William James' Talks to Teachers Revisited

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ABSTRACT: This essay considers William James and his famous work – *Talks to Teachers*. It provides a short, education-relative, biography of James and the historical context of his writings. The book itself is summarized and reviewed, but with a constant eye toward its relevance for current issues. Specific topics include the relationship of psychology to education, the nature of education in North America, and an extensive discussion of education as "habit formation."

Keywords: history of education, *Talks to Teachers*, William James

RESUMÉ: *Talks to Teachers,* ouvrage célèbre de William James, fait l'objet de cet article. On y décrit brièvement les études de William James, sa biographie et le contexte historique de ses écrits. Le livre est résumé et revu mais en étant toujours en rapport avec les problématiques actuelles. Des thèmes précis sont abordés dont les rapports entre la psychologie et l'enseignement, le caractère que l'éducation revêt en Amérique du Nord et une discussion étendue sur l'enseignement en tant qu'*apprentissage routinier.*

Mots clés: histoire de l'enseignement, *Talks to Teachers*, William James

The roots of this essay came from the first author's 2013 Presidential address given to the Southwestern Psychological Association – one of the American Psychological Association's regional meetings. Knowing that this audience of psychologists (and students of psychology) would reflect most every sub-field of the discipline, William James and his Talks to Teachers seemed like a topic of common interest. In one way or another, every person present was an educator, was still being educated (at the University level), or had some

degree of interest in the issues facing public school education. Based on responses to that presentation, this informal look at the current relationship between psychology and education emerged. Its goal was (and remains) not to be prescriptive, but to stimulate reflection.

William James and his Talks

William James was born on January 11th, 1842, in New York City. His grandfather – an Irish immigrant – was by the time of William's birth among the wealthiest men in New York State. His father was a self-styled iconoclastic theologian, strongly influenced by the philosophy of the Christian mystic Emanuel Swedenborg. James' brother, Henry, is a noted figure in American literature.

James grew up around a table where disputation about such matters as formal education was encouraged, and a table that hosted the likes of Emerson and Thoreau. Indeed, as a child of privilege, James himself had the best education that money could buy. It was delivered initially by private tutors in the U.S., then at the finest schools in England, France, Italy, Germany and Switzerland. As a result he was remarkably well-read, especially in philosophy, passable in several foreign languages, but entirely uncertain about "what to be when he grew up." James considered art and worked briefly as an apprentice for the famed William Morris Hunt – but allegedly his father threatened suicide if he actually chose art as a vocation instead of a pastime. True or not, he switched to science and eventually medicine.

In 1865, at age 23, James traveled with the noted biologist Louis Agassiz on an expedition up the Amazon in Brazil. Following that, he visited the labs of Helmholtz and Du-Bois Reymond in Germany – at that time the most prestigious centers of what we would now call physiological psychology. He eventually completed his medical degree at age 27, and according to one biographer (Taylor, 1990) perhaps considered doing something akin to clinical psychology, but that never came to fruition.

From 1873 onward, James essentially spent the rest of his working life as an academic at Harvard. He began as an instructor in physiology, then taught his first course in psychology in 1875, and by 1879, was from then-on a faculty member in either philosophy and/or psychology. James was an excellent classroom teacher and he published prolifically. Although beloved by both his students and peers, James

found the teaching and research duties at Harvard to be utterly exhausting.

In the mid 1870s the publisher Henry Holt saw a market for a new psychology textbook. Specifically, Holt wanted something to compete with what was then the English-language standard, Herbert Spencer's *Principles of Psychology*. After a few false starts, Holt offered the idea to James in June of 1878, with the book to be published in June of 1880.

It actually came out in May of 1890. It was of course worth the wait, as James' *Principles* still remains arguably the most important book in psychology ever written by an American author. The book also marked something of a transition for James. Although he championed a scientific approach, James himself had already tired of what he called "brass instrument" psychology (e.g., at what he saw as the German's [Wundt, Fechner, etc] unnatural fascination with using lab equipment). That is, James, having literally "written the book" on psychology, personally wanted to return to more philosophical questions – such as those found in the essays of his masterful works *Pragmatism* and *Will to Believe*. Indeed, James actually came to fear that he might be most remembered as a psychologist. As such, James was happy to give the Harvard program over to Hugo Münsterburg in 1892.

William James died from heart problems on August 26th, 1910, at about 2:30 am, resting peacefully in his wife's arms.

The *Talks to Teachers* were public lectures first given at Harvard to actual elementary school teachers in 1892. They were first published as a book in 1899, and that volume was immensely successful – in fact it has never been out of print (for almost 120 years). The *Talks* are often distilled to two simple nuggets for educational psychology drawn from one passage:

NO RECEPTION WITHOUT REACTION

NO IMPRESSION WITHOUT EXPRESSION

Or, in modern parlance, every perceived stimulus will have some effect. For most serious James scholars the *Talks* is a "minor work" because it introduces nothing new. That is, it just takes the psychology of his day and applies it to education. In book-form these *Talks to Teachers* are usually also packaged with three "talks to students" that examine the

"good life" in James' contemporary America. Together this forms most of what James had to say to students and teachers per se, and importantly James was not offering any sort of grand theory – merely practical advice grounded in psychology. Unlike his contemporary John Dewey (see Hutchinson, 2015), James never aimed to be an educational reformer, but simply an advocate of applied psychology and an avuncular source of practical philosophy.

Even though James scholars consider the *Talks* a minor work, for historians and political scientists it stands as a wonderful example of the "Progressive movement" at the turn of the last century. Among other things, the Progressive movement held that American education could and should be revitalized by scientific research. In that sense, most of us like to think that we are all still *progressive*, and it is more in this sense that it informs this essay. With that introduction, let us revisit James' original *Talks*, considering them in light of more-modern psychology, and applying them to some of the broad education-related questions of today.

What is the relationship between psychology and education?

James begins humbly – going to great lengths to praise the work of classroom teachers and to dispel any notions that psychology could be a "magic wand" for their trials and tribulations. He stresses that psychology is a science and that teaching is an art, and he cautions that the historical record provides little evidence of science ever much benefitting art. Building off of this base, James does go on to say that psychology is however in a unique role to mediate between the physiological substrate of human beings and their education. That is, to translate the "*organic and mechanical facts of mind, brain, and behavior"* into something that might actually be useful for teachers. What James truly understood was that education is surely among the most important possible applications of psychological science. If revisiting James yields nothing more than this reminder, it has been worthwhile.

Education in America

James next has some fun with how educational styles and goals differ across nations. You may recall that we noted that he was schooled in U.S., England, France, Italy, Germany and Switzerland – so he was experienced on the subject. After poking fun at "German engineering" and

"English gentlemen" James stops rather abruptly without ever really considering the style or goals of an American education. Perhaps James just didn't want to presume – after all, his audience (of actual American teachers) were the experts, not him. Or perhaps he feared that any substantive answer could offend. That is, no matter how he described the goals of an American education, some (be they the traditionalists or the progressives) would surely oppose whatever characterization he might offer. Given that James was not proselytizing, this deference is understandable.

In a 1908 essay (James 1908/1987), 16 years after he first obliquely introduces the question, James provides his own answer concerning what the goals of education in America should be. Cosby (2011) summarizes this work and other Jamesian sources to conclude that for James the goal of education in America should be to train responsible citizens, as well as to produce what we would now call "critical thinkers."

James was a big fan of Marcus Aurelius, and the first part of this – to train responsible citizens – is a clear nod to that writer's Stoic political philosophy. To paraphrase a famous maxim, "What is good for the hive, is good for the bee" Marcus Aurelius says, and James is endorsing that here – what is good for America is good for her educational system and for her youth.

Additionally, the focus on citizens as critical thinkers seems reasonable enough for what the goals **should** be, and who today would argue with James on that? Perhaps the most philosophically important concept James ever introduced hides in his simple phrase "*cash value*." James' pragmatic epistemology admonishes us to understand the *real* nature of things not by searching for some pre-Socratic essence, but by looking at the cash value they hold for our daily lives. The cash value of education then should be to create responsible citizens who can think critically.

In this same part of the text, James also talks about trade schools, and has good things to say about them. He likes them for two reasons. First, and again with a nod to both Marcus Aurelius and James' own pragmatism – they fill a need for the State. They train people to do useful thing. Second, he finds them to be "honest" – his words (James, 1899/1958). That is, in a trade school the objectives and what counts as delivering upon those objectives is all very transparent. If I

am trying to train cooks or carpenters, I just need to sample their work to see how effective their education has been.

Many of you reading this article have surely had to develop "learning objectives" for some accrediting/oversight body. Increasingly, State governments now also want us to measure our "products" – to demonstrate how well we are spending their money in education. If we were training cooks or carpenters, how to do this would be easy enough, but how to show the effect of an elementary school, or even a liberal arts, education?

The Building Blocks of Education: Baldwin on Imitation

After this rather long prolegomena, James does finally get around to covering some psychology. One of the first concepts he covers is that of our organic instincts – for James, these were essentially the building blocks for learning. Depending on how you count, James covers between 12-15 of these, but we'll mention only one by way of example—Imitation. James' understanding of imitation was based almost entirely upon the work of James Mark Baldwin.

James Mark Baldwin studied with Wundt, and eventually completed his PhD at Princeton. While on the faculty at the University of Toronto he created the first psychology laboratory in Canada, and in 1897 he served as President of the American Psychological Association. Most everything that Jean Piaget is famous for saying about the assimilation and accommodation of schema in children is outlined in the talk that was Baldwin's APA presidential address (see also, Cairns, 1992). He is considered by many to be the father of the scientific-experimental approach to both developmental and social psychology, the founder of sports psychology, and to have provided the most plausible account for a Lamarkian theory of evolution.

Among Baldwin's many interests was imitation, and after reviewing his work on that subject for the teachers, James notes several ways in which our natural propensity for imitation can be leveraged in the classroom. One of these is the notion that we as teachers can and should be modeling desired behaviors for our students to imitate. This is in fact widely taught and practiced among elementary school teachers, and even University professors today. If you have graduate students you likely are mindful of mentoring them to

model certain things – good lab methods, an appropriate presentation style, and so forth. The formal concept of a mentor modeling for his/her pupil goes back to at least the Middle Ages, but James may have been the first to ground the practice in science.

Habit and Beyond

After his review of the various organic instincts, and a few related psychological topics, James summarizes the first half of his *Talks* with the idea that what teaching is all about is shaping instincts and building habits. That is – that children come with certain organic features that can **(***indeed, will, rather we like it or not*) be shaped and molded. Moreover – that education, even, life itself – can be understood as nothing more than the building up of habits. Those two nuggets we provided earlier are just variations on this theme:

NO RECEPTION WITHOUT REACTION

NO IMPRESSION WITHOUT EXPRESSION

Indeed, the vast majority of the psychology in the *Talks* concerns habit formation. Here is a "mash up" of quotes taken in order from pages (57 to 60) to give you a sense of what James' has to say about habit formation in his own words:

> Nine-hundred and ninety-nine thousandths of our activity is purely automatic and habitual…we are stereotyped creatures, imitators and copiers of our past selves… The teacher's prime concern should be to ingrain into the pupil that assortment of habits that will be most useful to him throughout life. Education is for behavior, and habits are the stuff of which behavior consists… The great thing in all education is to make our nervous system our ally instead of our enemy. It is to fund and capitalize our acquisitions, and to live at ease upon the interest of the fund. For this, we must make automatic and habitual, as early as possible, as many useful actions as we can… Professor Bain's… maxim is, 'never suffer an exception to occur until the new habit is securely rooted in your life.' Each lapse is like letting fall a ball of string which one is carefully winding up: a single slip undoes more than a great many turns will wind again.

Then, adding his own existential flourish to Bain's advice James (p. 60) says this

> Seize the very first possible opportunity to act on every resolution that you make… It is not in the moment of their forming, but in the moment of their producing motor effects, that resolves…

And last, for the teachers themselves

> Don't preach too much to your pupils or abound in good talk in the abstract. Lie in wait rather for practical opportunities… and work the good habits into [their] organic tissue. (James, 1899/1958, p. 60-61)

James has long been seen as a theoretical forerunner to behaviorism, and the impact of behavioral psychology on American education has been well established. Given his standing, there can be little doubt that these passages were influential upon those behaviorists, from Thorndike to Skinner and beyond.

Bad Habits

As James continues his focus on habit in the next section, he also shifts a bit to the matter of how the good habits of our youth will only leave a legacy in our adulthood if they are sustained. Interestingly, James (p. 61) builds his argument off an extensive quote from Darwin.

> [From Darwin, speaking about his childhood] poetry… gave me great pleasure, and… I took delight in Shakespeare… pictures formerly gave me considerable, and music very great delight. But now… I cannot endure to read a line of poetry… Shakespeare… [I find] so intolerably dull that it nauseate[s] me. I have also lost my taste for pictures and music. My mind seems to have become some kind of machine for grinding general laws out of large collections of facts… If I had to live my life again I would have made a rule to read some poetry and listen to some music at least once every week; for perhaps…the loss of these tastes is a loss of happiness…possibly injurious to the intellect… and… character.

James concludes this section as follows

> The hell to be endured hereafter, of which theology tells, is no worse than the hell we make for ourselves in this world by habitually fashioning our characters in the wrong way. (James, 1899/1958, p. 64)

Association and Habit: The Facts of Life

Beyond behavioral habits, the second most overtly psychological part of these talks concerns James providing the teachers with his associationistic account of mental events. And with the presentation of this model of mind James concludes the "psychology" that he is providing to the teachers. To cover the material, James walks them through a briefer course of the model of mind that the provided in his *Principles*. Additionally, he covers in some detail specific works by Galton, Ebbinghaus, Romanes and Münsterberg as illustrative empirical examples of his brand of associationism. Just like the formation of habits, the formation of mental associations is one of those "mechanical facts" of our organic nature. It will happen, like it or not, so the teacher must actively take control of the environment so as to shape the associations that are being formed to her will. To state it most bluntly: Feed the child what you want him to know. Or, to quote James (p. 131): "Pupils are…little pieces of associating machinery."

It is perhaps worth noting that James takes a very holistic approach to this "feeding." He goes to some length to talk about enriching experiences, real world exercises, and other ways that associations are better formed beyond mere "chalk and talk." Having said all that, James also understood that some kids just have more of what Spearman (1904) would call "G" – or native intellectual gifts – than do others, and that nothing the teacher did could ever change that (see also, Dreary, Lawn, & Bartholomew, 2008).

The details of what James believed to be the case concerning habit formation and learning by association mattered less to him then, or us now, than the "punch line." **These things are going to occur**. The job of the teacher then is to shape what habits get formed and what associations get made by whatever means work. Here again we see the best of James, his pragmatism.

Memory as an application of psychology to education

James segues from association to memory, and having done so, the tone of his lectures changes from even less theoretical to even more practical. For example, James (p. 75) writes: "The difference between an interesting and a tedious teacher consists in little more than the inventiveness by which the one is able to mediate these associations…"

Much of his advice related to memory is actually more substantive. One of the things he covers in some depth is distributed versus massed practice. Another quote…

> Cramming seeks to stamp things in by intense application immediately before the ordeal. But a thing thus learned can form but few associations. On the other hand, the same thing recurring on different days, in different contexts, read, recited on, referred to again and again, related to other things and reviewed, gets well wrought into the mental structure. This is the reason why you should enforce upon your students the habits of continuous application. There is no moral turpitude in cramming. It would be the best, because [it is] the most economical mode of study if it led to the results desired. But it does not… (James, 1899/1958, p. 93-94).

James also considers in some detail the matter of rote memorization. On the one hand, James is a fan of the results. He says, for example, "Nothing…is…more delightful…than a mind able…to furnish a quotation accurate and complete" (p. 95). But, he appreciated that he was speaking to an audience of "progressive" teachers who at that point in American education were actually turning away from rote memorization. He concludes by offering something that sounds very much like current methods – that it is best not to "hammer in" but to **analyze** sentences until they are understood, asserting that repeated and detailed analysis will likely still result in rote memory, but be far less painful for the child.

Speculations and Conclusions

We have reviewed the turn of the century psychology that James felt would be of interest and benefit to teachers. From habit formation to memory these topics have been embraced to good ends by the educational community. But an interesting question, although one hard to answer, is what impact James' *Talks* actually had on the practice of North American education.

It was commonly used as a Normal School text up until WWI, and as previously noted has never been out of print. Likewise, it was a prominent secondary source in works by Cattell, Dewey, and other authors in what would become the canonical early texts of teacher training. Even in modern times it remains a widely cited work by respected authors (e.g., Berliner & Rosenshine, 1987; Eison, 1990). As our

brief summary just illustrated, it was however a review of psychology with an eye toward practice, and not a book about educational theory. As such, it was never intended to be a controversial pot boiler nor to promote any Jamesian movement in education. With that said, documenting its true degree of *direct* influence becomes difficult.

This then brings us to our final, summary, point: What would James think of modern academic instruction? Even if it was never his goal to revolutionize the matter, how might he feel about its evolution in the last 100 plus years, not just in elementary schools, but in our universities too? Would James be a fan of our use of technology, or of online education? Would he find any pedagogic value in assignments that require the use of Twitter or Facebook? What would James make of concepts like "learning styles" and a focus on student-directed inquiry?

We can be fairly confident that James would have been a strong advocate of many of cognitive psychology's contributions to pedagogy. For example, the idea that students should have critical thinking skills is one James manifestly endorsed. Elsewhere (Henley, 2007), it has been detailed that James clearly anticipates such specific techniques as anchored instruction, case-based teaching, as well as the use of multiple modalities and the testing effect – all matters of cognitive psychology being applied to educational psychology today.

James was early in his career fascinated by the promise of technology, although over time that fascination comes to be displaced by a more humanistic philosophy. Given that, it is difficult to be certain what James might make of our modern computer-dependent classrooms. He certainly endorsed engaging activities over dry lectures, so James would surely have been a proponent of using technology in any way that proved valuable – after all, he was rather pragmatic. But, James was also a healthy skeptic. Indeed, he was critical of some of the "new ideas" that progressive education was embracing in his day. In fact, and consistent with his focus on habit, we can infer that what James most feared was that the central purpose of education might be adrift, adrift not from design or neglect, but drifting nonetheless from actually educating students toward merely managing (or even entertaining) them.

To reframe this last matter, let us again quote James (1899/1958, p.15): "Soft pedagogics have taken the place of

the old steep and rocky path to learning. But from this lukewarm air the bracing oxygen of effort is left out. It is nonsense to suppose that every step in education can be interesting." Importantly then, when we remove hot button issues like high-stakes testing and school violence from the picture the basic challenge of education remains unchanged: Engaging students in meaningful ways. As such, the issues facing educators in James' day did not differ inherently from those we face presently. In a nutshell, and fully accepting that what we do will have consequences, the crucial question ever remains how to best interact with our students so as to interest them without making it trivial or inappropriate. In turn, James' sage advice on point surely deserves to be revisited.

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