

ARTICLE

# DEMOCRACY AND THE INDUSTRIAL IMAGINATION IN AMERICAN EDUCATION

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## ABSTRACT

Educational politics in the United States is entangled in the notion that the foremost mission of education is, in the infamous words of Gov. Scott Walker's proposed revision of the University of Wisconsin's mission, "to develop human resources to meet the state's workforce needs." This general outlook is not an outlier. It is typical of those who approach education primarily as a way to fuel industry with skilled labor. This outlook is premised on an increasingly dominant educational model that is mis-educative, antidemocratic, and incompatible with values of mutual respect and individual dignity. It is helpful to analyze the industrial model of education more precisely, getting clearer about the way it informs both educational discourse and delivery, so that our critiques of ill-considered aims and priorities can be clearly and forcefully targeted.

## THE INDUSTRIAL MODEL IN AMERICAN EDUCATION

Media fact-checkers promptly corrected Marco Rubio when he called for more vocational education during the November 2015 GOP presidential debate: "Welders make more money than philosophers," he said. "We need more welders than philosophers." It was widely pointed out in response to Senator Rubio's remark that, on average, those who major in philosophy at a college or university tend to have higher salaries than professional welders. But this point, despite its utility for promoting philosophy as an academic major, is a distraction from the insistent social question: what, if any, is the chief mission of education?

In *Woman and the Nineteenth Century* (1845), Margaret Fuller admonished the practice of educating girls exclusively to be wives and mothers. "A being of infinite scope," she wrote, "must not be treated with an exclusive view to any one relation . . . Give the soul free course. . . and the being will be fit for any and every relation to which it may be called."<sup>1</sup> Contemporary educational debate in the United States is entangled in a similarly constrictive notion. The mission of K-12 and higher education is, in Wisconsin Gov. Scott Walker's infamous words last year, "to develop human resources to meet the state's workforce needs."<sup>2</sup> Walker's clumsy statist language was destined to fade with his political fortunes, but his general outlook is not an outlier.

It is typical of those who approach education primarily as a way to fuel industry with skilled labor. This outlook is premised on an increasingly dominant educational model that is both mis-educative and antidemocratic. It is fundamentally at odds with fitting students “for any and every relation” to which they “may be called.”

Is the principal aim of education to provide a padded yoke for the state’s workforce so that students may be trained and productively driven down preexisting vocational rows? Or is it, all things considered, to improve our lives? It’s the former, according to the industrial model implicit in much current U.S. educational politics and policy. This outlook is evidenced, as Diane Ravitch and many other critics have observed, in the business model that drives for-profit colleges and universities, recent closures of humanities programs, the adjunctification of higher education, and the implicit economics of much (though certainly not all) online education.<sup>3</sup>

I am sidestepping debates about what some have called the “factory model,” suggesting instead that we focus on the social, political, and pedagogical consequences of understanding education as just another industrial sector. It is helpful to analyze the industrial model of education more precisely, getting clearer about the way it informs both educational discourse and delivery, so that criticisms of ill-considered aims and priorities can be clearly and forcefully targeted. What is the industrial model of education? On that model, educating whole persons for lifelong growth is replaced by education as just another industrial sector, on a par with any other sector. Its job is to manufacture skilled labor, and it is expected to do so in a way that is maximally efficient. Knowledge on this model is a market commodity: teachers and professors are delivery vehicles for knowledge content, and students are either consumers/customers or manufactured products. Educational institutions on the industrial model are marketplaces for delivering and acquiring content; tuition is the fair price for accessing that content, and the high-to-low grade differential is the means for incentivizing competition. Even when tacit and unexpressed, all or most of this is presumed by the faithful to be obvious and uncontroversial. Critics of industrial education are thus dismissed and broad-brushed as obsolete protectionists.

This industrial outlook has become a mostly unexamined prepossession, and educators in the U.S. from K–12 through university have yielded the driver’s seat to it without enough forethought. Doing so keeps many citizens, educational leaders, and policymakers from making decisions that further their own best values and their students’ needs.

## WHAT DO WE LOSE WHEN WE TREAT EDUCATION LIKE AN INDUSTRIAL SECTOR?

What do we lose, individually and collectively, when we treat education like an industrial sector? Let me highlight two areas of loss: the industrial model eggs on our problems, and it sacrifices personal enrichment.

*First, the industrial model eggs on our social problems.* Our political parties in Washington and across the U.S. substantively disagree about what it means to have freedom of access, but in the main they have failed to debate education's fundamental mission.<sup>4</sup> Because both major U.S. political parties have imbibed the industrial model, they tend automatically to identify investment in the future with the need to grow techno-industrial sectors and thus jobs. It is sane for people to vote for jobs when we have so little control over the conditions through which we and our children can make a living, given the great inequalities of wealth and power built into our economic regime. But neither party *consistently* sees students as cooperative participants in changing that regime.

Obviously many specific aims of education are set and defined by our economic infrastructure, such as the demand for great precision in STEM areas. That is not the problem. The problem arises when institutions and policymakers assume, following the logic of the industrial model, that our primary and overriding educational aim is thus to train students to fit the specifications of this existing infrastructure. When this occurs, our best hope for cultural transformation is directed down the very channels that are implicated in our social, economic, environmental, and geopolitical problems.

The United States does need to improve access to occupational training, as President Obama frequently says. Moreover, there is a legitimate need to infuse formal schooling, from preschool on, with the interests students have in adult careers. Such an occupation-rich education in turn can energize and redirect our ever-evolving cultural practices through more informed and insightful public deliberation. But none of this means we should turn students and teachers into functionaries or serfs for, in Dewey's words in *Democracy and Education*, a "feudal dogma of social predestination."<sup>5</sup> Indeed, if there is cause for optimism in education even within an economic infrastructure that is partially to blame for our many problems, it is that so few people would knowingly choose an educational career that requires training students merely to fit the predetermined roles required by the status quo. Instead, we, as educators, hope our students will participate in the intelligent redirection of society.

*Second, the industrial model sacrifices personal enrichment.* Fractious politics aside, it is not clear where growth, community, and quality of life come into the picture when we see education through a narrowly utilitarian-industrial lens. An educational institution may train more students with fewer or lower-paid teachers or professors, and an industrial sector may produce more clothes, cars, or animal protein to meet market demands with lower overhead costs. These products can then be purchased at a relatively low price and used for, or put to work to produce, more things. The industrial imagination stops here, with efficient production and affordable consumption. This is arguably a useful objective when taken in isolation from its collateral consequences. But what else have we unintentionally made

through these means, to which industrial thinking is oblivious? Have we made narrower lives? Have we at times left each other embittered and disabled? Have we anesthetized moral and ecological sensitivity, imagination, and care? Have we, in Dewey's words, made life more "congested, hurried, confused and extravagant"?<sup>6</sup>

If we are obliged to answer with a qualified yes, then we need repeatedly to ask these questions in administrative policy debates, electoral politics, legislative debates, and other public forums. Excepting right-wing reformers, many Americans still wear on their sleeves the notion that, all things considered, the main point of education is to help us live better. The dispiriting industrialization of American education betrays a willingness to overturn a hard-won Jeffersonian value that, despite its long history of antidemocratic detractors, penetrates the deeper soil of American yearnings and sympathies: everyone should have the ongoing opportunity for an education that fronts growth, emotional development, imaginative engagement, aesthetic vitality, social responsibility, and care. Let us hope that this idea still has the power to adjust the attitudes and practices of those determining educational policies, as it is the general outlook most compatible with a democracy.

## DEMOCRACY AND EDUCATION

Is the industrial model of education, taken as a whole, even compatible with a democratic society? This question goes to the enduring pedagogical and political heart of Dewey's *Democracy and Education*.

Dewey's basic pedagogical idea was, of course, that kids learn better when they organically assimilate knowledge in an active, personal, imaginative, and direct way. The industrial model of content delivery and retrieval, in contrast, lacks any sense of students or teachers as live creatures actively exploring, navigating, reaching, grasping, and making. For Dewey, both students and their teachers are active and cooperative players in who they are becoming and in the world they are helping to make.

For example, children in Dewey's Chicago "laboratory school" in the early 1900s were taught mathematics and economics through a carefully designed and challenging curriculum that included gardening and cooking in the school's kitchen. Many contemporary "farm-to-school" programs reveal the durability of that "edible classroom" approach, perhaps most famously the Edible Schoolyard project at the Martin Luther King Jr. Middle School in Berkeley, California. When practical experience in a garden and kitchen are woven into the curriculum (not simply added as gravy atop "real" curricular work), students may better understand the loop of growth, maturity, decline, death, and decay. Far from being detached from life, such concrete understanding may, with the help of teachers, become a source of more abstract insights about photosynthesis, agricultural yield, soil ecology, economics, and mathematics. Knowledge achieved in this way is readily retained and put to work. It is of value in the direction of life.

So Dewey believed in the pedagogical value of integrating head, heart, and hands, and he held that a genuinely educative activity is not “just another damn thing” to be checked off on a list of intrinsically worthless tasks. But he always kept a watchful eye on the political upshot of such integration for a healthy democracy: when we split the head from the hands, or isolate humane studies from practical life, we unfortunately tend to suppose that a liberal cultural education is the right of only an elite few—the heads. Don’t we all—and not just the socially advantaged “heads”—deserve an education that prioritizes human growth?

In an often-quoted 1909 address to the New York City High School Teachers Association, soon-to-be President Woodrow Wilson, then president at Princeton University, baldly asserted, “We want one class of persons to have a liberal education, and we want another class of persons, a very much larger class, of necessity, in every society, to forego the privileges of a liberal education and fit themselves to perform specific difficult manual tasks.”<sup>7</sup> In comparison to Wilson’s master-servant model, the current industrial model is often more one-size-fits-all: everyone should be educated for the workforce. Dewey wisely took a different tack.

If democracy is reduced to the formal mechanics of “one person, one vote,” with duties exhausted at the polling booth, then perhaps a democracy can treat students—or a majority of students à la Wilson—as serfs to the consumer economy as-is. But Jefferson’s spirit endures among those who also cherish democracy as an inspiring moral ideal, one that not only legitimates the polling booth but also implies a way of life that breaks down exclusionary social barriers and opens up diverse and mutually respectful points of contact and communication. The moral meaning of democracy, Dewey famously argued, “is found in resolving that the supreme test of all political institutions and industrial arrangements shall be the contribution they make to the all-around growth of every member of society.”<sup>8</sup>

Democracy in this sense, Dewey urged, is not a static inheritance that we can simply live off of, but an ideal that must be re-achieved under current difficulties through the active efforts of cooperative individuals in each generation.<sup>9</sup> Schools are our chief cultural means for educating free citizens who can intelligently and creatively participate in this perpetual rebuilding process. This is how we invest in our future. Under existing economic and social conditions, fronting “education for the state’s workforce” as the chief mission of schools amounts to plutocracy, a frozen system of privilege, frantic and unsustainable consumption, deadening efficiency, and sacrifice of the quality of a student’s present life for the sake of a remote, promised good. Consequently, taking the democratic ideal in its moral significance, the industrial model of education is plainly antidemocratic. After all, we must learn our way together toward democracy.

Ubiquitous references to economic prosperity only weaken the case for the industrial model. It is true that a healthy economy is a public good. It is equally true that this good is not served when students, educators, and policymakers treat

each other chiefly as servants to the workaday world of adult business-as-usual. Nor does it serve this public good to treat each other as interchangeable functionaries. It serves the public good, as a happy by-product of keeping our priorities straight, when our various professions, occupations, leisure activities, and on-the-ground pursuits are energized by educational institutions that are cultures of imagination and growth, regardless of their diverse aims and emphases.

It also serves the public good when teachers, instead of being asked to hoe the straightest line toward testable skill acquisition, help students to imagine the conditions and challenges they face in light of what is possible. Absent qualitatively rich imaginative engagement, a child's education becomes a story of lost possibilities.

These reflections on the public good suggest a pluralistic strategy for educational politics and policy, akin to the development of "environmental pragmatism" as an orientation toward environmental problem-solving.<sup>10</sup> A revolutionary cultural shift in the U.S. away from the industrial model and toward education-as-growth would be salutary, but this does not mean we are doomed with anything short of that shift. We can ameliorate many educational problems by finding common ground with others who agree that the status quo is unacceptable, yet disagree about why. It is perhaps unlikely, for example, that editors of the *Harvard Business Review* will approach Carol Dweck's research on growth mindset from a standpoint beyond serviceability to industry, as evidenced in their recent article "How Companies Can Profit from a 'Growth Mindset.'"<sup>11</sup>

Prioritizing education-as-growth does indeed help businesses and professions, but it is a matter of great consequence whether we see this service mostly as a by-product. Hence, we should continue to debate basic conflicts among educational values, even as we simultaneously prioritize public deliberative processes to agree upon particular actions and policies rather than insisting upon a shared alignment of basic ends and justifications as a political prerequisite. In this way we can grapple open-endedly with specific problems that involve conflicting educational value frameworks, emphasizing convergence on solutions (or at least a way forward), while also working toward a fundamental redirection of our culture.

It bears adding that many criticisms of the Common Core in the US should be viewed against the backdrop of the industrial model. Ignoring this implicit cultural matrix can make it more difficult to clarify educational priorities and values so that our assessments and standards can operate as means to our best ends. There is no reason to object, in principle, to a Common Core that views teachers as informed, skilled, and experienced facilitators and practitioners. Meanwhile, as countless educators are patiently asserting, there are sound empirical reasons to raise questions about a tendency to use an inflexible yardstick to standardize measures of educational progress uniformly across all individuals, schools, school districts, and state borders. It is particularly appropriate to raise cautionary flags in

an institutional milieu where teachers often feel they are under the constant surveillance and regimen of an administrative bureaucracy.

Philosophy can go only so far. The vexing questions set and defined by the concrete problems of education are among the most momentous we face. As Dewey observed, hypotheses for dealing with them must be tested, settled, and modified in that experimental medium. Nonetheless, at its best, philosophical reflection is not an idle luxury best left to professionals who have nothing more important to do. It is a practical necessity to reflect on what we are really aiming for as we discuss K–12 spending and priorities, consolidation and mergers, school budget caps, student-teacher ratios, affordability in higher education, and so on.

It would be a tragedy that trivializes all of our successes if U.S. educational politics and policy continues the national lockstep march down a path in which educational institutions—or industries, for that matter—gain economic efficiency and increase productivity by frustrating human growth, imagination, and fulfillment.

## CONCLUSION: ON THE MORAL POVERTY OF THE INDUSTRIAL MODEL

In *Democracy and Education*, Dewey placed his own hope for social reconstruction in education's creative possibilities. A century on, this remains our greatest hope.

We are confronted with unsustainable consumption and ecological crisis, and we meet it with a narrow education for the workforce. We are ensnared in a cycle of violence, retribution, and knee-jerk recrimination, and we propose a narrow education for the workforce.

We find walled-in social groups that suppose they have nothing to learn from—and much to oppose and fear in—other social groups. Many of these groups claim direct access to absolutely authoritative truths not of this world and quarantined from revision, so that the education of youths is declared on track only when the risk of an unsanctioned realization is averted and they have arrived safely at a foregone conclusion. Locally, nationally, and globally, we need the arbitration of wider outlooks to separate the recyclables from the refuse. And we answer with a narrow education for the workforce.

We desperately need to learn our diverse ways beyond the hell we inflict on each other in the name of righteous certainty, beyond the misery that clings to the idea that habituated assumptions, ancestral voices, or institutional authorities should be heeded without investigation, critique, and reformation. And we propose a narrow education for the workforce.

We need public dialogue, social learning, restoration of trust, and reconciliation. The resources to meet this need must be sought amid oppression, rage, and fanaticism on all sides, fueled by nationalism, jingoism, ethnocentrism, xenophobia,



homophobia, sexism, racism, massive migration, and economic dislocation. And we offer a narrow education for the workforce.

Here is this growing generation, born to great problems and possibilities. From K–12 to university, a critically reflective and occupation-rich cultural education can help to establish conditions for personal flourishing, critical inquiry, and democratic participation. Through a self-fulfilling faith in the possibilities of education-as-growth, we bet on social hope over despair and on durable ways of life over unsustainable ones. Perhaps our greatest challenge is to make such an education available to all Americans while we support increased engagement in mutually transformative cross-cultural study and dialogue.<sup>12</sup>

## NOTES

1. Megan Marshall, *Margaret Fuller* (New York: Mariner Books, 2014), 226.
2. Philip Bump, “Scott Walker moved to drop ‘search for truth’ from the University of Wisconsin mission. His office claims it was an error,” *Washington Post*, February 4, 2015, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-fix/wp/2015/02/04/scott-walker-wants-to-drop-search-for-truth-from-the-university-of-wisconsin-mission-heres-why/>, accessed March 25, 2016.
3. Chapter 5 of my *Dewey* (New York: Routledge, 2015) contains a brief overview of Dewey’s progressivism in the historical context of twentieth-century movements for educational reform, a familiar story to most readers of this journal. For brief analyses of the industrial model of education written for nonspecialists, see my contributions to:
 

*The Chronicle of Higher Education* (November 2, 2015) <http://chronicle.com/blogs/letters/what-we-lose-when-we-treat-education-like-an-industrial-sector/>, accessed March 25, 2016.

*Education Week* (January 20, 2016) <http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2016/01/20/education-must-broaden-growth-of-social-infrastructure.html>, accessed March 25, 2016.
4. Many Republicans regard educational freedom as the absence of any formal or legal impediments, while many Democrats argue that the promise of education-for-the-workforce is hollow without genuine, effective, and equitable access to it.
5. MW 9:328. Citations of John Dewey’s works are for the critical edition published by Southern Illinois University Press under the editorship of Jo Ann Boydston. Citations give series abbreviation followed by volume number and page number. For example: (LW 10:12) is page 12 of *Art as Experience*, which is published as volume 10 of *The Later Works*. Series abbreviations for *The Collected Works of John Dewey*: EW *The Early Works* (1882–1898), MW *The Middle Works* (1899–1924), LW *The Later Works* (1925–1953).
6. LW 1:272.
7. Woodrow Wilson, “The Meaning of a Liberal Education,” *Wikisource*, [https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/The\\_Meaning\\_of\\_a\\_Liberal\\_Education](https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/The_Meaning_of_a_Liberal_Education), accessed March 25, 2016. Wilson’s address, “The Meaning of a Liberal Education,” was published in *High School Teachers Association of New York*, Volume 3, 1908–1909. Wilson continued: “You cannot train them for both in the time that you have at your disposal. They must make a selection, and you must make a selection. I do not mean to say that in the manual training there must not be an element of liberal training; neither am I hostile to the idea that in the liberal education there should be an element of the manual training. But what I am intent upon is that we should not confuse ourselves with regard to what we are trying to make of the pupils under our instruction. We are either trying to make liberally-educated persons out of them,



or we are trying to make skillful servants of society along mechanical lines, or else we do not know what we are trying to do.”

8. MW 12:186.

9. LW 13:298–99.

10. For example, see Bryan Norton *Sustainable Values, Sustainable Change* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015) and Andrew Light’s forthcoming chapter on Dewey and international climate negotiation in *The Oxford Handbook of Dewey*, ed. Steven Fesmire (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, forthcoming 2017).

11. Harvard Business Review, “How Companies Can Profit from a ‘Growth Mindset,’” HBR.org, <https://hbr.org/2014/11/how-companies-can-profit-from-a-growth-mindset>, accessed March 25, 2016.

12. This paper was presented at the John Dewey Society’s Centennial Conference on *Democracy and Education*, April 7–8, 2016, in Washington, DC.

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