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Commentary

This 19th-Century Book Is Still Timely for Teachers

By Peter Gibbon

In the mid-1890s, the philosopher and psychologist William James took to the road, traveling from Boston to Chicago to Colorado Springs, Colo., lecturing to thousands of teachers. He later condensed his ideas into a small book, [*Talks to Teachers on Psychology*](#), published in 1899. It drew on his influential textbook *Principles of Psychology*, published nine years before, that brought him fame on the world stage, but *Talks to Teachers* is rarely talked about today. Although much has changed in American education since the late 19th century, *Talks to Teachers* remains a remarkable and still relevant book.

The volume, which blends an appreciation of the hands-on and the purely intellectual, anticipates evolutionary psychology and celebrates the curiosity of the young. The author examines the contradictions that humans face every day in the classroom and outside it.

"Deep in our own nature the biological foundations of our consciousness persist undisguised and undiminished," James writes.

Innately aggressive, we go to war, he says, but adds that our fighting instinct can be made an ally of the educator by driving us to master difficult, unpalatable subjects. "Make the pupil feel ashamed of being scared at fractions, of being downed by the law of falling bodies." Effective teachers appeal to pride and ambition, in other words.

James warns that not every subject is interesting or easy to master. Jean-Jacques Rousseau is naive when he advises Émile (the title character in [Rousseau's novel about rearing a child](#)) to compete only with himself, according to James. Runners need competition; so do students. James is wary of soft pedagogues who would do away with grades, ranking, and trophies. He is also scornful of Karl Marx's advice to share all property. Even students are covetous, desiring their own desks, pencils, and books. "Among the first words which an infant learns to utter," he writes, "are the words 'my' and 'mine.' "

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The educators of today should find inspiration in James' reflections. Though he was a believer in individualism, James emphasized the importance of imitation and emulation in all areas of life, particularly in the classroom. Impressionable children need admirable teachers, he writes. To motivate students, teachers must be interesting. To instruct, teachers must be skilled. What lies at the heart of the skill: association, which makes connections and commands attention. The effective teacher constantly connects his subject with the students' previous knowledge and experience. James lauds the masterful connector, the imaginative associator, the instructor who seizes the right moment and sets the right example.

Clearly, James' classroom is teacher-centered, and a superior teacher would be more than a coach, a facilitator, or a guide on the side.

A realist, James knew that even inspired teaching does not guarantee success: "It is nonsense to suppose that every step in education can be interesting." The teacher must use the spot quiz and the gold star, depending on fear and self-interest as well as curiosity. Students need to memorize, not mindlessly but through association, striving for an educated memory. Anticipating E.D. Hirsch's defense of cultural literacy, James claims that the best-educated mind has the largest stock of ideas and conceptions "ready to meet the largest possible variety of the emergencies of life."

A pragmatist like James does not insist on one method of instruction. Pupils are not to be bludgeoned with mindless drills and tedious lectures. Defenders of differentiated instruction have a friend in James. Anticipating Howard Gardner's discovery of multiple intelligences, James insists that students vary in temperament and that a skilled instructor uses different techniques for different learning styles.

Jean Piaget was born shortly after James finished his *Psychology*. Like Piaget, James advocates matching a student's mental stage with the appropriate subject. Like his younger contemporary John Dewey, James lauds object teaching—playing with blocks, handling wool and cotton—and laments the disappearance of the world of natural things. He says that laboratory work and shop work will encourage precision, self-reliance, accuracy, and honesty.

James, of course, devoured books and loved to play with ideas. He looked forward to the arrival of what he called the "theoretic curiosity" of adolescence and the possibility of abstract thought. But the cerebral James worried that a youth "brought up exclusively by books carries through life a certain remoteness from reality."

One of the most popular chapters in *Talks to Teachers* was titled "[The Laws of Habit.](#)" Habit makes tasks that at first seem impossible easier, James believed. Making routine the mundane tasks of life sets free the "higher powers of mind ... for their own proper work," he writes. Believing in the plasticity of the young brain, James urged teachers to inculcate and students to acquire good habits. "Our virtues," he reminds us, "are habits as much as our vices."

James was modest. At the beginning of *Talks to Teachers*, he warns his audience that there is no "new psychology," just a little physiology of the brain and Charles Darwin. He concedes that his work depends on that of many other researchers. Further, knowing psychology does not make a good teacher. Teaching is an art, and artists should not be too docile or dependent on experts, James says, while insisting that content is as important as pedagogy.

"Prepare yourself and the subject so well that it shall be always on tap: then in the classroom trust your spontaneity and fling away all further care," he advises.

James was skeptical of credentialism and evaluation. In higher education, he warned about the "Ph.D. Octopus," which encouraged snobbery and docility and offered no evidence that its recipient could teach. Though James believed in giving students feedback, he would not be sympathetic to our mania for testing. He recognized that students vary enormously and develop differently.

Of course, there are omissions in *Talks to Teachers*. James does not presume to say what subjects should be taught when or whether students should be grouped by age. He does not speculate on the role of Latin or civics. There is no mention of immigrant children or the family. He did not visit dozens of schools, as Horace Mann did, or found a laboratory school, like Dewey. James gives us a sense of the complexity of the human brain, but he did not have access to current brain-imaging technology or to current brain research trying to explain the interaction of billions of neurons. Rather, James wished to make his psychological study useful to teachers of all subjects and grades.

James was a traditionalist: Teachers should be talented people who know their subjects and can instill good habits and a desire for virtue in students who are immature. Learning involves hard work and the acquisition of facts. Students are hard-wired to imitate, to compete, to be rewarded.

James was a progressive: Teachers must connect their subjects to the students' minds and to the real world. They must engage the natural curiosity of students with material objects. Students differ in temperament and ability, and the teacher should employ a range of techniques to instruct them and to match the techniques to the age of a student.

James was suspicious of ideologues and skeptical of educators who thought they had a quick fix or the right answer. Truth, said this pragmatist, is what works. *Talks to Teachers* offers today's readers keen insights and graceful prose.

Most importantly, *Talks* exemplifies balance. James' approach to education is pragmatic and eclectic: memorize and associate, handle objects and think abstractly, compete and cooperate, work in groups and struggle alone. To a friend, he wrote that *Talks* should encourage "a certain flexibility of mind"—as useful a habit today as in 1899.

Peter Gibbon is a senior research scholar at Boston University's school of education and the author of *A Call to Heroism: Renewing America's Vision of Greatness* (Atlantic Monthly Press, 2002).