

# *Neo Politico*

The Youth Journal for  
Applied Politics

Issue 5      September 2015      Education Reform

## **Table of Content**

Performance Based Pedagogy: A Critique of its Effects on Student Subject Formation by Ryan Jiang .....	4
I Don't by Arjun Reddy .....	7
A Self-Compromising Pedagogy: The Faults of Prescriptive Solutions in Attempting to "Reform" Education by Chandler Scott .....	8
Challenging the Modern Technocrat: Choosing an Existential Education by Andrew Xiang .....	12
Ode to Todai by Yan Zhang .....	15

## Our Philosophy

Everything is political. Everything we do is implicated in, intertwined with, and swimming through spheres of politics. Whether it is the material politics of capitalism, where certain groups of people attain more wealth at the cost of others, or the black radical politics around the U.S., we are all participants in one way or another.

While it is true that everything is political, it is also equally a lie to say politics is everything for people. It is common to find high school students hating politics, either because of a deep resentment of a politician's subject-position or because of a perceived disconnect between politics and the student. It is an undeniable trend that high school students are gradually divesting from politics. Politics is seen as an external structure that denies the student any agency in changing politics.

However, though the downward trend is strong, we can do more to give students opportunities to garner agency. Whether the politics is engaged with the stability of American democracy or the progression of a feminist group, creating spaces for students to express their agency, their energy, their opinions can go a long way towards revealing their relation to the world.

We created Neo Politico to establish that space where any student, regardless of their prior experience, can voice their opinions on certain issues. Every opinion matters because everyone matters. We only hope that more students across the entire world can join us in increasing political engagement and producing a critical consciousness of the world.

# Performance-Based Pedagogy: A Critique of its Effects on Student Subject Formation

Author: Ryan Jiang from the College Preparatory School, CA

It's hard to imagine that twelve months from now, I'll be on a plane departing to the next chapter of my life: college. I know that for many of my friends (and myself included), getting into a prestigious educational institution seems to be the sole purpose of our lives; the college application process has been the culmination of our entire sixteen-year existences. Touring colleges has only emphasized the finality of the admissions process, as admissions officers, one after the other, declare that they "want to know who you are through your application," as if I could reduce my personality, my thought-processes, my sentience, my essence... **me**... into two essays, my SAT scores, and my GPA.

Sadly, our pedagogical system not only demands that our identities be summarized in an overly-reductionist and technocratic manner, but actively produces students incapable of being differentiated from their test scores and their numbers. If a student devotes the entirety of his/her passions, desires, and motivations to the acquisition of a 4.0 GPA, or the coveted 2400 SAT score, then his/her identity truly becomes inextricable from a collection of numerical metrics.

Public policy in the past few decades has only served to entrench and enforce this performance-based pedagogy. The No Child Left Behind policy, instituted in 2002, has largely shaped the distribution of federal funds to public schools. Under No Child Left Behind, the federal government allocates funds to various schools based on their success in standardized testing. Instead of achieving its purported aim of "increasing academic excellence," No Child Left Behind has instead transferred funds from poor school districts in need of federal assistance to rich, affluent districts predominately populated by rich white and Asian kids. Furthermore, the resulting focus on standardized tests has created a cult of "teaching to the test," a practice widely condemned by teachers across the nation, yet a practice which the teachers have little choice but to participate in, lest their salaries be docked accordingly.

No Child Left Behind, along with the cultural dominance of the college application process, has

shifted how youth, brought up in this education system, come to understand their own identities. Instead of being understood as subjects with a meaningful world of actions, American teenagers increasingly are viewed as "not-yet's," "will-be's," - juxtaposed against society's model of an ideal democratic citizen, or an ideal producer or consumer within society. To the high-school educational system, *I am not a person*, rather a *potential person* a decade down the road. I am not a subject, rather a *subject-to-be* once I gain adequate technical expertise in the field that I ought work in, pre-determined in advance by experts.

The concept of potential lends itself to a larger philosophical discussion: what is potential in the first place? Aristotle postulated the concept of *potentiality* in contrast to *actuality*. For me to run a marathon, I must have the potentiality of running in the first place; the actual act of running the marathon constitutes the actuality of that potential. Giorgio Agamben, a famous Italian continental philosopher, argues that Aristotle's understanding of potentiality is intuitive, yet overly simplistic; rather, potentiality can only be understood in context of *impotentiality*, or the ability to not-do and not-be. In other words, my potential to run the marathon can only be understood in relation to my potential to choose not to run the marathon. For Agamben, not only is impotentiality an important philosophical question, but impotentiality is also necessary for a fully-functioning subject with a meaningful world of actions. This makes sense - for me to truly have agency, I must be able to both say yes and no to any given option.

Now, how does this relate to educational systems writ-large? Tyson Lewis, a professor of educational foundations at Montclair State University, observes that a widely held understanding of the purpose of education is to "help students realize or fulfill their individual potentials." The aforementioned No Child Left Behind policy echoes this sentiment, as the executive summary reads: "Every child should be educated to his or her potential." For Lewis, this focus on maximizing and actualizing potential "collapses personal potential and fulfillment, and social improvement into one equation." Within this skills-dominated educational framework, potentiality is destroyed and instrumentalized in the name of efficiency and effectiveness; students' lives become completely apoliticized and managed by preconceived notions of success. **We can't say no, only yes.** Our potential must constantly be assessed, maximized, and then

actualized. If we can do something, we must do it.

Learning for learning's sake, for the joy of understanding the world, has become an endangered aspect of human existence. When a high school junior enrolls in twelve AP classes, and her reality is confined to endless amounts of homework to the detriment of her social interactions and enjoyment, education has been purely reduced to economic understandings of success. Michael S. Roth, the President of Wesleyan University, lamented the cynical, technocratic climate of current pedagogical practices in his New York Times article "Young Minds in Critical Conditions." For Roth, students across the nation "are very good at being critical... clos[ing] themselves off from their potential to find or create meaning... from the books, music, and experiments they encounter." Reading books for the sake of enjoyment, or learning to satiate curiosity, has all but died in the contemporary educational system. Instead, prep class after prep class for the upcoming SAT, the upcoming AP, the upcoming final...

**As students, we must reclaim our ability to not-do, to not-be, and our impotentiality.**

I'm not arguing that laziness is a virtue; rather, that we must shift our understanding of education away from our current goal-oriented, actualization-focused model. Pedagogy ought shape and mold students into subjects, not strip away their subjectivity. What I am proposing is to shift the educational climate into one where students can pick majors they are genuinely interested in, regardless of whether or not it'll "make money": a climate where students can read books for entertainment rather than for an AP score, a climate where thousands of dollars don't have to be spent on SAT prep courses, a climate where blacks, Latinas, and those who can't afford college tuition can truly say: no child is left behind.

"What makes us human," Lewis writes, "is precisely the capability to not be, or impotentiality."

# I Don't

Author: Arjun Reddy from the Kinkaid School, TX

I don't know how to live by natural rhythms waking up when the sun rises, but getting up to an alarm clock blaring telling me to go to school at 5 A.M.

I don't live knowing how to appreciate a book for its literary value as I curl up with it during a snowstorm on a cold December day, all I know is how to effectively use Sparknotes the day before my test to not fail my quiz

I don't live knowing what's going on in the world around me yet I know the casualties of Jamestown in the Starving Times of 1616

I don't live learning basic facts; I live memorizing them two nights at a time only to forget them the following week

I don't live knowing how to help my friend who wants to kill himself, yet I live reciting the quadratic equation  $-b \pm \sqrt{b^2 - 4ac}$  all over  $2a$

I don't live knowing what a job is or how to buy a house but I know the currency used in Ancient Egypt

I don't live knowing how the current political system works, yet I know all the people that attended the first Constitutional Convention

I don't live knowing how to give basic first aid treatment, but I know the Mitochondrion is the powerhouse of the cell

I don't live knowing myself, because all I know is how to study

# A Self-Compromising Pedagogy: The Faults of Prescriptive Solutions in Attempting to “Reform” Education

Author: Chandler Scott from Anderson High School

## **I. Introduction to A Self-Compromising Pedagogy**

This essay will confront the question of education reform, and its necessity in the contemporary classroom. There exists a historically developed notion that education reform is a reference to the adjustment of legislature surrounding education; an adjustment that exists to perfect the functioning of academic institutions in the region affected by the given legislature. However, this essay is going to highlight that this approach to education reform is highly problematic. I will establish that legislative prescriptions to education neglect the structure of the learning-apparatus from which subjects obtain knowledge. From this argument, I will extrapolate on the impact of legislative institutions on the functioning of the learning apparatus aside from its prescriptive impositions. Lastly, I will articulate a different form of education reform such that education and reform become bounded, and the subject is liberated through constant reform to the nth power. I will not, however, attempt to compare the two lenses of education, for this ultimately compromises my thesis that prescriptive solutions are bad. Instead, through actively criticizing the dominant system of education and then articulating an alternative, an arborescent dualism is constructed, one in which the former consumes the latter, ultimately resolving the dilemma surrounding education reform.

## **II. The Essay: A Post-Modern Pedagogy: The Faults of Prescriptive Solutions in Attempting to “Reform” Education**

Contemporary educational institutions confine learning to a two-sided spectrum. The first, formal education, takes place within a school, and is pervaded by a mentality of managerialism. This mentality is

present primarily in the secondary US educational system, where the subject experiences a strictly defined curriculum and a delineated space for learning (the classroom). Because it has an institutional foundation, formal education is socially accepted as the most concrete methodology for the acquisition of knowledge. Thus, it shouldn't come as a surprise that the learning-apparatus associated with formal education is under constant evaluation. The second side of the spectrum is informal education. This type of education is one that occurs through non-mediated interactions with the external world. The subject freely learns from experiences, learning in solitude, away from institutional requirements and standards. Informal education is said to be the most liberating methodology for the production of knowledge.

These two systems are constructed to coexist with one another, complementing the processes that comprise each. However, the development of formal education in the United States has complicated the coexistence of these systems in many ways. Firstly, formal education in the United States has more recently been isolated as the sole area from which subjects obtain concrete knowledge. This notion is justified through the labor system largely requiring subjects to graduate from high school. Positing formal education as the primary expectation of citizens alienates the subject from their experiences, and constructs a paradigm in which subjects internalize the managerialist mentality embraced by institutions of formal education. These effects are products of the socially constructed necessity of formal education. As subjects are taught that institutions are the principal site for obtaining knowledge, their capacity to generate an independent understanding of the world becomes obstructed, as this capacity becomes reformulated by an institutional pedagogy. This pedagogy is presented in the classroom, through the learning-subject's relationship with their instructor. Between the learning-subject and their instructor exists a violent relationship; a relationship that victimizes the learning-subject in their ignorance, while simultaneously positing the instructor as a superior body, capable of liberating the learning-subject with their valuable collection of knowledge. This forces the learning-subject to confront a false dichotomy- neglecting their instructor and institutions of formal education and becoming savage-like in their ignorance, or fully embracing formal education and developing a concrete understanding of the world and thus being able to

make decisions that maximize their value to life. Furthermore, when faced with this dichotomy, the learning-subject embraces the latter, demonizing the institutionalized pedagogy associated with informal education in favor of a highly structured mode of learning. However, rather than remaining within the classroom, this demonization spills over into the daily life of the learning-subject. Out of the fear associated with being savage or other, the learning-subject internalizes the managerial approach to learning, neglecting their own experiences as capable of being valuable sites for the acquirement of concrete knowledge.

Institutional approaches to pedagogy are thus inherently oppressive in the contemporary learning-apparatus. Creativity is modulated and directed through paths, constricting the liberating capacity of learning-subjects to generate independent and unique concepts to challenge dominant ideologies. Liberation is not found in the reformation of formal educational institutions, however. Despite constant legislative reformation, the formal educational learning-apparatus still remains equally, if not more, constricting in its approach to pedagogy as it was when the Boston Latin School, the first public school in the US, was established. This is due to the inherent hierarchization that contemporary institutions embrace as principle. Reform is self-defeating if the object of said reform remains functionally the same at the foundation.

Thus, rather than a top-down legislative approach to liberate subjects from instructional oppression, what is necessary is a rigorous critique, a deconstruction beginning from the bottom and resonating throughout the hierarchical structure of formal educational institutions. This deconstruction isn't just blatant rejection, however. Rather, the process of criticism is inextricably bound to the process of reconstruction. That is, the act of micro-politically attacking the institutional approach to education is itself a liberating departure. Constant criticism is valuable so long as it originates from the subject, absent mediation or regulation. Modes of criticism aren't strictly bound by regulation, either. From the smallest articulations in dialogue, to rigorous protestation, any methodology for challenging the formal educational institution should be utilized. The goal is to reverse the alienation, away from the demonization of

informal education, and towards that of formal education. Once learning-subjects are confronted with dissenting opinions, they are forced to second guess their deeply held faith in the status quo. However, absent a recognition that this state of second-guessing is the starting point for the construction of new beliefs, these dissenting opinions could have a negligible impact on the functional structure of formal educational institutions. This is why broader discussion of the faults of these institutions is so crucial. Similarly, what is also crucial is a recognition that subjects are to predicate their criticism upon informal educational bodies of knowledge. This means beginning from a single voice of dissent, and contextualizing it to develop a permanent critical lens through which to view the world.

# Challenging the Modern Technocrat: Choosing an Existential Education

Author: Andrew Xiang from Ronald Reagan High School, TX

Modern education suffers from a catering problem; rarely, if ever, do educators or administrators take pre-curricular action that questions the paradigms and objectives behind educational projects. The most fundamental educational questions that exist take the form of "What is the purpose of education?" and "For whom is this geared for?" and yet these are the questions that are never asked. This applies in particular to the reform discussion that dominates modern dialogue about education; scholars and intellectuals posit "fixing" our educational system as external to intrapersonal relationships, which fails to interrogate our individual relationships with shaping educational processes that are supposedly external to us. The most important aspect of modern education ought to be its inherently existential nature; vacating these discussions of personal empowerment for increased debate about the value of standardized testing and other curriculum based reform guarantees the inevitable replication of the technocratic and supposedly objective forms of education which produce material violence.

One of the biggest problems inherent within national curriculums of education is that they overlook the most common part of every student's existence- the condition of individual praxis. Policies like No Child Left Behind (and the universalized standards enforced by national regulations) leave behind the most important part of every child's existence, namely the unique lived experiences of every individual (which ought to alter and shape the way that education affects them).

Existential questions about what education entails should produce a common answer: education ought to serve as a training site that provides the tools that students need to challenge the problems around them- yet this idealized vision of why we engage the structures of education rarely happens or take place. Instead, educators, policy makers, and administrators default to the norm; educational leaders adopt a "market and workplace skills" perspective on the function of education, and all the tests and assessments

and SATs mandated by the regulations that govern student bodies serve as superficial processes in a technical framework oriented around producing self-serving, competitive, and technocratic individuals.<sup>1</sup> The failure of education can be summed up in one sentiment: classrooms are filled with unique individuals, not blank information processing slates.

The proliferation of technocratic and coldly rational modes of education has both material and symbolic impacts on the lives of students. Schooling that fails to nurture and develop the search for individual identity and meaning in favor of technically oriented practices produces individual subjects who lack meaning and produce material violence as a result. The individuals produced by our education systems fail to possess worldly care or any concerns beyond individual vantage points and thus practice forms of disingenuous politics that naturalize external harms as banal and everyday events.<sup>2</sup> The production of alienated individuals who feel an inability to effectuate structural changes (and therefore internalize deterministic political stances as an inevitability of existence) is a direct result of educational systems that fail to teach students how to utilize their identity and lived experiences as productive supplements to their educational curriculum. We are at the very real risk of producing a society in which all meaningful struggles for change are depoliticized by the rhetoric of inevitability.<sup>3</sup> Challenging the sites of material violence begins by drastically overhauling the education system.

Every meaningful educational reform must thus incorporate the factor of *individual existence* into the teaching regimes currently in place at schools across the country. This is a tenuous process; we are at risk of once again degrading the value of individual experiences if we push for holistic reform measures that fail to understand the unique contributions every student can make in shaping their own educational processes. Educators should start encouraging and developing curriculum discourses of reflectivity and inquiry for their individual students, in the process creating safe spaces for students to engage in critical self-interrogation about the value of their lived experiences. An existential education would create the conditions for individual students to learn about the significance of their histories and experiences and

assure them that what they experience does matter.

Education can become emancipatory when developed around specific student experiences and nurtured to grant students the confidence and tools they need to challenge specific conditions around them. One of the core theses of existentialism is that every individual/subject matters, and that we all have the power to shape our own lives; when this idea becomes applied to educational spaces, students have the opportunity to learn the tools that grant them the belief in their individual ability to effectuate change. Through engaged systems of education, we can challenge the creation of disingenuous, technocratic individuals in favor of self-aware, empowered students who can overcome the material barriers around them.

# Ode To Todai

Author: Yan Zhang from the Bronx High School of Science, NY

3 APs to fix,  
no frees at all  
2 tests tomorrow  
and no lunch installed

Instead of JUST regents,  
CORE was added too!  
SATs are this weekend,  
and you need two SAT II's

A subject and main test  
can't be simply on one day  
for some hell of a reason  
only college board could say

An AP test costs 99 dollars,  
The normal SAT? 52.  
a subject test is 26  
and there's no refund for you

If you fail you have no choice  
Just try again... again...  
College board is getting rich  
From children and their pens

since when did education  
turn into a money making industry?  
please tell me when you can:  
why can't it be for...free?

And what about some other places?  
Japan is ranked so high,  
2nd in education  
Including schools such as Todai

For Todai, one simple test  
could score your way right in  
so why did we put 5 new scores  
into the calculation?

September

Todai's tuition is 5,000 dollars

New England's worst institution? Twenty thousand.

So, America, may I ask:

Just what are you planning?

Do you want us in debt? torture?  
we don't study all these tests to get a college  
with some library made from gold and steel  
we came to study, learn, and become scholarly.

So someone, explain, what's going on?

Reference: Todai is short/common way of saying tokyo university. It is one of the top 20 universities internationally and admission is calculated by only one test.

<sup>1</sup> Stanley, Rasheed. "An Existentialist Curriculum of Action." (Maryland: University Press of America, 2007), 4.

<sup>2</sup> Greene, Maxine. "Landscapes of Learning." (New York: Teachers College Press, 1978), 152.

<sup>3</sup> Spanos, William. "Global American: The Devastation of Language Under the Dictatorship of the Public Realm." *Symploke* Volume 16, Numbers 1-2, (2008)



Knowledge is power. Becoming a metric to establish how developed societies are, education systems were embedded into the social fabric of democracies around the world. However, no system is perfect.

In the fifth issue of Neo Politico, contributors scrutinized, researched, and proposed methods through which the current education system can be improved.

Cover design by Samiur Khan