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

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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."