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### Recommended Citation

Hofford, Don (2006). "The Adult Learner's Quest: W.E.B. Du Bois As Vicarious Mentor," *Adult Education Research Conference*. <https://newprairiepress.org/aerc/2006/roundtables/5>

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## The Adult Learner's Quest: W.E.B. Du Bois As Vicarious Mentor

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The intentional adult learner is intellectually and emotionally in a perpetual "act of seeking." The search is for purpose, meaning, humanistic dialogue, self-awareness, creative adventure, and life-affirming experiences. This act of seeking makes the on-going, existential life journey an educational commitment; a continuing involvement with both abstract ideas and concrete reality. Age dims the eyes, not visionary possibilities; slows the reflexes, not the reflective skill that helps define the person as a thinking, questioning, questing *being*.

For the adult learner who views life as an adventurous experiment with possibility, "being educated" is not seen as a completed accomplishment, but rather as a transformative journey. One way to reshape one's perceptions, one's thoughts, one's ideas, and ultimately one's self, is to choose a vicarious mentor; a person whose life, writings, and prophetic spirit may be tapped-into as a possibility to inspire, challenge, and raise questions about those big issues of life which have the power to define who we are. There are many such possibilities for this on-going intellectual dialogue. The choice made here is W.E.B. Du Bois.

### Why Choose W.E.B. Du Bois?

W.E.B. Du Bois continues to be a towering, insightful historical presence in the world-wide struggle for social justice, civil rights, and human dignity. He was equally at home on the political battlefields, in the classroom, on the lecture circuit, or with pen in hand creating diverse works of literature and critical social analysis. This man of self-proclaimed *double consciousness* left an intellectual legacy for the thoughtful academician, the activist political rebel, the social nonconformist, and - as delineated in this paper - the self-directed continuing learner. He asked, in the words of one of his fictional alter-egos, "questions so fundamental that not to talk about them is to die." It is in the asking of fundamental questions that we move forward as continuing learners. It is in the search for answers that we engage in the quest for thoughtful *becoming*.

The research that undergirds the premise of this paper was conducted in an attempt to philosophically illuminate a self-guided educational path/quest. The effort involved an on-going dialogue with Du Bois by way of his extensive, diverse writings. It was necessary to become conversant with his creative writings - novels, plays, poetry, meditations - and also his academic, political, autobiographical, and journalistic writings. There was reason to believe that an interpretive study of the life and writings of DuBois could be distilled into an educational philosophy, a conceptual map that could be personalized to guide an individual's continuing educational process. Here was an exercise in self-directed adult education, a quest for being.

The basic research for this paper was begun as an effort to provide metaphorical planks for a philosophical foundation for the adult who has defined "self-cultivation" as a purpose for continuing education. Much of adult education today is utilitarian and instrumental, premised on the pragmatics of job training and career retooling. Such utilitarian purposes result in a formal education circumscribed by institutionally prescribed objectives. There are, however, adult learners whose intellectual goals are not primarily focused on a "credential." Their individual goals do not necessarily rule out the credentialing benefits to be gained by formal education, but they are not driven primarily by the vision of some tangible reward. Rather, such learners are

motivated by a more subjective, poetic passion to understand more and to *be* more. There is no finality to the quest, no certified ending. This study offers a look at a philosophical foundation for the adult learner who is more interested in finding meaningful answers to the basic question of selfhood, “who am I?,” than in answering the professional question, “what am I?”

The individual who chooses Du Bois as a mentor becomes increasingly aware of his prophetic intellectual legacy to symbolically mid-wife the birth of ideas and ideals. Du Bois’ words offer wisdom, realistic appraisals, poetic insight, and prophetic interpretations. They teach. They also scourge the conscience. Du Bois can help the serious continuing learner probe personal philosophical positions, political ideologies, religious motivations, and rigid - or emerging, more flexible - value systems.

Du Bois inspires because of the magnitude of his accomplishments, and the strength of his personality. But, he also inspires because of the incompleteness of human possibility that he represents. He was human, all too human. He experienced intense success and bitter failure, sorrow as well as joy, impatient anger and patient resolve, truth and falsehood, good and evil. He wrestled with basic life contradictions and paradoxes. And he prevailed.

Du Bois made an existential choice to set his own intellectual expectations and learning agenda. He was a model for the adult continuing learner. He continued to actively learn and self-educate into his ninety-fifth year, when death finally overcame his will to be. In his eightieth year he had written a statement of both purpose and prophecy: “We blind riders of dreams hang wildly on and try each decade to formulate what the last decade denied” (1986 p.193). Du Bois’ dreams propelled him forward on a search for possibilities. What the past had denied, the future might yet bring to fruition. This meant an unending search for *being*; coexisting with the quest for Truth, Goodness, and Beauty. To use the words of Jonas Salk (1973), Du Bois had “the sense of being and becoming, of which the wise are more conscious than others” (p.72).

The “sense of being and becoming” is a legacy that Du Bois left for those who might seek to learn from his life and his words. A mentor is example, guide, advisor, conscience-pricker . . . teacher. A mentor provides opportunities for creative dialogue. For the life-long learner, Du Bois provides one possibility for vicarious mentorship. In his life and thought there can be found inspiration, motivation, encouragement, challenges, and knowledge; all available to the adult for whom continuing learning and becoming are not the “impossible dream,” but rather the pursued possibility.

### References

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