

## JOHN DEWEY SOCIETY: 2014 PAST PRESIDENT'S PANEL

# INTRODUCTION: *EXPERIENCE AND EDUCATION TODAY,* A SYMPOSIUM

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### INTRODUCTION

The four papers in this symposium were selected from thirty submissions for the Past President's Panel at the 2014 annual meeting of the John Dewey Society in Philadelphia. Taken collectively, they demonstrate the continuing power of Dewey's philosophy to inspire, clarify, and critique contemporary educational ideas and practices. I will have a few words to say about these papers below, but first I want to put them in context.

The John Dewey Society, in its current form, has three operational missions: (1) to encourage, and contribute to, critical inquiry into pressing contemporary issues in culture, society, and education in the spirit of John Dewey; (2) to foster and provide venues for new educational knowledge; and (3) to encourage studies of the philosophy of John Dewey and American pragmatism. In recent years, the society has served mission (1) by the publication of its blog *Social Issues*, its new journal, *School and Society*, its Commission on Social Issues, and occasionally, by organizing its John Dewey Lectures and Symposia on social and cultural issues at its annual meetings. It has served mission (2) through the publication of this journal, *Education and Culture*, and the journal *Educational Theory*, which it cosponsors with the University of Illinois Department of Educational Theory and Policy. Some Dewey Lectures and Symposia also fall into this second category. Our sister organization, the John Dewey Studies Special Interest Group (SIG) at the American Educational Research Association (AERA), is also devoted to this educational studies mission and it frames its annual meeting around studies in the Dewey tradition.

Roughly five years ago, the executive committee of the Dewey Society decided to create an annual panel of papers, selected from submissions responding to a specified call, on major works of Dewey himself, in order to serve mission (3). We have been gratified by the response to this new effort, as each call has generated many submissions.

The panel has been labeled the Past President's Panel (or PPP) because the members of the executive committee wanted to create a significant role for the past presidents of the society in order to keep them active and visible. In the initial conception, the president-elect would organize the call and the selection process, and a past president would be selected to respond to the presentations. The name of the panel led to a number of problems. Some past presidents assumed that this would be an invited panel of past presidents, and were frustrated when the expected invitations did

not arrive. Others, thinking along the same lines, failed to submit proposals because they thought the panel would be open only to past presidents. And then, as presidents of our society are usually chosen after long and successful careers, we started losing our past presidents, thus narrowing the pool of respondents. Finally, as our meeting coincides with the annual meeting of AERA, and most of our leaders are also active in that organization, some remaining past presidents were reluctant to accept the invitation to respond, while others had to back out at the last minute due to conflicts with the AERA schedule. The whole “past presidents” concept didn’t work out as expected, and as good pragmatists, we are now dropping it.

Nonetheless, the concept of an annual panel on the contemporary significance of major works by Dewey remains viable, with or without the participation of past presidents. This panel will, starting in 2016, simply be called the Panel on the Philosophy of John Dewey.

#### EXPERIENCE AND EDUCATION: INTERACTION AND CONTINUITY

The 2014 papers addressed the living ideas in Dewey’s late masterpiece, *Experience and Education*. In his earlier works on the philosophy of education, from *School and Society* (1899) and *The Child and the Curriculum* (1900) through the magisterial *Democracy and Education* (1916), Dewey sought to lay out a system of ideas for the “new education,” challenging older school practices. This new education included manual arts, nature study, arts, and play. Dewey did not invent the activity school; it actually had quite a long history by 1900. His task was to bring its leading ideas into alignment with contemporary theory. The leaders in the new education, misleadingly labeled “progressive education,” though its main trends were not in close alignment with the progressive movement of the times, were, for their part, following their own lead. While they valued the association with Dewey, whose role as an American intellectual was established and growing, they were by no means his followers. Their differences came to a head after the publication of *Democracy and Education*, and by the 1930s, Dewey saw the need to differentiate his own views from what he considered to be excesses in progressive education.

Dewey’s argument was that while the “old” education overemphasized the objective factors—the pre-existing subject matters conventional schooling sought to convey to young people—the new educators overemphasized the subjective factors—the impulsions brought into educational settings by the young. These were two parts of a larger whole, and as Dewey saw it, educators thus needed a “theory of experience,” a theory of what arises as an upshot when these factors are brought together in educational settings.

Young people are already live creatures; they bring their habits—their readiness to act—into settings containing subject matters, which for Dewey were things to be acted upon. The complex of action on subject matters and undergoing of the consequences Dewey labeled “experience.” Whenever young people enter schools

and classrooms they will meet up with subject matters and have experiences—there is no value attached to experience per se. The educational question is, “What features must experiences have to be educative—to provide educational value?”

To this question, Dewey answered that they must satisfy the criteria of interaction and continuity. We may provide a first, rough account of these suggestive terms in this way: for the experience to be interactive, the individual young people must engage, must find in the setting materials that call on their habits, that call them into action, that enable them to project ends and pursue them. For the experience to provide continuity, it must build upon their already formed powers and capacities and provide present opportunities for continuous, future growth as they pursue challenging ends over time, so that when they enter later, similar situations their habits will have been strengthened—they will be better equipped to project and achieve ends.

### THE SYMPOSIUM

The papers in this symposium draw upon this analysis of experience to address four contemporary educational settings: (1) study abroad programs that promise a global experience, (2) “makers-day” workshops, (3) classroom discussions, and (4) information-rich settings with computers and Internet access.

William Guadelli and Megan Laverty begin their analysis in “What is Global Experience?” by noting that today’s global educators, like the progressive educators of Dewey’s time, are not realizing the full potential of students’ study abroad experiences. Students travel abroad to study, are provided with activity-packed schedules, and offered opportunities for reflection. But these educators often neglect to consider, and reconstruct, the subjective element, the habits the students bring into play in the foreign settings. Drawing on Dewey’s analysis of experience, the authors propose that global educators attend more closely to the ‘phases of qualitative apprehension’ prior to study abroad, and back off from overscheduling of experiences to allow for greater free play of students’ own selected activities, which can, during the time abroad, expand in continuous, challenging, unpredicted ways.

Margaret Macintyre Latta and Susan Crichton, in “Innovation’s Renewing Potential,” examine the Maker’s Day experience as an opportunity for teacher enrichment. The Makers Movement encourages experiences of designing and building in cooperative groups, in studioliike environments. It thus resonates with Dewey’s notion of learning through occupations and his substitution of work areas for classrooms in his model elementary school in *School and Society*. Macintyre Latta and Crichton demonstrate the close fit between design thinking in the Maker’s Day experience and the kind of thinking Dewey encourages in educative experiences, and in this way use Dewey’s theory of experience to unpack and clarify the guiding ideas of the Maker’s Day experience.

Susan Mayer, in “Representing Dewey’s Constructs of Continuity and Interaction within Classrooms,” provides a tool for representing and assessing interaction and continuity in classroom discussions. She asks, “How are we to make sense

of these suggestive concepts in the everyday practice of classroom communicative exchanges?" She provides a set of categories of classroom moves (framing, developing, evaluating) as an analytical tool for uncovering interaction and continuity. Conventional teachers frame discussions themselves and guide student developments along conventional lines, and then evaluate them in terms of conventionally good answers. Two problems arise: (1) there is no space for the students to enter into and engage on their own terms with the event (no interaction), and (2) students interpret the teacher's evaluations, and incorporate the lessons learned, differently. Some are more adept at picking up the teacher's intent, but others interpret it in ways that leave them lost and unmotivated as the teacher moves ahead (no continuity).

Teachers comfortable with constructivist methods, on the other hand, invest their students with interpretive authority. The learners are freely encouraged to contribute to framing the discussion topic and to develop it in various ways (interaction). Instead of bringing a one-size-fits-all evaluation of answers, such teachers provide space for individual students, cooperating with one another and the teacher, continuously to develop and evaluate their own answers, in this way articulating them with their own prior understandings and preparing themselves to move forward (continuity). Teachers and researchers armed with these discourse categories can study and identify interaction and continuity as empirical factors in classroom interactions.

Finally, Stefano Oliverio, in "The Need for "Connectedness in Growth": *Experience and Education* and the New Technological Culture," considers information-rich, Internet-mediated learning. Some leading gurus of Internet education, such as Marc Prensky and Judy Breck, have suggested that the Internet is a self-sufficient learning environment. Armed with search procedures, students can find the sum total of information, organized knowledge, and tutorials they need to support learning of any topic and for achieving any end.

Like the progressive educators of Dewey's day, Oliverio argues, these gurus over-emphasize the subjective element in experience and devalue the importance of teachers and the culture of learning. The Internet, Oliverio claims, presents the sum total of information and knowledge as an array of simultaneous points, and thus obscures the historical continuity of knowledge development and use and learners' own positions in that continuity. He argues that to preserve this continuity, we must avoid simply turning over online information and knowledge to the young for their use, helter-skelter, in all directions at once. Instead, following the lead of Dewey, we have to invent something new, something that (as I read him) performs the same function for all of these simultaneous points of information that the program of the humanities did with books, that is, to provide a culture of knowledge acquisition and use that facilitates the productive engagement of learners and guides their own continuous growth.

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