

Traditionalist Education: A Needed Emphasis

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It's been my experience, first as a graduate student in education and then as a professor of education, that the philosophical/methodological focus in the field of education--in education courses, the professional literature, and the professional discourse generally--is and has been overly one-sided. This is not to say that what we do/did attend to, talk about, write about, advocate, and implement is/has been all bad—to the contrary, even though I am becoming less and less enamored with it personally, it is/has been arguably good. My claim is that we have tended to take into account just one side of things (from now on I'll keep things in one tense or another to avoid unwieldy sentence constructions, but I'm talking about a phenomenon that has gone on for decades). Our frame of reference is incomplete, and that leaves us with a skewed and inadequate intellectual basis for thought and action in our area of concern. This writing fleshes out this contention and tells of two projects of mine that have been attempts to do something about this need I see in the field that has persisted over the course of my career in education, over forty years.

I've found it helpful to divide the thinking and actions and prominent personages in education into two broad categories: progressive (other terms that get at this perspective are pragmatism, social reconstructionism, neo-Deweyianism, critical theory, and developmentalism); and traditionalist (essentialist, perennialist, classical, non-progressive, and I include in this camp classical or Jeffersonian liberalism and modern libertarianism). For many years, those in the progressive category, broadly defined, have gotten far more play—and, more particularly, favorable play--than those I'm calling traditionalists. That is to say, with reference to the past, we have given far more attention to John Dewey, William Kilpatrick, and Harold Rugg than William Bagley, Robert Hutchins, and Albert J. Nock. The university where I teach has an active John Dewey Society, with publications and meetings with lengthy speakers lists. There is no such organization or activity in the memory of William Bagley, say. In fact, as far as I can see, Bagley, Hutchins, Nock, and their like, have virtually, if not completely,

disappeared down the memory hole of educational thought and practice.

In more recent times, one can count on progressives—again, broadly defined—like Mike Rose, Paulo Friere, and Jonathan Kozel showing up on course reading lists and in the references at the end of education publications far more often than Russell Kirk, Edward Wynn, or Thomas Sowell. One is far more likely to hear educational discourse framed in constructs/ideals progressives employ—among them, democracy, social justice, multiculturalism, diversity, constructivism, and developmental responsiveness—than those traditionalists might use—say, the Western heritage, cultural pluralism, constitutional republicanism, personal liberty, intellectual integrity, the scholarly disciplines, or academic excellence.

I have done a couple of things in the direction of righting this imbalance: I authored a book and created a university course. I will discuss each of the two in turn. A point of information, my own views fall in the traditionalist camp; another way to put it, I'm a non-progressive.

The book is entitled *While There is Time: Conservatism and Individualism in Education* (reference in the bibliography). It is made up of five interrelated essays, and I consider it a book of advocacy. The back cover blurb provides a sense of the book's contents:

. . . the philosophical orientations we most need to affirm and employ as bases for constructing elementary and secondary school programs in our time are the ones most often dismissed by professional educators, namely, conservatism and individualism. These essays outline conservative and libertarian perspectives on education, explore what all the talk about teaching democracy in the schools is about, contrast sports and schools as settings, and employ the concept of personal authenticity in a discussion of the work of teaching. What holds the essays together is all of them are grounded in conservative rather than liberal and individualist rather than collectivist frames of reference.

The course is entitled Traditionalist Education and is offered for both graduate and undergraduate credit at my university. The catalog description:

Perspectives on schooling at all levels directed at preserving and extending a heritage (cultural, racial, ethnic, religious, regional, national), or promoting individual freedom, character, or academic excellence.

Six things to note about the course:

- You don't have to be anachronistic, misguided, and even malevolent to be a traditionalist. This course does not equate traditionalist education with a soulless 3-Rs, back-to-basics approach; rigidly prescribed content; an exclusive focus on the Western canon and no concern for non-European traditions and accomplishments; indifference to social inequities; teacher dominated classrooms; lectures, recitations, and worksheets; desks in a row; cutthroat competition; and tedium. Those negative stereotypes, which are prevalent, persist in large measure, I believe, because, for all practical purposes, one side—the progressives—has been doing all the talking. To this course, and to me, the heart of a traditionalist education is that students study seriously what will contribute to significant achievement and growth in the areas listed in the description (and implied; there is a tight word count limit with course descriptions): the finest aspects of a heritage; becoming a freer and more self-determining human being; developing one's strength of character; and more closely approximating the upper limit of one's potential academically (and in this time of grade inflation, that means actual accomplishment, not just getting a good grade).

- While both progressives and traditionalists care about character or, an older term, virtue, they tend to emphasize different qualities as comprising it. Traditionalists are more likely to focus on "stern" virtues such as orderliness, self-discipline, personal responsibility, hard work, independent-mindedness, perseverance, loyalty, and courage. Progressives, in contrast, are more likely to promote "soft" virtues such as care, compassion, service to those less fortunate, inclusion in the group, and self-esteem. There are, to be sure, good

qualities in the progressive list, but our one-sidedness has lead us to overlook the worth of stern virtues.

- You don't have to be politically right-of-center to favor traditionalist education. For example, two prominent contemporary writers, E.D. Hirsch and Diane Ravitch, both liberals and both on the bibliography, believe that liberal ends—racial justice, economic parity, gender equity, and so on—are best attained by conservative educational means.

- Traditionalist education is not just for European-heritage white people from advantaged backgrounds. Some African Americans may want an education for their children centered in their African culture and heritage rather than one that promotes multiracialism and cultural relativism. Some African Americans may want schooling that immerses their children in the best of the Western heritage. African American educator Marva Collins, listed in the bibliography, for instance, wants her students to see themselves both as African Americans and citizens of the world. In her view, the West shouldn't be "them" and "theirs" to her students; it should be *us* and *ours*. The renowned African American intellectual and activist W. E. B. Dubois made this same point with reference to his reading of Shakespeare. Native Americans and Hispanics might hold comparable views. Those with a strong religious orientation--Catholics, Jews, Muslims, Christian fundamentalists, Mormans, others—may want schools that ground their children first of all in their religious beliefs and history. All of these people would deny vehemently that being who they are and caring about the fate of their kind means they will be intolerant or hurtful toward others. And last, low-income people may want a traditional education: schooling that focuses on classical content and strong character isn't just for rich people, they affirm. They believe rich people know something important: that this kind of education is the best vehicle for achieving and maintaining status, power, and respect in the world.

- Note the reference to individual freedom in the course description. Progressives tend to emphasize collectivist values: democracy (which places power in the hands of the collective), egalitarianism, cooperation, group assignments, and so on. While

not completely rejecting these beliefs, traditionalists, at least some of them, emphasize personal liberty, qualitative distinctions among individuals and groups, and the place of competition and individual initiative in a life well lived. By the definition of traditionalist education operative in this course, libertarians, individualists of all stripes, have a home in this camp.

- And last, there is the reference to academic excellence in the description. If you care about students pushing hard to go beyond their outer limits academically, if your focus is on students standing out from the crowd intellectually, you can find a place for yourself here. If you care about schools taking the ceiling off of what the most talented and committed students are expected to, and can, accomplish in school, and encouraging and supporting them as much as anybody, you fit here.

As for instructing the traditionalist education course, two approaches come to mind:

The first, and the one I prefer, is to distribute the bibliography at the end of this writing, which can be augmented from time to time to students at the beginning of the course, along with other sources: the names of journals and organizations, prominent individuals to contact, web sites, and so on. Students individually identify goals to direct their study and begin wherever they choose in the possibilities provided them, and, with the instructor's help and the help of other students, move themselves forward in their learning over the span of the semester. They can read sections of a book rather than the whole book, and dig into whatever it is or just touch down on it. It is not the means that are most important but rather the ends: learning as much as they can in the course and establishing a base from which to continue learning after the course's completion. They keep a log describing, succinctly, what they did and why and what came out of it. Class sessions are devoted to students sharing with other students and the instructor what they are doing and its outcomes—learnings, problems, issues, emerging topics of concern, next steps in their study—for their response and suggestions. Evaluation of students is based on the quality of their engagement in the class sessions (which includes supporting other students' and the instructor's work), reviews of

logs, and oral and written examinations in which they document that they have used their time in the course productively.

A second approach involves the instructor identifying required books and articles, web sites to review, etc., and assigning dates for their consideration by the entire class—e.g., everyone reads the first six chapters of book X by a such-and-such a class session, and at that time, everyone, including the instructor, will share his or her analyses, creative thoughts, and assessments with reference to that material. Depending on their own interests and the students with whom they work, instructors will choose different things to put on the required to-do list, so I won't put my list here. Enough to say that, in terms of books, I would choose eight or so from the bibliography, including some from the distant past as well as more recent ones, and I would make sure that some reflect an individualistic perspective (Gatto, Lieberman, Llewellyn, Lyman, Nock, Richman, and Sowell). Because of time limitations, I would require only portions of a book, often as little as a chapter or two or three; but, of course, other instructors may wish to require entire books. I would very likely include a traditionalist critique of John Dewey, whose perspective is so central to the progressive outlook, and who, in our time, is celebrated but not critically assessed. The book on the bibliography by Henry Edmondson III, *John Dewey and the Decline of American Education*, gets at that. An aside, some may wonder why *Horace's Compromise* by TheodoreSizer is on the bibliography, since Sizer is identified with the progressive approach. I find it interesting how progressives have made Sizer one of theirs, and how he has gone along with it, because his arguments in that book reflect essentialist and libertarian thinking.

With both approaches to instructing the course, student writing would aim at being more than a report or summary. It would attempt to offer a fresh insight, perspective, or critique.

So those are my two projects, the book and the course. Were these two undertakings successful by conventional standards? In truth, no, they weren't. I am convinced the book has merit and I use it to what I consider good effect in several courses I instruct, but no trade or education publisher was interested in the manuscript and I ended up self-publishing it, and it hasn't sold at all. As for the course, no

acknowledgment came my way from my department and college for developing it and getting it approved as a university offering, and there's been no student interest in it. But by my own standards were these efforts successful? Yes, they were. In my eyes, they were both honorable endeavors and I gave both everything I had in me, and I'm pleased with my work and, frankly, proud of it.

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