

The Complexity of Thomas Jefferson

A Response to “The Diffusion of Light’: Jefferson’s Philosophy of Education”

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Abstract

This response argues that Jefferson’s educational philosophy must be considered in a proper historical context. Holowchak accurately demonstrates both Jefferson’s obsession with education and the political philosophy on which his educational beliefs are built. However, the effort to apply modern democratic and meritocratic attributes to Jefferson is unwarranted.

This article is a response to:

Holowchak, M. A. (2013). “The diffusion of light”: Jefferson’s philosophy of education. *Democracy & Education*, 21(2). Article 4. Retrieved from <http://democracyeducationjournal.org/home/vol21/Iss2/4>

HOLLOWCHAK (2013) HAS written an important and well-crafted article in which he correctly contextualizes Jefferson’s educational philosophy within that of his political ideology. The gist of this piece is that Jefferson’s republicanism and his views on education required a symbiotic relationship that was “critically dependent on a democratic and meritocratic vision of education” (p. 1). Holowchak identifies several key components of Jefferson’s educational philosophy, including public support for schooling, a broad-based availability for students from all classes, local control of education, and the utility of education, personally and for the greater social good. In this response I highlight two of his most important ideas while also presenting a different perspective on two others.

A major point of emphasis for Holowchak (2013) is his assertion that Jefferson’s philosophy of education had “a moral underpinning” and that this is “a point missed by most scholars” (p. 1). He is right on target. This moral component of education in a republic was also linked to Jefferson’s sense of community. According to classical republican theory, were virtue guided citizens, and Jefferson saw schools as the vehicle for instilling or strengthening this moral sense. As Sheldon (1991) has argued, Jefferson reflects “a more classical republican vision of economically independent, educated citizens participating directly in the common rule of local ward republics” (p. 16). Citizens, therefore, needed a proper republican education in order to use their political power to benefit and protect their new republic, be it at the local, state, or national level. As Jefferson noted in his 1818 Report of the Commissioners for the University of Virginia, education enabled

citizens “to form them to habits of reflection and correct action, rendering them examples of virtue to others, and of happiness within themselves” (Lee, 1967, p. 118). In this regard, Jefferson is expressing a modern democratic ideal. This view of education is similar to that espoused by Dewey (1909/1975):

The moral responsibility of the school . . . is to society. The school is fundamentally an institution erected by society to do a certain specific work, —to exercise a certain function in maintaining the life and advancing the welfare of society. (p. 7)

Like Jefferson, Dewey saw citizenship in broader strokes. *Citizen* was more than a political label applied to one who votes or is governed. It also refers to “a member of some particular neighborhood and community” (Dewey, 1909/1975, p. 10). In this sense, a citizen has the responsibility to contribute to the welfare of his or her community. In an 1814 letter to Thomas Law, Jefferson explained that “the correctives which are supplied by education” can lead to the appropriate behaviors that are beneficial to the individual and to the greater society at large (Peterson, 1984, p. 1338).

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Holowchak (2013) thus argues that Jefferson's educational philosophy, and therefore his plans for educating Virginians, was grounded in this understanding of republicanism. Benjamin Rush believed, as did many in the founding generation, including Jefferson, that republicanism required "to adapt our modes of teaching to the peculiar form of our government" (Runes, 1947, p. 91). Holowchak clearly demonstrates Jefferson's most familiar rationale for a system of public education—namely that the people are the best protectors of their own and their fellow citizens' liberty. In 1816 Jefferson wrote to Charles Yancy: "There is no safe deposit for these [the liberty and property of the people] but with the people themselves; nor can they be safe without information" (Ford, 1892, p. 4). And as Holowchak demonstrates, the education of all citizens was the vehicle to assure this protection. Civic education, therefore, had an empowering effect of enabling each citizen to be, as Jefferson expressed to Joseph C. Cabell, "a participant in the government of affairs, not merely at an election one day in the year, but everyday" (Hamilton, 1926, p. 210). Jefferson was certainly obsessed with the potential abuse of power by overextending governments and how best to prevent this. In a letter to William Branch Giles in 1825, only a little over six months before his death, he expressed his grave concerns regarding what he perceived as the consolidation of power by the national government and the "usurpation of all the rights reserved to the states" (Peterson, 1984, p. 1509). And four years before this, he wrote to General James Breckinridge, reiterating his "zeal for the general instruction of the people" (Peterson, 1984, p. 1452). Jefferson's faith in the necessity for a good republican education as a check on governmental abuse was certainly one of the most consistent tenets of his political ideology.

Beyond this sense of the people being the bastion for protecting liberty, Holowchak (2013) also identifies the evolutionary nature of Jefferson's educational philosophy. Just as republican governments must evolve, so too must their citizens. Individual improvement, for Jefferson, was important for the person and for the community. The "human condition," Jefferson wrote, is "susceptible of much improvement . . . and . . . the diffusion of knowledge among the people is to be the instrument by which it is to be effected" (Lipscomb & Bergh, 1903, p. 491–492). In 1818, in the Rockfish Gap Report, he wrote: "Education . . . engrafts a new man on the native stock, and improves what in his nature was vicious and perverse into qualities of virtue and social worth" (Lee, 1967, p. 119). This improvement enabled citizens to become happier, more virtuous, and more successful. Jefferson clearly recognized "the value of knowledge and the prosperity it produces" (Ford, 1892, p. 167). This also benefitted the community by sharpening political skills such as being able to critically analyze the rhetoric of those seeking and holding office. This notion also resonated with Dewey (1916/1999), who wrote: "Hence education means the enterprise of supplying the conditions which ensure growth, or adequacy of life, irrespective of age" (p. 51). In this regard, Jefferson and Dewey were advocates of what we today call lifelong learning.

Where Holowchak's (2013) argument falters is in his blanket assertion that Jefferson's proposals were "both meritocratic and democratic" (p. 13). While there are certainly elements of his plans

that were meritocratic and democratic, there are others that clearly were not. Two points I challenge are (a) his claim that Jefferson wanted to replace the "artificial aristocracy" (Holowchak, 2013, p. 7) of leaders with a natural one and (b) his failure to distinguish between educating citizens and educating all people, thus implying that Jefferson's educational philosophy was democratic in the modern sense of the term.

In the first instance, Holowchak (2013) asserts that Jefferson sought *only* his "natural *aristoi*" to occupy "the higher levels of governmental functioning and other significant occupations" (p. 5). Indeed, he argues that one of Jefferson's goals "was the creation of a natural aristocracy *to overthrow* [emphasis added] the artificial aristocracy" (p. 7). In an 1814 letter to Peter Carr, Jefferson explicitly stated that at the second level of his educational system students would fall into two categories: "those destined for labor" and "their companions, destined to the pursuits of science" (Peterson, 1984, p. 1348). Additionally, this "learned class" would also be separated into two distinct tracks: one for those pursuing "learned professions" and one for those entering political careers. The latter would be specifically for "the wealthy, who, possessing independent fortunes, may aspire to share in conducting the affairs of the nation, or to live with usefulness and respect in the private ranks of life" (p. 1348); in other words, they would come from the American version of Jefferson's "artificial aristocracy" (Holowchak, 2013, p. 7). Furthermore, the number of talented students from the general populace who would enter the university would be so small (given Jefferson's plans called for a severe meritocratic reduction in the number of those advancing) that it would take many years before there would be a critical mass of his natural aristocracy available to occupy leadership positions. Peterson (1970), the distinguished Jefferson biographer, acknowledges that Jefferson's educational plans "carried elitist overtones" (p. 152) and estimates this number at about ten seniors per year being able to advance to the college or university level (p. 152). And certainly many of these students would be seeking the professional track and not that designed for leadership. In fact, Peterson argues that Jefferson "did not believe the mass of citizens either required or were susceptible to education at advanced levels" (p. 151). It is true that, if enacted, Jefferson's plan would have expanded the pool of potential leaders to some degree and eventually increased the role of the natural aristocracy in governing, but it certainly would not have replaced the class of "artificial" leaders based on wealth and status who dominated Virginia society.

The second problematic issue in Holowchak's (2013) argument is his contention that Jefferson believed in educational opportunities that would "be in the service of enabling *all people* [emphasis added] to know their rights, oversee their government, and preserve their liberties" (p. 8). Indeed, he asserts that "Jefferson's political liberalism was driven by the normative notion that no one ought to decide for another that other's best interest" (p. 9). However, this assertion belies the realities of Virginia at this time and, indeed, of Jefferson's own household. If Holowchak were to substitute *all citizens* for *all people*, he would be on more solid ground. However, in arguing that this applied to all people, Holowchak must stretch this application to include African Americans, Native Americans, and women. In doing so,

Hollowchak must contradict the historical evidence. In the interest of “quasi-completeness” (p. 11), he addresses the education of these particular groups of people and other issues in a final section he admits to being a “hodgepodge” (p. 11).

He first discusses women and education. Hollowchak (2013) cites a letter to Nathaniel Burwell in which Jefferson admits to not giving education for women much thought and also acknowledges that other than this letter “we only have glimpses of Jefferson’s thinking on female education” (p. 12). Hollowchak argues that Jefferson had strong ideas of the important role women could play in America’s new republican society and that Jefferson felt “they were naturally suited for domesticity” (p. 12). This is certainly not a surprising view for a man during Jefferson’s time, but Hollowchak seems to argue that Jefferson’s views on how a girl should best prepare to be mistress of the household, as evidenced by his own schedule for his daughter Martha, equaled an education that would enable women to decide their own destinies and promote their own happiness. And even in the case of educating his daughter, Jefferson thought about it “only as . . . occasionally required” (Peterson, 1984, p. 1411). Furthermore, according to Jefferson’s plan, the overseer of each ward school (the first level of his system) would “chuse the boy, of best genius in the school, to send him forward to one of the grammar schools” (Jefferson, 1787/1982, p. 146). If Jefferson believed women to be the “natural equals of men,” then why did he only allow for their being educated at the lowest level of his educational system? Did he not believe girls and boys have equal intellectual capabilities? In 1788 Jefferson wrote to Anne Willing Bingham that women were “too wise to wrinkle their foreheads with politics” and had “the good sense to value domestic happiness above all other” (Peterson, 1984, pp. 922–923). Politics was the purview of the men of the household. Jefferson’s vision of the proper relationship between gender and education was a complex one, and Hollowchak does not adequately address this complexity.

Hollowchak (2013) next addresses the educational potential of Native Americans. He correctly references Jefferson’s respect for and curiosity about their varied languages and cultures. Jefferson did, in a letter to Chastellux in 1785, aver that he considered Native Americans “to be, in body and mind, equal to the white man” (Peterson, 1984, p. 801). Hollowchak (2013) concludes that Jefferson believed Native Americans could be “educated as fully as White Europeans” (p. 13) but they resisted accepting the Euro-American cultural beliefs. However, he does not fully consider Jefferson’s equation of adapting to Euro-American cultural norms with learning as evidence of Jefferson’s conflicted views. Hollowchak does posit that Jefferson did not consider the consequences of his ethnocentric attitudes—only that he believed Native Americans needed to be taught the skills required to succeed in the invasive civilization. In his *Notes on the State of Virginia*, Jefferson (1787/1982) made the case that one of the changes needed at the College of William & Mary was to “the professorship of Brafferton” (p. 150), a school established to educate Native Americans. In fact, Jefferson proposed the Brafferton

would be better answered by maintaining a perpetual mission among the Indian tribes, the object of which, besides instructing them in the

principles of Christianity . . . , should be to collect their traditions, laws, customs, languages, and other circumstances which might lead to a discovery of their relation with one another, or descent from other nations. (p. 150)

Hollowchak fails to address Jefferson’s apparently contradictory thoughts regarding Native Americans and their pursuit of happiness.

Hollowchak (2013) saved his discussion of educating African Americans for last. He argued that Jefferson was cautious in his belief that African Americans were of inferior intelligence, and he acknowledges that Jefferson’s “misguided empiricism” (p. 13) was at least partly the result of the oppressive conditions the American slave system imposed on most African Americans. However, Hollowchak seems to ignore other contextual factors that impacted Jefferson’s thinking. The potential of equality of European Americans and African Americans in the 18th and early 19th centuries was not a commonly held belief, especially in the American South. Jefferson (1787/1982) explicitly described a number of physical differences, thus “proving a difference of race” (p. 138). Furthermore, he was critical of African Americans failing to capitalize on exposure to the benefits of European American culture that the slave system offered. Native Americans, who generally did not have these “advantages” still managed to demonstrate intellectual gifts that were “not destitute of design or merit” (Jefferson, p. 140), Jefferson insisted. To allege Jefferson was not a racist ignores this evidence. How else does one explain Jefferson’s dismissive attitude towards the African American poet Phyllis Wheatley? According to Jefferson: “The compositions published under her name are below the dignity of criticism” (p. 140). In Jefferson’s opinion, Wheatley’s poems did not deserve to be considered poetry since African Americans remained trapped at an emotional level below that of European Americans. For African Americans, he suggested, love “kindles the senses only, not the imagination” (p. 140). Given Jefferson’s life experiences, he would be even more remarkable if he did not view Wheatley’s work through racist lenses. Absent too from Hollowchak’s (2013) argument is the recognition that the vast majority of African Americans in Virginia during Jefferson’s lifetime were enslaved. By law and by practice, these people had no ability to decide what was in their best interest. As a slave owner, Jefferson decided on a daily basis what these people could and could not do, thereby violating Hollowchak’s assertion that Jefferson strongly believed this ought not be the case. This fact alone contradicts Hollowchak’s assertion of the democratic and meritocratic nature of Jefferson’s educational philosophy.

The problematic concerns I call attention to are evidence of Jefferson’s fascinating complexity. For example, he detested political parties yet was instrumental in organizing one of the first in American history; he was a Virginia aristocrat but authored a statement of political philosophy that would guide American democratic development; he was publicly critical of slavery yet freed only a handful of his own slaves upon his death; he feared a strong central government but used his executive powers to purchase the Louisiana Territory in 1803; and he favored local control of schools yet proposed a plan to systematize education for all of Virginia. As Ellis (1997) has written, studying “Jefferson was like entering a

crowded room in which there were always several ongoing conversations, and the constant buzz suggested that more was at stake than the resolution of merely historical questions” (pp. x–xi). Holowchak (2013) does an excellent job of demonstrating how Jefferson’s educational philosophy reflected his political ideology. Indeed, Peterson (1970) has argued that one of the reasons why Jefferson’s plans for education are important, even though most of his agenda was never enacted until well after his death, is their foundation being “the citizen-republicanism of the new nation” (p. 151). However, Jefferson was no social reformer. Rather, he sought to achieve “realizable goals” (p. 148), in particular, as Holowchak (2013) argues, an “effective participatory citizenry” (p. 10). In presenting Jefferson’s philosophy of education, Holowchak tries to reduce the numerous conversations Ellis (1997) references to a single narrative. In doing so, he is forced to try and fit square pegs into round holes. For while Jefferson’s educational philosophy had democratic and meritocratic elements, it also contained features that were elitist and biased. This is consistent with his complex nature. This does not necessarily diminish Jefferson’s reputation; it just places it in a more accurate historical context.

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