

The Art of Teaching and the End of Wokeness

Adam Ellwanger

Any enthusiast of classical liberal education will be much dismayed at the current state of education in America, both in K-12 schools and our colleges and universities. In addition to the schools' incessant propagation of the modern leftist worldview, there is the new war against standardized means of assessing student performance—and even a growing conviction that *any* formal measure of academic success is a way of perpetuating the injustices of the “status quo.”

For over thirty years, when surveying the unfolding crisis in the nation's schools, conservatives and their allies have centered their critique on matters of curriculum. Almost without exception their arguments revolve around the conviction that we are teaching the wrong things, and the solutions that they propose usually consist of recommitting ourselves to teaching the right things. These critics aren't wrong. American students *are* being taught the wrong things. History has been reduced to a cataloguing of Euro-American failure, injustice, and violence. Literature serves as a springboard from which to launch attacks on “uninterrogated” traditional values and “assumptions.” Social studies are now a vehicle for gender ideology and Critical Race Theory, which teaches a moralistic race essentialism where whites are *de facto* bigoted oppressors and minorities are virtuous victims of “systemic” brutality and hatred. In the wake of the racial unrest in the summer of 2020, some public schools have abandoned advanced mathematics courses on the grounds that they marginalize minorities.¹

Suffice it to say, then, that there are many ways in which the curriculum can be improved. Nevertheless, focusing on curricular concerns as a way to “reclaim” the schools is a deeply misguided approach. The conservative fetishization of the *whats* of American education (i.e., considerations of *what*

1 Mica Soellner, “Virginia to Drop Advanced Math Courses Before 11th Grade, Citing Equity,” *Washington Examiner* (April 23, 2021).

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is being taught) is largely responsible for the success of the left in conquering these institutions. Put simply, an exclusive focus on the *whats* has been self-defeating, because the left's successes in turning schools into houses of political indoctrination were largely achieved by *ignoring* the question of content: their victory was secured through an elevation of style over substance, of form over content. Their conquest was achieved through a resolute dedication to the *hows* of schooling; that is, the methods by which content is conveyed to students and how teaching techniques and strategies can be instrumentalized to serve ideological ends. They also devoted themselves to changing *how* the schools are run at the administrative and procedural levels. This elevation of the *hows* over the *whats* allowed the political left to take over education at a time when their activists were a minority within what was then a culturally conservative institution. This hostile takeover was consolidated mainly throughout the 1980s. By the time that educational reformer William Bennett was appointed to the post of Secretary of Education by Ronald Reagan in 1985, many were sounding the alarm that American schools were in intellectual decline.² But by then, the left's alternate model of education had already substantially dislodged the older model that had been defined by strict standards and rigorous monitoring of student performance. By the mid-1990s, the new educational order had received the tacit (if oft-unspoken) approval of administrators and school boards.

In what follows, I highlight how critics of American education have neglected the issues of procedure and pedagogy—the *hows* of schooling—and I argue that a new consideration of methodological concerns related to teaching holds the most promise for changing the culture of American schools. I do not offer a fully-articulated pedagogical method adapted to these ends: rather, I call for those opposed to the dominant trends of the schools to begin an urgently-needed discussion of how *extra-curricular* elements of the educational *process* can be utilized as forms of political resistance.

Conservative Impotence

Among the most prominent conservative critics of the ongoing effort to erode the standards of American education was the eminent professor of political philosophy, Allan Bloom. His book *The Closing of the American Mind* (1987) was a polemic on the state of higher education in America where he advocated

2 William J. Bennett, *First Lessons: A Report on Elementary Education in America* (U.S. Government Press, 1986); Rudolf Flesch, *Why Johnny Can't Read: And What You Can Do About It* (William Morrow Press, 1986).

a curricular return to the great works of Western civilization. Bloom's book served as a critical diagnostic of the malady of the schools, but the Great Books cure he endorsed serves as an example of the fixation on the *whats* of education. The essence of his critique is that American students aren't being taught the right things: not in terms of values, or habits, or facts, or books. He writes: "[W]hen a student arrives at the university, he finds a bewildering variety of courses. And there is no official guidance, no university-wide agreement, about *what* he should study."³ Bloom's emphasis on content is evident in another passage from *The Closing*: "To be open to knowing, there are certain kinds of *things one must know* which most people don't want to bother to learn and which appear boring and irrelevant."⁴

Another seminal critique of education from the late '80s was E.D. Hirsch, Jr.'s *Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know* (1988).⁵ He persuasively showed that the modern elevation of skills over content actually hampers students' mastery of those critical skills. For example, he explains that the mere *ability* to read cannot be meaningfully operationalized if the student does not possess the rote, gross, broad knowledge that enables one to *make sense* of what one reads. Thus, he called for standardizing curricula at both the national and local levels. Infamously, he included an appendix to his book that was a list of concepts, people, things, and events: the stuff that "every American needs to know." While I am deeply sympathetic to Hirsch's critique of American education, he, like Bloom, is completely transfixed by the question of *what*—the question of content.

In 2021, it might seem strange to characterize the conservative agenda on education by citing two books that were written over thirty years ago. But the fixation on content displayed by Bloom and Hirsch remains at the core of contemporary plans for the revitalization of our schools.⁶ If we are to restore the proper function of American education (which Bloom argues is the democratization of classically-liberal culture), we cannot dedicate ourselves to a curricular plan that will require the official consent of a majority of professors unequivocally opposed to such reforms. Thus, we need a strategy that can be

3 Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind* (Simon and Schuster, 1987), 338.

4 *Ibid.*, 41.

5 E.D. Hirsch, Jr., *Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know* (Vintage, 1988).

6 Jon Schaff, "The Curriculum Needs Truth, Goodness, and Beauty; not 'Decolonization,'" *The American Mind*, May 12, 2021; Daniel Buck, "How to Incentivize the Classics," *National Review*, June 6, 2021; Shawn Barnett, "Why a Classical Education is Almost Impossible Today," *The Federalist*, August 19, 2019; Jeremy Tate, "Nobody wants to Cancel the Classics—Except the Academic Elites," *National Review*, May 6, 2021.

adopted by dissident educators who can deploy it in any classroom, within the context of any curriculum, regardless of what it teaches.

Learning from the Left: the Hows of Education

There are innumerable pedagogical theorists who could be used to demonstrate how a shift from curricular content to pedagogical technique has conditioned students to be receptive to the left's worldview. But the work of Brazilian educator Paulo Freire stands out because of its enormous influence on educational theory in the last forty years. Freire's most famous work is called *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970) and it is required reading to understand the aims of secular progressive education.⁷ Freire's main contention is as follows: the Western capitalist system was purposely designed to oppress a lower class, thereby ensuring the material affluence of the bourgeoisie. This oppression takes many forms, but he claims it begins by depriving students of the critical faculties that would allow them to become conscious of their subjugation and its causes. Freire argues that public schools are warehouses of ideological brainwashing, where students are indoctrinated with a worldview that will ensure their social marginalization. Thus, if oppression begins in the schools, he posits that education can also be used to counteract this oppression.

Notably, though, Freire insists that the job of the educator is not a counter-indoctrination in which teachers provide the knowledge that will allow for the destruction of the existing order. In fact, for Freire, there are no teachers—only “teacher-students,” which he claims is a guarantee that there are no hierarchical relationships between a master and learners. Instead, the job of the educator is to “facilitate dialogue” among the oppressed, listening to their grievances and organizing tactical efforts to resist their domination. The idea of curricular content—any formal knowledge that a teacher might transmit to a student—is a special target of Freire's. He refers to curricula as “the banking concept” of education, where purportedly ignorant students are viewed only as empty vessels to be “filled” with knowledge that actually reinforces their subjugation.⁸ His entire educational model works toward the inevitable moment that his interlocutors adopt a Marxist itinerary for radical political change, an ongoing “humanization” of the oppressed that will eventually secure “authentic liberation” and “critical consciousness” for all people.⁹

7 Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (Continuum, 1993).

8 Freire, 73.

9 Freire, 79.

Most teachers today have never read Freire, but by the time they finish their training they have absorbed his foundational premises: that the purpose of education is enabling individual political liberation from an existing oppressive order and that cultivating *habits* is more conducive to this project than curricular *content*. These assumptions gave rise to a number of other methodological interventions that marginalize the teaching of content and cultivate particular political sensibilities in students.

Consider the prominence of the “decentered classroom,” which assumes that the physical arrangement of the traditional classroom is another means to establish pedagogical authority and encourage a passive attitude among students. Devotees of this theory worry that the lectern at the front of the room is a draconian symbol of authority. They fret that only the teacher has easy access to the blackboard, an arrangement that implies that only he can dispense knowledge. Students’ desks—clearly designed around a flat surface to use for notetaking—are one more way that the oppressors encourage passive acceptance of curricular content. Thus, the *decentered* classroom is common today. Teachers will sit in a student’s desk, symbolically laying down their intellectual authority by joining the rest of the class in a circle. Like Arthur’s Round Table, the circle implies that no one exists at the “head” of the class. No one has exclusive access to the blackboard. The circle expands the gaze of the students, further decentralizing the exchange. But sitting in a circle with Arthur didn’t make Galahad a king, and thus the “decentralizing” teacher partakes in stealth power of the very sort he deplores. Some more examples of the *hows* are in order.

There is the movement that seeks to normalize plagiarism, insisting that it is unfair to penalize students for passing off others’ writing as their own.¹⁰ After all, an author’s “ownership” of his work is just a way to adapt students to the values of Western capitalism. And don’t forget the movement among teachers to stop penalizing students for non-attendance or tardiness.¹¹ Obviously, these penalties are a form of “injustice.” Not all students have the same access to transportation, and “neuro-divergent” students may have depression that keeps them from getting out of bed, or social anxiety that demands they take a more roundabout route to class to avoid crowds of people. Class must be “accessible” for these students, and thus, it must be optional.

¹⁰ See, for example, Jennifer A. Mott-Smith, “Bad Ideas about Writing: Plagiarism Deserves to be Punished,” *Inside Higher Ed*, May 23, 2017.

¹¹ See Adam Ellwanger, “Accessibility, Ableism, and the Decline of Excellence,” *Quillette*, December 28, 2019.

The emphasis on pedagogical method is also evident in the New Civics movement, which uses the pedagogy of “service-learning” to teach “action civics.” More radical New Civic proponents certainly emphasize subject matter in their attempt to displace traditional civics education with social justice curricula, including the replacement of traditional history with the *New York Times*’s 1619 Project, the celebration of diversity, the sustainability movement, and the concept of “global citizenship.” But the movement’s spread is partly due to its emphasis on process, replacing classroom taught subject matter with field training in political activism and Alinsky-style community organizing.¹²

Perhaps the marginalization of curricular content is most evident in expressivists’ insistence that the topics of student writing are irrelevant—only that they write matters. Many such teachers assign students to write about themselves in some capacity.¹³ This shift in content from objective academic questions to personal experience encourages the student to see himself as an authoritative source of knowledge—a belief that affirms the subjectivism of left identity politics. The shift to the personal also means the student *can’t be wrong*. After all, as a teacher I can’t say “No, that isn’t your favorite book,” or “No, that isn’t how you felt when your grandma died.” This abdication of the duty to evaluate student work is supported by academic professional associations. In 1974, the Conference on College Composition and Communication (the official organization for teachers of college writing) affirmed “students’ right to their own language,” a right that allows students to resist the unjust rules of standard written English.¹⁴ Neither writing competence nor any standard of correctness can be used to judge the quality of work. And thus, neither content, nor competence, nor style can serve as acceptable grounds for assessment.

The pedagogical practices above are only a sampling of how methodological and philosophical choices regarding the education process have been mobilized to achieve an ideological transformation of the schools.

From the What to the How: Reclaiming American Education

The use of the word “indoctrination” in discussions of education almost always carries a negative connotation that audiences associate with

12 Peter Wood, “Why We Need a Civics Alliance,” National Association of Scholars, March 22, 2021.

13 See David Bartholomae, “Inventing the University,” in *Writing on the Margins* (Bedford/St. Martin’s, 2004): 60-85.

14 “Students’ Right to Their Own Language (with bibliography),” Conference on College Composition and Communication, <https://cccc.ncte.org/cccc/resources/positions/srtolsummary>

“brainwashing” or similar forms of cognitive “programming.” But the best theorists of education understand that any curriculum worth the name must be a form of indoctrination: any course of study imparts a “doctrine” to the student. Despite the schools’ pretense of neutrality, in practice they have decided on a doctrine: the leftist doctrine teaches that diversity, inclusivity, accessibility, and multiculturalism are inherently moral goods, even as practitioners deny any objective conception of morality. Schools’ denial that they convey these ideas as doctrine maintains a shred of plausibility because these doctrinal virtues require very little engagement with content. They are largely conveyed through a vacuous repetition of familiar mantras, many of which amount to hollow platitudes: “our difference is our strength,” “you are perfect as you are,” “love is love,” etc. This characteristic emptiness must be exploited.

If we are to redirect the trajectory of American education, there is only one viable form of recourse: we must temporarily abandon the concern with content and dedicate ourselves to developing teaching techniques that might cultivate a disposition and style of thinking that will encourage students to view current institutional politics and official ideology with skepticism and hostility. This reorientation will require dissident teachers to give significant thought to “mundane” aspects of teaching that were previously viewed as frivolous and subordinate to the issue of curricular content. Some progress can be made simply by refusing the innovations and commonplaces of modern education. *Re-centralize* the classroom, for example. Give lectures (rather than holding open-ended “discussions”). Stand at the front of the room when lecturing. Maintain an attendance policy and insist upon punctuality. Penalize plagiarism. Insist upon the existence of objective truth: maintain that there are correct and incorrect answers and that knowledge is not contingent upon the “lived experience” of the individual.

The left’s annexing of the schools was achieved by attending to the *hows* of education more than to the *whats*. Formulating a complete pedagogical model for reclaiming American education will be an involved process that will require sustained dialogue and collaboration between dissident teachers across the country. This dialogue—which demands a focus on tactics rather than texts—is our most urgent task. Together, we must develop strategies to form a much different sort of citizen than the schools are now producing. Nothing less will be sufficient for our aims.