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TEACHING THE ART OF LIVING:
THE EDUCATION PHILOSOPHY OF RUTH MARY WEEKS

by

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THE SERIES

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THE TEXT

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JUDY PROZZILLO BYERS

A native of Fairmont, Dr. Judy Byers is known regionally for her work as a folklorist, workshop director, English education consultant, and storyteller. She came to Fairmont State College in 1982 after having taught in Marion County public schools for thirteen years; at present she is a Professor of English and the Supervisor of English Education. She holds a B.A. degree from Fairmont State College and M.A. and Ed. D. degrees from West Virginia University, with postgraduate work at the Folklore Institute, Indiana University, Bloomington campus.

Dr. Byers is actively involved in civic, community, and professional organizations. Her chief research interest is West Virginia folklore. Upon the death in 1974 of Dr. Ruth Ann Musick, an eminent collector of Appalachian folklore, Dr. Byers was named executrix of the unpublished Musick Folklore Estate. Among other publications she has produced seven educational storytelling tapes, entitled *Lore of the Hills*, featuring The Hill Lorists, a storytelling troupe of which she is a member.

Dr. Byers is married to Dr. George F. Byers, also a Professor of English at the college; they have one daughter, Julia Sterling Byers.
Ruth Mary Weeks (1886-1969) of Kansas City, Missouri, the nineteenth president—and second woman president—of the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE), channeled her talents and considerable energies into various roles: as poet, public speaker, literary and pedagogical critic, researcher, textbook author, and editor. However, day in and day out, from year to year between 1909 and her retirement in 1956, Weeks chiefly taught English in her native city. During this half-century as a professional educator she formulated a distinct teaching philosophy, one that she put into practice in her classrooms and also internalized as a personal approach to life. By the early 1920s Weeks had already begun expounding her teaching philosophy in writings about vocational training and socializing education. Once she became associated with the NCTE she began to advocate this same philosophy as it applied to instruction in English, and she maintained the emphasis through her remaining career. What she termed “teaching the art of living” has markedly influenced English instruction in the United States. Weeks developed a teaching model that is still applicable in our schools today.

The core ideas that underlie Ruth Mary Weeks’ pioneering contributions to English teaching appear with special clarity in two of her numerous published statements. The first of these was her presidential address to the NCTE, delivered in 1930, entitled “Teaching the Whole Child.” Effective instruction, she proposed, could best be accomplished by persons whose own lives exemplified the principles they sought to convey:
An English curriculum which develops the intellectual, emotional, and creative elements of our youngsters in well-balanced fashion can be planned and taught only by teachers who are themselves keen and sensitive and witty and creative. . . . The art of living—that is the subject that we teach; the art of living! And we ourselves must be the masters of that art. (15-17)

In this address Weeks established “teaching the art of living” as a theme of the National Curriculum Commission she initiated to develop a pattern curriculum illustrating the best current teaching practices. Chaired by Wilbur Hatfield, the Commission published as its report An Experience Curriculum (1935), in which it concluded that life experience is “the best of all schools” and that the ideal curriculum “consists of well-selected experiences” (Applebee 119).

Teaching the art of living, as Weeks espoused it, was an experiential, child-centered approach to learning that emphasized the views of John Dewey and the progressive movement in education. Looking out upon her tumultuous society as it struggled to accommodate influxes of immigrants, to recover from the trauma of the Great War, to rectify economic imbalances, and later to weather the Great Depression, Weeks saw an imperative need for educational practice to help shape the contemporary world. English instructors needed to make learning more relevant to life and to ensure that their students became responsible, creative human beings. The intellectual, emotional, and creative faculties of each child all had to be nurtured. Weeks thus advocated a teaching approach that would develop “the whole personality for a complete and happy life” (“Teaching the Whole Child” 10). And she knew that teaching of this kind was a heavy responsibility, since “until we are complete human beings, we are unfit to be school teachers.” After all, “you teach far more by what you are than by the lessons you assign” (16).

In her second major commentary, an article published in 1937 and entitled “Content for Composition,” Weeks further elucidated her teaching philosophy. Here she championed the correlation movement in education which proposed to integrate English with other subjects so as to foster what we now call holistic learning. She regarded integration as a means of bringing “the world into the English classroom,” where it belonged (299). The NCTE’s Committee on Correlation, which Weeks chaired, had recently published as its report A Correlated Curriculum. In that work she advocated
producing a new breed of teacher that would be prepared to validate a fresh approach:

A whole teacher teaching a whole child to live a whole life is the new idea. Everything must be fitted into this whole and serve its purpose there. Subject matter in itself is valueless; only as a part of living can it be valuable. To give it some value is the teacher’s function and he does it by making his classroom the scene of living. (quoted in “Content for Composition” 297)

Weeks challenged English educators to make possible a new sort of education by themselves mastering the art of living.

But exactly how was a working teacher to transform herself, or himself, into such a master? Weeks’ characteristically straightforward answer was—through determination to develop one’s “whole living personality” (“Teaching the Whole Child” 10). She saw the new educator as involved in all facets of existence—making friends in varied walks of life, traveling, reading, and keeping current on events, science, art, music, drama, and cinema. The educator must promote his or her own physical and mental health through regular exercise and must take care to stay involved in the community (17).

These were lofty and strenuous ideals, especially since, as a veteran teacher, Weeks knew from experience the manifold limitations typically imposed on teachers, especially on women. She criticized as often inadequate the academic preparation future teachers received in normal schools which, by emphasizing method over content, deprived them of valuable cultural and social exposure. She knew how the practical demands upon teachers’ time and energy could make of them virtual recluses. And she was aware that regulations imposed by school boards often actually denied teachers the opportunity to participate in civic and political activities. Never one to mince words, Weeks portrayed the English teacher’s life as too often one “of scant leisure, a constant contact with immature and inferior minds, of comparative poverty, of social isolation, and in the case of women who more and more dominate the profession, of complete biological detachment from life” (19). She knew how easy it was for a teacher to fall into a stultifying routine. She confessed that in 1914 and 1915, while teaching at Tudor Hall in Indianapolis, she had endured just such a dreary existence. She went nowhere, met virtually no one, and affiliated herself with no community activity. And when a friend labelled her as “not dead
but teaching,” the ironic comparison so shocked her that she learned a valuable lesson: “Most people die long before their death. It takes effort to stay alive” (17).

Just who was this woman of such conviction—this high school teacher who presumed to give her colleagues across the nation a pep talk about staying alert and alive in the profession? One observer, J. N. Hook, has hinted at Weeks’ dynamic personality by referring to her as an “energetic little woman—‘this whirlwind’” (94). For example, even though by the early 1920s she had only begun to write for *English Journal*, the NCTE’s house organ, through her intelligence and spunk she quickly rose within the organization until by 1928 she was a member of the editorial board. James Hocker Mason, the author of a doctoral dissertation on the early years of the NCTE, provides further glimpses of Weeks that yield insight into her personality. At the 1927 Board of Directors’ meeting in Chicago she was a mere newcomer, but she was nonetheless also a dynamic female who expected her views to be heard—a relatively new phenomenon in the male-dominated executive branch. Not taking herself or her colleagues too seriously, years afterward she joked about this occasion: “I believe I was noticed,” she recalled, “mainly because . . . I wore a rather striking silk, fringed, green shawl. I was also young for the Council in those days. It was a small, tight group on the gray side” (Mason 94). Affability and even temper were among Weeks’ endearing traits. “I used to play cards with her and some older ladies,” a former student wrote, “and sometimes the others would get into spirited arguments over a play. She always laughed and threw up her hands with a humorous comment. I never knew her to express anger” (Varney 12).

According to Mason, one of Weeks’ early triumphs was in convincing the NCTE to adopt the doubtful course of scheduling its annual conference in Kansas City—the hinterlands, farther west even than the Mississippi River! At the 1928 convention, in Balti-
more, she promised that if the Council chose Kansas City as the site for 1929, she would personally guarantee attendance by no fewer than 600 delegates. Since no NCTE convention had yet drawn more than 400 attendees, this pledge seemed daring if not foolhardy. Reluctantly the Council took a chance on her. When, on the eve of the Kansas City convention, Executive Secretary Wilbur Hatfield saw that the huge ballroom of the Hotel Baltimore had been reserved for the opening session, he intervened and ordered a smaller room instead. Weeks and the local arrangements committee arrived on the scene shortly afterward, just in time to save the day. As she cheerfully described the situation years later,

Well!!!! Every remaining on-duty employee of the hotel, the local committee, all Kansas Citians whom I could commandeer, and a lot of early arriving delegates who were angels of God if ever there were such, stripped every bedroom, committee room, parlor, etc., of its straight chairs. I’m telling you it was some job! But we seated that crowd of 600! Tennyson would have written another “Charge [of the Light Brigade]” had he seen it.” (Hook 95)

Over 1,000 persons from all parts of the nation attended the convention of 1929, including for the first time many black educators. Weeks’ management skills and enthusiasm had made the difference. The grateful Council crowned her with a wreath of roses as “our Princess Ruth Mary” and elected her President for the coming year (“The Kansas City Council Meeting” 61).

Ruth Mary Weeks’ marked enthusiasm for an active and socially useful life came to her as a birthright. She was born on February 21, 1886 to Edwin R. and Mary Harmon Weeks, both civic leaders in Kansas City. Her grandfather Weeks, a Seventh Day Adventist minister, and his wife had devoted themselves to the abolition of slavery and the education of black children. The elder Weeks had operated a station on the underground railroad in New York prior to bringing his family, with fifteen cattle and two wagons, to Kansas City. Young Edwin R. Weeks had helped his father build a school in nearby Westport that became the first free school for blacks in Missouri (“Weeks, Edwin R.”). Grandmother Weeks, herself a forceful personality, participated in the Bloomer movement for dress reform and the emancipation of women (“Random Thoughts”).
Young Edwin R. Weeks worked his way through Phillips Exeter Academy, where he studied physics and the exciting new field of electricity. In time he won national recognition, not only for bringing electric lighting to Kansas City but also as a pioneer in the electronics industry; he was a friend and colleague of Thomas A. Edison. Having inherited his parents’ humanitarian instincts, Weeks helped found the Bands of Mercy, an organization of humane societies across the United States (“Edwin R. Weeks”).

Ruth Mary Weeks’ mother, Mary Harmon Weeks, made her own significant contributions to education. By the time her daughter was born, she had taught mathematics and English at Central High School in Kansas City for twenty-one years. She was among the founders of the now-familiar PTA, the Parent-Teacher Association of America. Her work on behalf of mothers and children, which began in 1889 in Ruth Mary’s kindergarten class, actually antedated the national organization by eight years (Craven).

Lived out amidst a family of accomplishments and commitments like these, Weeks’ childhood was filled with experiences that sowed the seeds for her activist philosophy. Her parents were her friends and confidants, not merely authority figures. They sought to mold her entire personality, or what she would later term “the four faces of the human soul: thought, feeling, action, and laughter” (“Teaching the Whole Child” 10). Aesthetic experiences they made available to her helped develop her emotional sensitivity. As she told the 1930 NCTE delegation,

I learned to love sunsets by being taken as a child night after night and summer after summer to the hillside above our country home to watch the sun drop down into the waters of a sapphire lake. . . .
I learned to love religious music by sitting in a half-lighted chapel evening after evening while a choir sang and a great organist played his favorite selections. I learned to love poetry by having it recited to me throughout childhood as an evening lullaby by a mother who could not sing. I learned to love rhythms by dancing and skating and marching to music and experiencing the undiluted physical glow of metric movement. (“Teaching the Whole Child” 13)

As a student at Central High School she showed a keen interest in physics, but her father cautioned her that no career openings existed for women in science. “It would break your heart,” he said, “to train for something you couldn’t use” (Phillips).
Heeding his advice, as an undergraduate student at Vassar College she majored in economics, read Greek, and enjoyed literature. In the early twentieth century Vassar was noted as a progressive, outward-looking school for women. Weeks recalled half a century afterward that the “theme song” at Vassar in those days was “how to apply intelligence to life”: “Every girl thought she had a mission to make the world better . . . and no graduate ever stopped to worry about being unfashionably aggressive” (Phillips). Like her fellow students, Weeks wished to better her world, but upon her graduation in 1908 she was not yet quite sure what course she would follow. Some of her classmates were about to enter the business world, often as executive secretaries, while others planned to do volunteer work in social service. Seeking to make her contribution outside volunteerism, the typical lot of many educated women of her generation, she decided upon teaching, a profession already accessible to women. And, following the example of her parents, she determined to begin her effort in Kansas City. Her plan to become a useful citizen in this fashion must have touched her classmates, for they elected her the recipient of a valuable William Borden European Fellowship (“Ruth Mary Weeks, Outstanding Teacher”).

In 1908, upon the opening of Westport High School, Ruth Mary Weeks began teaching in her home city. Except for five years between 1910 and 1915, during which she visited Europe on her Borden Fellowship, earned a Master’s degree from the University of Michigan, and taught at two private schools, she remained in Kansas City until her retirement. Though trained in economics, at Westport High School she was assigned to teach English. As she wryly remembered, “those in charge wouldn’t even let me teach civics, let alone economics. Women didn’t even have the right to vote then” (Phillips). From 1916 to 1926 Weeks taught at Kansas City Junior College, and in the latter year she joined the staff of the newly opened Paseo High School, where she served as Chair of the English Department for thirty more years.

Even though Weeks had not been permitted to teach in her first academic field, she made a lifelong effort to apply her expertise in economics and in social service to involvements within her community. In fact, she was honored in Who’s Who for her advocacy of social education. She was an active young woman; by 1925 she had already lectured widely on the subject and published six books.

Immediately upon her graduation from Vassar, Weeks volun-
teered for a time at a New York settlement house sponsored by five women’s colleges. Shocked at the scene, which she described as “a low slum area full of immigrants right off the boat,” she quickly decided that the well-meaning efforts of the college students there were futile. “A school was the natural approach to these people,” she reasoned at the time (Phillips). But, what kind of school? How would it be organized, and what would be its curriculum? After teaching in Kansas City for a year, Weeks felt she should try to answer these questions by developing and presenting in book form a model curriculum for vocational education. Other writers had discussed the theoretical side of this topic, but they had not yet supplied the practical pedagogy. She elicited the opinions of local union leaders and of the American Federation of Labor, and then, using her fellowship from Vassar, in 1910 she traveled to Europe to study the trade schools there. Sometimes, it developed, her visits to the schools were necessarily conducted under restrictions, since in both France and Germany women were not as a rule allowed to enter the boys’ facilities. Fortunately she had sailed to Europe equipped with letters of introduction from prominent educators who requested permits of admission on behalf of “R. M. Weeks.” These letters she would send ahead in advance of her visits. The necessary permits were always forthcoming, the authorities no doubt assuming she was a man (“The People’s School”).

After a year of travel and observation Weeks wrote *The People’s School: A Study in Vocational Training* (1912), in which she examined every phase of German, French, and Swiss vocational schools for both boys and girls. She considered also in this work the experiments in vocational education being made by American city schools and corporations. Defining her own aims for the book, Weeks wrote: “I wanted particularly to show the very intimate relation of the trade school to various social and intellectual movements. I regard [the trade school] as being potentially one of the most far reaching means of social improvement” (“The People’s School”).

As the first American book on vocational training, *The People’s School* attracted considerable attention and resulted in demand for Ruth Mary Weeks as a lecturer at educational conventions (“An Entire Kansas City Family”). The book was later placed on reading lists distributed by the Great Books Foundation. However, analysis of vocational education was only Weeks’ first step toward linking school and life; next, she undertook to explore the entire curriculum. While pursuing graduate study at the University of Michigan under
Fred N. Scott, a colleague of John Dewey, she was inspired by Dewey’s works, especially his epoch-making little volume, *The School and Society* (1899). Already sensitive to the trend of thought that characterized the school as a world in miniature, Weeks recognized that teachers required more practical guidance as they attempted to apply progressive theorems in actual classrooms.

Soon she translated her developing ideas into a text for educators, *Socializing the Three R’s* (1919). Successful teachers of tomorrow, she reasoned there, would not simply seek out the best methods for teaching children to read, write, and calculate, but in addition they would consider how to help young persons survive in society and create a better world in the process. All school subjects, therefore, must be reinterpreted in light of these aims and taught through reference to contemporary civilization (165). Weeks and other proponents of the progressive movement advocated social education of this sort in all fields. However, even though the concepts she had set forth in *Socializing the Three R’s* were being generally accepted in the elementary curriculum, she observed that teaching in arithmetic resisted the changes she had proposed. Together with a co-author, Rosamond Losh of the Kansas City Children’s Bureau, she proceeded in *Primary Number Projects* (1923) to analyze ways in which children can learn early number skills in real-life situations.

The next thirty years of her professional life Weeks spent adapting the principles of socializing education to her daily teaching of English. In addition, during the period of her leadership in the NCTE she chaired a subcommittee of that body’s Curriculum Committee called the Committee on Correlation. The latter group compiled and analyzed existing correlation experiments in English pedagogy across the United States. Weeks edited the results in a lengthy report, *A Correlated Curriculum* (1936). This document encouraged “natural fusions and integrations” of subject-matter, but it discouraged “ill-considered attempts at correlation made merely because it is in fashion” (“The National Council” 19). Presenting the report at the 1936 annual meeting of the NCTE, Weeks wittily likened the skillful curriculum-maker to “a juggler with four balls, each of which he must keep in the air—interest, growth, social vision, and skill” (“Pattern-Making in Education” 192). She declared on this occasion that she would remain a “staunch correlationist” even though she feared that integration could easily be misinterpreted and reduced to narrow themes, or else taken to such extremes that the essential components of English study, such
as the study of literature, could be sacrificed. “Let us by all means make of education a vital pattern,” she warned. “But let it be a rich pattern” (193).

Weeks sought through the years to create learning materials that illustrated her evolving ideas. Shortly after the publication of *A Correlated Curriculum*, she produced with Thelma Winnberg Cook and P. H. Deffendall a series of ten teaching units entitled *English Through Experience* (1936). In this collection English skills such as grammar, usage, spelling, and composition were integrated with a wide variety of literature and life themes. Not long afterward, Weeks collaborated with Rollo L. Lyman and Howard C. Hill, both of the University of Chicago, in preparing two literature anthologies for use at the secondary level. In her introductions to the new texts, *World Literature* (1938) and *English Literature* (1941), she encouraged students to read widely in order to discover some of life’s secrets and satisfactions contained in great writings. Her steady support of literature as an element in teaching the art of living led her to chair two other NCTE committees that surveyed the reading materials used in English classes across the nation. These were the Committee on Present Practice in the Use of Reading Lists (1938) and the Committee on Newspapers and Periodicals (1946). The latter group published its summary of classroom practices as *Using Periodicals: A Report on the Use of Magazines and Newspapers in the English Class* (1950).

Upon her death in 1969 Weeks, an only child who never married, left no survivors. (A foster son, Oliver Payne, had died in naval action during World War II.) Nevertheless, her teaching philosophy lived on after her and exerted a continuing influence. Even though history has revealed shortcomings in the experience curriculum and correlation design so prevalent in the progressive era in education, much of the spirit that gave rise to these pioneering initiatives still prevails. The underlying philosophy of Weeks’ approach was still in evidence when, between 1955 and 1965, the Council produced an ambitious five-volume English curriculum series. Teaching the art of living was clearly influential as a concept when, at Dartmouth College in 1966, the Anglo-American Seminar on the Teaching of English once again emphasized the importance of children’s activities, especially oral and creative experiences, for holistic learning (Hook 120-21). Weeks’ central ideas were honored then and, at the core, remain among the goals of advanced researchers and instructors today.
First and last a classroom teacher, albeit a remarkably energetic and innovative one, Ruth Mary Weeks sought throughout her career to realize with her students her own theoretical aims. Generations of young persons in Kansas City benefitted from her enthusiasm for literature and life. Her ability to make her classroom an exciting yet civilized place was legendary. “Her highly personalized instruction was never routine,” one former student fondly recalled at the time of her death. It was “always lively and marked by a love of literature and language which she wanted to implant permanently in the minds of her young people (“Ruth Mary Weeks, Outstanding Teacher”). As recently as 1986, a Kansas City resident paid tribute to her former teacher’s fostering guidance. “I first met Miss Weeks in a course in freshman English composition,” Dorothy Varney wrote, “—not always a subject to evoke special enthusiasm”:

But when I entered the room, I had a feeling that this class would be notable. The teacher was pretty and full of sparkle. She proved to be humorous and liked to shrug and to gesture with her delicate hands to prove a point. She always had something encouraging to say about our attempts to write. (12)

What more valued tribute can a teacher receive than the respectful regard, and recollection, of his or her students? Of all her accomplishments, Ruth Mary Weeks was proudest of her former students who went on to pursue successful and creative careers. Many of them kept in touch with her for years after they had left her classroom (“Ruth Mary Weeks, Outstanding Teacher”). Like Weeks herself, those men and women had surely learned well “the art of living.”
Works Cited


“The People’s School: A Kansas City Teacher’s New Book on Vocational Training.” *Kansas City Star*, 24 March 1912, 10C.


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No. 2. Ronald D. Pearse, “Ethical Behavior is Strategic Behavior” (1991)

No. 3. John M. Teahan, “‘One of the Nation of Many Nations’: Walt Whitman and Multiculturalism” (1992)

No. 4. Judy Prozzillo Byers, “Teaching the Art of Living: The Education Philosophy of Ruth Mary Weeks” (1993)

COLOPHON

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