

18 Educational Values: Schools as Cultures of Imagination, Growth, and Fulfillment

On Chapter 18: Educational Values

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Dewey's pivot to the final seven chapters of *Democracy and Education* as well as a culmination of prior chapters, especially those on aims and interests, can be found here in chapter 18. His goal here is to clarify the role of education in a democratic society from the standpoint of specific areas of study. It may help a contemporary reader to imagine Dewey patiently weighing in on an animated dispute about the mission of schools and on the best teaching methods for achieving that mission. The disagreement began, we can imagine, when someone confidently asserted that the primary mission of schools is to fuel industry with skilled labor, and that the best means to this end is vocational training. As with that perennial issue about the role of schools in relation to the workforce, many of the concerns that Dewey was directly addressing a century ago still arise in ordinary conversation, especially when people representing a cross-section of cultural backgrounds, socio-economic classes, or academic goals (imagine a business major, an English major, and an education major) try to communicate with each other.

Some understanding of Dewey's overall philosophy is essential at points, making this chapter among the most challenging and rewarding. Where the text is slow going, consider Dewey's observation that a writer may have a reputation for being clear "merely because the meanings he expresses are so familiar as not to demand thought by the reader" (LW 10: 273).

The Nature of Realization or Appreciation

The chapter has three sections, the first of which is subdivided. In the first section, Dewey carefully distinguishes two spheres of experience: "direct appreciations" and "technique and other purely representative forms" (MW 9: 240). In a loaded sentence that will require us to do some unpacking, he observes that teachers should not assume that students "have a foundation of direct realization of situations sufficient for the superstructure of representative experience erected by formulated school studies" (MW 9: 241).

Dewey's distinction between the two spheres of experience is often misunderstood. He is not, for example, distinguishing between something desirable *vs.*

undesirable, such as Holden Caulfield's distinction in *The Catcher in the Rye* between being "real" vs. "phony," or being authentic vs. inauthentic. It may help to fast forward from 1916 to 1929, when Dewey revised the opening chapter of his *Experience and Nature*. That great work contains a comprehensive treatment of the distinction at hand, which he discusses in terms of *primary* and *secondary* phases of an experience.¹

The *primary* phase of any experience – say, my 6-year-old tottering without training wheels for the first time, forgetting to pedal, and falling – is direct and immediate. It is experience "in the raw," or only minimally refined by reflection, and it is where experience (and my son) meets the existential pavement. This primary phase is *undergone* but not reflectively *known*. Because primary experience sets the doubtful scene for all problems that kindle reflection, it is the fertile soil from which our thoughtful "take" on anything grows. *We cannot bypass primary experience*. This is why, for instance, "filling in" for student responses ("Here's what you meant, right?") rarely reaches beneath the surface of their lives. It does not involve them in what Dewey calls an appreciative or personal realization.

Meanwhile, the *secondary* or cognitive phase of any experience is mediated by representational signs and symbols. This is indirect experience, which is "cooked" and "made sense of" by our conceptual frameworks. Through secondary experience we selectively shine a light on relevant features of primary experience. For example, after helping my son back up, my wife and I remind him to keep pedaling. He comes to appreciate the immediate import of the abstract notion of pedaling. Prior to this direct encounter, we could have lectured him about the importance of pedaling, and it would have hit home like a speech on quantum mechanics. "Getting command of technique and of methods of reaching and testing generalizations," Dewey explains, "is at first secondary to getting appreciation" (MW 9: 242).

Dewey uses this two-phase distinction to make the case that kids learn better when they organically assimilate knowledge in an active, personal, imaginative, and direct way. This is equally true of an adult at the outset of learning something new. Engaged understanding is not divorced from living, and it can be helped along by teachers, or by anxious parents of eager bicyclists. Once achieved, concrete understanding can become a source of motivation and interest for ever more abstract insights. For example, why does the bicycle slow down when I stop pedaling? Why does pedaling keep it upright? A prelude to Newton's three laws of motion! Knowledge *achieved* through personal realization is more readily retained and put to work. It is of value in the direction of life.

Consequently, when introducing students to new territory, Dewey urges that the main educational goal is not conveyance of information or skill acquisition.

¹ This is a *functional* distinction. That is, it is a distinction drawn so that we can think something through, not a separation we should look for "out there." See Dewey's discussion of reflective experience in chapter 11 of DE.

These are by-products if all goes well. The main goal is “to enlarge and enrich the scope of experience, and to keep alert and effective the interest in intellectual progress” (MW 9: 242). When we are at “the primary or elementary phase” of any subject, we need to get a “feel” for the problems. Dewey here answers a core question that unifies *Democracy and Education*: How might formal education add something to informal, incidental, and direct ways of associating and learning? Formal schooling, he answers, “must provide genuine situations in which personal participation brings home the import of the material and the problems which it conveys” so as to evoke “attitudes of open-mindedness and concern as to the material symbolically conveyed” (MW 9: 242). Absent this, schooling will not speak to living.

The products of secondary experience – including Dewey’s own philosophy of education – may or may not operate as intelligent guides to life. In Dewey’s terms, secondary products may or may not nourish and expand primary experience, which is his test for their value. Secondary experience serves as a reliable guide to living to the extent that it forms what we might today call a continuous “feedback loop” with primary experience. More simply put, theory must form a feedback loop with practice. This insight – that symbolic experience must be integrated and coordinated with direct experience – is basic to Dewey’s philosophy, and it is the key to this chapter.²

In three sub-sections Dewey draws out “three further principles” to extend these thoughts on personal, appreciative, direct realizations.

The Need for Real Standards

Neglect of personal (i.e. appreciative) realization leads to “unconscious hypocrisy” and “instability of disposition” (MW 9: 244). A student who has worked through a problem better appreciates that subject than one who merely spouts the conventional answer because he or she was “trained externally to go through certain motions” (MW 9: 244).

Dewey is targeting the Lockean model of experience, which he discussed in chapter 5 of DE. On that model students are blank slates to be written upon by their environments, albeit special slates that possess (in a gaseous inner space called mind) a few latent and readymade powers such as attention, memory, and abstraction. These separate mental powers or faculties must, on that view, be disciplined through repetitive exercises so they will be prepared for the tasks

² To see why this idea is so basic for Dewey’s philosophy, consider that he was inspired by scientific successes to advocate an experimental method of *inquiry*. Inquiry involves patiently looking into things and thinking them through instead of simply giving way to whatever we prefer to believe. When we follow an experimental method, the symbolic conceptions of secondary experience can be derived and refined with systematic rigor, and then traced back to the primary context from which these conceptions emerged and which they nourish and expand (LW 1: 39). That is, scientific inquiries feed back into direct experience, and this is why appreciative realizations achieved through scientific processes warrant our trust.

ahead. This spawned the idea that education is a sort of intellectual gymnastics that prepares students for the “real world” of adult life.

This education-as-training approach lacks any sense of people as live embodied creatures actively exploring, navigating, reaching, grasping, and making. For Dewey, in contrast, learning begins when people – like my son on the bicycle – encounter problematic situations that destabilize, engage, and stimulate deliberate readjustment to meet the surprises of a changing world. To shift the image, it is as though people have mental tentacles reaching out for food. Young and old, we reach out to grasp, assimilate, and transform subject matter that may nourish and consummate our life projects. Both students *and* their teachers are active players in who they are becoming and in the world they are helping to make.

In order to develop his picture of personal realization as an educational value, Dewey introduces a number of binary relations, as seen above with direct *vs.* indirect. He rarely sides with either contender in a conceptual prize fight: this *vs.* that. Instead, he uses dyadic tensions to reconstruct our way of thinking so that we see situations whole. When we approach the teaching situation as a whole, we do not see a growing child as a storage cabinet for the day’s academic lessons. Rather, we see possibilities at hand for deepening and widening the child’s immediate experiences, and to realize these possibilities we reach for representations of “absent and distant affairs” that can “only be signified or symbolized” (MW 9: 241) – i.e. we reach imaginatively for the lesson in service to the pedagogical situation, instead of mechanically subordinating the child to the lesson.

The need for personal realization is, in Dewey’s view, especially salient in moral life. When rules become inflexible doctrines, symbolic representation becomes an end in itself “instead of really calling up the absent and remote in a way to make it enter a present experience” (MW 9: 241). So we may become what Mark Twain called “good in the worst sense of the word,” and our moral thinking may take on an aloof quality, as though we are spectators rather than participants. This saps our potential to become engaged and creative players.

Add to these problems the fact that our moral outlooks are mostly inherited from others at second hand. In Dewey’s view, it is fine to live with hand-me-down ideas, but only so long as they fit and are not worn out. Our moral habits need to be *effective*. If, for example, we think generosity a good thing simply because others prize it, or because of externally imposed discipline, the efficacy of our generosity is incidental and fragile. It lacks any substantive justification that might secure it.

We all at one time or another robotically recite “the proper thing to say” absent the “urgency, warmth, and intimacy of a direct experience” that has deeply adjusted our attitudes (MW 9: 241–3). Many do little but this, and teachers and scholars are not immune from espousing high-minded theories with few roots penetrating the deeper soil of their own dearest inclinations. In part, this happens because the professed standards of value that we wear on our sleeves get out of sync with the actual standards we live by (MW 9: 243).

Yet the moral dispositions we betray in our behavior are more important than those we parade in our pronouncements. This is Dewey's take-home point: The moral experiences of greatest value are first-hand realizations, and these have a different quality, as when you "take in" someone's concerns or find that a conversation "really brought it home."

The fact that we spontaneously prefer something does not, of course, mean we should upon deliberation choose it. "We prefer spontaneously, we choose deliberately," Dewey notes in his 1932 *Ethics* (LW 7: 286). But in contrast with a widely held view of moral deliberation, our best choices are not marked by emotionless rationality, detached moral bookishness, or sharp separation from the intimacy of our own yearnings. Our most reliable moral choices are informed by attentive, vital, and appreciative *dramatic rehearsals*.

Dewey's theory of dramatic rehearsal in deliberation, which is gaining a foothold in twenty-first-century philosophy and cognitive science, is implicit in this sub-section. Deliberation, he writes in *How We Think*, is "a kind of dramatic rehearsal" in imagination. When we are presented with only one alternative for dealing with perplexing circumstances, we act on it without hesitation. But when alternatives contend with one another as we forecast the consequences of acting on them, the ensuing suspense sustains deliberation (LW 8: 200).

Catechisms and moral formulas are often dispensed by moral authorities (clergy, parents, teachers, etc.) as though moral thinking is a recitation or "mechanical rehearsal" rather than a dramatic rehearsal (MW 9: 244). Yet in order to responsibly deal with unique life situations, we need to make an appreciative survey of the consequences that will follow if we make this or that choice among competing alternatives. This is Dewey's skeletal description of the actual psychology of deliberation. In the words of his 1922 *Human Nature and Conduct*, deliberation "runs ahead and foresees outcomes, and thereby avoids having to await the instruction of actual failure and disaster" (MW 14: 133).

Dramatic rehearsal is not a formula, recipe, flow chart, or procedure for moral deliberation and judgment. It is a native psychological activity that we need to build on, though on its own it is morally neutral. When Dr. Seuss's Grinch has a "wonderful awful idea," he was dramatically rehearsing. We need all the help we can get to imaginatively forecast and evaluate alternative scenarios in a way that meets the situation *well*, with what is best in us. Careful ethical reflection upon ideals and principles is a vital tool for effective dramatic rehearsals, but good deliberation is much harder work than just applying an abstract principle to the events at hand. No rehearsed option will be perfect, each will spawn new questions, and each must be evaluated in relation to other problems and goals.

Engaging Imagination

Continuing his reflections on "the place of the imagination in appreciative realizations" (MW 9: 242), Dewey draws out a second principle by observing that imagination is "the medium of appreciation in every field" (MW 9: 244).

It is only through imagination that a representational experience (“Hmm. . . Let me think this out”) becomes a personal realization (“Oh! Now I get it!”).

For humans, imaginative activity is as natural as flexing muscles (MW 9: 245). Imagination is an essential function of human interaction: our capacity for “realizing what is not present” to the senses (LW 17: 242). It is only through imagination that we creatively meet possibilities afforded by a situation. No genuine thinking lacks this fundamental activity. The experienced gardener, for example, grasps and cultivates the possibilities of seed and soil, considering “what may be, but is not yet” (MW 9: 153).

Imagination, in Dewey’s view, is not an inspirational power descending from the heavens. Nor is it limited to daydreams or fantastical inventions. Imagination is as ordinary, practical, and unavoidable for humans as singing and nest-building is for birds. It functions concretely, inescapably, and irreplaceably in the moment-to-moment life of the artist, the moral decision-maker, the scientist, the teacher, and the student.

Imagination plays a formative role in thinking, according to Dewey, by enabling us to stretch beyond our conditioning. “The engagement of the imagination is the only thing that makes any activity more than mechanical” (MW 9: 244). Through imagination we communicate with the past and present experiences of others. If as a daily routine we sideline the vital engagement of children in order to “cover ground” prescribed by the lesson plan, the cumulative effect is to choke imagination. This is culturally suicidal.

One take-home lesson for educators is that the popular divorce of imaginative play from serious curricular matters walks hand-in-hand with mechanical teaching methods. “The difference between play and what is regarded as serious employment should be not a difference between the presence and absence of imagination, but a difference in the materials with which imagination is occupied” (MW 9: 245). When play is belittled as a childish phase best not indulged beyond kindergarten, the tragic result is “a deadly reduction of serious occupation to a routine efficiency prized simply for its external tangible results” (MW 9:245) such as performance on a standardized test.

What do notions like “achievement” and “academic success” mean on the popular get-down-to-business view that marginalizes play? “Achievement,” Dewey laments, “comes to denote the sort of thing that a well-planned machine can do better than a human being, and the main effect of education, the achieving of a life of rich significance, drops by the wayside” (MW 9: 245). Moreover, when a child’s imagination is relatively unoccupied with subject matter, it is diverted down side-channels of mind-wandering away from what is being taught.

Dewey is not disparaging inventive flights of fancy and daydreaming. Not only are these immediately enjoyed, but they simulate and prepare the way for the tighter weave of controlled reflective thought. But educators should strive for the ideal: The child’s insuppressible imagination may be directed toward “concern with what is done” so that the immediate activity takes on an expanded and enriched significance (MW 9: 245–6). Absent imaginative engagement a child’s education becomes a story of lost possibilities.

Aesthetic Consummations

Because education ultimately aims at human fulfillment, we must not isolate the arts from the rest of the curriculum. There is nothing inherent in schooling that justifies our isolation of academic learning from direct fulfillment. Yet we have long tended to see art as either (a) something we honor by separating it from the bulk of daily life, or (b) a pretty luxury to squeeze in as long as it does not distract from intellectual discipline through the three R's. Either way, we end up denying aesthetic consummations to the mainstay of academic work.

The assumption that there is an inherent separation between academic rigor and aesthetic consummations leads to an anesthetizing attitude toward reading, writing, math, and technical skills. "Every subject at some phase of its development should possess, what is for the individual concerned with it, an aesthetic quality" (MW 9: 258). Perpetual bliss in schoolwork is a fantasy, but a richer fulfillment is an ideal worth striving for. Let us achieve together what is possible, Dewey urges, instead of setting out with *unrealistic* and untested assumptions about the inherent stick-and-carrot nature of student motivation.

The fine arts throw into relief the tragedy that so much experience is shallow and narrow, incomplete and underdeveloped. Many experiences are too loosely organized to give expressive form to much of anything – for example, consider the perfunctory way some high school and college students approach essay writing, unguided by sympathy for any ideal more inspiring than word count. The fine arts are "organs of vision" (MW 9: 247) that reveal possibilities beyond the self-absorbed, the trivial, the despondent, or the humdrum.

The fine arts "are the chief agencies of an intensified, enhanced appreciation" (MW 9: 247) and they can be a source of fulfillment that reverberates through life. "They are not luxuries of education, but emphatic expressions of that which makes any education worth while" (MW 9: 247). The fine arts offer a resource, standard, and hopeful reminder that we are not limited to merely passing through. Even amid the troubles, regret, and fretting that subdues so much of life, aesthetic experiences remind us that human experience can grow and be fulfilled.

The Valuation of Studies

Sam Cooke's 1960 classic "Wonderful World" may be the most famous twentieth-century song about academic disciplines: "Don't know much about history / Don't know much biology / ... maybe by being an A student, baby / I can win your love for me."

What is the value of studying history or biology? The question points to a dual sense of the word *value*. Studies may be appreciated as intrinsically worthwhile, or they may be valued as a means to something comparatively

advantageous that is enjoyed for itself.³ Cooke's delightful, love-besotted persona hopes that his studies will help win a lover, so they are taken as *instrumental* goods. His schooling is bathed in the light of a happy possibility that motivates him to subordinate present enjoyments, and his studies have just that much immediate significance. The same logic holds for students pushing themselves to impress a college admissions committee, or studying for a standardized admissions exam. Consider Dewey's advice to educators in that light: "In general what is desirable is that a topic be presented in such a way that it either have an immediate value, and require no justification, or else be perceived to be a means of achieving something of intrinsic value. An instrumental value then has the intrinsic value of being a means to an end" (MW 9: 251).

Some spark of direct interest in history or biology might coincidentally flare. It happens. Cooke's studies would to that extent be appreciated for themselves. This would be a fine thing, but *not* because academic pursuits have some inherent snobbish superiority or aristocratic purity in comparison to consummated love or other affairs of common, practical life. Enjoying the studies for themselves could be doubly good because studies that become the immediate fruit of personal enrichment also become resources for dealing with other life situations. "Never having been realized or appreciated for itself, one will miss something of its capacity as a resource for other ends" (MW 9: 249).

Absent that direct enjoyment, Cooke's academic pursuits are less likely to help when the need by-and-by arises. Human existence is, after all, a scene of instability and risk in which diverse goods compete, and we need to draw from all the intellectual resources we can muster. Cooke's passionate dedication is meaningful, but taking the most expedient straight line to a goal can make us heedless of other opportunities and aims. It is from this wider standpoint, and not from any mismeasure of the inherent worth of Cooke's pursuit, that we might ask whether his lovestruck moral imagination has fallen short of "a warm and intimate taking in of the full scope of a situation" (MW 9: 244). More to the educational point, we need to organize schooling so that students enjoy not only the instrumental anticipation of remote goods, but also gain direct fulfillment while they cultivate forward-looking intelligence. Teach toward fulfillment, so that the subject matter becomes "an end in itself in the lives of students—something worthwhile on account of its own unique intrinsic contribution to the experience of life" (MW 9: 249).

The Segregation and Organization of Values

Schooling is often approached as a series of isolated and artificial tasks to be gotten through on the way to something important. This sacrifice of the

³ At the outset of section 2, Dewey importantly highlights a logical distinction between the prized and praiseworthy, valued and valuable, desired and desirable, appreciated and evaluated. The former word in each pair suggests a felt motive (perhaps intense and vital, perhaps degraded and stultifying), while the latter is a term of reflective judgment (MW 9: 246–7). Something we desire may not bear out as desirable once we forecast the collateral consequences of pursuing it.

present is worsened by pigeon-holed isolation of courses and fields from each other, worst of all the sharp separation of the humanities from professional or occupational pursuits. This leads to flat and fragmented experiences that are too superficial and hollow to meet the holistic aims of a liberal cultural education, which in a democracy is the right of everyone. Academic life is further disintegrated as new courses of study proliferate to meet market demands. Under current conditions, this proliferation drives the wedge even deeper between studies we deem instrumental (often disparaged by humanities faculty) and those we deem intrinsically worthwhile (often regarded as irrelevant luxuries by business faculty). Alas, Dewey writes, “In the multitude of educations education is forgotten” (MW 9: 255).

Dewey is not knocking specialization. Specialization in art, the sciences, politics, religion, business, recreation, etc. is an apt response to demands on time, material resources, and diverse motivating interests. But under prevailing institutional politics the “aim and animating spirit” of academic specialization is not benign (MW 9: 257). As each discipline or profession struggles to gain or retain its rightful piece of the curricular pie, advocates of the humanities may come off as self-interested players struggling to hold onto their old elitist share. Meanwhile, their better-paid colleagues in business programs parrot that “business is business” as “a separate and independent province with its own peculiar aims and ways of proceeding” (MW 9: 256).

Dewey suggests a way beyond this impasse: Infuse the humanities throughout the curriculum while simultaneously bringing all fields and professions into the arena of humane study. We live better *and* serve the public good when our various adult occupations and pursuits are energized by educational institutions that are humane cultures of imagination and growth. Indeed, an educational institution – from K-12 to a university – can reveal in microcosm the refinement that is possible in other cultural institutions (MW 9: 257). Students who get a rich cultural education are of course better prepared for adult responsibilities, but this is a by-product of their growth. Growth – both *my* growth as an individual and *our* growth as free inhabitants of a democratic culture – is Dewey’s chief criterion by which educational success should be judged.⁴

The chapter closes with hard questions regarding “that organization of schools, materials, and methods which will operate to achieve breadth and richness of experience” (MW 9: 257). Dewey asks:

How shall we secure breadth of outlook without sacrificing efficiency of execution? How shall we secure the diversity of interests, without paying the price of isolation? How shall the individual be rendered executive *in* his intelligence instead of at the cost of his intelligence? [. . .]How can the interests of life and the studies which enforce them enrich the common experience of men instead of dividing men from one another? (MW 9: 257)

⁴ In *The Problem of the Liberal Arts College*, Dewey explores the function of the liberal arts college in a democratic society (LW 15).

A philosopher's pen can clarify these momentous questions. But the issues are set and defined by the concrete problems of education, and hypotheses for dealing with them must be tested, settled, and modified in that insistent and hopeful experimental medium.

I began by suggesting that we imagine Dewey weighing in on a common dispute about the mission of schools. Such an everyday conversation is pregnant with implications for pedagogy, educational politics, and educational policy. It would understate the matter to point out that Dewey's response – schools should become cultures of imagination, growth, and fulfillment – has yet to become more than a minor tributary to the educational mainstream.⁵ But a new century for *Democracy and Education* has begun.

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⁵ For further reading on the topics in this chapter see Alexander (2013); Fesmire (2015); and Garrison (2010).