

American Public University System

Enlightenment and Education

Claire A. Perry

HUMN 541 Enlightenment and the Modern World

Polina Kroik

November 26, 2023

A young girl works to learn her letters so that she may begin to read; nearby their older sibling is working hard on their schoolwork so that they may go to a good college. A man studies a new language in order to broaden his experiences while another learns a trade so that they may improve their lives and feed their family. Education comes in many forms, but is important in all of them; so is the access to education for everyone.

Education is an integral aspect of our lives today, with many jobs requiring higher levels of education, but even basic access to education has not always been available. What we now think of as a common right was once restricted, both in access and content, and it was not until the Enlightenment that the importance of a proper education for all began to be addressed.

The Enlightenment encouraged allowing everyone access to education regardless of social or economic status; while something of a radical idea at the time, it is one still promoted today. Until thinkers like Immanuel Kant began to push the idea of education for all, learning for the pleasure of learning was either unheard or something for the social elite. Today we know how important an education for opening up opportunities and allowing people to make informed choices. In fact, many of the tenants of the Enlightenment are still important for a well-functioning society, not just a well formatted educational system.

This paper looks at how the Western Enlightenment and education impacted each other both then and today; many tenants of the Enlightenment still impact our lives today, but education has had one of the biggest impacts of all. It was not just Enlightenment that had an impact on education though, education helped to make it easier for people to become enlightened. How did the Enlightenment's push for education to be available to everyone affect our educational access today? How does access to a decent education affect the possibility for enlightenment in today's world?

Education before the Enlightenment was generally limited to those who belonged to the right social or economic groups; with subjects focused around religious instruction and included reading, history, "...arithmetic geometry, astronomy and music" (Altun, 51). Unlike modern students, the pre Enlightenment knowledge was merely what the teachers stated it was and the students were to follow the teacher's instruction implicitly. The point of learning was not about being able to discuss and debate the information, but more about the repetition of the approved information. The idea that in order to truly learn, one must be able to think for one's self and not merely retain information was to be important in how education was recreated.

The concept that knowledge was made rather than simply learned, much less that it could only be achieved when not oppressed by authority, would become a tenant of the Enlightenment. Only once a person could think for themselves could they have a chance at reaching enlightenment, and only through education could people have the chance to gain the knowledge they needed in order to think freely. However, in order to learn, students could not be suppressed by their teachers as they had been, nor could who was allowed to learn be regulated as it had been. It was not just those of different socio-economic groups that found access to education limited though; gender also affected who was allowed to learn.

Thinkers like Immanuel Kant argued that education needed to be accessible by all in order for enlightenment to occur, but he did not go into specifics such as gender or race. Mary Wollstonecraft, on the other hand, went further and argued that education should not be limited by one's gender, but should truly be accessible to everyone. Like many others who supported the Enlightenment movement, Wollstonecraft pushed for people to not blindly follow what was taught, but she also argued that women should not be exempted from a proper education because of "...such deeply rooted prejudices..." that "...have clouded reason..." regarding gender

(Wollstonecraft, 2). She was frustrated by women being treated as lesser beings simply because of the rational that men used to excuse such behavior and fought to change how women were viewed.

Wollstonecraft sought to use education to help women become better partners in marriage and give them a better foundation to grow from. She sought to get rid of the prejudices that kept women oppressed by promoting common sense to counter the untruths and reasoning being used that allowed such prejudiced ideas to flourish. The usage of common sense and reason as a rebuttal against many of the different prejudices that mankind is susceptible to, has been a core argument of the enlightened and further encouraged as education among all become more common place.

Common sense and reason were not something that was only for the select few, but were available for all who chose to use them, regardless of position or gender; it was only a matter of enabling the populace to see that. The Enlightenment sought to bring such concepts to everyone who willing to accept them and promote common sense and reason over prejudices and ignorance. One way to bring such concepts to the masses was through making education available to everyone, and where the concepts of Kant and Wollstonecraft are important.

The Enlightenment had a major impact upon how education was viewed and administered, as well as other aspects of life, such as freedoms and equality. Many of the ideas introduced by the Enlightenment were considered radical at the time; today those same ideas are seen as a necessity or right. The belief that "...the only person who can teach a person is that person him or herself..." with the teacher...portrayed as the facilitator or...guide" (Radford, 102) went against everything that pre Enlightenment education was based on. Today though, that is how most students are taught to learn; a teacher is meant to help guide a student, but it is the

student who responsible for figuring out the material. The belief that we can only teach ourselves was integral to people achieving enlightenment though; it pushed for individuals to be active participants in their learning.

This concept that mankind needed to be able to think beyond what was being taught at the time and learn instead to make conscious decisions was a core tenant for the Enlightenment movement. “Enlightenment is man’s emergence from his self-imposed immaturity...” (Kant, 2) and a chance for mankind to transcend the limitations imposed upon it. To truly gain knowledge involved thinking and that could not be properly done without redefining how the learning process was done. In order to do this though, the educational process had to be redefined and education had to be accessible to more than just the elite.

Enlightenment was not just about questioning what was being taught or giving everyone the same chance to become enlightened and achieve autonomy; it was a way “...in which the critique of what we are is at one and the same the historical analysis of the limits that are imposed on us...with the possibility of going beyond them” (Foucault). By offering everyone a chance at enlightenment, the hope was that the world would become a better place; though it was unlikely that everyone would become enlightened. Even if only a portion of those who had access to education achieved some form of enlightenment, the number of individuals beneficially impacted by opening up educational access still made an impact upon the world in general.

The changes brought about helped to create a way of life that was intended to improve society and make things better for everyone, especially those who were willing to embark on the path towards enlightenment. Even if one could not fully achieve enlightenment, it was felt that one would still benefit from the attempt by no longer being bound by restrictive ways of thinking

and being. The impacts that this new way of thinking would have upon future humanity can still be seen today in the advances in science and other fields.

As stated, prior to the Enlightenment, education was about knowing something rather than actually learning it and was limited to those males born into the social and economic stations. The change in emphasis, from dead languages and religious facts to problem solving and creating knowledge without being oppressed by authoritarian figures (Radford) made it even more important that education become open access. In fact today, "...basic education has become compulsory for everyone..." (Altun, 53) regardless of socio-economic background or gender. Access to education is considered a right in today's world, rather than something for the elite to use for social climbing.

These simple differences of going from closed access to open and promoting the idea that "...the students construct their own knowledge..." rather than "...knowledge is imposed upon them" (Radford, 104) had an important impact upon the current and future generations of students alike. No longer was education something that separated the classes and genders; everyone now had the same chance at becoming autonomous and enlightened through education. This would become more important for future generations as education became a way to improve one's station in society and economic status.

Education has also become easier to access for people of all backgrounds with a variety of options for students to find what best fits their learning style and needs. The addition of virtual or online schooling has helped to open up opportunities for those who do not have easy access to the more standard forms of schooling; allowing for even more people to access education. It was not just the introduction of the Enlightenment movement that helped education become more widespread throughout Western civilization though.

Improvements and open access to the education system also helped to further enlightenment opportunities for people. Kant and others of the initial Enlightenment period believed that education was important for achieving enlightenment and autonomy since one had to be able to think for oneself and learn reason, hence the push for making education accessible to all. It allows for "...the ability of...citizens to achieve sufficient education to obtain an acceptable level of well-being" (Abeles, 67); creating both self-improvement and improvement to the society in general. The impact education can have is not limited to the individual, but rather felt across the community.

The importance of having access to education cannot be stressed enough. After all, it is education that helps to "...bring about the harmonious, multifaceted development of the human personality, rendering it autonomous" (Abu-Rabia-Queder, para 4). Autonomy helps promote enlightenment for the individual and allows for growth; this is also important for a culture to keep from being stagnant. Education and enlightenment are not limited to a single part of a person's life either, but rather continue to affect one's present and future long after the initial journey.

There is a lifetime impact that education has upon a person; the qualities that are often stressed as being important to apply in education in order to be successful are equally important when applied to life. By using the lessons taught during one's educational phases of life, one can become a better human being. Qualities such as "...being knowledgeable, principled, open-minded, caring, balanced, and reflective..." (Tate, 254) are also important for the path to enlightenment and reiterate the symbiotic natures of education and enlightenment.

Perhaps "the greatest innovation that the Enlightenment brought to humanity was that everyone was invited to use their own mind..." (Altun, 52); the relationship between the

Enlightenment and education is far more closely entwined than many realize. On its own, education would have remained stagnant, with students limited by their instructors as much as they were by their socio-economic status or gender. At the same time, the Enlightenment would not have been able to spread as much as it did with the advancements that were made to education. Tenants such as common sense and reason would have been harder to spread amongst the people without the usage of a productive educational system.

It was through the combined efforts of both that mankind was able to start making leaps and bounds towards autonomy independent thought. That is not to say that there have not been issues or setbacks along the path towards enlightenment via education, but that should be expected in a world where freedom of choice and self-thinking are promoted. The importance that enlightenment and education continue to have for mankind cannot be ignored.

Enlightenment and education are both vital to mankind. They are also vital to each other, for without one the other would not be able to flourish. The initial Enlightenment period helped to create an educational system that promoted students to actually learn rather than merely recite dead languages or approved information. It also ensured that education was open to everyone regardless of who they were. While the Enlightenment was key to helping make education what it is today, education also helped to promote the Enlightenment by allowing people the ability to learn how to think for themselves and achieve autonomy. These concepts are not outdated either, both education and enlightenment are a necessary part of society's growth; without them we would become stagnant and unable to make many of the advances we have since the Middle Ages. An enlightened world and an educated world are the same thing.

Works Cited

- Abeles, Tom P. "Is There a Case for a 'Liberal Education'?" *On the Horizon*, vol. 22, no. 1, 2014, pp. 67–71, <https://doi.org/10.1108/OTH-10-2013-0038>.
- Abu-Rabia-Queder, Sarab. "Does Education Necessarily Mean Enlightenment? The Case of Higher Education among Palestinians-Bedouin Women in Israel." *Anthropology & Education Quarterly*, vol. 39, no. 4, 2008, pp. 381–400, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1548-1492.2008.00029.x>.
- Altun, Mustafa, and Recep Bilgin. "Contributions of Enlightenment Movement to Modern Education." *International Journal of Social Sciences & Educational Studies*, vol. 9, no. 3, 2022, pp. 49–59, <https://doi.org/10.23918/ijsses.v9i3p49>
- Foucault, Michel. "What is Enlightenment". Foucault.info, <https://foucault.info/documents/foucault.whatIsEnlightenment.en/>
- Kant, Immanuel. *Answer the Question: What is Enlightenment?*. Translated by Daniel Fidel Ferrer, 2013. https://www.academia.edu/28967489/Answer_the_question_What_is_Enlightenment.
- Radford, Luis. "Education and the Illusions of Emancipation." *Educational Studies in Mathematics*, vol. 80, no. 1/2, 2012, pp. 101–18, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10649-011-9380-8>.
- Tate, Nicholas. "International Education in a Post-Enlightenment World." *Educational Review (Birmingham)*, vol. 65, no. 3, 2013, pp. 253–66, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00131911.2013.785938>.
- Wollstonecraft, Mary. *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman : "Strengthen the Female Mind by Enlarging It, and There Will Be an End to Blind Obedience."* A Word To The Wise, 2019. <https://web-s-ebsohost-com.ezproxy2.apus.edu/ehost/ebookviewer/ebook?sid=5d1e5771-66df-4db7-b89c-08fedf49c548%40redis&vid=0&format=EB>

Works Resourced

Brewer, Joseph. "EDUCATION AND THE MODERN WORLD." *Etc.*, vol. 61, no. 4, 2004, pp. 487–93. <https://www.proquest.com/docview/204097517?accountid=8289>

Dashkova, Ekaterina Romanovna (1840). *The Memoirs of Princess Dashkova*. London, H. Colburn. Retrieved from <https://archive.org/details/memoirsprincess01wilmgoog/page/n28/mode/2up>

Journals of the Lewis and Clark Expedition. University of Nebraska, Lincoln. <https://lewisandclarkjournals.unl.edu/journals/contents>

Locke, John. *Toleration*. Jonathan Bennett, 2017. <https://www.earlymoderntexts.com/assets/pdfs/locke1689b.pdf>

Paine, Thomas. *The Writings of Thomas Paine, Complete*. Project Gutenberg, 2021. <https://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/31270>

Perry, Claire. *Enlightenment and Freedom*. American Public University System, 2023.

Perry, Claire. *Enlightenment and Equality*. American Public University System, 2023.

Rousseau, Jean-Jacques. *The Confessions of Jean Jacques Rousseau*. The Project Gutenberg, 2004. <https://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/3913/pg3913-images.html>.

Swift, Jonathan. *A Modest Proposal*. The Gutenberg Project, 2019. <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/1080/1080-h/1080-h.htm>

Thomas Jefferson's Enlightenment and Native Americans. The Jefferson Monticello. <https://www.monticello.org/thomas-jefferson/louisiana-lewis-clark/origins-of-the-expedition/jefferson-and-american-indians/jefferson-s-enlightenment-and-american-indians/>

Voltaire. *Treatise on Tolerance*. Jonathan Bennett, 2017. <https://www.earlymoderntexts.com/assets/pdfs/voltaire1763.pdf>