



John Dewey on Education and the Quality of Life

David T. Hansen

PHILOSOPHER, EDUCATIONAL THEORIST, founder of a famous school, public intellectual, prolific writer, international lecturer, renowned professor, a figure both acclaimed and criticized—American philosopher John Dewey (1859–1952) was all these things and more. His conception of education has inspired generations of educators and his works continue to be studied in universities everywhere. As a philosopher, Dewey wrote enduring texts on art, ethics, the nature of inquiry, religion, and other topics. That body of work has enjoyed a considerable renaissance in recent decades, following a “wilderness period” (from roughly the 1940s through the 1970s), when analytic philosophy prevailed in the discipline. This renewal of interest, now worldwide, has coincided with the publication of Dewey’s complete works in 37 volumes (several volumes of his correspondence are forthcoming). Virtually every aspect of his life and thought has been scrutinized; scholars have even paid systematic attention to his unpublished poetry.

No single essay, or indeed book, can do justice to the scope and range of Dewey’s life and thought, a fact illustrated by the spate of recent biographies that have come out (see, for example, Martin, 2002; Rockefeller, 1991; Ryan, 1995; Westbrook, 1991). In this chapter, I will focus on his convictions about what it means to lead a meaningful life. I will begin with a sketch of his core educational and political ideas. This section will be the most lengthy in the chapter, if only to convey something of the power and originality in Dewey’s outlook. I will turn next to an account of Dewey’s public life, with special reference to his work in the Laboratory School, which he

founded in Chicago. I will then conclude with a brief comment on the complex nature of Dewey's legacy.

DEWEY'S PHILOSOPHY OF EDUCATION

At the core of Dewey's thoughts on education is his belief that life constitutes a generative gift. In his view, education should assist people in learning how to realize and extend this gift. Dewey envisions humanity's promise as limitless. He perceives no fixed boundary to human creativity and imagination, and no limit to how deeply and literally "meaning-full" human life can become.

For Dewey, the quality of life mirrors its aesthetic depth, understood as the extent to which it embodies grace, artfulness, and appreciation, whether in maintaining a home, a classroom, a business, or a government. The quality of life also reflects its emotional maturity and attentiveness, which Dewey contrasts with sentimentality or superficiality. Moreover, the quality of life displays its moral depth, which encompasses considerations of freedom, justice, compassion, humility, and personal as well as social responsibility. Finally, the quality of life mirrors its intellectual scope and discipline, the extent to which intelligence rather than caprice, routine, or blind habit guides its trajectory. For Dewey, a fulfilled life features a deepening of quality, however subtle, through each experience. Education constitutes the pathway of such a life.

As Dewey elucidates these ideas and addresses how to translate them into educational practice, he also analyzes why humanity has not yet learned, intellectually and morally, how to realize the gift of life. While there may be no limit to human potential, there is also no limit, or so it appears, to the dispiriting, demoralizing, and often violent ways in which people stunt their own or others' possibilities. Dewey is ecumenical in tracing the sources of humanity's still unrealized ability to fulfill life's promise. He points to the class system perpetuated by a capitalist economy with its attendant inequities and strife; to the collectivist system generated by communism with its smothering of individuality; to various forms of ethnocentrism; to modes of bigotry and intolerance such as racism; to schooling centered around rote learning and conformity; and to the tremendous acceleration of history as seen in rapid technological, scientific, and economic transformations around the globe, which Dewey believes generate as much fear and uncertainty as hope. These are among the forces that weigh humanity down and prevent it from reaching its boundless promise. In works such as *Democracy and Education* (MW9) and *Experience and Education* (LW13), Dewey articulates an educational approach that he believes can address the situation.

The Indirect Approach to Education

Dewey proposes an indirect rather than direct assault on the conditions that undermine human possibility. He is not a revolutionary. Rather, he is what we might call, for heuristic purposes, a reconstructionist. He urges people to build upon what is efficacious in the system even while moving it in new directions. That posture is consistent with how he urges educators to work with the young. In *Democracy and Education*, his penultimate educational treatise, he writes that "frontal attacks are even more wasteful in learning than in war" (MW9, p. 176). Dewey means that it is impossible to educate another person *directly* in the sense of unilaterally transforming his or her knowledge, perceptions, insight, and dispositions. Metaphorically speaking, a teacher cannot reach into a child's mind or heart and rearrange the intellectual, emotional, moral, or aesthetic wiring. Moreover, a teacher cannot "give" a student an education as if handing her or him a set of objects. Nor can the student "get" an education as if reaching for something on a shelf. As Michael Oakeshott puts it, "A picture may be purchased, but one cannot purchase an understanding of it" (1989, p. 45). A person can earn a high school or college degree, but that fact says nothing about whether the person has become educated.

For Dewey, the indirect way to teach entails focusing directly on the environment in which teaching and learning take place, whether it be a classroom, school auditorium, sports field, graduate seminar, or computer workshop. The environment includes the curriculum, instructional methods, and physical setting. Educators should take pains to select rich curricular materials and activities. They should cultivate the pedagogical talent necessary to engage students creatively with the curriculum. On the one hand, that talent encompasses the capacity to listen patiently, to speak clearly and honestly, and to be acutely attentive to students' responses to the curriculum. On the other hand, pedagogical talent includes a command of time-honored instructional methods such as the capacity to give a good lecture, to lead a thoughtful and sustained discussion of a text, and to organize effective small-group or individual learning activities. "A large part of the art of instruction," Dewey writes, "lies in making the difficulty of new problems large enough to challenge thought, and small enough so that, in addition to the confusion naturally attending the novel elements, there shall be luminous familiar spots from which helpful suggestions may spring" (MW9, p. 164). This grasp of method is both practical and intellectual. It is practical in the technical sense of knowing how to employ instructional approaches, and intellectual in the sense of understanding why and when they can stoke genuine educational experience.

Educators also need to consider how the physical setting may support or hamper learning. The arrangement of space, materials, light, and so forth

will play a role in the course of experience. According to Dewey, both mind and body are always implicated in education, whether in a kindergarten, medical school laboratory, or 10th-grade poetry class. Moreover, the mind and body always dwell within a physical medium and are always influenced by it, usually unawares. Thus, the physical environment will factor into the quality of teaching and learning.

When juxtaposed with the term *direct*, the *indirect* may connote passivity, tentativeness, caution, or circumspection. However, Dewey's indirect approach to educating places much more extensive and far-reaching obligations on the educator than any direct method that comes to mind. For one thing, in Dewey's conception the educator must have a command of subject matter. This readiness means more than a knowledge of fact and information, indispensable as that is. Rather, it entails a grasp of the logic in the subject matter, a sense of its history and trajectory, and a feeling for the human interests and creativity that gave rise to the very existence of the subject in the first place. Dewey's approach also obliges the educator to become a permanent student of students. The educator must learn how to recognize and respond to the distinctive and varied ways in which students engage the curriculum. That process means learning how to heed students' thinking and incipient ideas as well as learning how to fuel them, and, given the rapidity of classroom activity, doing both often within the very same moment.

A fundamental aspect of being a student of students is being attuned to their powers of expression and understanding (Garrison, 1997; Latta, 2002; Van Manen, 1991). Attunement calls upon the teacher's growing aesthetic, emotional, moral, and intellectual sensibility. It means noting students' present capacities to put facts and ideas together in addressing issues and problems; to manipulate instruments and tools; to discern patterns, whether in color or logic or language; to communicate with others; and to bring their thought into form, whether it be prose or sculpture or speech. Teachers need to cultivate their attunement continuously because students differ widely in their capacities and proclivities, and also because each individual student will always be changing and (hopefully) growing, however subtly and unpredictably.

Teacher educators have long appreciated Dewey's article "The Relation of Theory to Practice in Education" (MW3, pp. 249–272) because in it Dewey emphasizes that the most important outcome of any preparation program is not knowledge of instructional techniques per se, but rather such knowledge *bound up* in a larger commitment to studying how students think and engage the curriculum. Facility with technique comes with practice; but that facility will be hampered if it is not guided by a deepening "pedagogical" perception. In his widely read book for teachers *How We Think*, Dewey implies that if teachers were forced to choose between having dispositions such as open-mindedness toward students and a sense of responsibility for educating them, and having a comprehensive knowledge of instructional

technique, they should unreservedly select the former. He also shows, however, why such a choice is not necessary if the educator comprehends the principles behind the indirect approach he articulates (LW8, p. 139).

Dewey puts forward the idea of *continuity* to assist educators in grasping the values inherent in being a student both of students and of subject matter. Just as subjects such as history, art, and science have a continuous trajectory, in the sense of one interpretation or work responding to prior views and accomplishments, so it is with human growth. Genuine human development always draws upon prior experience, and educators should act on that truth in their pedagogy. However, Dewey differentiates education from acquisition. His idea of educational continuity means something other than establishing routines and becoming habituated to environments. The latter may not involve education at all. For example, a person can be trained through a scheme of rewards and punishments to behave in a certain way. That person will have acquired a new behavior. But education would emerge only if the person began to think about the new behavior—to question it, reflect upon it, consider its rationale, and so forth.

The term that Dewey applies to the teacher's task in maintaining educational continuity is *reconstruction*. Education involves reconstructing prior knowledge, understanding, and insight as the student takes in new questions, problems, perspectives, and realms of activity. This process, according to Dewey, is fundamentally transformative. At every moment it features "an immediate end, and so far as activity is educative, it reaches that end—the direct transformation of the quality of experience." The process obtains throughout a person's life. "Infancy, youth, adult life—all stand on the same educative level in the sense that what is really *learned* at any and every stage of experience constitutes the value of that experience, and in the sense that it is the chief business of life at every point to make living thus contribute to an enrichment of its own perceptible meaning" (MW9, p. 82). For Dewey, education always involves thought and awareness, whether we have in mind the child coming to grips with addition or the adult comprehending the workings of a poem. These undertakings yield what he calls the direct transformation of the quality of experience. He pictures a person who has accomplished more than memorizing a new fact or piece of information, but who now has a new meaning in his or her life, however modest in scope that meaning may be when weighed against the totality of the person's background. Dewey's focus on meaning-making gives rise to the democratic aspect of his philosophy of education, to which I now turn.

Education and Democracy

Unlike many political and social theorists, Dewey does not begin with a conception of a democratic society and then fashion an educational system to

serve and sustain it. He does not believe that education should serve anything or anybody. According to Dewey, to put it in the service of an aim or purpose outside its own movement is to compromise and perhaps destroy it. On the one hand, if education is determined solely by the needs of the state, its substance may not cohere with the needs and interests of individuals. On the other hand, if education is guided merely by the individual's particular interests and desires, it may become a tool for self-promotion and self-aggrandizement at the expense of societal improvement.

It may sound strange and counterintuitive to suggest that education should not "serve" the self. However, Dewey has nothing esoteric or ascetic in mind in arguing that the purpose of education for each individual is not self-reproduction but self-transformation. The latter implies genuine growth in the range of contacts and meanings that a person experiences. It suggests that the person is continually engaging more of the world than before. For example, the construction worker who seeks to develop his or her facility with tools; grasp of form and fit; and feeling for brick, mortar, and wood is constantly transcending his prior self. This worker may not employ such language to describe his or her work and, in fact, might be stunned to hear it cast in such poetic terms. All the same, anyone attentive to the worker's day-to-day efforts will see that this individual's artfulness is being deepened and enhanced. Interacting with more and more of the world of construction work, the worker is constantly educating him- or herself into a more artful self. One day the worker may realize that, having been transformed to such an extent, he or she can now help others enhance their abilities, and thereby enjoy the same widening experience of meaning that the worker him- or herself has undergone. A comparable account holds for any person who grows through her or his work and play, whether parent, policewoman, teacher, or politician.

For Dewey, education constitutes its own end. Human growth has no higher aim than the capacity for further growth. In formal terms, Dewey writes, education "is that reconstruction or reorganization of experience which adds to the meaning of experience, and which increases ability to direct the course of subsequent experience" (MW9, p. 82). Dewey regards education as the deepening and enriching of the quality of life, by which he means its felt meanings and significance. At the same time, education equips people to direct or guide that very process into ever-widening realms of meaning.

Dewey does not believe that the self has a fixed nature. The self *is* what it thinks, feels, imagines, and does. It has no identity or meaning outside these modes of activity. This outlook means that the self is permanently engaged in a process of "losing" and "finding" itself. According to Dewey, every time the quality of a person's experience alters, so does his or her self. However imperceptibly, through the course of any meaningful experience, the self can

become more knowledgeable, sensitive, and aware. That process means it has literally lost its prior identity in which it was *not* as knowledgeable, sensitive, or aware. At the same time, however, the self has found a new identity, or *new quality* of personhood, that is captured in those same terms. Moreover, the self can now better direct subsequent experience because it now brings to bear a deeper, broader capacity, once more captured in the phrase *more knowledgeable, sensitive, and aware*. For Dewey, this process constitutes the spiral of growth, whose end is never terminal or fixed, but always in continuous transformation. We discern again his belief that humanity has an unfathomable capacity to enrich its experience and to expand its realization of meaning.

Meaning remains a crucial watchword because it opens the door to Dewey's outlook on democracy. His large corpus is replete with expressions of moral outrage at how often social and individual practices constrain experience—and thereby narrow and diminish the quality of selfhood that people can cultivate. Too often, social circumstances smother the prospects for human growth, forcing persons into routines, ruts, and lowered expectations of the meaning of life. In the worst cases, injustice, bigotry, and violence damage or annihilate human prospects. Equally often, individual habits, outlooks, and desires narrow both the individual's and others' possibilities. Individuals accept truncated modes of existence that shut down outlets for human sympathy, grace, and meaning. Dewey poses the question, What kind of political arrangement will best draw *out* individual capacities for growth, while at the same time drawing individuals *into* the life of their society?

Democracy is his answer. According to Dewey, democracy is more than a form of government. It is more than a system of laws, institutions, and practices such as voting. Rather, democracy "is primarily a mode of associated living, of conjoint communicated experience" (MW9, p. 93). Democracy comes into being through expanded communication, shared experience, and an abiding disposition to seek interaction with others rather than to shun them. The construction worker developing the ability to communicate with fellow workers is fueling democracy. The parent who initiates a conversation with another parent in the public park is enacting democracy. The taxi rider and cabbie who swap experiences are realizing democracy. The teacher willing to hear out a student's explanation creates a democratic moment for both precisely because it is marked by sincere communication, shared experience, and a commitment to mutual engagement. None of these people must think in such terms. Their purpose is not "the growth of democracy." Rather, their direct aims are getting jobs done, sharing backgrounds, supporting others, and so forth. However, the indirect effect is that their willingness to interact with others in genuine rather than solely self-serving ways infuses the societal ethos, however microscopically in each particular case, with expanded communication and meaning.

For Dewey, a democratic society is characterized by a constant, open-ended, and unconstrained expansion in communication. It features ever-widening and ever-new channels for mutual contact and understanding. A democratic society is a growing, transforming society. This view complements Dewey's image of a growing, transforming self. One fuels and depends upon the other. A society that expands its communicative pathways draws out individual initiative, thought, and engagement. Thus, it constantly invites the individual to grow. At the same time, each individual's broadened participation immediately contributes to the widening of societal passageways. Thus, each person transforms society itself, however minutely in comparison with the whole. This image captures what Dewey means by democracy as a mode of associated living.

According to Dewey, a democratic society depends on formal education far more critically than does a society that seeks merely to replicate itself. In the latter, education is limited to bringing the young up to speed with convention and custom. It does not entail educating the young to take up hitherto unknown and unrealized possibilities. However, in a society that aspires to grow, people will "endeavor to shape the experiences of the young so that instead of reproducing current habits, better habits shall be formed, and thus the future adult society be an improvement on their own" (MW9, p. 85). By "better," Dewey denotes a society with enriched, expanding interaction between all its members. In such a society, people will find it important to ensure that resources are distributed so that all have the fullest possible opportunities to engage in the formative process of communication, interaction, and meaning-making.

Dewey argues that his approach to education, outlined in the previous section of this chapter, is indispensable to the emergence of a democratic society. "Since a democratic society repudiates the principle of external authority," he writes, "it must find a substitute in voluntary disposition and interest; these can be created only by education" (MW9, p. 93). But as suggested previously, Dewey has in mind more than the American Founding Fathers' ideal of an educated public equipped to influence the machinery of government. His conception is at once deeper and more thorough. It is that democracy cannot come into being without an abiding commitment to what he calls "an interest in learning from all the contacts of life" (MW9, p. 370). Dewey describes such an interest as "moral" because it means, literally, the willingness to learn from *all* rather than just *some* of the contacts that people have in life. That posture means remaining open, flexible, and responsive, including with those who may differ in values, outlooks, and hopes. This aim establishes a more profound public meaning to education than being able to control governmental processes. Education should form persons with a robust social disposition, even as it also equips each person to realize his or her personal talents and bent.

Dewey harbored no illusions about how difficult it is to cultivate and sustain democratic life. Nonetheless, he pushed his idealistic vision to the limit and in so doing invited others to articulate their hopes as fully as possible. That very act of invitation can build confidence and generate energy. Countless educators and citizens have been inspired by Dewey's call and example. In the following section, I will touch on his extraordinarily active life—he was one of America's last great public intellectuals—and on his pioneering work as founder of the famed Laboratory School in Chicago.

DEWEY'S PUBLIC LIFE AND THE LABORATORY SCHOOL

Dewey's educational and democratic vision materialized in an historical moment as tumultuous and confusing as our own. He was born in 1859, when the United States was largely an agrarian society and on the cusp of a nearly ruinous civil war. By 1916, the year in which he published *Democracy and Education*, the United States had experienced massive industrialization and urbanization; rapid population growth; an enormous expansion in the provision of public schooling; a revolution in communications and modes of transportation; several overseas wars, including the cataclysm of World War I; and myriad scientific and artistic breakthroughs. An acute observer of these events, Dewey understood the uncertainty and fear as well as the excitement they triggered. He sought to elucidate an educational approach (outlined in the previous section), that would enable people to understand and to shape these prodigious changes rather than merely being shaped by them.

Dewey not only studied his contemporary times but also commented upon them in endless op-eds, magazine articles, and public speeches and in meetings with unions, political parties, and other groups. In 1915 Herbert Croly, Walter Lippmann, and the other editors of the newly launched and soon to be widely read magazine *The New Republic* invited Dewey to become a regular contributor. Over the next twenty years he published more than 150 articles in the journal on a wide range of national and international topics, ranging from education in China to politics in New York City. His writing on education and other topics brought him so much attention that by the 1920s it was said that no public issue in America was settled until he had commented on it (Commager, 1950, p. 100).

Moreover, because of his ideas and civic commitment, he was enjoined to support and participate in many newly formed institutions that would go on to have illustrious histories in American society. He gave a supporting address at the founding meeting of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) in 1909. Guided by W. E. B. Du Bois and others, the NAACP gave critical voice to Black Americans' political, economic, and social aspirations. Dewey was active in the formation of the

American Association of University Professors (AAUP) and was elected as its first president in 1913. He accepted the office because of his fervent belief in the value of academic freedom, at that time under threat as university presidents and trustees engaged in arbitrary dismissal of faculty. Dewey also participated in the founding of the American Union Against Militarism (AUAM) in 1916 and for many years served on its national committee commencing right after the end of World War I, when it was renamed the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU). In this and other capacities he became an articulate defender of freedom of speech and thought in public life. He joined and was an active supporter of the New York City teachers union, speaking out repeatedly on behalf of teachers, students, and public education. He traveled extensively in the United States and abroad, giving speeches to packed auditoriums; offering seminars; and meeting with politicians, educational leaders, and academics. He also sustained a regular teaching schedule, wrote numerous scholarly books, and maintained a family life as well as many friendships.

In the midst of these busy affairs, Dewey continued to think of himself first and last as a philosopher. In his view, philosophy is not the rarefied study of timeless truths and reality. It does not mean determining standards of what is good, right, just, beautiful, or the source of happiness, and then propounding these from on high. "Philosophical problems," he argues, "are in the last analysis but definitions, objective statements, of problems which have arisen in a socially important way in the life of a people" (MW3, p. 73). For Dewey, philosophy is an interactive practice of thought, study, and criticism. It focuses on the uses or absence of intelligence, creativity, imagination, and other generative capacities in human affairs, even while drawing upon knowledge of life to criticize such terms as *creativity* and *imagination*.

Dewey's underlying sense that genuine philosophical problems mirror problems in experience propelled him to accept the ambitious task of forming the Laboratory School at the University of Chicago. Dewey founded the school in 1896—its initial name was the University Elementary School—and remained intimately associated with it until his move in 1904 to Columbia University in New York. During these 8 years, Dewey gained enormous insight into the dynamics of teaching and learning. Certainly, he brought to the task a strong scholarly background in psychology, ethics, social theory, and more. He had also studied educational philosophy, had begun to publish in the area, and had become somewhat familiar with the workings of schools in the United States. But he had not, as yet, come fully to grips with the elements of a philosophy of education—among them, conceptions of teaching, learning, and curriculum—nor had he found a way to bring them into a critical, working unity. His years at the Laboratory School created conditions that led him to reconstruct his outlook. His experience gave him confidence that the vision he slowly but steadily propounded through speeches, publica-

tions, and teaching was right for both democratic society and for individual flourishing.

During Dewey's tenure the Laboratory School grew steadily, beginning with its initial enrollment in 1896 of 16 children. It retained throughout a faculty-student ratio of 9 or 10 to 1 (in marked contrast with many schools at the time with classrooms of more than 40 pupils). Most of the children were from local middle-class families, some being the sons and daughters of university faculty; Dewey's own children were among them. After it became permanently housed, the school enjoyed ample outdoor space for gardens and playing fields and also had state-of-the-art laboratories and workshops. At the same time, financial concerns were a constant worry for Dewey; for his wife, Alice Chipman Dewey (1859–1927), who served in a number of administrative positions in the school; and for Ella Flagg Young (1845–1918), who served as a general supervisor in the school beginning in 1901 and whose insight into the dynamics of teaching and learning had a marked and lasting impact on Dewey's philosophy of education (Blount, 2002; Lagemann, 1996).

In her detailed study of the Laboratory School's initial years, Laurel Tanner (1997) muses about what it would have been like to visit the place when the renowned philosopher himself walked its halls. Her account and those of others make it clear how truly experimental were the school's operations. Dewey conceived the idea of a "laboratory" school as a place to put on trial his provisional ideas and those of his faculty regarding education. During his sojourn it underwent significant changes in curriculum, pedagogy, evaluation, and administration. Those changes resulted from the communicative environment Dewey advocated and enacted through his own conduct. The teachers in the school had an active and sustained voice in determining every facet of the academic and social program. They were influential in bringing about major changes such as a shift from their working as "generalists" in the elementary grades to working as subject matter specialists; the school accordingly adopted a departmental structure (a rare sight in today's elementary schools).

However, Dewey and the teachers also retained a strong interdisciplinary, collaborative bent in their work. As emphasized earlier in this chapter, Dewey believed in working with the child *and* the curriculum. He urged a dynamic balance in the educator's focus, and his years at the Laboratory School helped convince him that genuine student learning best derives from engaging with the richest, most thoughtful curriculum the educator can conceive. His experience also clarified his view that subject matter comprises more than information in a textbook. It also includes students' and teachers' aesthetic and intellectual responses to what is encompassed in the disciplines, as well as the personal experience they bring to its study. Moreover, Dewey and his colleagues came to see how vital it was for teachers to develop a longitudinal view of the curriculum, to envision where students might be a

week, a month, a year from the given lesson for the day. The teacher's direct focus is always on present conditions and how to fuel the richest possible experience in the moment. Indirectly, her or his concern includes students' deepening understanding and command of the curriculum over time.

Dewey came to believe that a school would function best if it could become a genuine community, a "miniature democracy" characterized by open channels of communication and interaction. He did not mean a democracy in an electoral sense; he believed strongly in the leadership functions of school administrators, teachers, and parents. Rather, Dewey believed the school could become a place of "conjoint communicated experience" (MW9, p. 93) that would generate meaningful social and personal growth. The school could become a vehicle for the enrichment of students' and educators' minds and hearts, an aim that embodies Dewey's fundamental concern for the quality of life. He and the faculty of the Laboratory School tinkered constantly with mechanisms and programs to bring this vision into being. The records of the school yield a story of meetings, hallway conversations, and enthusiastic correspondence. The records also show that the administrative running of the school was organically integrated with ongoing curriculum and pedagogical development (an achievement mirrored in many successful schools in operation today). This arrangement included communication with the university, thereby reflecting Dewey's hope that the school would "break down the barriers that divide the education of the little child from the instruction of the maturing youth, [thus demonstrating] to the eye that there is no lower or higher, but simply education" (MW1, p. 55).

THE LEGACY OF DEWEY'S PHILOSOPHY OF EDUCATION

Dewey's school attracted an increasing stream of visitors and inspired many comparable educational experiments. Innovative and what came to be called "progressive" schools sprang up in various parts of the country throughout the early decades of the 20th century. Many of the founders, administrators, and teachers in these schools devoured Dewey's educational writings, and their enthusiasm spread quickly into schools and colleges of education as well as among many sectors of society. Countless progressive-minded educators in the public school system sought to bend its ways to accommodate Dewey's ideas. The upshot was that for many educators and members of the public, Dewey and progressive education became synonymous.

That fact complicates, and some would say compromises, Dewey's educational legacy today. For one thing, the very meaning of progressive education remains contested and confused. In the broadest sense, progressive education represents a commitment to the student as an individual rather than as a cog in the social wheel. It advances the notion that life in school

can influence life in society, and that the school should therefore enjoy considerable autonomy. It stands for establishing democratic values throughout the educational process. However, many progressive educators have advanced a "student-centered" educational approach that is paired with a negligent if not suspicious outlook toward academic instruction, a posture that relegates teachers to the role of mere "facilitators" (Santoro Gomez, 2005). In other uses of the term, *progressive education* intimates a hostile, us-versus-them struggle between teachers and the system in the spirit of a wholesale rejection of school-based hierarchies and structures. In still other guises, progressive education means an integrated curriculum and pedagogy that seeks to challenge students intellectually while also proceeding organically with the adult-led operations of the school. This last mirrors the approach that Dewey and his faculty sought to enact in the early years of their school. However, in the public imagination Dewey often became associated with *all* these disparate and sometimes irreconcilable versions of progressive education. The upshot was that Dewey became the target of criticism from a variety of educational and political quarters, despite multiple attempts on his part to clarify his actual philosophy.

Dewey's school did not survive as a laboratory environment in the manner that he and his colleagues envisioned. Today it functions like many other independent college preparatory schools. Most of the numerous experimental schools founded along the lines of Dewey's undertaking have also not retained their laboratory character (see, for example, Semel & Sadovnik, 1999). These facts help account for why scholars continue to debate just how influential Dewey's ideas have been in American education. On the one hand, there is evidence that Deweyan imagination, creativity, and sophistication remain alive and well in American education. That influence sometimes saturates entire schools, while at others it characterizes a few classrooms or groups of educators in a given locale. Furthermore, Dewey continues to be read in schools and colleges of education, and the academy in general is at present focusing a great deal of attention on his work. At the same time, there is also evidence that many schools and classrooms today are not educative settings, and there is an equal amount of evidence that while Dewey is taught and read in colleges and schools of education it is at a superficial level.

It has always been hard to discern how many educators have actually studied Dewey's work, as opposed to merely citing it, as they convert him into either a symbol of their fondest aspirations or the embodiment of all that is wrong in American education. The other side of the equation is that anyone who does truly engage Dewey's thought will realize how formidable a challenge he presents to the educator. Some have concluded that education modeled after his philosophy is impossible to pull off; it simply expects too much of the teacher (see Schwab, 1978). For me, Dewey's elevated ideas render his philosophy of education endlessly fascinating and unsettling.

Rather than expecting too much of the educator, I do not believe he “expects” anything at all. He never asks his reader to agree with him. He invites the reader to think, to feel, to wonder, and to care for the quality of life, even as he enacts these traits in the very style of his writing. He offers little by way of concrete advice, despite the wealth of techniques and suggestions he had at hand. Instead, he invites people to use their intelligence and imagination in dealing with the concrete situations in which they find themselves, and which nobody knows better than they. I believe his philosophy will strike a chord with anyone who aspires to live fully and to assist others in doing the same.



Paulo Freire's Politics and Pedagogy

Stephen M. Fishman and Lucille McCarthy

Education must begin with the solution of the teacher-student contradiction by reconciling the poles of the contradiction so that both are simultaneously teachers *and* students.

—Paulo Freire

SOCIAL HOPE—hope for a better, more equitable future—is crucial for all teachers, no matter their grade level. For who can teach effectively without a sense of optimism that his or her pupils live in a world that encourages an increase in justice, equality, and collaboration rather than in a world that earmarks these qualities for decline? In our present era—when expanding poverty, ecological damage, and international conflict have left social hope in short supply—Paulo Freire's voice is a treasured one. As we will show, this Brazilian philosopher and educator brings together the two great reformist visions of Western thought—Christianity and Marxism—in a way that demands all instructors' attention. That is, Freire's blend of these two visions can be a source of social hope for all of us as classroom teachers, a source we need if our practice is to be both effective and full-hearted.

We divide our essay into three sections. In the first, we present the intellectual movements that influenced Freire as he developed his politics and pedagogy. In the second, we discuss the influence of Freire's politics on his pedagogy. Finally, we present a brief overview of the worldwide impact of Freire's ideas.

Ethical Visions of Education: Philosophies in Practice, edited by David T. Hansen. Copyright © 2007 by Boston Research Association for the 21st Century. All rights reserved. Prior to photocopying items for classroom use, please contact the Copyright Clearance Center, Customer Service, 222 Rosewood Dr., Danvers, MA 01923, USA, tel. (508) 750-8400, www.copyright.com