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The educational situation in Utopia: Why *what is*, is

Jayson Seaman
John Quay

Abstract

In this response to Molly Ware's review of our book, *John Dewey and Education Outdoors*, we extend her suggestion that complexity be regarded as an important, generative force in education reform. Drawing on Dewey's 1933 *Utopian Schools* speech, we discuss the "level deeper" that Dewey sought as he criticized the method/subject matter dichotomy, which he saw as an artifact of social class carried forward in the form of a curricular debate rather than a natural source of productive tension. Dewey radically argued that *learning* itself contained similar anti-democratic tendencies. Eschewing the false child vs. curriculum dichotomy, Dewey believed complexity as a catalyst for educational action would be achieved by engaging children in historically formed *occupations*, harnessing the forces that drive technological and cultural evolution in order to spur interest, effort, and the formation of social attitudes among students. Following Ware, we suggest that reformers should seek to understand at a level deeper the many sources of complexity they encounter as they both challenge and honor *what is*.

Keywords: John Dewey • outdoor education • curriculum theory

We are grateful for the opportunity to respond to Molly Ware's thoughtful review of our 2013 book *John Dewey and Education Outdoors*. In this brief essay, we return to Dewey in order to extend Ware's suggestions for embracing tension as a generative aspect of reform in education, while still establishing a basis for challenging *what is*. For Dewey, the basis for critique was not educational *per se*, but principally social and political, for "...the currents of social life that run outside of school... condition the educational meaning of whatever the school does" (Dewey 1933, p. 133). For Dewey, the persistent conflict between method and subject matter – which is a main subject in our book – was conditioned by currents of social life that run outside of school, and it was these currents that deserved scrutiny over and above the principles of any specific reform.

M. Mueller and D. Greenwood, Editors for Special Issue on Ecological Mindfulness and Cross-Hybrid Learning

This response addresses issues raised in Molly Ware's essay entitled: *Practicing finding the spaces available within the educational situation*.

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In the present article, we use Dewey's jaunty 1933 *Utopian Schools* speech to elucidate his vision for an education that occurs in a more organic way than continually trying to strike a balance between method and subject matter – the chief dichotomy that frustrated him throughout his career. We point back into Dewey's educational philosophy to suggest an alternative view on complexity that furthers Ware's suggestion to adopt more ecologically mindful approaches to reform. We are especially concerned that such frameworks should include a focus on the cultural and historical basis of received ideas.

Either/or in education

While we agree with Ware that dualisms are unlikely to be abolished (e.g., masculine/feminine), and even can be the source of productive action if approached openly and creatively, the dualism that most bedeviled Dewey – *child* and *curriculum* – was, to his mind, so likely to have deleterious effects on democratic schooling that it deserved special scorn. Of course, the method/subject matter dichotomy was rooted even more deeply in the (then) warring child centered vs. humanist traditions (Kliebard 1995). Dewey differs from Ware in his stance toward this deep-seated division in that he did not wish to achieve balance but rather to alter the underlying logic of their relationship:

In the preface of *Experience and Education*, Dewey (1938, p. 5) argues that “it is the business of an intelligent theory of education to ascertain the causes for the conflicts that exist.” ... “instead of taking one side or the other,” this intelligent theory should “indicate a plan of operations proceeding from a level deeper and more inclusive than is represented by the practices and ideas of the contending parties” (p. 5). Going to this deeper level, however, does not mean attempting “to bring about a compromise between opposed schools of thought, to find a *via media*, nor yet make an eclectic combination of points picked out hither and yon from all schools” (p. 5). (Quay and Seaman 2013, p. 62)

Dewey would likely eschew proposals for a *via media* between method and subject matter, such as Ware's. As Kliebard (1995) wrote, Dewey “was trying to reconstruct the issue of the child versus the curriculum in such a way as to make their opposition unnecessary” (p. 63). Still, he retained complexity as a dynamic catalyst for educational action, but in his theory its origins were rooted in cultural and historical lines of human activity rather than what he regarded as arbitrary artifacts of a mistakenly designed institution.

In the remainder of the essay, we first look to the cultural plane to examine “*the causes for the conflicts that exist*” between method and subject matter, and explain why he regarded them as so pernicious. We then discuss how, in Dewey's framework, complexity worked both as a source of historical understanding and an engine for activity – a principle he operationalized with the idea of *occupations*. We close by underscoring Ware's argument that complexity and tension – however they are understood – should be regarded as important, dynamic, and generative forces in education reform.

Education in Utopia

In a 1933 speech at Columbia University, Dewey outlined a utopian vision of schooling. “The most utopian thing in Utopia,” Dewey began, “is that there are no schools at all” (1934, p. 136). In his fictional narrative, he described a community whose physical environment is configured to facilitate free assembly, maximize social interaction, promote artisanal skill in workshops equipped “with all kinds of material – wood, iron, textiles” (p. 136), and cultivate intellectual inquiry in museums, libraries, and scientific laboratories. So-called teaching happens through cross age interaction and adult mentorship as individuals are jointly “carrying on some line of action ... whether painting or music or scientific inquiry, observation of nature or industrial cooperation in some line” (p. 137).

The standard educational questions he directs toward the Utopians are met with skepticism; when asking about specific learning objectives and methods of assessment he “came upon a blank wall.” “My utopian friends thought I was asking why children should live at all, and therefore they did not take my questions seriously” (p. 138).

For they asked in return to my question, whether in the period from which I came for a visit to Utopia it was possible for a boy or a girl to grow up without learning the things in which he or she needed to learn – because it was evident to them that it was not possible for any one except a congenital idiot to be born and grow up without learning. (p. 138)

Dewey’s unusually brash language notwithstanding, he regarded the Utopian arrangement as ideal for three main reasons:

- (1) Utopians view teaching not as a means of imparting knowledge, but as a process of “creating attitudes by shaping desires and developing the needs that are significant in the process of living” (p. 139). The Utopian approach is to design environments to foster interest, allowing children to pursue unique lines of individual development.
- (2) The structure of schooling in Utopia follows how learning occurs naturally in social life, that is, as a function of increasing participation in culturally meaningful activity. Dewey had been making this point for 30 years by the time he gave his *Utopia* speech; in *Pedagogic Creed* (1897) he wrote: “The most formal and technical education in the world cannot safely depart from” the general process by which individuals appropriate “the social consciousness of the race” (para 1); that is, learning as a feature of participation in social activities.
- (3) The underlying reason Utopian schooling can be organized as such is because Utopians have abandoned “the whole concept of acquiring and storing away things” (p. 139). The need to create dedicated institutions for efficiently ‘delivering’ instruction was an artifact of “the pattern that exists in economic society,” where “personal acquisition and private possession were such dominant ideals in all fields” that they had “taken possession of the minds of educators to the extent that the idea of personal acquisition and possession controlled the whole educational system” (p. 139). The kind of institutionalized, age-graded schooling with which Dewey was familiar reflects “the acquisitive system of society” (p. 139). The two are mutually entailed.

Dewey's *Utopian Schools* speech is not simple fantasy; it is a morality tale about how education is shaped by cultural context. Specifically, he uses a fictional story to inveigh against the tacit influence of pecuniary thinking on educational matters especially how it shapes the priorities and structures of formal, institutionalized schooling. Utopians were free to harness the complexities inherent in social life, stemming from polyphonic lines of human activity and diverse individual interests. Utopians didn't need to handle method and subject matter as discrete concerns, because they had decoupled learning from acquisition and instead fostered it by means of involvement in meaningful productive activity. The "educational situation" Dewey tried to elucidate through this tale was not merely educational, but also social, political, and economic. For Dewey, complexity in education is necessarily and functionally related to social and cultural dynamics in these areas; its generative capacity stemmed from the problems humans have encountered throughout history as they carved out livelihoods and organized themselves socially.

One of the most educationally and politically radical ideas Dewey proposes in the *Utopian Schools* speech is that the emphasis on learning should be diminished. He wrote: "the social change which had taken place with the abolition of an acquisitive economic society had, in [the Utopians'] judgment, made possible the transformation of the centre of emphasis from learning (in our sense) to the creation of attitudes" (p. 139, parentheses in original). This passage begs a few questions: What does Dewey mean by learning "in our sense?" How is learning (in our sense) linked to the character of a society as economically acquisitive? How could diminishing the role of *learning* in schools possibly be good for democratic education? Answering these questions helps to reveal the possible costs of maintaining too strong a grip on the method and subject matter dualism, even if its total eradication is unlikely.

| *Learning 'in our sense'*

Dewey's educational philosophy can be described as evolutionary (Fallace 2008). He saw the problem of public education as historical in nature, functions of economic and social developments – particularly the transition from agrarian to industrial society (Dewey 1899). Mass culture, industrial production, a money economy, and democratic politics posed unprecedented challenges to questions of how to acculturate the young into mature roles while fulfilling the relatively new promise of individual potential.

Prior to the modern era, only specialists and elites undertook "training for the profession of learning" (1899, p. 466). In other words, learning was a specialized activity that preoccupied only a small percentage of the population. Even when the majority undertook *to learn*, still "the aim was distinctly a practical one; it was utility, getting command of these tools, the symbols of learning, *not for the sake of learning*, but because they gave access to careers in life otherwise closed" (Dewey 1900, pp. 82, emphasis added). Learning as a thing-in-itself, or as Dewey put it, learning *as such*, did not yet exist on any large scale, let alone as a key aspect of social mobility, individual fulfillment, or technological progress. But, capitalism and science as dominant institutions – along with art as a force for resistance and renewal – had irrevocably changed the role of learning; they had put it "into circulation" (Dewey 1899, p. 465). So while as early as 1896 Dewey had asserted that "the school system has always been a function of the prevailing type of organization of social life" (p. 285), by 1938 his resolve on this point had, if anything strengthened: "[processes of] distribution of commodities and services ... are the most important

factor in determining the present relations of human beings and social groups to one another” (p. 80). Dewey increasingly recognized that school as a means of organizing learning was a pillar of capitalism.

In this framework (although in terms that would probably chafe Dewey), institutionalized education is a cultural mechanism for distributing *learning*. Setting aside political concerns, Dewey’s charge was that schools, along with most reformers, had unwittingly adopted “the medieval conception of learning,” (1900, p. 308), which is to say, the idea that theory is separate from – and largely superior to – practice and requires specialists to dispense to children arranged in the most efficient manner. This was (a) no longer possible at any rate due to systems of mass communication and the prospect of individual self-determination (i.e., people could learn in service of their own goals without needing an expert to tell them how to do it), and (b) undesirable as a foundation for institutionalized education, because regulating learning by way of ‘instruction’ would distort and limit participation in culture (see Dewey’s numerous criticisms of traditional education for more on this point).

By “learning (in our sense),” Dewey means learning as a specialized activity that was once pursued exclusively by figures in high culture, which schools now take as their job to distribute using means of direct instruction (and correspondingly, gimmickry and coercion). In contrast, learning in the Utopian sense happens naturally through processes of social interaction in the pursuit of common aims, which is how learning had been accomplished culturally for millennia prior to the industrial era. To Dewey, unless pursued in the Utopian way – as the formation of civic attitudes and dispositions toward scientific experimentation and artistic renewal – *learning* as a social practice and basis for schooling contains inherent antidemocratic tendencies; it risks coming “under the influence of ends, such as private advantage and power, which are a heritage from the institutions of a prescientific age” (1938, p. 81). The acquisitive nature of capitalistic motives amplifies these tendencies by making knowledge a matter of private, internal possession. The method/subject matter debate has its roots in the medieval conception of learning, now institutionalized as formal, public education.

Occupations as embracing complexity

Our book *John Dewey and Education Outdoors* closes with a treatment of Dewey’s concept of *occupations*, which Dewey defines as “a mode of activity on the part of the child which reproduces, or runs parallel to, some form of work carried on in social life” (1899, p. 92). “The activities of life,” he wrote, “are of necessity directed to bringing the materials and forces of nature under the control of our purposes; of making them tributary to the ends of life” (Dewey 1915/1990, p. 137). Occupations gave Dewey a manageable ‘unit’ for practically handling the complexity inherent in his notion of *experience*, and for putting it into curricular form (Seaman and Nelsen 2011).

Our intent in the book was not to urge a consensus on the purpose of education, as Ware asserted, but like Dewey to argue for a clearer understanding of the meaning of *purpose* in education. Occupations – the activities of social life – are inherently purposeful, stemming from the practical problems of physical survival, cultural continuity, and social organization. These are the forces that drive technological evolution and, in industrial society, increasingly require

governance and coordination. In Dewey's analysis, school as a social institution lacks the kinds of purposes that animate 'real world' human activity – this is why student motivation is such a perennial problem in schools (see Wardekker, Boersma, Ten Dam, and Volman 2011 for contemporary versions of this argument). Moreover, in the real world, or in "experience" as Dewey conceived it, there is no method/subject matter division. The need to develop increasingly compelling methods ("devices of art" as Dewey called them) by which to motivate students to internalize subject matter stemmed from a faulty understanding of purpose and interest in education.

The main problem facing schools was that, through processes of historical evolution, *learning* had become an occupation unto itself. "Motivation to learn" for Dewey was a historical – not only a pedagogical – problem. When he writes things like "The basic question concerns the *nature of education* with no qualifying adjectives prefixed" (1938, p. 90), he is not arguing for agreement on a specific set of purposes, but instead wants reformers to see education in its historical and cultural context; a problem of what animates collective human action and how knowledge circulates in public life. This is the 'level deeper' he wanted reformers to pursue, but instead they cycled back and forth between the inclusion of more/different subject matter or new methods of instruction. As we pointed out in our book, one consequence is the "crowded curriculum," or a proliferation of "adjectival educations," to use the terms provided by the editors of this special issue of CSSE.

Looking deeper at educational tensions

Like Dewey, we see the tensions between method and subject matter as artifacts of a system that places undue emphasis on *learning* (in our sense), and as a consequence, still fosters inequality and fails to adequately engage young people in vibrant civic, scientific, artistic, and ecological life. Although outdoor education reforms over the 20th century have occasionally confronted the hegemony of institutionalized schooling, they also have capitulated to the very forces they were meant to challenge by arguing their merits in standard terms. As a result, outdoor education and other innovative approaches are often easily marginalized in a crowded curriculum. The entrenchment of standardized tests in schools suggests to us that learning is still regarded as a matter of private acquisition, and that "The basic question" Dewey raised in 1938 still "concerns the nature of education with no qualifying adjectives prefixed" (p. 90)

Molly Ware has challenged us to revisit what might have been our tacit acceptance of Dewey's progressivism – that mastery of natural and cultural forces once and for all is achievable or even desirable. She has rightly reasserted the importance of complexity as a generative force in education, and we regret that we did not treat this more substantively in our book. We appreciate the opportunity she has presented to look more closely at Dewey's work to see one way complexity might be regarded in his pragmatic educational philosophy. We also see her call for "ecological mindfulness" to be consistent with Dewey's desire for reformers to pursue a "level deeper" by looking for social and cultural currents that shape the meaning of taken-for-granted educational concepts. These approaches to inquiry will help reformers manage their responsibility to challenge, in addition to honoring, *what is*.

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