

PHILOSOPHY OF EDUCATION

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I do not consider our ridiculous colleges as public institutions. Nor do I count the education of society, for this education, facing two ways at once, achieves nothing. It is only fit to turn out double men, always seeming to relate everything to others while actually relating nothing to anyone but themselves. These forms of display are common to everybody and deceive no one. They are so much wasted effort.

☞ Rousseau (1762) par. 33

Teaching is the cultivation of a mind, a staged performance, the weaving together of knowledge by teacher and student, a map, a tour, and much more. My philosophy of education, on the other hand, is more like a push-me-pull-you. In case you never watched the old version of Dr. Dolittle, that's a fictional animal, kind of like a talking llama with two front ends, that's always trying to go in both directions at once. In like manner, I am informed by two contradictory educational philosophies that are always bumping into each other in dissonant annoyance; I'll call them the ideal and the pragmatic.

Ideally, my philosophy of education is very much in line with that of Jean-Jacques Rousseau in *Emile* (1792). It consists of a particular student, and a tutor who stays with him through childhood and into early adulthood, until they are separated by mutual consent. There may be more than one student, but certainly no more than five or so; the teacher pays close attention to the natural needs and impulses of the child, and trains them toward what is most in accordance with the natural good of man, without surrendering to destructive self-will. Freedom and learning that which will be of most benefit and interest to the individual are essential, as is a close bond of understanding between student and teacher. The place where education occurs with the least strain and resistance is at the intersection of two interested and engaged minds, the one focused on making some truth or idea evident by any means needed at the moment, and the other in, for an instant at least, forming an exact image of the other within itself, until unity of understanding is attained. Much time and experience together aids immensely in the creation of that unity.

That philosophy, however, was not created for the system within which most teachers work. Like Rousseau, I do not believe in mandatory public education, but where it is necessary, it may be well to acknowledge that the aims of such an institution do not lend themselves by nature to encouraging any of the values of individuality, diversity, or self-expression which we have been trying so hard to foster over the past quarter-century. They do very much, however lend themselves to teaching an agreed upon body of knowledge of a given culture or civilization in an ordered and predictable fashion. Trying to integrate individualistic progressivism into such a system, while it may be the better option when no other recourse is available, is philosophically dissonant and self-contradictory. "He who in the civil order wishes to preserve the primacy of the sentiments of nature does not know what he wants. Always in contradiction with himself, always floating between his wishes and his duties, he will be neither a man nor a citizen. He will be good neither for himself nor for others. He will be a man of our day -- a Frenchman, an Englishman, a bourgeois. He will be nothing" (Rousseau, 1792, par. 27). When the form of education is prescribed, therefore, it is better to accomplish with it the good which is in accordance with its' native structure. In this I am in favour of a classical liberal arts education taught in a mostly traditionalist manner, though using whatever means are most in accordance with the subject taught, and that will vary a good deal.

I can't yet say what all this means for my future classroom. Probably that I'll try to find one in a very small liberal arts school if I can possibly help it. Otherwise, means and methods are determined by content, and content is influenced by a number of specific circumstances, and must be adjusted accordingly.