

Benjamin Franklin and Individualism in the History of American Education

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Any discussion of America's history is incomplete without at least a mention of Benjamin Franklin. For most Americans, he is without need for introduction. His long list of feats includes inventing bifocals and lightning rods, founding two colleges, co-founding the first US hospital, mapping the gulf coast, helping draft the Declaration of Independence, and drawing the first cartoon in a newspaper. His face on the one hundred dollar bill solidifies him as an American icon and legend.¹

Time and time again in the discussion of American education there is a clash between the values of the individual and the values of the society. Franklin exemplified and taught individualism and self-determination in education, which influenced much of the history of American education, including the common school era and the progressive era. Franklin's philosophy of education is crucial to understanding the whole of American education and its history.

The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin offers a rich and vivid portrait of Franklin's inspirational drive and intellect. Touted as one of the most famous and influential autobiographies ever written,¹ it acts as yet another addition to his seemingly endless list of feats. The account follows his journey as a tremendously determined self-thinker who always presses for more. Starting from humble beginnings, Franklin works to uproot himself from his birthplace to booming Pennsylvania and, through hard work, becomes an immensely gifted inventor, politician, and scientist. In his writing, Franklin was unafraid of sharing pride in his accomplished life²:

"Most people dislike vanity in others, whatever share they have of it themselves; but I

¹ AIP. "Benjamin Franklin 1706-1790." Benjamin Franklin 1706-1790.
<http://www.aip.org/history/gap/Franklin/Franklin.html> (accessed March 19, 2014).

² Franklin, Benjamin, and Leonard Woods Labaree. "Beginning Life as a Printer, Arrival in Philadelphia." In *The autobiography of Benjamin Franklin*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1964.

give it fair quarter wherever I meet with it, being persuaded that it is often productive of good to the possessor, and to others that are within his sphere of action; and therefore, in many cases, it would not be altogether absurd if a man were to thank God for his vanity among the other comforts of life.”²

Quite clearly, the primary message throughout Franklin’s autobiography is for the individual to advance through relentless industriousness and self-education, which he praises for the great deal of his successes. This theme is apparent in even the beginning recollection of his youth, in which he states, “From a child I was fond of reading, and all the little money that came into my hands was ever laid out in books.”² This sets the tone of Franklin’s life: nonstop work into nonstop success and spending money to make money.

Franklin’s first notable feats are achieved while working for his brother’s printing company at the age of 15. As an apprentice who otherwise would not be permitted to write, Franklin creates articles in secret under the name of a fictional widow and sneaks them into the shop at night. Although all 16 of his articles draw high acclaim and popularity, Franklin is scolded by his brother when he reveals himself as the author. Unhappy with this treatment, Benjamin chooses to run to Philadelphia, a large center of commerce at the time, in pursuit of a better life.

Franklin initially struggles to find work, but is eventually given a job by the state’s governor, Sir William Keith. At the age of 19, Franklin begins his travels to London. Upon returning, he buys out the Pennsylvania Gazette newspaper. In addition to his financial support, Franklin frequently contributes aliased writings to the newspaper. Soon, the Pennsylvania Gazette becomes the most profitable periodical in the colonies.

In the first two sections of his autobiography, Franklin aims to drive home the point that

learning comes through hardships and self-motivation. His upbringing leaves no room for complaints about poverty, and his early life leaves no room for complaints about misfortune. Despite having numerous setbacks and burdens, Benjamin still comes out on top as an exemplification that the best source of education lays within the individual.

Although the autobiography's remaining sections do not contain much pertaining to education, Benjamin still addresses the topic in pieces such as his 1749 "Proposals Relating to the Education of Youth in Pennsylvania". In this proposal, Franklin suggests that an academy should be built for boys with a sincere enthusiasm for learning. There is a tremendous assortment of skills he believes should be required for the education of youth, including making and reading maps, exploring ancient customs and religions, chronicling famous writers, memorizing ancient names and their new name counterparts, performing arithmetic and accounting, understanding morality and frugality, grasping natural history and history of commerce, and practicing astronomy. On top of mental fitness, Benjamin also wants students to be physically fit and trained in running, leaping, wrestling, and swimming. He writes little on the suggested qualifications for admission, but it can be assumed that only the exceptionally motivated would be able to obtain acceptance.³

Franklin's views on ideal education and self-improvement in general may be perceived as extreme and perhaps unachievable in modern times. However, Franklin's views are widely circulated today; in fact, an essay written by Franklin in 1758 titled "The Way to Wealth" contains a slew of phrases that are nearly ingrained in modern American culture. The essay, in which Franklin speaks directly to the issue of what a person should do to become successful and wealthy, contains phrases such as "There are no gains without pains", "Have you somewhat to

³ Franklin, Benjamin. *Proposals relating to the education of youth in Pennsylvania*. Philadelphia: Printed [by Franklin and Hall], 1749.

do tomorrow, do it today”, and “Early to bed and early to rise makes a man healthy, wealthy and wise”. All of these phrases which are now so prevalent in society reassert Franklin’s belief that the power of the individual is limitless when directed correctly.⁴

Franklin’s focus on self-improvement is further emphasized in his response to the heavy taxation at the time:

“...the taxes are indeed very heavy, and if those laid on by the government were the only ones we had to pay, we might more easily discharge them; but we have many others, and much more grievous to some of us. We are taxed twice as much by our idleness, three times as much by our pride, and four times as much by our folly; and from these taxes the commissioners cannot ease or deliver us by allowing an abatement. However, let us hearken to good advice and something may be done for us; *God helps them that help themselves*, as Poor Richard says.”⁵

This response illustrates Franklin’s tendency to not place importance on governmental and political issues when discussing individual success; as in his autobiography, he places the burden of improvement on the individual regardless of how hard the times are or how unfair the situation may be. This quote offers perhaps the greatest insight on how Franklin believed education should be: initiated and controlled by the individual, and for the individual.

The recurring theme found in Franklin’s autobiography, essays, and way of life is that man can do anything through ample motivation and self-empowerment. Again and again, Franklin points to these factors as the keys to his success. Franklin’s essays on teaching and learning are focused on self-improvement above all else. Quite certainly, Franklin’s favor of strongly individualized education would make him an opponent of using taxpayers’ money to

⁴ Franklin, Benjamin. *The Way to Wealth*. Hudson [N.Y.: Printed and sold by Webster & Stoddard], 1786.

⁵ *The Works of Benjamin Franklin*. Edited by Jared Sparks. Vol. 2. (Boston, 1836), 2:92-103

fund schools for everyone – even the unmotivated.

It would be incorrect to think that Franklin was an oddity in his time when it came to his views on education. There is much evidence to suggest that a majority of Americans during Franklin's lifetime supported this style of learning. The most famous case that demonstrates this is the reaction to Thomas Jefferson's 1779 bill on education. The draft laid out a plan for local taxes to go towards the creation of universal public schools for children. The schools would be at maximum a day's ride from major populations and would teach reading, writing, arithmetic, and geography. Despite the benefits it may have had, the bill was extensively rejected by the populace. At this time, Americans generally did not support government-run education and instead favored individualized trades and tutoring.⁶

Franklin's philosophy of individualism would not always remain outwardly popular. Near the end of the 18th century, a large push for common schools began. The essence of these schools went against the individualist philosophy of education in most ways; common school reformers desired federally or locally funded school systems that would teach reading, writing, arithmetic, geography, and history. As can be seen, Thomas Jefferson's plan for a universal school system acted as scaffolding for the common school.

Looking at perhaps the most recognizable and influential common school reformer in history, Horace Mann, we can see Benjamin's legacy living on past his life. In a circulation letter written by Mann in 1842, Mann argues for the common school and describes its opponents as "...men of wealth and leisure, too numerous to be overlooked... who profess to fear that a more thorough and comprehensive education for the whole people, will destroy contentment, loosen habits of industry, engender a false ambition, and prompt to an incursion into their own favored

⁶ Jewett, T.O. (1997). Thomas Jefferson and the purposes of education. The Educational Forum, 61, 110-113.

sphere...”⁷ Although painted in a sinister light, the description Mann gives of wealthy opponents sounds like a caricature of Benjamin Franklin. Franklin defied laziness in any regard, even if it meant living a life of struggles. Franklin also supported the building of an ambitious and industrious personality that would lead to wealth. In this regard, the path of education began to stray from Franklin’s individualist dream during the common school reformer’s era.

According to Mann in his essay “Massachusetts System of Common Schools”, however, Franklin is part of the line of educators that helped create the common school movement. In the essay’s beginning, Mann outlines the history of education in Massachusetts and claims that the forefathers “made a bolder innovation upon all preexisting policy and usages than the world had ever known since the commencement of the Christian era”.⁸ For Mann, common schools were just an extension of early philosophy on education; instead of providing a communal education for all, they would provide individualized education for many people. In this way, it can be said that Franklin’s philosophy survived in its most basic sense within this era; however, it clearly does not reach its full extent as Franklin would have imagined it.

In the progressive era of the early 20th century, a substantial return to Franklin’s philosophy of individualized education took place. This change of ideas was not a direct and conscious turn towards Franklin’s philosophy, but instead a turn away from the common school reformer’s philosophy. John Dewey, the most influential figure of the progressive education movement, stressed practical skills, hands-on education, and individual assessment as well as group learning in education. Dewey’s philosophy on education was much more complex than

⁷ Mann, Circular letter: Fifth annual report of the Board of Education, together with the fifth annual report of the Secretary of the Board (1842), p. 87-89.

⁸ Mann, Horace. *The Massachusetts system of common schools: being an enlarged and rev. ed of the Tenth annual report of the first secretary of the Massachusetts board of education*, Boston: Dutton and Wentworth, state printer, 1849.

that of Franklin's and even Mann's, and thus makes him more difficult to place in a line. In some ways, Dewey favored individualized education; in others, he favored education comparable to that of common schools.

In Dewey's *Democracy and Education*, he details at length his views on individualism in education. He first points to the history of individualism, stating that the concept only existed in religion, aside from the Greeks. He claims the idea of the individual is a manifestation of the modern age, and asserts it did not exist in the sense that the modern man knows it until after the French and British revolutions. Dewey's final say on the individual in education is as follows:

"A progressive society counts individual variations as precious since it finds in them the means of its own growth. Hence a democratic society must, in consistency with its ideal, allow for intellectual freedom and the play of diverse gifts and interests in its educational measures."⁹

This statement typifies a strongly developed Franklin philosophy of education. As Horace Mann believed he was spreading an individualized mode of education, Dewey regarded himself in the same light. Dewey considered it necessary to have individuals in a democracy for it to properly flourish, yet at the same time realized the inherent paradox in promoting individuals in a massive society. Both Dewey and Mann chose to live with this paradox and pursue what they believed was the ultimate form of education: promoting individualism to the masses.

Like Franklin, Dewey strongly believed in the career as a means to achievement. "The opposite of a career is neither leisure nor culture, but aimlessness, capriciousness, the absence of cumulative achievement in experience, on the personal side, and idle display, parasitic

⁹ Dewey, John. "Democracy and Education." Gutenberg. <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/852/852-h/852-h.htm> (accessed April 3, 2014).

dependence upon the others, on the social side.”⁹ As such, Dewey promoted learning trade skills equally with learning for leisure. Dewey’s focus on trade and career shows his interest often tended to lean towards the individual and the elevation of the self.

Toward the end of the progressive era, there were many critics of individualism in education. The most prominent of these was D.H. Lawrence, who wrote a scathing critique of Benjamin Franklin in the second chapter of *Studies in Classic American Literature*. The prevailing argument of Lawrence focuses on the impossibility of Franklin’s mode of teaching. He stressed his belief that it is impossible to better oneself merely by wanting it to be so, which is a vital tenet that Franklin promotes throughout his autobiography. “There is a certain earnest naïveté about him. Like a child. And like a little old man. He has again become as a little child, always as wise as his grandfather, or wiser.”¹⁰ Lawrence poses a firm objection to Benjamin’s style of self-help that remained prevalent in his time. In the end, Lawrence seems to think that Franklin only remains relevant based on his tremendous feats and talents in other fields.¹¹

Whether through his sheer number of achievements or through the merit of his educational philosophy, Benjamin Franklin has remained greatly relevant throughout the history of American education. A recurring theme found throughout his autobiography, essays, and way of life is that the individual is the most crucial part of education and should therefore be the core focus of it. Education giants such as Horace Mann and John Dewey looked to the ideas of the founding fathers, like Franklin, as scaffolding for their own goals in education. Critics of Franklin like D.H. Lawrence appear all throughout the history of America, but Franklin’s style of education seems to persist and continue to have an impact on education, showing its importance

¹⁰ Lawrence, D.H.. "Chapter 2." In *Studies in Classic American Literature*. Thomas Seltzer, 1923.

¹¹ University of Maryland Baltimore County. "On Benjamin Franklin and the American Identity." On Benjamin Franklin and the American Identity. http://userpages.umbc.edu/~jamie/html/on_benjamin_franklin_and_the_a.html (accessed April 1, 2014).

and merits in the history of American education. Without a doubt, Franklin is a force to be reckoned with, and in the field of education and history, it is no different story.

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