

The Adult and the Curriculum

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INTRODUCTION

Among Jean-Jacques Rousseau's enduring legacies has been the equation of student-centered education with child-centered education; implicitly, the "student" in most student-centered education has been understood as "the child." While the assumption of student childlikeness may take any number of forms — in teacher education programs at the university level, for example, it can be seen in our tendency to treat undergraduates not as experienced learners but as *inexperienced* teachers, as "kids" — the most troubling expression of that assumption is the valorization of social ignorance as innocence. All too often, student-centered education has been understood in terms of a kind of preservation of or return to innocence.¹

The regeneration — or "return to innocence" — motif has figured centrally in the United States' faith in democratic education: We look to the next generation to solve current social problems, on the assumption that if the upcoming generation can be buffered from social problems, it may be able to start us off on a new footing.² Many Americans, not least of them professional educators, believe that education can help solve problems as disparate as homelessness, illiteracy, graffiti, gang violence, sexism and racism, poverty, teen pregnancy, technophobia, AIDS, rampant consumerism, joblessness, cultural imperialism, and drug abuse. Insofar as it is assumed that social problems are a kind of "cycle" that is perpetuated when children are exposed to harmful social influences, the solution to those problems is thought to lie in controlling the conditions under which children are reared.³ As a young woman in my undergraduate foundations class once put it, "I feel like if we could just ship all the kindergartners to the moon and educate them there, away from everything else, we could really make a difference. But by the time we get them in high school, it's too late."⁴

It is a surprisingly popular educational fantasy. Rousseau had a version of it in *Emile*; Newt Gingrich has offered us his, a kind of Congressional *film noir* rendition of the Boys' Town orphanages that he remembers from World War II movies; some home schoolers appeal to their own variations; Horace Mann, Catharine Beecher, Maria Montessori, Nel Noddings, Jane Roland Martin, and Molefi Asante, among countless others, have all set forth proposals for protective school settings that would allow children to grow up free of contamination from prevailing social problems.⁵ For all the differences between such proposals, they have in common the appeal to a purified, protected environment in which the threat posed by (for example) inadequate parents or problematic neighborhoods, distasteful cultural norms, racism, inequality, capitalism, urban sophistication, and/or poverty can be held at bay, while the child-centered pedagogy in question restores, enhances, supports, and cultivates the natural gifts to which each child can lay claim as part of his or her

human endowment. Despite their optimism regarding the possibility of individual (and sometimes collective) flourishing under alienating conditions, such isolationist approaches to education evince a profound *societal* helplessness: a belief that it is too late to do anything about our social problems ourselves, but that the next generation may get things right if only we can protect them from contamination by prevailing conditions.

Not all student-centered education takes this approach, however. In contrast to child-centered approaches that reference education to the “innocent” child — the child understood apart from the contingent historical and political situation into which he or she is born — adult-centered approaches reference education to adults located in a particular place and time, and understand their possibilities and limitations partly in terms of their social situation. Because not all adult student-centered education starts with the historical and political situation of adults, “adult-centered” approaches to education may differ from “adult student-centered” approaches. Distinctively “adult-centered” education takes the achievements, problems, and historical possibilities of socially situated learners as its starting point.⁶

Perhaps the best example of adult-centered education can be found in Carter G. Woodson’s *The Mis-Education of the Negro*, which conceives of student-centered education in terms of the shared situation of learners.⁷ In what follows, I argue that Woodson’s adult-centered approach to education is better suited to progressive aims than is Rousseau’s child-centered approach to education. Both approaches stress the centrality of experience and the importance of a nurturing and supportive environment that allows learners to explore their possibilities to the fullest; they differ, however, in their conceptions of experience and authenticity. Whereas child-centered education tends to equate authenticity with unmediated, politically innocent individual experience, adult-centered approaches reference authenticity to shared political experience. And whereas child-centered education typically assumes some degree of detachment from (implicitly contingent) social conditions, adult-centered education begins with the social, political, cultural, economic, and historical *situation* of learners — while embracing an emergent vision of social possibility.

ADULT-CENTERED EDUCATION

For Rousseau, the good and pure man is the one who is least part of his situation: a man who rises above it and is always the same, regardless of his surroundings.⁸ Rousseau’s endorsement of innocence is not a Peter-Pan-style refusal of growth, for certainly he believes that Emile must become a man who knows and acts in the world. But Emile can only be in the world authentically, in Rousseau’s view, if his intuitions, motivations, actions, and understanding are *grounded* in innocence. Although Woodson, too, appeals to authenticity to guide and orient thought and action, the term for him does not indicate transcendence of one’s historical circumstances. Instead, authenticity means being able to understand and act on the world without recourse to either romantic or oppressive notions of *possibility*. As he sees it, authentic education for African Americans must start from learners’ shared experience of trouble and struggle but broaden to consider as-yet-unimagined forms of experience.⁹

Instead of attempting to start over with a new generation uncontaminated by the existing order, Woodson begins in the middle, with the possibilities embodied in the present generation of adults. It is pointless, in his view, to try to protect black children from any knowledge of racism.¹⁰ While educators must fight against demeaning portrayals of blacks in school or popular texts, they cannot expect positive textual portrayals to provide adequate preparation for the world in which African Americans find themselves.¹¹ What is needed instead is an education that informs children and adults alike about their situation, while also awakening them to possibilities not framed by that situation. Such an education must be both objective — careful, historically accurate, and politically sensitive — and visionary — alive to as-yet-unseen possibilities.¹²

Like Rousseau, Woodson takes as his foil those forms of mis-education that exploit the plasticity of learners by harnessing learning to ends other than students' own. An authentic education respects and develops students' own distinctive possibilities; mis-education, on the other hand, teaches students not to make meaning for themselves but to rely on the ideas of others. For all the evils of slavery and segregation, Woodson says, the greatest evil endured by the Negro has been the systematic mis-education imposed upon him.¹³ Because blacks in a racist society do not enjoy the privileges and opportunities that whites do, the educational program that works for whites will be, at best, useless to African Americans. At worst, a white-referenced education will pass on the lies, rationalizations, and values that organize racism itself. "It is very clear," for example, "that if Negroes got their conception of religion from slaveholders, libertines, and murderers, there may be something wrong about it, and it would not hurt to investigate it."¹⁴ Accordingly, Woodson believes that African Americans must set aside the values and goals they have borrowed from whites, to develop their own sense of the good and desirable. The most important educational objective for the Negro is for him to learn to "think and do for himself."¹⁵

Learning authentic ways of being in the world will not, in Woodson's view, be a matter of African Americans setting aside their history of inequality and returning to an uncontaminated, pre-contact version of blackness. Rather, it will mean developing alternative ideas and living out new kinds of social relations. Blacks' history of struggle provides the tools for a *possible* authenticity as yet to be realized, but authenticity itself must emerge from experimentation with new social relations. While it is true that the first step towards change is to undo the effects of mis-education, that process does not mean restoring a pre-contact sensibility. Instead, it means shaping new meanings and values through use of tools that blacks have developed for their own purposes: The arts, for example, have played an important role in blacks' struggle for creative self-determination in the face of oppression.¹⁶ The educational solution to alienation is not to go back to some more innocent model of humanity but to go forward to create something new — in Paulo Freire's words, "the new man: neither oppressor nor oppressed, but man in the process of liberation."¹⁷

In contrast to Freire, however, Woodson sees the new man — the New Negro — not as someone who has broken his ties to his former contradictory self but as

someone who reclaims his heritage of struggle for new ends. Whereas Freire argues that the oppressed must set aside their false consciousness before they can be reborn as free men,¹⁸ Woodson argues that the tools with which to counter internalized oppression are already available to the oppressed. The challenge is to reclaim one's heritage without its baggage of oppression, and the only way to do that is to treat it not as a fixed entity having an inherent, once-and-for-all meaning but as an instrument for use in creating a new situation. As an African-American standpoint theorist, Woodson treats the experiences of slavery, segregation, and oppression as yielding an epistemic advantage for African Americans. That advantage is not an automatic attribute of blackness but is produced by the *work* African Americans perform in maintaining, negotiating, and challenging prevailing power relations.¹⁹ The history of African Americans as Woodson sees it is not simply a fact — moral or otherwise — but material to be taken up in the production of new art and new knowledge. African Americans must learn to *use* their history of oppression for collective black purposes, without allowing black identity or possibility to be dictated by that history.

Insofar as the distinctive intellectual, spiritual, artistic, economic, vocational, and political perspective and tools yielded by blacks' history of struggle are generated from within African-American culture, they can be seen as authentic rather than as borrowed or imposed. As such, they represent the starting point for an authentic black education. These tools are not themselves the standard of authenticity, however, for what is to count as authentic must be *worked out* through the educational process. While Woodson wants blacks to be inspired by their successful forebears, for example, he does not want them simply to replicate the past.²⁰ Authenticity is to be treated as an emergent ideal, validation being progressive rather than retroactive.

THE ROLE OF THE TEACHER

A key question raised by child-centered education is how the teacher can be sure of responding to authentic as opposed to artificially induced student interests, feelings, and needs. Some theorists have argued that the teacher herself must be uncontaminated.²¹ While this requirement seems to pose a considerable obstacle for the child-centered project, Rousseau neatly finesses the difficulty it sets by fictionalizing his account — saying in effect, “just suppose that we start with exactly the kind of tutor we require, and just suppose that that person is me.” (It is not clear that he thought of this leap of faith on our parts as actually requiring any sort of suspension of disbelief, but that is another story.) Making a similarly self-aggrandizing move a century later, Catharine Beecher offered herself and other women as the sort of teachers who could help preserve childhood innocence. Observing that women were naturally purer than men, Beecher argued that women were natural teachers of children — close enough to innocence themselves to able to protect the innocence of children.²²

Whether or not the teacher is required to be innocent, she must have access to a protected, “natural” environment in which to observe the student, so as to help the child discover his or her natural possibilities and limits. Provided that the teacher can

observe the child in surroundings that do not exert social influence over the child, it is assumed that the behavior observed will be authentic. Yet it is not as if the teacher is merely a passive observer of natural behavior. While the child-centered teacher must be selfless, she is not to be inactive. The teacher, Rousseau says, “ought to be wholly involved with the child — observing him, spying on him without letup and without appearing to do so, sensing ahead of time all his sentiments and forestalling those he ought not to have.”²³ The warrant for this aggressive involvement is that the teacher acts, in effect, as a projection of the child’s inner adult, helping to guide the student in a suitable direction without imposing her own will. Because the student’s own needs and purposes are central to the pedagogical project, the teacher is “for” the child: Bracketing her own interests as an individual, she offers herself as a tool and resource for the student’s use in exploring possibilities. Like the rest of the child’s environment, the teacher may serve as support, stimulus, and sometimes even as immovable object, but never as an authoritative *influence* over the child. Pedagogically, she is an all but invisible facilitator, not a person in her own right.²⁴

There is a high cost to this teacherly invisibility. Although the pedagogical intent is to lend support to the child’s limited powers, the effect is to undercut student agency. When Rousseau, for example, has Emile’s tutor produce the “natural” environment needed for his pupil to flourish, while hiding from Emile any knowledge of the tutor’s labor, he undermines Emile’s capacity to know either his world or his powers through his own labor. Both the tutor’s invisibility and his role in constructing the environment upon which Emile depends raise the question as to what Emile really can be said to know — for the cost of dependency on others to make things happen *for* one is an inability to know things for oneself.²⁵ In adult-centered education, by contrast, students produce knowledge through shared work and struggle. Whether the work in question is creative or practical, it is meaningful only insofar as students engage with the world as it is, working in solidarity with one another. The task of the teacher is not to provide students with invisible assistance but to help students see their situation and what might be done to change it.

While a service orientation is inseparable from adult-centered teaching, as it is from child-centered teaching, the conception of service is quite different in the two cases. For Rousseau, service means selflessness and invisibility of the kind associated with trusted servants and mothers; for Woodson, service means something more like civil service — commitment to the needs of the community. The first requirement for adult-centered teachers is that they have the skills, knowledge, and attitudes that will allow them to “understand and continue in sympathy with those whom they instruct.”²⁶ Intended to insure that teachers know how to enlist the skills and knowledge that students already have, this requirement also provides students with a protected environment in which racism (for example) does not control or determine values or inquiry. When students are surrounded by hostile forces in their everyday lives, school cannot protect them from knowledge of their world — but it can offer support for the construction of non-alienated knowledge concerning that experience. Teachers who know their students’ situations and “continue in sympathy” with them are in a position to provide them with some of the tools they need to engage in meaningful inquiry.

The second requirement is that adult-centered educators be able to introduce students to new ideas — and that they themselves do not simply rely on old methods and assumptions. Teachers dedicated to progressive education require study. Since in adult-centered education the pedagogical focus is on the *situated* student, the teacher must study not only the student but the situation. “To educate the Negro we must find out exactly what his background is, what he is today, what his possibilities are, and how to begin with him as he is and make him a better individual of the kind that he is.”²⁷ Because older methods and ideas are tied to an older situation, progressive educators need to examine and experiment with new ideas and methods. Finding out what students need cannot be referred to the already-known, for the question is not only who students are but who they are to become — and what it will *mean* for them to become free persons.

CONCLUSION

It is no accident that education has been a key component in most popular discussions of democracy — that we prefer to think of multicultural education, for example, in terms of education for children. The innocence of children is a cherished metaphor in American education, symbolic of the capacity of American democracy to renew itself with each new generation. In an almost overwhelmingly complex economic and political system, in which historical inequities between whites and blacks, between Anglos and Native Americans, and between men and women have taken different forms over the years without ever disappearing, education seems to hold forth the promise that all may be set right if only we can train *this* generation from scratch.

As Woodson’s adult-centered approach to education suggests, however, a more viable approach both to understanding ourselves and to effecting social change may be to start in the middle: to begin with the actual conditions in which we find ourselves. “By forgetting the schoolroom for the time being and relying upon an awakening of the masses through adult education we can do much to give the Negro a new point of view with respect to economic enterprise and group cooperation.”²⁸ Change must start with this generation and with us; if we cannot change ourselves, it is pointless to try to teach the next generation how not to make our mistakes. By re-educating ourselves, rather than deferring change to the next generation, we can give new meaning to the idea of authentic education.

1. This has been true of other kinds of education too, of course. Earlier in this century, for example, Indian boarding schools provided what was meant to be a culturally “purified” environment for Native American children by removing them from their families and tribes; the boarding schools were in some sense an effort to restore Native American children to “innocence” by keeping them away from influences perceived as harmful. See Deirdre A. Almeida, “The Hidden Half: A History of Native American Women’s Education,” *Harvard Educational Review* 67, no. 4 (1997): 757–71. Examples of purified environments that allow a return to “innocence” can be found in education for adults and young adults as well as education for children. For example, the faculty in Sandy Petersen’s study of a Job Corps high school site clearly consider that a crucial part of the education they provide is removing students from their home environments and giving them an environment freed of nonsalutary influences. Repeatedly, the instructors note that these are *good* “kids” (although some of the students are in their early twenties), but say that they require a substitute environment before they can realize their full potential. The potential envisioned for them, however, is for the most part limited to dead-end jobs.

Thus, the “innocence” envisioned for these students is a kind of non-dangerousness with respect to the dominant order. See Sandra Lynn Petersen, “Reducing Alienation in African American Female Students Who Have Dropped Out and Enrolled in a Job Corps High School” (Ph. D. diss., University of Utah, 1998).

2. For an important discussion of the social and political function of child-centered ideology, see Barbara Ehrenreich and Deirdre English, *For Her Own Good: 150 Years of the Experts’ Advice to Women* (Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor/Doubleday, 1979), especially 183–210.

3. Theorists from a variety of political and intellectual traditions have challenged this assumption. For example, see Bronwyn Davies, *Frogs, Snails and Feminist Tales: Preschool Children and Gender* (Sydney, Australia: Allen and Unwin, 1989), for a discussion of some of the problematic assumptions informing a child-centered approach to eradicating sexism.

4. On the other hand, I have been surprised at the number of students who reject any equation of innocence with childhood. Interestingly, it seems that parents are the ones most likely to find the idea of childish innocence and goodness absurd. Competitiveness with siblings, such students say, is at least as characteristic of children as “innocence.” In light of this objection, it is perhaps significant that Rousseau never had any experience of child-rearing — and that he insisted that Emile be an only child.

5. Among recent versions of this educational program, see Molefi Kete Asante, “The Afrocentric Idea in Education,” *The Journal of Negro Education* 60, no. 2 (1991): 170–80; Jane Roland Martin, *The Schoolhome: Rethinking Schools for Changing Families* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992); and Nel Noddings, *The Challenge to Care in Schools: An Alternative Approach to Education* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1992). While these theorists do not necessarily embrace social ignorance as a condition of individual innocence — and indeed may explicitly call for an informed understanding of social conditions — their appeals to a purified environment and/or uncontaminated teachers implicitly invoke standards of social innocence.

6. This is not to say that such education is necessarily confined to the education of adults, but that, whether it involves children or adults, the kind of experience on which adult-centered education draws is informed by social and historical understanding. By contrast, child-centered education, even when it involves adults, appeals to a kind of experiential innocence — direct, unmediated experience shorn of its societal accretions.

7. The central texts referred to in this discussion will be Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Emile, or On Education*, trans. Allan Bloom (1762; reprint, New York: Basic Books, 1979) and Carter Godwin Woodson, *The Mis-Education of the Negro* (1933; reprint, Washington, D.C.: The Associated Publishers, 1972). Obviously, these two theorists make very different assumptions and have quite different projects, and in fact my point in contrasting them is to problematize the unity assumed for “student-centered” education by underscoring the differences between “child-centered” and “adult-centered” versions of student-centered education.

8. Manhood must be emphasized here: Implicitly, most student-centered education is male-referenced — including, in some cases, versions intended to serve as feminine or feminist correctives to masculinist paradigms. With regard to child-centered education, see the discussion in Valerie Walkerdine, “Femininity as Performance,” in Valerie Walkerdine, *Schoolgirl Fictions* (London: Verso, 1990), 116–24. With regard to adult and/or adult-centered education, see Elizabeth Ellsworth, “Why Doesn’t This Feel Empowering? Working through the Repressive Myths of Critical Pedagogy,” *Harvard Educational Review* 59, no. 3 (1989): 297–324. In Rousseau’s work, of course, the focal student is unquestionably male; Woodson’s work, although intended to include women, frequently invokes manhood as a measure of freedom and authenticity.

9. For Rousseau, imagination poses an enormous threat to self-sufficiency and to authenticity grounded in direct knowledge of oneself in relation to things. For Woodson, however, imagination in the form of vision is indispensable to any form of education that does not simply prepare people for the prevailing social order.

10. If African-American children suffer the costs of racism on a daily basis, it makes more sense to prepare them to cope with racism than to try to protect them from the knowledge of racism. As I have argued elsewhere, it is because white teachers assume the generic white child as the reference for child-centered education that they assume innocence as the ground of authenticity. For white children, being kept safe from knowledge about racism is a way to be kept free of blame for “society’s” ills — but of course ignorance about racism does not keep whites from participating in the benefits that accrue to them from institutionalized racism. See Audrey Thompson, “Not the Color Purple: Black Feminist Lessons for Educational Caring,” *Harvard Educational Review* 68, no. 4 (Winter 1998): 522–24.

11. See Woodson, *Mis-Education*, 142. Implicitly, Woodson may be suggesting the limitations of the kind of uplifting educational approach that W.E.B. Du Bois and Jessie Fauset took in publishing *The Brownies Book*, a Harlem Renaissance-era magazine intended to provide black children with positive black role models.

12. Keeping hope alive cannot be referenced to experience if the experience in question is hopeless, as it is under slavery. For African Americans, religion has played an indispensable role in keeping alive a belief that life is worth living and that justice will prevail. See Katie G. Cannon, *Black Womanist Ethics* (Atlanta: Scholar's Press, 1988), 18. Whereas in Deweyan pragmatism religion plays at best a marginal role, in the work of African American theorists who adopt a political pragmatist stance (such as Cannon and Cornel West), religion may play a significant and even vital role. Woodson, too, emphasizes the role of the historically black church in providing educational leadership and a vision not referenced to the racist status quo.

13. "Negro" will be used interchangeably with "African American" and "black" in this essay, as Woodson's usage makes it difficult to do otherwise: Just as many student-centered theorists have used "the student" or "the child" in the singular to refer to an entire group of possible people, Woodson uses "the Negro" to refer to all African Americans. This dated usage makes it difficult to avoid recourse to his own language, since modern usage does not lend itself to "the African American," for example.

14. Woodson, *Mis-Education*, 73.

15. *Ibid.*, x.

16. *Ibid.*, 140.

17. Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, trans. Myra Bergman Ramos (New York: Continuum, 1970), 42. While Freire is in some important respects an adult-centered educator, he is difficult to categorize, as he also has child-centered leanings.

18. See, for example, Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 33, 47. In this regard, Freire is implicitly more child-centered than adult-centered, though his appeal to innocence is quite different from that of Rousseau and other child-centered educators.

19. See Audrey Thompson, "Political Pragmatism and Educational Inquiry," in *Philosophy of Education: 1996*, ed. Frank Margonis, (Urbana, Ill.: Philosophy of Education Society, 1997), 425–34.

20. Woodson here offers an intriguing parallel to Butler's work on performance and authenticity, in that both theorists argue that self-imitation is not authenticity. But of course where Woodson sees authenticity as "real" so long as it is historical, collective, and emergent, Butler regards authenticity as an artifact of a certain kind of cultural performance. Because she sees authenticity as a tool of the dominant order — a tool predicated on the otherness of marginalized, "inauthentic" persons — Butler does not view authenticity as a tool that can be claimed for counter-oppressive purposes. See Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990).

21. In *Caring: A Feminine Approach to Ethics and Moral Education* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), Nel Noddings offers an important theorization of teaching as a "feminine" service role, and in this essay I borrow her convention of designating the teacher with a female pronoun. I differ from Noddings, however, in considering the teacher's being "for" the student not as a feminist role to be endorsed but as a problematic role underwritten by patriarchal assumptions and individualistic commitments.

22. Her position was not quite as essentialist as it sounds, for she did not mean the category of women to include *all* women. Only women such as herself would meet the criteria of innocence and purity — white, middle-class, educated, single, implicitly heterosexual women. See Kathryn Kish Sklar, *Catharine Beecher: A Study in American Domesticity* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1973).

23. Rousseau, *Emile*, 189.

24. That the teacher is to figure as part of the environment is made clear in Rousseau's discussion of the use of force as opposed to authority. The tutor is not to command anything of his student but to "let him know only that he is weak and you are strong." Although the tutor is another human being, Emile is to regard him as part of nature, and thus to interpret his use of force in terms of the "necessity in things, never in [terms of] the caprice of men." Rousseau, *Emile*, 91.

25. This, of course, is the Hegelian master/slave argument that standpoint theorists such as Dorothy Smith and Patricia Hill Collins invoke. Rousseau himself appeals to something like this argument when he insists that Emile is never to be master of others, for fear of becoming dependent on them — yet he does not problematize Emile's dependency on the invisible services provided for him by his tutor.

26. Woodson, *Mis-Education*, 28. Of course, this requirement applies to culturally and racially sensitive education for children as well; again, the term “adult-centered” education is not meant to suggest that such education is only for adults but rather to underscore the emphasis on student knowledge as opposed to student innocence. Because so much of child-centered education is colorblind, it insists upon overlooking the knowledge that children may have regarding race, racism, and ethnic differences, for example.

27. *Ibid.*, 151.

28. *Ibid.*, 109.