
Presidential Address

PHILOSOPHY INTO ACTION: DEWEY'S COMMUNITY OF INTEREST

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The Milau Viaduct in France spans two valleys, connecting them by way of a cable stay bridge that required both fierce imagination and courageous will to overcome the geographical and economic obstacles that would keep the people and land separate. Today I want us to imagine that impossible span as a way to think about coalitions and community across difference, including socioeconomic status, in order to challenge injustice in education. I will use John Dewey to help us explore the challenges to coalitions across difference. Dewey dedicated his life to education for human flourishing and social justice. For social justice in education is our enterprise today as we think together on the landscape that would keep us at arm's length, about how we can build community based on interest.

DEWEY'S LIBERALISM

In "The Meaning and Office of Liberalism" Dewey provides a step for our work. We live in oppressive times, in a new century using ancient means of war, both military and economic, that constrains the liberty of many for the benefit of a few. Dewey reminds us that "liberty in the concrete signifies release from the impact of *particular* oppressive forces." These oppressive forces change over time, when they might emerge as new to replace old, and become themselves the oppression they sought to replace. Dewey argues that the "old and the new have forever to be integrated with each other, so that the values of old experience may become the servants and instruments of new desires and aims." In the "necessity for adjustment" that propels educators to feel the oppression of injustice and inequality to be addressed.¹

Today an oppression of injustice is felt in a perpetuation of market-driven aims of education that clash with aims that support an education where the young are engaged in learning and discovering their place in the world, to understand what it means to be together with those who believe, look, and speak in ways different from theirs. Instead our educational landscape is increasingly flat and conforming to monotonous testing and mind numbing drill, particularly in schools that reflect high diversity and represent working-class communities. The irony is that in the very schools where there is ethnic and racial diversity, the very schools where learning about and discovering one's place in the world could be done collaboratively with those who are unlike us, instead we find dogmatic methods of individualistic, high intensity rote teaching with little or no opportunity of intellectual inquiry and social engagement.

In early twenty-first century USA, our vision of education is one that engages each student both as an individual and as one who learns to use “organized social effort as a means” to act in the world.² Whether it is applying new skills in researching a current social problem or interpreting what is written and comparing it to other perspectives, education is a participatory social and purposeful inquiry.³ Educative experiences that include debate around social issues, issues where information has been gathered and exchanged, then interpreted from multiple perspectives, opens the doors to challenge inequality. Such educative engagement teaches young people to work together to construct, rather than consume, knowledge and apply it to life issues. And one of the most educative aspects of such experience is that it teaches the young to learn to communicate and to trust one another toward a common goal. Instead we have schools reflecting the socioeconomic level of that particular community, and siloed from other more or less fortunate districts. Except for intramural sports, students rarely see the schools of others, in itself often a singular event that could raise awareness of inequality. Of approximately 45 million school age children, the vast majority of them attend public schools, institutions that potentially and historically have been sites where those across difference can learn together. This is one reason we should care what happens to our public schools. This public institution is impacted by funding and public sentiment, and increasingly, by market forces. Additionally, “policymakers and citizens increasingly expect *schools* to reduce the disparities in grades and test scores that contribute to adult inequalities.”⁴ Whether we want to be or not, educators in all branches of the teaching profession are affected by economics.

PRIVILEGE, POWER, AND THE MIDDLE CLASS

Equality rests on access and “a social environment that provides” a person with the “opportunity for release, expression, fulfillment, of his distinctive capacity.”⁵ In a democratic society, this opportunity is realized when we have adequate housing, access to health care, and schools that foster empowerment. When socioeconomic class limits anyone’s opportunity, there is a need to stand up against that limit, to foster, in the words of my colleague, Patrick Finn, “an attitude.” This is a time for *attitude* in the United States. During the last decades of the twentieth and now the first part of the twenty-first centuries, we have seen the erosion of economic power in poor, working-class, and middle-class sectors. “Economic divisions may harden into social divisions...passing on today’s inequities to the next generation.”⁶ We cannot seek equality in education without acknowledging the role of economics in our collective and educational lives.

Kevin Phillips argues that “by 2000 the conservative restatement of old-market theology, antiregulatory shibboleths, God-wants-you-to-be-rich theology, and Darwinism had built up the greatest momentum since” the early 1920s, the late 1970s, and the last decades of the twentieth century.⁷ Neoliberal

market forces influence popular and gimmicky innovative “toys” to occupy and divert people’s attention from the more mundane needs that the government is neglecting: new movies and entertainment over interstate highways, public health, and education. Consumption is our largest economic product, so to speak. But consumption and manufactured fascination with new automobiles, phones, and other cultural toys only thinly disguise the weak infrastructure of government that is expected to protect and support its citizens. Hurricane Katrina was a natural disaster that unmasked an inept and uncaring government.

Writing in the *New York Times Review of Books*, Jeff Madrick begins his essay on *The Moral Consequences of Economic Growth*, by Benjamin Friedman, by analyzing the economic levels of the last decades of the twentieth century. He states that the post-Second World War economic growth of the middle class began to erode in the late 1970s and intensified by the century’s end. While it is true that the economy was growing, it was not the middle or working class who gained, but the rich who amassed great earnings, and commensurate political power. “Median family income rose only slightly” during this time period.⁸ However, even this positive gain was more the result of two-income households. “Between 1973 and 1993, the average wage of non-management workers fell nearly 25 percent, from \$615 a week in today’s dollars to only \$479.” Working people, both white collar and blue collar, could not keep up with rising costs in healthcare, college tuition, public transport, prescription drugs, and more. For the poor, working-class people, the end of the twentieth century found their economic status stagnated and the gap between rich and poor, black and white abysmally growing. “Since a small number of well-to-do Americans had much larger incomes and built and increased enormous fortunes, inequality reached the notorious levels attained in the Roaring Twenties.”⁹

In education, conservative aims brought into schools and classrooms less resources and higher demands for “accountability,” through the infiltration of corporatization of schools. In *American Education and Corporations*, Deron Boyles analyzes this invasion of our nation’s classrooms by corporations, promoting a hidden curriculum of consumerism and materialism, reducing teaching and learning to a technical task.¹⁰ The bubble test fits neatly into this techno-rationality approach where all ideas are reduced to facts and drills. This is what corporations’ “bottom-line” looks like in schools, not the boardrooms of CEOs but the cubicles of the workers, interchangeable and expendable. The daily grind in school.

It was in these last decades that educators heard persistent reference to students as “clients,” “outcomes,” “productivity,” and other business terms that were and still are being applied to education, teaching, and children. Business style models of organization have infiltrated classrooms, such as Baldrige, a model of measurement and tracking school districts have adopted around the state of Ohio, further constraining teachers and categorizing their students.

We may or may not be concerned with market forces and the state of the economy, but in a capitalist system a staggering wealth is partnered with staggering poverty and inequality. Sociologist Allan Johnson analyzed current levels of wealth and found that in 2006,

The richest 10% of the U.S. population holds more than two-thirds of all the wealth, including almost 90 percent of cash, almost half the land, more than 90 percent of business assets, and almost all stocks and bonds. The richest top 20 percent of all households receives 56 percent of all income, and the richest 40 percent receives 78 percent, leaving less than a quarter of all income to be divided among the remaining 60 percent of all households.¹¹

MOVING PHILOSOPHY INTO ACTION □ DEWEY'S COMMUNITY OF INTEREST

In "Education and Our Present Social Problems," Dewey focuses on the commonality of social problems as they impact and connect teachers with other workers who offer labor as a service to the common good. In 1933, President Hoover convened the Citizens Conference in Washington, D.C., under the title, "The Crisis in Education." What exactly defined this crisis? To educators, stated Dewey, it is

reduced appropriations at the time schools have increased responsibilities put upon them by the number of pupils and other factors due to economic collapse...closed schools...enlarged classes; obsolescence of equipment; eliminating special programs like art and music; [teachers'] salaries cut or unpaid.¹²

Dewey is describing education today, beleaguered with dwindling resources and increasing obligations.

For Dewey, and for many of us in teacher preparation who have dedicated ourselves to public education and an improved society, education was and is meaningful when it affects change to make the world less poor, less unjust, less inequitable. And if the condition of public education seems to have remained the same as when Dewey spoke of the present social problems, so have poverty, injustice, and inequity continue to wield their misery upon citizens of this democratic society. "We must," Dewey says to educators,

frame our social objectives on the basis of knowing the forces and causes which produce the evils from which we suffer, and must frame them on the basis of those forces and conditions in the actual situation which supply means for their realization.¹³

He goes on to take an accounting of those forces and conditions:

Dewey identifies these constituencies as part of the problem and sources of the crisis in education:

The fountain heads of the attack [on public education] everywhere are large taxpayers and the institutions which represent the wealthier and privileged elements in the community. Those who make the least use of the public schools, who are the least dependent upon them, because of their superior economic status, who give their children at home by means of private teachers [or schools] the same things which they denounce as extravagances when supplied in less measure to the children of the masses in schools, these are the ones most active in the attack upon the schools. Under the cry of economics...the efficiency and attractiveness of schools are being threatened.¹⁴

To frame our objectives on the naming of “the forces and causes which produce evils from which we suffer” necessitates a broad vision of who we are and who it is that “suffers.” Dewey prophetically connects social problems with education. Not just education in the sense that we educators should study or teach or research and write about these social problems, but to understand that the root of these social problems, economics, is at the root of our educational crisis itself.¹⁵ Dewey turns the tables on the critics who blame education for economic woes, and says

the causes of economic catastrophe are the causes of the educational crisis. Whatever will remove or mitigate the forces which brought about the collapse of industry, the terrible insecurity of millions of our people, the breakdown in government due to decrease of revenues, will have the same beneficial effect on education.¹⁶

Educators are not passive nor should we be. Dewey challenged educators to look closest to themselves, at how social problems affect them at home. Dewey describes how teachers entertain an illusion: “that their vocation...is so distinctive, so separated from other wage earners and salaried persons” that we become aloof to the very problems that we must engage in.

The educator is a human being, as a member of the community and as an educator, whether teacher or administrator, must concern himself with economic interests conditions, needs, possibilities, and plans for reconstruction if he is to be secure and effective in performing his educational function.¹⁷

Our wellbeing is tied to the wellbeing of others; the health of our public schools is tied to the economic health of the people.

We are part of this community and its concerns, because they are our concerns. “Social problems,” Dewey continues, “are directly [our] concerns...because of education itself.” Society and education cannot be separated just as the individual and society cannot. What is it, according to Dewey, that keeps us bound together in a “community of interest?” The

“community of interest” is one that all who work for society belong to. First, whether we are workers in coalmines, factories, shops, schools, or any other salaried worker who toils for the common good, we are all part of this “community of interest.” We are bound up by the service we provide to society by our labor. Any social problem that affects one, affects all. “The problem is social because it is common.” If educators begin to study the problem where we are, at home, we see that our interests as teachers are the same as the other workers. We provide services, necessary services, for society.¹⁸ Dewey stated that the services we gave “performed an indispensable social function.” When we see our interests in common with other workers, social problems no longer are distant, academic, and affecting somebody else. They are ours.

And if social problems are ours, argued Dewey, then we are responsible for them, not just their consequences. Here Dewey makes a sober point when he says “that we are part of the causes which bring them about in what we have done and have refrained from doing; and that we have a necessary share in finding their solution.”¹⁹

This call of Dewey’s to involve teachers in educating the “community of interest” is not one of proselytizing or propagandizing, but in a political climate where it is in the interests of the wealthy and those in power to keep the “community of interest” separated, distinct, even competitive and suspicious of one another, whatever we do as educators will be interpreted as a threat against those who benefit from the status quo.

Public education is a civic right and necessary for a democratic society to thrive. Dewey would point to economics. While those of us in public institutions and who are proponents of public education may think the golden rule means do unto others, Johnny Hart, the writer of the comic strip “The Wizard of ID,” has another take. Picture the King of ID striking a noble pose, holding a bag of gold. The bubble reads “Remember the Golden Rule: He Who Has the Gold, Makes the Rules.”

Yet in a democratic society, there are other kinds of “gold” beyond money. The power of people to determine their leaders, the voices of the many holding leaders accountable, and the demands of citizens for social goods for the common good, like schools for their children or their neighbors’ children, this is where we must seek our “community of interest.” We will find our like minds amongst ourselves, and engage in academic debate about education, but it is insular and insulated from the external circumstances that hold our public education hostage.

A century and a half ago Marx and Engels cried out in favor of the unity of the working classes of the world against their exploitation. Now, in our time, it is essential and urgent that people unite against the threat that looms over us. The threat, namely, to our own

identity as human persons caught up in the ferocity of the ethics of the marketplace.²⁰

Let us return to the Milau bridge. The chasm was wide, the challenge overwhelming, but the collaboration of architects, construction workers, engineers, and more began building this structure from both ends of the chasm at the same time in 2001. They met in the center in 2005, only one-eighth of an inch off their calculations. The soaring structure connects France and Spain, leaving the environment of the valley below untouched and unharmed by the daily flow of traffic. This was planful, cooperative, intentional, difficult, persistent, and imaginative work. Do we take up Dewey's challenge to become the thing we ask by linking with those who have common interest, including the poor, working class? Such is our task in forming a community of interest

NOTES

1. Quoted in Joseph Ratner, ed., *Intelligence in the Modern World: John Dewey's Philosophy* (New York: The Modern Library, 1939), 450–52.
2. *Ibid.*, 454.
3. John Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems*, in *John Dewey: The Later Works, 1925–1953*, vol. 2, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale, Ill.: Southern Illinois University Press, 1999), 362.
4. Meredith Phillips and Tiffani Chin, "School Inequality: What Do We Know?" (2003), <http://www.russellsage.org/programs/main/inequality/050516.461131>.
5. John Dewey, *Ethics*, in *John Dewey: The Later Works, 1925–1953*, vol. 7, ed. Boydston (Carbondale, Ill.: Southern Illinois University Press, 1999), 350.
6. Russell Sage Foundation, "The Social Dimensions of Inequality," (New York: Russell Sage, 2007), <http://www.russellsage.org/programs/main/inequality>.
7. Kevin Phillips, *Wealth and Democracy: A Political History of the American Rich* (New York: Broadway Books, 2002), 339.
8. Jeff Madrick, "The Way to a Fair Deal," in *New York Review of Books*, January 12, 2006, 37–40.
9. *Ibid.*, 37.
10. Deron Boyles, *American Education and Corporations: The Free Market Goes to School* (New York: Falmer, 2000).
11. Allan G. Johnston, *Power, Privilege, and Difference* (New York: McGraw Hill, 2006), 43–44.
12. John Dewey, "Education and our Present Social Problems," *Educational Method* 12, no. 7 (1933), 385–90.

13. Ibid., 386.

14. Ibid., 387.

15. See Phillips, *Wealth and Democracy*. Phillips analyzes the economic history of wealth in the United States, examining the turn toward free markets and capitalist democracy, where the “economic utility of promoting consumption is that...the public pursues” its egocentric interests, for instance cars, music players, entertainment, and so on, “at the expense of...needs like indoor plumbing, education, and medical care” (334-41).

16. Dewey, “Education and our Present Social Problems,” 387.

17. Ibid., 387-88.

18. See Benjamin Friedman, *The Moral Consequences of Economic Growth* (New York: Knopf, 2006). Friedman traces the historical connections between moral and economic trends, arguing that economic growth does advance democratic aims like tolerance and equality. It is in uneven prosperity, Friedman argues, such as we have experienced intermittently since the 1980s to present, that the government has passed regressive tax cuts, slashed social welfare, and in society intolerance has increased, for instance in immigration and racism. Dewey’s “Education and our Present Social Problems” was given during the Depression, when the desperation of the common people was rising. Friedman’s argument connecting economic health with progressive social programs is interesting in light of the “New Deal” of President Franklin Roosevelt. Nevertheless, Friedman offers a way for us to understand economics as it is manifested in the social consciousness of a nation over time.

19. Dewey, “Education and our Present Social Problems,” 388.

20. Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of Freedom: Ethics, Democracy, and Civic Courage* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield, 1998), 115.
