Democratic Temperament
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Chapter 5

Democratic Teaching

For William James, the school was a crucial site for imparting the democratic temperament. James insisted that the welfare of the nation depends upon having thoughtful citizens who attempt to realize their ideas and ideals while respecting other citizens and cultures. Therefore, the ideas disseminated in the classroom should produce activity. For James, it would be insufficient for students to discuss conceptions of justice; they should then try to create just conditions in the world. Nevertheless, James's proposal for the distribution of knowledge at first appears to be quite elitist: his call for the creation of an aristocracy of the college educated might be heard as an appeal for a well-trained ruling class. In this chapter, I try to establish that the elitism of James's educational program is mitigated by its democratic function, preparing citizens for self-rule, and that democracy is not incompatible with elitism of a certain kind.

I

Recently, the most prominent debates about the relationship between politics and education have emphasized the importance of the curriculum while neglecting a different aspect of politics and education, i.e., that of student character or personality. Yet this concern has been central to the tradition of political theory, especially in the works of Plato, Rousseau, Thoreau, Tocqueville, Weber, and Foucault. In the *Oxford English Dictionary*, education and character are linked in one definition of "education": "culture or development of powers, formation of character, as contrasted with the imparting of mere knowledge or skill." The character of the good student is similar to that of the democratic citizen. True students and citizens are courageous, independent, and willing to engage others in spirited, but ultimately respectful dialogue about differences. These students and
citizens energetically respond to their world. The same spark that produces inquiry creates an inclination to action, which is common to both learning and democracy.

Spiritless students become passive citizens who cannot shoulder the burdens of governance. They are unable to seek the truth behind the manipulative rhetoric of politicians and advertisers, and they lack the energy and skill to analyze complexities of power and the nature of justice, much less engage in collective action. Passive students do not learn well. They let the words of the books pass before their eyes, and the lectures and class discussions float past their ears, but little except the discipline—the tests, grades, required attendance—penetrates to their souls, where real learning occurs. Many educational practices undermine democracy by promoting submissiveness in the students. From the perspective of the educator, passivity is disastrous, as widespread resignation indicates a tragic stifling of the human capacity for free action grounded in reason, passion, and commitment.

Some readers might feel uncomfortable with applying political categories to teaching because they believe the classroom should be independent of politics. Perhaps at the office or factory, workers might have to watch carefully what they say about politics or company policy—free speech is not protected on the job—but in the classroom and in writing, students should be free to disagree with each other, with the text, or with the professor so long as they accept rules of evidence, grammar, rhetorical argument, and civility. The classroom should indeed be a space for the free exchange of ideas, but a few moments' reflection reveals that education is neither power-free nor purely democratic.

Democracy aspires to equality of power, but power in the classroom and power in the institution are not equal. The legitimacy of the teachers' authority to give students grades or evaluations derives from the formers' superior command both of the subject and of the standards of academic excellence. The students also have strength: they can kill discussion through sullen silence, or by entering it they can enable even mediocre teachers to transmit their knowledge. Student evaluations give the students additional leverage, particularly over untenured faculty. Although many evaluations are filled out thoughtfully, some students use them as a form of revenge against professors. Many faculty members bitterly resent
student evaluations, finding it humiliating to be criticized by young people, especially undergraduates, and their resentment may emanate, at least in part, from the power reversal. Such faculty members often are the most jealous of their privileges and power, and their contempt for students often surprises me: "No eighteen-year-old is going to tell me how to teach." By contrast, William James contended that if students were given more power in governing a university, they would begin to act more responsibly. (Although James did invite students to criticize his courses, today's student evaluations, which are usually written in haste and anonymously, tend not to embody this principle of responsibility.) James attempted to develop a theory of pedagogy in which power in the classroom would be used to foster the democratic temperament.

Democratic pedagogy does not imply equal power for teacher and student but, instead, the preparation of students for democratic citizenship. Ideally, the classroom is a place where students acquire the abilities to articulate their thoughts both orally and in writing, to scrutinize and appreciate traditional wisdom while being open to new and strange ideas, and obtaining the historical, linguistic, and theoretical knowledge needed to begin to comprehend their own and other cultures. Finally, the democratic classroom imparts to students a certain character (partly described in Chapter 2), which involves being intellectually independent, critical, courageous, imaginative, and respectful of others.

I fear that many of my students, admirable as they are in other ways, lack this democratic character. For the purpose of analysis I will describe an ideal type, in the Weberian sense, of student. As with all ideal types, many students do not fit it, yet I believe it captures part of the ethos of generation X. Many of today's students are curious but intellectually indolent. If a book, newspaper, or challenging film is not assigned, they will ignore it. They do not want to appear foolish or so concerned about matters intellectual or political that they seem depressed or weird. They are more comfortable in front of a screen—television, computer, or video game—than in front of a book. They have good intentions: they would stop pollution, war, prejudice, and rape; they want to feed the hungry and shelter the homeless. But they do not want to speak in class or in public, much less organize any sort of political action. They are cynical about authorities but eager to please their parents, teachers, and each other.
They experience and accept the classroom as power-laden. Why must they attend class and arrive on time? If they come late or not at all, it’s their loss, not the professor’s. They read books they hate, attend classes that bore them, record and repeat on examinations lecture formulas that often make no sense to them. Papers must be submitted by arbitrary deadlines. Professors always win in a dispute about grades, even though the student knows more about how much was learned in the class than the teacher does. The students endure teachers who are cruel and sarcastic, sexist or politically correct in order to get the grade that is necessary for a good job or admission to some type of graduate school.² The questions, Is this what I really think? Is this what I really want to do? rarely arise.

Students often embody Karl Marx’s description of alienated laborers.

What constitutes the alienation of labour? First, that the work is external to the worker, that it is not part of his nature; and that, consequently, he does not fulfill himself in his work but denies himself, has a feeling of misery rather than well-being, does not develop freely his mental and physical energies, but is physically exhausted and mentally debased. . . . His work is not voluntary but imposed, forced labour. It is not the satisfaction of a need, but only a means for satisfying other needs. Its alien character is clearly shown by the fact that as soon as there is no physical or other compulsion, it is avoided like the plague. . . . We arrive at the result that man (the worker) feels himself to be freely active only in his animal functions—eating, drinking, and procreating, or at most also in his dwelling and in personal adornment.³

Some college students cannot wait for weekends, which begin Thursday night, when they can get blind drunk and relieve the tension created by hypocrisy. Silent in the classroom, they are boisterous in the bar, at the rock concert, and on the playing field. Drawing on James’s Talks to Teachers and his public letters on education, one could attribute the students’ alienation to their feeling of powerlessness as students, citizens, and workers.⁴

Professors hate the silence of the students and their lack of initiative. We want them to care about their own learning—to do extra reading, not the minimum. We wish they would appear more eager about class. It is
disheartening to watch students cheer when they see a sign posted that a professor is ill and must cancel class. Class periods often begin with some student faces covered with boredom, heads down on the desks, showing every sign of still suffering from a vicious hangover at two in the afternoon. During discussions, many appear unresponsive; they do not want to answer the teacher’s questions and they ask none of their own. After years of paranoia, I have learned that blank looks may not indicate that students don’t care: they may be interested, but they refuse to reveal it in their faces or in any other aspect of their behavior.

Student passivity and anti-intellectualism are built into the culture and into the structure of educational institutions, but what effect do professors have upon the students?² Do we contribute to student resignation or disrupt it? Using Foucault’s language, we might ask, What disciplinary practices do professors exercise upon the students, and what type of character or subjects do we create through those disciplinary practices?² Have we encouraged their dependence on us for approval of their ideas? In correcting and reproving students, have we broken their will, made them feel stupid and incompetent to think or write clearly? Can the teacher’s authority be used to undermine student apathy? If we are tired of the listlessness of young people today, the bored looks, the silence, how can we wake them up? I am not suggesting that classrooms or families be transformed into little Greek assemblies, but I would argue that in a democracy, professors and parents should use their authority to invigorate young people in the classroom and the world outside.

William James linked the active student with the citizen in his writings about education. These writings can be read politically by placing them in the context of his call for a dynamic body politic, his description of aggressive human instincts that require taming by reason, and his celebration of heroes and geniuses. James advocated a pedagogy that would encourage students to be responsive and strong-willed, but he was not entirely democratic in his thinking about the distribution of knowledge. He wanted the college-educated to serve as a leadership class to balance popular instincts, and he urged the people to act vigorously while being led and checked by an intellectual elite. Is this a contradiction, and if so, what is its meaning? Was James ambivalent about democracy, or is this type of educational elite actually, as he claimed it to be, consistent with democracy?
James called for Americans to overcome paralysis by embracing action founded on chosen beliefs, and he developed an influential pedagogy compatible with democratic action. He applied his psychological theories explicitly and his political principles implicitly to the art of teaching in his influential text *Talks to Teachers on Psychology*, which was widely used in teacher training and reprinted twenty-three times between 1899 and 1929. He considered teaching to be his vocation, of both Harvard students and the American public, and he identified education as a crucial component in preserving American democracy. A famous story is told about Gertrude Stein who studied with James when she attended Radcliffe. After reading the questions on a final exam, Stein wrote a note, “Dear Professor James, I am so sorry but really I do not feel like an examination paper in philosophy today,” and left the class. The next day she received James’s reply: “Dear Miss Stein, I understand perfectly how you feel. I often feel like that myself.” He gave her the highest mark in the class. He enjoyed being challenged during lectures, and as a proto-Bakthinian, disliked delivering monologues. He surprised his students by asking them at the end of his courses to assess them.

James’s wish that citizens should be forceful, independent, and generous flowed from his pedagogical principles, and he sought to create in students a balance between action and thought. Teaching must be conducted in such a manner that the dynamic character of the students, who are naturally bold, curious, and energetic, will be maintained. He asserted that teachers should stimulate students’ imaginations, inspire them, and discipline them without paralyzing their wills. “Although you have to generate in your pupils a large stock of ideas, any one of which may be inhibitory, yet you must also see to it that no habitual hesitancy or paralysis of the will ensues, and that the pupil still retains his power of vigorous action.”

James feared that elements of the intellectual life might induce paralysis: the universe could appear frighteningly complex; the habit of study induces rumination rather than reaction; one could become so balanced in outlook, so used to seeing all sides of the question, that one becomes unable to act. James declared, “Not to be able to proceed to extremities, to be still able to act energetically under an array of inhibitions—that indeed is rare and difficult.” Although some inhibitions are necessary—only a
maniac behaves and speaks without inhibition while a "melancholic is so inhibited that he does not act at all"—in the ideal citizen, action overcomes inhibitions.\textsuperscript{13} James repudiated reckless, impulsive action without regard to consequences as dangerous, but the opposite and equal danger is no action at all. "There is no more contemptible type of human character than that of the nerveless sentimentalist and dreamer, who spends his life in a weltering sea of sensibility, but never does a concrete manly deed."\textsuperscript{14}

Because education's primary purpose is not to transmit ideas or information, but to supply students with resources for action, James held that pupils should be encouraged to react to what they learn rather than memorizing and repeating it.\textsuperscript{15} In order to create something other than submissive students, teachers should appeal to student interest, not fear. Reliance on coercion to gain the students' attention "is a wasteful method, bringing bad temper and nervous wear and tear as well as imperfect results. The teacher who can get along by keeping spontaneous interest excited must be regarded as the teacher with the greatest skill."\textsuperscript{16} James also subscribed to "a complete system of self-government by the students." Students should be treated as adults and given responsibility for their own affairs.\textsuperscript{17} He claimed that students at Harvard had become more mature in large part because of an "all but complete remission of paternalism in the Faculty-government." The way to improve the conduct of students is to give them more power.\textsuperscript{18}

James exhorted colleges to impart to their students (and students to the rest of the society) a liberal temper, tightening up the minds of the romantics—making them clearer thinkers who establish evidence for their propositions—while "softening" those trained exclusively in the hard sciences—leading them to realize the importance of poetry, questioning, and imagination.\textsuperscript{19} He desired that students be able to think vigorously and independently and hoped they would develop open, tolerant, and unconventional minds.\textsuperscript{20} Knowing "the chief rival attitudes towards life," he wrote, is the "essential part of liberal education. Philosophy, indeed, in one sense of the term is only a compendious name for the spirit in education which the word 'college' stands for in America."\textsuperscript{21} The students who imbibe this spirit of action and openness would serve as the teachers of the democratic citizenry, which leads to the question, What is the source of authority for democracy's teachers?
If James's theory of pedagogy was democratic, his model for distributing knowledge was elitist. What is the meaning of this new Jamesian paradox? How was his elitism different from that of democracy's true enemies? Before trying to salvage James as a democrat, I will describe his vision of the educational elite, the function of that group, and the processes of creating it and spreading its influence.

The most antidemocratic element of James's educational theory was his sharp distinction between extraordinary leaders and the common people. As I showed in Chapter 1, James believed that communities determine their fate by following rare individuals.22

The notion that a people can run itself and its affairs anonymously is now well known to be the silliest of absurdities. Mankind does nothing save through initiatives on the part of inventors, great or small, and imitation by the rest of us—these are the sole factors active in human progress. Individuals of genius show the way, and set the patterns, which common people then adopt and follow.23

The world ... is only beginning to see that the wealth of a nation consists more than in anything else in the number of superior men that it harbors. ... Geniuses are ferments; and when they come together as they have done in certain lands at certain times, the whole population seems to share in the higher energy which they awaken.24

The distinction between “superior” and “ordinary” cannot be debated here, but it can be noted that the role of the “superior” ones is to awaken energy in “the whole population.” Although it is true that James chose representative rather than direct democracy, he did not say that the people cannot govern themselves—after all, he called for student self-government—only that they cannot do so “anonymously,” i.e., without leaders. He also argued, as Tocqueville did in Democracy in America, that democracies require an influential aristocratic component. “In our democracy, where everything else is so shifting,” James wrote, “we alumni and alumnæ of the colleges are the only permanent presence that corresponds to the aristocracy in older countries. ... We stand for ideal interests solely,
for we have no corporate selfishness and wield no powers of corruption. We ought to have our own class-consciousness."^{25}

Wolin responds: "James says that intellectuals need their 'own class consciousness,' but before that he says that there are no interests and selfishness. Would the formation of class consciousness not lead to the formation of corporate selfishness, and do teachers not have tremendous powers of corruption? A reader would want to know why James's sceptical powers suddenly are suspended."^{26} By "class consciousness," James did not imply material interests or the formation of teacher unions but was using the political vernacular to state something like, We should recognize that we are intellectuals and be proud of that fact, despite the attacks of anti-intellectuals, because we have a public contribution to make. The present danger is that intellectuals are not reaching audiences outside the academy and are exclusively interested in concocting ideals rather than ensuring that those ideals are realized in the world. His overstatement that intellectuals have no "corporate selfishness" may have been a function of the rhetoric: calls for change often lack doubt.

Like Plato, James placed education at the center of his scheme for social transformation. In *The Republic* and according to James's plan, leaders would be qualified by their learning. Of course, the theories of the two men are quite different. According to an old-fashioned reading of *The Republic*, Plato imagined well-trained philosophers who would apprehend the truth in the forms and govern society according to what they see.^{27} The conflicts and power struggles at the heart of politics would be eliminated because the correct path would be apprehended by the philosophers and their authority would be undisputed by the many. A significant component of his educational plan and proposed social arrangements is to prepare the people to accept them.

Unlike Plato, James was committed to citizen action and to voting, implying that he respected the average citizen's capacity for courage and commitment to the common good.^{28} For James, "geniuses" are characterized, not by what they know, but by the quality of their minds and temperament. By teaching the teachers of the many, the geniuses will transmit their qualities to the people and thus prepare them for self-government, which means in large part that the people will become capable of recognizing "good men" to serve as political leaders. For both James and Plato, philosophers embody the brain and reason of the country while the
many tend to be guided by instinct or desire. James did not want to destroy the people's spirit, he wanted it ruled by reason. Both Plato and James criticized political and economic institutions that inflame covetousness and undermine reason. The college-educated, in James's approach, like Plato's philosopher-kings, help reason ascend over passion, and thereby produce sagacious public decisions.

Not unlike traditional images of the political theorist, James's "geniuses" would lead the culture forward by interpreting both history and the present in new ways, providing visions of new and more generous institutions and policies, and disseminating a magnanimous temperament that would dampen the popular instinct for war. Imagination, critical perspective, and the ability to reason would be disseminated by genius-professors to their graduate students in universities who would become college professors; college professors would prepare high school and elementary school teachers. The transformation of the country begins with "the reflective members of the State, and spreads slowly outward and downward." Students trained in graduate schools would be the most contemplative, creative, and intelligent citizens. The healthy effects of education would be widely distributed among the population by "inoculating as many young Americans as possible with a general culture of the college grade," and professors would extend their benign influence on the nation via their students.

Such men are the backbone of the country. And no one can question the advantage to the country of having the largest possible number of them go to college, broaden their intellectual outlook, gain the sense of kinship with intellectual things, become once for all members of the free-masonry of the Educated, and continue to be voters for ideal interests during the remainder of their life.

James did not always clearly distinguish between geniuses and teachers since he anticipated that the former would pass their "spark" on to the latter and through them to their students. It may be elitist to distinguish geniuses from ordinary people but egalitarian to hold that the many are capable of being influenced by the geniuses; and it is democratic to call for the spread of college education to everyone with the capacity for study.
American college students should come “from all degrees and ranks of society,” not just the wealthy. James compared U.S. colleges favorably with Oxford and Cambridge because the latter “are, on the whole, aristocratic and not democratic schools.” Of course, not everyone has the intellect, wish, or funds to attend university, but the masses of people would still be affected by geniuses when they were taught in high school and grammar school by the college students who had had direct encounters with the geniuses or students of geniuses. Because of their crucial function of disseminating the democratic temperament, “the teachers of this country, one may say, have its future in their hands.”

How would these teachers be developed? In essence, college students would learn by coming into contact with exceptional books and teachers. It is the quality of its men that makes the quality of a university. You may have your buildings, you may create your committees and boards and regulations, you may pile up your machinery of discipline and perfect your methods of instruction, you may spend money till no one can approach you, yet you will add nothing but one more trivial specimen to the common herd of American colleges, unless you send into all this organization some breath of life, by inoculating it with a few men at least who are real geniuses.

To say that there should be a few geniuses indicates that the task of education will be carried on by many who are not geniuses but who are educated. Nevertheless, the process of transmitting the spirit of geniuses to ordinary people is made complicated precisely because of the distinction James made between them. Will the ordinary folks listen to and be capable of receiving the teaching of the geniuses? In a paper supporting a proposal at Harvard to reduce the number of years at college from four to three, James acknowledged the gulf between the people who are committed to ideas and practical people, who will be touched by the scholarly temperament but will not become scholars. James did not believe that the aim of education is to make all students “intellectuals,” and since contemplation is not the natural temper of most students, it would be fruitless to try to transform them. Such an exercise frustrates both the student and the professor. “Listlessness, apathy, dawdling, sauntering, the smoking of ciga-
rettes and living on small sarcasms... are the direct fruit of keeping these men too long from contact with that world of affairs to which they rightfully belong.”

What could induce practical people to take advice, within the university and without, from scholars? What would give the geniuses authority? James thought academic style must change to attract popular interest. The curriculum should not be arcane but speak to subjects in a lively way. Whereas many people see colleges as exhibiting “a kind of sterilized conceit and incapacity for being pleased,” colleges need to become robust and hearty because “if a college, through the inferior human influences that have grown regnant there, fails to catch the robuster tone, its failure is colossal, for its social function stops: democracy gives it a wide berth, turns toward it a deaf ear.”

In college, the curriculum should help to form democratic students, ironically by giving them an appreciation of excellence. James lived in a time when the terms “masterpieces,” “excellence,” “superiority,” and “great deeds” were not impugned as being inherently antidemocratic or culturally biased. He stressed the truths and standards of great books, saying that at college, students should learn respect for the first-rate and disdain for the trashy and impermanent (108). The aim of colleges is to promote “the higher culture.” College, James said, teaches what “superiority” is. “Universities are already a sort of agency providentially provided for the detection and encouragement of mental superiority.”

Although James did not believe in a canon and argued for broadening the college curriculum to include modern works, he maintained that students should learn the nature of excellence by reading “masterpieces” of thought and studying great historic deeds. Masterpieces stimulate the mind while promoting standards of excellence and visions of alternative societies. In language highly unfashionable today, and not particularly pluralist, James postulated that great books contain standards for action. “The ceaseless whisper of the more permanent ideals, the steady tug of truth and justice, give them but time, must warp the world in their direction” (110). By studying history, which describes the activities that “have stood the test of time; we acquire standards of the excellent and durable” (108). Wolin remarks: “This is a very old fashioned notion that goes back to the eighteenth century and earlier. It was always summarized by the popularity of Plutarch in the education of gentlemen because Plutarch has
a series of great lives and great men who were supposed to serve as models.44 James’s traditional conception of education exposes his faith in truth and the progressive direction of history.

James tempered the elitism of his paean to excellence in two ways. First, he called for sympathy with people’s mistakes and the pathos of lost causes.45 Then he said that great books were not the only source of an education in excellence; people who did not attend college should receive a trade education, which also confers upon its students the means to recognize quality in fine workmanship. That knowledge would impart the ability to recognize and respect excellence in politicians.

It is not immediately apparent how teachers might follow James’s advice today in shaping the curriculum. And even after his caveat to remember and empathize with the losers, one wonders if a steady diet of the excellent and extraordinary in college prepares students to appreciate their fellow citizens. As I showed earlier, James was torn on this issue, alternately praising the heroic pursuit of excellence and criticizing the American obsession with “the bitch-goddess Success.”46 This is not to say that James equated excellence and success; success can be attained by standards lower than excellence.

Having explicated James’s theory of geniuses and the process of creating them, I would suggest that his theory is not as elitist as it first appears, and I will assess it by employing three criteria: its stated purposes, the method of selecting the geniuses, and the relationship of the many with the few. I argue that the elitist language James employed belies an egalitarian intention. He showed that a certain kind of elitism, the search for excellence in intellectual and political leadership and its dissemination among the many, is compatible with democracy.

James’s democratic intention can better be discerned by looking at the political and historical contexts of his theory. The “anti-Dreyfus craze” fomented popular cries against les intellectuels; aristocrats indicted American populist impulses for undermining knowledgable guidance in public affairs; and the masses did appear to possess a hearty appetite whetted by demagogues for imperialist wars. Against these challenges, James affirmed that intellectuals serve the crucial function of moral and political leader-
James has already been depicted as being unafraid of popular action, even militant conflict, but he did fear the populist impulse behind imperialism, lynching, and corruption in urban machines and national government. Instead of being restrained by public leaders, the human instinct for aggression was being incited by the tabloid press, Theodore Roosevelt, and other demagogues. The same dynamic occurs today when some politicians and public intellectuals play on widespread fears of crime, unemployment, poverty, and the temptation for children to use drugs or engage in promiscuity (and thus risk attendant diseases or unwanted pregnancy). Such leaders respond to these fears with calls for harsh punishment of criminals, a buildup of the military, invective toward real and imagined domestic and foreign enemies, and an end to affirmative action, welfare, and government support for education, the arts, and the humanities.

In the nineteenth century, James's friend Henry Adams expressed his belief that the Constitution of 1789 was outmoded, in part because it left power in the hands of the masses who were unqualified to wield it and because those who possessed sensitivity, perceptiveness, and restraint were excluded from positions of authority. Such criticisms were at the heart of the Progressive call for civil service reform and the replacement of machine politics with managers. James conceded the force of these arguments, agreeing that democracy "may undergo self-poisoning," but he did not support the elimination of popular rule—on the contrary, he invoked faith in democracy, calling it "a kind of religion, and we are bound not to admit its failure." Democracy requires civic education so that citizens will act wisely and, above all, choose good leaders. This is the first political purpose of education in excellence: to help citizens recognize and vote for representatives who embody the democratic temperament, i.e., who are committed to an active citizenry and mutual respect at home and abroad.

Earlier in this chapter I showed that James's pedagogy was appropriate for direct democracy, and then I contrasted his pedagogical theory with a seemingly elitist formulation of the intellectual's function in society. I have tried to suggest that despite James's overly sharp division between intellectuals and other citizens, ultimately the purpose of intellectual leadership is to augment, not replace, democracy.
I began this chapter with a discussion of the need for a pedagogy that is appropriate to democracy. Teaching that relies upon the coercion of grades to elicit responses from students will only reinforce the passivity that teachers say they detest. Professors should use their authority to undermine student submissiveness, to wake them up. Certain teaching strategies, or forms of discipline, such as requiring students to speak in class, can be employed to motivate students to become active learners. As Rousseau might have said, professors need to force students to be free.

James provided a cautionary objection to my argument that coercion can be used democratically. He saw a danger in relying on it too much as a mode of teaching and, instead, urged professors to make their subjects engrossing to the students. “The genius of the interesting teacher consists in sympathetic divination of the sort of material with which the pupil’s mind is likely to be already spontaneously engaged, and in the ingenuity which discovers paths of connection from that material to the matters to be newly learned. The principle is easy to grasp, but the accomplishment is difficult in the extreme.” 51 Reliance on coercion to gain the students’ attention “is a wasteful method, bringing bad temper and nervous wear and tear as well as imperfect results. The teacher who can get along by keeping spontaneous interest excited must be regarded as the teacher with the greatest skill.” 52

Do not, then, for the mere sake of discipline, command attention from your pupils in thundering tones; do not too often beg it from them as a favor, nor claim it as a right, nor try habitually to excite it by preaching the importance of the subject. Sometimes, indeed, you must do these things; but the more you have to do them, the less skilful teacher you will show yourself to be. 53

In place of stimulating student interest, teachers threaten students with low grades, including points off for absences, late submission of papers and tests, lack of participation in discussion, spelling and grammar errors, and failure to do assigned reading.

Forsaking coercion is, however, problematic. Students of teachers who
have forsaken compulsion often use their freedom to avoid learning. How have things come to this point? Students who become accustomed to strict discipline in the early grades do not always adapt well to freedom later. They do not know how to work for something other than the grade, and they become extremely nervous when they are unsure what the teacher wants of them and when they are asked to develop their own ideas about a subject rather than presenting those of the author or professor.

A highly disciplinary model of pedagogy serves the needs of our economic and political system. Guided by their parents, many students use their college years to prepare for careers rather than pursuing intellectual interests. Colleges and universities, eager for the tuition dollars of a shrinking pool of students, most of whom are anxious about their future, try to accommodate demands for vocational courses such as advertising in the Art Department, journalism in English, law in Political Science, and accounting and business in Economics. Students then complain of boredom in classes they did not really care about in the first place, and which do not speak to their curiosity or larger questions of meaning; students are at other times impatient with courses that lack immediate relevance to their job aims or to negotiating “the real world.” The conception has become rare in the enterprise of higher learning that students might not use their undergraduate years primarily to prepare for a place in the world, but develop a critical perspective on that world, and even attempt to shape it according to ideals acquired from their education. Unfortunately, the students do not complain enough about excessive discipline, which they assume to be part of the price that must be paid for success. Such students will probably not assume leadership roles in democratizing American politics and civil society.

In the spirit of James’s teachings about education, I would like to put forward some suggestions for democratic change, even though I realize that the maxims and the proposals that follow will seem old hat to anyone interested in educational reform since the beginning of the century. I was lucky to attend first a progressive high school that employed Deweyan teaching methods and later the University of California, Santa Cruz, which had no grades, no textbooks, rare examinations, few firm deadlines for papers, and no attendance requirements. The university teachers assumed that the students had come to learn, and in most cases that as-
assumption was correct. I heard many splendid lectures, but questions and challenges to the teachers' positions were welcomed.

I have now taught for a number of years in more traditional institutions and have found the students, overall, more inert and the professors more disciplinary and less experimental. Innovation now seems to mean “group projects.” Textbooks and examinations are the norm. Students groan that they are required to sit through endless lectures without being given the opportunity to react, and they should object more than they do about being able to graduate from college without having to encounter great works of philosophy, history, literature, religion, and psychology. The idea of student participation in governing specific departments and the university itself has largely been dropped. Student evaluations, distributed and completed by rote, are what remains of the call for “student power” that became popular in the sixties.

Given the present situation, it seems useful to articulate again the principles of democratic teaching. They include the disruption of inherited ideas by questioning, indirection, and the presentation of alternative worldviews; challenging students to become independent thinkers and political actors by having them read significant books that are meaningful to the professor and potentially so to the students; sharing as much power as possible with the students; and finally, having sympathy with and affection for the students.

Translating these Jamesian principles into concrete reforms, here are some suggestions. First, James called for students to experience “great” authors and books. Even recognizing that the term “great” is highly contested and has been invoked in heated debates over expanding the canon, perhaps both traditionalists and innovators can agree that the resurgence of textbooks which, with few exceptions, are not brilliantly written should be questioned. Their very emphasis on clarity and neutrality induces mental laziness in the process of acquiring knowledge. Students should, for the most part, be exposed to powerful minds.

Second, reliance on examinations should also be reconsidered. Some exams rigorously challenge students and require them to pull together the various readings and ideas presented in the course, but too often testing demands only a restatement of the professor’s ideas and the information in the text without eliciting a reaction from the student. Generally, it is better
to allow students the time to write essays that analyze the text and respond to it. This recommendation is an amendment of James, who apparently took exams for granted.

Third, professors should require students to take an independent stand in writing papers and in commenting in class, or at least to state their difficulties in arriving at their own position. Students should not be rewarded for simply repeating the ideas of the professor or the text. This idea is in the spirit of James, who told students always to react to what they read and hear: "No reception without reaction, no impression without correlative expression—this is the great maxim which the teacher ought never to forget." 54

Fourth, while making students aware of the classic works of Western civilization, the teacher must show the students how their concerns are addressed by authors of various countries, languages, periods, races, and genders, including their own. White male students can learn from non-white authors and from women writers just as women and people of color have always learned from white male writers. A multicultural education is particularly necessary in order to engender mutual respect in the diverse society of the United States. This point is a minor amendment of James, who believed in teaching powerful books in addition to the classics, and points in the direction of Dewey's multicultural classroom.

Fifth, outside the classroom, students should regularly participate in department meetings and serve on search committees. By participating more in the running of the university, students will better understand it, and upon graduation, become more articulate supporters of higher education. The more responsibility the students are given on campus, and the less they think of themselves as a subjugated group, the more lively they will be in the classroom. James explicitly called for students to take greater responsibility for student life on campus, so this proposal only expands his.

Sixth, academic departments and the administration should set an example for the students by being models of democratic decision making. Decisions should be made openly and with the involvement of the entire department, including the students. Democracy in the United States cannot be built from the top down, and we should start where we live and work. This suggestion supplements James's thinking.

These steps, among others, might help release the intellectual energy of the students, and invigorated students will be more likely to compre-
hend the world outside the college and to react to it in a humane and generous manner. Jamesian pedagogy would create citizens who are not content with merely voting for qualified representatives. Such students would not accept the lack of democracy in the United States and would critically analyze and challenge the hierarchical organization of politics, corporations, schools, and other institutions. Given the powerful economic and political forces that shape education, I, following James, may overemphasize the ability of professors to change the character of the citizenry and create democratic forms of politics and work in America. Yet it may be as Henry Adams counseled that "a teacher affects eternity; he can never tell where his influence stops."55 On bad days, it is hard to tell where a teacher's influence begins. But why not try?