

The Technocratization of Public Education

Subverting educational practices

By [James F. Tracy](#)

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The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation is directing \$1.1 million to fit students in seven US public school districts with “galvanic skin response” bracelets. The devices are designed to measure students’ receptivity to teachers’ lessons through biometric technology that reads and records “skin conductance, a form of electrodermal activity that grows higher during states such as boredom or relaxation.” [1, 2].

The funding is part of the Gates Foundation’s \$49.5 million Measures of Effective Teachers project that is presently experimenting with teacher evaluation systems. As Melinda Gates put it on the PBS NewsHour, “What the Foundation feels our job is to do is to make sure we create a system where we can have an effective teacher in every single classroom across the United States.” [3]

The effort of extraordinarily wealthy elites to further subvert educational practices through “neuromarketing” techniques is the latest example in a long sequence of educational reforms dating to the early 1900s. Indeed, the Gates Foundation’s fixation on stimulus-response measurement and data collection is a fitting chapter of this history.

State sanctioned education in the United States has become a type of task-oriented training, quite apart from what education once involved—the cultivation of the human will and intellect. Children in most public schools today receive this type of conditioning, while the more affluent often send their offspring to private institutions or home school. What passes for education today is to a significant degree the legacy of late-nineteenth-to-early-twentieth century German psychologist Wilhelm Wundt and the Rockefeller family’s philanthropic project.

A professor at University of Leipzig, Wundt was the originator of what he termed a “new” or “experimental” psychology that stripped psychology of any of its potential philosophical concerns with the soul, will, or self-determination of the individual. In Wundt’s reconfiguration of psychology the mind is merely an apparatus that responds to given stimuli, and through the measurement and recording of the stimuli and responses of the subject the psychologist in the laboratory (subsequently the teacher—and now the students—in the classroom) can determine the effectiveness of one stimulus-response method over another, as well as the functional capacities of the student.

For Wundt and his followers the human being is the sum total of her experiences; devoid of character and essence that might interfere with the ends of the collective unit. This view of the human psyche set the stage for the establishment of eugenics, psychiatry, and the social engineering carried out in public school classrooms.

Wundt exerted tremendous influence through his American doctoral students who studied at Leipzig and returned to transform US education. One of the most influential of these adherents was G. Stanley Hall, who after studying at Leipzig came back to the US in 1883 to teach at Johns Hopkins, begin the American Journal of Psychology, and mentor American intellectual and educational icon John Dewey. Others include James McKeen Cattell, who returned in 1887 and took a faculty position in psychology at Columbia in 1891 where he minted 344 doctoral students. James Earl Russell, another of Wundt's students, became director of Columbia's Teachers College in 1897 and remained in the position until the late 1920s [4]

For the next thirty years Cattell, Russell, and Dewey, who ended a ten year stint at University of Chicago and joined his fellow Wundtians in 1904, played substantial roles in transforming public education along the lines that would firmly establish Wundt's ideas and approaches in American public education. At the same time, Columbia Teachers College became the largest teacher training institution in the world. By the early 1950s roughly one-third of all deans and presidents of accredited teaching schools in the US were graduates of the Columbia program.

While Wundt's apostles were well positioned to wreak havoc on US education, their mission was greatly aided through funding from the Rockefeller Foundation. John D. Rockefeller saw education as a rewarding object of patronage, pointing to the \$45 million he used to establish the University of Chicago in 1890 as the investment that fused the Rockefeller name with liberal philanthropy. He and his handlers, which included his son John D. Rockefeller Jr. and Frederick Taylor Gates (no relation to Bill Gates), concluded that education paid off especially well in terms of burnishing the family's image.

As John Junior became more involved in the family's philanthropic efforts he devised new avenues for Rockefeller money, founding the General Education Board-what became known informally as Rockefeller's "education trust." The Board channeled especially sizable funds in to reshaping elementary education in the American South through the application of Wundtian experimental psychology approaches.

Gates remarked famously on the General Education Board's ambitions for the many deprived public schools in the South, where the trust would play a substantial role in educational reform. "We shall not try to make these people or any of their children into philosophers or men of learning, or men of science," Gates announced.

"The task we set before ourselves is very simple, as well as a very beautiful one, to train these people as we find them to a perfectly ideal life just where they are. So we will organize our children and teach them to do in a perfect way the things their fathers and mothers are doing in an imperfect way, in the homes, in the shops and on the farm." [5]

In 1916 the General Education Board proposed establishing a school with a new curriculum that excluded Latin, Greek, English grammar, and classical literature, while emphasizing different teaching methods for history and literature. In 1920 the Lincoln School was established and became the laboratory school for Columbia's Teachers College. Until its closure in 1946 Rockefeller spent \$5 million on the institution and thousands of burgeoning educators who visited or trained there were reminded how the program was something they should emulate in their own communities. [6]

As American education was being overhauled, and with it the consequent diminished possibilities for an informed public opinion, the view of popular democracy among elites following World War One also grew dim. For example, Walter Lippmann, a founding member of the Council on Foreign Relations and proponent of Anglo-American accord throughout the 1920s and 1930s, maintained in his writings that decisions of substance cannot be left to the man in the mass who lacks proper expertise in domestic or foreign affairs, but must rather be the province of trained experts.

Indeed, the theme of qualified expertise was similarly emphasized by public relations pioneer Edward Bernays, who advised his clients to use expert figures the public held in high regard, such as scientists or medical doctors, to gain the public's acquiescence on a topic or to promote a trend or product. Overall, the use of experts to manage and mobilize public opinion emerges relatively alongside an educational system that had come to understand and treat the student as a stimulus-response mechanism.

Most professional educators at the college or university level regularly encounter the legacy of Wundtian psychology and the Rockefellers' educational undertakings. Students often exhibit an inability to think logically and independently either aloud or in writing because formative educational experiences—combined with the lifelong instruction of mass media—recognize and address the individual not as a full human being capable of profound acknowledgment and understanding, but rather as a sensory apparatus upon which stimuli is targeted and a response prompted and measured (i.e. the correct answer or product purchase). Thus the common responses when the student is asked to reflect on and discuss course content are unsurprising: “What do you want?” “How much should we write?” “Will this be on the exam?”

In such an educational and cultural environment where the recognition and cultivation of individual will is discouraged and the deferral to expert opinion is all but obligatory, the result is a combination of skepticism and cynicism. Erich Fromm recognized this phenomenon in the 1940s by pointing out how the perception among individuals that only trained experts could address complex problems—and then only in their own specific specializations—discourages people from using their own minds to seriously think about and address concerns facing themselves or society as a whole. “The result of this kind of influence is a two-fold one,” Fromm wrote in 1941.

“One is a skepticism and cynicism toward everything which is said or printed, while the other is a childish belief in anything that a person is told with authority. This combination of cynicism and naiveté is very typical of the modern individual. Its essential result is to discourage him from doing his own thinking and deciding.” [7]

This very type of apathetic malaise acts to short circuit political engagement as much as to lessen the exercise of simple common sense in everyday decisions. On cable and broadcast television, for example, where most Americans still rely on heavily to form a view of the world, one will encounter an endless sequence of experts wheeled before the camera to provide an opinion for the viewer.

The technocratic application of neuromarketing to what passes for education today is a fitting outcome in a society that has become almost completely controlled by a scientific elite. As was the case one hundred years ago this technocracy is funded and directed by the super wealthy, and trained to refine and implement what they see as most efficient practices for sculpting and managing the collective mind. This self-selected class and its

overseers also recognize how such a brave new world operates at optimal efficiency when the bulk of the population has been effectively zombified through stultifying stimulus-response rituals –a process that after many generations has come close to complete fruition.

Notes

1. Valerie Strauss, "\$1.1 Million Plus Gates Grants: "Galvanic" Bracelets that Measure Student Engagement," Washington Post, 11 June 2012, http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/answer-sheet/post/11-million-plus-gates-grants-galvanic-bracelets-that-measure-student-engagement/2012/06/10/gJQAgAUbTV_blog.html
2. Diane Ravitch, "Just When You Thought It Couldn't Get crazier," dianeravitch.net, 9 June 2012, <http://dianeravitch.net/2012/06/09/just-when-you-thought-it-couldnt-get-crazier/>
3. PBS NewsHour, "Melinda Gates on the Importance of Evaluations in Shaping Effective Teachers," 4 June, 2012, http://www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/education/jan-june12/melindagates_06-04.html
4. Paolo Lioni, The Leipzig Connection (Sheridan, OR: Heron Books, 1993).
5. General Education Board, Occasional Papers, Issues 1-9, New York, 1913, 6, http://books.google.com/books?id=QzhDAAAAYAAJ&printsec=frontcover&source=gbs_ge_suummary_r&cad=0#v=onepage&q&f=false
6. Lioni.
7. Erich Fromm, Escape From Freedom (New York: Avon, 1969 [1941]), 276.

James F. Tracy is Associate Professor of Media Studies at Florida Atlantic University. He is an affiliate of Project Censored and blogs at memorygap.org.

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<https://jamesftracy.wordpress.com/>

About the author:

James F. Tracy was a tenured Associate Professor of Journalism and Media Studies at Florida Atlantic University from 2002 to 2016. He was fired by FAU ostensibly for violating the university's policies imposed on the free speech rights of faculty. Tracy has filed a federal civil rights lawsuit against the

university, with trial set to begin November 27, 2017. Tracy received his PhD from University of Iowa. His work on media history, politics and culture has appeared in a wide variety of academic journals, edited volumes, and alternative news and opinion outlets. Additional information is available at MemoryHoleBlog.com, TracyLegalDefense.org, and jamesftracy.wordpress.com.

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