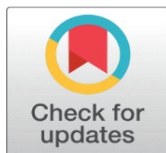


LEO TOLSTOY'S FOLK PEDAGOGY: A DEMOCRATIC REVOLUTION IN EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

This article examines Leo Tolstoy's contributions to folk pedagogy, focusing on his experimental school at Yasnaya Polyana (1859–1862) and his ABC Book (Azbuka, 1872). Rejecting authoritarian education models, Tolstoy championed child-centered learning, cultural relevance, and moral development through folklore. His methods—emphasizing freedom, dialogue, and peasant wisdom—anticipated progressive education movements by decades. Despite criticism from Tsarist officials, Tolstoy's pedagogy influenced later reformers, including Montessori and Dewey. This study analyzes his key principles, pedagogical innovations, his predecessors and enduring relevance in contemporary education debates.

Keywords: Leo Tolstoy, Folk Pedagogy, Intergenerational Continuity, Moral Education, Child-Centered Learning, Russian Folklore

1. INTRODUCTION

While Leo Tolstoy (1828–1910) is celebrated as a literary titan, his work as an educator remains understudied in Western academia. This paper explores his radical pedagogical experiments, which sought to democratize education for Russia's peasantry. Rejecting rigid, church-dominated schooling, Tolstoy argued that true learning emerges from freedom, cultural authenticity, and ethical engagement [Tolstoy \(1862\)](#). His ideas predated key 20th-century educational movements, offering a model for student-centered, experiential learning.

2. TOLSTOY'S PEDAGOGICAL PHILOSOPHY

2.1. YASNAYA POLYANA SCHOOL AS A CRITIQUE OF AUTHORITARIAN EDUCATION

At about 200 km from Moscow, in his demesne, Tolstoy organized a free school for peasants' children. He spoiled all the rules in society. At first that time it was a nonsense to teach the poor reading and writing. All the education was for fee. And the last, he used his own curricula.

Tolstoy's approach to education was shaped by his disillusionment with traditional schooling, which he saw as oppressive and disconnected from the needs of peasant children.

Tolstoy's School at Yasnaya Polyana condemned traditional schooling as oppressive:

"Education is the free relation between people, where neither party hinders the other's development." [Tolstoy \(1862\)](#)

He rejected standardized curricula, rote memorization, corporal punishment. Tolstoy advocated for a pedagogy of freedom. He believed that children learn best when they are not coerced but are instead allowed to follow their natural curiosity.

2.2. CORE PRINCIPLES

- 1) **Freedom in Learning:** No fixed curriculum—students chose what to study. No compulsory subjects or exams.
- 2) **Dialogue Over Monologue:** Following in the footsteps of his great predecessor, the educator K.D. Ushinsky, Tolstoy considered dialogue an essential part of education and upbringing. [Ushinsky \(1857\)](#) Teachers and students co-constructed knowledge. They learned from each other.
- 3) **Folk Wisdom:** Peasant traditions (proverbs, songs) were the foundation for texts.
- 4) **Moral Growth:** Education as a means of ethical, not just intellectual, development. Ethics were taught through narratives, not dogma.
- 5) **Practical Knowledge:** Emphasis on skills relevant to peasant life (agriculture, crafts).

3. THE YASNAYA POLYANA EXPERIMENT (1859–1862)

At his estate, Tolstoy established a school where peasant children attended free of charge. His school embodied his philosophy. It was a revolutionary idea at that time. His methods were pioneering too:

- **No Punishments, Grades or Exams:** Learning was assessed through discussion, not standardized testing.
- **Storytelling and Oral Tradition:** Tolstoy incorporated folk tales and oral histories into lessons.

Student-Centered Learning: Children decided when and what to study, often gathering in spontaneous discussions.

His journals reveal: "Children learned best when their natural curiosity guided them." [Tolstoy \(1862\)](#) So in his practical pedagogical activities at the Yasnaya Polyana school, he sought to implement the principle that the only method of upbringing is experience—the child's individual experience, accumulated in

accordance with his needs, aspirations, and desires. But collective experience is not also rejected by Tolstoy. It serves as a concentration of content selected by the child himself or by a group of children. In the latter case, we can speak of the collective accumulation of individual experience. The key condition of pedagogical practice for the great thinker is granting the child freedom of choice. This determines the specificity of the mechanism of intergenerational continuity in Tolstoy's practice.

4. THE ABC BOOK (AZBUKA, 1872): FOLK PEDAGOGY IN PRACTICE

Tolstoy believed that education should not just instruct but also cultivate morality. He wrote: "For a child to learn well, he must learn freely and happily. And for him to learn freely and happily, the teaching must respond to his spiritual needs."

Tolstoy (1875)

He compiled peasant proverbs, recorded folk stories, and even rewrote his own literary works in simpler language to make them accessible. His "ABC Book" [Azбуka \(1872\)](#) was full of folk tales and natural science, blending traditional knowledge with practical skills. It was designed to teach peasant children reading, writing, arithmetic, and—most important—moral values. Unlike dry, religiously rigid textbooks of his time, Tolstoy filled his ABC Book with folktales, fables, and simple stories that conveyed deep ethical lessons in a language accessible to children.

To achieve this, he ingeniously retold stories from:

- Russian folklore (proverbs, fairy tales)
- Aesopian fables (adapted for peasant life)
- Biblical parable (stripped of church dogma, focusing on universal ethics)
- Real-life peasant experiences (stories of honesty, labor, and compassion)

You might wonder: Why did these stories resonate so deeply? What is the secret?

- 1) **Cultural Relevance:** Tolstoy used animals, rural settings, and peasant dilemmas (land, labor, honesty) so children saw themselves in the tales. So stories mirrored peasant experiences.
- 2) **Dialogue-Based Learning:** Teachers were encouraged to discuss the stories, not just recite them.
- 3) **Non-Punitive Morality:** Unlike religious primers that threatened hell, Tolstoy's stories showed natural consequences (e.g., the liar loses trust, the greedy man loses everything).

More over, nothing has changed over the centuries. Despite unprecedented technological progress, modern society faces the same dilemmas: good vs bad, together vs individual, technology vs nature and so on. Thus, the relevance of ethical education through Tolstoy's stories is greater now than ever. By 2020, Tolstoy's ABC Book (Azбуka) had undergone over 100 reprints [Eikhbaum \(2018\)](#), maintaining its status as Russia's most influential primer and consistently outselling state-approved textbooks in the post-Soviet era [Zajda \(2020\)](#).

5. CRITICISMS AND GLOBAL INFLUENCE

5.1. CONTEMPORARY BACKLASH

Tolstoy's ideas were radical for his time and faced backlash. Tsarist officials blamed him for the lack of Orthodox indoctrination. Critics and elites accused him of romanticizing peasant life and rejecting structured education.

5.2. LASTING IMPACT

Leo Tolstoy's pedagogical ideas and experience inspired many educators in the world. John Dewey [Dewey \(1897\)](#) and Maria Montessori [Montessori \(1912\)](#) echoed his emphasis on child-centered learning in their Progressive Education. But they inherited only one part of his pedagogical system – focus on a person itself. However collective experience is not also rejected by Tolstoy. It serves as a concentration of content selected by the child themselves or by a group of children. In the latter case, we can speak of the collective accumulation of individual experience. Early Soviet educators like N.K. Krupskaya admired Tolstoy's democratic approach and she was inspired for Soviet education reforms [Krupskaya \(1918\)](#).

Building upon the educational legacy of Ushinsky and Tolstoy, Paulo Freire developed his theory of dialogic pedagogy, synthesizing their insights with critical social theory. [Freire \(1970\)](#)

Tolstoy's resistance to rigid curricula and mechanical assessment in 19th-century Russia strikingly anticipates modern critiques of standardized testing. Like Sir Ken Robinson (2010), who argued that standardized education 'kills creativity' by prioritizing uniformity over individual potential, Tolstoy condemned exams as 'artificial hurdles' distorting authentic learning.

6. CONCLUSION

Tolstoy's pedagogy remains vital for its respect for learner autonomy, integration of folk culture, rejection of dehumanizing education systems.

As he declared in Education and Culture (1862): "The only criterion of pedagogy is freedom."

The key condition of pedagogical practice for the great thinker is granting the child freedom of choice. This determines the specificity of the mechanism of intergenerational continuity in Tolstoy's practice. In an era of mechanized learning, Tolstoy's vision challenges us to rehumanize education.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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