

Education as Initiation Revisited: General Rituals and the Passage to Adulthood

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AIMS

Richard S. Peters's illuminating conception of education as initiation is among the leading ideas of contemporary philosophy of education. A new collection of essays, *Reading R.S. Peters Today: Analysis, Ethics, and the Aims of Education*,¹ has called attention to its contemporary relevance. After summarizing Peters's conception, I propose a major reconstruction, drawing on the distinction between *general* initiation, exemplified by obligatory tribal initiation rites at puberty, and *particular* initiations exemplified by voluntary rites of admission to fraternities or occupational guilds, for example. Peters's conception involves initiations to particular cultural practices. My reconstruction extends the idea to general initiation, firmly connecting education as initiation to rites of passage to adulthood.

EDUCATION AS INITIATION

In developing the idea of education as initiation Peters aimed to resolve long-standing conflicts between conservative notions of education as cultural transmission (the shaping or molding metaphor), and progressive notions of education as cultural regeneration (the growth metaphor).² "Initiation" was offered as a middle ground. In *Ethics and Education*, Peters develops the idea in two stages. Chapter 1, offers a *conceptual analysis* with three conditions: to count as "education" something must (i) possess intrinsic value; (ii) conduce to knowledge, understanding, and the development of cognitive perspectives; (iii) not engage learners involuntarily or unwittingly.

Chapter 2, then, puts forth education as initiation as a *synthetic sketch* fleshing out the analysis. "Initiation" for Peters indicates learners and teachers joined in gaining knowledge, understanding, and active cognitive perspectives. To be an initiate in an activity is to know its traditions and rules, to understand its point, and to be able to participate as a social "insider"; initiates share, and care about, the values inherent in the activities.

These two components — the conceptual analysis and the initiation metaphor — are closely linked: the initiation metaphor concretely reveals what is stated more abstractly in the analysis. I now turn to the main lines of criticism against his conception of education as initiation.

CRITIQUES OF PETERS'S CONCEPTION OF EDUCATION

A CONSERVATIVE CRITIQUE

Shortly after publication of *Ethics and Education*, critics attacked from both conservative and progressive ranks. Conservative Mary Warnock argued that education as initiation over-emphasized "insider" understanding and voluntariness. She claimed that all learners had a moral right to acquire basic facts and skills. While accepting that the deeper and more nuanced understandings and capabilities deriving

from education as initiation were “worthwhile,” they were trumped by the moral obligation to provide the basics. Insofar as time and effort devoted to education as initiation took time from the basics, it violated that moral obligation.³

This argument was intended to undercut both the “knowledge and understanding” and “value” conditions of Peters’s analysis. The former was rejected as too strong, in that it did not count mere transmission of facts and skills as “education.” The latter was rejected as too weak, because it assigned an insufficient weight to the overriding moral value of transmitting basic facts and skills.

One answer to Warnock’s criticism is that becoming an initiate in academic forms of thought logically requires acquisition of many basic facts and skills. One can hardly be an “insider” in history, for example, without knowing a fair amount of history. Granted that learners may become adept at historical thinking while remaining ignorant of important areas of history, armed with the tools of historical thought and available reference sources, such deficits can readily be eliminated.

A PROGRESSIVE CRITIQUE

Progressives and radical students saw Peters as a conservative and education as initiation as merely a reiteration of the cultural transmission model — and Peters’s formulations sometimes suggested such a reading.⁴ One such critique is offered in Gert Biesta’s “Education, not Initiation.”⁵ Biesta claims that initiation is tantamount to transmission, and counters it with an “agency” conception stressing each individual’s growth in uniqueness or difference.

“Initiation vs. agency” is, however, an “untenable dualism.” The “worthwhile activities” intended by Peters include transformational ones. Education as initiation allows for the differences and new identities regularly exhibited in all intellectual and artistic fields. In art education, for example, it is a given that mature artists develop unique perspectives and practices. They do this by working through traditions and conventions, as filtered through their unique life experiences and those of their generation, discarding outmoded forms while extending their fields in new ways. They do not study the old masters to become different from them; this would be immature and shallow. Rather they study masters to learn from them in the process of qualifying themselves as insiders or initiates — as creative members of the artistic community, agents positioned to manage and advance the tradition in creative and unexpected ways.

Michael Luntley and Kelvin Beckett help explain how this takes place. Beckett notes that for Peters, initiation is a two-step process.⁶ In the first step, teachers bring learners into the worlds of cultural activity and teach them basic moves. Luntley adds that this first stage is possible because cultural activities are continuous with thought and behavior patterns learned prior to education as initiation. A young girl, for example, moves her body naturally in response to music. Her dance teacher then builds on her natural expression, speaking about her moves in the language of dance and inviting her into traditions and practices of dance.⁷

In the second step of the initiation process, as Beckett observes, after learners acquire requisite vocabularies, teachers and learners explore these cultural worlds

together. These worlds are constantly evolving. Learners inevitably have new interests shaped by new generational life situations. Using the tools acquired in the first step young people as agents question the judgments and emphases of their teachers and move beyond them in unpredicted ways. Initiation in Peters's sense thus *implies* agency.

THE CRITIQUE OF CONCEPTUAL ARBITRARINESS

A more enduring critique was stated by William Dray: different groups in society have quite different conceptions of education, reflecting differing social positions. In the guise of conceptual analysis, Dray asserted, Peters simply advances the educational values of his own group. Like Warnock, Dray complained that Peters over-emphasized nuanced academic knowledge and understanding; other groups might emphasize quite different educational values.⁸ Peters took this critique seriously, eventually conceding that different groups might have differing legitimate conceptions of education.⁹

EDUCATION AS INITIATION RECONSIDERED

Dray does not target the "initiation" metaphor itself, and his critique does not imply that education is *not* initiation — at least in a sense independent of Peters's analysis of education. I will provide such a sense in the next section.

But first, I want to put my account in context. I started by calling Peters's conception "illuminating," to suggest that it was a programmatic definition intended to cast light on certain features of the educational situation prevailing when Peters formulated it.¹⁰ The conception of education was part of Peters's larger program to revitalize teacher education as it became a university-based field in the 1960s and demanded the kind of knowledge base possessed by other university-based professional fields. In developing that knowledge base Peters sought to elevate the intellectual content of both teacher education and general education in schools. A definition of education bringing the intellectual dimension to the fore was intended to serve just that purpose.¹¹

Peters's larger educational project was enthusiastically taken up in United Kingdom the 1960s and 1970s, but has not been sustained. The intellectual disciplines of philosophy, history, and sociology, which became, under Peters's influence, standard fare in teacher education programs of that time, have all but disappeared from undergraduate teacher education today, and are not likely to be re-established as central to teacher education any time soon.¹²

Nonetheless, education as initiation can be re-shaped to illuminate *today's* educational situation. Prominent among the current challenges of post-industrial democracies is the broken link between education and adulthood. All developed societies today face an occupational crisis, as jobs are outsourced to low-wage nations and employees are replaced by contingent workers and industrial robots. Increasingly, school and college graduates are unable to find remunerative work, and remain stuck in post-adolescent stasis.

There are three features of education as initiation I wish to reconsider in the light of the occupational crisis: (a) the relationship between *particular* initiations into

various cultural activities and *general* social initiation as exemplified by obligatory tribal initiation rites at puberty, (b) the fields of activity to which the notion of initiation applies, and (c) the conditions required for successful initiation.

PARTICULAR AND GENERAL INITIATION

Peters's notion of education as initiation is focused squarely on the intellectual dimensions of academic disciplines. His account highlights school teachers and lessons. Education aims at initiations into science, history, literature, and the like; education is thus a "package" of particular initiations.

For Mircea Eliade, initiation refers to a "body of rites and oral teachings whose purpose is to produce a radical modification of the ... status of the person to be initiated"; the novice emerges from the initiation ordeal "a totally different being." Eliade distinguishes between *two types* of initiations: (a) obligatory collective initiation rituals whose function is to effect the transition from childhood to adult status by introducing novices to the spiritual and cultural values and practices of the community and assigning them adult responsibilities, and (b) voluntary particular initiations into secret societies and occupational guilds, for example, which distinguish initiates from other members of society.¹³

At first glance, education, taken as a whole, appears to fit the notion of *general* initiation: obligatory initiation into society. The child emerges from education as an adult — a "totally different being." The various disciplines, however, have their own occult languages, so education in history, literature, and the sciences can be conceived as *particular* initiations. But what is the relation between education as general initiation and education as a package of particular initiations? And why did Peters not think of education in terms of general initiation?

Significantly, Peters was well aware of this distinction and actually did consider this question carefully. In "Ritual and Education," an article Peters co-authored with Basil Bernstein and Lionel Elvin, the authors mark out this very distinction.¹⁴ The function of general rituals is, they say, is to unify the social whole through shared repetition of symbolic behaviors. We may add that many vivid examples of such general rituals can be found in the history of education, including athletic contests in English public schools and weekly sermons at Bryn Mawr and Morehouse Colleges. Wellington reputedly stated that "the battle of Waterloo was won on the playing fields of Eton," suggesting that general school rituals — not academic lessons — generated the patriotism and leadership in the elite class that sustained the Empire. In her sermons Martha Carey Thomas directed Bryn Mawr women not merely to excel academically, but to devote themselves to leadership in all walks of life. At Morehouse, President Benjamin Mays told young black male students that "Morehouse holds a crown over your heads, and expects you to grow into it." These colleges, through such general rituals, sent forth an astounding cadre of female and black leaders.

But in highly differentiated modern societies, Peters and his coauthors assert, the number and significance of general rituals declines: such rituals can only be effective in education when a high degree of social consensus and uniformity among

students prevails in a school. In today's comprehensive schools, they say, these conditions simply do not exist. As a result, general school rituals wane and students develop their own "youth-culture" rituals outside of school to form their transitional identities. In short, for Peters and his co-authors, educational agencies have lost the power to perform general social rituals and initiate young people into responsible adult roles.

"Ritual and Education" appeared in 1966, amidst a vital and widespread revival of youth culture and an economy boosted by social and military spending. The authors felt that schools could concentrate on intellectual development, while young people formed identities through the youth culture, found work in the growing economy, and affected their transitions to adult status in recognizable ways despite the absence of general rituals in schools. Today, however, youth culture has broken into thousands of little pieces while opportunities for work disappear. Pathways to adult status are obscure for both former working- and middle-class young people. More and more school and college graduates, regardless of their academic attainments, languish in their parents' basements. General rituals of initiation — genuine rites of passage to adult status — are needed more than ever. And once education as initiation is freed from Peters's conceptual analysis of education, it can be reshaped to guide the development of such rituals (as considered, in the final section).

FIELDS OF EDUCATIONAL ACTIVITY

Peters's conception of education privileges liberal education in science, mathematics, history, the social sciences, literature and the arts, and in particular, the intellectual dimensions of these disciplines. It excludes or under-values practical arts like technology, crafts, and design, and the instrumental values they serve as gateways to remunerative adult work. As Donald Schon has demonstrated, however, these practical fields have their own traditions and insider knowledge.¹⁵ They are not mere applications of academic knowledge, but possess their own practical knowledge bases. Thinking or reflecting in these fields does not in general draw back from practical activity for intellectual reflection, but instead draws directly (and often tacitly) on practical knowledge, and the vocabularies of practices are interdependent with their operational moves. Practitioners learn to reflect-in-action by learning-in-action from mentors and guides, through apprenticeship processes just like those Peters brings to the fore in his second stage of education as initiation. The field of education as initiation thus can and should be extended to technical and professional education.¹⁶

CONDITIONS OF INITIATION

Peters's account of the material conditions of successful initiation also over-emphasizes the intellectual dimension of activities and practices. Indeed, Peters at times even *confuses* the intellectual dimension of activities with the activities themselves. Peters speaks variously of education as initiation into "forms of thought," and "worthwhile states of mind characterized by breadth of understanding," but also "worthwhile activities" or "practices or traditions enshrined in a public language." The various formulations, however, are not equivalent because forms of thought or states of mind — paradigm objects of formal classroom education — are

clearly *abstracted from* real world activities or practices. It is one thing, for example, to learn to *think like* an artist, and another to actually *be* an artist. This is equally true even in intellectual fields like history or literature. There is simply more to any learned activity or practice than thinking, and novices simply cannot *think* themselves into the status of initiates. It is one thing to *talk* a good game, another to *play* one.

The knowledge, understanding, and even practical ability engendered through formal classroom learning do not by themselves grow into adult capability. In an oft-cited paper Sally Ann Moore of Digital Equipment Corporation estimates that in “learning for performance” 5 percent of time must be devoted to didactic learning to develop “I know,” 20 percent to the discursive and heuristic dimensions for “I understand” and “I can do,” and an additional 75 percent to informal learning of “*I adjust and adapt.*” Her figures may not be precise but they give us some sense of how initiates actually form their adult capabilities.

Didactic, discursive, and heuristic education can be organized in formal courses: teachers can present, explain, and discuss the basics, and then guide the first steps of practice. The “adapt and adjust” stage, however, requires hours of informal learning. Teachers can help us learn to read and guide our early reading, but only years of self-directed reading can make us “readers.” Coaches can introduce us to rules and guidelines of a sport like tennis, and provide lessons to teach us basic strokes, but only practice and play can make us “tennis players.” Foreign language courses can teach us vocabulary and basic grammar and guide us in informal dialogues, but only immersion can make us capable speakers.

Thus, the second step of Peters’s account of initiation, where teachers and learners explore cultural worlds together, can comprise only a fraction of what is needed to move the novice to initiate status. Even excellent high school art or history programs cannot by themselves make students into artists or historians; when young people do exceptional work in adult fields — and they sometimes amaze us by doing so — long periods of self-determined or mentor guided informal learning are invariably involved. Education as initiation thus requires a third stage — of informal exploration alone or with outside mentors — freed from the limitations of classroom instruction and the direct control of teachers.¹⁷

OUTLINE FOR A RECONSTRUCTED CONCEPTION OF EDUCATION AS INITIATION

Armed with these modifications to Peters’s account, we can now propose an outline for a reconstructed conception of education as initiation.

NESTING PARTICULAR ACADEMIC INITIATIONS IN GENERAL SOCIAL INITIATION

First, my proposed reconstruction of education as initiation *conjoins* particular initiations and general social initiation, and nests the former in the latter. The overriding aim of education on this account becomes transition to adulthood and thus education becomes a rite of passage. Schools guided by this notion assess themselves primarily by how well they move their charges forward to independent adult status. Academic initiations serve as *both* introductions to activities with their own inherent values *and* as steps in the passage to adulthood. Academic lessons and

courses are nested in, and qualified by, the larger purpose of social initiation. Such schools mark successful transitions to adulthood in public ceremonies: their graduation rituals, honor rolls, and halls of fame give primary place not to those with the highest academic marks, but to those demonstrating adult knowledge-in-use, in jobs, internships, and apprenticeships, independent research projects and business ventures.

But what of Peters's doubts about general initiation rituals in comprehensive schools? I selected my earlier examples — Eton, Bryn Mawr, and Morehouse — to illustrate how such rituals work in the exactly opposite kinds of schools — those serving distinct groups defined by class, race, and gender. Peters doubted that such rituals were useful where student groups shared little in common.

But today's school students are not as diverse as they may appear. Children from elite families do not attend comprehensive schools, while those who do, the children of so-called working and middle classes — black or white, male or female — all face similar life challenges and thus can respond to common rituals. Steady jobs of all kinds at all levels are disappearing. All young people need high-level knowledge and skill for decent work of all kinds. They need further education that does not drive them into unmanageable debt. They need attitudes of flexibility and adaptability to turn knowledge and skill to account in responding to unpredicted occupational opportunities throughout life. They need networking skills to connect with others and make themselves and their capabilities visible. Without general rituals responding to these needs, just who will be “holding a crown over the heads” of *their* students?

EXTENDING THE FIELD OF EDUCATION AS INITIATION

Second, the proposed reconstruction expands education as initiation beyond the liberal arts and sciences. I argued in the last section that as worthwhile activities with long traditions and inherent values, the “liberal” subjects are on the same plane as subjects with more immediate occupational aims like commerce, technology, design, and crafts. Students can be initiated into entrepreneurship, videography, computer programming, or the culinary arts, just as they are initiated into mathematics or history. Occupational arts have their own forms of thought and action; their activities, while serving instrumental ends, also possess inherent value — they are worthwhile activities in their own right.

Thus we can return to Peters's initial acknowledgment of the technical as a form of knowledge. We can also embrace Dray's insight — as Peters himself eventually did — that several legitimate conceptions of education can exist side-by-side in contemporary society. Our comprehensive schools can satisfy several of these at once — they do not have to choose between them. While some students may emphasize liberal arts and university preparation, and others preparation for polytechnic colleges and workplaces, all will undergo rigorous training in several disciplines and fields, acquiring packages of particular initiations and all — regardless of class origins — will be concerned about occupational opportunities. All will embrace education's transitional role — as initiation into adult life.

RAISING STANDARDS OF INITIATION

Finally, the proposed re-conception raises the standards for education as initiation. As I argued in the last section, formal education cannot by itself generate adult capabilities. The students conceived by Peters as initiates may *think* more or less like artists and historians, but they remain incapable of performing at adult levels in these or any other fields. Learning for performance requires many hours of specialized informal learning, adapting, and adjusting school lessons in demanding adult contexts.¹⁸

Many young people find the time for learning on their own or with the guidance of outside mentors, and amaze us with their accomplishments and maturity. But most are constrained by bloated curricula and limitless hours of homework. It is hardly surprising that many of today's most accomplished young people have turned to homeschooling to clear time for personal and mentor-guided learning.

But what about students confined to schools? Mary Warnock thought that educators had a moral obligation to provide young people with many "facts and skills." But education as initiation, in the sense here proposed, implies the opposite: educators have a moral obligation to clear time from "facts and skills" for informal learning. Instead of mandating endless "specific learning objectives" assessed by standardized tests, they need to free young people deeply to explore the worlds into which they have been invited. They need to provide time and space for self-determined learning, and mentors to guide it. And they need to mark these forms of learning with suitable rituals — from mentor award ceremonies to science, technology, and arts fairs. Then students can present themselves during graduation rituals as accomplished young adults, ready, able and well positioned to shoulder the challenges of full membership in society.

SUMMARY

Peters's initially presented education as initiation as a *synthetic sketch* to fill in his *conceptual analysis* of "education." In the face of criticisms of his analysis, Peters acknowledged that other legitimate conceptions of education might exist. This acknowledgment does not imply that the initiation metaphor itself must be rejected; instead it frees philosophers of education to reconceive education as initiation in terms less closely tied to Peters's analysis and more relevant to today's educational situation — particularly the broken link between education and adult status. In this essay I have outlined a proposed reconstruction nesting the particular initiation processes in academic disciplines with general social initiation — the rite of passage to adulthood. On this view education as initiation applies to a broad range of liberal disciplines and occupational fields, and highlights the rigorous standards to be met in affecting transition to adult status through education as initiation.

1. Stefaan Cuypers and Christopher Martin, eds., *Reading R.S. Peters Today: Analysis, Ethics, and the Aims of Education* (New York: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011).

2. Richard Stanley Peters, *Ethics and Education* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1966), 46. This work will be cited in the notes as *EE* for all subsequent references.

3. Mary Warnock, *Education: A Way Ahead* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1979). As Kelvin Beckett sums up her view, “Warnock objected to any analysis of the concept of education that suggests that this aim is more important than transmitting facts and skills.” See Beckett, “R.S. Peters and the Concept of Education,” *Educational Theory* 61, no. 3 (2011): 242.
4. See Bryan Warnick, “Ritual, Imitation and Education in R.S. Peters,” *Journal of Philosophy of Education* 43, Su. 1 (2010).
5. Gert Biesta, “Education, not Initiation,” in *Philosophy of Education* 1996, ed. Frank Margonis (Urbana, IL: Philosophy of Education Society, 1997), 90–96. Surprisingly, Biesta does not mention Peters, nor take up any of Peters’s actual formulations of education as initiation for criticism.
6. Beckett, “R.S. Peters and the Concept of Education,” 244
7. Michael Luntley, “On Education and Initiation,” *Journal of Philosophy of Education* 43, (2009): 41–56, reprinted in *Reading R.S. Peters*, eds. Cuypers and Martin.
8. This incident is recalled in D.C. Phillips, “Philosophy of Education,” *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2009 Edition), ed. Edward N. Zalta, <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2009/entries/education-philosophy/>.
9. See John Gingel and Christopher Winch, *Philosophy of Education: The Key Concepts* (London: Routledge, 1999), 63.
10. I here use the term “illuminating definition” in the sense of Richard Shusterman. See Shusterman, “Pragmatism Between Aesthetic Experience and Aesthetic Education,” *Studies in Philosophy and Education* 22, no. 5 (2003): 403–412. Peters clearly acknowledged the selective emphasis in his conception of education: Following Dewey, he noted that “emphasis will be given at different periods to different aspects of what it means to be educated ... we do not emphasize things which do not require emphasis — that is, such things as are taking care of themselves fairly well; see, R.S. Peters, John Woods, and William H. Dray, “Aims of Education: A Conceptual Inquiry,” in *The Philosophy of Education*, ed. R.S. Peters (London: Oxford University Press, 1973), 20.
11. See Brian Simon, “The Study of Education as a University Subject in Britain,” *Studies in Higher Education* 8, no. 1 (1983), for an account of these developments.
12. See Paul H. Hirst, “Philosophy of Education in the UK: The Institutional Context,” in *Leaders in Philosophy of Education*, ed. Leonard Waks (Rotterdam: Sense Publishers, 2008), 305–315; Hirst charts the rise and subsequent fall of Peters’s program for teacher education, in which Hirst was a major force.
13. Mircea Eliade, “Initiation, an Overview,” in *Encyclopedia of Religion*, vol. 7, ed. M. Eliade (New York: MacMillan, 1987), 224.
14. B. Bernstein, H.L. Elvin, and R.S. Peters, “Ritual in Education,” *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society of London: Series B, Biological Sciences* 251, no. 772 (1966): 429–436.
15. See Donald Schon, *Educating the Reflective Practitioner: Toward a New Design for Teaching and Learning in the Professions* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1990).
16. The technical *is* included in Peters’s initial list of forms of knowledge (*EE*, 51). Peters, moreover, mentions carpentry and cooking as proper school subjects — activities thought to be worth passing on (*EE*, 144). Not only did these school subjects disappear in later statements, but so did the technical as a form of knowledge; see the new list in Paul Hirst and R.S. Peters, *The Logic of Education* (New York: Humanities Press, 1970), 63. After *EE*, “practical subjects dropped out of the picture, leaving (only) theoretical enquiries concerned with the pursuit of truth, like science, history and literary studies,” John White, “Why General Education: Peters, Hirst and History,” in *Reading R.S. Peters Today*, eds. Cuypers and Martin, 120.
17. In his brief discussion of informal education, Peters says it consists largely in “conversations” (*EE*, 88); In this he again displays an intellectual bias; informal education generates “learning for performance” though conversations only as these are tied directly to operational moves.
18. Peters oddly insists that secondary schools and universities concentrate on general canons implicit in forms of thought rather than specialized and personal learning (*EE*, 56). He vastly underestimates the learning capabilities and accomplishments of teens and young adults. And he undervalues specialized education by needlessly running it together with ‘training’ as serving merely instrumental ends and thus not even counting as education. See *EE*, 86; Hirst and Peters, *Logic of Education*, 67.