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## Teaching John Dewey as a Utopian Pragmatist While Learning from My Students

William Henry Schubert

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### ***Education and the American Creed***

More than any other figure of the past century, Dewey promoted and strengthened the belief in education as the principal conclusion of the American creed. Among the multitude of cultures that find conflict in American and global society, Dewey envisioned an overarching intercultural education to build a sense of unity through diversity.

He conceived of community not as a group set against other groups by special interests, but as a cosmopolitan association of people who draw their strength through finding common cause through their diverse talents. He never doubted the democratic prospect and was an activist for virtually every democratic social movement—educational opportunity, human rights, child welfare, academic freedom, and social justice. He advised his fellow philosophers that they should study the problems of humanity rather than the problems of philosophy.

Throughout his life and over the course of a half-century since his passing, John Dewey has been vilified, honored, betrayed, vindicated, attacked and defended. But when all is said and done, he gave America and the world the most provocative, comprehensive, and powerful vision for human progress through democracy and education for the twenty-first century. He was a man for his times and a man for all times. He knew full well that progress is never made. By its very nature, progress is in the making.

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### ***Teaching John Dewey as a Utopian Pragmatist While Learning from My Students***

**by William H. Schubert, University of Illinois-Chicago**

When I speculate on the major contributions of John Dewey to education, I think of his integration of dualisms, his unification of theory and practice in principled action, and his utopian vision. As a professor in the area of curriculum studies, I try to teach these three dimensions of Dewey to graduate students.<sup>1</sup> Sometimes, to generate student interest in a lecture on Dewey, I semi-jokingly claim to have psychic powers that enable me to get in contact with the spirit of Dewey. After the blinking of classroom lights and asking the class members to chant Dewey's name several times, I find myself depicting Dewey's life and ideas as if his spirit has taken over my voice. While space here does not permit an elaborate rendition of this rather bizarre act of teaching, I will simply relate the three above-mentioned contributions. I do want to note, however, that on many occasions my students have taught me much about how to teach about (and *to be*, in the case of role-playing) John Dewey.

For each of Dewey's contributions that I want to mention below, I will show how a student has enlightened me about that dimension. To learn from one's students is clearly a hallmark of Dewey's philosophy of education. To listen to the strengths brought into class by students has, for me, been a dynamic source of ideas over the years. The inspiration of student insights illustrates the value of beginning with Dewey's *psychological* (i.e., the interests and concerns that students derive from experience) and its relation to Dewey's *logical* (i.e., organized knowledge, disciplinary and personal-practical). Because of my own study and experience (Deweyan *logical*), I can often add to student interests and concerns (Deweyan *psychological*) to help an idea evolve through subsequent pedagogical relationships.

In the mid-1980s, a graduate student, Charles Smith, told me about an undergraduate philosophy class he had taken at another university. In that class the professor (whose name I do not know) suggested a strategy for understanding the significance of Dewey's contributions to education and philosophy. His message was to simply substitute the word *is* for the word *and* in Dewey's book titles. I tried it and thought it enlightening.

I thought of my long study of Dewey's life and work. Many of Dewey's book titles are, indeed, two key words or concepts joined by the conjunction *and*. Take, for instance, his educational *magnum opus*, *Democracy and Education* (1916), wherein the message becomes democracy *is* education, and conversely, education *is* democracy. Let us consider his earlier books, derived from the renowned laboratory school that he designed and developed at the University of Chicago from 1896 to 1904. Converting those titles, we have the school *is* society and society *is* the school from his classic 1900 book, *The School and Society*. From the 1902 companion book, *The Child and the Curriculum*, we are spurred to ponder meanings of the child *is* (perhaps even read *as*) the curriculum and the curriculum *is* the child. Much later, in his retrospective look (*Experience and Education*, 1938) at what happened in his name under the label of *progressive education*, Dewey argued that the issue runs deeper than a mere contention between advocates of progressive education and traditional education. He and philosopher of education Boyd H. Bode of Ohio State University separately were loan advocates who attempted to resolve the dualism that ultimately divided and broke the spirit of the progressive education movement, and with it the Progressive Education Association (PEA). Some members of the PEA advocated child-centered (or child study) as the organizing center of their work, while others called for social reconstruction.<sup>2</sup> Again using the *is-for-and* strategy in Dewey's 1938 call for unity, we should consider the deeper meanings of education *as* (or *being*) *experience* and reciprocally the question could become: What if we come to see that experience itself *is* education?

Broader ramifications of this *is-for-and* strategy can be traced in Dewey's corpus of philosophical works; consider for instance the idea that character *is* event when reflecting on Dewey's essays from the *New Republic* and elsewhere, published under the title *Characters and Events* (1929). Think, too, of the ramifications of experience being nature, and nature as experience, in his *Experience and Nature*

(1929), perhaps the closest he came to writing a metaphysical statement. Or consider his metaphysics of human beings (*Human Nature and Conduct*, 1922), which could inspire a discontinuance of the image that human nature is not merely the fount from which conduct flows, but that human nature *is* in fact conduct. Indeed, if pragmatist Dewey aligned firmly with pragmatist predecessor Charles Sanders Peirce's admonition that the meaning of a proposition resides in the consequences of acting on it, it would seem to clearly follow that conduct is the truth or meaning of human nature. What we do is what we are. The *is-for-and* strategy continues to challenge us along the same lines when we consider Dewey's *Liberalism and Social Action* (1935), as we observe that liberalism (to be more than shallow rhetoric) must be known by the instantiated social action that it *is*. Similarly, thinking of *The Public and Its Problems*, it is not the public over here and the problems it faces over there; rather, it is the larger vision of public that creates and incorporates problems, must struggle with them, and tentatively strives to resolve them. Finally, Dewey's *Philosophy and Civilization* (1931) and *Freedom and Culture* (1939) stimulate similar integrations of potential dualisms. Can there be genuine culture that *is* not free? Can there be renditions of civilization that *are* not couched in philosophy? Can life be truly civilized only if it *is* philosophically reflective as it continues to re-create itself? Clearly, one could take the *is-for-and* strategy too far, but within proper balance it is a pedagogical heuristic that I think valuable for extending the spirit of Dewey.

In the early 1990s Ann Lopez wrote her Ph.D. dissertation on an investigation of Deweyan progressive practices in three contexts of urban education: an inner city school, a dance school, and a home-based education project. As revealed in the above integration of dualisms, Lopez helped me understand more fully that theory and practice were *one* in the course of action. One must look at, even embody or take into oneself, the action in order to understand the theory implicit in it (Lopez, 1993). Again, we can return to Peirce's notion that the meaning of a proposition resides in the consequences of acting on it, and in Dewey's reconstructed titles character is event, human nature is conduct, liberalism is social action, education is experience, democracy is education, the school is society, and the child is the curriculum. It may not be mere coincidence that George Dykhuizen's *The Life and Mind of John Dewey* (1973), a long-time definitive source for details of Dewey's life, also has *and* in the title. If this *and* were converted to *is*, it could imply the existence of mind that encompasses life and/or the existence of life that is only made alive by the mind embedded in it.

In any case, to understand the philosophy of John Dewey, we must see Dewey as a public intellectual who took difficult and controversial stances that illustrate (no, perhaps that *are*) his philosophy. When he created the Dewey School (lab school), his philosophy was to integrate philosophy, psychology, and pedagogy in practice. When he worked with the founder of social work, Jane Addams, at her settlement house (Hull House) in Chicago, his philosophy embodied the struggle of the poor and oppressed for a better life. When he left Chicago for New York and

Columbia University in 1904, his philosophy was a statement of resistance against an inappropriate coupling of teacher training with the experimental derivation of educational ideas. By opening the door of his New York home to Maxim Gorky in 1906, he illustrated a courageous philosophical stance in the face of many American authorities, who saw Gorky as a radical socialist striving for support for causes deemed immoral and un-American. More of the political and economic strands of his philosophy were revealed as he helped to found the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People in 1909, the American Association of University Professors in 1915, and the American Federation of Teachers in 1916, and to promote the Women's Suffrage Movement from 1906 to 1919. In 1929, Dewey became president of the People's Lobby and chair of the League for Independent Political Action, and in 1937, he served as a member of the Commission of Inquiry into the Charges against Leon Trotsky, who was exiled in Mexico. He traveled widely to lecture and consult for extensive periods of time in other countries, e.g., Mexico, Turkey, China, Japan, and Russia, as well as visits to several European countries. Frequently, Dewey defended the rights of both citizens and visitors to the United States to express ideas that even he disputed, such as those of Bertrand Russell on marriage and morals.

All of these actions, and many more, reveal deeply lived dimensions of Dewey's philosophy. I try to teach students that what his pragmatism or progressivism in education meant must be seen in actions he took as well as in books and articles he wrote. Sometimes, personal actions can be more revealing than political stances. Between the time Dewey left Chicago for Columbia, his family took an extended trip to Europe, where his eight-year-old son, Gordon, tragically died from typhoid fever; on the same trip they adopted an eight-year-old Italian boy, who became a full member of their family, and much later (in his seventies) a Vietnam War protestor. When Dewey was in his late eighties, he and his second wife were distressed at the plight of children orphaned in Europe during World War II, and they adopted two children, a brother and sister from Belgium. Again, Dewey's life is the story of his philosophical conviction, the theory embodied in his action.

Finally, I want to mention a little-known article that Dewey published in the *New York Times* in 1933.<sup>3</sup> The article is titled "Dewey Outlines Utopian Schools." It was introduced to me by a former doctoral student, Michael Klonsky, who has become director of the Small Schools Workshop in Chicago, a consultancy that helps schools in Chicago and throughout the United States to divide into small, more meaningful communities. Klonsky was intrigued by a point in the second paragraph of the piece wherein Dewey said that the educational environments he saw in his utopian vision housed "not much more than 200 people, this having been found to be about the limits of close, interpersonal acquaintance on the part of people who associate together." While Klonsky valued a source of legitimacy from a renowned philosopher for his small school efforts, I was more interested in other matters that Dewey found in his venture into educational utopia. There is much to build on in Dewey's short article, and I hope to do a much longer treatment of this

document. However, I see the main idea behind it as a radical critique of the competitive economic system that sustains most state, private, and parochial schools as we know them throughout the world today. In essence, Dewey finds that the great culprit behind nondemocratic education is the *acquisitive society*. An attitude of acquisition—the capitalistic ethos, if you will—penetrates our being in ways we scarcely realize. It staunchly prevents the kind of education that Dewey proposes as most desirable.

I use the term *education* instead of *school*, because Dewey's utopian vision holds that the teaching-learning environments that would bring greatest growth are not schools as we know them. His first sentence, in fact, is: "The most Utopian thing in Utopia is that there are no schools at all." He goes on to describe beautiful places where children and adults can grow together, where the very idea of purposes or objectives is not in the vocabulary, where instructional method is not necessary because learning is natural and needs to be nurtured rather than restricted, and where standardization and the surveillance of testing are anathema. The contemporary (then and now) form of education in the sorting machinery of schools (with its standards, goals, tests, and sordid comparisons) is a function of acquisitiveness. The remedy for this mis-educational state of affairs Dewey learned from the Utopians: "they said that the great educational liberation came about when the concept of external attainments was thrown away and when they started to find out what each individual person had in him from the beginning, and then devoted themselves to finding out the conditions of the environment and the kinds of activity in which the positive capacities of each young person could operate most effectually."<sup>4</sup>

In honor of the fiftieth year since John Dewey died, I advocate that we devote great energy to understanding why we are so far removed from his utopian vision, and much more importantly, how we can move toward it with courage and dedication.

## Notes

1. See Schubert (1986) and Schubert, Lopez-Schubert, Thomas, and Carroll (2002) for elaboration on how I have developed a Deweyan perspective in the teaching of curriculum studies.
2. See Bode (1938).
3. First published in *New York Times*, April 23, 1933, Education Section, page 7 from an address on April 21, 1933 to the Conference on the Educational Status of the Four-and Five-Year-Old Child at Teachers College, Columbia University. Now available in Dewey, *The Later Works, 1925–53* (vol. 9, 1933–34), edited by J.A. Boydston (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1989).
4. Ibid., page 139.

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Craig Kridel is a professor of educational foundations and curator of the Museum of Education at the University of South Carolina. Email: [craigkridel@mindspring.com](mailto:craigkridel@mindspring.com).