Review of Jim Garrison's book *Dewey and Eros: Wisdom and Desire in the Art of Teaching*

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Jim Garrison’s (Garrison, 1997) book has already become very dear to me. With regard to style, imaginative power, breadth, and conceptual wholeness this is one of the best books I ever read within the Deweyan discourse. From the very first pages I had the feeling I was diving into a genuinely new outlook, not only on Dewey but on the very subject of education.

This book answers fully and positively an urgent question regarding Deweyan scholarship, i.e., can anything new be said about Dewey? It offers fresh insights into Dewey’s now almost ‘classic’ theory of inquiry, but this time reconstructed from the standpoint of desire. On this account inquiry is propelled not by an emotionally neutral quest for rational knowledge, but by a deeply felt and lived-through desire for a life in equilibrium, in which knowledge occupies an important place, certainly, but is not crowned king at the expense of the many other ways of experiencing the world.

At the same time Garrison proposes a paradigm for the educational field by linking Dewey’s philosophical and educational thoughts with feminist theories of education as a caring practice. This is a fruitful approach. Garrison is quite clear in what motivates him here: to ‘safe’ education from the hands of the bureaucrats and technocrats that have invaded schools and have made their philosophy of control and regulation the dominant one, and to give it back to whom it belongs: the teachers and the pupils. The impact on schools and curriculum is momentous (cfr. Berding, 1997).

On his view the concept of ‘sympathetic understanding’ is central. It stresses the role of feeling and intuition in education. To my mind this concept is a link not only between Deweyan pragmatism and feminism, but also to other traditions, such as German phenomenology (where it is called ‘Verstehen’) and the humanistic approach of the Polish educator Janusz Korczak, that centers around ‘respect’ (cfr. Berding, 1995). It also reminds me of what my former countryman Max van Manen, working within the phenomenological approach at the University of Edmonton (Alberta, Canada) calls ‘pedagogical tact’ (Van Manen, 1991). It involves openness, and sensitivity towards the experiences of others, e.g., pupils. Garrison presents us with a case story which shows how far-off teachers can be with regard how they under-estimate the experiences of their pupils.

Throughout the book beginning with an explanation of the meaning of Eros in Plato’s Symposium, Garrison pleads for sensitivity towards the rhythms of life. Loss and gain, comfort and discomfort, certainty and uncertainty, losing balance and regaining it, make up our daily lives, sometimes without us even noticing it. In education there are, what Garrison calls ‘teachable moments’ which signify that teacher and pupil interact in a congruous and dynamic rhythm. These moments ought to be cherished for they are sparse. I cannot better summarize this point than by quoting Garrison (1997, 125) here: “The rhythm of nature, human nature, and learning is the same. It is an endless process of growth and becoming through the creation of meaning.”

Garrison has written a marvelous book, a ‘must-read’ for all in the educational field. At the same time he has enriched our understanding of Dewey and Deweyan thought, and has provided us with a clearer view of what really counts in a ‘good’ education.

References


