

# Jefferson and Democratic Education

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## Abstract

This essay is a reply to James Carpenter's "Thomas Jefferson and the Ideology of Democratic Schooling." In it, I argue that there is an apophatic strain in the essay that calls into question the motivation for the undertaking.

## This article is a response to:

Carpenter, J. (2013). Thomas Jefferson and the ideology of democratic schooling. *Democracy & Education*, 21(2), Article 5. Available at: <http://democracyeducationjournal.org/home/vol21/iss2/5>

**I**N "THOMAS JEFFERSON and the Ideology of Democratic Schooling," Carpenter (2013) defends the thesis that "Jefferson's educational views did not reflect an embrace of democracy but in reality demonstrated his vision of American republicanism in its infancy" (p. 2).

Carpenter (2013) begins with a modern-day distinction between *democratic schooling*, which comprises "pedagogical practices that prepare students to be active citizens," and *republican education*, which "generally refers to efforts to prepare students to be good citizens" (p. 2). The distinction, thus, is one of active citizenry versus good citizenry. He illustrates *active* by "democratic practice [that] extends to create an entire school atmosphere that empowers students and creates equal opportunities for all to serve in leadership positions and to influence educational decisions" (p. 2). He illustrates *good* in a normatively neutral sense by citizens who "know their rights and responsibilities, understand the political and historical legacy of important documents and government actions, and meet the expectations of citizenship" (p. 2). Overall, Jefferson's educational vision, Carpenter says, aims more at the latter than at the former. The ultimate aim is participatory republicanism—each citizen involved in business, politics, religion, and recreation insofar as personal situation allows.

Jefferson's (1984) conception of citizenship in the early republic, Carpenter rightly notes, is fleshed out neatly in his Rockfish Gap Report (1818)—where education is given to each citizen to meet needs qua citizen, which include transaction of business; the calculation, expression, and preservation of

accounts and contracts; moral improvement; prompt discharge of duties to neighbors and country; knowledge of rights; and intelligent and faithful observance of social relations (Jefferson, 1984, pp. 457–473). The Rockfish Gap Report certainly demands both active citizenship, in the sense of citizens' full involvement, and good citizenship, in the sense of dutiful discharge of duties to others and to state and nation.

Having made the key distinction between democratic education and republican education, Carpenter (2013) states, "These modern notions do not directly impact the goal of this paper," for "*democrat* and *republican* meant very different things in Jefferson's time" (p. 2). Nonetheless, a section of Carpenter's paper, titled "Jefferson as Democrat," is devoted to the notion of Jefferson's view of education as democratic. He writes, "For the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Jefferson's ideas regarding education can be

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seen as democratic if not radical” (p. 5). Again, “Jefferson can be seen as a founding father of democratic education in the United States” (p. 6). He cites publicly funded education for all children, state expense of promotion of higher education for underprivileged but talented students, and a “politically liberating curriculum” as instances of Jefferson’s democratic leanings. In fact, those who resisted his educational reforms did so because of the reforms’ radical democratic leanings (pp. 5–7): The wealthy few did not wish to pay to educate the unwealthy many.

“But is this an accurate picture?” states Carpenter (2013, p. 6). No, he thinks. Jefferson was not in any significant sense a founder of democratic education, for Jefferson’s republicanism, situated in his day, was certainly not democratic in our modern sense. There follows a section (pp. 6–7) on Jeffersonian republicanism.

Carpenter’s (2013) expatiation of Jefferson’s conception of *republicanism* is for the most part accurate and in keeping with Jefferson’s elaboration of *republican* in the Rockfish Gap Report, his First Inaugural Address, and numerous letters to select correspondents—e.g., P. S. Dupont de Nemours (24 April 1816), John Taylor (28 May 1816), and Samuel Kercheval (12 July 1816). So, there is no need of a critique of it.

In a section titled “Jefferson and Public Education,” Carpenter (2013) next returns to the notion of Jefferson as founding father of democratic education. This section offers evidence against that thesis. “If we examine his plans and writings more closely, some contradictory ideas . . . emerge” (p. 7).

First, Jefferson embraced a social hierarchy that “precluded equality of status” (Carpenter, 2013, p. 7). Blacks were not allowed access to educational institutions. Women were included in his plan for ward-level education, but excluded from higher education. Ward-level education was sufficient for women’s domestic role. Here Carpenter asks: Was Jefferson chauvinistic, unsympathetic, or misogynistic? An answer is beyond the scope of his essay, he asserts, yet one thing is certain: “His view of women as being at least unfit for citizenship and therefore not needing an equal education to boys is evidence that Jefferson was not as democratic as twentieth century theorists might claim” (p. 8).

Second, Jefferson “was not concerned with educating all to their fullest potential” (Carpenter, 2013, p. 8). That seems an unsustainable claim, given Jefferson’s insistence (e.g., the Rockfish Gap Report) that each citizen be educated in pursuance of his needs. (Here we must acknowledge Jefferson had a very economical view of the “needs” of his fellow citizens.) Carpenter cites as evidence Jefferson’s sometimes elitist depiction of certain subsets of the American citizenry. There is Jefferson’s incautious employment of words, when he writes in his *Notes on Virginia* of “twenty of the best geniuses [to] be raked from the rubbish annually” (p. 8). Additionally, Jefferson’s distinction between “education designed for leadership and that which served the masses of students” clearly represents the “world of deferential relationships” (p. 8) of Jefferson’s day and seems more in keeping with preservation, not annihilation, of the artificial *aristoi* of birth and wealth Jefferson so abhorred in his 1813 letter to John Adams (1984, 1304–1310).

Third, there is “Jefferson’s failure to see equality in terms other than a very narrow political sense”—that of free White males

(Carpenter, 2013, p. 8). Jefferson’s mitigated sense of the talents of women and Blacks, it seems, precluded any categorization of him as father of democracy in the modern sense. Carpenter (2013) does state that stratifying in terms of leaders and led, males and females, and Blacks and non-Blacks was part of the “natural order of things” in Jefferson’s universe (p. 8).

Finally, Carpenter (2013) cites Jefferson’s undemocratic actions. He encouraged “indoctrination of republican principles as a proper civic education for students” (p. 9), thereby disallowing free choice. In letters he openly expressed the need for the professor of law at the University of Virginia to be a deep-dyed republican (e.g., John Cartwright, 5 June 1824; James Madison, 8 January 1825; and Joseph C. Cabell, 3 February 1825). Here I merely note that the republicanism defined by Jefferson’s Rockfish Gap Report and more trenchantly and fully by his First Inaugural Address—e.g., equal and exact justice to all men; peace, commerce, and honest friendship with all nations; jealous care of the right of election by the people; honest payment of debts; and freedom of religion, of presses, and of persons, inter alia (Jefferson, 1984, pp. 459–460 and 494–495)—is scarcely a dictatorial political policy. Furthermore, Carpenter says that Jefferson acted like anything but a good republican when several makebates were expelled from the University of Virginia in 1825 for violent actions aimed at foreign faculty. Jefferson endorsed strong administrative action to restore “a perfect subordination . . . and industry, order, and quiet” (Carpenter, 2013, p. 9). Here, I suspect, Carpenter (2013) makes too much of this incident, as due consideration ought to be given Jefferson’s age and failing health at the time. Such objections stated, education for Jefferson, Carpenter concludes, was not democratic, but republican with “limited democracy” (p. 9).

Overall, Carpenter’s essay offers a fine depiction of education in the service of Jefferson’s republicanism. I end with discussion of two blemishes—the first more substantive.

First, there is an apophatic tension throughout the essay. Carpenter (2013) constantly tells readers that it is a mistake to approach Jefferson’s views on education from the perch of modern conceptions of democracy—a point iterated, for instance, at paper’s end, when he writes, “What I am arguing is that to apply modern democratic understandings to Jefferson’s views on education is to fall guilty to presentist interpretation” (p. 10). Yet the essay is just an evaluation of Jefferson’s educational thinking from a modern democratic perch. How else are we to understand the conclusion, “Jefferson showed himself to see education as the guarantor of republicanism with limited democracy as the vehicle to ensure the republic’s survival” (p. 9)? Thus, far from showing critical appraisal of Jefferson’s educational views from the modern conception of democracy as unavailing or *de trop*, Carpenter shows it to be availing and *ad rem*, which his thesis forbids.

Second, following Ellis, Carpenter (2013) maintains that Jefferson’s overall plan of educational reform for Virginia was “magisterial in conception, admirable in intention, unworkable in practice” (p. 5), yet he fails to explain why it was unworkable other than by expressing inability of the county to “bear the expense” (p. 5)—an issue Jefferson addressed fully later in life in a significant letter to Joseph Cabell on January 14, 1818 (Jefferson and Cabell,

1856, pp. 102–106). In the letter to Jefferson (4 December 1786) to which Carpenter refers, Madison spoke of the “indulgent consideration” that Jefferson’s Bill for the More General Diffusion of Knowledge was being given after having been overpassed the year prior. Madison’s tone was not resigned, but sanguine. He wrote:

*In order to obviate the objection from the inability of the County to bear the expence, it was proposed that it should be passed into a law, but its operation suspended for three or four years. Even in this form however there would be hazard in pushing it to a final question, and I begin to think it will be best to let it lie over for the supplemental Revisors, who may perhaps be able to put it into some shape that will lessen the objection of expence. I should have no hesitation at this policy if I saw a chance of getting a Committee equal to the work of compleating the Revision. (Madison, 1975, p. 190)*

In sum, Ellis’s criticism, appropriated by Carpenter, needs amplification. Madison seemed to think that Jefferson’s educational

reforms were salvageable in his day. I too tend to think they were salvageable.

Those blemishes notwithstanding, one must be grateful that Carpenter (2013) did what, he tells us, should not be done: offer an evaluation of Jefferson’s educational thinking from the perch of the modern democratic perspective.

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