

A New Name for Some Old Ways of Teaching: Dewey, Learning Differences, and Liberal Education

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Abstract

The diversity of learning differences in today's college classrooms raises an array of difficult questions that pedagogical theory and practice have yet to address. The trend toward more individualized instruction presents a puzzle when considered alongside this new diversity, particularly in the context of classical ideals of liberal education. Drawing on the surprisingly timely educational writings of John Dewey, this essay attempts to sketch a pedagogical vision for the 21st century that shifts the focus back toward the process of learning itself, and that grounds learning in the personal experience of the learner without compromising the larger goals of liberal education. Meeting the challenges presented by diverse learners may hold the key to reinvigorating higher education as a whole.

A perceptible trend has emerged in today's college classrooms. Its signposts are buzzwords like "student centered" and "active learning," and a greater awareness of the diversity of "learning styles" or "learning differences" among students. Driven in part by recent insights in neurodevelopmental psychology into the complexity and diversity of human learning, as well as a political or moral critique of the shortcomings of traditionalist, Eurocentric biases in both pedagogy and curricular content, this trend has culminated in the desire for a more dynamic conception of classroom activity meant to displace the static model of the teacher as "professor." The result has been a call for new pedagogies and a demand that education become more practical.¹

I argue in this essay that the changes associated with the recognition of learning differences are precisely what we need to reinvigorate higher education in the

twenty-first century. Following Dewey's early-twentieth-century example, teachers today recognize the inadequacy of our educational practices for the diverse populations we aim to serve. Nationally, about a third of students who enter college drop out. Many arrive woefully underprepared. More and more individuals enter college in search of a degree rather than an education and regard large swaths of their educational experience as courses that they simply need to get through and that elicit little engagement. Students and institutions alike are squeezed by societal pressures that demand education be justified by practical, utilitarian benefits. Sadly, the nearly century-old lament that "somehow our teaching has not attracted children to the school and its work" remains true today (Suzzallo, 1979, p. 469; Sarason, 2004, p. 138).

The current lack of a coherent and persuasive vision to address these issues courts error and misadventure. In what follows I outline a Deweyan vision of educational reform that addresses the concerns associated with the need for more active learning. Making education more practical in the specific Deweyan sense, I argue, will enable us to reinvigorate the goals of liberal education while recognizing the true diversity of today's learners. I concentrate on two areas where such reform might profitably focus: bridging the divide between general or liberal and vocational education, and reforming classroom pedagogy. My claim is that Dewey-inspired changes on these two fronts will enable us to respond to the issue of learning differences in a way that strengthens rather than undermines the traditional goals of liberal education, including cultivating moral judgment and social responsibility through critical self-reflection and fostering respect for the culture and history of others.²

By shifting our focus away from end products to the context of the learning process itself, Dewey outlined a pedagogical vision that is grounded in the active energies that drive human beings to understand themselves and the world around them; that entreats teachers to attend to these inner forces and to nourish them with the promise of individual growth and genuine understanding as their fruits; and that values the power to make people think over the unthinking mastery of facts and wholehearted effort over glittering finished products. Lastly, it is a vision that understands the educative value of social interaction and that regards cooperative group activity in the classroom as essential experience rather than a novel diversion. In the end, the changes demanded under the banner of learning differences and active learning may be simply a new name for some old Deweyan ways of teaching.³

Democracy and Diverse Learners

Not unlike the early twentieth century of Dewey's day, the cultural milieu inhabited by today's students is in the midst of major demographic changes gradually but profoundly altering the social fabric. Immigration, a decline in population growth, an aging American populace, changes in family structure and upbringing, and an increased complexity of ethnic and racial identities, among many other

factors, have combined to alter the face of twenty-first-century America (Keller, 2001). These changes have had an unmistakable impact within the walls of colleges and universities. The most dramatic trend since Dewey may be the evolution over the past 50 years, as one observer dubbed it, “from elite higher education to mass higher education” (Keller, 2005, p. 62). Even near the end of Dewey’s long life in 1940, 24.5 percent of Americans had graduated high school and only 4.6 percent graduated college. In 1996, by contrast, 87.3 percent had completed high school and 27.1 percent had 4 years or more of college. Today, 75 percent of high school graduates spend some time in postsecondary classrooms within two years of graduation (Keller, 2001, p. 234; AAC&U, 2002, p. vii). No longer the province of an elite upper crust, as it was in Dewey’s time, higher education today is indeed closer to being a mass institution.⁴

The recent awareness of differences in learning styles can be seen as an outgrowth of this larger trend. To be sure, university experience today is a reality for millions who in a previous era would have been excluded.⁵ While this welcome heterogeneity has revitalized many aspects of university life, divergent expectations from students, parents, faculty, and society at large about the goals of higher education have strained traditional ideals and practices. In particular, the value of a general or liberal education that, as Dewey once held, is “fitted rather to a leisure class in an aristocracy than to an industrial and democratic life” for today’s professionally minded students has been called into question (qtd. in Durant, 1953, p. 390).

The very notion of mass higher education goes against the grain of two millennia of Western thought. Even the familiar bifurcation of college curricula between general education and the more practical major is a legacy of the slave-holding societies of classical antiquity, where an education that was *liberalis* or “fitted to freedom” was reserved for the narrow minority of free citizens.⁶ Equally elitist was the vision of the liberal arts that took shape during the late medieval period around the *trivium* (grammar, rhetoric, dialectic or logic) and *quadrivium* (algebra, geometry, astronomy, music) and centered on theological training. It is not until Abraham Lincoln’s Morrill Act of 1862, which paved the way for the new land grant state universities committed to teaching “such branches of learning as are related to agriculture and the mechanical arts” in addition to the classical curriculum, that these elitist assumptions begin to chafe against America’s egalitarian ideals (Bok, 2006, p. 26).⁷ Seen in this context, issues surrounding learning differences are merely the next phase in a century-and-a-half-long struggle to reconcile these conflicting classical and modern educational ideals. A coherent vision that would reconcile active learning pedagogy with the larger goals of the liberal arts remains needful even today.

No thinker understood more profoundly the fundamental ties between democracy and education than Dewey. In his conception of democratic life Dewey is the spiritual heir of the distinctly American tradition, inaugurated by Emerson and later Thoreau and Whitman, which held there is more to democracy than an institutional arrangement. While “universal suffrage, direct participation in choice

rulers, is an essential part of democracy,” he argued, “[...] political democracy is not the whole of democracy.” Democracy can only be maintained where it is “social” and “moral.” That is, where a set of what Dewey called “intellectual and emotional traits” are actively cultivated—qualities like widespread opportunities for social mobility, the free circulation of experiences and ideas, and the extensive realization of the purposes that hold men together. Since they eschew by their very nature coercive, authoritarian practices, democracies depend upon “shared interests” for their unity and a “personal appreciation of the value of institutions” for their stability. These traits “do not grow spontaneously on bushes. They have to be planted and nurtured. They are dependent upon education” (1916/1993, pp. 121-122).⁸

Democracy and education, then, are deeply, organically intertwined for Dewey, both in their method and highest aim—creating the conditions for the moral growth of individuals and for society as a whole. Indeed, the cornerstone of Dewey’s thinking is the idea that the “supreme test,” not only of political and educational arrangements, but of human associations more generally, should be “the contribution they make to the all-around growth of every member of society” (1920/1982, p. 186). Education, like democracy, is a “social function” that involves “securing direction and development in the immature through their participation in the life of the group to which they belong.” The dual dynamics of “widening of the area of shared concerns” and “liberation of a greater diversity of personal capacities,” which Dewey believed characterize democratic life, must be sustained deliberately through education (1916/1944, pp. 81, 87). Hence, it is imperative that our educational practices recognize the educative force of social arrangements where cooperation and shared purpose operate as deeply educative in nature, and combine this with the educational aspiration of discovering and developing personal capacities.

Given this vision, it is not surprising that Dewey was attuned to the idea that individuals are possessed of different minds—in contemporary parlance, to learning differences. Although lacking today’s precise developmental or neuropsychological vocabulary to express it, Dewey perceived the inadequacy of the educational system of his day to the diverse population courted by the then very new ideal of public education. Reacting to charges that the inclusion of “active occupations” in school curricula, by which he meant occupations “of nature-study, of elementary science, of art, of history,” somehow deprecated the ideal of well-rounded humane learning, Dewey held,

It is our present education which is highly specialized, one-sided and narrow. It is an education dominated almost entirely by the medieval conception of learning. It is something which appeals for the most part simply to the intellectual aspect of our natures, our desire to learn, to accumulate information, and to get control of the symbols of learning; not to our impulses and tendencies to make, to do, to create, to produce, whether in the form of utility or art. (1899/1964, p. 308)

Predating the pioneering insights of Howard Gardner and others into the myriad kinds of minds humans possess by some 80 years, Dewey realized in 1899, “The simple facts of the case are that in the great majority of human beings the distinctively intellectual interest is not dominant. They have the so-called practical impulse and disposition” (1899/1964, p. 309). Rather than cling to an outmoded conception of education seen from a Deweyan perspective as ill suited for current social realities, “fitted rather to a leisure class in an aristocracy,” and condemn the failures of those of “practical impulse” as signs of uneducability and slight aptitude, Dewey understood the importance of bringing a critical eye to entrenched pedagogical institutions and assumptions (qtd. in Durant 1953, p. 390).

Indeed, with a wisdom before his time, Dewey regarded the all too common student displays of apathy and inattention not as illnesses to be cured with medications, but as direct consequences of a flawed context of learning. “Human nature being what it is,” he held, “it tends to seek its motivation in the agreeable rather than the disagreeable.” Criticizing even progressive-minded educators who went to great lengths to make their subject matter *appear* interesting, Dewey argued that in the end the material is

...still just so much geography and arithmetic and grammar study; not so much potentiality of child-experience with regard to language, earth, and numbered and measured reality. Hence the difficulty of bringing the mind to bear upon it; hence its repulsiveness; the tendency for attention to wander; for other acts and images to crowd in and expel the lesson. (1902/1964, p. 356)

In tragically prescient language, Dewey discerned in 1913 that “educators blamed the children or the perverseness of human nature, instead of attacking the conditions which, by divorcing learning from use of the natural organs of action, made learning both difficult and onerous.” His diagnosis of classroom misbehavior at a time when classrooms were unlikely to have even electric lighting should give us pause when we look askance at calls for more active learning:

Even in the ordinary hard-and-fast school, where it is thought to be a main duty to suppress all forms of motor-activity, the physical activities that are still allowed under the circumstances, such as moving the eyes, lips, etc., in reading to one’s self; the physical adjustments of reading aloud, figuring, writing, reciting, are much more important than is generally recognized in holding attention. The outlet in action is so scanty and so accidental, however, that much energy remains unutilized and hence ready to break forth in mischief or worse; while mind takes flights of uncontrolled fancy, day-dreaming and wandering to all sorts of subject (1913/1979, pp. 185-186).

Part of Dewey’s critique of the regnant educational approach in his day targeted the emphasis on “absorption and learning” rather than “construction and giving out.” In a spirit that prefigured the individualist ethos of learning today, he

complained, “There is no opportunity for each child to work out something specifically his own, which he may contribute to the common stock, while he, in turn, participates in the productions of others.” Dewey’s educational writings abound with admonitions that education must begin with the student’s “present powers.” Not as something to be given free rein, as many mistaken criticisms hold, but as the “seeds” that classroom practice must endeavor to cultivate (1897/1964, p. 118). In the end, Dewey understood that the shortcomings resided in ineffective educational practices rather than in the learners themselves, and set out to formulate a new vision of education more fitted to an egalitarian society where higher education is the province of all citizens.

Toward a More “Practical” Deweyan Education

Continuing to formulate this vision is precisely where educational reform today must begin. Central to this effort must be an attempt to reconcile the liberal or general and practical or vocational aspects of education. General education courses designed to provide a foundation in the liberal arts and cultivate free minds are often too removed from the practical training of the majors for students to appreciate their value. Here a rigid dichotomy between a liberal arts core and career-specific majors undermines learning in both areas. In the absence of clear continuities between these two fundamental components of higher education, core courses become outdated requirements simply to be gotten out of the way, while classes in the majors are reduced to conveyances for transmitting large amounts of factual information that students simply memorize without developing essential habits of thought.

On the traditional model of liberal education Dewey sought to replace—espoused more recently by people like William Bennett (1984, 2002), George Will (1983), and E. D. Hirsch (1987) to a certain extent—the aim is the transmission of a largely static body of knowledge that goes under the name of “the wisdom of the ages” or “the memory of civilization.” Whatever its guise, it represents something that purports to be timeless and uncorrupted by the popular prejudices and narrow social aims of today—in short, a tradition beyond question. The task is simply to impart this tradition to students, of whom we only require deferential reception of this wisdom. As one teacher observed—and one might add, by design—“the canonic voices [are] so loud students [can]not hear their own” (Fishman and McCarthy, 1998, p. 89).⁹

A Deweyan approach, by contrast, would reject the passivity of this model. Because the disseminated knowledge never enters the flow of personal experience, meaningful and lasting learning is unlikely to take place. Most certainly, it will fail to yield student growth. Such an education, Dewey once quipped, amounted to “training for the profession of learning” (1899/1964, p. 309). No less true today than in Dewey’s time, the training of students to approach books like scholars seems a poor model for liberal education in a democratic society that offers higher learning to all its citizens. More specifically, Dewey understood that what was being taught, below the surface level of achieving a mastery of facts, and to a much

deeper and lasting result, was the development of “a special intellectual interest [... an] ability to view facts impartially and objectively; that is, without reference to their place and meaning in one’s own experience” (1902/1964, p. 341). Besides knowledge itself, what education imparts are habits. On this view, education is “the process of forming fundamental dispositions, intellectual and emotional, toward nature and fellow men” (1916/1944, p. 328).

The key Deweyan shift here is that providing students with a foundation in the liberal arts is not just about exposing them to different disciplines. It is also about cultivating habits: habits of critical thinking, reading, writing, and effective communication, to be sure. But habits of expressing what one believes, of taking seriously the perspectives of others, and of seeing issues from more than one side as well. Put another way, cognitive skills and practical competencies, such as critical thinking, effective oral and written communication, interpretive ability, and problem-solving, must not be divorced from either content knowledge or the traditional aims of general education, including the cultivation of moral judgment and social responsibility, opening the mind, understanding one’s self, and fostering respect for the culture and history of others. More than specific bodies of knowledge, as a path to well-rounded human beings the liberal arts represent a particular perspective or approach that can be applied to any discipline.

A Deweyan conception of liberal education, then, would involve a greater degree of “manual” or practical training—a suggestion likely to cause defenders of liberal education to recoil.¹⁰ But Dewey’s language here is misleading. Though a committed advocate of the introduction of “practical activities” and “active occupations,” which included things like “shopwork” and the “household arts” of sewing and cooking, into the school system, Dewey stood in staunch opposition to the teaching of such endeavors as “mere practical devices,” “modes of routine employment,” or “technical skills”—in sum, to anything approached in a narrow, utilitarian way. Instead, these practical activities must be approached in a “broad and generous way” as “methods of life,” conceived in their “social significance”—that is, “points of departure whence [students] shall be led out into a realization of the historic development of man” (1899/1964, pp. 299-310).

Sounds great, but what does all this mean practically? Dewey gave the example of teaching children sewing and weaving. Nothing, he said, would strike intelligent observers as more strange than seeing both boys and girls in their early teens engaged in sewing and weaving. Seen as practical training of boys for sewing on buttons and making patches, it appears narrow and utilitarian, and surely not worthy of inclusion in school. Yet seen “from another side” such work “gives the point of departure from which the child can trace and follow the progress of mankind in history, getting an insight also into the materials used and the mechanical principles involved.” In the end, Dewey held, “you can concentrate the history of all mankind into the evolution of the flax, cotton, and wool fibers into clothing.” The occupation provides a motive, gives firsthand experience, and brings students in contact with reality. Importantly, it grounds the individual in a picture of com-

munal life, and enables her to see all there is “of large and human significance” in daily work. Translated into “its historic and social values and scientific equivalencies,” it is “liberalized” and made capable of spurring genuine, personally rooted, learning and growth. Attending to the “social and scientific values” found in work even offers an opportunity for students to develop “imagination and sympathetic insight” (1899/1964, pp. 304-306).¹¹

Adapting this approach to any other topic requires but a bit of creativity and imagination on the part of teachers, along with another habit Dewey sought to cultivate—a spirit of experimentalism. The best guidance I know of for how to teach things in their “large and human significance” was offered by William James, who asserted in a Deweyan spirit,

You can give humanistic value to almost anything by teaching it historically. Geology, economics, mechanics, are humanities when taught with reference to the successive achievements of the geniuses to which these sciences owe their being. Not taught thus, literature remains grammar, art a catalogue, history a list of dates, and natural science a sheet of formulas and weights and measures. (1908/1987, p. 1243)

Too many of our subjects today have been dehumanized and are taught in a very illiberal way that reduces the material being studied merely to “stuff to be learned” that is detached not only from any larger social and historical significance, but from the experiences of students themselves. That so much of it fails to be internalized by students should come as little surprise.

Classroom Pedagogy and the Need to Unlearn

Compounding these shortcomings is our current preoccupation with results and outcomes. From a Deweyan point of view, where many of our classroom practices go astray is our focus on the end-products rather than on the process of learning. Instead of concerning ourselves with outcomes of how much knowledge has been imparted to students, Dewey counseled attending first and foremost to the context in which learning occurs. Informed by his grasp of the fact that most learning occurs indirectly or tacitly, he held that education is “the enterprise of supplying the conditions which insure growth” (1916/1944, p. 51). For Dewey, learning is a name for adjustments to moments of conflict or discontinuity between the human organism and its environment. This fundamental corrective behavior or “activity” inheres in life itself: “In order that life may persist, this activity has to be both continuous and adapted to the environment.” “Adaptive adjustment,” as he called it, begets learning, first by trial and error, then via memory an accumulation of things learned, leading to habits of action and ultimately “generalized pictures” of objects and situations (1920/1982, pp. 125-128).

The thrust of Dewey’s educational theory, baldly put, is to make classroom learning an extension of this natural human activity or “motion” rather than an impediment to it. By virtue of the human organism’s natural participation in this

constant exchange with its environment, which always includes physical reactions as well as mental acts, Dewey believed students (children, adults) possessed an array of “natural powers” or “natural capital” always operative in the form of reflection or thinking. This includes curiosity, suggestion (ideas or beliefs stimulated by experience), and intellectual organization. For Dewey, these natural powers of individuals are “urgent for development, needing to be acted out in order to secure their own efficiency and discipline.” Though they may require a certain guidance and the inculcation of traits of “seriousness, absorption, and definiteness of purpose” to receive their highest expression, these powers are poised to unfold naturally, while engaging the full emotional and intellectual range of the self—that is, an ineluctable part of “a normal development of a life process” (1922, p. 185). The task for educators is to create classroom conditions that build on these natural powers and developments rather than thwart them in favor of activities more easily regulated and assessed, but always less engaging to students. Pedagogical failures—“whatever is dead, mechanical, and formal in schools”—Dewey believed (1913/1979, pp. 159-160), will be rooted in “the subordination of the life and experiences of the child to the curriculum” (1902/1964, p. 343).¹²

To illustrate this, imagine a classroom context that we may call “unproductive.”¹³ Students enter the experientially sterile environment of the classroom. The natural, active “life activity” Dewey described is abruptly halted. The free flow of impulses is radically bottlenecked, with only very narrow modes of response permitted and often a specific answer desired. They search for some connection, some linkage to past experience and existing habits, and find only previous classroom habits, which are likely to be those of passivity and “divided attention”—the ability to simulate attention outwardly, while the mind wanders within (Dewey, 1913/1979, p. 197). Students are confronted with alien information, occupying a wholly external relation to themselves and their interests, often presented in abstract form with little hope of engaging the emotions. As a result of these conditions, students are forced into a fundamentally passive orientation. Unable to fix the new information within the stream of their experience, the material becomes purely formal—“just stuff to be learned.” Motivation wanes, or is nonexistent. Comments or questions from students become a rarity, as the capacity for information to provoke thought has been neutralized by the cessation of impulse. The entire endeavor is emptied of life for both the students and the teacher—and not surprisingly: As Dewey understood, “the isolation of intellectual disposition from concrete empirical facts of biological impulse and habit-formation entails a denial of the continuity of mind with nature” (1902/1964, pp. 351-354).

Contrast this with a productive context, organized to assist rather than obstruct the natural process of growth. The student’s current capacities and attitudes—“his demand for realization of his own impulses”—are not suppressed. The supreme aim in the classroom is that of “inducing a vital and personal experiencing” then and there. Most significantly, a concern with conveying information is not primary. Rather, the teacher’s concern is with “the subject matter as a

related factor in a total and growing experience,” as opposed to something external and “ready-made” (1902/1964, p. 352). As Dewey defined it, good teaching is “teaching that appeals to established powers while it includes such *new* material as will demand their redirection for a new end, this redirection requiring thought—intelligent effort” (1913/1979, p. 180). Put another way, subject matter must involve student “interest,” in Dewey’s well-known usage, although it may be better described as “identification.” That is, “the recognized identity of the fact to be learned or the action proposed with the growing self; that it lies in the direction of the agent’s own growth, and is therefore, imperiously demanded, if the agent is to be himself” (1913/1979, p. 156).

The point is that without forming the right habits, any edifices of knowledge teachers may succeed in conveying will remain external to students’ native—and naïve—frames of mind, and thwart genuine understanding. Because the disseminated knowledge never enters the flow of personal experience, meaningful and lasting learning is unlikely to take place. Most certainly, it will fail to yield student growth. On a Deweyan view, this knowledge can be best realized in a context that not only demonstrates, but gives students the opportunity to practice themselves, how to think, write, and talk about the subject matter. In the truest sense, it should be student-centered, rather than centered on the teacher or the curriculum.

Dewey’s perspective helps elucidate the familiar problem of why students often seem to retain so little of what is taught. For Dewey, learning always involves more than mere absorption; in the absence of the renewal or reconstruction of personal experience, it is not clear that learning—I should say understanding—occurs at all: “a child’s character, knowledge, and skill are not reconstructed by sitting in a room where events happen. Events must *happen to him*, in a way to bring a full and interested response” (Suzzallo, 1979, p. 470).

Contemporary theorists of learning have deepened this point further. The “text-test model,” as Gardner calls the absorption approach, is limited by its failure to stimulate reconstruction of experience, or in Seymour Sarason’s phrase, to help students “unlearn.”¹⁴ Gardner has been particularly insightful on the issue of the “constraints” operative in the mind that inhibit understanding. Recent research has suggested that structures of assumptions or theories about how the world works are already entrenched in the mind by the end of childhood. Contrary to accepted wisdom, these early frames of mind prove extraordinarily difficult to alter, even with considerable amounts of schooling (Gardner, 1983/1993, p. xviii; 1999, p. 120).

Striking examples of the power of such constraints can be found even at elite universities, like MIT and Johns Hopkins. In one study, when asked to explain relatively simple phenomena, exceptional physics students provided incredibly unlearned responses. Gardner observed not only that the students failed to give correct answers, but that the answers given mirrored those of people who had never studied physics, including younger children. “Despite years of schooling,” he concluded, rote learning of external curricula had ensured “the minds of these college students remain[ed] fundamentally unschooled” (1999, p. 120).¹⁵ In Deweyan terms, their

accumulated experiences failed to be reconstructed or renewed in any way.

The existing “natural lines of force” within these students’ intelligences, as Gardner described them, reminiscent of Dewey’s notion of “active powers,” rendered their ability to learn new, more complex theories surprisingly difficult. In short, they were never able to *unlearn* these existing ways of thinking. Here Sarason is especially clear:

The road of learning has its ups and downs and their major source is a way of thinking and acting that in some way prevents you from a different way that you (or someone else) want or need to acquire. The source may be personal, cognitive, emotional, motivation, or all of these, and if that source is not identified, the individual has a hard time of it. (2004, p. 152)

Failure to unlearn such unreflective ways of thinking and acting becomes an insurmountable obstacle to individual development, which involves learning to think and act in ways more productive of growth. To put it in Deweyan language, “Education is or ought to be, a continuous process of reconstruction, in which there is progressive movement away from the child’s immature experience to experience that becomes more pregnant with meaning, more systematic and ordered” (Bernstein 1966, p. 142).

If nothing else, making education more practical means grounding it in the individual experience of learners. The value of Dewey’s perspective is that it accounts for our educational shortcomings not by attributing the failures to students themselves, but by firmly establishing classroom practice as the locus of reform. In the absence of clear continuities between classroom experience and the rest of students’ “stream of living,” as well as between different areas of the curriculum, not only will reconstruction of experience fail to occur, these classroom experiences may prove to be “mis-educative.”¹⁶

Conclusion

A century after Dewey’s major writings on education, much work still needs to be done. A recent report by the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) struck a Deweyan tone in its appeal for “alert self-reflection and creativity” within institutions of higher learning to meet today’s “changing times.” In broad strokes the report calls for “a newly pragmatic liberal education” that will meet the diverse needs of students in the twenty-first century, calling for educators to reconcile the goals of liberal and professional education. In a Deweyan spirit, it calls for approaches that “look beyond the classroom to the world’s major questions, asking students to apply their developing analytical skills and ethical judgment of significant problems in the world around them” (AAC&U 2002, p. xii). Although merely suggestive, the report’s vision is for a liberal education for all students, not just those in elite colleges or traditional liberal arts disciplines, asserting that “a liberal education *is* a practical education because it develops just those capacities needed by every thinking adult: analytical skills, effective communication, practical

intelligence, ethical judgment, and social responsibility” (AAC&U 2002, p. 26).

Yet, as Dewey so deeply understood, none of this is possible without the right pedagogy. Too often contemporary academic debates have centered on what will be taught, rather than how it will be taught. The demands for active learning and a more practical education to meet the needs of today’s diverse learners are shifting the terms of the debate from what to how, as are, ironically, the dreaded pressures associated with assessment and learning outcomes. Suffice it to say, however, the current climate of educational reform, which holds improvements in standardized test scores to be the moral equivalent of learning, is profoundly un-Deweyan. Not only is the emphasis moved away from the process of learning to end results, and from genuine understanding to factual recall, but the stuff to be learned is also conceived in an external, ready-made way that reduces all students to a faceless mass of scores.¹⁷ What is more, the foundation of the Deweyan vision—the creativity and commitment of individual teachers—has been hampered as a result. Classrooms are too often “dull, boring, unstimulating places for both students and teachers”; they will not become productive contexts of learning for students until they become so for teachers as well (Sarason 2004, p. 65).

In keeping with what Gardner (1999) has called “teaching for understanding,” introducing an historical perspective and a topical, thematic focus to courses outside the traditional liberal arts canon would afford instructors the opportunity to move away from the “text-test” model where students are bombarded with large bodies of factual knowledge that they simply reproduce on exams. Freed from burdensome requirements to “cover” every chapter in the textbook, instructors could pursue specific themes or examples in depth and immerse students in the given discipline by teaching them to think like an historian, a mathematician, a scientist, or a psychologist, rather than merely survey all aspects of an entire field in an uninspiring manner. Students would be challenged to think and draw connections between their various areas of study, while instructors would be able to design courses they are excited to teach.

Still, we cannot overlook the fact that according to one estimate, some 60 percent of college seniors are enrolled in pre-professional or vocational majors. Only about one third choose majors in the liberal arts (Bok, 2006, p. 283).¹⁸ Given this reality, general or liberal education bears a responsibility to foster the skills and habits of mind even today’s employers lament our graduates fundamentally lack: at a very minimum, quantitative skills, effective written and oral communication, analytical or thinking ability, collaborative capacity, and a familiarity with languages and cultures outside their own.

As Dewey held, and as the AAC&U report recognizes (2002, pp. 25-26), such an approach depends less on the actual subject matter taught than on a particular approach to teaching and learning. Survey courses that aim to cover as much ground as possible should be abandoned in favor of a more thematic approach organized around what Gardner calls “rich or generative concepts” that can be pursued in depth and approached in an interdisciplinary fashion (1993, p. 192). The type of

learning sought—and assessed—must not confuse recall with understanding or acquiring information with learning to think. Here the divide between the general and the practical, between contemplation and action, must be bridged through our understanding of learning itself: “acquiring something you can use because you understand it” (Oakeshott, 2001, p. 8). If we take this as our guidepost for what we mean by making education more practical, we will have learned at long last what Dewey sought to teach us. In the end, it may well be that the greatest threat to academic rigor and the ability to think, the lack of which has so long been lamented in American life, may reside not in the capitulation to the vulgar preferences of students, but in the standardized and objectified forms of evaluation we have contrived to escape them.

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Notes

1. The body of literature on learning differences is rapidly expanding, but the seminal work remains Gardner (1983/1993). On the need to make education more practical, see AAC&U (2002).

2. On this conception of liberal education, see Nussbaum (1997).

3. The reference here is to William James’s famous lectures, which he called *Pragmatism: A New Name for Some Old Ways of Thinking* (1907/1987).

4. Writing in 1899, Dewey himself noted, citing no particular source, that “Hardly 1 per cent of the entire school population ever attains to what we call higher education; only 5 per cent to the grade of our high school; while much more than half leave on or before the completion of the fifth year of the elementary grade” (1899/1964, p. 309).

5. In 1940, 24.5% of Americans had graduated high school and only 4.6% graduated college. In 1996, by contrast, 87.3% had completed high school and 27.1% had four years or more of college. Roughly 75% of high school graduates get some postsecondary education today (Keller 2001, p. 234; AAC&U 2002, p. viii).

6. One of the better discussions of these issues remains Conant (1945), also known as the “Harvard Red Book.” For a learned and compelling attempt to reinvent this classical ideal, see Nussbaum (1997).

7. See also Cremin (1964, chapter 1) and Butts and Cremin (1953, Part III). The so-called Harvard Red Book put the two conflicting goals somewhat differently, framing the tension as a rift between Jeffersonianism and Jacksonianism: “that of discovering and giving opportunity to the gifted student and, second, that of raising the level of the average student” (Conant 1945, pp. 27-35).

8. Dewey concluded, “democracy has to be born anew every generation, and education is its midwife” (1916/1993, p. 122).

9. In this context I am indebted to the trenchant analyses of Bromwich (1992, esp. chapter 2).

10. Interestingly, the demise of the institution of the apprenticeship marks a recurring lament in Dewey's educational writings. In the apprenticeship learning takes place in a context that unites thinking and doing, theory and practice, rather than attempting to teach swimming while outside the pool, as Dewey once characterized purely intellectualized learning. The apprenticeship also fostered certain habits of discipline, responsibility, an obligation to produce something in the world—in short, it involved “character-building” (1899/1964, pp. 297-298). More recently, Gardner has turned to the institution of the apprenticeship for inspiration as well (1993, esp. chapter 10).

11. Nussbaum (1997) has recently argued that such development of the sympathetic or moral imagination is a cornerstone of liberal education.

12. See also Dewey (1910/1997, pp. 29-41).

13. For the distinction between productive and unproductive contexts, I draw on Sarason (2004).

14. As Sarason puts it, “Learning always involves unlearning and learning” (2004, p. 152).

15. For more on this research see Gardner (1993).

16. Dewey asserted that “Any experience is mis-educative that has the effect of arresting or distorting the growth of further experience” (1938/1997, p. 25). On the larger issue of the pitfalls of “experiential” learning that fails to provoke vital experiencing, see Roberts (2005).

17. On this point, see Taylor (1962). Writing over four decades ago, Taylor asserted, rather apropos for today, “We are asking not to know our students by what they say in writing or in speech, but to know whether or not they possess correct information as revealed in mechanical tests that can be graded like eggs, by nonhuman means.” Alas, we tend to “seek for ways in which he can provide answers to questions he would never dream of asking, answers that merely reflect the demands we make upon him for information on topics of our choosing,” instead of asking our students for “private essays each week which can give their teachers an understanding of who the student is and what are his honest thoughts, what are his weaknesses and inadequacies, what are his strengths, his needs, his hopes” (p. 72).

18. Bok (2006) has argued compelling that general education also offers an opportunity “to help undergraduates think about their careers in terms broader than simply making money” (p. 282). Engaging students in moral reasoning to cultivate an ethical sensibility, fostering an appreciation of larger social, political, and economic contexts through broad historical approaches to topics, and awakening them to a sense of social justice and civic responsibility, are at least a few ways that a general or liberal education can complement and enrich, rather than oppose, practical or vocational study.

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