

| **ESSAY** |

**Constructing a Relevant Contemporary Philosophy of Education:  
Explorations of a Freirean Scholar**

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**Abstract**

Using Paulo Freire's (2005) theoretical construct of generative themes, this essay discusses the necessary elements of a relevant contemporary philosophy of education, drawing on dominant themes in the work of several representative, seminal thinkers: Rousseau, Wollstonecraft, Dewey, Du Bois, Freire, Morrison and hooks. Each of these thinkers addresses issues that are quite pertinent to contemporary educational practice, highlighting the importance and intersectionality of class, race, and gender, alongside the importance of democracy as both a political ideal and instructional method. The essay will end with a harmonization of the identified generative themes of each of these thinkers into the author's educational philosophy, formalized to be as pertinent as possible to the issues of today's classrooms.

**Keywords:** Class, gender, race, intersectionality

A large part of what has formed us, both as educators and as people, is the writing that has shaped our thinking. Towards this end, the focus of much undergraduate and graduate coursework in colleges of education is to lead educators through the personal journey of developing their own philosophy of education. As an assistant professor working towards tenure, now working to guide this process with my students in their own coursework, I have spent a lot of time trying to identify the thinkers that have most influenced me. This essay represents an attempt at modeling the type of deconstruction of one's own influences that I hope to help my students undertake.

In so doing, I am deliberately focusing on a few key figures, those who both represent significant shifts in educational philosophy writ large and whose work was personally influential in shaping my own educational philosophy. I have organized it chronologically, beginning with Enlightenment thinkers such as Jean Jacques Rousseau (1718) and Mary Wollstonecraft (1791), moving to John Dewey (1921) and his contributions to the integration of democracy as both educational goal and method. With W.E.B. Du Bois (1903) and the literary example of Toni Morrison (1970), I explore my own growing recognition of how marginalized racial groups are not yet being fully included in Dewey's idealized democratic society. With my discussion of Paulo Freire (2005) comes an even fuller recognition of how lower classes and citizens in developing countries are still marginalized within education, and how education can be used as a

mechanism to change that unequal reality and bring about a more egalitarian, utopian society. I will also consider how Freire's general model of liberation through education, though limited in Freire's own conception thereof with regards to race and gender, has been more fully developed in both areas by thinkers such as bell hooks (1994).

This progression of educational models and ideals of inclusion over time fits closely with Freire's (2005) theoretical construct of generative themes—that is, in different time periods different principles have dominated the conversation within the philosophy of education. These principles tend to build upon one another, as each new generation of thinkers recognizes glaring inequalities and gaps in previous philosophers' thinking and seek to fill those gaps through their own theoretical writings. While I did not encounter these thinkers chronologically in this same order, the progression of thinking represented in their writing here maps well onto the changes in my own thinking over time, and it is that personal progression that is the focus of this essay. I will explore each philosopher's thinking in terms of the dominant generative themes that are addressed, as well as the blind spots which remain to be filled by future thinkers.

To conclude, I will discuss how I have harmonized the various dominant generative themes within each of these philosophical thinkers' work into one philosophy of education that does its best to recognize all the needs which must be addressed through contemporary educational practice.

## **Rousseau**

Rousseau (1918) is one of the first modern thinkers to fully address the education of children in his seminal tome, *Emile*. While my first encounters with Rousseau in an undergraduate philosophy course were relatively cursory, primarily focused on his theories regarding human nature, I delved much more deeply into *Emile* in graduate school. At that point, I had already become closely acquainted with the other thinkers I will discuss in this article, like Freire, Du Bois, hooks and Wollstonecraft. However, it was in reading *Emile* that I began to understand how fully Rousseau and other Enlightenment thinkers had set the foundation epistemologically for how I thought about the educational process.

For Rousseau, the primary concern of education is that it allows children to develop as nature intended, avoiding the corruptive elements that are inherent in human society. Within the first paragraph of his work, Rousseau (1918) powerfully asserts that “man is born free but is everywhere in chains” (p. 37). Later, Rousseau states more specifically that it is society that entangles and brings men down—men are, in his words, “enchained by our institutions” (p. 42). The solution to this predicament, in Rousseau's eyes, is a return to the natural state of man, a return to the early innocence of childhood in which people are inherently free. With regards to the education of children, the paradoxical challenge to teachers is to allow children to learn and grow without allowing exposure to fallen human institutions to corrupt them. Rousseau (1918) argues that mothers naturally know how to care for their children (p. 46), and as such should simply “observe nature and follow the path it maps out for you” (p. 47). Rousseau similarly argues that the best way to allow the natural development of children to occur is to educate them in the

country away from the corrupting societal influences of the city (p. 103); in such a climate, they can develop their own natural abilities through practical experiences, learning by doing without being stunted by social pressures (p. 105).

I find Rousseau's (1918) trust in the innate qualities of people very appealing. According to him, we are "born sensible" (p. 4), able to learn to speak and be without being pushed (p. 36), and endowed with reason naturally that will lead us to know good and evil without any outside help (p. 31). It is a fascinating paradox that Rousseau goes on at such length about the natural excellence of man, and how education should be focused primarily on maintaining and keeping connection with that state of nature. Yet his book is also filled with meticulous comments regarding things that must or must not be done for a child's education to be complete (how to be clothed, how to be accustomed to strange noises or animals, how to become accustomed to firearms and other tools). This reveals an inherent paradox in Rousseau approach to education: children are naturally their best selves and education should only encourage that natural development, but education is inherently led by adults who have already been somewhat corrupted by their experience in society.

Rousseau's focus on promoting man's natural goodness is also made somewhat problematic by his commitment to ideals of freedom and democracy, prominent topics in Rousseau's social climate (which included the French Revolution). After all, in the natural world there are inherent hierarchies in which the freedom of some creatures is limited by their inherent weakness compared to other creatures. Rousseau (1918) applies this same principle to people, arguing that all should "keep to your appointed place in the order of nature" (p. 83) to be happy, and that true freedom comes when people are able to realize and live within their own limitations. In Rousseau's (1918) words, "that man is truly free who desires what he is able to perform, and does what he desires" (p. 84), not aspiring to anything beyond that. Man's strength comes in part from contentedness within himself, and weakness comes when man strives to do or be more than he can be (p. 81). This tension between human freedom and natural social harmony is another paradox within Rousseau's philosophy of education.

Rousseau's philosophy has several inherent strengths—recognitions of complexities within education that had not been recognized before. For example, Rousseau is the first to recognize that childhood involves several distinct stages, such as infancy, middle childhood (the age from around 3 and 12), and adolescence—indeed, Rousseau's book is structured around these various stages. While some of his claims regarding specific child-rearing practices at certain ages may seem odd or counterintuitive by contemporary standards (e.g. the notion that swaddling is a form of bondage that inhibits children's growth [Rousseau 1918, p. 45]), the simple recognition that child development should be divided into separate stages requiring different strategic approaches to instruction had not occurred before Rousseau and set the stage for important child development thinkers like Jean Piaget.

Rousseau's focus on the individual, as well as education's role in promoting a full human experience, is another strength I draw of his work. To Rousseau (1918), the purpose of education is the "true study...of the human condition" (p. 42) and the development of individual people's strengths so that they can realize the extent of their potential. Indeed, to Rousseau "the man who has lived the most is not he who has counted

the most years but he who has most felt life” (p. 42). This development of individual potential is what allows for true freedom—granted, Rousseau’s focus on nature allows this discussion of individual potential to take a somewhat Darwinian perspective in which some people will be naturally stronger or more able than others, but his focus on the individual and the role of the individual in promoting freedom and realizing a full human experience is nonetheless groundbreaking for its time.

In sum, I draw from Rousseau three generative themes—the value of nature; the significance of freedom and the individual; and the recognition of different stages of childhood development. As for the role of nature, Rousseau repeatedly and powerfully asserts the natural goodness of man and the importance of nurturing rather than stunting man’s natural abilities. For Rousseau, the degradation of nature impacts man’s freedom and individuality, since Rousseau is intimately concerned with how the social structures of his time impinged on man’s natural abilities and potential (though, as noted, this emphasis comes occasionally into tension with Rousseau’s focus on the natural order of things, including differentiation between stronger and weaker men). Finally, Rousseau demonstrates how children’s education must align their cognitive development and provides an extensive analysis of how different stages of a child’s growth required different approaches to a child’s education.

As Rousseau is understandably a product of his time, many of the limitations of his work may be relatively low-hanging fruit in a contemporary academic climate. Especially given the sexist, classist and racist nature of his social environment, his work should be looked upon charitably to the degree that it does not address education for women, low-income communities or communities of color. However, those gaps are nonetheless limitations of his work, which future thinkers will happily fill in.

### **Wollstonecraft**

The first educational philosopher I read who seriously questioned some of these gaps was Mary Wollstonecraft, who cogently and powerfully addresses the neglect for education of women in the work of Rousseau and other Enlightenment age thinkers. Wollstonecraft’s basic argument is simple: in her contemporary world, the only reason that women are not men’s equal is because they are not given the same opportunities to become educated and develop their intellectual abilities and reason. In Wollstonecraft’s (1891) mind, this can be easily fixed: “let woman share the rights, and she will emulate the virtues of man” (p. 287).

Like Rousseau, Wollstonecraft’s work is very much a product of the Enlightenment. Her argument is an appeal to man’s reason, and to basic Enlightenment principles of equality and progress. Women have the same potential as men to develop rationally and intellectually, but they are not given the same educational opportunities. In the name of equality and fairness, this should be rectified. It is a powerful, if simple, argument. Indeed, Wollstonecraft’s (1891) argument is phrased almost as a challenge to the men of her age: if men feel that women shouldn’t be educated, they should “prove first, to ward off the charge of injustice and inconsistency, that they [i.e. women] want reason” (p. 5). This argument is couched in conciliatory language, which states that women do not “have

sufficient strength of mind to acquire what really deserves the name of virtue” (Wollstonecraft 1891, p. 19), and that “from the constitution of their bodies, men seem to be designed by Providence to attain a greater degree of virtue” (Wollstonecraft 1891, p. 28). However, especially given Wollstonecraft’s time period and social world, this can perhaps be recognized as a political necessity on Wollstonecraft’s part—that is, she recognizes that her message will not be heard at all if men in power are not given some recognition of their goodness and supposed superiority.

Given all that, it is interesting that Wollstonecraft’s (1891) contemporaries give significant resistance to this piece, as she is very careful to couch her revolutionary claims regarding gender equality in very male-hegemonic terms, asserting that women are weaker than men both “in point of strength” (p. 8), or speaking physically, as well as with regards to reason (p. 28). Though Wollstonecraft (1891) makes the strong claim that women, like men, are endowed with reason, she also takes great pains to “frankly [acknowledge] the inferiority of woman” (p. 37). Perhaps, in addition to being a conscious political move on Wollstonecraft’s part, this also serves as an example of the power of hegemonic thinking. In other words, perhaps even a woman like Wollstonecraft, committed as she is to the cause of female equality in education, cannot help but be influenced by the dominant sexual mores of her time.

Despite these concessions of Wollstonecraft’s that somewhat undercut her primary argument regarding the need for women’s education, her work is a classic of feminist literature, a powerful statement regarding the equality of men and women when it comes to potential intellectual development. Wollstonecraft’s work is also powerful due to its recognition of gender as a social construction. Wollstonecraft (1891) is careful to assert that female inferiority is learned rather than innate, something “women are told from infancy” (p. 49) so that men can keep women “in a state of childhood” (p. 50). In this sense, Wollstonecraft (1891) believes that a woman is “a voluntary slave” (p. 59), meaning that she has the potential within her to break the bonds of gender inequality through her own personal intellectual improvement and betterment. Wollstonecraft (1891) insists that women are “rational creatures” (p. 9) and should be treated as such.

Wollstonecraft’s argument for women’s education is predicated upon several key principles: first, education cultivates reason, which enables a person to acquire virtue. As “every being may become virtuous by the exercise of its own reason” (Wollstonecraft 1891, p. 52), including women, women deserve access to education to make this self-improvement possible. Second, education will allow women to cultivate their natural faculties (like Rousseau, Wollstonecraft believed strongly in the natural abilities and potential of human beings) and an independent mind, so that they are not dependent on men or husbands to make decisions for them (see Wollstonecraft 1891, p. 66). Lastly, education will allow women to prove their equality, so long as they are given equal opportunity—“strengthen the female mind by enlarging it, and there will be an end to blind obedience [to men]” (Wollstonecraft 1891, p. 56).

In summary, the primary generative theme I personally drew from Wollstonecraft’s work is the importance of always taking gender and the rights of women into consideration. While this is a principle, I have also taken away from reading the work of Judith Butler (1990), Patricia Hill Collins (2000) and Virginia Woolf (1927), the elegant simplicity of Wollstonecraft’s arguments has remained with me. To Wollstonecraft,

women are equal in potential and thus deserving of equal opportunity when it comes to education. Though this basic principle may seem self-evident in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, it indeed represents a “revolution” (p. 284) in Wollstonecraft’s (1891) day, and her forward thinking and stalwart commitment to her ideals in the face of opposition deserve the highest praise.

However, Wollstonecraft’s work does have aspects that are problematic. As mentioned before, Wollstonecraft occasionally makes statements that seem to imply her own acquiescence to “natural” male superiority. It is unclear whether such statements are a conscious political concession on her part, the unconscious reflection of her own acceptance of hegemonic gender norms, or both. However, such statements do not negate the power of her overall message regarding inherent and natural equality of intellectual potential between men and women.

Despite her commitment to women’s rights, Wollstonecraft also has blind spots to other marginalized communities. Much like Rousseau, Wollstonecraft does not address issues of social class (like Dorothy Day [1948] and other twentieth century feminists who follow her), and most of her specific criticisms of women’s education pertain only to the education of the upper classes (e.g. reading of romance novels and so forth). Wollstonecraft also does not address issues of inequality based on race. While it would be easy to attribute such problems to the time and place in which she lived, it is important to note that some critical race theorists, like Zeus Leonardo (2015) and Ricky Lee Allen (2008) would disagree, as white abolitionists existed in both the U.S. and Britain during the 1800s.

## Dewey

John Dewey (1921) addresses one of these missing pieces through his focus on public education for all, including children of lower social classes and children of immigrants. This inclusion of all within education is central for Dewey because of his view of education as a means of promoting social cohesion and citizenship. For societies to thrive, there must be structures that pass on “the life of the group” (Dewey 1921, p. 3), which includes social norms and culture, as well as means of subsistence. Education in this sense is one of the primary means whereby the norms and practices of a given society are passed on from generation to generation. As Dewey (1921) states, “society not only continues to exist *by* transmission, *by* communication, but it may fairly be said to exist *in* transmission, *in* communication” (p. 5). Only through the communication of norms from generation to generation does society continue to exist. Schools play a crucial role in this process.

Dewey’s focus on the socially reproductive nature of school seems remarkably like the focus of early anthropologists like Edward Tylor (1871), Lewis Morgan (1871), Claude Lévi-Strauss (1955) and so forth on social reproduction, as well as the work of early sociologists like Emile Durkheim (1893). Indeed, Dewey’s (1921) descriptions of the “deliberate effort” made to pass on the “ideas and practices” which make possible the “constant reweaving of the social fabric” (p. 3-4) makes clear the social construction of knowledge and culture in a way that seems revolutionary given Dewey’s prominence before the rise of postmodernism and poststructuralism.

To Dewey, this socially reproductive nature of schooling is crucial for the promotion of democracy. Dewey disagrees with Rousseau's assertion that education should promote what is natural in children; rather, Dewey (1921) sees "the natural or native impulses of the young" as something that should be "directed or guided" to be more in accordance with the social norms of their surrounding culture (p. 47). Through this education in social norms, individuals gain "a personal interest in social relationships and control" (Dewey 1921, p. 115), and this interest gives them reason to want to participate in democratic political institutions.

However, Dewey recognizes that education does not only take place within schools. To Dewey, all social life is educational. Education is "a continuous reconstruction of experience" (Dewey 1921, p. 93), and as knowledge is experiential, all social experience leads to greater knowledge. This will resonate strongly with Freire and his rejection of "banking education" (Freire, 2005, pp. 71-72) or education which divorces ideas and principles taught in school from their connection with the daily realities of students.

In sum, the generative themes I draw from Dewey's work are social reproduction (as all societies must reproduce their basic beliefs and culture to continue to exist), public education (as all students deserve and need access to education to participate fully in society), and democracy (as schooling gives students the skills they need to fully participate in representative democracy). With his emphasis on these themes, Dewey addresses the need for universal education. His recognition of the inequality of previous forms of education (that is, the private education available only to upper classes in the age of Rousseau and Wollstonecraft) is a landmark shift, one that will only be taken further by thinkers such as Du Bois and Freire. Indeed, there is a need for these thinkers to take this further, as Dewey's thought, while very progressive for its time, does not address inequalities on the basis of gender or race, and also does not recognize the full extent to which schooling is inherently unequal for the oppressed lower classes. Indeed, some of the principles of public education that Dewey most fully lauds (such as its socially reproductive function) will be questioned by critical theorists in the late twentieth century, as scholars like Pierre Bourdieu and Jean-Claude Passeron (1977), Paul Willis (1978), and Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis (1976) point out that schools reproduce not only beliefs and culture for social cohesion, but patterns of inequality as low-income students are taught to maintain their social station rather than question or push against it.

### **Du Bois and Morrison**

The primary contribution of W.E.B. Du Bois to my educational philosophy is direct and simple: to be fair and equal, education must recognize inequalities which exist in society on the basis of race. In *The Souls of Black Folk*, Du Bois (1903) famously states that "the problem of the Twentieth Century is the problem of the color-line" (p. 13). That is, all lived experience, including access to education, differs extensively for white people and people of color. As such, the generative theme of Du Bois' work might most accurately be stated as being race—more specifically, recognizing how inherent and ingrained inequalities in Western society play out on the basis of racial stratification.

Personally, the social theorizing of figures like Du Bois regarding race had a more impact on my thinking through literary figures like Alice Walker (1982), Lorraine Hansberry (1959), Ralph Ellison (1952), Langston Hughes (2001), and as I will discuss hereafter, Toni Morrison (1970). I argue that these writers have made a prominent contribution to how philosophies of education affect communities of color through the expansive social reach of their writing, which has gone well beyond the reach of most academic theorizing. The contribution of women of color like Morrison is especially important to highlight, as it recognizes a prominent blind spot of previous thinkers, including Du Bois—that is, the unique experience of women of color. While Wollstonecraft argues eloquently for the inclusion of women in education, due to the time and place of her writing this plea does not include women of color. Similarly, though Du Bois makes a powerful contribution to the political dialogue regarding racism in the United States and throughout the West, his primary concern is with civil and other rights for black men—black women, and other women of color, remained quite marginalized in Du Bois’ contemporary discourse surrounding education.

Morrison’s work is perhaps most touching in its recognition of the acceptance of racial hegemony on the part of children of color, something which many educational theorists do not address. In *The Bluest Eye*, the main character Pecola idolizes the white child actress Shirley Temple, wishing that she could especially have the beautiful blue eyes of that actress and everything they represent in terms of social position and acceptance (Morrison, 1970, pp. 46-47). The complicated racial politics of the black community are discussed in powerful nuance throughout the novel, as other black characters with intentions for upward mobility and lighter complexions (like Geraldine) consider themselves above characters like Pecola, referring to her as a “nasty little black bitch” (Morrison 1970, p. 92). The acceptance of implied white superiority, and the complicated identity and community politics that this implies within communities of color, only makes the enfranchisement of communities of color in education (which as an institution is also inherently deferential to and based upon white cultural norms) even more complicated. Though not specifically a work intended for use in the philosophy of education, Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye* highlighted for me the need to recognize not only racial inequality in education, but the intersections between inequality on the basis of race and gender which play out daily in the school lives of children of color.

## **Freire**

Paulo Freire’s work fills a unique gap in my philosophy of education as it is one of the first seminal texts in the field to come from the developing world, and as such it represents an intimate knowledge of the way in which class oppression plays out especially severely for disenfranchised low-income communities in developing countries. To make clear the point that society is inherently unequal, Freire uses very unequivocal language to describe how society is divided between those who are oppressed and those who are oppressors, the latter drawing their social power from their ability to maintain dominance over the former. The oppressive classes of society objectify and domesticate (Freire 2005, p. 51) the oppressed classes to maintain their place in the hegemonic power



structure. As Freire (2005) states, “the oppressor consciousness tends to transform everything surrounding it into an object of its domination” (p. 58).

With specific regard to schooling, Freire classifies education as oppressive inasmuch that students (especially marginalized students) are objectified through their participation in schools. Freire (2005) describes the method used for this objectification as “banking education,” a school model in which students are seen as empty receptacles to be “filled” with knowledge by teachers (pp. 71-72), and a student is seen as “good” if they passively and meekly receive what they are given (p. 73).

One element of Freire’s philosophy harkens back to that of Rousseau, in that he sees education as an essential element of humanization. To Rousseau (1918), education is successful when it leads participants to *feel* life strongly and live life the fullest (p. 42). To Freire (2005), the entire purpose of education is, especially for the marginalized and oppressed who have been objectified and dehumanized by school and society, to “become more fully human” (p. 68). However, to reach full humanization in a Freirean sense, it is not enough to recognize the resilience and strength of marginalized groups: truly revolutionary education must be both emancipatory and humanizing in its very nature.

This is achievable if teachers consciously remember to treat their students as co-creators of knowledge and educational practice, rather than as “subjects of investigation” (Freire 2005, p. 107). To accomplish this, students should take an active part in curricular design, from the identification of the basic themes of instruction to the construction of the actual pedagogical practices used to address and explore these themes (see Freire 2005, p. 108-115). This participatory pedagogy becomes what Freire (2005) terms as praxis, or reflection combined with action, with a conscious aim to do so for the purpose of social transformation (p. 51). Only through such praxis can individuals reach full humanity; divorced from application, knowledge returns to its previous banal and flavorless state, becoming a meaningless collection of dates and trivia that has no use beyond memorization and regurgitation. Knowledge, when seen through a lens that recognizes its transformative potential, is the root of all meaningful social action. When knowledge is truly created, through a pedagogical process that involves meaningful interaction with and reflection upon one’s circumstances, then education truly becomes liberating. As Freire (2005) states, “liberating education consists in acts of cognition, not transferrals of information” (p. 79).

The first action that must be taken to achieve Freirean social transformation is an act that is deeply personal: one must learn to “name the world” (Freire 2005, p. 88), or be able to identify the elements of structural oppression in one’s personal and professional experience. It is from that point of naming that one can move forward and pursue social change. This process of learning to name one’s experience with oppression and pain is a necessary first step towards seeking social change—indeed, “to speak a true word is to transform the world” (Freire 2005, p. 87). This is so because through this process, one gains an increased sense of self-efficacy that makes social change seem not only possible, but plausible. As Freire (2005) states, “people to come to feel like masters of their thinking by discussing the thinking and views of the world explicitly or implicitly manifest in their own suggestions and those of their comrades” (p. 124). This is the process of reflection that makes up the crucial first part of praxis. That reflection brings forth not only concrete recognition of structural inequalities, but also promotes critical

thinking that stimulates creative and innovative potential responses to such inequality, and thus leads to action towards concrete goals. The end goal of this process for a Freirean educator is that “the thematics which have come from the people return to them—not as contents to be deposited, but as problems to be solved” (Freire 2005, p. 123).

All of these pedagogical principles have one primary purpose in mind—that is, education in a Freirean context leads students to liberation. This is perhaps the most fitting generative theme of Freire’s work: liberation through education. As students learn through critical pedagogy that they can be subjects instead of objects, and not only recognize inequality in their own lives but challenge it, widespread social transformation becomes not only a utopian possibility, but a true potential reality.

### **hooks**

However, while Freire’s work is a powerful treatise on the effects of oppression, it neglects to “name” several of the most prominent forms of oppression, especially oppression based on gender and race. bell hooks (1994), perhaps one of the most prominent followers of Paulo Freire, addresses these blind spots in her own construction of “engaged pedagogy,” which draws heavily from feminist literature as well as Paulo Freire’s construction of critical pedagogy. As hooks (1994) states, “‘engaged pedagogy’ is more demanding than conventional critical or feminist pedagogy” in that “it emphasizes well-being,” meaning that students of all backgrounds (including all potential variations of race, gender, class and sexuality) must be recognized as “fully human” and encouraged in their own personal processes of what hooks terms “self-actualization,” a construction which in hooks’ usage closely parallels Freire’s notion of “critical consciousness” (p. 15). Freire’s critical pedagogy provides a clear and powerful model wherein marginalized students can be led to recognize their own potential self-efficacy, while hooks’ (1994) engaged pedagogy takes this model and makes it even more inclusive and personal by overtly centering the ways in which Freire’s model of critical pedagogy can overlook injustices perpetuated on the basis of race and gender.

### **Harmonizing a Philosophy of Education**

All of these thinkers contribute elements which I have shaped into my own philosophy of education. From Rousseau, it is important to note that education should be tailored to fit the various stages of a child’s development, and should recognize the fact that children are born with certain innate strengths granted them by nature. Education should seek to magnify and enhance these natural talents if students are to reach their full potential.

From Wollstonecraft comes recognition that this natural ability to develop reason is not limited to men; rather, women have just as much innate potential for self-improvement through education as men, if they are allowed to pursue such. Du Bois (and literary figures like Morrison) bring the important acknowledgment that this innate potential within people extends to communities of color as well, and especially to communities (like women of color) that experience intersections of marginality based on race, gender, and/or sexuality.

From Dewey comes the affirmation that education is a right to which all are endowed, and that education (by its nature) is an inherently socially reproductive act. From Freire and hooks comes recognition that this social reproduction is not always positive—rather, schooling is one tool used by those in power to maintain their power and keep marginalized communities in their place. However, Freire and hooks also provide a pedagogical model that can subvert hegemonic social reproduction in education, leading students to recognize their own self-efficacy in the face of inequality and work towards transformative social change.

Perhaps most importantly, Freire and hooks provide a powerful model of how educators can move forward reflectively, recognizing that there are likely still many innovations in education yet to be made and blind spots yet to be recognized. In *Teaching to Transgress*, hooks (1994) discusses her own interactions with Paulo Freire, and how when confronted with his own failures to recognize sexism in his work, Freire was a “generous spirit” (pp. 54-55) that was willing to recognize those shortcomings, asserting that hooks (1994) and other philosophers could build upon his thought and make it much more than Freire was able to make of it himself. Indeed, hooks (1994) asserts that Paul Freire “[embodies] the [self-reflective] practice he describes in theory” when he discusses the importance of praxis (p. 56). As every thinker’s contributions to the field are similarly human and short-sighted, I can only work towards the goal of my own work being similarly self-reflective, willing to recognize when my philosophical models are insufficient and have room for improvement.

It is important to note that the scholars and writers presented here are far from an exhaustive list of those who have shaped my educational philosophy. Using Freire’s (2005) generative themes as a literary device here has been helpful, but is also inherently limiting, as a focus upon individual scholars to represent educational philosophy surrounding gender, race, and social class means many personally meaningful names go unmentioned and impactful bodies of work go unexplored—important names like Gloria Anzaldúa (1987), Audre Lorde (1984), Miles Horton (1998), and Malcolm X (1965). However, both those explored in this text and those mentioned here have contributed to a personal philosophy of education that I view at its root as focused upon *humanity*—that is, the affirmation of the full humanity and equality of all students and educators, and the recognition that the educational process can (and should) be a means of recognizing and expanding that humanity. As a cisgender white man raised speaking English by two upper-middle-class academics, I have always lived in a world and been educated in schools that have recognized my humanity and encouraged me personally to “become more fully human” (Freire, 2005, p. 68). The thinkers I have discussed here are those who have helped me to recognize that the same has not been true for students and children whose identities are different from mine on the basis of race, gender and social class—especially for those (like Toni Morrison) who grew up being marginalized on multiple intersecting axes of social difference. Given the fact that the majority of our nation’s educators and administrators continue to not reflect the identities or backgrounds of the students they serve (U.S. Census Bureau, 2013), I share this piece to model a jumping-off point for reflection among similarly positioned colleagues with whom I work and whom I teach.

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