do we have such adequacy levels without even a minimal capabilities list?

It seems, then, that DeCesare's view confronts the problem of either insisting on inclusion or equality in terms of which children are to be schooled or allowing for exclusions at the level of who forms these functionings to deliberate — who is to be deemed educable. The first move consists of a possible imposition of values and the second seems to allow for the perhaps arbitrary exclusions of certain individuals. The problem then, is that safeguarding the democratic process seems to necessitate the imposition of *some* values. Again, sharing DeCesare's commitment to the capabilities approach and its potential to yield a vision of education that is truly inclusive, I offer these two points as in need of further consideration: 1) whether insisting on democratic deliberation is an imposition of process and 2) whether social exclusions will be tolerable and, if not, how this middle ground position might defend formal inclusion without an imposition of values in specific local contexts, and, of course, without reference to a prior list.

1. Amartya Sen, "Capabilities, Lists, and Public Reasoning: Continuing the Conversation," *Feminist Economics* 10, no. 3 (2004): 80.

2. Martha Nussbaum, "Capabilities as Fundamental Entitlements: Sen and Social Justice," *Feminist Economics* 9, no. 2–3 (2003): 44.

3. Amartya Sen, "Democracy as a Universal Value," *Journal of Democracy* 10, no. 3 (1999): 12.

4. See Meira Levinson, "Challenging Deliberation," *Theory and Research in Education* 1, no. 1 (2003).

5. Sen, "Capabilities, Lists, and Public Reasoning," 80.

6. See Lorella Terzi, "A Capability Perspective on Impairment, Disability and Special Needs: Towards Social Justice in Education," *Theory and Research in Education* 3, no. 2 (2005): 212.

7. Ibid.

8. See Ibid.