Discursivity, Heteroglossia, and Interest: Revisiting Herbert Kliebard’s Dewey

Kyle A. Greenwalt

Abstract
This paper revisits Herbert Kliebard’s figure of John Dewey in Kliebard’s The Struggle for the American Curriculum. The paper argues that, while there are indeed reasons for the disembodied picture of Dewey that emerges from Struggle, such figuration ultimately has an effect that is overly reproductive: It ignores Dewey’s efforts to live within and across institutional boundaries so as to reconstruct the practices and interests of the society in which he lived. Using the work of Bakhtin and Dewey, I argue that it is only by such a Deweyan engagement that our own voices will ultimately be able to “ring” or “sound” in novel and potentially radical ways.

Guardian angel or ghost? In a certain sense, that is the question raised by Herbert Kliebard’s (1986/1995) portrayal of John Dewey in his masterful work, The Struggle for the American Curriculum. As Kliebard explains in the Preface to the First Edition of his work, one of the major problems he faced was “how to treat the towering figure of John Dewey.” He continues:

Although I had been a student of Dewey’s work for almost all my professional life, I found myself puzzled as to where he belonged in the context of the interest groups I had identified. I decided in the end that he did not belong in any of them and that he should appear in the book as somehow hovering over the struggle rather than belonging to any particular side. I suppose I should also confess to using Dewey’s voice in some of the chapters as a way of commenting myself on how the battle was proceeding. (p. xv-xvi; emphasis added)

Dewey therefore towers from the heights above. He does not so much participate in the educational struggles of the twentieth century as he does preside over them. What should we make of this portrayal?
According to the Oxford English Dictionary, the verb “hover” is derived from the common Middle English verb, “hove.” In general, both verbs have had similar uses, covering a range of meanings. These include:

- Of a winged creature: To hang or remain suspended in the air over or about a particular spot
- To keep hanging or lingering about (a person or place), to wait near at hand, move to and fro near or around, as if waiting to land or alight
- To remain waiting; to tarry, linger; to hesitate before taking action

Given these meanings of “hover,” the idea of Dewey as either a ghost or a guardian angel seems more than appropriate. Perhaps John Dewey has some unfinished business here on earth, and he hesitates, not sure whether to return and take action or to move on to his final resting place? Or perhaps John Dewey has yet to earn his angelic wings, and he therefore watches in concern, always ready to intervene, as yet another teacher ponders leaping to her death from the proverbial bridge of curriculum standardization?

Isn’t it tempting to put this Deweyan ghost to rest, to give him his angelic wings? After all, hasn’t he earned his reward? This is, perhaps, one implication we can engineer from Kliebard’s text. Yet, to my mind, such is not the approach to take. For ultimately, a lot of us still need Dewey to do our work; and I suggest that an earthier Dewey might better serve the purpose. John Dewey can no longer be allowed to “[hover] over the struggle rather than belonging to any particular side.”

In the spirit of Jacques Derrida—for whom no part of a text is so obscure as to preclude a productive and generative reading—I therefore seek to “open up” a space out of Kliebard’s text in which to produce an understanding of curriculum and its history. I argue that a Deweyan reconstruction of American education requires a renewal of its discourses rather than a continued struggle over the interests it shall serve. For if we assume that the curriculum serves as the site of particular interests—be they material or symbolic—we end up making of the curriculum nothing more than an empty vessel. Curriculum becomes a site for exploration and colonization, a realm in which competing empires stake their claims. Under this regime of thought, to take interest in the curriculum is to make of it a mirror, one which reflects the face of the “hidden constituencies who were seeking sanction for their most cherished beliefs in the face of what they perceived to be a massive social upheaval” (Kliebard, p. 251). Curriculum becomes the site in which groups come to recognize themselves. It makes all of us—students, teachers, researchers, citizens—into nothing more than spectators.

Hence, this paper begins by examining in more detail Kliebard’s use of “discourses” and “social languages” as an organizing framework for his work. This in turn leads to a reconceptualization of discursivity, intentionality, and their relationship to social change, work which I do through an engagement with the thought of Mikhail Bakhtin on heteroglossia. Finally, I return to Dewey, and in particular,
to his own thought on the topic of “interests.” In so doing, I avoid what I feel is the rather un-Deweyan portrait of Dewey that emerges in _The Struggle for the American Curriculum_, and I thereby locate my more down-to-earth figure of Dewey. I close by drawing implications for curriculum research and school reform by bringing together the three strands of the paper: discursivity, heteroglossia, and interest.

**Discursivity**

Herbert Kliebard’s seminal work on the history of the American curriculum has dominated interpretations in the field for the last twenty years. Kliebard’s central working theory, one he states to have borrowed from historians of the Progressive Era such as Daniel T. Rodgers (1982), is perhaps most cogently stated in the preface to the second edition of his work: that the curriculum of the American public school is not the product of any one, unitary historical process, such as those of social control or democratic evolution. Rather, it is the tenuous compromise left behind by warring “interest groups,” each of which had its “own” ideological agenda. Kliebard continues by noting that:

> While it is true that two or more of these interest groups will occasionally form a temporary coalition around a particular reform, their platforms in the struggle for the American curriculum are not simply dissimilar or even contradictory; they are, more often than not, antagonistic. (p. x)

As Kliebard notes in the afterword to his history, the struggles for the curriculum were antagonistic (and “not simply . . . contradictory”) because they were, in his reading, symbolic battles over “status and approbation” (p. 251).

As an insightful example, Kliebard can therefore argue that the debate about vocationalism in American schools is not “so much a matter of whether occupational skills could be taught successfully,” but rather represents a challenge to the status of “an effete academic curriculum” in a country transformed by the rise of masculinely coded, industrial work spaces (p. 249). Discourses about vocationalism in the schools, for Kliebard, are therefore in a certain sense the property of coherent interest groups—they are owned. They allow the interest group to recognize itself, to shape itself, to give voice to its ideology, and to differentiate itself from other, competing interest groups. Kliebard imagines leaders for each interest group, and behind these leaders he discerns “the hopes and fears of millions of Americans who were troubled by an uncertain world and who found a certain promise and comfort in ideas about how the curriculum should be redesigned” (p. 251). In all of this, the sense of the term “interest” must remain highly accentuated, for the notion of a material interest is clearly overshadowed here by stakes that are instead symbolic.

What are the effects of imagining the curriculum as a vehicle for symbolic struggle? Clearly, to begin with, such an approach reifies curriculum. It makes curriculum into a self-sustaining object over which competing forces then engage in struggle. Yet such an approach also makes curriculum into a symptom,
a surface marker that can be read for signs of a deeper malaise. Curriculum becomes a manifestation, emerging out of the latent, material structure of school in its institutional form. I argue, then, that a position such as Kliebard’s inevitably leads—lacking a proper critique of this symbolic framework—to an overinvestment in the curricular imaginary. That is, it ultimately leads to an engagement in what John Guillory (1994) has called “imaginary politics.”

Imaginary politics are a very real version of political struggle. And such struggle does, to a certain extent, matter. For Guillory, however, the American Culture Wars of the last twenty-five years have obscured some important points. The practice of imaginary politics is marked by the assumption that the victory of an integrated curriculum—a curriculum that is essentially interdisciplinary and multicultural—would mark the victory of societal integration. It assumes that a refuguration of the canon (or the curriculum) signals social change. Or as Guillory states, it “is only in the pedagogic imaginary that changing the syllabus means in any immediate sense changing the world” (p. 37).

Guillory claims that course syllabi, which for him are the material instantiations that the terms “curriculum” or “canon” claim to totalize and represent—as organic, national “Cultures”—must always be located within their institutional frameworks. Syllabus, curriculum, Culture. The chain of signification is clear. The Culture Wars largely assumed that (high) national Cultures were the stakes over which the curriculum battles were fought. In doing this, the fact that curriculum is itself always institutionally located in specific syllabi is forgotten. As such, questions such as—Who wrote this particular syllabus? For what particular group of students? For what particular social and institutional purposes?—are all too often overlooked.

Such a process lends an air of unreality to debates about the curriculum, for it assumes the possibility of a resolution to curricular questions at a level at which no resolution is possible (as if the federal government can actually dictate what flesh-and-blood students end up experiencing in a particular classroom). It also leads to an unfortunate reinscription of past debates within the context of the present. Guillory argues that when one “forgets” the institutional location of such debates, an overinvestment in the curricular imaginary is the natural outcome. Instead, he suggests that scholars ask what “it would mean to redefine the object of our critique as the institution of the school, of which the syllabus is only an instrumentality” (p. 38).

In borrowing D. T. Rodger’s framework of social languages, then, I argue that Kliebard has returned the analysis to the exact position from which it began. For Kliebard claims it “would do violence to Rodger’s position to assume that any social language is the exclusive possession of any group” (p. 246). Yet this is exactly what his framework ends up doing. Kliebard argues that his approach “requires that one abandon the quest to define progressive education in terms of an inventory of stable attributes” (p. 246). Nevertheless, in the very next clause of the same sentence, he writes:
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[my framework] recognizes that reform subgroups (whether or not they are called interest groups as in the case of Struggle) can be defined in terms of rather consistent and recognized ideological positions and that these positions can be identified to some extent through the social language they characteristically employ. (p. 246; emphasis added)

Indeed, doesn’t Kliebard’s text give us a set of stable and consistent ideological positions through which to recognize different interest groups? And is this not the reason why Kliebard cannot locate Dewey, and hence disembodies him?

The theory of competing interest groups only makes sense through an approach mobilizing traditional Marxist theory: Competing groups engage in ideological struggle over a limited set of (symbolic) goods. An alternative approach—one that I would like to explore in the next section of this paper—is to conceive discourse as itself a network of power (rather than a communicative instrumentality) that positions subjects differentially through time and space. Within such an approach, there is no coherent ideological interest that is self-same through time, but rather, discursive networks into which subjects are inserted. Discourse rather than interest. For educational reform discourses (like all other discourses) do not mean anything per se in their repetition over time—what will matter, as I shall argue, is the position from which a particular enunciation is launched at a particular moment in time, and its particular, often localized, effects.

**Heteroglossia**

Why is it that reform discourses can be recycled in these ways? What provides them with such continuity through time? Why aren’t old discourses more easily forgotten and new discourses more easily mobilized? Furthermore, why is it that the same few Kliebardian “interests” have so consistently and insistently existed throughout the entire twentieth century, despite massive change in the society surrounding the schools? Such questions will be considered in this section by considering the work of the Russian theorist Mikhail Bakhtin (2000) in his essay, “Discourse in the Novel.” I will begin by briefly sketching Bakhtin’s interest in particularized, embodied languages, and then proceed to explore in detail the Bakhtinian concept of heteroglossia.

Bakhtin continually reminds us that the notion of “language,” especially of a national language, is in itself somewhat abstract and lifeless. Rather than focusing on language—as an abstract symbolic system—Bakhtin asks us to think about what he variously calls “languages,” “discourses,” or actual, living “utterances.” That is, Bakhtin points out the manner in which language is itself both vivified and, more importantly, internally stratified, by the differing social classes, professions, and genres that determine it. These various social and professional discourses are not themselves segregated or unrelated to one another. They form instead what Bakhtin calls, inimitably, a “heteroglot unity.”

Bakhtin therefore asks us to imagine language as a field in which power is at play. Language is something alive, it has a history (a “becoming”), and a mate-
rial being. The concrete discourses that make up an abstract language are therefore that which give it life, in that they are fused with various ideologies, ways of looking at the world:

Thus at any given moment of its historical existence, language is heteroglot from top to bottom: it represents the co-existence of socio-ideological contradictions between the present and the past, between differing epochs of the past, between different socio-ideological groups in the present, between tendencies, schools, circles and so forth, all given a bodily form. (p. 291)

He goes on to note that these languages “do not exclude each other, but rather intersect with each other in many different ways.” All languages are therefore “specific points of view on the world, forms for conceptualizing the world in words, specific world views, each characterized by its own objects, meanings and values.” Language diversity is therefore an embodied reality: languages “encounter one another and co-exist in the consciousness of real people” (pp. 291-292).

Bakhtin asks us to imagine language as the product of centripetal and centrifugal forces: nationalizing, unifying forces that attempt to colonize and assimilate through the construct of a “proper” and “correct” language, working against the forces of dialect, patois, argot, slang—all of which, as embodiments of particular world views, resist. This background of centrifugality Bakhtin terms heteroglossia. As he notes, every “utterance participates in the ‘unitary language’ (in its centripetal forces and tendencies) and at the same time partakes of social and historical heteroglossia (the centrifugal, stratifying forces)” (p. 272). As such, utterances can carry no “consistent and recognizable ideological” interests; for utterances exist on the horizon between myself and the other (p. 293). The word is always half someone else’s. The task before the speaking subject is therefore to recognize this heteroglossia, to formulate one’s own intentionality, and to thereby orchestrate an embodied language encounter.

Understanding heteroglossia is therefore key to Bakhtin’s project. To do so, one must first realize that the term is used in at least two senses. On the one hand, there is a type of heteroglossia that one might call internal. Bakhtin explains this sort of heteroglossia by asking us to imagine an object—let us say, following Kliebard, that such an object is the school curriculum. On the one hand, Bakhtin will point out the “internal contradictions inside the object itself,” that is, when thinking about the school curriculum, one must confront the “multitude of routes, roads and paths that have been laid down in the object by social consciousness” (p. 278). Therefore, one can think about the curriculum as the essential subject matter that the child must learn, or as the complete set of experiences society wishes the child to have, or as the complete set of experiences the child actually does have, or even as the complete set of experiences that the child is prevented from having. The word “curriculum” reveals only a specious unity if the internal heteroglossia that stratifies perception of the object is not acknowledged. This stratification is due, again, to the various world views embodied in social and professional groups.
In addition to this perceptional stratification, Bakhtin also describes what he variously calls the “apperceptive background” or the “social heteroglossia” of the object. These are the voices and world views that the object, so to speak, brings with itself to consciousness. As Bakhtin writes, aside from the internal stratification of the object, one “witnesses as well the unfolding of social heteroglossia surrounding the object, the Tower-of-Babel mixing of languages that goes on around any object” (p. 278). There is no “Edenic” character to the world—people were here prior to us, and their words about the world determine how it is the world is experienced. The “object is always entangled in someone else’s discourse about it, it is already present with qualifications, an object of dispute that is conceptualized and evaluated variously” (p. 330). To speak of the school curriculum, then, is to engage the various social dialogues that surround the object. It is to take part in the debate about whether or not the schools are mediocre and whether or not curriculum standards might not improve them. It is to argue about whether the child’s interest or the child’s effort is primary in the process of coming to understanding. As Bakhtin notes, the meaning of words such as “curriculum” do not come from dictionaries—but neither can such words mean whatever it is we want them to mean. People fight over words, and that struggle means each word too has a history (a becoming), which the speaker must acknowledge.

Bakhtin calls such an acknowledgment—the process whereby one takes into account another’s speech in forming one’s own—“dialogic.” Dialogic speech can be obvious, as in the case of scholarship, or more hidden, as in the case of the novel. The dialogism of scholarship, as Bakhtin often notes, is “compositionally marked” (e.g., p. 284); that is, it is somewhat polemical, in that it is methodical about the compositional techniques through which it acknowledges another’s words about the object (through citations, references, footnotes, and the like). From my own perspective, one of the great weaknesses of Bakhtin’s work is that it does not give proper consideration to the institutional locale of such dialogicized, scholarly speech.

Bakhtin does at several points suggest problems in scholarly speech: the fact that it can become crystallized (p. 284), reproductive (p. 281), or perhaps reified (p. 299). He also notes how unproductive life and thought can become when it is sealed off, unable or unwilling to interact with the surrounding social heteroglossia of the larger society (p. 368). Yet in general, when Bakhtin speaks of professional groups and the stratification they can bring to language (“the language of the lawyer, the doctor, the businessman, the politician, the public education teacher and so forth” [p. 289]), he considers neither the unique characteristics of particular forms of disciplinary knowledge nor the institutional locales in which they grew up—both of which have come to mark most types of professional work.

Bakhtin seems to consider professional groups as distributed evenly throughout the social body, where they are able to function and interact with other professional and social groups. By way of contrast, it is also important to
consider the institutional location of such discourses; for institutions shield and enclose. They make it difficult for new social groups to enter the institution, to carry out their own discursive practices, and thereby affect and redirect the discursive practices of the institution. Indeed, once an institution is effectively set running, state intervention itself becomes less and less effective against the powers of the institution’s inertia. Following Bakhtin, one can therefore note that, without the ability of new social groups to enter into intra-institutional dialogue, new social languages are likewise blocked off, and social heteroglossia—as a creative agent—becomes fossilized into rigid forms.

Institutions are themselves, therefore, stratified in a Bakhtinian sense. Yet such stratification is rarely renewed or enriched by contact with their exteriors. Discursive patterns begin to demonstrate a remarkable continuity across time—indeed, as Kliebard has shown us, four discourses about the American curriculum have been in almost continuous mobilization for a century—both within the research community and in the schools themselves. Debates have begun to reenact themselves as the discourses available to us calcify. Social heteroglossia is not so much overcome as it is reduced to the same few notes, against which our own voices have difficulty sounding.

Likewise, as social heteroglossia becomes something taken for granted, internal heteroglossia seems to become more important for the social actors within institutions. One forgets, as Bakhtin would forbid us to, that the curriculum is no one, unitary thing, and that the question of what values the curriculum should really contain and reflect reveals only a desperate attempt to eliminate even internal heteroglossia. Institutions promote an overinvestment in their “sacred” objects, an imaginary politics. Indeed, the price of institutional enclosure seems to be just such an overinvestment in an imaginary, monolithic curriculum. Clearly, what needs attention is not so much the curriculum, the canon, or the syllabus, but the institution itself. Otherwise, the school’s trajectory risks becoming merely memorial, a faithful reproduction of the same social dialogues, time and again.

**Interest Reconsidered**

In the previous section of this paper, I showed how the institutionalization of discursive practices produces a stratification that is rarely renewed or enriched by contact with the institution’s exterior. My question for this section, then, is as follows: How can the institution of schooling be opened up to new social languages, especially given the current context of high-stakes testing and learning standards—standards that no doubt have the effect of “standardizing” teaching and learning?

In answering this question, I return to Dewey, contrasting the figure of Dewey that Kliebard orchestrates in his own text with the one that my own reading of Dewey might produce. In doing this, I contrast Dewey’s own use of the term “interest” with the “interests” that emerge from Kliebard’s text. Drawing upon ideas I established in the last section, I will show how (discursive) practices are fossilized by institutionalization, turning teachers and students into spectators
(rather than agents) of their own learning. Ultimately, I wish to free Dewey from being a spec(ta)ter of the current educational scene.

Some of Dewey’s most enriching thought takes place in his discussion of “The Democratic Conception in Education,” which is, of course, the title of chapter seven in Democracy and Education (1916/1997). Dewey here attempts to provide for the reader a compelling rationale for his vision of education and schooling. As he notes there, any attempt at providing for such a rationale runs up against “the need of a measure for the worth of any given mode of social life” (p. 83). What, then, is the nature of that measure? Dewey’s answer is clear and precise:

Now in any social group whatever, even in a gang of thieves, we find some interest held in common, and we find a certain amount of interaction and coöperative intercourse with other groups. From these two traits we derive our standard. How numerous and varied are the interests which are consciously shared? How full and free is the interplay with other forms of association? (p. 83)

Here, Dewey provides us with a standard as well, one that speaks back to the current obsession with standardization.

Yet Dewey’s standard is of course different. The contemporary standards movement reduces students and teachers to the “idle view of a mere spectator” by imposing upon them “aims laid down from above” (Dewey, pp. 102, 109). By contrast, Dewey could state that “the two elements in our criterion both point to democracy” (p. 86). Dewey’s two democratic criteria, then, imagine students and teacher as social actors rather than mere spectators. It makes of them—or anyone else participating in this mode of conjoint living that Dewey calls democracy—subjects in pursuit of their own interests. Hence, any analysis of these democratic criteria necessarily involves a definition of the term interest.

As Dewey (1916/1997) notes, “interests and aims, concern and purpose, are necessarily connected” (p. 125). Interest refers to that which mediates, to that which is in-between; aim, on the other hand, refers to that which is mediated, to that towards which practice is driven. “The difference is but one of emphasis; the meaning that is shaded in one set of words is illuminated in the others” (p. 125). Interest, then, is not the goal, or even that which orients and drives practice. Rather, interest is practice—“acts to be performed; difficulties to be overcome” (p. 127). Interest is what is undertaken, and given that all life necessarily has a social component, that which is performed conjointly or in common with others. By way of extension, aim is that which gives meaning to practice by providing for moments of reflective culmination and continuity. Aims (much less interests) are not fixed and static, something to be attained and possessed. Rather, good aims are merely suggestions as to “how to observe, how to look ahead, and how to choose in liberating and directing the energies of the concrete situations” in which individuals find themselves (Dewey, p. 107).

In a very real sense, Dewey provides us with a set of suggestions by which we may critique the calcifying effects of institutions on discursive practice. Groups
are defined by the practices they share, and the more numerous and varied, the better. Institutions have the perhaps inevitable effect of limiting interest by preventing the discursive practices of the exterior from full participation. Yet institutions limit aim as well as interest. They do this by limiting one’s ability to take intelligent aim—that is, they limit the “full and free” interplay with other groups outside of the institution, groups whose own practices might enrich the foresight and sensitivity with which those on the interior carry out their own.

Institutions such as schools and universities, then, are sites of labor, play, and community in their own right—Dewey was quite clear about that. Yet such institutions lose their positive social purpose when they become immune to the range of interests that are positioned at their exteriors. Indeed, the democratic purpose of education is lost “except where intercourse of man with man [sic] is mutual, and except where there is adequate provision for the reconstruction of social habits and institutions by means of wide stimulation arising from equitably distributed interests” (Dewey, 1916/1997, p. 100). A potentially educative institution thereby implies a democratization of (discursive) social practices—their social extension and reconstruction through intercourse with their exteriority. The two terms are important, for extension without reconstruction could lead to a brutal colonization of the institution’s exterior. Clearly, such is not Dewey’s goal.

The curriculum must not be made sacred. While “it” is undoubtedly important, we must remember that there are as many curricula as there are localized, embodied interests and aims. Dewey warned teachers of this very danger when he addressed them in 1938:

What avail is it to win prescribed amounts of information about geography and history, to win ability to read and write, if in the process the individual loses his own soul: loses his appreciation of things worth while, of the values to which these things are relative; if he loses desire to apply what he has learned and, above all, loses the ability to extract meaning from his future experiences as they occur? (Dewey, 1938/1997, p. 49)

We must therefore, as Dewey notes, keep in mind the values to which all knowledge is relative. This is not to advocate a theory of epistemological relativism. Rather, it is to recognize that knowledge is a form of social practice and participation, and that all such practices are enriched by broadening the horizons of one’s own experiences, horizons determined by the institutions and social groups of which one is a part. As one expands the groups and institutions with which one interacts on a daily basis, there is a corresponding expansion of the richness of one’s life, of the set of meanings that one can extract from experience.

John Dewey was a participant in multiple institutions during his lifetime: as high-school teacher and assistant principal; professor of philosophy, psychology, and pedagogy; cofounder of the experimental Laboratory School at the University of Chicago; cofounder of the American Association of University Professors; cofounder of The New School for Social Research; Signatory to the Founding Call
that led to the formation of the NAACP; member of the American Federation of Teachers; Chairperson of the 1937 Commission of Inquiry into the Charges Made against Leon Trotsky in the Moscow Trials; and lecturer at Hull House, to name just a few. He intervened in debates of interest to clinical psychologists, sociologists, educationalists, and philosophers in multiple fields. And indeed, as Herbert Kliebard has noted (1986/1995), Dewey’s own work engaged educational scholars in each of the various interest groups that mark educational scholarship in the twentieth century. Yet rather than claiming, as Kliebard does, that Dewey “did not belong in any” of the interest groups, that Dewey “should appear . . . as somehow hovering over the struggle rather than as belonging to any particular side” (p. xix), I would instead like to emphasize just how open Dewey was to participating from within these multiple and conflicting sites. It is precisely his engagement across and within institutions that makes his work so relevant for scholars in the field today.

Conclusion: Encouraging Heteroglossia as an Institutional Counterpractice

This paper began by demonstrating how Kliebard’s Dewey appeared all too ghostly to match up to the real flesh-and-blood struggles in which Dewey and his contemporaries were engaged. It continued by a double displacement. First, by disrupting the linkage between discourses and interests, I attempted to demonstrate an alternative explanation for the remarkable continuity of educational language over the course of the twentieth century. Secondly, by disrupting the linkage between Kliebardian and Deweyan interests, I attempted not only to reclaim a figure of Dewey that is more productive, but also to demonstrate the way in which Dewey continues to be relevant for contemporary educational debates.

It is not, then, the same few ideological interests that have dominated public schooling over the past century. Rather, it is the same few discourses. How might this situation best be remedied? If we are to take both Bakhtin and Dewey to heart, then it is entirely possible that the only manner in which we as educational scholars might get our own voices to truly “sound” is by bringing them into “full and free” interplay with other forms of association. The fullness of such freedom is always necessarily limited—yet such is not a contradiction in terms. Practices, including discursive practices, are always orchestrating events. And it is our “interests” and intentions that give guidance to our orchestration. The meaning and outcome of this process is always open—for meaning and outcome must always pass through the interests and intentions of the other.

The John Dewey Society has recently undertaken the extremely exciting task of forming a Committee for Social Issues (CSI). Such an undertaking can be viewed as aligned with the analyses presented in this paper. Yet there are also problematic differences. For, on the one hand, the webpage announcing the CSI notes that the mission of the Dewey Society “cannot adequately be fulfilled” only by “internal contributions” such as scholarly exchange in journals, for these “com-
Communications are too self-enclosed” (Waks, 2007, para. 4). Rather, the CSI aims to “further the work of the society” by “communicating with, and engaging, various publics” (para. 4). Such an approach seems promising. Unfortunately though, the CSI website imagines this communication in a manner that is problematic, given the analyses presented in this paper:

Ideally, that process [of communication] should in turn give rise to better informed and more thoughtful communications by members of those publics and policy-making bodies, in newspapers and journals of opinion and their own newsletters, and in legislatures and executive agencies. (para. 5)

The process of enlightenment seems unidirectional in that it is “those publics” that will become “better informed.” Our own public, seemingly, has got things figured out quite well, at least as it regards its public face.

In conclusion, then, Dewey would remind us that engagement with the exterior necessarily entails the reconstruction of our views and practices. Bakhtin would remind us that, indeed, it is only upon the condition of entering into commerce with the exterior that our own voices will truly start to sound. Discourse, heteroglossia, and interest: a commitment to thinking through the implications of these three concepts ensures that the horizon of our own work remains committed to the values of openness, difference, and the dialogic. As someone interested in both the work and legacy of John Dewey as well as in the more particular task of reforming public schooling, these are values towards which it seems wise to remain ever mindful.

Acknowledgements

I wish to thank both Education and Culture’s three anonymous reviewers and Cleo Cherryholmes for their insightful comments on an earlier draft of this paper. I also wish to express my deep gratitude to Herbert Kliebard for writing the book that thoughtfully introduced me—and an entire generation of curriculum scholars—to the history of our field.

References


Kyle A. Greenwalt is an assistant professor in the Department of Teacher Education at Michigan State University.

Email: greenwlt@msu.edu