



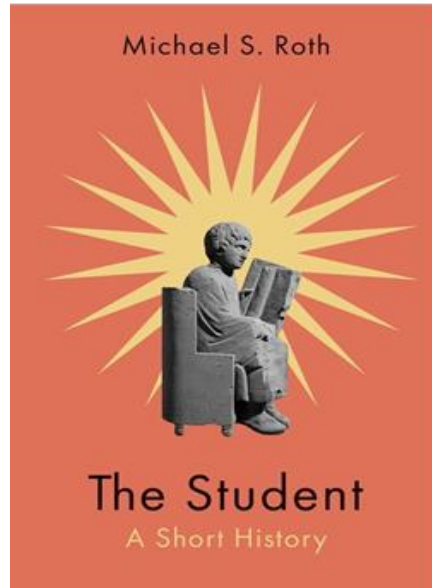
Roth, M. S. (2023). *The student: A short history*. Yale University Press.

Pp. 216

ISBN: 978-0300250039

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Michael S. Roth's latest book *The Student: A Short History* explores the evolving role of students through the ages, from ancient civilizations to modern times. The author draws from a vast array of historical and contemporary sources to paint a broad, yet insightful picture of what it means to be a student. The book is both a historical analysis and a reflection on the philosophical underpinnings of learning and education. The target group for the book is professors, teachers, and scholars who are interested in the evolution of the student role. It serves as a resource for those looking to understand the past, present, and potential future of the student as an educational and societal figure. It could also appeal to readers involved in debates about contemporary educational challenges and reforms, providing them with a historical perspective that might inform their views and decisions.



The author is a distinguished historian and university administrator, currently serving as the president of Wesleyan University. Before his tenure at Wesleyan, Roth was the president of the California College of the Arts and held the role of associate director at the Getty Research Institute in Los Angeles. His academic career is marked by his extensive work in history and the humanities. His leadership at Wesleyan has been characterized by initiatives aimed at affordability and inclusivity, significantly influencing university policies and curriculum to better serve its diverse student body.

The book is neatly structured into five chapters, beginning with the roots of educational practices in ancient times and progressively moving toward contemporary issues facing students today. Each chapter is dedicated to a specific era or significant aspect of student life, providing a mixture of philosophical reflections, historical narratives, and personal anecdotes.

In the opening chapter, Roth explores the relationships between iconic educators such as Confucius, Socrates, and Jesus, and their students. He reveals how these figures shaped the very concept of learning and the dynamic roles of teachers and students. For instance, Confucius emphasized ethical practices and virtue, fostering a learning environment based on mutual respect and wisdom. In contrast, Socrates is portrayed as focusing more on questioning assumptions and encouraging critical thinking among his students. Roth illustrates how Socrates's method of dialectical inquiry helped students discover their ignorance and motivated them to seek true knowledge. The Socratic method, as the author discussed, encourages an interactive learning environment where the teacher acts more as a facilitator of dialogue rather than a traditional authoritative figure. In this line of inquiry, Roth also discusses Jesus in terms of his role as a Rabbi whose lessons went beyond intellectual instruction to deeply personal and transformative experiences for his followers. The narrative shows how Jesus's teachings encouraged a form of discipleship that was profoundly tied to personal growth and communal responsibility.

Roth's focus then shifts to the historical progression of learning and education from early childhood to apprenticeship or formal schooling. This section explores how different societies have shaped the educational journeys of the young, emphasizing the evolution from informal family-based teaching to more structured forms of learning. Roth delves into the transition from children viewed as mere participants in the family economy to individuals deserving of specialized education. The author uses historical examples to highlight how education has been used as a tool for socialization, professional preparation, and personal development. Generally, the book provides a comprehensive overview of how the notions of childhood, apprenticeship, and student independence have intersected and evolved, influencing modern educational systems and the concept of the student as an autonomous learner.

Roth explores further, the significant transformations in the concept and role of students from the Enlightenment through the 19th century within the wider sociopolitical context. Specifically, the rise of individual rights and the emphasis on reason and scientific inquiry shaped new educational paradigms and redefined the student's role in society. Roth discusses how educational institutions began to shift away from traditional, often religiously dominated, teachings toward more secular and rational curricula that emphasized critical thinking and empirical evidence. This period also saw the expansion of educational access and international knowledge transfers with the growth of public education systems that aimed to produce informed citizens. The chapter covers key figures in educational reform and philosophy, such as

Kant, Locke Rousseau, and Wollstonecraft, whose ideas influenced modern concepts of education and learning.

With a focus on more recent developments in the 20th and 21st centuries, Roth explores the various dimensions of college life that contribute to a student's personal and intellectual growth and the complexities and challenges they navigate during their transition into adulthood within the academic environment. By examining the expectations placed on students and highlighting how societal and cultural shifts have influenced these expectations, the author explores the role of colleges in fostering critical thinking within academia. Roth also addresses the pressures that come with the freedom and responsibilities of college life. Furthermore, the author considers how students' interactions with peers and faculty shape their educational journey and their development as individuals. Through a thorough analysis of the college experience and its role in shaping students into thoughtful, capable, and resilient adults, Roth contributes to the broader discussion of what it means to be a student in a complex and rapidly changing world.

A final theme explored by Roth is the critical role of intellectual independence within the context of educational settings. In other words, the ability to think for oneself – a hallmark of mature scholarship and personal development – is deeply intertwined with learning from others. Roth emphasizes the importance of dialogue, debate, and the exchange of ideas as foundational elements that encourage students to develop their own thoughts while engaging with different perspectives. Further, Roth calls for “A liberal education [that] should enable you to discover capabilities you didn't even know you had while deepening those that provide you with meaning and direction” (p. 176). He underscores that true intellectual growth involves more than just absorbing information; it requires active engagement with ideas, challenging one's preconceptions, and considering alternative viewpoints. According to Roth, this dynamic between individual thinking and communal learning suggests that educational environments are most effective when they foster both independence and interdependence among students. Roth argues that this balance is crucial for cultivating knowledgeable individuals and thoughtful citizens capable of critical thinking and innovation in broader societal contexts.

Roth excels in articulating the historical contexts that have shaped the student identity, making adept use of his scholarly expertise to draw connections between disparate epochs and cultures. Not surprisingly, the book occasionally lacks depth, especially in parts where the author attempts to cover broad swathes of history in a single chapter. His analysis of the transition from medieval to modern educational practices, however, is particularly compelling, highlighting how shifts in political, social, and economic landscapes have influenced student roles.

One key strength of *The Student* is its relevance to current educational debates. Roth links historical trends with contemporary issues in education, such as the commercialization of education, the impact of technology on

learning, and the political controversies surrounding education. His ability to distill intricate historical and philosophical ideas into clear, concise prose makes the book a valuable resource not only for academics but also for general readers interested in the evolution of student life and learning.

One of the book's strengths, however, is also its weakness. Roth's explanations are strongly oriented towards the discourse in the Global North and the formal learning processes therein. Although Confucius and the historical Jesus are taken up, the explorations of how the role of the student has developed over time remains limited to Western knowledge and promotes a perspective focused on the individual. In times of global climate change, the de-colonization of knowledge, and an interconnected world, valuable perspectives of Indigenous cultures and traditions on learning and the relationship between teacher and student are noticeably absent from this historical account.

Within Indigenous traditions in particular, the relationship between teacher and student takes place within a complex matrix that includes knowledge of each other's family, village, tribe, clan, homeland, and history (Mercurieff & Roderick, 2013). Teachers and students share a deep connection through a common ancestry that underscores a holistic sense of self interwoven with the community and the natural environment. Instead of direct questions or instructions, learners are expected to observe closely and imitate the actions of their teachers. This approach encourages independent thinking and learning from experience rather than relying on verbal and often abstract instructions in Western teaching styles.

Further, Indigenous teaching methods often involve indirect approaches such as storytelling and subtle guidance (van der Hoek, 2023). This technique respects the learner's inherent intelligence and allows them to figure things out for themselves through independent reflection. It also prevents the learner's self-confidence from being weakened by avoiding direct criticism. Pausing and taking time to reflect are essential parts of the learning process that allow learners to internalize and understand the lessons (de Leeuw & Greenwood, 2014). In this way, learning can be understood as a multi-sensory process that involves seeing, hearing, intuition, emotions, and a connection to the environment. This holistic approach ensures that learners are fully engaged and that the knowledge they acquire is deeply rooted in their experiences and environment.

Especially since Roth explicitly emphasizes that true intellectual growth involves more than simply absorbing information but requires actively engaging with ideas, questioning one's preconceptions and considering alternative viewpoints, it is surprising that Roth does not address Indigenous knowledge more directly. In the pedagogical framework provided by Indigenous knowledge, the role of the student is to observe, listen, and learn actively and independently. They are expected to develop their skills and knowledge through a process of self-discovery and interaction with their environment and community. The student learns at their own pace, guided by their interests and experiences, and are encouraged to use their innate

intelligence to navigate and understand their world (Graeber & Wengrow, 2021).

Roth's *The Student: A Short History* does a commendable job of charting the evolution of the student's role within predominantly Western educational paradigms from ancient times to the present. However, the book could have benefited from a more inclusive approach that integrates non-European perspectives to provide a fuller picture of the student-teacher dynamic across different civilizations. The exclusive focus on European and individualistic frameworks may leave readers yearning for a more global viewpoint, especially in today's interconnected world where diverse cultural insights are crucial.

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