Teaching and Democratic Values in Higher Education

Allen F. Harrison

"What you see is what you get — consistency, persistency, and mediocrity in classrooms."

I.

Every Wednesday evening, in the small Southwestern state college where I once taught, I would spend a few minutes at intervals roaming the halls, peering in at classrooms, listening to the drone of professorial voices, trying to get a sense of the process operating in those rooms. My senior students had been set to work in small groups for a half hour or so, sharing the learning of techniques for business policy analysis. It was during those periods that I would wander.

After a number of these interludes I began to formulate several observation-based principles, which in time tended toward a generalized hypothesis.

My observations were these:

1. In the typical college classroom, very little happens. Professors lecture, occasionally scrawl something on a chalkboard, or show something on a screen with an overhead projector. Students take notes or don’t. Apart from minor body adjustments on the parts of all concerned, that is all that happens in a typical class period of, say, fifty to seventy-five minutes.

2. Students invariably sit in rows and columns of schoolroom chairs. Most of the males slouch. Professors invariably stand at a lectern. No one moves, ever, during a class, except for the occasional random adjustment mentioned above.

3. The affect of the students, even from a rear view of them, is like an emanation. It is palpable. It is of boredom.

4. Virtually every observed classroom communicates, through these phenomena, a quality of generalized, ritualized, formalistic purposelessness, a quality of simply getting something over with.

In time, intrigued by all this, I attempted to build a conceptual model of the classroom, using a brainstorming technique that I often employ in model-building workshops. Starting with a simple observation, or a set of them such as I had already made, the technique is to generate as many explanations as possible for the observation and then to conceptualize an explanatory or descriptive model that will allow for all the explanations.

A complete list of all the possible explanations would be far too long; but here are a few of the more obvious ones:

1. Professors lecture because their responsibility is to cover material and there are precious few alternatives to lecturing for delivery of the material.

2. Professors lecture because to do otherwise would be to lose control.

3. Professors believe students wouldn’t understand any classroom procedure other than lecturing.

4. Professors believe they get paid to “teach” (i.e., do all the work) and activities such as small group work or discussions, which cause the students to work, are not fair to them. (A senior professor actually said this to me once.)

5. Students come into class expecting to be bored by lecturing, therefore they are bored and emerge bored, and professors simply play into such expectations.

Given these and numerous other possible explanations for my observations, the model that emerges is an obvious one. It squares firmly with much basic learning theory:

\[ P = f(E_1 + E_2 x R) \]

Here, P stands for professorial performance, E1 is professorial experience, E2 is professorial expectations, and R represents student response to the process. In the classrooms I had been observing, student response had been quite passive, which is to say virtually nonexistent, hence as a factor in the formula it had little or no significance.

The hypothesis that arises from the model—compellingly, I believe—is this:

University classroom teaching practice is in general an artifact of professors having learned to teach under traditional pedagogical regimes. Traditional methods tend to be authoritarian, non-participative, curriculum-centered rather than student- or problem-centered. Hence they stand in opposition to democratic values, paradoxically the foundation of the society in which teaching institutions are embedded.

The probability is that such observations, leading to the same hypothesis, could be made as a matter of course through roaming the halls of most other institutions of higher learning. Classroom behavior on the part of professors is not a
Examples include:

1. A Pacific Northwest state college, chartered as an "alternative" institution, repeats over and over again in its literature that the seminar and discussion, not the lecture, are the norm in its classrooms.

2. The St. John’s Colleges, founded on the Great Books curriculum, call all their faculty “tutors,” without academic rank, and expect tutors to act as Socratic discussion leaders in class. Lecturing is specifically discouraged as a classroom strategy. In practice, the less said in class by a tutor, the better.

3. The external degree-completion programs of a number of colleges and universities, focused on adult learners, require their potential faculty to demonstrate the skills of “facilitators” of learning, and claim to value those skills more than subject matter knowledge.

4. Similarly, “andragogical” literature makes clear that normative classroom behavior on the part of professors is simply not healthy in an adult learning situation.

It would seem that the battle for student-centered, participative, non-autocratic teaching has been pretty well abandoned in “traditional” institutions, if it was ever fought there, and is now carried on, instead, primarily in non-mainstream, non-traditional institutions, in adult-only programs, and in non-institutional learning, such as corporate management development programs. If that is so, then the gap between teaching behavior and democratic values is widening, which strikes me as a matter of considerable concern. It also sends me, for guidance and perhaps for solace, back to the educator and philosopher who, more than any other, perceived and articulated the “embeddedness” of teaching in democratic society: John Dewey. I shall discuss Dewey in that context in the pages to follow.

Having turned to Dewey for enlightenment, I shall then have reference to another thinker, the psychologist Kurt Lewin, whose notions in the domain of social change are in striking harmony with Dewey’s in the domain of education. In attempting a synthesis of the democratically-informed ideas of these two men, I shall try to delineate a set of principles for teaching in higher education that might help us to direct our attention to the topic in a fresh way.

II.

“Essentially what Dewey wanted to do,” Joel H. Spring tells us, “was give meaning to the fragmented experiences of the world of modern man.”

In this essay I am not prepared to struggle with the criticisms of Dewey and of “progressive education.” Surely many of Dewey’s experiments, as well as those of his followers, went awry, and surely some of the criticism has been deserved. The sadness is that the Deweyan model has been so generally ignored, if not rejected. The irony is that it has been rejected, for the most part, for what are popularly judged to be experimental failures, when the essence of Deweyan education was experiment itself. In fact, Dewey must be given primary credit for the stimulating notion of the “experimenting society.”

Experimentation is the essence of pragmatism—an integral part of the Deweyan heritage—as it is of personal growth and development; just as it is (as Dewey often reminded us) of the maintenance and preservation of a democratic society. Experimentation also demands tolerance for error and mistakes. To employ the Deweyan educational paradigm is to run totally counter to the dreary ethos of the typical classroom. For Dewey, as Jerome Nathanson put it,

Education...is not to be viewed passively, as the means by which already established knowledge is poured into the receptacles that are [students]. On the contrary, education is first and foremost a matter of active participation.

Besides his fame as an educator and educational theorist, and his role as founder, along with William James and Charles Sanders Pierce, of American pragmatism, Dewey was a compelling teacher, as Mervyn L. Cadwallader has pointed out. Unfortunately, we cannot be sure what his style, approach, and method were, though much can be inferred. It is clear that he came early to the observations and speculations that were to inform his eventual method and approach. Here is a passage from an essay published in 1888:

[The chief intellectual defect found in pupils [is] lack of flexibility, lack of ability to turn the mind towards new ideas, or look at old ones in new lights. There is a helplessness towards what lies outside of the wonted grooves of thought.]

Clearly this is the same helplessness seen by Edgar Z. Friedenberg more than 75 years later. Friedenberg postulated psychologically and societally disastrous results from a
system based on teacher control, student subordination, and enforced passivity. "Students," he said, "do not resent [such total control and authority]; that is the tragedy. All weakness tends to corrupt, and impotence corrupts absolutely."11 Surely, this is a helplessness, an impotence that can only persist and be perpetuated under the influence of teachers who themselves are reluctant or unable to move outside of their "wonted grooves of thought."

That Dewey, at the tender age of 27 or so, was already speculating on the same questions that would preoccupy him throughout his long career as an educator, is demonstrated by this elegant passage:

How can we make the mind, not more mature, but more receptive to ideas; how can we cultivate, not a higher grade of intelligence, but spontaneity of action?12

Though not yet visibly connecting the differing notions, Dewey was already toying with ideas germane to both educational experimentation and the democratic ethos. He was already deeply, impressively focused on the basic relationship between teacher and learner:

The student deals, not with a material foreign to himself, by which he may be hampered, but with himself. He must discover the very material of the study. Nor can rules of discovery be externally laid down for him in routine methods to which he must conform. The ways of getting at the material and of treating it must be left to himself. The teacher's function must be largely one of awakening, of stimulation.13

And it follows from this that:

[T]he best of the teaching will after all be the degree in which the mind is awakened and is given ability to act for itself.14

These early excursions by Dewey into educational philosophy and practice cannot have been based upon a great foundation of experience, a least as a teacher. Perhaps as a student, with a wonderfully developed reflexive objectivity, he was able to reach such clear early formulations. One wonders if he might not have been a rebel against the teaching to which he had been subjected as a student.

In any case, not many years later (1890) Dewey had already formulated what was to be, until the end, the core of his educational philosophy:

[T]he college student should require of his college course that it give him that sense of the proportions and right values which can come only of centering all studies in their human relationships.15

By 1897, and approaching early middle age, the philosopher was expressing a point of view which carries an undertone of annoyance, if not exasperation, with conventional teaching practices:

Judgment as the sense of relative values involves ability to select, to discriminate, by reference to a standard. Acquiring information can therefore never develop the power of judgment.16

And:

[T]he active side precedes the passive in the development of the student's nature.... [T]he neglect of this principle is the cause of a large part of the waste of time and strength in school work. The [student] is thrown into a passive... attitude.... [T]he result is friction and waste.17

Dewey as pragmatic philosopher and ethicist; Dewey as psychologist, educator, and educational theorist: these are two tremendously influential personas that are well-remembered in America, whether favorably or otherwise. The third, and by no means least important, part of Dewey the man and thinker was that of the theorist and advocate of democracy and human freedom.

In a brilliant essay published at the age of 29 (1888), Dewey developed his theory of democracy, a nugget of analysis that was to stay basically intact throughout his career. He began with a defense of democracy from those who saw it as merely another form of government or as a Hobbesian agglomeration of otherwise non-social beings:

Society in its unified and structural character is the fact of the case; the non-social individual is an abstraction arrived at by imagining what man would be if all his human qualities were taken away.18

He proceeded then to his basic metaphor, democracy-as-organism:

If... society be truly described as organic, the citizen is a member of the organism, and, just in proportion to the perfection of the organism, has concentrated within himself its intelligence and will. Disguise it as we may, this theory can have but one result, that of the sovereignty of the citizen.19

Finally, in a statement that could be construed as the essence of Dewey the democrat:

Democracy is an ethical idea, the idea of a personality, with truly infinite capacity, incorporate with every man. Democracy and the one, the ultimate, ethical idea of humanity are to my mind synonyms.20
I spoke earlier about Dewey’s notion of the “experimenting society,” the implication of which is a direct legacy from philosophical pragmatist, the image of which is holistic, the thrust of which is profoundly democratic. As one might expect, Dewey expanded his pragmatism to virtually every facet of human associated life. In terms of formal organization, for example, Dewey hypothesized (perhaps more hopefully than realistically) that “the relation of individual freedom to organization is seen to be an experimental affair.” And that is because:

Organization tends to become rigid and to limit freedom. In addition to security and energy in action, novelty, risk, change are ingredients of the freedom which men desire. Variety is more than the spice of life; it is largely of its essence, making a difference between the free and the enslaved.

It is as a passionate advocate of human freedom, albeit a pragmatic one, that Dewey crystallizes his philosophy of education, even when education is not the subject:

Choice is an element in freedom and there can be no choice without unrealized and precarious possibilities... Variability, initiative, innovation, departure from routine, experimentation are empirically the manifestation of a genuine nusus in things. At all events it is these things that are precious to us under the name of freedom.

In later life, Dewey published The Public and Its Problems (1924), in which the original, youthful theme of the democratic “organism” still prevailed. The basic reasoned “faith” and advocacy remained:

Regarded as an idea, democracy is not an alternative to other principles of associated life. It is the idea of community life itself.

But throughout the book there is a note of relative pessimism, of a sense of muted frustration, perhaps because, at the age of 52, Dewey had not yet seen the democratic reality approach the democratic ideal. He had seen too much of the growth of government, of the efficiency criterion, of benevolent repression. Beginning with Woodrow Wilson, whose influence upon the growth of professionalism in governmental bureaucracy is today little known but in the early years of the century was considerable, government had increasingly become one of experts, the “masses” becoming less and less fully informed and involved. To counter that ominous development, Dewey returned to an old stand and to his original unit of analysis, the individual, growthful, responsible, educated human being. Indeed, the following statement is a précis of Dewey’s educational philosophy, though uttered in the context of a discussion of democratic values:

To learn to be human is to develop through the give-and-take of communication an effective sense of being an individually distinctive member of a community, one who understands and appreciates its beliefs, desires and methods, and who contributes to a further conversion of organic powers into human resources and values.

The statement is an astonishing, if somewhat more “pragmatic” echo of a much earlier (1897) assertion about teaching and learning:

[All education proceeds by the participation of the individual in the social consciousness of the race.]

Dewey’s preoccupation was with teaching and learning, and with the development of a free, autonomous, experimenting human organism as part of the greater democratic, organic whole. And, according to Nathanson, Dewey never wavered in his central focus:

The key problem of democratic education... is to devise methods that will stimulate the development of individual possibilities, whatever they are, and regardless of traditionally accepted views of “learning.”

Beyond almost all people of his time and ours, Dewey possessed the enormous ability to conceptualize at a global level and then, as if instantaneously, to project that conceptualization to the most finite and practical (or pragmatic) level. Given his training, predilections, and experience, he always returned from a focus upon the philosophical-ontological universe to examine with wonder the development of the individual human being.

III.

The key to [achieving social change] is a clear conception of consequences wanted, of the technique for reaching them, together with... the state of desires and aversions which cause some consequences to be wanted rather than others.

The statement is from Dewey’s The Public and Its Problems. It summarizes what he saw as a process of citizen and citizen-group inquiry, experimentation, and learning, toward achieving social goals within a community. It could as well have been written by Kurt Lewin, a German-born pioneer in Gestalt psychology, who came to this country in the early 1930s and became known in time as the father of much of what we know about human motivation, particularly in groups and organizations. It is to Lewin that we owe the term and procedures of Action Research (Dewey’s “conception of con-
sequences and the technique for reaching them," to be developed and acquired by the actors involved), and the social notion of levels of aspiration (Dewey's "state of desires and aversions"), which so strongly influence the extent to which we are motivated to seek goals.

Unlike Dewey, Lewin was in no discoverable way an ideologue. He seems instead to have regarded himself, and to have proceeded in his psychological investigations, as a "pure" scientist. Like Dewey, he was an avid experimenter, but unlike him, the many experiments carried on by him and his successors tended to be consistently successful in the sense of being synthetically conclusive. It is that cumulative conclusiveness that has made the Lewinian legacy an important one. The relative scientific purity of the Lewinian experimental tradition has contributed to a set of findings which incidentally strengthen democratic values, especially in that part of human associated life that is lived in formal organizations.

What was probably Lewin's most famous experiment took place during World War II, when he was on the faculty of The University of Iowa, and he was asked by the federal Office of Price Administration to find a way to influence American housewives to cook and serve such meats as heart, brains, kidneys, and the like, so that prime cuts could be shipped overseas to support the war effort.\(^9\) Lewin used as his experimental subjects group of Red Cross volunteers—Iowa City housewives, for the most part. The approach he used with half the groups was this: A dietitian came to group meetings, and made a formal lecture complete with flipcharts and other display paraphernalia. The approach was essentially teacher-to-students. With the other groups, the dietitian sat in as a consultant, and asked the women to think about the problem: How to get "housewives like us" to change their meat-buying behavior. The approach here was essentially participative.

In a follow-up study several months after the group sessions, Lewin found that 32% of the women in the participative groups had indeed served the meats in question, while only 3% of lectured-to women had done so.

From this set of experiments (perhaps trivial-seeming, today) came the notion that if a solution to a problem is "imposed" upon a group, its members will not be highly motivated to pursue it, whereas if the solution is the group's "own," that is, one in which they have and feel ownership, an acceptable solution is much more likely, and behavior change is much more lasting. As Lewin laconically noted,

Lecturing is a procedure in which the audience is chiefly passive. The discussion, if conducted correctly, is likely to lead to a much higher degree of involvement.\(^30\)

Such Lewinian insights have had profound effects on the study of modern organizations, if not on the actual practice of management. Here are a few of the more important aspects of that set of effects:

1) Lewin's investigations of social change convinced him that if a group is immediately involved in solving its own community problems, and is provided with the appropriate conceptual and tactical tools, it will invariably solve its own problems better than can outside experts. From this basic idea has come Action Research, an approach that informs virtually the whole field of Organization Development, a movement in turn based upon relatively radical notions of organizational power-sharing.\(^31\)

2) Field theory, a Lewinian construct which sees the human being as a goal-seeking creature endeavoring to extend his boundaries, his field or "life space," has been instrumental in many variations of what has come to be called the "Human Potential" movement. As with Dewey, the individual is the proper unit of analysis, even in large-scale change, and to understand an individual's need for change, it is necessary to understand his aspirations and to view the universe of change from his unique perspective.\(^32\)

3) Lewin's notions about behavioral change (the well-known cycle: a) create dissatisfaction; b) "unfreeze" behavior, c) reinforce new behavior; d) "refreeze") have been enormously influential in the whole organizational change movement.\(^33\)

While I would not have the temerity to claim that the change movement, with its focus on humanistic values, has been overwhelmingly successful, nevertheless it has had broad and virtually universal impact. Managerial behaviors have changed, as have organizational policies towards people. While in most cases the workplace is far from democratic, there is considerable evidence that managerial awareness of the embeddedness of the workplace in a democratic society has grown considerably, and that growth of awareness is a result of the organizational change movement, itself greatly influenced by Lewin. A correspondingly widespread change, in the college and university classroom, influenced by Dewey or anyone else, has not happened.

IV.

I hope, at this point, that my essay is not being read as a simple plea to college professors to learn techniques alternative to lecturing, thence to become facilitators of group process through some instant metamorphosis. While that is a pleasant notion, it is obviously simplistic and only a small item in a much larger framework. I am proposing instead a new model, a fresh paradigm, through a synthesis of some of the ideas of Dewey and Lewin, for the college teacher as practitioner. That paradigm includes four basic elements, which I shall present and discuss in descending order of level of abstraction.
1. First, the professor as practitioner needs to become acutely aware of the societal embeddedness of his or her craft and the institution in which that craft is practiced. There is no question in my mind that the enhanced awareness must be of democracy and democratic values. There is no other factor approaching equal significance in defining our western, American society. Such an awareness goes beyond mere notions of academic freedom, according to which focus, as Cadwallader has noted, “the survival of our political democracy requires teachers who are free to examine the unorthodox and the unpopular, and free to teach criticism.” Instead, it includes a realization that the classroom is itself an integer of democratic society, and that in any such integer there are important issues of ownership, à la Lewin. That is to say, the students “own” the system and the process as much as does the professor. This does not mean that the professor abdicates responsibility, or that he or she surrenders power. Instead, both responsibility and power are voluntarily shared. Such an understanding can lead to profound changes in behavior on the part of both parties.

2. As a practitioner, the professor becomes reflexive, sensitive to what works and what doesn’t. He or she becomes a practitioner of the pragmatic. No longer does the lecture (or the slide-show, or even the role-play or the discussion) drone on and on without consideration of its impact, of its effectiveness in the learning process. Accordingly, the professor becomes a reflector upon action, rather than merely the only actor in the scene, unconcerned about whether the audience responds or not. He or she consciously begins to employ reflection-in-action, which Donald A. Schon describes as “on-the-spot surfacing, criticizing, restructuring, and testing of intuitive understandings of experienced phenomena.” This kind of stance, integrated through courageous experiment and application, will lead a professor inevitably to consideration of useful alternatives to lecturing and student passivity. Indeed, the shift should be not only profound and immediate, but truly “owned” by the professor, hence internalized and lasting.

3. Having succeeded with mastery of the first two elements of the paradigm, the professor will now move with relative ease to the third: to the modeling of democratic values by his or her classroom behavior. Again, such a shift need not involve radical changes, such as abdication of responsibility or power, or the watering-down of academic substance. I speak here only of the likely development of a new set of competencies which are congruent with the sort of modeling suggested. They include listening, confirmation, support, and encouragement, the challenging Socratic question, tolerance for ambiguity, willingness to forego closure, and above all, ability and willingness to learn from the resulting interchange with students.

4. Finally, the academic practitioner will come to see himself or herself in a truly different role. No longer the autocrat, the sole arbiter of wisdom, the only dispenser of “cognitive input,” the professor becomes the manager of a learning process, indeed the facilitator of change and growth. A profound personal, behavioral shift will have been accomplished, one that can accurately be described as a shift from a teaching orientation to a learning orientation.

Here, however, I must tread carefully, because there are many who would reject if not resent such labels as “manager” and “facilitator.” May they continue to do so; I do not seek or advise new labels, I seek only changes in practice. But no matter the self-applied rubric, there will be recognition of some new classroom persona, once the first three conceptual levels have been integrated.

V.

John Dewey and Kurt Lewin were both eminently practical men, as well as profound thinkers and dedicated democrats. The beauty of the performance achieved by practitioners (in any field), once they understand and have assimilated Dewey and Lewin, is that life becomes easier rather than harder, being among people more rewarding rather than less, teaching both more stimulating and more challenging while far less of a chore. The ultimate reward, it seems to me, is not just experiencing the excitement of becoming more process-aware and process-oriented, but of being keenly aware of having become part of the process itself, rather than of the problem.

Notes


3. See Bureaucracy and the Modern World (Morristown, NJ: General Learning Press, 1976), 22. “Although the artificial system is manifest to members of organizations (they are constantly drilled in it), the natural system... is largely latent. If the forbidden knowledge is acquired by some, it introduces instability and presages system change.” An application by analogy to the college classroom would suggest that most students, being constantly drilled in passivity-inducing compliance to professorial routines, are not aware of their plight. It is only the enlightened few who discover the nature of the process.

5. See Knowles et al, above, passim. Indeed, the writer's personal professorial experience tells him that it is precisely in management development ("training") activities that the styles and techniques of delivery are stressed consciously, seldom so in the teaching institution.


22. Ibid. 309.


27. Nathanson, 74.


33. See especially Deutsch and Krauss, above; though the framework will be found in virtually every management text, usually under the heading "Managing Change."


Allen F. Harrison has just completed four years as Chair of Business Administration at The College of Santa Fe, New Mexico; with the current academic year he takes on duties as Director, International Programs. His A. B. is in English from Grinnell College, his doctorate is in Public Administration from the University of Southern California.