R.S. PETERS AND THE CONCEPT OF EDUCATION
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Abstract. In this essay Kelvin Beckett argues that Richard Peters’s major work on education, *Ethics and Education*, belongs on a short list of important texts we can all share. He argues this not because of the place it has in the history of philosophy of education, as important as that is, but because of the contribution it can still make to the future of the discipline. The limitations of Peters’s analysis of the concept of education in his chapter on “Criteria of Education” are well known. In the chapter on “Education as Initiation,” however, Peters offered a synthetic sketch of education that, Beckett argues, points us toward a more comprehensive definition of education, one which, he maintains, can be accepted by all philosophers, regardless of the tradition they work in.

Richard Peters’s place in the history of philosophy of education is well established. One guide to the discipline describes a turning point in the 1960s when for the first time “a distinctive body of work began to appear, notably Israel Scheffler’s *The Language of Education* [1960] in the USA and Richard Peters’ *Ethics and Education* [1966] in the UK.”1 In a recent article in this journal, Bryan Warnick asserts that Peters’s *Ethics and Education* was one of the “most influential books in philosophy of education in the twentieth century.”2 Peters was a leader of the analytical movement in philosophy of education,3 a movement that has since come under intense criticism. But even critics of analysis acknowledge the important role it has played in the field’s history. As one critic puts it, “one way of writing the recent history of the philosophy of education in the English-speaking world is as the systematic dismantling of ‘analytic philosophy,’” especially of *Ethics and Education*, the “most influential” of its “canonical texts.”4 *Ethics and Education* was more influential in Great Britain and the Commonwealth countries than in the United States.5 In this country, however, it had a tough act

to follow. When we read that philosophy of education in Britain “was dominated for twenty years — one is tempted to say created — by the work of one man, Richard Peters,” we immediately think of the influence exerted in this country by John Dewey.

In this essay I argue that *Ethics and Education* belongs on a short list of important texts we can all share, regardless of where we work, what tradition we work in, and whether we are personally sympathetic to the book’s arguments. I argue this not because of its importance in the history of philosophy of education but because of the contribution it can still make to our understanding of the concept of education. Others have pointed out that Peters’s work “was largely driven by his analysis of the concept of education,” and that he devoted the first two chapters of *Ethics and Education* to this topic. But the same authors also note that in the face of criticism Peters was forced to conduct a “fighting retreat from his initial position” and that in the end he accepted that “different groups within a society may have differing legitimate conceptions of education.” Peters may have failed, then, but his failure was instructive: we now accept the necessity of offering only “minimalist ... definitions of education.” Even philosophers who are sympathetic to his analysis and who ask what there might be in it “that transcends Peters’ personal conception of education” agree that whatever else might be found will be “perhaps more limited” than Peters had originally intended. I understand this position and I agree with it. But I also believe that there is more in Peters’s analysis than a personal conception of education and, further, that we have yet to fully appreciate an important aspect of his work that points us toward a new, more comprehensive, and more acceptable analysis, one that takes account of an important part of education we have so far neglected.

**Education as Initiation**

The first part of *Ethics and Education* is titled “The Concept of Education.” It includes two chapters: “Criteria of Education” and “Education as Initiation.” Peters presented his initial position on the concept of education in “Criteria of Education.” Here he claimed to be analyzing “our concept” by looking at how we

7. Ibid.
8. Ibid., 65 and 66.
9. Ibid., 66.
use the word “education” and its cognates. He then provided three criteria that he said are “implicit in central cases of ‘education’”:

(i) that “education” implies the transmission of what is worth-while to those who become committed to it;
(ii) that “education” must involve knowledge and understanding and some kind of cognitive perspective, which are not inert;
(iii) that “education” at least rules out some procedures of transmission, on the grounds that they lack wittingness and voluntariness [on the part of the learner].

Peters did not say what he meant by “central” cases of education. He did say that a statement such as “it was a real education to have to travel with my neighbour . . . is an exception to the obvious criterion that education is something we consciously contrive for ourselves or others” [EE, 23–24]. Nor did he specify who “we” are, although later, when defending his analysis, Peters explained that “we, in this context, are in the main educated people and those who are professionally concerned with education.”

Peters’s initial position on the concept of education, then, is given primarily from the point of view of a teacher, and his first concern is that teachers transmit something worthwhile.

Peters’s main contribution to our understanding of the concept of education in “Criteria of Education” is, I believe, his argument that education involves more than transmitting facts and skills. He said “we do not call a person ‘educated’ who has simply mastered a skill” or “who was merely well informed.” An educated person “must also have some body of knowledge and some kind of conceptual scheme to raise this above the level of a collection of disjointed facts. This implies some understanding of principles for the organization of facts” [EE, 30]. For Peters, the facts and skills teachers transmit are part of highly developed “forms of thought and awareness”; and, as he said, “all forms of thought and awareness have their own internal standards of appraisal. To be on the inside of them is both to understand and to care” [EE, 31]. The point Peters was making — a point I believe we can all agree with — is that students need more from their teachers than just facts and skills. They also need the ability to separate truth from falsehood and right from wrong for themselves. But this means understanding the standards of appraisal used to determine what counts as a fact and a skill. For Peters, the process of coming to understand these standards and to care about using them is, at least in the account he provided in “Criteria of Education,” the most important part of education.

11. R.S. Peters, Ethics and Education [London: George Allen and Unwin, 1966], 45. This work will be cited in the text as EE for all subsequent references.

The publication of *Ethics and Education* generated a lot of criticism. Peters may have assumed that he was describing how educated people and professional educators used the word “education,” but most educated people and professional educators seemed to disagree. Some of the criticism came from more conservative philosophers. Mary Warnock, for example, believed that the ethical worthwhileness of education that Peters emphasized was less important than what she saw as its moral necessity. In *Education: A Way Ahead*, she argued that children have a right to education; that the state has a corresponding duty to satisfy that right; and that these moral facts justify the state imposing a basic common curriculum on schools that would require teachers to transmit the facts and skills children need as adults. Warnock did not deny the importance of initiating students into worthwhile forms of thought and conduct. Rather, she objected to any analysis of the concept of education that suggests that this aim is more important than transmitting facts and skills: moral necessity, for Warnock, must always trump ethical worthwhileness. Given only what he said in “Criteria of Education,” it is not clear how Peters could respond to this criticism. We can, as he said, teach children facts and skills without necessarily helping them understand the standards of appraisal used to separate truth from falsehood and right from wrong, and this would seem to be a weakness in Warnock’s position. But we can also teach children only those facts and skills they need in order to understand and use the standards of appraisal, without necessarily teaching them everything they have a need (and a right) to know. This would seem to be a weakness in Peters’s position. It is true that, because they understand the standards of appraisal, children should be able to discover the facts and skills for themselves. But what if, for whatever reason, they are not able to do so? Have we not failed in our moral responsibility to transmit them?

Other criticisms of *Ethics and Education* came from more progressive philosophers. Peters, following Scheffler, argued that the “‘child-centred’ revolt” against “formal instruction backed by a variety of coercive techniques” may have “altered radically the manner of education” but it also neglected “the matter of education” (*EE*, 35 and 36). “The child-centred teacher,” according to Peters, has “the moral problem of choosing between letting children pursue their interests, which may be not at all in their interest, and getting them to pursue what is in their interest. … Talk about ‘growth,’ ‘self-realization,’ and gearing the curriculum to the interests of children glosses over this fundamentally normative aspect of education” (*EE*, 35–36). But critics charged that Peters’s third criterion regarding wittingness and voluntariness on the part of the learner, the criterion intended to


address child-centered teachers’ concerns about the manner of education, failed to rule out some procedures of transmission that they felt were unjustifiable. As James McClellan argued, “if you start out committed to transmitting what’s worthwhile to kids in such a way that the kids will become committed to it, you’re inevitably going to violate their ‘wittingness and voluntariness.’”17 And Peters left himself open to this criticism when he said that “an interesting implication” of his third criterion is that, unlike conditioning, “indoctrination cannot be ruled out as a process of education,” because “for indoctrination to take place” the beliefs involved “have to be understood and assented to in some embryonic way” (EE, 41–42).

Most of the criticism directed at Ethics and Education came from philosophers who believed that Peters’s analysis of the concept of education in “Criteria of Education” was simply too narrow; and in “Aims of Education — A Conceptual Inquiry,” published seven years later, Peters acknowledged having no adequate response to their criticisms. There was, as Peters said, the objection to his desirability condition that “many regard being educated as a bad state to be in”,18 and there were the objections to his knowledge conditions, which included “both depth and breadth of understanding,” “that we often talk of specialized education” and “we might talk of Spartan education ... when we know they had nothing to pass on except simple skills and folk-lore.”19 “These counter-examples to both the desirability condition and the knowledge conditions of ‘education,’” Peters admitted, “make it very difficult to maintain that an adequate analysis has been given of the concept.”20 Still later, in an essay on “Democratic Values and Educational Aims,” Peters announced “that he no longer holds the views ... which he put forward in Ethics and Education,” and that he had developed a “revised conception of education.”21 Here he argued that “the concept of education may be contestable, but it is not completely so... At least it denotes some kind of learning — and not any kind of learning either”: he specified that “education surely develops a person’s awareness by enlarging, deepening and extending it.”22 And if asked the question, “towards what situations ... is the development of awareness to be directed?” he said that “the answer can only be ‘the human condition.’” “But,” Peters asked himself, development “in what ways? In trying to answer this question we have surely arrived at the contestable aspect of this more specific concept of education.”23 He then acknowledged that “I myself, in previous writings, assigned a ... role to all-round knowledge and understanding.

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19. Ibid., 52.
20. Ibid., 53.
22. Ibid., 32 and 33.
23. Ibid., 34.
But this is manifestly contestable, even within our own society. For though it is an aim of education, it is surely a narrow one.\(^{24}\)

Peters’s chapter on “Criteria of Education,” the criticism it faced, and Peters’s responses to his critics have all been thoroughly discussed.\(^{25}\) No one doubts his claim that education involves transmitting more than just facts and skills; and in his revised conception of education, Peters continued to emphasize the importance of deepening and broadening students’ awareness. But neither does anyone doubt his critics’ argument that Peters failed to justify his stronger claim that all-around knowledge and understanding is the aim of education and, by implication, that in cases of conflict it must always take precedence over transmitting facts and skills, on the one hand, and helping students explore their interests, on the other.

We clearly need a more acceptable definition of education.\(^{26}\) But the question is whether the only option available is a minimal definition.\(^{27}\) Though Peters acknowledged in “Democratic Values and Educational Aims” that the concept of education “may” be contestable, he immediately went on to say that it is not “completely” so; and he argued not just that it must involve learning, but that the learning must deepen and broaden students’ awareness of “the human condition.” Clearly, he thought that there is something more to be said here, and even if we no longer believe that it is possible to give a substantial account of “the” aim of education, I think we can agree with him on this point. The conflicts we have described may be the inevitable result of competing conceptions of education, but the fact that we are able to discuss them rationally and to resolve them in practice, sometimes in ways that limit the application of our personal conceptions, would seem to indicate that there is an important aspect of education we have so far neglected. To understand what this might be, I believe we can make no better start than with Peters’s discussion of “Education as Initiation,” the second chapter of Ethics and Education. Here Peters considered the implications of his three criteria and offered what he called a “synthetic sketch” of education. And it is in this analysis, I think, that Peters made a second major contribution to our understanding of the concept of education. Peters said, in brief, that the process of education involves two stages. While the first stage is characterized by teachers initiating students into worthwhile forms of thought and awareness, the second stage involves “humans,” old and young, participating in shared learning experiences. Furthermore, as we will see subsequently, there is evidence to suggest that Peters believed the second stage to be just as important as the first. Taken together, these two stages clearly point us toward a more comprehensive definition of education. The issue that remains is whether we can justify the further claim, which seems counterintuitive, that the role teachers play as participants in shared

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24. Ibid., 35.
25. See Barrow and Woods, An Introduction to Philosophy of Education; Warnick, “Ethics and Education Forty Years Later”; and Winch and Gingell, Philosophy of Education.
27. Winch and Gingell, Philosophy of Education.
learning experiences is just as important as the role they play in initiating students into worthwhile forms of thought and awareness.

In “Criteria of Education,” Peters argued that our main concern as teachers should be to transmit knowledge, understanding, and cognitive perspective. In “Education as Initiation,” there is a shift in perspective: the “teachers” and “students” of the earlier chapter become “participants” in “modes of thought and awareness.” And this shift in perspective required that Peters give a new, expanded analysis of the concept of education. Here he stated that “the process of initiation into . . . modes of thought and awareness . . . is the process of education” (EE, 51), and he described the process as one in which students, with the help of teachers, become increasingly active participants in modes of thought and awareness. Furthermore, Peters said that teachers’ and students’ main concern as participants is the discovery of new knowledge:

The cardinal function of the teacher, in the early stages, is to get the pupil on the inside of a form of thought or awareness. . . . At a later stage, when the pupil has built into [his or her] mind both the concepts and modes of exploration involved, the difference between teacher and taught is obviously only one of degree. For both are participating in the shared experience of exploring a common world. The teacher is simply more familiar with its contours and more skilled in finding and cutting pathways. The good teacher is a guide who helps others to dispense with [his or her] services. (EE, 53)

Peters developed this analysis in a later chapter in Ethics and Education where he discussed “Authority and Education.” In it he made clear that students are to be encouraged to become active participants in forms of thought and awareness right from the beginning. He said that in the early stages of education teachers “must convey the notion that [they are] engaged on an enterprise of the human spirit which is not a matter of just transient titillation. . . . A sense of curiosity and wonderment must be conveyed about the questions behind the quest, together with a passion for precision and accuracy in accepting or rejecting answers to them” (EE, 165–166). “In other words,” he continued, “what is intrinsic to the activities and forms of awareness must be vividly intimated without arrogance. As soon as pupils begin to be infected with the excitement, to identify themselves with the quest, question and answer and other forms of encouragement can help to lead them on” (EE, 166). Finally, Peters made clear that as part of their initiation students should be encouraged to challenge the knowledge they receive from their teachers:

In the sphere of knowledge no one can be regarded as more than a provisional authority. Nothing is ever right or true just because an individual, however learned, says so; this depends ultimately on facts which are independent of persons and on public procedures for discovering and assessing them. There is thus always what D.H. Lawrence called “the holy ground” which stands between teacher and taught, to which ultimate appeal must always be made. The teacher has dwelt for a long time in it and is familiar with its contours, [the teacher] has also been trained in the procedures of a discipline which are necessary for its appreciation and exploration. . . . [His or her] task as a teacher is not only to convey the importance and excitement of [a discipline] and to display gradually how the world looks when revealed by the searchlight of [its] theories; it is also to initiate others into the procedures by means of which such assumptions, which include [the teacher’s] own, can be assessed. . . . For what matters is not what any individual thinks, but what is true. . . . Paradoxically enough a teacher must both be an authority and teach in such a way that pupils become capable of showing [him or her] where [he or she] is wrong.” (EE, 167)
Here I believe we can see Peters trying to take into account an important aspect of education, an aspect that has been largely neglected. His “synthetic sketch” of education, begun in “Education as Initiation” and developed further in “Authority and Education,” does not just broaden his initial position, thus anticipating critics who would later argue that the analysis he gave in “Criteria of Education” is too narrow; it also gives us a way to resolve the conflicts between Peters’s personal conception of education and other more conservative and more progressive conceptions. First, when we adopt the perspective that sees education as involving young and old sharing in the experience of exploring a common world, the issue of what knowledge should be emphasized — facts and skills, on the one hand, or standards of appraisal, on the other — can be resolved by asking, what do students need most from us if they are to participate fully in our quest? And put this way, it would seem that most often we would side with Peters in his argument with more conservative philosophers. In a connected world awash with fact and falsehood, and with ready access to adults who demonstrate both mastery and incompetence when it comes to exercising the skills children need, it is at least arguable that what students need most from teachers is an understanding of how to separate truth from falsehood and right from wrong. Second, when we view education as a shared experience, the issue of whose interests should be pursued — students’ interests, or what teachers believe is in their interest — is resolved by asking, which will make the greater contribution to our quest? But even here, it would seem, Peters’s position would often be given the edge, this time in his argument with more progressive philosophers. It is true that if the experience of exploring a common world is to be truly shared, and not just interpreted as teachers sharing their experience with students, students must be encouraged to explore their own interests and to transmit the knowledge they acquire to teachers. And in a world that is constantly changing, a world that children experience differently from adults, students will clearly have a lot to contribute. But it is also true, as we will see in the next section, that progressive philosophers do not have as strong a sense as Peters did of a common world that teachers and students are exploring together, and they do not place the same emphasis that he did on the role students can play in testing [and perhaps correcting] the views of their teachers. But without the ability to assess the views of others, or even the idea that the quest they are pursuing is shared with them, the contribution they can make must surely be limited.

Education as Shared Experience

Richard Peters was not the only major philosopher in the last century to suggest analyzing the concept of education in terms of shared experience. Though they worked within different traditions and developed their own conceptions of education, John Dewey and Paulo Freire did so as well. Peters, as we have seen, focused most of his attention on teachers and on what they should transmit. Dewey and Freire, on the other hand, were mainly concerned with students, with what they do, experience, and learn. The personal conceptions of education Dewey and Freire developed are, like that of Peters, problematic. But, again like Peters,
these problems are resolved when they shift perspective and conceive of students and teachers as being participants in shared activities, either problem-solving activities [Dewey] or problem-posing activities [Freire].

In *Democracy and Education*, Dewey defined education as “that reconstruction or reorganization of experience which adds to the meaning of experience, and which increases ability to direct the course of subsequent experience.” But critics charged that the growth of children’s experience in some directions, growth that satisfied the criteria built into his definition, might not be worthwhile. Dewey responded to his critics in *Experience and Education*. There he said that “the objection made is that growth might take many different directions: a man, for example, who starts out on a career in burglary may grow in that direction, and by practice may grow into a highly expert burglar. Hence it is argued that growth is not enough; we must also specify the direction in which growth takes place.” But, Dewey contended, “the question is whether growth in this direction promotes or retards growth in general. Does this form of growth create conditions for further growth, or does it set up conditions that shut off a person … from the occasions, stimuli, and opportunities for continuing growth in new directions?” Despite its superficial appeal, this rejoinder only serves to raise further questions: Might not the proceeds of a career in burglary more than make up for the restrictions it imposes? Can we not substitute almost any other career for a career in burglary and the result also be a dead end? Given that the criminal life is an important part of the human experience, can we not argue that denying children the opportunity to explore it is irresponsible? Surely Peters was right, we want to say, when he argued that “talk about ‘growth,’ ‘self-realization,’ and gearing the curriculum to the interests of children glosses over [the] fundamentally normative aspect of education” (*EE*, 35–36).

But Dewey’s analysis of the concept of education in *Democracy and Education* is broader than his definition might suggest. In the chapters leading up to the definition, Dewey described children’s experience growing in the context of activities they share with adults, with parents at home and teachers at school. Experience, as he observed, grows “willynilly” and “the only way in which adults consciously control the education which the immature get is by controlling the environment in which they act” (*DE*, 18–19). An “intelligent home” is one example of the kind of environment he had in mind. Here is his description of how an infant might learn the meaning of the word “hat” from his or her mother:

> When the mother is taking the infant out of doors, she says “hat” as she puts something on the baby’s head. Being taken out becomes an interest; mother and child … enjoy it in

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31. Ibid., 29.

The sound “hat” soon gets the same meaning for the child that it has for the parent; it becomes a sign of the activity into which it enters. In short, the sound h-a-t gains meaning in precisely the same way that the thing “hat” gains it, by being used in a given way. And they acquire the same meaning with the child which they have with the adult because they are used in a common experience by both. [DE, 15]

For Dewey, what makes this activity educational is the fact that the mother is communicating meaning to the infant within the context of a shared experience; and communication, as he said, “is a process of sharing experience till it becomes a common possession” [DE, 9]. With this shift in perspective, Dewey’s analysis of education becomes, at least in outline, similar to that of Peters. By introducing adults (parents) into the analysis, Dewey was suggesting that education involves more than just children and the growth of their experience: for the parents, and thus for the children as well, the growth is occurring within the context of worthwhile activities into which the children are being initiated.

The normative aspect of Dewey’s analysis is made explicit in his discussion of school education. Dewey maintained that schools remain “the typical instance of environments framed with express reference to influencing the mental and moral disposition of their members,” and he noted that one of the specific functions schools perform is to eliminate, “so far as is possible, the unworthy features of the existing environment” [DE, 19 and 20]. The problem with schools, Dewey argued, is that “when the acquiring of information and of technical intellectual skill do not influence the formation of a social disposition, ordinary vital experience fails to gain in meaning” [DE, 9]. Dewey consistently emphasized the social aspect of school education, the communicating of meaning in the context of shared activities. He made this especially clear when he spoke about “the importance of fostering in school good habits of thinking” [DE, 152]:

The educational moral I am chiefly trying to draw … is that no thought, no idea, can possibly be conveyed as an idea from one person to another. When it is told, it is, to the one to whom it is told, another given fact, not an idea…. Only by wrestling with the conditions of the problem first hand, seeking and finding [his or her] own way out, does [the person] think…. If [the person] cannot devise [his or her] own solution [not of course in isolation, but in correspondence with the teacher and other pupils]…. [be or she] will not learn, not even if [be or she] can recite some correct answer with one hundred percent accuracy. [DE, 159–160]

For Dewey, students create meaning within the context of problem-solving activities they share with teachers and other students. But these are activities teachers have devised to “consciously control” the education students get by “controlling the environment” in which they act. And one of the criteria these activities must meet, according to Dewey, is that they be worthwhile.

Dewey, like Peters, suggested analyzing the concept of education in terms of shared experience. Unlike Peters, however, he emphasized only one aspect of this experience. Though he recognized that communication between adults and children “modifies the disposition of both the parties who partake in it” [DE, 9], his focus is mainly on the dispositions of the young and on how their experience is modified. And while Dewey was more concerned than Peters was with students exploring their interests independently of teachers, and on how this also contributes to the growth of their experience, he did not discuss at length
the possibility that what students discover might be new to their teachers and that, in communicating it to them, their teachers’ experience might grow too. What is largely missing in Dewey, but can be found in Peters, are the ideas of a common world that teachers are exploring with their students and of a relation in which teachers learn not just from their teaching but from their students as well.

The progressive philosopher who did the most to develop an analysis of education in terms of shared experience was Paulo Freire. In Pedagogy of the Oppressed, Freire contrasted his “libertarian” conception of education with what he called the “banking” concept.33 Banking education is monologic: knowledge is seen as “the property of the teacher rather than a medium evoking the critical reflection of both teacher and students,” and education is seen as a transaction in which teachers deposit knowledge in their students.34 Libertarian education, on the other hand, is dialogic: “through dialogue, the teacher-of-the-students and the students-of-the-teacher cease to exist and a new term emerges: teacher-student with students-teachers. . . . They become jointly responsible for a process in which all grow” (PO, 80). Libertarian education employs a “problem-posing method” in which teachers and students are “critical co-investigators” (PO, 80 and 81). Working with the teacher to pose and solve problems, students “come to see the world not as a static reality, but as a reality in process” (PO, 83). From such a perspective, Freire explained, “looking at the past,” for example, becomes “a means of understanding more clearly what and who they are so that they can more wisely build the future” (PO, 84). The content of libertarian education is “the organized, systematized, and developed ‘re-presentation’ to individuals of the things about which they want to know more” (PO, 93). While the content is “constituted and organized by the students’ view of the world, . . . the task of the dialogical teacher . . . is to ‘re-present’ that universe to the people from whom [he or she] first received it — and ‘re-present’ it not as a lecture, but as a problem” (PO, 109). Thus in libertarian education, students are “producing and acting upon their own ideas — not consuming those of others” (PO, 108).

Freire developed his conception of education through working on adult literacy campaigns in countries where the illiterate were doubly oppressed: being integral parts of economic systems that depended on and exploited their labor while at the same time being denied the right to vote or hold office.35 But the lessons Freire taught have inspired educators working with oppressed adults and youth


34. Paulo Freire, Pedagogy of the Oppressed [New York: Continuum, 1970], 80. This work will be cited in the text as PO for all subsequent references.

35. See Gutek, Historical and Philosophical Foundations of Education; and Spring, Wheels in the Head.
everywhere, and it is at least arguable that they capture an important truth about education generally, including the education of children. The child’s view of the world is problematic in much the same way as the view of the oppressed adult: seeing only superiors (adults) and inferiors (children), the idea of equality struggles to gain ground. Furthermore, children, like oppressed adults, need the help of teachers if they are to understand the challenge they face and seize the possibility of change. But in distinguishing so sharply between libertarian education and banking education, Freire’s conception does not leave room for the idea, which is found in Peters, that what students need most from teachers if they are to realize the possibility of change is to be presented with the teacher’s view of the world, a view that makes room for the idea of equality, and to be given the intellectual tools they need to examine it critically and to reconcile it with their own view. These may be “deposits,” at least at first, but, to change the metaphor slightly, this does not prevent students from “mining,” with the help of teachers, the different views for what each is worth and discarding the rest as “slag.”

Freire did a lot to develop an analysis of education in terms of shared experience. But in the end he did not get as far as Peters did, stopping in much the same place as Dewey. It is true that teachers and students are co-investigators of reality. It is also true that “the problem-posing educator constantly re-forms [his or her] reflections in the reflections of the students…. The teacher presents … material to the students for their consideration, and re-considers [his or her] earlier considerations as the students present their own” (PO, 80–81). But in the “culture circles” where education takes place, it is only the students’ understanding that is being critically examined while in Peters’s more traditional classrooms the teacher’s understanding is always open for criticism. In addition, although an important part of Freire’s pedagogy involves teachers reflecting on the views of students and reexamining their own beliefs as a result, the students do not participate in this aspect of an educational campaign, and the reflections are not intended (as they are for students in the culture circles, and as they could be for teachers in Peters’s classrooms) to lead them to question their basic understanding of reality. The participants in the pedagogy are said to be partners, but the partnership is between “revolutionary leaders,” on the one hand, and “the people,” on the other. Furthermore, the world they are exploring is more the students’ world than the teacher’s, while the world they are creating will look more like the teacher’s than the students’.

Peters, Dewey, and Freire all made major contributions to an analysis of the concept of education in terms of shared experience. Taken together, they help us understand an important aspect of education, one that has been largely neglected, and this in turn can help us overcome the limitations of our personal conceptions of education, whether these are teacher-centered (like Peters’s) or student-centered (like Dewey’s and Freire’s). To see how the analyses of these

37. See Gutek, Historical and Philosophical Foundations of Education; and Spring, Wheels in the Head.
philosophers might work out in practice, however, we should turn to the work of the social anthropologist Gloria Ladson-Billings. Ladson-Billings gives an ethnographic account of eight elementary teachers working in a low-income, predominantly African American school district in the San Francisco Bay area in the late 1980s and early 1990s. These teachers practiced what Ladson-Billings calls “culturally relevant pedagogy,” a form of teaching that involves distinctive conceptions of self and others; of classroom interactions; and of knowledge. Knowledge is “something that each student brings to the classroom... What they know is acknowledged, valued, and incorporated into the curriculum.”

This is done because “culturally relevant teaching views knowledge as something that is continuously re-created, recycled, and shared” (TD, 81). The eight teachers in Ladson-Billings’s study, five African American and three European American, “see themselves as part of the community, see teaching as giving something back to the community, and encourage their students to do the same” (TD, 38). As one of the teachers tells her students:

Dupree: Every weekday morning when I wake up I know I’m on my way to work with the most important people in the world. Do you know why you’re the most important people in the world?

|Silence.|

Dupree: Because you represent the future. How you turn out will have consequences for us all. What you decide to do with your lives can help this community and the world be a better place. [TD, 37]

Ladson-Billings acknowledges the influence of Freire. She says that “in each class there is constant talk of the ‘struggle’ in which the students are engaged to make things better for themselves, their families, and their community, and each class helps the students see that the struggle can be fought, if they are armed with an education.” For Ladson-Billings, “the primary role of culturally relevant teaching is to empower students to examine critically the society in which they live and to work for social change.” But Ladson-Billings also cites Eliot Wigginton’s “Foxfire experience,” saying that this form of pedagogy empowers teachers as well. Culturally relevant teachers

... come to participate in a reciprocal relationship with students in which they use their professional knowledge and skills to help students academically, socially, and culturally. In turn, the students can use their cultural and community knowledge to help their teachers more fully integrate into the students’ (and their parents’ and communities’) worlds. The teacher becomes a “new” person, made over by the experience of interaction with “new”

38. Gloria Ladson-Billings, *The Dreamkeepers: Successful Teachers of African American Children* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1994), 87. This work will be cited in the text as TD for all subsequent references.


views and perspectives of the world, and comes to believe that she or he can learn from students as well as teach them.42

All of the teachers in Ladson-Billings’s study see themselves as working together with students to build a stronger community. The teachers have the basic facts and skills as well as the knowledge and understanding students will need if they are to continue to make important contributions as adults. But the students have already acquired a considerable body of family and community knowledge, much of which is new to the teachers and which they validate by incorporating it into the curriculum. As one teacher says,

Sometimes my black children will have information about home remedies or stories or folktales they’ve heard from their grandparents. We take those stories and remedies and write them up, compare notes, see how their knowledge compares with so-called traditional knowledge. I’m always amazed when students tell me things that I don’t know. That happens a lot (the older I get). But it’s not just about younger generation versus older generation. My students know about things like community politics and police brutality. I can’t feed them a steady diet of cute little animal stories and happy middle-class kids. Their experiences have to be a part of the curriculum, too. ([TD, 53])

Student knowledge is incorporated into the curriculum in the context of projects in which teachers and students share in the experience of exploring the world around them. One teacher, for example, “worked with her students to identify poorly utilized space in the community, examine heretofore inaccessible archival records about the early history of the community, plan alternative uses for a vacant shopping mall, and write urban plans which they presented before the city council.”43 Another teacher “decided to analyze . . . with her students” the question of whether the ancient Egyptians were Black ([TD, 85–86]). This month-long “Imhotep Project” was intended to help students challenge the official Eurocentric social studies curriculum, and it seems to have worked. One sixth grader observed,

You know how they’re always talkin’ about great things from Europe and how all these white people did so many great things, but you never hear about great things from Africa. They talk about Egypt but they talk about it like it’s not Africa . . . . I’m just sayin’ that if you make people think of the Egyptians as white then you will think that only white people can make great things. ([TD, 87])

As another teacher says, “our children are very verbal and very bright. They can really get going on a topic and make you think about it in so many different ways” ([TD, 87]).

Ladson-Billings’s account of culturally relevant pedagogy strengthens the analysis of education as shared experience that Peters developed in Ethics and Education by showing how students, even at an early stage in their education, can contribute to the knowledge they share with teachers. Working across racial, socioeconomic, and generational lines, on projects they all know something about

but that they would like to know more about, the teachers and students have their initial views both confirmed and challenged through a process of investigation and discovery that they participate in together. Ladson-Billings, as previously noted, explicitly acknowledges the influence of Freire. The primary purpose of culturally relevant teaching is to help students critically examine (and change) the world they live in. The influence of Dewey is also apparent, especially in the project-based instruction teachers employ and the importance it places on student research and discovery. But I would argue that the philosopher with whom Ladson-Billings has most in common is Peters. Culturally relevant teachers use their “professional knowledge and skills” to help students in their academic, social, and cultural development, and they do so in a way that satisfies Peters’s three criteria of education. As Ladson-Billings says, “culturally relevant teaching is passionate about knowledge” (*TD*, 94); among the numerous examples she gives of how teachers strive to transmit more than just facts and skills, she describes how one teacher uses the governing structure of a local Baptist church to help students understand how the two houses of Congress work. For this teacher, “just knowing the names of Congresspeople does not imply creating knowledge” (*TD*, 96). Furthermore, culturally relevant teachers transmit their knowledge and skills to students as participants in shared activities that are intended to explore (and shape) the world they live in, thus providing the concrete detail we need to “fill in” the synthetic sketch of education Peters began in “Education as Initiation” and developed further in “Authority and Education.” The central role shared experience plays in culturally relevant teaching is perhaps best seen in the classroom of a teacher who told Ladson-Billings that she and her students “spend a lot of time talking about language, what it means, how you can use it, and how it can be used against you” (*TD*, 82). The teacher asks her students to perform and then explain to her the meaning of some of the lyrics in an M.C. Hammer rap, which she then puts up in Standard English on an overhead projector (“doing what interpreters do”):

“I want the children to see that they have some valuable knowledge to contribute. I don’t want them to be ashamed of what they know but I also want them to know and be comfortable with what school and the rest of the society requires. When I put it in the context of ‘translation’ they get excited. They see it is possible to go from one to the other. It’s not that they are not familiar with Standard English . . . they hear Standard English all the time on TV. It’s certainly what I use in the classroom. But there is rarely any connection made between the way they speak and Standard English. I think that when they can see the connections and know that they can make the shifts, they become better at both. They’re bilingual!” (*TD*, 84)

**Conclusion**

In this essay I have argued that Richard Peters’s major work on education, *Ethics and Education*, belongs on a short list of important texts we can all share. I argue this not because of the place it has in the history of philosophy of education, as important as that is, but because of the contribution it can still make to the future of the discipline. The limitations of Peters’s analysis of the concept of education in “Criteria of Education” are well known. Peters would later acknowledge that he was describing just one conception of education, and that there were other, equally legitimate conceptions his analysis was unable to account
for. In “Education as Initiation,” however, and later in “Authority and Education,” Peters pointed us toward a new, more comprehensive, and I believe more acceptable analysis, one that accounts for an important aspect of education that we have so far neglected. In “Criteria of Education” Peters analyzed the concept of education from the point of view of a teacher. He argued that teachers should transmit to students not just facts and skills, but knowledge, understanding, and cognitive perspective as well. But he also claimed that transmitting all-around knowledge and understanding was the aim of education, and he was unable to respond to critics who disagreed and who argued that his conception of education was too narrow. In “Education as Initiation,” however, Peters gave a synthetic sketch of education in which teacher transmissions are crucial only during the early stages of education. Here the aim is to give students the knowledge and understanding they need to become active participants in the experience of exploring a common world. With this shift in perspective, in which “teachers” and “students” become “participants” in shared learning experiences, Peters overcame the limitations of his narrower, teacher-centered conception of education and gave us a way to resolve conflicts between it and more conservative and more progressive conceptions.

An analysis of the concept of education in terms of shared experience is suggested not just by Peters but by John Dewey and Paulo Freire as well. Dewey showed us how the analysis can apply at the very beginning of the process of education when he described an infant learning the meaning of the word “hat” in the shared experience of going out of doors with his or her mother; and Dewey made it central to his analysis of education in school, where students are said to create meaning within the context of problem-solving activities they share with teachers and other students. Freire showed us how the analysis might apply later in life, when adults seek to clarify, critically examine, and move beyond the understanding they acquired as children within the context of problem-posing activities they share with teachers. It must be acknowledged, however, that an analysis of the concept of education in terms of shared experience is problematic. It seems counterintuitive to suppose that the role teachers play as participants in shared learning experiences might be just as important as the role they play in initiating students into worthwhile forms of thought and awareness or in facilitating students’ own learning experiences. But Gloria Ladson-Billings shows us how this analysis can work in practice. Working together on projects in which they all have an interest, each contributing something different and each learning something new from the others, the goal teachers and students set themselves is to come to common understanding of a topic being investigated.

Peters acknowledged that the analysis of education he presented in “Criteria of Education” had failed: without being fully aware of it at the time, he had tried to elevate an aim of education to the status of the aim. The danger in presenting and developing the analysis he sketched in “Education as Initiation” is that we will repeat this mistake. But the idea that teachers and students are participants in shared learning experiences, while I believe it captures an important aspect of education we have neglected to date, is still only part of the story. Such an analysis clearly helps us see the limits of application of our teacher-centered and
student-centered conceptions, and to resolve conflicts between them. But far from replacing these conceptions, the most that can be said is that it fills in a gap they have left us. I have said several times that “Education as Initiation” points us toward a new, more comprehensive, and more acceptable analysis of the concept of education. But this is an analysis that includes and expands on rather than replaces the analysis Peters provided in “Criteria of Education.”