

University of New Hampshire

## University of New Hampshire Scholars' Repository

---

Education Scholarship

Education

---

2005

### Political Agency and the Classroom: Reading John Dewey and Judith Butler Together.

Sarah M. Stitzlein

*University of New Hampshire*

Follow this and additional works at: [https://scholars.unh.edu/educ\\_facpub](https://scholars.unh.edu/educ_facpub)



Part of the [Education Commons](#)

---

#### Recommended Citation

McGough, Sarah M. Political Agency and the Classroom: Reading John Dewey and Judith Butler Together. *Philosophy of Education*, 2005, pp 99-107.

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Education at University of New Hampshire Scholars' Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in Education Scholarship by an authorized administrator of University of New Hampshire Scholars' Repository. For more information, please contact [Scholarly.Communication@unh.edu](mailto:Scholarly.Communication@unh.edu).

## Political Agency and the Classroom: Reading John Dewey and Judith Butler Together

Sarah M. McGough  
*University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign*

In Toronto last year, several PES members joined a panel session to discuss “agency after Foucault.” Many philosophers of education, in the wake of Foucault and other recent poststructuralists, often struggle to make sense of agency, intention, and the individual subject, particularly within social justice education. Some participants in this session and others challenged certain assumptions about human subjects as autonomous, self-made, efficacious agents of social and political change, many of which were held by the pragmatists whose work largely began and continues to influence our field.

In many cases, the views of pragmatists and poststructuralists are stubbornly opposed to one another. In this essay, however, I suggest that constructing an amalgam through dialogue between them offers solutions to particular problems within each tradition, especially in regards to agency. John Dewey and Judith Butler, significant philosophers within each tradition, show considerable similarity as well as important points of difference in their theories of agency. The fruitfulness of reading them together has largely been overlooked, and I offer here such a reading as a contribution to the philosophical struggle that continues from last year’s conference. I will describe each theory separately before showing how, when taken together, each theory rescues the other from certain pitfalls, and a more robust vision of agency and political change through education is formed. I will end by highlighting some educational implications that follow from the resulting view.

Central to Butler’s account of agency is her depiction of subject formation. Butler describes a process of discursive construction, where the circulating power of cultural norms and practices brings the subject into being and produces the effect of a bounded, identity-marked, material body. In order to maintain its constitution as a viable being who is linguistically recognized, the subject must perpetually perform this identity. Performativity, then, is the repetition of cultural norms and codes, the activity of which styles and constitutes us because it has the ability to produce what it names. Bodily comportment and the continued force of culture sustains the identity.

Because the subject is compelled to perform identity constraints and cite norms, Butler’s theory breaks from her humanist forerunners, including the pragmatists. Unlike a humanist subject who chooses to do a deed, Butler shows that that the subject must repeat these norms in order to maintain its status as a recognizable human. Butler adds that this nonhumanist subject is not entirely culturally determined and, even though constructed, the very circulations of power that constitute the subject render it capable of agency.<sup>1</sup>

The opportunity for agency lies in the possibility of varying required repetition, resignifying language, or misappropriating the essentializing identity terms

assigned by others. When identity is understood as the signification of political signs, agency becomes resignification and variation of necessary repetition and is capable of revealing signification as never fully fixed or determined. Butler describes the subject's spontaneous and unpredictable exploitation of the unstable language that constitutes him or her. This exploitation operates through power redeployment rather than transcendence. It is capable of producing significant effects over time insofar as it reveals the problematically constructed nature of identity-defined life and difficulties with the social institutions that support it. Performatives are provisionally successful not because they emit from a subject's intention, but rather because they bear a history of authority through their citations of established practices.<sup>2</sup> Butler's agent, then, wields neither sovereign power nor intention. Agency is an effect and redeployment of power rather than a property of a person.

Particular exercises of agency as political protest and change follow from Butler's depiction of subject formation. When subjects are interpellated and forced to repeat cultural constraints, they continually define and reinforce standards of acceptable living. Thereby hierarchies of identity and living and, moreover for Butler, alterity are established. Those who do not fulfill cultural standards or who fail to uphold viable interpellations are relegated to this realm of exclusion and are often retained there through violent acts.

Butler urges us to work toward connections and against exclusions by producing resignifications that reveal exclusions. Agency can expose the failure of cultural norms to achieve their goals of a cohesive, unified identity. Subjects can show how striving for identity coherence requires that one continually distinguish oneself from the abject who has been excluded from one's identity category, thereby causing distance and differentiation rather than connection between people.

According to Butler, rather than perpetuating differentiation and exclusion via expanding the list of acceptable identity positions, identity categories should be corrupted or rendered ambiguous. Identity categories, however, are currently necessary for cultural existence and the signification of certain states of living; therefore, they should not be terminated prematurely. Butler's agency appreciates the democratic political potential of these categories as open and contested and encourages subjects to invoke the categories, especially as terms of affiliation for political action, while simultaneously critiquing them. She aims for a "crossroads" connecting identity positions that acknowledges their founding and perpetual acts of exclusion.<sup>3</sup>

Dewey's theory of agency also begins with an account of the subject. For him, subjects form and are dynamically formed by transactions with the environment, including language and other people. Transaction is an ongoing process of exchange that brings the body into being. While Dewey at times appears irreconcilable with Butler insofar as he upholds a belief in prediscursive materiality and substance metaphysics, reading his account of transaction through a poststructural lens and with an emphasis on the process of transaction suggests that there is no subject or essence that exists prior to transaction. Rather, the transaction brings the subject into

being. Transaction molds an otherwise indistinguishable organic mass into culturally coherent ways of being by instilling typical modes of movement, communication, and appearance, that define the being as human. In turn, the organism performs the conditions of recognizability in ways that both incorporate and alter its environment.

Transaction puts the process first, as opposed to interaction that privileges an already existing subject. Transaction proposes that distinctions between organism and environment arise from this process, rather than predate it, as though metaphysical givens.<sup>4</sup> Transaction is a continuous process that subjects must continue in order to maintain their status in the world as living, acting, efficacious beings. Like Butler's compelled discursive performativity, the subject actively and necessarily participates in the establishment and perpetuation of its existence.

Impulses, or native bursts of energy, typically taking the form of demands for actions or objects that can bring about action, are central to transaction. Impulses try to find opportunities where power can be enacted. Butler's more nuanced theory of power, drawing on Foucauldian insights, proves useful here in rescuing Dewey from what, at times, appears to be a belief in the wielding of power from without. For, in some cases, Dewey's description of this process seems to uphold power as an external social tool to be acquired, grasped, and deployed at will by an agent. Impulses might more appropriately be understood as drawing out or directing power that is already circulating within the subject and redeploying it in terms of the constitutive power structures that enable being. This sense is clearly evident within Dewey's own words, "It is not so much a demand for power as a search for an opportunity to use a power already existing."<sup>5</sup>

For Dewey, there is always a waiting pool of impulses that have not yet come into play. They can do so suddenly on their own, they can be intelligently and gradually played out, or they can be suppressed and tucked away. Dewey, in his educational theory, favors impulses that are investigated and gradually played out, while Butler's more spontaneous sense of agency might be more aligned with explosive impulses. Dewey argues that traditionally conservative customs avoid and suppress impulses because they are seen as threatening. In contrast, he insists that impulses can be taken up as fruitful agents of change. He depicts the classroom as a space for investigating students' impulses and how they might be constructively put to use. Dewey envisions impulses as a fount of ingenuity and attempts to harness them through classroom inquiry. Butler, on the other hand, posits a bodily excess that is not pinned down by normative structures, interpellation, or current ways of understanding the world and can be used to work against the essentializing process of unification. She claims the body exceeds interpellation from others and the speech acts it issues itself.<sup>6</sup> Much like Dewey's impulse, Butler's excess offers the potential for change.

While impulse for Dewey, and linguistic insurrection for Butler, spring from individuals, Dewey's notion of agency moves to the level of the social through his discussion of habit and transaction. Habits assemble impulses into patterns or styles of being in the world that one largely performs effortlessly and without conscious

reflection. Habits, unlike impulse, are acquired ways of being that are formed through interaction with social institutions, cultural norms, and intelligent inquiry. Taken together, habits render the body as a pattern of activities and behaviors. In Dewey's words, "All habits are demands for certain kinds of activity; and they constitute the self. In any intelligible sense of the word will they *are* will."<sup>7</sup> There is no complete person behind the habit, just as there is no doer behind the deed for Butler. We do not use habits at will because we do not preexist them. "The use itself is the habit, and 'we are the habit.'"<sup>8</sup>

Habits enable us to operate in the world with ease through routine and mechanical skills. They often take corporeal form as bodily comportment, appearance, and gesture. More significant for Dewey is an understanding of habit as a predisposition to act or sensitivity to ways of being, rather than an inclination to repeat identical acts or content precisely. Habits give rise to desires that propel action and organize the body and environment in ways that allow desires to be pursued. Because habits carry out judgment and intelligence through organizing our perceptions, forming ideas, and developing know-how, they enable us to pursue our desires. When formed tentatively as hypotheses in light of intelligent foresight into future, unpredictable circumstances, habits can be flexible agents of change whose form emerges as situations unfold.<sup>9</sup> In this way, habits, as intimately tied to intelligent reflection, are projective and sites of agency. They can be changed in ways that change the subject and, through transaction, can effect change in the world as well. The heart of agency lies in the process of acquiring new habits and changing old ones — a process deeply embedded in Dewey's educational vision. Because the subject is constituted and enabled by cultural structures and norms, as it was for Butler, habits cannot simply be willfully dropped in their entirety. We should not try to overthrow habits entirely in the mistaken belief that we can be freed from them, but rather we should rework them in liberating ways. Dewey proposes the gradual replacement of old habits by those that are more intelligent and just. Ideally, because habits are "adjustments *of* the environment, not merely *to* it," adopting new habits can change the environmental phenomena that produced the problematic old habit.<sup>10</sup>

Working against the popular understanding of habit as ongoing and precise repetition, Dewey argues that habits must not necessarily be repeated: "Repetition is in no sense the essence of habit. Tendency to repeat acts is an incident of many habits but not of all."<sup>11</sup> Given transaction, repetition only happens after a habit is formed if the environment stays the same and the continued action proves fruitful. Butler has shown that many habits must be repeated, especially those that culturally position the subject and are necessary for continued recognition. Resonating with Butler's claims about the necessity of repetition but the possibility of variation on repetition, Dewey contends that subjects are bound to repeat, but not particular things or reflections of a stagnant world. Rather, they show a proclivity; what and how they repeat may vary. Dewey's variations on repetition differ from Butler's because they are often provoked by change in the environment or unsatisfactory conditions. The acquisition of a new habit, for Dewey, also tends to arise more slowly out of the old than does Butler's more spontaneous account of linguistic breaks.

Intelligent consideration of habits involves experimenting with new ways of being and trying them out in concert with the environment. The experimental nature and plasticity of habit suggests that Dewey might be interpreted as understanding habits themselves as flexible — as being held tentatively, as subject to change, and as not fully determined by normative ways of being. Changing habits is a key aspect of agency and the achievement of educational goals. Educational situations can be constructed that raise student awareness of their habits and the ways in which their habits might be implicated in problems, including tendencies to disconnect from students different from oneself, rigidity in traversing a changing world, and failures to communicate with others. Teachers can aid students in the process of intelligent reflection by attuning them to their actions and resulting consequences. Within classrooms, students can engage in activities that link people, thereby helping students to understand the ways their activities affect others, their potential for agency, and their ability to produce political change.

While Dewey prizes the plasticity of habit, in some cases he describes a core of abiding habits that provide one the identity he believes is necessary for enacting freedom. For Dewey, identities help us understand ourselves and options available to us. Identities assist us in making decisions about our lives as we frame purposes for our futures. While Dewey allows that even this core is a contingent cultural product that may be changed over time, he seems to cherish it in ways that I believe overlook how that core may be complicit in oppressive acts toward others or in stagnant notions of one's self or one's identity group. He fails to consider Butler's question, "To what extent is 'identity' a normative ideal rather than a descriptive feature of experience?"<sup>12</sup> Butler reveals the constraining and essentializing ways in which subjects are pressured to fulfill identities, including here the effort to maintain an identity-defining core of habits. Butler would likely urge Dewey to forego our efforts to maintain stable categories of self-identity and be willing to be interpellated within and outside of the categories in which we envision ourselves so that we may subversively misrecognize and misrepresent them.

Butler presents identity construction as a political process and identity as a political effect, thereby offering up new matter for political change and complicating Dewey's goal of individual identity development. She locates a fruitful future in relinquishing coherence. This suggestion is in accord with agency understood as power redeployment, where internal coherence is not required. In this way, she goads Dewey to go one step further in his support of elastic habits — to trace them all the way down to reveal that fundamental defining identities are not necessary and are in many cases more harmful than helpful.

Identifying a key element missing from Dewey's account of agency and change, Butler insightfully draws attention to the play and failures of language. Dewey does not see that the ordinary language that brings us into being can be ruptured by an unexpected, extraordinary speech act. Butler locates the power of speech in this break that forcefully interrupts linguistic tradition by introducing the unspeakable out of context, rather than in the linking of language to prior context. While Dewey certainly includes language within his more encompassing term, "environment," he

underestimates its potential as a platform for agency, and a more nuanced notion of agency must centrally draw upon this potential, as Butler rightly contends.

One problem with Butler's theory, however, is that the play of language seems to exclude an active agent. The subject for Butler must engage in citation to continue to exist and agency is located within moments of resignification — moments that often occur by chance. Veronica Vasterling argues that agents really have limited intention over language because the reiteration takes place in the movement of language itself. She persuasively argues that the resulting notion of agency is not very viable insofar as the subject is not much of an active participant in the shaping of its own existence, the content, and way it cites.<sup>13</sup> Butler fails to show how subjects can actively rework the circumstances in which they find themselves via iteration.

A closer reading of Butler reveals her belief that our inability to ensure that our words will be received in the ways we intend does not mean that we cannot act intentionally. Rather, we can try to steer resignification and the production of certain types of meaning, including the exposure of exclusion that I described earlier. Vasterling astutely responds that this can be legitimate agency because it has initiative and intervention, but adds that it must be picked up by others to effect broad change. Dewey's transactional account, which poses a closer linking of people and educational situations where students work together to achieve desired ends, can provide the social aspects and provocation of initiative that makes the more active sense of agency Vasterling seeks complete.

Habit, for Dewey, is inherently social. This differs considerably from Butler's more individualistic account of performativity and iterability. Butler theorizes the agency of the individual and, while accounting for others as the audience of performatives, does not theorize collective social action. For Dewey, habits are never separated from communal living and socially coordinated efforts to improve life.

Because bodily habit, via transaction, is always constituted by influences from without — which interact with impulses and inquiry, and then necessarily extend back outward to interact with the cultural environment — a stage is set for corporeal enactments that confound the structures that compel and constrain them, and often do so publicly and alongside others. While also allowing a space for discursive acts of resistance, Dewey's habit pushes past Butler's adherence to linguistic insurrection and offers a way of understanding the concrete realities of living bodies, including the corporeal experiences of material inequalities and their potential for corporeal resistance. Though Butler asserts that language can have real effects on bodies, habits both display and protest those effects, thereby offering a more complete sense of agency.<sup>14</sup>

Butler's criteria guiding the enactment of agency toward political change has many critics, including Nancy Fraser and Martha Nussbaum. Fraser believes Butler praises resignification as a good simply by virtue of being change. Fraser claims Butler does not provide criteria for what counts as good change.<sup>15</sup> Certainly, enacting agency via resignification does not ensure political effectiveness. Butler, however,



does not show us how to analyze the effects acts of resistance do have. Or, as Nussbaum has sharply argued, Butler does not differentiate good subversions that confront problems with identity and bad subversions that work against justice.<sup>16</sup> Nussbaum faults Butler for not upholding a normative vision that can guide and assess political change. While my earlier discussion shows that Butler's depiction of subjugation does point toward certain acts of exclusion revealing protest as important, I believe Fraser and Nussbaum are largely correct.

When Dewey is read alongside Butler, pragmatism can offer a means for justifying which reworkings of habit, and for determining which instances of political change, are good. While both Dewey and Butler would reject holding a comprehensive portrait of the good life for the future, the pragmatist notions of truth and flourishing can provide judgment on the goodness and effectiveness of acts, as well as point toward directions for future change. Moreover, when these pragmatist principles are seated within the political ideals of democracy, criteria of equality, justice, and associated living may be drawn upon. In Butler's most recent work we are beginning to see that she, too, is willing to adopt such normative visions to a limited extent.<sup>17</sup>

Placing Dewey and Butler's theories of agency in dialogue shows valuable points of overlap and supplements areas of weakness in each. Each philosopher similarly provides an account of agency intricately tied to subject construction and played out through habit and performativity. Combining Butler's sophisticated account of power, appreciation for linguistic insubordination, and focus on problems of identity coherence with Dewey's embodied notion of habits, the ongoing process of transaction, and pragmatist democratic criteria for political effectiveness offers a more robust notion of political agency that I sum up under the Deweyan inspired name of flexible habits. Flexible habits entail a propensity for change and a sensitivity to resistance that supports and invites acts of corporeal and linguistic insubordination. They target and cultivate a possibility that seems to occur most often unpredictably for Butler, thereby retaining the potential for signifying in unexpected ways while the process of inquiry and the role of the classroom make political acts more intelligent, with effects that can be anticipated and normatively analyzed. More than just a chance resignification, flexible habits entail an active confrontation with the symbolic realm, where conflicts among values and the failure of ideals are targeted and exposed through an intelligent, educational process. A unique and valuable sense of agency and social efficacy results.

Agency via flexible habits is something that is reflected upon and often intentionally used. In some respects this appears to contradict performativity and iterability as described by Butler, especially given that Butler does not allow for self-reflexivity insofar as one cannot get outside of power to reflect. Following Butler's critic, Vasterling, I believe political change can still happen in the way Butler describes and yet agents can be reflective and intentional, where this sense of intention is not a humanist notion of having complete control over the world.<sup>18</sup> Moreover, their political effectiveness is most likely strengthened by these reflective activities. Schools could well be tasked with cultivating and refining reflection



primarily within the context of social injustice and the changing of habits that perpetuate it. Students can learn how to reflect within and because of power, and they can learn how their reflections upon their activities help ensure that change is positive.<sup>19</sup> They could also overtly discuss systems of oppression, constraints of identity, and the status of democratic living in order to guide student intention and goals in engaging with others and changing themselves.

Classrooms can provide a space that supports and is sensitive to acts of subversion — a space where alternative ways of being are tested out and where political change is collectively forged. Such a space would make resistance conceivable, possible, and meaningful. Indeed, such an institutional and social space would bring attention to flexible habits that otherwise might go unnoted. It could draw attention to their significance and to ways in which others might respond to and join in with the changing habits of an individual student. Not only might teachers unite the acts of their individual students, but they also might teach students about and unite them with larger social efforts for change — revealing to students the power of social collaboration and the far-reaching impact of individual agency.

Butler largely overlooks the role of schools in enhancing agency or being a space where it plays out. In his early writings Dewey envisions schools as important centers for developing agency, particularly in the context of cultivating democratic citizens. As the years passed and the limitations of schooling became clearer through his educational experimentation, he grew less confident that schools could be the chief location of building political agency and democracy.<sup>20</sup> Certainly, it seems here, schools can be key places where students develop political agency and enact it in pursuit of social goals and justice when they are guided by the sense of agency arising from reading Dewey and Butler together.

---

1. Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"* (New York: Routledge, 1993), x.

2. *Ibid.*, 226–227.

3. *Ibid.*, 116.

4. Gert J.J. Biesta and Nicholas C. Burbules, *Pragmatism and Educational Research* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield, 2003), 26.

5. John Dewey, *Human Nature and Conduct* (1922; repr., Mineola, N.Y.: Dover Publications, 2002), 141.

6. Judith Butler, *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 155.

7. Dewey, *Human Nature and Conduct*, 25.

8. *Ibid.*, 21.

9. Charlene Haddock Seigfried, *Pragmatism and Feminism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 246. See also John Dewey, *Democracy and Education* (New York: The Free Press, 1916), 339–340.

10. Dewey, *Human Nature and Conduct*, 52.

11. *Ibid.*, 42.

12. Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 16.

13. Veronica Vasterling, "Butler's Sophisticated Constructivism: A Critical Assessment," *Hypatia* 14, no. 3 (1999): 28.

14. Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 148.
15. Nancy Fraser, "False Antitheses," in *Feminist Contentions*, ed. Seyla Benhabib, Judith Butler, Drucilla Cornell, and Nancy Fraser (New York: Routledge, 1995), 215.
16. Martha C. Nussbaum, "The Professor of Parody," *New Republic* (1999), [http://web.lexis-nexis.com/universe/document?\\_m=090424c715f3b7645010b78064198140&\\_docnum=1&wchp=dGLbVlz-zSkVA&\\_md5=87f7298f66](http://web.lexis-nexis.com/universe/document?_m=090424c715f3b7645010b78064198140&_docnum=1&wchp=dGLbVlz-zSkVA&_md5=87f7298f66).
17. Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender* (New York: Routledge, 2004).
18. Vasterling, "Butler's Sophisticated Constructivism: A Critical Assessment," 26.
19. Barbara Applebaum also gets at this in "Social Justice Education, Moral Agency, and the Subject of Resistance," *Educational Theory* 54, no. 1 (2004): 59–72.
20. Robert B. Westbrook, *John Dewey and American Democracy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991), 508.