

John Stuart Mill: On Instruction, Intellectual Development, and Disciplined Learning¹

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A pupil from whom nothing is ever demanded which he cannot do, never does all he can.

John Stuart Mill

John Stuart Mill, born in London in 1806, was educated by his father, James Mill, a leading exponent of radicalism. John Stuart Mill became one of the most widely recognized authorities on utilitarianism.² His most famous works include *On Liberty*, *Representative Government*, *Utilitarianism*, and *The Subjection of Women*.

In the mid 1850's, Mill wrote his *Autobiography*, and in it we find, among other things, a remarkable story of a father (James Mill) dedicated to the intellectual development of his son, as is evidenced in the methods he used to instruct, guide, and direct John Stuart Mill to ever deeper levels of understanding, insight and knowledge.

James Mill carefully crafted a one-on-one tutorial approach, with emphasis on the development of critical thinking abilities, traits and dispositions. His fundamental purpose was to develop, in his son, a mind in control of itself, ever reaching for the truth.

This article highlights the most prominent instructional methods used in this process, as detailed by John Stuart Mill in his *Autobiography*.

Like the best traditions of the Oxford Tutorials and Cambridge Supervisions, analysis of James Mill's tutorial approach can be used to design instruction that disciplines and cultivates the intellect. The methods used by James Mill had a profound and lasting effect on his son. Though we cannot replicate the early 19th century world of John Stuart Mill, though few parents and teachers can dedicate the time and energy to the instruction of one pupil alone, still we can learn a great deal from studying the methods and effects of James Mill's instruction.

We should not view the methods illuminated in Mill's autobiography as individual cannons to be necessarily replicated, but as models whose essential components and qualities can be exported and adapted. Because James Mill understood firsthand the character and habits of the disciplined mind, because he thought it critical to instill such disciplined habits of mind in his son, and because he was willing to think and rethink how best to reach his pupil through years of tutelage, he was able, over the long run, to foster remarkably deep learning. James Mill approached the acquisition of knowledge and insight as an unending, often confusing, messy, uncomfortable process. He recognized it as a process that entails grounding one's thinking in significant ideas, connecting important ideas to other important ideas, a process of discovery and rediscovery, of

¹ All quotes in this article are taken from *Autobiography* by John Stuart Mill, first published in 1873. The version used for this article was published by Penguin Books, 1989, London, England.

² The utilitarian philosophy is grounded in the principle that right actions are to be measured in proportion to the greatest good they achieve for the greatest number.

application and correction. He recognized the difficulties in bringing ideas into thought and taking ownership of them. He consistently guided (if not drove) his pupil to deeper and deeper levels of understanding.

What follows are excerpts from Mill's *Autobiography* that exemplify and support these conclusions. As you read through them, you will be best served by developing a bridge between the methods used by James Mill and what we might hope to accomplish in instruction today, given our particular circumstances. We believe that the essence of James Mills' methodology is found in the best instruction in all disciplines, at all levels throughout education – students intellectually engaged, learning command of their own minds as they read, write, discuss, question, as they think their way into and through important ideas.³

The Instructional Methods of James Mill

Mill begins his autobiography with comments on the extraordinary approach to education taken by his father and the importance, therefore, of documenting the methodology used. Mill says:

“in an age in which education, and its improvement, are the subject of more, if not of profounder study than at any former period of English history, it may be useful that there should be some record of an education which was unusual and remarkable, and which...has proved how much more than is commonly supposed may be taught, and well taught...

the common modes of what is called instruction, are little better than wasted.”

There may be interest in noting the successive phases of any mind which was always pressing forward, equally ready to learn and to unlearn either from its own thoughts or from those of others (p. 25).

my father, in all his teaching, demanded of me not only the utmost that I could do, but much that I could by no possibility have done (p. 28).”

Much of his daily instruction:

“consisted in the books I read by myself, and my father's discourses to me, chiefly during our walks...In these walks I always accompanied him, and with my earliest recollections of green fields and wild flowers, is mingled that of the accounts I gave him daily of what I had read the day before. To the best of my remembrance, this was a voluntary rather than a prescribed exercise. I made notes on slips of paper while reading, and from these, in the morning walks, I told the story to him (p. 29).

In these frequent talks about the books I read, he used, as opportunity offered, to give explanations and ideas respecting civilization, government, morality, mental cultivation, which he required me afterward to restate to him in my own words. He also made me read, and give him a verbal account of, many books which would not have interested me sufficiently to induce me to read them of myself...He was fond of putting into my hands

³ From this point forward, the name “Mill” will be reserved for John Stuart Mill. When the father is referenced, the name James Mill will be used. Also note that, throughout this article, some commentary is offered. At other times, the points made by Mill require no comments.

books which exhibited men of energy and resource in unusual circumstances, struggling against difficulties and overcoming them...Of children's books, any more than of playthings, I had scarcely any, except, an occasional gift from a relation or acquaintance...It was no part however of my father's system to exclude books of amusement, though he allowed them very sparingly. Of such books he possessed at that time next to none, but he borrowed several for me (p. 30)."

Note the instructional processes and patterns used by James Mill and which became routine in the life of Mill from an early age –

1. the student is required to read from a substantive text and then on the next day give an oral summary of what he read.
2. The teacher then comments on important ideas connected with the ideas the student has summarized. The student is then required to state in his own words these explanations and summaries.
3. the student is required to read the works of important thinkers he would himself never choose to read, but that illuminate important traits of mind.

Mill comments on the value of learning through teaching other students:

"In my eighth year I commenced learning Latin, in conjunction with a younger sister, to whom I taught it as I went on, and who afterwards repeated the lessons to my father; and from this time, other sisters and brothers being successively added as pupils [Mill had eight siblings], a considerable part of my day's work consisted of this preparatory teaching. It was a part which I greatly disliked; the more so, as I was held responsible for the lessons of my pupils, in almost as full a sense as for my own; I however derived from this discipline the great advantage, of learning more thoroughly and retaining more lastingly the things which I was set to teach: perhaps, too, the practice it afforded in explaining difficulties to others, may even at that age have been useful (p. 31)."

Throughout his autobiography, Mill mentions the names of important writers and theoreticians who influenced his development under his father's tutelage. These include John Austin, Auguste Comte, William Wordsworth, Jeremy Bentham, the St Simonians, Tocqueville, Charles Austin, Thomas Carlyle, John Roebuck, John Sterling, Plato, Aristotle, Bacon, Locke, and so on. Internalizing the important ideas and understandings of these and other important theoreticians was a primary theme running throughout Mill's education. Mill, for example, comments on being profoundly influenced by the Socratic method, as detailed in the works of Plato:

"There is no author to whom my father thought himself more indebted for his own mental culture, than Plato, or whom he more frequently recommended to young students. I can bear similar testimony in regard to myself. The Socratic method of which the Platonic dialogues are the chief example, is unsurpassed as a discipline for correcting the errors, and clearing up the confusions incident to the *intellectus sibi permissus*⁴, the understanding which has made up all its bundles or associations under the guidance of popular phraseology. The close, searching *elenchus*⁵ by which the man of vague generalities is constrained either to express his meaning to himself in definite terms, or to

⁴ "This phrase, from Bacon's *Novum organum*, means 'intellect left to itself.'" {NOTE that all footnotes from this point forward, except where apparent, are quoted directly from Mill's *Autobiography* and were found in that document as footnotes }.

⁵ "Literally, a pearl or a pearl pendant worn as an earring, but as a technical philosophical term *elenchus* refers to the Socratic method of extracting truth through cross-examination."

confess that he does not know what he is talking about; the perpetual testing of all general statements by particular instances; the siege in form which is laid to the meaning of large abstract terms, by fixing upon some still larger class-name which includes that and more, and dividing down to the thing sought – marking out its limitations and definition by a series of accurately drawn distinctions between it and each of the cognate objects which are successively parted off from it – all this, as an education for precise thinking, is inestimable, and all this, even at that age, took such hold of me that it became part of my own mind (pp. 38-39).”

In the following critique of his father’s methods, we see Mill’s insight into the importance of consistent application of abstract theory to concrete reality.

“In going through Plato and Demosthenes, since I could now read these authors, as far as language was concerned, with perfect ease, I was not required to construe them sentence by sentence, but to read them aloud to my father, answering questions when asked; but the particular attention which he paid to elocution (in which his own excellence was remarkable) made this reading aloud to him a most painful task. Of all things which he required me to do, there was none which I did so constantly ill, or in which he so perpetually lost his temper with me. He had thought much on the principles of the art of reading, especially the most neglected part of it, the inflexions of the voice, or *modulation* as writers on elocution call it (in contrast with *articulation* on the one side, and expression on the other), and had reduced it to rules, grounded on the logical analysis of a sentence. These rules he strongly impressed upon me, and took me severely to task for every violation of them: but I even then remarked (though I did not venture to make the remark to him) that though he reproached me when I read a sentence ill, and told me how I ought to have read it, he never, by reading it himself, shewed me how it ought to be read. A defect running through his otherwise admirable modes of instruction, as it did through all his modes of thought, was that of trusting too much to the intelligibility of the abstract, when not embodied in the concrete. It was at a much later period of my youth, when practicing elocution by myself, or with companions of my own age, that I for the first time understood the object of his rules, and saw the psychological grounds of them. At that time I and others followed out the subject into its ramifications, and could have composed a very useful treatise, grounded on my father’s principles. He himself left those principles and rules unwritten. I regret that when my mind was full of the subject, from systematic practice, I did not put them, and our improvements of them, into a formal shape (pp. 39-40).”

Note in the following passage the intellectual discipline required of Mill and the importance of the teacher bringing rigor to the learning process (through the rigor of his or her own thought).

My father... commenced instructing me ... by a series of short lectures, which he delivered to me in our walks. He expounded each day a portion of the subject, and I gave him next day a written account of it, which he made me rewrite over and over again until it was clear, precise, and tolerably complete. In this manner I went through the whole extent of the science, and the written outline of it which resulted from my daily *compte rendu*, served him afterwards as notes from which to write his *Elements of Political Economy*. After this I read Ricardo⁶, giving an account daily of what I read, and discussing, in the best manner I could, the collateral points which offered themselves in our progress. On Money, as the most intricate part of the subject, he made me read in the same manner Ricardo’s admirable pamphlets, written during what was called the

⁶ On the Principles of Political Economy and Taxation (1817), by David Ricardo (1772-1826), one of the founders of classical economics.

Bullion controversy. To these succeeded Adam Smith; and in this reading it was one of my father's main objects to make me apply to Smith's more superficial view of political economy, the superior lights of Ricardo, and detect what was fallacious in Smith's arguments, or erroneous in any of his conclusions. Such a mode of instruction was excellently calculated to form a thinker; but it required to be worked by a thinker as close and vigorous as my father (p. 43).

As we see from this passage, Mill recognizes the fact that to foster depth and rigor in thinking, *teachers must themselves think with rigor and discipline*.

This passage offers a rich example of an effective instructional design, in which:

1. the teacher routinely briefly explains an idea of importance to the student.
2. the next day the student is expected to provide a written account of the mini-lecture.
3. the student is required to write and rewrite the paper, becoming clearer and clearer, increasingly more precise and complete.
4. this pattern is repeated, focusing on the important works of theoreticians in a discipline.
5. the student is then required to work out an intricate comparison of two important theoreticians, using one to illuminate faults and superficialities in another under the guidance of a disciplined thinker (the teacher).

Mill goes on to explain the complex nature of intellectual development:

The path was a thorny one even to him, and I am sure it was so to me, notwithstanding the strong interest I took in the subject. He was often, and much beyond reason, provoked by my failures in cases where success could not have been expected; but in the main his method was right, and it succeeded. I do not believe that any scientific teaching ever was more thorough, or better fitted for training the faculties, than the mode in which logic and political economy were taught to me by my father. Striving, even in an exaggerated degree, to call forth the activity of my faculties, by making me find out everything for myself, he gave his explanations not before, but after, I had felt the full force of the difficulties; and not only gave me an accurate knowledge of these two great subjects, as far as they were then understood, but made me a thinker in both. I thought for myself, almost from the first, and occasionally thought differently from him, though for a long time only on minor points, and making his opinion the ultimate standard (p. 43).

In this passage, Mill exemplifies the intellectual dispositions of *intellectual autonomy* and *intellectual perseverance* characteristically fostered through his father's methods.

We also see here, not for the first time, Mill's deep sense of respect for the intellectual capacities of his father. James Mill understands that the mind of the growing child can only be developed to its fullest capacities through the tutelage of the true intellectual (or at least a person striving to develop intellectually). We learn later in Mill's autobiography that he did come to differ from his father on some significant points. However, it was only through the discipline and skill he learned through his father's tutelage that he was later able to *critique* his father's ideas and positions.

On the problem of requiring rote memorization in schooling, Mill says:

Most boys or youths who have had knowledge drilled into them, have their mental capacities not strengthened, but overlaid by it. They are crammed with mere facts, and

with the opinions or phrases of other people, and these are accepted as a substitute for the power to form opinions of their own. And thus, the sons of eminent fathers, who have spared no pains in their education, so often grow up mere parroters of what they have learnt, incapable of using their minds except in the furrows traced for them. Mine, however, was not an education of cram. My father never permitted anything which I learnt, to degenerate into a mere exercise of memory. He strove to make the understanding not only go along with every step of the teaching, but if possible, precede it. Anything which could be found out by thinking, I never was told, until I had exhausted my efforts to find it out for myself (p. 45).

In the following passage, Mill points out the importance of fostering discipline in the use of language, the importance of clearly delineating meanings of terms:

My recollection in such matters is almost wholly of failures, hardly ever of success. It is true, the failures were often in things in which success in so early a stage of my progress, was almost impossible. I remember at some time in my thirteenth year, on my happening to use the word idea, he asked me what an idea was; and expressed some displeasure at my ineffectual efforts to define the word: I recollect also his indignation at my using the common expression that something was true in theory but required correction in practice; and how, after making me vainly strive to define the word theory, he explained its meaning, and shewed the fallacy of the vulgar form of speech which I had used; leaving me fully persuaded that in being unable to give a correct definition of Theory, and in speaking of it as something which might be at variance with practice, I had shewn unparalleled ignorance. In this he seems, and perhaps was, very unreasonable; but I think, only in being angry in my failure. A pupil from whom nothing is ever demanded which he cannot do, never does all he can (p. 45).

Note some parallels here, if you will, with sports analogies. In learning a sport, players expect their progress to be slow. They expect to be continually corrected by the coach. They will forgive the coach many scoldings because they recognize that the coach is only interested in their being better able to play the game. And they recognize that this requires discipline and hard work. Indeed rigor is essential to developing in any complex skill area, including that of cultivating the intellect. We may at times ask too much of our students. We may at times ask them to perform at a level higher than that at which they are capable of performing. Yet if we appropriate the spirit of Mill's point, we see the importance of pushing and prodding the student on to an increasingly higher level of skill. Through this kind of approach, we help students gradually, through years of committed practice, embody the traits of the true intellectual. We help them develop ever more sophisticated uses of language, recognize and correct deficiencies in their thinking, expect more and more of themselves over time, just as any good athlete does.

On the importance of developing intellectual humility and appreciation for the skills and abilities of the teacher, Mill says:

One of the evils most liable to attend on any sort of early proficiency, and which often fatally blights its promise, my father most anxiously guarded against. This was self conceit. He kept me, with extreme vigilance, out of the way of hearing myself praised, or of being led to make self-flattering comparisons between myself and others. From his own intercourse with me I could derive none but a very humble opinion of myself; and the standard of comparison he always held up to me, was not what other people did, but what a man could and ought to do (p. 46).

I was disputatious, and did not scruple to give direct contradictions to things which I heard said. I suppose I acquired this bad habit from having been encouraged in an unusual degree to talk on matters beyond my age, and with grown persons, while I never had inculcated on me the usual respect for them. My father did not correct this ill breeding and impertinence, probably from not being aware of it...(p. 46)

...with all this I had no notion of any superiority in myself; and well was it for me that I had not. I remember the very place in Hyde Park where, in my fourteenth year, on the eve of leaving my father's house for a long absence, he told me that I should find, as I got acquainted with new people, that I had been taught many things which youths of my age did not commonly know; and that many persons would be disposed to talk to me of this, and to compliment me upon it. What other things he said on this topic I remember imperfectly; but he wound up by saying, that whatever I knew more than others, could not be ascribed to any merit to me, but to the very unusual advantage which had fallen to my lot, of having a father who was able to teach me, and willing to give the necessary trouble and time; that it was no matter of praise to me, if I knew more than those who had not had a similar advantage, but the deepest disgrace to me if I did not... now, when my attention was called to the subject, I felt that what my father has said respecting my peculiar advantages was exactly the truth and common sense of the matter, and it fixed my opinion and feeling from that point forward (p. 47).

Mill's emphasis on the *work* involved in cultivating the mind, rather than on natural talent, is significant. The tendency in schooling and society today is to excessively credit one's *innate* intellectual abilities, rather than to adequately acknowledge the significance of intellectual perseverance and superior instruction in cultivating the intellect.

On peer influences, Mill says:

It is evident that this, among many other of the purposes of my father's scheme of education, could not have been accomplished if he had not carefully kept me from having any great amount of intercourse with other boys. He was earnestly bent upon my escaping not only the ordinary corrupting influence which boys exercise over boys, but the contagion of vulgar modes of thought and feeling (p. 47).

Again we see the care with which James Mill approached his son's education. If James Mill was concerned with the potential effects of peer influences a century ago, how much more so would he be concerned with them today? One of the common criticisms of home study programs is that students in these programs will lack the socialization they get in being thrown together with peers of their same age in large groups. And yet, might it not be that the opposite concern should in fact be expressed? Until all students have a chance at developing their minds, until skills, abilities and traits of mind are established, the problem of bad influences of any kind, including peer influences, on the playground and in the streets, will be a concern to the intellectually disciplined tutor and teacher.

On the idea that learning should be easy, interesting, amusing, Mill says:

It is, no doubt, a very laudable effort, in modern teaching, to render as much as possible of what the young are required to learn, easy and interesting to them. But when this principle is pushed to the length of not requiring them to learn anything *but* what has been made easy and interesting, one of the chief objects of education is sacrificed. I rejoice in the decline of the old brutal and tyrannical system of teaching, which however

did succeed in enforcing habits of application; but the new, as it seems to me, is training up a race of men who will be incapable of anything which is disagreeable to them (p. 58).

How apt is Mill's point, and how often it is violated in today's classroom, where students often expect learning to be effortless, uncomplicated, undemanding.

In a chapter entitled, *Last Stage of Education and First Stage of Self-Education*, Mill writes:

From this point I began to carry on my intellectual cultivation by writing still more than by reading (p. 71)....After this I continued to write papers on subjects often very much beyond my capacity, but with great benefit both from the exercise itself, and from the discussions which it led to with my father (p. 72).

It was in the winter of 1822/23⁷ that I formed the plan of a little society, to be composed of young men agreeing in fundamental principles – acknowledging Utility as their standard in ethics and politics, and a certain number of the principal corollaries drawn from it in the philosophy I had accepted – and meeting once a fortnight to read essays and discuss questions conformably to the premises thus agreed on...the name I gave the society I had planned was the Utilitarian Society. It was the first time that any one had taken the title of Utilitarian...The Society so called consisted at first of no more than three members...the number, I think, reached ten, and the society was broken up in 1826...The chief effect of it as regards myself, over and above the benefit of practice in oral discussion, was that of bringing me in contact with several young men at that time less advanced than myself, among whom, as they professed the same opinions, I was for some time a sort of leader, and had considerable influence on their mental progress (pp. 77-78)

From this passage, we see Mill emerging from student to teacher, from dependence on his father's tutelage to independent thinker. We see him beginning to take command of his own learning and his own mind, taking necessary steps toward life-long learning and self-development.

Conclusion

James Mill, as a leading intellectual of his time, was no ordinary father. But happily, the methods he used in fostering deep learning and insight through his instruction can be separated from his own depth of understanding. What is essential is a personal commitment to disciplined thought. The *methods* used by James Mill are generalizable, as long as the teacher is personally engaged in his or her own fitness of mind.

James Mill believed that the development of the intellect must occur during the early years of a child's life to reach one's full potential in adult life. As we read Mill's autobiography we cannot help but be struck by the sacrifice of time and energy given on the part of the father to the son. It seems clear that James Mill could see no alternative, given the condition of schooling at that time. No doubt many of the problems that concerned him with in the educational systems of the 19th century would, sadly, be the same, or even magnified in today's schools.

Though we cannot offer one-one-one tutelage in schooling today, yet we can all of us learn from the methods used by James Mill.

⁷ Mill would have been 16-17 years of age at this time.

In the introduction of the *Autobiography*, John Robson, editor, comments on James Mill's concept of education:

He was not unusual in following classical notions of education built on the rhetoricians' evaluation of such training: memory was one of the five basic skills in effective communication and persuasion. But mere accumulation was a petty goal; incorporation demanded reformulation and exposition. Exposition was itself viewed as corrigible, and with further learning through constant practice, both oral and written. The full achievement of potential was not seen as easy and automatic; striving was believed to be as human as enjoyment, and far more admirable (pp. 4-5).

The passages which have been the focus herein are taken from the first few chapters of Mill's *Autobiography*. They illuminate powerful instructional methods that, when deeply understood and routinely applied, engage the intellect and cultivate the mind. The reader is encouraged to further experience the thinking of John Stuart Mill, in his *Autobiography*, and his other important works.

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