Review Essay: Dewey and Pedagogy


The greatest satisfaction in writing reviews, in my personal experience, comes from the introduction to colleagues of excellent publications they otherwise might have missed. This is especially so when the publications are by or about philosophers or in areas that might not be covered in most departments of philosophy.

Since courses on the philosophy of education usually are taught by faculty in the field of education, most members of SAAP who are in departments of philosophy are probably unfamiliar with this area. Hence, they run the risk of not knowing about important and interesting publications that have been appearing on Dewey and the philosophy of education. It must be remembered that when various forms of analytic philosophy all but eclipsed pragmatism and Dewey in the departments of philosophy in the U.S.A., and threatened to do the same in the departments of education, a few in education insisted that Dewey's pragmatism addressed itself to key educational issues in a way that analysis could or would not. Now these faculty members or their former students are speaking up and contributing to the reinterest in pragmatism and Dewey.

Although I have chosen to review only two recent books that highlight the continued relevance of Dewey to education and educators, three others will be mentioned as an appropriate background. Above all should be mentioned the 1998 publication by Jerome A. Popp, Professor of Education at Southern Illinois University at Edwardsville, of _Naturalizing Philosophy of Education, John Dewey in the Post-analytic Period_ (Southern Illinois University Press). Especially informative are the first ("The Reemergence of Pragmatism") and last ("Is Teaching a Causal Process?") chapters. Popp contends "that Dewey's arguments provide the basis for both a rejuvenated account of conceptual analysts and a criticism of the Utopian relativism currently dominating the literature". He argues that "naturalizing" philosophy of education (understood as focusing "on the philosophic aspects of human development, teaching, and the social institutions designed to support both") entails using the results of the cognitive sciences in epistemology (against the trends of analytic philosophy).

Two important publications devoted to early education are _John Dewey and the Early Childhood Classroom_ by Harriet K. Cuffaro (New York: Teachers College, Columbia University, 1995) and _Dewey's Laboratory School, Lessons for Today_ by Laurel N. Tanner (New York: Teachers College, Columbia University, 1997). Harriet Cuffaro is a member of the graduate faculty at Bank Street College of Education where she teachers courses in Curriculum and Foundations and supervises teachers. Her first chapter (A Teacher's Perspective) give an account of her first encounter with Dewey's _Experience and Education_ and how it enabled her to bring together the many separate aspects of her educative experience that 'had hitherto seemed unconnected. Since
then she has tried to translate the educational philosophy of Dewey into the everyday life of the classroom, emphasizing learning from experience with all its complexities. Laurel N. Tanner is Professor of Education at the University of Houston and Temple University. She examines the practices and policies, based on the original documents, of Dewey's Laboratory School (1896-1904). In the course of her examination she provides practical guidance of how today's schools can introduce Dewey's reforms in child learning, school administration and supervision, curriculum development, and character education. While both books are directed toward early education, there are points of practice that can be extended, *mutatis mutandis*, to undergraduate education.

The study by Jim Garrison, Professor of Education at Virginia Tech/Blacksburg, is based on the conviction that we become what we love because we love what we passionately desire. Hence the need for teachers to educate "eros" (the original Greek meaning of passionate desire). In the words of Garrison: "I would like to renew the ancient conversation about educating eros to desire the good. The modern age has almost lost he ability to talk passionately about the passions, about beauty or about the good. . . . I want to recover this remarkable [Platonic] way of talking about education and then modify it [by eliminating the elitist sense] for use in a modern democratic society. . . My ultimate goal in this book . . . is to use this reconstruction [of Plato] to help us better understand teaching for the loving, vigorous, and logical vocation that it is." (p. xiii) Such teaching is impossible without the use of practical reasoning or practical wisdom.

Although Dewey has done an immense, amount of work on the topic of practical reasoning, most educators today think that the field has closed the book on Dewey's pragmatic philosophy. They are mistaken. Garrison intends to restore the ancient vocabulary of education (so as to liberate the meanings hidden from modern and postmodern minds) and to clear new trails for educational inquiry (by tapping the extensive body of new scholarship on Dewey that has emerged in recent years). He relies on a large number of these new studies (many by members of SAAP, including R. Boisvert, L. Hickman, G. Pappas especially, C. Seigfried, and R. Shusterman), creatively incorporating them into the elaboration of his thesis that "good teaching requires a complete philosophy because it involves the three great questions of life: What is life (or teaching)? How should we live (or teach)? What does life (or teaching) mean?" (p. xx) It is little wonder. Garrison concludes, that Dewey developed philosophy as education rather than just a philosophy of education.

Probably the most original section of Garrison's study is the last part, the last three chapters. To illustrate his contention that teaching is a caring profession, and good care requires personal connection. Garrison employs the example of a teacher-student relation taken from a fifth grade classroom that shows: moral perception as a necessary part of the logic of practical reasoning. If Garrison is correct in stating that "[caring] teachers must sometimes break the rules" (p. 172), in his enthusiasm he overlooks the flack generated from disapproving (and often jealous) fellow teachers, administrators, and especially parents. Illustrations in *John Dewey and the Challenge of Classroom Practice* are based on adult students in an undergraduate introduction to philosophy course, a course that tried to put into practice Dewey's pedagogy. The coauthors, Stephen M. Fishman (who teaches philosophy at the University of North Carolina/Charlotte) and Lucille McCarthy (who teaches composition and literature at the University of Maryland/Baltimore
County), found themselves in a rare and enviable (because expensive) situation of collaborating on
the inquiry and composition of student projects and classroom presentations in the same course.
They had met in 1989 at a Conference on College Composition and Communication, and have
published a number of studies of Fishman's classroom (see "Works Cited"), the latest of which is
the second part of the book under review, which brings together Dewey's theory and Fishman's
practice, offering "... information about the teacher's method of achieving student-curriculum
integration" (p. 10) The authors believe that the Deweyan principles utilized are potentially useful
in a wide range of settings. In sum, the book shows: an instructor studying his own classroom and
offers model for "productive teacher inquiry" into integrating student and curriculum (chapter 8),
classroom continuities and interactions (chapter 9) as well as the construction and criticism of
student projects (chapter 10). The open-mindedness and careful listening of opposing positions by
Fishman's students, as well as their self-disciplining initiative, intellectual responsibility, and
courage, is impressive and should partially answer the questions we teachers of philosophy
probably ask ourselves; does this introductory course in philosophy make a difference in the lives
of my students?

In addition to any assistance this study might have in helping us improve our introduction
to philosophy courses—in my estimation the most challenging course we teach—the book gives a
glimpse into the history of how Dewey has been treated by philosophy and education departments
over the last half century. Rather than reading a general statement about the marginalization of
Dewey, we are given personal glimpses (in the introduction and first part of the book) by the
authors of their own respective "histories with John Dewey". We discover how Fishman, as a
major in philosophy at Columbia University (1954 through his doctorate), received no
encouragement to pursue his interest in Dewey (having been introduced to Reconstruction in
Philosophy in a summer course he took in Boston in 1955 from Professor Frankena, visiting from
the University of Michigan). Fishman pursued his interest privately as he struggled to understand
what philosophy is and to clarify "the fragmentation and discontinuity" he experienced during his
university years so as to avoid the same in his own teaching. As an graduate student in the Master's
Program in Education at the University of Chicago (1966-1968), McCarthy never actually read or
discussed Dewey 's work because "the department of education which Dewey founded had
abandoned him for theories in which learning was more easily quantified" (p 11). Yet, her first
"naturalistic inquiry into student experience" as part of her master's project was "a Deweyan sort of
inquiry" that has carried through to the methods and questions of this study. These personal
statements should be valuable to the younger students and teachers of philosophy in showing how
conditions in departments of philosophy and education have changed during the last decade or so.
The earlier conditions also show why there was a need to found a group such as the Association for
the Advancement of American Philosophy, a society that continues to encourage the study of
philosophers and philosophies otherwise neglected.

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