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 un-enlightened “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 …

The next

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


