

Lisa Stringfellow
4/17/11

In [A Passion for Learning](#), Philip Cusick details the lives of seven Americans of extraordinary achievement. These individuals came from varying geographic areas, social-economic situations, and religious and cultural backgrounds. Nevertheless, they embodied a "passion" that helped them move beyond their circumstances and craft an important place for themselves in the world. Cusick argues that for these individuals, the education that helped them rise to prominence was largely self-directed. While they may have attended formal schools, the learning that shaped their ideas and character was driven by their own inner curiosities, beliefs, and idealism. In the book, he describes several "pillars" that supported the educational development of people like Benjamin Franklin and Jane Addams. In looking at the life of W. E. B. Du Bois, one of Cusick's subjects, the pillar of "intelligent expression" is particularly evident. Through various resources available online, it is clear how much writing and speaking publicly helped Du Bois clarify his views of the racial problems he saw and enabled him to persuade others to advocate for change.

W. E. B. Du Bois was a gifted writer and orator. His upbringing exposed him to many opportunities to learn manners and proper bearing from his family members. In [A Passion for Learning](#), Du Bois is quoted, "I suddenly sensed in my grandfather's parlor what manners meant and how people of breeding behaved." This training served him well as he lectured as a student at Harvard. His bearing and ease of manner made people respect him and listen to his ideas. At the online exhibit on Du Bois at University of Massachusetts at Amherst, a [flyer](#) from one of his lectures is shown with reviews from those that attended. One states,

"When the name of William Edward Burghardt Du Bois was called and a slender intellectual looking mulatto ascended the platform and made his bow to the President of the University, the Governor of Massachusetts, the Bishop of New York, and a hundred other notables, the applause burst out heartily as if in recognition of the strange significance of his appearance there. His theme...heighten the significance. Du Bois...handled his difficult and hazardous subject with absolute good taste, great moderation, and almost contemptuous fairness."

Through his teaching and research at Atlanta University he sought to express the problems he saw in the African American community. In "The Study of the Negro Problems," a paper he presented at Atlanta University and which was also published in *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, Du Bois makes the case for the detailed scientific study of the African American community and the strong social forces that continue to play a role in its development. In a copy of the [text](#) available at Google Books, Du Bois states,

"Before we can begin to study the Negro intelligently, we must realize definitely that not only is he affected by all the varying social forces that act on any nation at his stage of advancement, but that in addition to these there is reaction upon him the might power of a peculiar and unusual social environment which affects to some extent every other social force...we should seek to know and measure carefully all the forces and conditions that go to make up these different problems, to trace historical development of these conditions, and discover as far as possible the probable trend of further development."

The online resources illuminate how Du Bois used the power of words to advocate for study of the problems facing the African American community and later for action to create meaningful change. Du Bois's ongoing disagreement with Booker T. Washington is well-documented. In an interesting primary source [letter](#) at the Library of Congress, Du Bois writes courteously to congratulate

Washington on his speech in Atlanta in 1895. In that [speech](#), Washington advocates for harmony between the races and states, "In all things that are purely social, we can be as separate as the fingers, yet one as the hand in all things essential to mutual progress." Despite what his friendly correspondence may imply, Du Bois finds this view of passive capitulation to segregation untenable and eventually responds in an open way. In [The Souls of Black Folks](#), published in 1903 and also available on Google Books, Du Bois writes quite pointedly about Washington and what he called the "Tuskegee Machine." With biting sarcasm, he describes how Washington, himself adept at persuasion and oration, made the liberal education that Du Bois advocated for talented African Americans seem foolish. He states,

"He intuitively grasped the spirit of the age which was dominating the North. And so thoroughly did he learn the speech and thought of triumphant commercialism, and the ideals of material prosperity, that the picture of a lone black boy poring over a French grammar amid the weeds and dirt of a neglected home soon seemed to him the acme of absurdities. One wonders what Socrates and St. Francis of Assisi would say to this."

Du Bois went on to explain why he felt such liberal studies were not in fact absurd, but created a foundation for the very programs that Washington supported. To have schools like Tuskegee, it was necessary to "train the best of the Negro youth as teachers, professional men, and leaders."

His attack on Washington's view, created challenges for Du Bois, but also brought many in the African American community to his side. Through his work with the Niagara Movement and later the NAACP, he continued to use his considerable skill in oral and written expression to lecture and write. Through his work as director of publicity and research for the NAACP and editor of their monthly magazine, *The Crisis*, he continued to advocate for civil rights and equality. Ever the literate scholar, Du Bois also used *The Crisis* to highlight the culture and strengths of the African American community. On a page detailing the history of [NAACP](#), how *The Crisis* was used as a platform for the writing and poetry produced during the Harlem Renaissance is discussed as well as how it continues Du Bois's legacy of social justice today.

As Cusick explains in his book, "Education depends on being open to learning, open to participating fully, and open to creating the person one becomes." As a person who "read three hours every morning and graphed his daily output of articles and letters," W. E. B. Du Bois is certainly a person who valued education and the expression of ideas. Throughout his life he showed a skill with words that persuaded many to his views and in turn helped change our society. The pillar of intelligent expression is a powerful metaphor for the way Du Bois was able to communicate his ideas to the world.