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Alain Locke: A Paradigm for Transformative Education— Addressing the Relationship of Knowledge to Social Concerns

Blanche Radford Curry

Transformative Education

What is the purpose of education? What are the relations between education, the individual, culture, and society? Too many of us within and outside of academe view public and private education as significantly lacking, nontransformative in regard to each of these questions. From methodology to curricula, there are too many examples, past and present, of education as nontransformative. There is, as Alain Locke advocated, a “need for a new organon in education.”¹

Transformative education integrates cognitive thinking processes with our normative life experiences. It addresses the current need to integrate knowledge and social-cultural problems like race-, class-, and gender-based injustices as a means for more effectively achieving justice, fairness, and quality of life for all. As such, education is understood not only as cognitive thinking processes but also as critical thinking about values that rejects dogmatic ideology. Locke’s essay “The Need for a New Organon in Education” offers us a compelling paradigm for transformative education.

In 1950 Locke argued for a need to reform the abstract, neutral, and contentless critical thinking that was the paradigm for reasoning methodologies and logical techniques. Locke’s critique of education reflected an intense dispute over a major objective of educational policies to reform dogmatic and fallacious cognitive thinking processes—logic and contentless critical thinking as the fundamental “integrating elements for knowledge.” This paradigm of education lacked any valuable application to social concerns, and it overlooked any meaningful examination of values in relation to social concerns. Moreover, the problems of dogmatic and fallacious cognitive thinking processes it rendered promoted and perpetuated racism.

Locke’s view of education during the 1950s echoes a 1990s approach. In

her 1990 essay "Diversity and Democracy: Multicultural Education in America," Diane Ravitch asserts that "The history of American public education contains numerous examples of racial, religious, and ethnic conflict. The curriculum of the schools is often seen by parents, policy makers, and interest groups as a means to shape the minds and values of the generation." The prevailing American view of education does not see cultural differences positively. It is a paradigm of education that generally represents the thinking of America's "dominant culture," namely, white America, and allows the exploitation of nondominant groups.³ It advocates knowledge that oppresses and forsakes greater progress towards the democratic ideal. Too many of our educational institutions—elementary, secondary, postsecondary, and graduate—were cited in 1992 by myself and others as exhibiting "institutional inertia to achieving diversity" and as being in need of "transforming resistance into celebration."⁴

The serious problems presented by each of these paradigms are eliminated by Locke's approach to education. Under Locke's paradigm of education, the examination of values does not lead to a neutral and impartial stance that fails to account adequately for different values; instead, it provides for a meaningful examination of values. Similarly, under Locke's paradigm, it is not possible to assert that the values of one culture are universal or to maintain that commonalities of values reflect people more realistically than the particularities of different values.

Locke's essay addresses three problems of contemporary learning: questionable historical solutions to these problems, the need for education to address the normative dimension, and critical relativism as a viable theory and application of the normative dimension. In this chapter I examine the importance of the normative dimension of education and Locke's critical relativism methodology as a viable theory and application of the normative dimension.

For Locke, there needs to be a coordination between philosophy and education in the quest to address common objectives of integrating elements for knowledge and to provide consistent approaches in education. He states that philosophers and educators agree on three points:

first, that contemporary learning suffers from a serious and immobilizing lack of any vital and effective integration, both as a body of knowledge and as a taught curriculum (excepting, of course, the pragmatic vocational clusters in the various professional fields); second, that this "ineffectiveness" is not so much an internal fault as it is an external dislocation in the relationship of knowledge to the problems of the social culture; and third, that unless some revitalizing integration is soon attained, not only the social impotence of our knowledge must be conceded in spite of its technological effectiveness, but a breakdown of the culture itself may be anticipated.⁵

These points, according to Locke, reflect the pragmatic pressures of a culture crisis and concerns for the systematization of knowledge, along with our special contemporary need for "unified knowledge," which has resulted in a problem of great significance and urgency. Locke explains that, historically, orientation courses, general education, and the core curriculum were proposed as the solution; and today I would add multicultural courses and special studies courses. Such curricula, he acknowledges, have merit as educational directives, linking "academic learning with the practical issues of living, and thus developing critical acumen and trained aptitudes leading to responsible and intelligent action."⁶

Locke embraced these educational directives and their objectives with his instrumental role in making Howard University the first university to require general education and principles of reasoning for graduation,⁷ but he persisted in thinking that more was needed than curriculum extension or revision. Equally important, he argued, is a fundamental methodological revision both in the ways we teach and in the ways we think, "if we are to achieve the objectives of reorientation and integration in education."⁸ Assuming that a change in our *scope* of thinking will change our *way* of thinking is a patent fallacy for Locke. If parochial thinking is to be transformed into global thinking, it is necessary to address issues of conflict; to account realistically for their differences by examining the history of their development; and, from a process-logic of this development, to assert bravely a normative stand. To continue traditional neutral scholarship about values in the name of impartial objectivity—the old academic balancing of pros and cons—no matter how wide the scope of the curriculum, will likely produce, in the end, a student who is more widely informed "but with the same old mind-sets, and more entrenched in the conceit of knowing more."⁹

The acuteness of the cultural crisis, according to Locke, calls for a fundamental methodological revision, in particular for a radical methodology as the solution to educational reconstruction. This methodology has specific correctives for traditional ways of thinking. Second, it "treat[s] materials . . . with critical and normative regard for values, but without becoming didactic or dogmatic."¹⁰ It ensures pedagogic attention to students' ways of thinking, thereby improving "global thinking," "process understanding," and the capacity for "evaluative criticism." It develops students' "capacity for thinking objectively but critically about situations and problems involving social and cultural values."¹¹ Locke refers to this radical methodology as "critical relativism." It is, for Locke, the essence of addressing the normative sense of education, both critically and objectively.

Locke's objection to the cognitive sense of education and, in particular, his emphasis on the normative sense of education shape the core of his ideas about

the nature of education. The normative features of education address the application of our lived experiences, effectively integrating knowledge and social concerns. Normative education for Locke involves developing attitudes, dispositions, values, and value judgments that lead to thinking and actions about ourselves and others that reject dogmatic ideology. Dogmatic dispositions and values are learned habits. Transforming these kinds of attitudes, dispositions, values, and value judgments into thinking and actions about ourselves and others that lessen racial, religious, ethnic, gender, class, age, and economic conflict is possible through Locke's paradigm for transformative education. For education to endeavor to achieve such results suggests a worthy purpose and a meaningful reason to pursue it. Accordingly, we understand that there is an intrinsic link between education, the individual, culture, and society. Thus, education is related to resolving social-cultural problems. We learn to rethink economic problems, implementing innovative strategies that address limited resources in conjunction with individuals' needs and reject the use of race, gender, class, age, and the physically challenged as frequent scapegoats for economic problems.

Values and Education

For a fuller sense of normative education, an understanding of the nature of values is essential. Our behavior, thoughts, perceptions, values, goals, morals, and cognitive processes count as knowledge that is derived from our culture. Locke wrote extensively on the nature of values. His analysis of values includes their psychological, social, and historical aspects; their impact on our social problems; the relation between values, culture, and education; and the complexity of examining values objectively and critically. Locke thinks that "values are rooted in attitudes, not in reality and pertain to ourselves, not to the world."¹³ Locke explains that it is from our culture, which evolves and changes constantly, that we learn valuations about ourselves and others. Our cultures are the bonds of thoughts and values between people that bind them as a given group. When we reflect upon our values and determine them to be inadequate, the result is new valuations, which Locke refers to as "transvaluations." Values for Locke affect our relations with others and our effective resolution of many social-cultural problems.

Locke's analysis of the psychological, social, and historical phenomena of values reveals that the values we derive from our culture consist of particular parameters that are experience-based "functional adaptations" that have an interpretive, perspectival character. These parameters determine the choices we make in life and often prevent us from valuing the choices of others and

from acknowledging the shortcomings of our own choices. For instance, white Americans and Asian cultures view eye contact very differently. Lack of sustained eye contact for white Americans in some situations suggests poor command of conversation and communication skills, while for Asian cultures it suggests respect and honor in many situations. Locke explains that it is from our culture, which evolves and changes constantly, that we learn valuations of others and ourselves. We should understand that others may not share our values, beliefs, perceptions, thoughts, morals, goals, and cognitive processes; realize the arbitrary basis of our own choices; and be willing to reexamine our choices in relation to choices made by others. We should learn to "view values relativistically in time perspective, so as to comprehend value change and development, and likewise, to see them in comparative perspective, so as to understand and appreciate value diversity."¹⁴ Locke's paradigm for transformative education challenges us to examine our valuations in ways that are inclusive rather than exclusive and dogmatic.

Like Ralph Barton Perry, Locke thought that "one of the most important functions of value theory is to provide a rational ground for the comparison of values, particularly those ultimate values by which [people] estimate their civilization, their progress, and the salvation of their existence. The problem of values constitutes the very core of human life."¹⁵ In Locke's review of Perry's *Realms of Value* (1954), he maintains that value is one of most significant and complex areas of philosophy.¹⁶ It provides an initial "point of contact between thought and actual living" that is usually not addressed by "professional or lay thinking." One of the reasons for this is "our chronic inclination to take values for granted." Locke asserts of Perry's work that

It is both a notable and welcome exception to encounter an analysis of value that, without loss of scholarly depth, examines values in the vital context of their actual functioning, and as in the case of *Realms of Value*, yields cumulative insight into the role of values in motivating and in providing sanctions—rational and rationalized—for our civilization.¹⁷

Insofar as values are learned, Locke says that adult education, in particular, is more than mere literacy, it is enlarging horizons and broadening human values, with the latter being more important.¹⁸ Education is a means to cultural self-knowledge and knowledge of one's race and others through cultural studies, expanding beyond one's individual ethnic group to multicultural Americanness and global humanity. Education should address cultural values and their relation to social problems. An effective curriculum connects social problems and education. Whether in the arts, the social sciences, or the natural sciences, the curriculum examines social concerns and provides knowledge of the causes

of human action. Locke explains that adult education must address the person "farthest down" and put him or her on equal footing with the rest of America.¹⁹ An important result of the education experience is the encouragement of collaboration, consultation, and coalition building between African Americans, whites, and others.

Education provides us with an ongoing reorganization of our social and personal experience. As an ongoing transforming process of our individual, cultural, and social selves, education can enable us to reshape our superiorist or inferiorist ideology of attitudes, dispositions, values, and value judgments. This reshaping of experience produces critical informed thinking that strengthens the quality of our personal, cultural, and social lives.

Of further importance to Locke's discussion of values and education is the philosophical framework of cultural pluralism. Locke's friend and collaborator Horace Kallen explains that cultural pluralism

is intended to signify [an] endeavor toward friendship by people who are different from each other but who, as different, hold themselves equal to each other. By "equal" we commonly mean "similar" or "identical." Cultural Pluralism, however, intends by "equal" also parity of the unequal, equality of the unlike, not only of the like or the same. It postulates that individuality is indefeasible, that differences are primary, and that consequently human beings have an indefeasible right to their differences and should not be penalized for their differences, however they may be constituted, whatever they may consist in: color, faith, sex, occupation, possession, or what have you. On the record, nevertheless, human beings continually penalize one another for their differences.²⁰

Cultural pluralism for Locke, according to Kallen, is "a way of life, the projection of value judgment into the milieu of contemporary problems" and "a practical model through which congenial relations between conflicting groups could be achieved."²¹ Locke thinks of it as a model of action in which each individual is an active participant; it provides people with self-respect, self-pride, and self-esteem.²² Cultural pluralism provides a philosophical framework for overcoming the barriers of segregation and racism that have afflicted general education since Reconstruction.²³ It means an inclusiveness of all American ethnic groups, including the American Negro.

For contemporary education to deal with attitudes, Locke explains, it must perforce grapple realistically with values and value judgments; to develop constructive mind-sets and efficient critical ones, the normative element must be a part of education. Adequate thinking on social issues must involve critical evaluation rather than stop short at descriptive neutrality. We must aim to deal with values as objectively as we deal with facts; further, it is important to be able to significantly and realistically correlate the factual and the value aspects

in the social science fields. The proper study of people is a comprehensive, comparative study with a realistic regard for difference instead of a rationalistic study with a zeal for commonalities and conformity. The result is a scientific humanism with a critical and relativistic basis.²⁴

Locke cites Karl Deutsch regarding what such training could accomplish: "It might aid [students] to achieve a better understanding of the nature of values and a greater openness to the values of other peoples and other cultures without weakening their understanding and attachment to their own."²⁵ Such training helps to "pivot the center," in the words of Bettina Aptheker. Elsa Barkley Brown explains that "all people can learn to center in another experience, validate it, and judge it by its own standards without need of comparison or need to adopt that framework as their own. Thus, one has no need to 'decenter' anyone in order to center someone else; one has only to constantly, appropriately, 'pivot the center.'"²⁶ This approach also understands that we truly know ourselves only when we know ourselves in relation to others; similarly, we can appropriately appropriate one another's experiences. For Locke, self-knowledge and knowledge of one's race through cultural studies are an important part of the Negro's progress in America. His view reflected that of Kallen and other cultural pluralists who asserted that European ethnic groups should be able to acknowledge their ethnic heritage and be fully American at the same time.²⁷

It is also understanding that we truly know ourselves when we know ourselves in relation to others. Similarly, it is learning too that we can appropriately "appropriate" one another's experiences. Appropriate appropriations of others' experiences involves acknowledging various experiences as belonging to others in real and significant ways that cannot be claimed by you. While it is inappropriate for white women to appropriate some senses of being a slave that are appropriate for African American women, there are other senses that are appropriate and meaningful to developing further understanding, cooperation, and appreciation of one another.

Race for Locke is a social, not a biological, phenomenon. He criticizes racism in several ways, pointing out biological fallacies, fallacies of groups, and the erroneous belief in the permanency of race types. In *Race Contacts and Interracial Relations*, Locke argues that racial temperaments are regularly traceable to historical economic and social causes.²⁸ He believes that while racial identity is important in a racial world, cosmopolitan citizenship identity is also important. As individuals, we are part of a community. We express our individuality through community, and our individual ideas are carried on through various communities. The self is community *and* individual, not either/or, but both, and not mutually exclusive but different perspectives of interconnection between individual and community.

Locke contends that the value humans place on race is fictitious and that "the real value of things, that which gives meaning and substance, lies in their possibility of providing the human with a healthy emotional state. . . . The real value of race, the positive value . . . [is] the great contribution it could make to the diversity as well as the unity of the human race."²⁹ Locke explains that differences reflect power bases and power relationships that have structured our values. White Americans should acknowledge some of the presumptions of powerful people. Similarly, helping people to appreciate what is valuable in other people's cultures and understanding of human values is important to learning the worth and strength of diversity. Much of history reflects a sense of power as hierarchy, which distorts and minimizes a sense of shared power that is more inclusive and diverse, resulting in more valuable and greater strength.

Critical Relativism

In 1950, Alain Locke advocated a new system of principles in education in his essay "The Need for a New Organon in Education." Locke's new system provides a significant theoretical and pragmatic vision of a paradigm for transforming education into a multicultural, collaborative approach that values unity within diversity. He refers to his new methodological approach to education as "critical relativism." It includes six important principles:

1. implement an objective interpretation of values by referring them realistically to their social and cultural backgrounds,
2. interpret values concretely as functional adaptations to these backgrounds, and thus make clear their historical and functional relativity. An objective criterion of functional sufficiency and insufficiency would thereby be set up as a pragmatic test of value adequacy or inadequacy,
3. claim or impute no validity for values beyond this relativistic framework, and so counteract value dogmatism based on regarding them as universals good and true for all times and all places,
4. confine its consideration of ideology to the prime function and real status of being the adjunct rationalization of values and value interests,
5. trace value development and change as a dynamic process instead of in terms of unrealistic analytic categories, and so eliminating the traditional illusions produced by generalized value terms—*viz.*, static values and fixed value concepts and 'ideals,'
6. reinforce current semantic criticism of academic value controversy by stressing this realistic value dynamics as a substitute for traditional value analytics, with its unrealistic symbols and overgeneralized concepts.³⁰

For Locke, critical relativism provides a systematic process of value analysis in response to Karl W. Deutsch's call for formal training about values. From Locke's view, critical relativism is a corrective discipline that undermines "dogma-forming attitudes in thinking and the elimination of the partisan hundred percentist mentality at its very psychological roots." Critical relativism is a process grounding "some normative principle or criterion of objective validity for values without resort to dogmatism and absolutism."³¹ It addresses the historical, social, and cultural perspectives of values.

Ernest Mason notes that Locke's critical relativism is "ethical insofar as it demands that we treat people different from ourselves with respect, with concern, and above all with understanding and tolerance."³² Crucial to this goal, Mason explains, is overcoming "the belief that before people of different races and cultures can live together they must adhere to the same principles and values."³³ Locke strongly objects to this view on the principle of unity in diversity, on which he elaborates in "Unity through Diversity: A Baha'i Principle."³⁴ Locke's critical relativism rejects any superiorist ideology, whether espoused by whites, African Americans, or another group. It encourages open dialogue, coalition building, and peaceful coexistence among diverse groups during a time of social crisis.

Locke's use of the term "relativism" does not mean that he is a [subjectivist] relativist about value judgments or the value of human pursuits. His critical relativism provides objective standards for the evaluation of values while avoiding absolutism and dogmatism, and it is not to be confused with "value pluralism" or "value subjectivism."³⁵ Locke explains it as the middle ground between subjectivism and objectivism, representing the natural distinction of values.³⁶ It is like Kant's regulatory principle, constantly moving between two extremes, resulting in an appreciation for value diversity. This quality of critical relativism is possible for Locke through reflection. If relativism is to work properly, it is important that we continuously reflect on our values as they influence our thoughts and practices and introduce necessary changes leading to what Locke called "transvaluation." With self-reflection and self-scrutiny, we better position ourselves to realize, in the words of Mason, "that genuine coexistence for which Alain Locke so passionately, thoughtfully, and humanely lived."³⁷

Conclusion

How can we manifest Locke's paradigm for transformative education today? How do we change our traditional narrow, exclusive, and disconnected paradigms of education? We know from Locke that changing the scope of thinking—

adding orientation courses, general education, a core curriculum, multicultural courses, or special studies courses—is not adequate for closing the gap between education and social-cultural problems. In addition to these curriculum offerings, we need to transform both the ways we teach and the ways we think. Locke's theory of critical relativism provides us with a methodological framework applicable to any curriculum. When we utilize it, the curriculum focus is enhanced as we critically notice the exclusiveness of ideas and concepts along with their cultural absolutism and subjectivism, thus transforming the ways we teach, which results in transforming the ways we think, thereby enriching the value of education for resolving our social-cultural problems.

It is necessary that we teach students the importance of culture; in so doing, the contributions of others are acknowledged, and critical analysis of our own position is encouraged. We are reminded by Mark Cohen that while we have improved in our understanding, too many still think that there are only three races—Caucasian, Negroid, and Mongoloid. Similarly, too many think that there is only one desirable pattern of human cognition, perception, and formation of categories, which leads to other false beliefs like the idea that standardized IQ tests are equally valid for assessing individuals from different cultural backgrounds, or that the use of analogy problems to test students' skills in logic reveals an innate, genetically driven intelligence, when the categories that are utilized are cultural and not universal.

With Locke's paradigm of transformative education, we champion education as fundamental to resolving many of our social-cultural problems. Given our contemporary multidimensional social crisis, the quality of life for all—including that of the dominant white American culture—is threatened by the reality of our not being able to live together and the possibility of destroying each other. This bleak scenario may reawaken our conscience and force us into action for transformative change. Who are the agents of change for this endeavor? If we in education, philosophers in particular, are not responsible for taking the lead in transforming it, then who? [Yet, we know that many of us are still in need of understanding and acknowledging the value of transformative education in order to become agents of change for this endeavor.] Locke's philosophy represents bridging theory and praxis, examining and living philosophy. In an interview with Locke, Cedric Parker said of Locke that he "is a member of that school of philosophers who believe in connecting classroom philosophy with current issues and the practical problems of everyday living."³⁸ Philosophy for Locke is not a leisure activity reserved for the elite. Rather, it is a guide and a tool that can enrich life for all people. Not to acknowledge Locke's paradigm for transformative education is to ignore our potential to better resolve our contemporary social-cultural problems.

Notes

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1. See Alain Locke, "The Need for a New Organon in Education" (1950), in *The Philosophy of Alain Locke: Harlem Renaissance and Beyond*, ed. Leonard Harris (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1989).
2. Leonard Harris, ed., *The Philosophy of Alain Locke: Harlem Renaissance and Beyond* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1989), 263.
3. See Diane Ravitch, "Diversity and Democracy: Multicultural Education in America," *American Educator* (Spring 1990): 407.
4. See Nancy P. Greenman et al., "Institutional Inertia to Achieving Diversity: Transforming Resistance into Celebration," *Educational Foundations* 6, no. 2 (Spring 1992).
5. Locke, "New Organon," 265.
6. Locke, "New Organon," 266.
7. See LaVerne Gyant, "Alain Leroy Locke: More Than an Adult Educator," in *Freedom Road: Adult Education of African Americans*, ed. Elizabeth A. Peterson (Mababar, Fla.: Krieger Publishing, 1996).
8. Locke, "New Organon," 266.
9. Locke, "New Organon," 268.
10. Locke, "New Organon," 269.
11. Locke, "New Organon," 270.
12. Locke, "New Organon," 272.
13. Alain Locke, "Values and Imperatives," in *American Philosophy Today and Tomorrow*, ed. Horace M. Kallen and Sidney Hook (New York: Lee Furman, 1935), 328.
14. Locke, "New Organon," 273.
15. Ernest D. Mason, "Alain Locke's Philosophy of Value," in *Alain Locke: Reflections on a Modern Renaissance Man*, ed. Russell J. Linnemann (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1982), 3.
16. Alain Locke, "Values That Matter," *Key Reporter* 19 (3 May 1954): 4.
17. Locke, "Values That Matter," 4.
18. See Alain Locke, "Negro Needs as Adult Education Opportunities" (1938), in *Philosophy of Alain Locke*, ed. Harris, 253-62.
19. Alain Locke, "Negro Education Bids for Par" (1925), in *Philosophy of Alain Locke*, ed. Harris, 239-52.
20. Horace Kallen, "Alain Locke and Cultural Pluralism," *Journal of Philosophy* 54 (February 1957): 120.
21. Kallen, "Locke and Cultural Pluralism," 120.
22. Gyant, "Alain Leroy Locke," 71.
23. See Gyant, "Alain Leroy Locke."