Introduction: Experience and Education in the Information Age

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For John Dewey, experience arises as an upshot when a living creature interacts with its environment. Such an interaction generates a situation, which is not a coming together of two distinct existences; rather, the organism both takes in and reshapes the environment, as in the situation where a dog chews meat from a bone and then digs a hole to bury it. The ‘environment’—the meat—enters into the dog as nutrients, and these eventually remake the dog at the cell level, just as the dog by digging a hole reshapes the environment. Dewey will later call this kind of interaction a transaction.

The specific environment of living creatures is constructed just in the course of their everyday living—acting to solve problems and pursue ends to sustain life and to grow. The environment is what the creature picks out as pertinent to—as means for securing—its life ends. As Dewey noted in his reflex arc article of 1893, perceiving is already trying to get, e.g., as reaching is already present in the coordinated act that includes the seeing of the desired object—as something wanted.[1]

Experience is acting and getting feedback from the environment that reconstructs subsequent action dispositions. As Dewey puts this point in Democracy and Education, creatures are often “more than compensated” for the energy expended in taking action in pursuit of their ends. By dint of feedback from the environment the creatures learn. They reconstruct habits and gains increased powers to achieve ends in subsequent situations—they grow.[2]

When considering humans, language and culture become new dimensions of action situations. Humans, in transacting with their environments, go beyond mere habit reconstruction; they can explicitly take note of the lessons of experience in language, share them with others, write them down and pass them on to their descendants. Institutions—libraries, schools, museums, universities—grow up for the preservation and conveyance of these lessons from experience.

Nonetheless, the foundation of vital understanding lies in the lessons derived directly from first-hand experience of things and processes in everyday life. [3] Human learners have to feel acutely their own needs and drives that motivate their own actions in everyday environments, convert them into ends-in-view, think and plan their way to reaching these ends, suffer the frustrations of failure and delight in the joys of success. The learning that develops from vital first-hand experiences filters into being as what Dewey calls the first of three stages in the development of knowledge.[4]

Human individuals act in social contexts. Even when acting in isolation from others, their behaviors are shaped by cultural norms acquired through initiation into life in their families, neighborhoods, and larger social worlds. Moreover, humans often act in social situations, cooperating with others and being guided by more experienced peers or adults. Communications within the context of action in these social environments add up to a second stage of knowledge.

These two levels of knowledge arise as individuals pursue ends and ‘learn by doing’—that is the natural way to learn. These forms of knowledge are unsystematic, but they are foundational: they shape the substrate for
subsequent learning and knowledge seeking upon which systematic learning of organized subject matters depends for its vital significance. If systematic knowledge—third stage knowledge—is not presented to individuals against the background of their earlier levels of knowledge—as additional powerful means for forming and achieving ends—it becomes merely inert and ornamental.

Developing this third level of knowledge is largely dependent upon schools and teachers. Their function is to move learners beyond foundational knowledge in the direction of adult functional expertise.[5] But there is always the danger that this organized knowledge will be served up in isolation from its history in human problems and inquiries, its uses in achieving human ends, and its connection to learners’ prior learning histories. This kind of knowledge is alien to experience. Learning it is not natural. It requires extraordinary effort, and often leads to boredom and fatigue.

Dewey’s educational project was to break through this ineffective conventional approach to teaching, to naturalize school learning by making it continuous with everyday learning by doing. And the only way to accomplish this, he insists, is to fold pre-organized knowledge into the knowledge stock already built up by learners, in the course of school activities governed by the learners’ own ends.

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Not all school experiences have valuable educational upshots. Some are simply stifling or deadening. Others may be highly stimulating but leave behind no traces that add to learners’ powers in dealing with subsequent problems or achieving ends. They are experiences, nonetheless, but they are not educative. In Experience and Education Dewey offered two criteria for educative school experiences. He called these the principles of interaction and continuity. Here is how Dewey himself expresses these principles. Here is his statement on continuity:

While the principle of continuity applies in some way in every case, the quality of the present experience influences the way in which the principle applies. The effect of over-indulging a child is a continuing one. . . . There is no paradox in the fact that the principle of the continuity of experience may operate so as to leave a person arrested on a low plane of development, in a way, which limits later capacity for growth. . . If an experience arouses curiosity, strengthens initiative, and sets up desires and purposes that are sufficiently intense to carry a person over dead places in the future, continuity works in a very different way. Every experience is a moving force. Its value can be judged only on the ground of what it moves toward and into.[6]

Each experience re-makes to some extent the experience—each experience lives on in the modified habits for good or ill. Here is his statement about interaction:

The word “interaction” expresses the second chief principle for interpreting an experience in its educational function and force. It assigns equal rights to both factors in experience—objective and internal conditions. Any normal experience is an interplay of these two sets of conditions. Taken together, or in their interaction, they form what we call a situation. The trouble with traditional education was not that it emphasized the external conditions that enter into the control of the experiences but that it paid so little attention to the internal factors which also decide what kind of experience is had.[7]
Interaction here signifies the living interaction of individuals with their worlds in their life situations. If the materials of the school world are meaningless to learners, if they do not bring them out of themselves, so to speak, into lively attention and action, they are dead zones, educationally speaking.

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These principles are highly abstract. They do not provide recipes for establishing learning environments, but rather constraints against mis-educative experience. If the environments do not conduce to lively engagement, including the formation of learners’ own aims, they fail to meet the criterion of interaction. If the actions they bring out in learners do not conduce to lessons that increase learner power in subsequent situations, they fail the test of continuity.

The actual means for creating educative situations change as new information and communications technologies emerge. Today the dominant new technologies in society and the schools are computers and the Internet. These new technologies profoundly reshape the behaviors and communication patterns of new cohorts of learners, which are referred to as the ‘net generation’. They also enter into classrooms as new elements of the learning environment. The educational situation has thus changed in profound ways in just a couple of decades. Meanwhile, our arrangements for learning have not been reconstructed. The new technologies have been brought into our classrooms as add-ons, without deep reflection on their radical significance for learning. We continue to put new wine in old bottles.[8]

That observation brings us to the papers in this symposium. The three papers each take up the new educational situation created by the new technologies and their new social and economic contexts. The papers address the new situation of the elementary school, college, and preservice teacher education.

Elinor A. Schierer considers the impact of new computer software curriculum packages used to convey subject matter knowledge in accordance with state and national standards. One problem is that they rely on computer mediated objects—instead of acting and undergoing in real worlds of experience, learners are manipulating simulations. She notes that these objects (e.g., animated characters in learning software programs) can engage students, but may not conduce to the kind of learning that adds to learners’ powers in their life situations: they may fail the test of continuity. She offers today’s elementary teachers and curriculum designers a set of design criteria—derived from Dewey’s two principles—that can help them avoid this problem as they employ software packages in their educational designs. These principles can readily be adjusted to apply to the use of educational software at all educational levels.

Matt Ryg and Eli Orner Kramer open by considering the new social and economic context for college students and adult learners. In a global economy shaped by neoliberal economic principles, industrial robots and offshore workers replace domestic workers, while contingent labor replaces full time jobs with benefits. College tuitions rise at more than the rate of inflation, while wages stagnate or fall.

In this new situation the investment in four-year residential college degree programs may no longer make sense. Ryg and Kramer correctly recognize that these programs are themselves technologies, and question whether they are appropriate educational technologies for our society going forward. They explore the technological appropriateness of an alternative technology, low-residence college programs, where short periods of on-campus education are supplemented by distance education and project-based learning for transfer credit.

Finally, Mark Keitges addresses the problem of fragmentary knowledge acquired
from web sites and online courses—knowledge acquired outside of a well-structured and coherent educational or training program. Like Schierer, Keitges is concerned that today’s students—even graduate and professional students—lack adequate foundational knowledge acquired through direct engagement with people, things and natural processes. Their minds are filled with unintegrated chunks of third-level school knowledge. They are not habituated to enter environments primed to form personal goals and pursue them with all the means available in the situation. They think of learning as something served up in predetermined curricula, not as the natural outcome of ends-directed behavior. As a result, today’s preservice teachers are unable to design learning experiences where their students form and pursue their own ends, or to facilitate learning in such situations.

Keitges sees this as a serious obstacle in preparing today’s preservice teacher trainees as effective teachers. He focuses on the example of the contemporary educational standard of preparing learners to have a ‘global perspective’. Preservice teachers enter their programs expecting to learn how to apply existing methods and materials. They rarely have overseas travel experiences, foreign language proficiency, or cultural understanding based on direct experience, on the basis of which to build up a global perspective in their students.

Keitges proposes that a case method in teacher education can address this problem. Well-developed cases, he says, can mirror the complexity of the real world situations they model, and allow for learning in messy, unstructured problem situations. Learning from case examples, also provides many opportunities to acquire more organized knowledge and put it to use in solving the problems built into the case activities. In this way, when preservice teachers learn from cases, they build up their own foundational knowledge and learn how to integrate it with level three knowledge. Keitges provides several examples of learning from cases, including a case investigating human rights violations where students follow the legal record, interview victims, and prepare reports proposing ameliorative measures.

Employing the case method in preservice teacher education has a double benefit. On the one hand, the preservice students in courses using the case method are learning by doing—approaching real world situations, communicating with affected individuals and peers, forming goals, thinking about means and working out plans, acting and getting feedback about what works, and reporting on their deliberations and conclusions. On the other hand, they confront problems requiring them to seek organized, level three, knowledge. The case studies thus supply the experiential substrate for their design of cases for use with their own school students. The case method bootstraps the missing foundational knowledge, and demonstrates how organized, level three, knowledge works as a powerful additional means in addressing problems and achieving ends.

The contributions to this symposium show how the principles of educative experience in Experience and Education can be applied to design learning experiences for today’s students—at all educational levels. School and Society welcomes both informal responses to these contributions and further article-length submissions on the design of educative experiences in the school and colleges of our contemporary technological society.

References

[2] The passage in Democracy and Education is worth quoting in full: “As long as it is growing, the energy it expends in thus turning the environment to account is more than
The return it gets: it grows.

A living being is one that subjugates and controls for its own continued activity the energies that would otherwise use it up. Life is a self-renewing process through action upon the environment.” MW 9: 5.

Dewey is practically rhapsodic as he describes the foundational value of direct experience in everyday life in School and Society, and is worth quoting at length: “No number of object-lessons, got up as object-lessons for the sake of giving information, can afford even the shadow of a substitute for acquaintance with the plants and animals of the farm and garden acquired through actual living among them and caring for them. No training of sense-organs in school, introduced for the sake of training, can begin to compete with the alertness and fullness of sense-life that comes through daily intimacy and interest in familiar occupations. Verbal memory can be trained in committing tasks, a certain discipline of the reasoning powers can be acquired through lessons in science and mathematics; but, after all, this is somewhat remote and shadowy compared with the training of attention and of judgment that is acquired in having to do things with a real motive behind and a real outcome ahead.” MW 1: 9.

“It is possible, without doing violence to the facts, to mark off three fairly typical stages in the growth of subject matter in the experience of the learner. In its first estate, knowledge exists as the content of intelligent ability—power to do. This kind of subject matter, or known material, is expressed in familiarity or acquaintance with things. Then this material gradually is surcharged and deepened through communicated knowledge or information. Finally, it is enlarged and worked over into rationally or logically organized material—that of the one who, relatively speaking, is expert in the subject.” MW 9: 193.

Dewey puts this point starkly: “The problem of teaching is to keep the experience of the student moving in the direction of what the expert already knows.” MW 9: 193.


LW 13: 25

I have taken up this problem in Waks, L., Experience and (Computer Assisted) Education, Educational Theory 51, 4, 2001, 415-32; and in Waks, L. Education 2.0: The Learningweb Revolution and the Transformation of the School (Paradigm, 2013)
Expanding Global Learning through Case Experiences: Technological Ruminations on Dewey’s Experience and Education

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Global Experience in Teacher Education

It is a familiar and generally accepted progressive educational thought that whenever we have learned something, whether it be an explicit fact or a more implicit skill, it can be presumed that an experience, in some way, informed our learning of it. The thing learned is often inextricably linked with the experience that led to it. The experience may have been tense or relaxing, exciting or lulling, insightful or cathartic – or it may have been all of these things and more. The experience may have occurred nearly concurrently with what was learned or it may have occurred many years in the past and we are only now coming to feel its reverberations and find some meaning in it. On closer inspection, an experience may have even been not actually our own, but that of someone close to us, in our family perhaps, or that of a stranger we feel a particular connection to without knowing why, and because of a close emotional or psychological identification with that person, at that moment, we adopt their experience as our own and believe it to be so.

All of these interconnected reflections on experience and its relation to lifelong and lifewide learning, to education in its broadest sense, are relevant when considering a more specific practice I address in this essay: global learning in preservice teacher education. For future teachers, the development of a global perspective is often described as a necessary condition for teaching and relating to globally diverse students in public school classrooms (Malewski, et al., 2012; Devillar & Jiang, 2012; Dunn, et al., 2014). Because so many educational administrators and idealistic program designers make similar claims for a global perspective, and because no singular definition of “global perspective” exists, there is very little agreement about what it might constitute. Moreover, the development of some abstract “global perspective” tends to neglect a necessary relation to an individual’s lived experience, a consequence which Dewey would likely have found unacceptable about current higher education priorities to increase “global experiences” abroad (see Gaudelli & Laverty, 2015 for a critique of this neglect).

I would like to suggest (uncontroversially, I think) that a robust global education encompasses knowledge from (at least) the political, ethical, socio-historical, economic and aesthetic domains. Following a Deweyan interpretation of these issues, knowledge from these different domains shares a fundamental connection to experience: on the one hand, to the experience of the “producer” or inquirer that leads to the knowledge, and on the other, to the experience of the “receiver” or learner that takes up this knowledge and applies it to his or her own life. From this it may be seen that the more rich, personally engaged, and prolonged the experiences leading to knowledge for future teachers, the more relevant and useful this knowledge will be when enacting their own pedagogy as practicing teachers.
Yet given that all knowledge today must be technologically mediated – e.g., produced, circulated, recirculated, and reshaped via the Internet for a global audience – knowledge often arrives to us as static, disembodied, univocal, its ostensive meaning stamped on its face while its original basis in experience is obscured. Because of this the global knowledge landscape presents an inaccurate (or at best incomplete) picture of how knowledge comes to be. On the surface, this is not necessarily a problem if what we are looking for is easily reproducible, recirculable knowledge with no experiential background to get in the way. We may want “exactly what we need to know” about a recent economic policy, natural disaster, or act of political violence, for instance, to add to our knowledge stockpile. However, this is a problem when faced with the challenges of educating students to develop a deeper global perspective that goes beyond “just the facts.” Preservice teachers, who are particularly attentive to the process of how knowledge is constructed, must be shown how to inquire into the roots of, rather than simply appropriate, decontextualized, recirculated knowledge from the global knowledge landscape. This necessitates a prolonged engagement with personally informed, specially designed, inquiry-based projects where they can be both reflective producers and receivers of knowledge.

While preservice teachers bring many richly educative experiences to the classroom, they must learn how to transform those experiences into learning resources for their students. To achieve this, global learning in preservice teacher education must include appropriate modeling for future teachers to learn how to inquire into the experiential and normative background of knowledge they are developing and connect it to the present and future learning of their students. I will argue for the important role of technologically mediated, experientially informed, case studies or examples (which may include narratives, films, videos, historical documents, conference proceedings, or extended student projects) that, when adequately performed, provide appropriate models of knowledge complexity for preservice teachers’ development of global perspectives in their learning and application to pedagogical issues. Case examples, whether already existent or constructed by teachers and learners for the classroom, enable preservice teachers to both reinterpret a particular experience of learning and the conditions that led to it, while at the same time, undergo a new experience in the creation and adjudication of the case example.

**John Dewey on the Experience of Teachers**

One may define Dewey’s central problematic in *Experience and Education* as how to capture the living, breathing past in all its collective knowledge for present generations to integrate into future experiences. Dewey’s question could not be more universal in importance: “How shall the young become acquainted with the past in such a way that the acquaintance is a potent agent in appreciation of the living present?” (Dewey, 1938/1998, p.11). In attempting to answer this question in the “language” of technologically mediated communication, we first turn to how Dewey describes the notion of experience in *Experience and Education*. Dewey appears to give no clear-cut definition of experience in this work. Instead, he describes two basic principles of experience – continuity and interaction – and immediately relates experience to the maximization of its educative potential. As Philip Jackson notes, Dewey’s task here is informed by two “sweeping generalizations”:

By examining human experience at the highest level of abstraction possible, asking how it works in general, we should be able to identify a set of traits
or characteristics that hold true of all experience, everywhere and possibly for all time. … Our understanding of those generic traits of experience can provide guidelines of a sort for the conduct of all forms of endeavor, including, of course, educational practice. (1998, pp. 139-40)

For Dewey, the basic principles of continuity and interaction characterize every experience, educational or otherwise. Continuity refers to how “every experience both takes up something from those [experiences] which have gone before and modifies in some way the quality of those which come after” (Dewey, 1938/1998, p. 27). On the other hand, interaction refers to how “an experience is always what it is because of a transaction taking place between an individual and what, at the time, constitutes his environment” (Dewey, 1938/1998, p. 41). Dewey takes it as a given that individuals experience their objective, changing environments (he also calls them “situations”) all the way down, to the biological level. Individuals’ internal and external capacities develop in concert over time. The capacity for freedom through self-control, for instance, is a capacity that develops through an educational focus upon reasoned inquiry and judgment in environments where prolonged social commerce with others demands an expression of one’s uniqueness.

Experience secures an endless supply of educational resources and problems. From the perspective of the educator who Dewey is addressing, teaching through experience, and designing an educational program around experience, necessitates reflecting upon one’s own experience in addition to the experiences of one’s students and finding connections between them. While the “central problem” of this approach to education is “to select the kind of present experiences that live fruitfully and creatively in subsequent experiences” (Dewey, 1938/1998, p. 17), solving this problem becomes challenging if an educator’s experience so differs from those of her (at times very young) students. According to Dewey, an adult educator should possess “greater maturity of experience [that] puts him in a position to evaluate each experience of the young in a way which the one having the less mature experience cannot do” (Dewey, 1938/1998, pp. 31-32). Dewey seems to define adulthood, in an educationally relevant sense, as possessing wisdom, foresight and judgment. For preservice teachers, this may be too much to expect. But a closer look reveals that Dewey intends this advice to refer to an ability to remain alert and adaptive to the present teaching moment, and not to years of experience. In his words,

…it is [the educator’s] business to be on the alert to see what attitudes and habitual tendencies are being created. … [He must] be able to judge what attitudes are actually conducive to growth and what are detrimental. He must, in addition, have the sympathetic understanding of individuals as individuals which gives him an idea of what is actually going on in the minds of those who are learning. (Dewey, 1938/1998, p. 33)

Educators not only teach, but they design educational experiences. Dewey assumes that the educator, at least for the “new” education, does both. Considering that knowledge only becomes operative in learning and behavior if we have sufficiently experienced it, what do we do in the case where educators, as students, have never experienced anything approaching a progressive education? For example, preservice teachers today, by virtue of experiencing education as preparation for standardized tests, may have little to no experience of Socratic, inquiry-based teaching and curricular methods that are propounded in education colleges of a progressive bent. Their experience is not, in this sense, significantly more mature than their
future learners. If they are to understand the importance of inquiry for teaching and learning, which I believe they should, they need to be afforded opportunities to experience inquiry in their programs. If they do not, we cannot blame them for not seeing its value for practice.

The Significance of Case Examples for Global Living

We are now able to articulate some further questions about global learning in preservice teacher education through this Deweyan lens: How can the preservice teacher gain the experience of global perspectives as well as develop her own? How does the educator design the environment for her students to develop said perspectives? How does one go about interpreting one’s own experience and connecting it with others? How can the experiential conditions of knowledge be maintained in the global knowledge landscape? These are complicated questions and no one universal answer would adequately apply to every individual practice and institution dealing with global learning. I believe, however, that Dewey points us in the right direction with his flexible conception of experience and his open-ended, “try it out” advice to practitioners. One way of addressing these questions is to consider them from the perspective of design: what objective thing, albeit recirculable as technologically mediated communication, can we design that would embody the internal capacities and dispositions we want students to develop? For one thing, we can design experientially informed case examples. Such case examples must create the conditions for “global experience” to occur.

The most fundamental characteristic of a successful case is that it accurately mirrors the complexity of whichever experience(s) on which it is modeled. By this I mean that all appropriate domain knowledge for understanding and appreciating the case must be accounted for within it. This does not mean this knowledge is always (or usually) explicit; it is often completely up to the case recipient to interpret the case in light of his/her own experiences. Furthermore, the “complexity” of the case must invite the unplanned, messy, and contingent, “allowing for spontaneous activities, events and encounters” (Gaudelli & Laverty, 2015, p. 8). These cases must not be understood as performing a propaedeutic function of preparing future teachers with the requisite facts and units of knowledge for teaching in a globally oriented manner. Rather, they cultivate appropriate dispositions for approaching new experiences in a more reflective, inquisitive manner. For this reason, they often work very well when paired with globally-themed teacher education programs that incorporate both “traditional” overviews of course methods as well as more progressive studies of international education systems and current events, for instance. Case examples can help preservice teachers realize the experiential continuum between global processes and the local needs of teaching.

For example, Iranian filmmaker Abbas Kiarostami’s 1989 modernist documentary film, Homework – which unlike many Hollywood documentaries has no “expert” narration of what to notice – queries schoolchildren about how they feel about their homework (Zarrin & Kiarostami, 1989). Through their responses, and those of their parents, teachers, and educational officials, a whole educational system’s reliance on authoritarian values is effortlessly laid bare. Case examples such as Homework invite no facile judgments of the unenlightened “Other.” They are successful because they are constructed in such a way as to invite diverse interpretations, personal reflection, and creative appropriation.

This leads us to another important characteristic of a successful case example: it must be able to function on multiple levels, to diverse audiences in terms of age and experience level. In organizing subject matter
anything which can be called a study … must be derived from materials which at the outset fall within the scope of ordinary life-experience. … The next step is the progressive development of what is already experienced into a fuller and richer and also more organized form, a form that gradually approximates that in which subject-matter is presented to the skilled, mature person. (1938/1998, p. 86-7)

The virtue of case examples is that they can maintain a consistent vision while still being able to be understood at different levels for different people. For example, the Brandeis Institute for International Judges puts out a series of publications that function effectively as conference proceedings, documenting the philosophical and practical discussions of international judges about various issues. The most recent, entitled “The International Rule of Law in a Human Rights Era” (BIIJ, 2013) follows the basic template of trying to evoke the excitement of actual discussion and debate, the changeability of ideas, and capturing private thoughts as they become public, collective knowledge. What this case example affords the student is a presentation of fundamental issues in human rights education as they are fleshed out theoretically and through various current examples of international human rights issues currently being adjudicated. This case exemplifies Dewey’s experimental method in education, which involves “keeping track … of reflective review and summarizing, in which there is both discrimination and record of the significant features of a developing experience” (1938/1998, p. 109). On another level, it is a lively conversation at a specific time and place, and these details are noted in the wider narrative. According to Daniel Terris, Director of the International Center for Ethics, Justice, and Public Life at Brandeis University, the purpose of these case examples is to “reinvent knowledge” as a “continuous, sustaining, recirculating network of knowledge” that is publicly accessible (Terris, 2013). An in-depth understanding of human rights issues on a global scale, and an awareness of how these issues are related to local classrooms, can significantly enrich the global perspective of preservice teachers.

The case examples I have mentioned so far are already existent; one needs merely to search for them and deploy them in the proper setting, with proper curricular support. However, case examples are often more meaningful and experientially informed when they are produced by the learners themselves. Existent case examples provide good models for how preservice teachers might approach designing their own cases that present issues pertinent to global learning, like for instance, filming documentary videos or writing their own “white papers” recording their groups’ thinking on an issue. Furthermore, a preservice instructor, who has led preservice teachers through a series of existent cases, might then ask students to construct (perhaps in small groups) a case for class discussion drawn from their current classroom placements. These cases would allow the class of preservice teachers the opportunity to examine global issues directly relevant to the time and place with which they are most familiar – the local school systems at which they are placed. The act of devising these case examples, as well as discussing them with peers, would certainly lead to worthwhile learning experiences of “positive freedom [as a] power to frame purposes, to judge wisely, to evaluate desires by the consequences which will result from acting upon them” (Dewey, 1938/1998, p. 75).

In an example intimately familiar to the author, an elementary teacher education social studies methods course, which had adopted a “global perspectives” theme, engaged preservice teachers in a series of “inquiry-
based” projects that necessitated online and in situ research on school-based topics. One of them, a “Community Inquiry,” required students to “get to know as much as possible about the communities which your [placement] schools serve and to which your students belong, so that this can inform your teaching” (Parsons, 2014). Over the course of 8 weeks, preservice teachers, grouped according to similar school placements, designed and carried out a battery of investigative research activities including reading extant literature about the community from multiple perspectives, walking around the community and noting observations, collecting artifacts for inspection, surveying and interviewing community members, and so forth. Students were assessed on how robustly they presented (the final form itself was open to creative interpretation) an understanding of the assets, needs, socio-political issues of the community, utilized existing data to make recommendations, and connected findings with their teaching practice. Most importantly, from a Deweyan perspective, these multi-tiered, case-based experiences forced students to become actively engaged with the experiential foundations of their knowledge making, adjudicate provisional findings with their group members, and witness the community as a living, breathing, evolving organism rather than as a collection of easily digestible facts, statistics, or truisms that close down thinking.

Conclusion

In these ways, future teachers begin to develop what Dewey called a “duty” or “responsibility” to determine students’ environments in productive, future-directed ways (Dewey, 1938, p. 44). For one thing, this provides an obvious benefit to teacher educators, allowing them to see their students actively “documenting” their own learning in a more authentic way than standardized assessments tend to measure. More importantly, preservice teachers are afforded opportunities to develop their abilities as knowledge producers, making the most of their wider experience and finding creative ways to convey their knowledge to future students.

Educators must first define what worthwhile experience they are striving to convey; next, they create a case example that embodies the conditions of that worthwhile experience for learners engaging with the case. The key, of course, is designing the environment in a way that promotes freedom and does not denote coercive control or the directing of students’ purposes for them. Preservice teachers can cultivate their sense of duty by creating case examples that showcase their maturity of experience and their openness to multiple points of view on global issues that are faced by all learners, themselves included. Opening up their uniquely designed case examples to democratic adjudication is central to their duty as future educators.

References


Criteria for Educative Experiences within the Technologically Mediated Elementary Classroom

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As Dewey noted in the Preface to Experience and Education (1938), challenges in the practice of education require us to identify the underlying problems that exist and then to consider the issues more “deep[ly] and more inclusive[ly]” (p. 5) so that we may proceed more “intelligently” (p. 5). Such examination is indeed intellectually challenging and, hence, often leads to a return to past, familiar practices without resolving the problems. Further, the daily demands faced by teachers and the current pressures to produce high student scores on high-stakes tests, especially at the elementary level, make it difficult for teachers to reflect on how the classroom tools that they use influence children’s learning. This essay is an attempt to help teachers consider how tools and their use in technological processes influence learning in both educative and mis-educative ways so that they might more carefully develop educative experiences that use technologies to enrich learning.

Today’s challenges of incorporating new technologies into the educational life of classrooms point to a fundamental problem regarding the role of experience in learning. In particular, efforts to respond to a myriad of reform initiatives have led to an instructional focus on identifying and prescribing activities—often mediated by curriculum software packages—that are presumed to lead to increased student learning. However, as Zais (1976) noted in his acknowledgement of Dewey’s concept of an educational experience, instructional activities or “learning activities” are not necessarily educational or learning experiences. Activities, as such, embody intentions for learning; in contrast, experiences can be the result of engagement in activities that may lead to learning. Therefore, not examined deeply, the use of such activities and their accompanying classroom practices may undermine the role of learning experiences and, in the process, may run the risk of diverting children from the constructivist goals that accompany experience-based learning because they may lead to experiences that are only “immediately enjoyable, . . . agreeable, . . . [or] exciting” (Dewey, 1938, p. 26). In addition, these technologies may be used as a substitute for the direct experience that leads to deep learning.

This essay focuses primarily on the challenges inherent in the use of the new technologies in elementary education as they enhance, inhibit, or undermine constructivist learning. That is, it recognizes that the use of these new technologies—similar to the use of any “experience” in education—has the potential to be educative, mis-educative (Dewey, 1938, p. 25), or simply non-educative. This focus on elementary education recognizes the need, particularly at that level, for an “experience base” to learning in order to move intellectual development from the concrete to the abstract. According to Piagetian theory, the need for first-hand experience is necessary for cognitive development to move forward to subsequent stages where more abstract thinking can occur. Thus, deep consideration of the nature of educative experiences in the early years of schooling is essential if we are to nurture children’s learning. And, such analysis also requires that we examine how we use...
technologies in classroom practices, why we use them, and what takes place during their use and as a result of their use.

Technologies have, of course, been a central part of human activity for millennia when considered as “the application of scientific, material and human resources to the solution of human needs” (Williams & Jinks, 1985, p. 50). The invention of tools and the development of ways to use those tools have created key technologies used in teaching so as to promote learning. For example, ways of communicating have changed in educational settings as humans have invented new ways to record our thinking, to access others’ thinking, and to share what we know. The focus in this essay on what I term the new technologies includes those developed in the last three decades which, through substantial economic investment, have made their way into so many classrooms, specifically various forms of computer-based hardware and the computer-mediated software applications that accompany them. The unquestioned acceptance and use of these technologies and their increasingly ubiquitous presence in classrooms demand analysis of how they affect the fundamental role of experience in learning.

These technologies have changed the nature of how children interact with the world. Without leaving the classroom environment or even moving from a desk chair, these technologies allow children to access information from many databases and to navigate to many websites. What is challenging about such access is how to determine the quality of the information collected and how to connect such information to the learning process, especially when learning is conceived as based in experience, as Dewey (1938) argued. His premise of a “theory of experience” (p. 25) as underlying both the “means and goal of education” (p. 89) calls into question whether such access counts as experience and whether such experience is educative.

**Experience in the Learning Environment**

Central to this line of thinking is the concept of experience itself and how experience contributes to meaningful learning. For Dewey (1938), experience must promote growth—expansion of one’s intellectual understanding of the world. Agreeableness, pleasure, efficiency, convenience, or easing of one’s effort are not characteristics to justify the use of such technologies in the learning environment as “experiences.”[1] In such cases, they become tools for the management of that environment and not tools that can contribute to educative ends. Hence, the use of the new technologies must enrich thinking and thus expand understanding to be educative.

Of use in grasping how experiences in schools differ from each other and yet comprise the array of what educators may term educational experiences is Edgar Dale’s “Cone of Experience” (1954, p. 43). First published in 1946, Dale’s text described the role of audio-visual tools as they influenced practice in the learning environment, their relationship to the empirical world, and their appropriate use in classrooms. His depiction of the various experiences found in schools places “direct, purposeful experiences” at the broad base of a cone that serves as the foundation for all other experiences. For Dale, these first-hand experiences were “the bedrock of all education” (p. 42), indeed similar to what Dewey (1938) called “the actual life-experience of . . . [an] individual” (p. 89). Without such a foundation, other experiences higher in the Cone, such as demonstrations, exhibits, motion pictures, visual symbols, and verbal symbols, increasingly risked premature abstraction, detachment of the child from meaningful learning, and thus the possibility of the mindlessness of rote learning. Further, the experiences higher in the Cone—mediated by the use of various tools and technologies—
become more and more distant from the first-hand experiences central to all learning. Ignoring these differences in experiences depicted in the Cone overlooks both principles from learning theory and Dewey’s concern for how continuity in experience (p. 35), and ultimately significant learning, can be fostered. Thus, the key is to use these first-hand experiences as starting points for learning which lead to other experiences that remain connected to educative ends.

Another example of how to examine the nature of experience as it can be differentiated in actual classroom life is grounded in the analysis of data from long-term, ethnographic research in an elementary school in England. This analysis depicted multiple forms of children’s experience occurring over time in the course of studying complex topics involving the integration of several content areas in the curriculum (Hunter & Scheirer, 1988). Similar to Dale’s Cone of Experience, sequences in the “experiential learning process” (p. 40) began with the teacher engaging children in a rich, first-hand experience designed to arouse curiosity, to encourage the development of questions to be pursued later, and to provide perspective and data to inform later in-depth investigation into topics embedded in the original experience. For example, here the children interacted fully with an authentic natural environment, the northeast English seaside. They were able to observe animals and plants, the location and history of the nearby village, and the everyday lives of the local people. From such careful observation, they recorded field notes and posed questions to pursue upon returning to the classroom when they gathered more information and carried out in-depth investigation of embedded topics.

The early first-hand experiences not only piqued children’s interests but also provided the context from which they were able to articulate meaningful questions for further investigations which were connected to the empirical world. Although this sequence led from a first-hand experience to experiences that were more abstract as children pursued their questions, all of these experiences were grounded in authentic everyday life and thus retained the characteristics of meaningful, educative experience. Further, this deliberate sequence in learning reflected Dewey’s notion of the continuity of experience that expands and enriches children’s understanding and leads to children’s growth toward desirable educational goals.

Criteria for Classroom Experiences with New Technologies

For the classroom teacher engaged in the demanding, day-to-day life of schools, the development of educative experiences for children can be both time-consuming and daunting. Identification of criteria to guide such efforts might facilitate careful and deliberate use of experiences that are more likely to be educative. In addition, such criteria must offer guidance regarding the appropriate use of new technologies as they intersect with the demands for educative experiences, especially given the sociological and political pressures to incorporate technological tools into as many parts of the curriculum as possible—ostensibly to prepare children for participation later in the 21st Century global economy. The challenge, of course, is to assure that current experiences are educative and that they lead to subsequent meaningful learning.

Establishing criteria to guide practice is one way of clarifying how the goals we hold can be implemented appropriately. If these criteria are carefully honed, they reflect our values—both with regard to educational goals, the ends of education, and with regard to the ways in which we wish to seek them when we work with children, that is, the means of education. Although it may be desirable to provide
teachers in the high-pressured elementary classroom a detailed set of criteria to guide practice, the following criteria are only a prolegomenon so as to invite further deliberation with fellow educators.

This guide for the development of educative experiences using the new technologies seeks to differentiate educative experiences from learning activities, that is, to consider not only the intentions for the work offered to children but the consequences in actual experience that result from those intentions. Indeed, the list of criteria which follows builds on Dewey’s criteria for educative experiences and the discussion thus far in this essay.

1. The learning experience using the new technologies relates clearly to authentic, direct, first-hand experience that is foundational to the learning sequence and that leads to worthy educational goals. The centrality of such experience in the empirical world as a requirement for learning recognizes both developmental learning processes and learning conceptualized as an effort to make meaning of the empirical world. Indeed, this emphasis on the fundamental connection between experience and learning parallels a central tenet of Dewey’s concept of the scientific method in education (1938).

2. The learning experience using the new technologies connects both to previous learning experiences and to learning experiences that will follow. Such connections make more likely Dewey’s notion of a continuity of experience (1938) in the learning process and might enable children to understand and value that continuity and appreciate the interconnections within their own learning.

3. The learning experience using the new technologies contributes credible information or data that enrich, extend, and contextualize what has been encountered in the direct first-hand experience. Children can thus take advantage of access to information or data not otherwise available in order to enhance the meaning of the first-hand experience. Such new data or information both broaden what has already been documented during a first-hand experience and demand further thinking to synthesize understanding.

4. The learning experience using the new technologies demands rigorous thought from children. These technologies provide children with data or information to encourage thought rather than serving as a substitute for their need to make sense of the empirical world. Indeed, children must interact and engage with the data or information provided by the technologies in order to analyze how the latter relates to what has already been examined and tentatively understood.

5. The learning experience using the new technologies sensitizes children to options for communicating what has been learned to others and to the strengths and weaknesses of those options. Clearly, the new technologies offer many graphic presentational formats and video formats for sharing what we know with others. However, what is most relevant to experience in learning is the decision-making process regarding how to communicate with an audience and how to appropriately shape what one has learned for others to understand. In this endeavor, the essential human desire to communicate remains at the center of children’s attention, with the new tools and technologies as facilitators of that process.
6. The learning experience using the new technologies leads to new opportunities for investigation that were not previously seen. In this sense, the new technologies may open up opportunities for subsequent learning that extend beyond the immediate focus of children’s work. The children thus realize that learning involves “cyclic processes” (Whitehead, 1929, p. 30), here encountering new and exciting interests and foci for learning built upon previous interests which have been studied rigorously. Concomitantly, children can reflect and become mindful regarding their own learning processes—what Noddings and Enright (1983) described as a “transcendent” (p. 187), holistic experience beyond the immediate moment—and, thus, conceive of themselves as learners.

7. The learning experience using the new technologies fosters independence rather than dependence in learning. The convenience, ease of use, and availability of a myriad of technological resources risk the development of “dispersive, disintegrated, centrifugal habits” (Dewey, 1938, p. 26) and challenge the educational goals of rigorous analysis, independence of thought, and reflection on one’s own learning. They challenge the development of children’s own agency with regard to the learning process. Indeed, these goals are intimately connected to the purposes for education in a democracy. Therefore, the use of the new technologies must not only provide children with support in their learning processes but also actively encourage them to become confident, independent learners who use technologies for their own educational purposes.

Teachers’ use of these criteria while they shape teaching practices and learning experiences that incorporate technologies is a demanding process, due not only to the complexities of classroom life but also to the sociopolitical context of teachers’ work with children. Indeed, a difficult road lies ahead to fully conceive a theory of experience in learning that incorporates the new technologies in ways that are educative for the learner and that contribute to increased understanding of our lives in a democratic society. It is a task that requires much collegial discussion, attention to intellectual rigor, and deliberate development of experiences toward worthy educational goals. Perhaps this discussion may contribute to those efforts.

Notes

[1] An example of a particularly problematic use of the new technologies as an experience is the “virtual fieldtrip,” an alternative to children being present in an actual environment via the use of video-clips, Skype interviewing, and the collection of information from websites and databases. Although this approach saves money and time and avoids the legal concerns for safety during the traditional field trip, the educative value of such an “experience” is questionable.

[2] See, for example, the rigorous and extensive set of primary and secondary “principles” (p. 14) for the development, implementation, and evaluation of instructional activities offered by Brophy and Alleman (1991). This framework reflected extensive research on actual classroom activities and student responses to those activities in pursuing instructional goals. The principles they presented focused on differentiation among instructional activities, even though they acknowledged that criteria for curriculum content are also important to curriculum development processes.
References


Reconstructing Dewey, Techne, and Educational Experience in the University

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Introduction

The 21st century has brought unforeseeable changes and challenges to higher education in the United States. In response to global capitalist expansion, a series “technocratic innovations” have been developed within and among institutions of higher education, which include, and are not limited to models of living-learning communities and limited-residency learning. In this paper we support a Deweyan philosophy of education that offers critical insight to theorists and practitioners who are striving to develop and deploy technocratic innovations that respond to some of the major changes in higher education. These problems include and are not limited to the increasing achievement gap, widening income inequality, the exponential growth in costs for residential programs, and the diversification of needs required by more mature students.

Second, we address what Dewey called “the central problem of an education based upon experience,” namely, “to select the kind of present experiences that live fruitfully and creatively in subsequent experiences.”[2] To offer constructive exemplars in innovative education, we critically address and examine (1) the experiential living-learning communities developed in Philosophy 4326/5326 – Lives Worth Living: Questions of Self, Vocation, and Community at the University of Minnesota, Twin Cities,[3] and (2) the use of limited-residency technology at Prescott College.[4] Both of these examples, we argue, are programmatic developments of techne-appropriate experiential learning that dissolve lingering dualisms in higher education today.

We use these programs to draw experimental and practical lessons. Living-learning communities need not merely add on to an already overburdened core curriculum. Rather, viewed from the perspective of techne-propriety, they are a way to foster intentional spaces that relate to the interests and life experience of students, faculty, the community in which they are surrounded, and to the community which they co-create. Limited-residency learning is not only techne-appropriate but also fills gaps in quality educative experiences for certain mature college students develop this theory in light of some problems in higher education. We do this to update and extend Dewey’s discussion of the quality of his theory in EE, as well as to argue that living-learning communities and limited-residency learning, when crafted and oriented well, are appropriate technocratic innovations that respond to some of the major changes in higher education. These problems include and are not limited to the increasing achievement gap, widening income inequality, the exponential growth in costs for residential programs, and the diversification of needs required by more mature students.
who need ways to complete their learning projects independent of the geographic space of the traditional, on-site, residential campus. As the reader can begin to see, an effect of this project is the beginning of an updated and contemporary theory of experience for the purposes of reconstructing and resolving some of the problems and paradigmatic insufficiencies in our technologically-sophisticated, capitalistically reductive, and increasingly complex world.

**Toward an Updated Theory of Experience**

Although Dewey’s theory of experience is as helpful today as it was nearly a century ago (when he first articulated it), it needs further elaboration in light of present circumstances. There is perhaps no place to better study these shifts in culture than in higher education today. On the whole, it is no secret that higher education in the United States is in the midst of immense transitional conflict.[5] The growth of digital technologies over the last decade has been unprecedented; it has changed the shape of knowledge dissemination via the university, as well as the shape of the university environment itself.[6] These opportunities have been maliciously co-opted by for-profit forces intent on expanding the territorialization of a narrow brand of academic capitalism.[7] Examples of such narrow capitalistic reductions of higher education manifest themselves in student residential buildings designed with luxury hotel-like amenities, and by the use of student programming funds and student fees for corporate entertainment that distract from, rather than wholly integrate, campus-learning experiences. This shift has also however, spurred proactive, civic-oriented, experientially engaged, social justice movements within higher education.[8]

While we admire progressive movements in higher education, we heed Dewey’s warning to not simultaneously fall into false dualisms and harsh Either-Or thinking that we believe is still prevalent in contemporary higher education.[9] For example, the idea that education and social justice are distinct has made many educators superficially add-on service learning components to classes and universities.[10] Too many of these initiatives rely on the notion that experiential learning and social justice education, for example, are categorically different from *quality* education itself, and need to be added-on rather than wholly integrated. Learning is a creative act where intelligence and agency are both interrelated, and implicit in community-based service, citizenship, and social change.[11]

The movement for the *techne*-appropriate, *quality* experiential education that we advocate can be experienced as the movement for social justice in higher education. This movement does not simply follow the tradition of early progressive education because it does not react against alternatives to traditional schooling. Deweyan reconstruction requires a new theoretical lens to analyze how technologies are deployed to address human problems.[12] To do this, we offer a creative interpretation of appropriate technology. Following Larry Hickman, the etymology of “technology” begins with the ancient Greeks:

*Techne*, the ancestor of ‘technology,’ was used by Greek contemporaries of Plato and Aristotle to designate any productive skill…. *Techne* was thus used to designate a realm of activity that occupied a place between two extremes: the order of nature (or supernature) and the disorder of chance. For the Greeks, productive skill was said to act with respect to both extremes.[13]

In this sense, *techne*-propriety elicits a notion of productive skills used for a purpose: to balance order and disorder. In the context of this paper, we employ *techne* to demonstrate the productive
skills of limited residency learning and the creation, maintenance, and development of intentional learning communities for social justice in higher education. Hickman offers an updated definition of technology, which we also put to work; he says:

Technology in its most robust sense, then, involves the invention, development, and cognitive deployment of tools and other artifacts, brought to bear on raw materials and intermediate stock parts, with a view to the resolution of perceived problems. Technology in this sense is what establishes and maintains the stable technical platforms – the habitualized tools, artifacts, and skills – that allow us to continue to function and flourish.[14]

If we take these evolving senses of technology seriously, then technocratic innovations in higher education ought to include the integration and development of low-residency learning and living/learning communities (amongst other reforms) as techne-appropriate social justice education. We now turn to the first of two case studies which exemplify the kind of reform we advocate.

**Philosophy Camp: A Model of Intentional Experience**[15]

The word “experience” has been dragged through the mud and explained in ways that make even what Freire calls the “banking model” experiential.[16] Contemporary “experiential” learning models abound.[17] Intentional experiences for individuals and communities of learners – both purposefully designed and created with enough space for spontaneous bursts of novelty and co-creation – lay at the heart of what techne-appropriate education could look like in the 21st century.

The kind of technology called upon here is related to the techne of the ancient Greeks. **Techne** means an art, craft, or skill, and not necessarily some prefabricated mechanical tool that lends itself to capitalist production and mindless consumption. To intentionally organize and plan communities of learners (even of short duration) is an art, skill, and techne of meaningful and purposeful educators. College professors and high school teachers alike plan “research agendas” and “lesson plans” for days, weeks, months, units, semesters, academic years, careers, and more. To plan a way of being in the world as an educator and, more specifically, as a teacher, requires intention, planning, and careful preparation.

The experiential learning model of Philosophy 4326/5326 – Lives Worth Living: Questions of Self, Vocation, and Community offers an example of a carefully planned and intentional learning community. Speaking about the role and value of learning in such a community, one student named Beth described her experience like this:

[S]omething that was really brought to light was community, and how important it is to live in a community and to see the people that you live with as part of your community and the things that are important in that community and I feel like it's good, it's easy to talk about these things... but in this course, we talked about community, and we talked about what it meant to be a good listener and we talked about what it meant to be a good friend, we talked about the things that were important to us as people within the course and then you got to know people on this such a real true level, you got to know their hearts so well that you couldn’t help but treat them well you couldn’t help but treat them like they were important and you couldn’t help but see everything that made them
up, because you get to know people backwards here….[18]

Beth’s testimony demonstrates how the uses of a variety of techne-appropriate curricula lend themselves to progressive and traditional learning outcomes in this course. Affectionately known as “Philosophy Camp,” Philosophy 4326/5326 at the University of Minnesota, Twin Cities, employs techne appropriately, and offers these technologies for use in the 21st century.[19]

Inspired by the Danish Folk School tradition, and by extension, the Highlander Education and Research Center,[20] Philosophy Camp employs a residential and intentional learning model “centered on the Socratic tradition of cooperative inquiry into large questions about how we can live our lives well.”[21] The techne put to work in Philosophy Camp is wide-ranging. Students gather in community at Shalom Hill Farm, near Windom, Minnesota, and spend roughly a month in retreat discussing questions of self, vocation, and community.[22] The primary instructional method employed in class is that of the “learning circle,” which focuses on the experiences accrued and brought to the circle by participants.[23] Not only are individual students experts and teachers of their own experience, but faculty and fellow participants are equally engaged in offering up stories that exemplify the philosophical – and practical – subject at hand. Freirian “culture circles” follow and/or employ a similar method, model, or techne.[24]

Philosophy Camp utilizes the surrounding community as a techne-appropriate field of inquiry. Students learn by doing the dishes of communally-prepared meals. Students learn the intricacies of sustainable farming, food preparation, and consumption, by practicing these techniques – some for the first time. Students learn the techne of storytelling and the art of community. Again, as Beth put it:

You learn people’s hearts first, and that sets you up to treat people so much better and with so much more respect, because you learn to love people so quickly and you learn to care about them so quickly and I think that you can’t help but live those community values, you can’t help but care what’s happening to other people in your group and see how your actions affect other people, because you get to know them so well and you care so deeply about them.[25]

By connecting philosophical or practical ideas to their experience, students learn the principle of continuity. We may connect ourselves, our lives, and our experience to a variety of meaningful social phenomena through the appropriate employment of technology.

Prescott College and Limited-Residency Learning

America has a rich history of schools that have moved beyond reductionist educational binaries. In the nineteenth century, schools like Berea College and Antioch College were amongst the very first schools to champion racial and gender diversity, and to stress a commitment to community and social justice. They saw these commitments not as positive additions to education, but as fundamentally techne-appropriate for quality educational experiences. In the first half of the twentieth century, schools like Black Mountain College applied Dewey’s philosophy and created living/learning communities of inquiry. In turn, schools like Prescott College in the sixties and seventies used and extended both social justice education and living/learning communities as tools to invigorate educational experiences.

Since Prescott’s founding in 1966, it has committed itself to the “education of the whole person” through a transactional experiential
learning process with the Southwestern wilderness. Besides developing one of the most recognized and celebrated experimental undergraduate colleges in country, it also developed an innovative adult education program, and a sub-program by and for Native-Americans to get accredited to teach on their respective reservations.[26] In recent years, they have also implemented limited-residency distance learning undergraduate and graduate programs. Limited-residency techne has become increasingly popular in higher education over the last decade.[27] It is easy to be skeptical of these programs, especially as to whether such models really give students a quality educational experience, or if they are just promoted by administrators as low-cost, high profit, investments for their schools.

Instead of getting quagmired in reductive and unhelpful narratives about good learning, we should ask if there is potential here for techne-appropriate experiential learning. The question is not if the “limited-residency” technologies are “good” or “bad,” but whether they have instrumental value in cultivating educated and critically-conscious persons. In the tradition of its previous experiments, Prescott College has offered a limited residency model because administration and faculty see it as furthering the possibilities for quality educational experiences. In particular they recognized,

…that highly motivated working adults needed another way to earn college degrees. Since then the invention of the internet has led to an explosion of fast-paced, purely online degree programs. But Prescott College has steadfastly made face-to-face, high-touch, individualized learning the centerpiece of its limited-residency program.[28]

Distance learning is a techne for particular types of learners, as opposed to a vulgar instrumentalism that first serves the budgetary needs of a for-profit college or traditional university. The difference is subtle but important. One can use the narrative of adult/different learners to further a pernicious and lazy sort of budget and efficiency streamlining in education, or one can see it as an opportunity to experiment and promote a pluralistic academy.

To demonstrate the quality of this kind of techne-appropriate distance learning, we interviewed an alumnus of the program. We asked him the following the questions, which are listed below with the responses received:

1. Why did you move from Prescott’s residential program to the distance learning program?

Part way through my third year attending Prescott College’s Resident Degree Program, I became dissatisfied with how much money I was spending on my education without a clear sense of how it might be reflected in an actual career down the line.

2. Do you feel the program fulfilled your learning needs at the time?

I have always been a very self-directed, autodidactical student. Moving to the (non-residential) Adult Degree Program allowed me to complete my degree while working and volunteering within my chosen field. While I had to sacrifice the benefits that come from being surrounded by other students and an active intellectual environment, I was able to delve deeper into the community of my choice gaining a ton of real-world, professional, hands-on experience. I found that the curriculum I developed for myself was as, and often more, rigorous than the curriculum developed by the Residential Degree Program.

3. For what types of learners do you think Prescott’s program is useful, and what type might be better served by other models?
There is no question that to succeed in an off-site community mentor focused program like Prescott’s Adult Degree Program, students must be extremely self-directed. Students already working within their field of choice will have much of the knowledge and community resources available for them to be successful, that might be challenging to find for students fresh out of high school. It also seems to be most successful for students who already have some college experience. The off campus-program does not provide some of the learning, research and study skills that the residential program teaches very effectively.

4. Do you think the Prescott distance learning program offers something educationally valuable, besides just being off campus, and better for adult learners with busy lives?

I think the most valuable aspects of the program to adult students are the: Life Experience credit transfer opportunities, access to working professionals as instructors instead of having to rely on professors, and more direct and individualized support from a personal advisor. I think these elements would be valuable for all students if the options were available. I actually completed a few of my courses at 2 local community colleges. That gave me access to a huge range of classes while costing very little and supporting the community based self-designed curricular components of my program. Having a ton of different learning tools available to me, allowed for me to design a program that most fit my unique educational needs. I don’t think that totally online or completely self-directed programs are a good alternative to a cohort model, but I am excited to see an individualized “menu model” with a strong personal advisor component come to fruition.[29]

As can be seen from Zach’s experience, limited residency education is clearly not for everyone, nor should it replace residential colleges and universities. Prescott’s limited-residency program(s) are techne-appropriate for self-directed and mature individuals who use facilitation and support to develop geographically-open educational experiences. Zach’s experience legitimizes (for many students) that limited-residency learning may offer the opportunity for a modernized quality education.

Conclusion

As we have shown, living/learning communities and limited-residency learning can be techne-appropriate means to a quality educational experience. In the spirit of Dewey, we believe these reforms should serve the purpose of the educational experience itself and not be “duck-tape” solutions to immediate capitalistic market imperatives. At the same time, living/learning communities and limited residency learning, can, when deployed in a holistic way, help ameliorate these economic problems. Living/learning communities when deployed as a technology to improve the quality of the educational experience, can help with retention, add to the quality of educational experiences, help students with problem solving and conflict resolution, and can offer students practical experience communicating across difference. When distance learning is deployed as such a quality educational technology, it can break down the dualism between residential and online learning. It also offers a way for mature students to take responsibility for their education, and to develop portfolios that expand beyond what a geographic campus can offer.

We recognize that both living/learning communities and low-residency learning are but two tools available in our effort to improve the quality of educational experiences within higher education. We also recognize that this paper is but a small step towards updating Dewey’s theory of experience in light of new
technologies: technologies that reshape the way in which we think and solve problems. Our hope is that by beginning a conversation about how we understand and deploy technology, we can clarify our own (and support other) reforms that seek to activate critical thinkers toward social justice. By carefully and creatively thinking about technology in higher education, we can offer new ways to initiate reform that does not fall into narrow ways of thinking or rely upon short term “duck-tape” solutions.

Notes

[1] Hereafter cited as EE.
[10] For examples of this trend, see: Lisman, et. al., Beyond the Tower (2000).
[24] Freire, Pedagogy of the Oppressed, p. 82. Much more has been written on Freire’s notion of a “culture circle”; see, for example, Mariana Souto-Manning’s Freire, Teaching, and Learning, (2010).

L. Jackson Newell, Katherine C. Reynolds, and L. Scott. Marsh, eds., *Maverick Colleges: Fourteen Notable Experiments in American Undergraduate Education*, 2nd ed. (Salt Lake City, UT: Utah Education Policy Center, Graduate School of Education, the University of Utah, 1996), 85. The section on Prescott is very illuminating (pp. 77-87).

Another alternative institution of higher education, Goddard College, has become exclusively a low-residency program.


References


Commentary: Education in a Changing World

Jim Ostrow  
Lasell College

How do we judge the value of higher education? Should colleges, as the Obama administration argues, be rated against set criteria; will this or that type of degree yield employment; how does the so-called value proposition drive the public’s view of higher education? Certainly, many do focus the question of value on what is intrinsic to the very mission of higher education: learning. There is often an ironic tone, with authors pointing to an unfortunate state of affairs where predominant interests skirt the problem of learning in favor of matters of cost, access, employment, transparency, etc. No one denies the importance of these issues; the objection is to an absence of focus on the core matter of learning, an absence that can account for a diversion of resources away from it in favor of cost cutting devices, such as replacing full-time with part-time instructors or increasing class size.

The question I pose here concerns the value of higher education for the advancement of a democracy. John Dewey believes that the reduction of the meaning of academic subject matter to attainable fixed assets, static notions of "truth," works against the development of an enduring responsiveness to a changing world in the interest of social progress. Conditions in support of developing a capacity for such a response may be called progressive; those that vitiate against it may be called regressive. Education, as learning-centered as it may claim to me, can be either.

In The Public and its Problems, Dewey warns of a conservatism that he describes as a growing social pathology, visible politically as a "riotous glorification of things as they are" (Dewey, 1927: 170). When one considers Dewey’s corpus of work, it is not surprising that he declares this pathology “manifests itself in a thousand ways.” It is a way of perceiving, contemplating, orienting to the world that he sought to expose and rid the world of throughout his career as a philosopher of the nature of human experience, logic, politics, ethics, art, and, our focus here, education. Dewey is concerned with the “hidden entrenchments” (169), the powerful cultural habits that secrete a fixed reverence for existing “truths” – religious doctrine, existing documents and allegiances, the basics to be learned. The habitual clinging to the ideal of certainty (or in philosophy, to its quest) misconstrues the nature of experienced existence; in everyday life, it is what William Blake calls the "mind-forg’d manacles I hear" that entail fear or avoidance of the unknown; a fixation on the stable and controlled. It is a habitual inability to recognize, imagine, be disposed toward the wonder of the unseen, not conceived, yet to come, the possible.

Throughout his political career, Barak Obama has himself promoted the ideal of a flexible mind eager for change. In a June 4th, 2005, speech, he declared: “The true test of the American ideal is whether we’re able to recognize our failings and then rise together to meet the challenges of our time. Whether we allow ourselves to be shaped by events and history, or whether we act to shape them” (Obama, 2005). In the 2008 presidential campaign, he spoke of “the promise of change over the power of the status quo,” and he advised, “Change will not come if we wait for some other person or some other time. We are
the ones we’ve been waiting for. We are the change that we seek” (Obama, 2008). The president reasserted this principle again in his tribute to the late folk singer, Pete Seeger (2014). The rhetoric bent on preserving current conditions, often couched today as a preservation of values, is symptomatic of a kind of cultural ignorance, a form of blindness to the very nature of human reality. The world is always changing; in flux. The question is less about whether or not we believe in change than if we are capable of responding to it, imaginatively, intelligently – do we “allow ourselves to be shaped by events and history”, or do we “act to shape them?”

Higher education can serve to either extend or stunt the development of competent, intelligent citizenship within a changing world. A first, basic question to ask is how students value what we have them do as students; what is the value of academic subject matter in their experience? On this point, Dewey is as relevant now as he is in Democracy and Education, where he criticizes a conception of subject matter as just “so much material to be studied” (Dewey, 1916: 169) with students spending most of their time proving or failing to prove that they can express material in the exact form in which it is provided. There is no better prescription for developing a misguided sense of the world as a closed matter, things already settled that need to be “learned,” as opposed to in flux, open to interpretation, change. When Dewey stresses the importance of teachers engaging the needs, capacities, and interests of students, he is not advising pandering or lack of discipline; he means to emphasize the value of academic subject matter as something deeper, or potentially deeper, than what at any time could be recorded in a text. Subject matter can be a field of possibility, a path to seeing the world anew and for affecting change.

President Obama joked a year ago that skill training in the manufacturing sector holds better promise for employment than an art history degree. Critics pointed out that graduates with liberal arts degrees have higher employment rates than those with technical degrees. They also asserted that the liberal arts foster critical thinking and creative problem solving in career and community (Jaschik, 2014). In fact, this may or may not be the case: possibilities for either superficial or deep involvement in an academic subject are as present for art history as they are for more technical or practical fields. Do art history students sit in dark rooms, as Kathleen Desmond has described, viewing slides along with “lists of names, dates and styles to memorize (and regurgitate on tests)” (Desmond, 2008), or do they explore the power of an aesthetic sensibility and art as a lens on the world?

Of course, there is also the broader issue of an environment that vitiates against educational depth. What view of subject matter is reinforced for students today? State mandated exams, as well as college admissions practices based upon standardized tests, have reduced the relevance of subject matter for students to so much stuff to be known and regurgitated. The College Board’s forthcoming changes to the SATs, such as vocabulary changes that will counteract racial and socioeconomic unfairness in the current instrument, or questions and problems that compel students to engage in critical analyses of more relevant texts, are positive. These adjustments do not, however, alter the perpetuation of a static view of academic subject matter. Whether SAT or ACT, the test remains a receptacle for subject matter conceived as demonstrable information; once dumped into the receptacle, it so often ceases to have enduring value, becoming for many students what Dewey calls something “received and left behind” (1916: 187).

Watch our middle and high school students completing their standardized exams or SATs in a frenzied, bubble-filling information-regurgitation, and watch them in their moment of relief when it is over. Watch
them also have nothing more to do with the subject matter they had to learn; they will wait until next time, when they have to gorge themselves with something else to leave behind. Education becomes dominated by what Neil Postman calls an “aberrant process by which a method for doing something becomes the reason for doing it…the test score is taken for reality” (Postman, 1979: 87). Students may experience subject matter as an exigent text – a closed matter once learned – or as an only partially defined field of opportunities for engaging the environment. When they see subject matter in the latter way, its import lasts – it endures as an impulse to inquiry and a disposition to seeing things anew. The alternative is subject matter forgotten directly following the course, because it has been discarded through the vehicle of the test, it has been learned, the student has taken it and doesn’t need to take it anymore.

To Obama’s credit, he has sometimes warned of the pitfalls of standardized testing, cautioning against teaching to the test, and encouraging dialogue about richer and more flexible forms of school assessment (Obama, 2014). What we need are national policies that directly and forcefully articulate the primacy of education for fostering precisely the dispositions toward positive, social change that the president has himself endorsed. His perspective on culture and change could be expressed through educational policy as a forthright celebration of learning through exploration, discovery, productive, forward-thinking action and projects, with corresponding assessment and reporting methods. Surely, teachers and professors understand within their own fields of expertise that subject matter engages their energy and imagination not as a collection of recorded knowledge but as unfolding opportunities to know and do more. When we ask our students to engage subject matter in the former sense, we compel them, notwithstanding our admonitions against grade consciousness, to value the content as something to receive and leave behind.

What is an educator’s purpose? As philosophers, historians, literary critics, mathematicians, social scientists, biologists, artists, designers, business or health professionals, we are driven by the new problems, angles of understanding, approaches to solutions provided through the lenses of our individual and intersecting fields. It is a simple truism to say we agree with the Socratic axiom that wisdom requires ensuring students recognize continuously how little they or anyone knows and understands about themselves and the world. And, yet, how thoroughly does Socrates’ axiom penetrate the ethos of an institution; stated differently, to what degree do the academic fields that we love have lasting value in the lives of our students? That is essentially the question posed by William Heard Kilpatrick in his famous essay “The Project Method” (1918), where he concludes that the student experience must be “wholehearted, purposeful activity proceeding in a social environment” lest what is being learned become reduced to what Dewey calls, “just something to be learned” (Dewey: 1916, pg. 169).

The point I am making about the value of academic fields in the student experience should not, however, be confused with a focus on individual students’ mental states. Dewey warns that the progressive education backlash against traditional, authoritarian methods of instruction too often suffers from the same fallacy of the latter, “only in an inverted form.” The fallacy is to miss that educative activity is located neither “inside” of the student nor within dictated, static subject matter. It is located in experience that is as infused historically with what has happened for the person as what has happened in the wider world, and which is as undergone by persons as much as it takes place within the surrounding environment. “When the emphasis falls upon having experiences that are educationally
worthwhile,” Dewey writes, “the center of gravity shifts from the personal factor, and is found within the developing experience in which pupils and teachers alike participate.” Academic subjects are then no mere collections of information, of fixed truths. The measure of their value are “the questions they raise, the problems they create, the demands for new information they suggest, the activities they invoke, the larger and expanding fields into which they continuously open” (Dewey, 1930: 322) The purpose of the educational relationship is no longer to stuff information into students in waiting. But neither is its purpose to treat students therapeutically, nor leave them to their own devices, worrying constantly about how they feel. Its purpose is purely and simply to be in the world, together, collaboratively, as novice and expert practitioners of “larger and expanding fields” continuously opened.

Learning can mean cramming in information as “subject matter” and being done with it. It can also mean believing in and becoming disposed to the power of academic fields to open mysteries, to anchor present and future living in intellectual and creative pursuit and discovery. In order for education to reach its transformative potential, what Maxine Greene calls the “lure of incompleteness” (Greene, 1995: 15) must be the overriding frame for our conception of subject matter and the interaction it incites. Education can be an opening for the development of a sensitivity to an environment in flux, where meanings are not settled, fixed, and where democratic citizenship filled with the anticipation of and solutions to problems is possible.

Notes

[i] For earlier, abbreviated versions of the arguments posed in this essay, see (Ostrow: 2014; Ostrow: 2014b; Ostrow: 2015)

[ii] The Obama administration’s push for a national college rating system is driven by two principles. On the one hand, there is the argument that, in the words of Deputy Under Secretary of Education, Jamienne Studley. “In today’s world, college should not be a luxury that only some Americans can afford to enjoy; it is an economic, civic and personal necessity for all Americans.” Thus, the administration seeks to rate Colleges to the extent that they open their doors to all students, regardless of ability to pay. The other driving principle is post-graduation employment – the extent to which degree completion leads to success in the job market. There are various flaws that have been identified with the measures one might employ in a rating system, ranging from the limits of graduation rate comparisons to the difficulties in weighing the relative “value,” not always purely economic, of career choices. Critics argue that higher education is about more than what any national ratings systems could possibly assess, including the inattention of common measures to variations among US colleges in mission and focus.

References


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