

## **Introduction: *Welcome to Creative Tension between Theory and Practice***

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I am delighted to introduce the first issue of *The Journal of School & Society*, the online journal of the John Dewey Society. Serving as the editor for a new journal, and editing this first issue, has presented some remarkable challenges, and equally remarkable rewards. Aside from overcoming the technical issues involved in creating a website that would function reasonably well for our purposes, I had to find a way to introduce and demonstrate the kinds of conversations we hoped to have. Fortunately, I have been mentored and supported by the members of the Board of the John Dewey Society, and have enjoyed enormous support from members of the wider educational community.

Notably, Walter Gershon was willing to take a flyer on a new journal and contribute his paper on sensual curricula. Walter presented portions of this paper at the inaugural Past President's Symposium at the John Dewey Society meeting in Vancouver, BC in April, 2012, and I immediately asked him if he would consider submitting to us. In this work, he moves beyond the broad and comfortable acceptance of the idea that the aesthetic realm is vital to the whole person, and thus to the learning process, and into a practical exploration of what can happen when we actually implement that idea in the classroom. Along the way, he engages the theoretical realm

with a vengeance, drawing together curriculum theory with sensory studies to propose a model he calls sensual curriculum. Walter and I also wish to extend a special thanks to Bill Doll, who provided extensive and insightful peer review during the development of the paper, and who served as the session respondent for the Symposium.

In yet another example of his extraordinary professional generosity, Gert Biesta agreed to write a response to Walter's article. I asked that he do this in the manner employed at the annual meeting and conference of the Philosophy of Education Society—to engage with Walter's paper in ways that highlight and trouble its contributions, and that open a continuing and dynamic discussion. In accomplishing this, Gert calls upon us to re-open the assumptions from the field of curriculum theory that Walter has adopted as his framework; he proposes that we need to think more deeply about defining and differentiating between learning and education,

One interesting tension that arose for me in working across Walter's and Gert's offerings has been the ways in which their discourses are grounded in subfields with quite different commitments and uses of language—not to mention shared assumptions. My years in my own master's program were spent immersed in cultural studies, and concerns with disciplinary literacy—particularly in my primary field, history. Moving from that into a teacher licensure program for secondary history, I entered the world of practice with something of a jolt; where was the theory, the perspective about what we were doing, and why? Where was any commitment to historical literacy, to imbuing our students with an awareness of the highly selective and idiosyncratic history-making process involved in authoring a textbook? Most of all, where was the larger consciousness about ourselves and the enterprise of public education?

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Pursuing doctoral coursework in curriculum studies while teaching high school full-time, I spent the next four years weaving an unsteady path between the critical understandings I found through my immersion in the scholarship of Freire and Giroux, and the practical demands of remaining employed in a public school classroom. While few of my teaching colleagues were interested in my theoretical grounding, I learned through innumerable discussions in the teachers' lounge that they shared my frustrations. Yes, certainly we were committed to the liberation of our students, to helping them to see behind and to escape or subvert the oppressive mechanisms we knew they encountered. At the same time, when Monday morning came, and on every day thereafter, each of us would see 160 of them across five class periods—and we would be expected to teach our content, to provide support with basic literacy and numeracy skills, and to advise on academic, social, and personal issues. Where was the time and practical support we needed to make change? Was it really so surprising that so many teachers I knew spoke derisively of the Ivory Tower and its denizens' pronouncements about liberatory teaching methods?

Having spent some time in each world, and also participating in a variety of professional communities, I find myself inserting explanations to myself as I read Walter's article and Gert's response: "Ah, yes, Walter is writing for an audience that has, for the moment, reached some consensus on issues surrounding the nature of education and of learning for the context he is addressing, and who are seeking to create a more humane space inside the classroom." And "Ah, Gert is picking up on the strands he began to raise some time ago about the nature of the *bildung*, and in particular is problematizing the ways in which we cast the educational process when we focus upon it as a matter of learning." This is yet another facet—and another challenge—that we face as educational philosophers and

practitioners who seek to work across the theory-practice/praxis gap—a degree of incommensurability or unintelligibility when we leave our familiar subfields and specializations and their shared linguistic codes.

Walter and Gert also invite us to stand in two rather different places to consider the balance we must strike when we attempt to work across theory and practice. On Walter's side, I see the urgency of thinking carefully about the kinds of experiences our children are having in public school classrooms—especially our children from minority and socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds. I, too, am familiar with the kind of disenfranchisement experienced by our children of color: the mind-numbing scripted curricula inflicted upon them, and the desperate need not to lose a generation (or more) as we strip their humanity away. Standing with Gert, I worry that attending to experience at the expense of critique of the larger enterprise will not only fritter away valuable time and energy; it will actually serve to reify the existing order with only very minor cosmetic adjustments.

I found my own path through these tensions in the work of John Dewey—in his embrace of an evolutionary (rather than revolutionary) understanding of human processes, his balance between the critical and the humane, his commitment to an interpretivist and constructivist stance, and in his deep awareness of the rift that two millennia of bifurcation between body and mind, and theory and practice, has wrought. Rather than looking for a neat solution, as I read Dewey I began to appreciate the dynamic balance at work when we seek to explore theory and practice in conversation with one another. In the members of the John Dewey Society, I have encountered others who were willing to cross philosophic boundaries, along with those imposed by a traditional approach to the disciplines. And ultimately, I have found an organization willing to commit to the School & Society Initiative and to this journal—a place

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where we can entertain the discussion. Walter's paper, and Gert's response, call upon us to juggle precisely the dilemma that Dewey saw so clearly: the challenge of keeping those plates

spinning simultaneously, all while hair is on fire in every direction.

Again, we welcome you to the discussion, and hope that you will enjoy taking part as well!