Dewey on the Virtues of Method/s

Jim Garrison
Virginia Tech University

Barbara Stengel's essay is so complete that it leaves little room for fault finding criticism. So, instead, I will limit myself to three questions of clarification before suggesting some ways of expanding around her core question: What is the meaning of method in teaching?

My first question concerns what Stengel calls "Method and Methods." Superficially, it sounds as if Stengel and Dewey are methodological monists. I have heard many otherwise competent educators accuse Dewey of methodological scientism, so I would like Stengel to restate the method of Deweyan inquiry and then distinguish it carefully from the individual teacher's selection of particular methods of instruction. Having this distinction firmly in mind helps illuminate some points about methodological virtue I will make later.

My second question deals with Stengel's section "Content and Method." Dewey clearly rejects the form versus content, or method versus subject-matter, dualism while allowing us to distinguish them for functional purposes. Stengel reminds us that subject-matter selections are "controlled by reference to social life," according to Dewey, while method is but arrangement of subject matter for a purpose. In method, purposes and ideas function to shape the child's powers of imagery, interests, and emotions intelligently. The delicate question is one of indoctrination: Whose social purposes should control, when, and how? To be fair, let me say I cannot answer this question, nor do I believe that anyone can give a completely decontextualized general answer without dogmatism. Stengel's essay raises this question, though, so I would like her to join me in struggling with this crucial question of democratic education. Posing the question prepares the way for what I would like to say later about methodological virtue.

My second question already strays into Stengel's last topic, "Method and Control." Stengel astutely observes that issues of method and control "entail not only awareness of educational aims and ideals, but a thorough analysis of interrogation of these ideals in light of democratic social needs." This expands on my second question. Such interrogation may not only involve the content of the democratic conversation, but the very meaning of philosophy itself. In the Chapter of *Democracy and Education* titled "Philosophy and Education," Dewey observes: "If we are willing to conceive education as the process of forming fundamental dispositions, intellectual and emotional, toward nature and fellow-men, philosophy may even be defined *as the general theory of education.*"[1] Stengel wisely insists that "aims and ideals, democratic social needs, teacher-student control and student self-centered — becomes the 'subject-matter' of a methods course." If Stengel and Dewey are right, then such existential questions as the following may be part of methodological inquiry, in the general sense, for methods courses in teacher education: What is teaching? How should I teach? What does teaching mean? Are such questions proper

to general method, or are they part of particular methods, or, as I suspect, are they part of individual method?

Stengel distinguishes between the choice of method and particular methods. She also states that having chosen "intelligent, contextual, holistic and responsive" method over no method at all, the inquiring teacher is free to choose from an array of particular methods. Stengel assumes, "Once the mantle of 'method' is put on, choice of 'best practice' will follow relatively painlessly." I wish to reflect further on this statement. Stengel's reference to Pat Conroy's lack of logic at the end of her essay provides a representative example of my concerns.

Choosing method or methods, choosing to proceed logically, is potentially deeply personal. I doubt personal need, desire, and interest, and personal preference generally, can be separated in choice from the methods chosen. This fact may have consequences for student-teacher recruitment and retention.

Dewey reminds us that "the method of teaching is the method of an art" (*DE*, 177). That teaching and its methods are arts is one reason good teaching is not a pure science, or completely separable from aesthetics and ethics. Dewey distinguishes between method as general and method as individual (*DE*, 177). Stengel concerns herself with method as general, but for many important questions about content and control, it is difficult to separate general method from particular methods, much less from individual method. This becomes especially clear once we recognize that one's individual method will influence one's willingness to choose the intelligent method of inquiry at all, much less particular methods of intelligent inquiry. One's intuitive method may be enough for one to do all right, or at least feel good about one's self. Conroy seemed to do all right, and feel good about it, but I join Stengel in worrying about his lack of logic.

Dewey introduces and discusses four "Traits of Individual Method" (*DE*, 180-86). While these traits can no doubt be developed and refined in methods courses, it is unlikely that any adult who does not already possess at least the germ of these virtues will choose method in the wider sense that Stengel advocates. I want to suggest that unless prospective teachers clearly display these virtues, among others, we should not recruit them into teaching, or retain them in teacher education programs.

The first trait of character is "directness." Dewey insists, "Self-consciousness, embarrassment, and constraint are its menacing foes....Something has come between which deflects concern to side issues" (*DE*, 180). By directness, Dewey does not mean egocentric self-confidence, rather he intends self-transcending absorption in the situation, including those with whom we share it, especially our students (*DE*, 181).

The second trait, or virtue, is "open-mindedness." It is "an attitude of mind which actively welcomes suggestions and relevant information from all sides" (*DE*, 182). Such open-mindedness listens to students as well as colleagues. "Open-mindedness," Dewey notes, "is not the same as empty-mindedness. To hang out a sign saying 'Come right in; there is no one at home' is not the equivalent of

10.47925/1998.354

hospitality" (*DE*, 183). Narrow, technocratically controlled classrooms and hyper-rationalized teacher proof curriculum closes minds; they are the enemy of pluralistic, participatory democracy.

The third trait of individual method is "single-mindedness." Dewey writes:

> What the word is here intended to convey is *completeness* of interest, unity of purpose; the absence of suppressed but effectual ulterior aims....Absorption, engrossment, full concern with subject matter for its own sake, nurture it. Divided interests and evasion destroy it.... Intellectual integrity, honesty, and sincerity are at bottom not matter of conscious purpose but of quality of active response (*DE*, 183).

Enough said.

The last virtue listed by Dewey is "responsibility." By this is meant "the disposition to consider in advance the probable consequences of any projected step and deliberately to accept them: to accept them in the sense of taking them into account, acknowledging them in action, not yielding a mere verbal assent" (*DE*, 185). Of the four traits of individual method discussed, responsibility is most obviously a moral virtue as well. The virtues of individual method applies to students as well as teachers, and should be especially prized by student-teachers. I ask Stengel, do the virtues of individual method have anything to do with method in its widest sense?

Let me conclude by thanking Barbara Stengel for her fine essay. Also, I would like to remind the reader that I have deliberately entangled her discussion in issues that lie at the periphery of her work. All I have tried to do is expand and continue a conversation well begun.

---

1. John Dewey, "Democracy and Education," in *John Dewey: The Middle Works*, vol. 9, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1980), 338. This article will be cited as *DE* with page numbers in the text for all subsequent references.

10.47925/1998.354