Listening

Over the weekend, I met with colleagues on the shores of Lake Michigan to discuss the topic of listening in education. This small group had worked together for several years, and I had joined just recently. We all had papers to discuss and a book manuscript to get together to pitch to a publisher. While I enjoy the buzzing, blooming confusion, politics, and networking of a mega-meeting like the American Educational Research Association's annual gabfest, a small seminar of like-minded people, focused on a particular task, is probably more gratifying intellectually. We exchanged our papers beforehand and the two editors of the proposed book collection provided extensive comments on drafts. The conversation over the weekend ranged over definitions of listening, listening in teaching and leading schools, as well as listening to silences in classrooms.

Many teachers still use direct instruction or one of its relatives, and still do most of the talking. They hear then what students say in response to their queries. Interesting work on an “erotetic” type of teaching, offered by Jim Macmillan and Jim Garrison years ago, calls upon teachers to anticipate what students’ questions should be given their prior knowledge and the subject matter at hand. But such interactive teaching is rarely practiced. To do so, one must listen and be more actively involved in students’ lives. Our current emphasis on high-stakes testing in schools silences many, though not all, such efforts.

I am fortunate to work at a place that supported my listening of Walter Feinberg’s John Dewey Lecture last spring at the American Educational Research Association annual meeting in San Francisco. I am even more pleased that the journal has the opportunity to publish the revised talk. In “Back to the Future”: Philosophy of Education as an Instrument of Its Time, Feinberg asks the question why certain philosophers, such as Dewey, are remembered for their educational writings, while others, such as Whitehead and Russell, are not. Feinberg argues that “…it is justified, but not because one or the other provides a more coherent argument, but rather because the educational writings of the former capture the historical moment and brings it to fruition in an image of a new social order with a new form of intersubjectivity.”

Editorial board member Barbara Thayer-Bacon calls for more of an emphasis on a “differentiated politics of difference” in her article, “Beyond Liberal Democracy: Dewey’s Renascent Liberalism.” She draws her inspiration from the direction Dewey took in his Logic. Thayer-Bacon draws upon his theory of social transaction to show possibilities of moving beyond individualism.

James Carpenter notes in “The Development of a More Intelligent Citizen-
Randall Hewitt begins his paper by listing ways children in schools are surrounded by messages from private corporations. He describes a democratic theory of education based on Dewey’s work that “privileges the social over the private, the public over the corporate, such that the homo-economicus ideal that our public schools train our children to aspire to on a daily basis is checked by a wider commitment to the good life defined in more socially benevolent ways.” Important work in this area has been done by scholars such as Alex Molnar and Deron Boyles. Public schools have become compromised in their mission by private corporations hawking their foodstuffs and other items to children within the walls of schools and on school buses every day.

Business professor Robert Mulligan contends in his essay that the radical subjectivism of the Austrian school of economics is a special case of Dewey’s ways of knowing. Dewey’s transactional philosophy focused economics in that school on “new, alternative ways of knowing to the scientific community, offering more profound insight or more efficacious practical applications.”

Two book reviews complete the issue. Editorial board member Christine McCarthy considers Teed Rockwell’s Neither Brain nor Ghost, a Non-dualist Alternative to the Mind-Brain Identity Theory. While McCarthy is critical of Rockwell’s argument on many counts, finding his concept of mind largely unexplicated, she commends Rockwell’s “main thesis—that experience, consciousness, and mind emerge from the interaction of organism and environment-- and not from a brain conceived to exist in isolation” as sound and pragmatic.

On the other hand, Dennis Attick finds Henry Edmondson’s John Dewey and the Decline of American Education to be almost wholly misguided. Edmondson blames Dewey for much of the current ills of American education, including the odd assertion that Dewey’s experimentalism turns students into “lab rats.” As I look at our schools today, I often recall that old quip about curriculum history in the last century: “Dewey lost and Thorndike won.” So I am puzzled when a book comes out in 2006 attributing the ills of today’s schools to Dewey, whose ideas about education seem not to have taken hold in too many schools, at least the ones I visit.

With this issue, we bid farewell to editorial board member Peter Hlebowitsh, the previous editor of this journal, and an invaluable source of wise counsel to me. We welcome starting next year three new members of the board: Matthew Pamental of Northern Illinois University and the new secretary/treasurer of the John Dewey Society; Daniel Tanner, longtime JDS member; and Naoko Saito of Kyoto University. My review of Saito’s book The Gleam of Light: Moral Perfectionism and Education in Dewey and Emerson will be forthcoming in this journal.

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