

Learning and Becoming with Dewey, Peters and Freire: A Response to Beckett

David E. Meens

University of Colorado Boulder

The science of education can only begin with a description of the educator in his relation to the one being educated.

Wilhelm Dilthey, cited in Biesta, “No Education without Hesitation.”

Pervasive, common sense understandings of the role of teachers and students within the project of learning are recalcitrant. Well over a century ago, John Dewey described the fundamentally conservative and traditionalist bent of the standard picture: teachers teach, students learn. Teachers have knowledge, students have ignorance. To the extent that teachers teach and learners learn, the ignorance of students is replaced with the knowledge of the teacher. The learning done by teachers, including through assessment and reflection, is learning about how to (better) teach learners. The learning done by students is, firstly, internalizing and reproducing specific content or activity and, secondarily, learning about how to (better) learn.

The persistence of this picture strikes some as strange, given the power and prevalence of critiques proffered by the likes of John Dewey and Paulo Freire. In families and communities, the traditionalist picture is explicitly taught (“study hard,” “listen to your teachers”). In films, novels, and other media, images and narratives provide powerful symbolic reinforcement of this straightforward and intuitive framing. When they are countered, alternative representations often invoke “progressive” pedagogical methods which invert the roles of teacher and learner.¹ Such methods seek to shift what Dewey termed the “center of gravity” of educational processes from the curriculum and the teacher to the individual student, him or herself.² Such an inversion of the traditionalist model is partial and has been fraught with its own distinctive failures, judged in terms of its own values and aims as well as those of its conservative critics. As a result,

the pendulum swing between traditional and progressive instructional methods proceeds as the deficiencies of one picture lead to efforts to implement the other, and the cycle repeats.³

This process of “back-and-forth to nowhere new” is a product of dysfunctional tendency in our thinking, in the available concepts and our tendency towards “Either/Or” thinking. That, at least, is the argument made by Dewey in *Experience and Education*, in which he addresses the response among education professionals to his critique of traditionalist and advocacy for progressive methods.⁴ This is the text from which Beckett mainly draws what he terms Dewey’s “new educational concepts.” The possibility that thinking differently might actually enable us to do differently, to transcend this cycle of pedagogical purgatory, remains a powerful enticement. Beckett’s return to this question and to Dewey’s proposed solution is warranted and even urgent—not because the discussion is new, but because the material and cultural circumstances Dewey and others sought to transform seem not to have fundamentally changed. Transcendence of the traditionalist/progressivist dichotomy remains a worthy endeavor because it has not been achieved in social practice, despite well-developed and oft-cited theory.

In responding to Beckett’s essay, I make three points that I hope advance this general aim. First, I find Beckett’s characterization of received thought—namely, the linking and even conflating of the positions of Dewey, Peters and Freire—to be misleading, obscuring perhaps more than it illuminates. Freire is committed to a conception of human nature based on agent-centered subjectivity, and his overriding interest in humanization through liberatory educational methods is metaphysical as well as practical. Following prominent critics, I take Peters’ approach to be basically conservative, in that he conceives “the educated person is a knowledge generalist initiated into various aspects of high culture.”⁵ True, *understanding* is a different relation to the material of culture than “mere” knowing in Peters’ characterization, but the measure of attainment is still mastering the material—albeit more thoroughly and usefully.

Dewey, in contrast to both, eschews not only traditionalism but also metaphysics. Beckett cites Dewey’s metaphor of the teacher as a guide leading

students through a territory unfamiliar to them, taking this to limit the teacher's learning. Of course, being a guide does not mean one does not learn throughout a journey. Additionally, this metaphor does not (nor is it meant to) capture the multifaceted and dynamic roles Dewey ascribes teacher and student in the process of learning understood as a project of shared inquiry, of organically integrated individual and collective becoming. Dewey was not miserly when it came to metaphors and analogies for various moments and movements of learning. There are indeed subject matter and learning situations in which the "teacher as guide" metaphor is apt, just as there are others in which the inquiry is better characterized in other ways. A more extensive survey of Dewey's illustrative portraits could be quite instructive for sketching the true outlines of his overall picture.

Here is the key: Dewey's conception of the process of inquiry and its aims precludes definite specification of roles and relations without reference to concrete situations and educational content. Both academic content and cultural context would need to be specified in order to ground Beckett's arguments about the appropriate aims and nature of learning, and of the roles, the "division of labor," appropriate to students, teachers, and others in the educative process. Teachers and students are, no matter their roles, equally participants in a shared, complex, multidirectional process with multiple moments and outcomes. Dewey would suggest that this basic fact doesn't tell us much, absent specification of the concrete situation under consideration. What is the subject matter under study? Is the focal domain algebra or accounting? Social studies or carpentry? Each subject matter has distinctive content which properly shapes the respective roles of teacher and student—to the content and to one another.

In addition to academic content, social context is vital. Who are the students, and who are the teachers? The social division of labor is an artifact, and the effectiveness of particular pedagogies of engagement and exchange will depend upon the beliefs and attitudes of the participants. Within the contemporary U.S. context, for example, disparate cultural contexts can make "progressive" efforts by teachers to perform role equality with their students counterproductive to learning.⁶ Specification of the division of labor, and the

roles presumed appropriate to different participants and their relation to one another, will be culturally and historically specific. Dewey self-consciously specifies the context he is speaking into in *Democracy and Education*; for example, he would be the first to warn against generalization of his arguments and insights in very different times and places. His ideas, like those he drew upon in his work, must be “reconstructed” in the specific context of application and tested in experience. To the extent that Dewey’s picture, which is presented in texts that span many decades, represents unrealized opportunities for reconfiguring practice; a more thoroughgoing engagement with his works is necessary at the same time and in order to reconstruct these notions for concrete, specific contemporary situations.

1 Kelvin Beckett, “Footnotes to Dewey: Everyone Learns,” *Philosophy of Education* 76, no. 1 (2020), Beckett’s statement that “20th century philosophers considered but ultimately rejected progressive conceptions” is too simple, too sweeping. Even on a moderately narrow construal of who might be considered a philosopher, proponents of the progressive picture abound throughout the 20th century and at present. See, e.g., David F. Labaree, “The Ed School’s Romance with Progressivism,” *Brookings Papers on Education Policy* 7, (New York: Brookings Institution, 2004), 89-129.

2 John Dewey, *The School and Society* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago, 1899).

3 For a classic 20th century history, see David Tyack and Larry Cuban, *Tinkering Towards Utopia: A Century of Public School Reform* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University, 1995); for an account focused on Dewey’s role, Thomas D. Fallace, “Tracing John Dewey’s Influence on Progressive Education 1903-1951: Toward a Received Dewey,” *Teachers College Record* 113, no. 3 (New York: Teachers College Press, 2011), 463-492.

4 John Dewey, *Experience and Education* (New York: Collier, 1938).

5 John White, “R. S. Peters” in *Fifty Modern Thinkers on Education*, ed. Roy A. Palmer (London: Routledge, 2001), 118.

6 See for example Lisa D. Delpit, “The Silenced Dialogue: Power and Pedagogy in Educating Other People’s Children” *Harvard Educational Review* 58, no. 3 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University), 280-298.