

The Pedagogical Subject and Liberal Learning

Jane Blanken-Webb

University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

“Blues and the Pedagogical Subject” presents a tale of a young musician thrust into a situation that essentially amounts to trial and error, with a strong emphasis on “error.” The point of the illustration is twofold. First, it serves to show how the blues operates as an ideological site in which “blues subjects” are formed through subjection to ideological forces situated within a particular social environment. Instead of viewing the “subject” as a free and autonomous knower, the author draws on Louis Althusser to explain how the subject is instead formed through subjection to “*specific contours of unfreedom* within which the subject must — and can — operate.” Thus, immersion within concretely situated ideological sites and engagement with material practices engenders the “blues subject,” whose internalized contours of unfreedom are just as much constitutive as they are limiting.

The second point, which the author claims as the primary purpose here, is not about the blues per se, but rather draws on the analogy of the blues to illuminate and address the problem of “the increasingly hollowed-out spaces of the curriculum and the culture where the liberal arts reside.” The author claims that this crisis in education has largely been misdiagnosed and that, rather than a “‘what’ problem” that is concerned with what people know or can do, we more accurately have a “‘frame-of-reference’ problem,” by which he means that our students and society at large do not “speak,” if you will, the liberal arts as a “first language.” Thus, the author poses a question that I believe captures the primary aim here: “how can we make our initiation of students into the liberal arts ethos *more like* the initiation of the blues subject?”

I believe the author’s Althusserian interpretation of the blues offers a critical insight for education, as so much of what we do, but more significantly *how* we do it, and indeed *who* we are is learned and enacted at a tacit level that is generally unavailable for conscious inspection. However, I am less convinced when it comes to the author’s primary claim pertaining to the problem that the liberal arts currently face and the analogy posed with the “blues subject.” Accordingly, the remainder of my response will examine the extent to which this analogy is effective in making the author’s case.

One reason the author draws on the analogy of the blues subject is to provide a more helpful way of understanding the current situation of the liberal arts. However, in diagnosing this problem, I believe the author sets up an untenable dualism between problems of “what” and “frame-of-reference” problems. My concern is that describing the problem this way does not offer an accurate enough diagnosis and actually functions to obscure the issue more than it clarifies what is truly at the heart of the matter. That is, one cannot acquire a frame of reference without some amount of content. The author clearly appreciates this in emphasizing that the kid in the example *does* need to be proficient on his instrument. However, the author

claims that “proficiency is a *what*, not a *how* or a *why*, and it’s the how or why that is the issue.” My point is simply that musical proficiency is most certainly a “how” as well as a “what” and probably also includes at least some aspects of “why.” Hence, just as John Dewey showed that it does not work to separate the child and the curriculum,¹ I do not believe that it makes sense to separate the acquisition of a frame of reference from matters of “what.” Fortunately, I do not believe the author is trying to separate matters of “what” from the acquisition of a frame of reference, but is rather working to show that engaging with empty content, void of experience that is an organic outgrowth of the social environment, is truly the issue at stake here. Accordingly, I propose that a more accurate diagnosis of the crux of the issue is rather an emphasis on content at the expense of experiencing.²

This rediagnosis of the problem draws heavily on Dewey’s philosophy, and I believe this is fitting here not simply because Dewey is a go-to philosopher for philosophers of education, but rather because the author’s own suggestions for addressing the problem fit so well with Dewey’s philosophy. The author suggests that we do away with the proliferating accountability structures that work to mechanize teaching and instead emphasize *experience* as meaningful *play*. In doing so, the author’s suggestion sounds remarkably close to proposing a Deweyan solution. To bring the point home, I will simply cite the author and ask readers to note the palpable similarities with Dewey’s discussion of play³ as well as Dewey’s general account of inquiry-based learning⁴:

Only by inculcating a spirit of *play* — not in the sense of idle distraction, but in the sense of *playing* an instrument — can we make *working* at the task of learning intrinsically joyous and worthwhile, and create an atmosphere in which even the tersest and most cryptic criticism can be taken as a puzzle to be solved rather than as a discouraging put-down. (emphasis in original)

This brings me to my final point. Although I find the author’s case about the “blues subject” to be extremely compelling, I think this case becomes problematic when it is applied to solving the liberal arts “crisis.” As such, I am left wondering whether other theoretical frameworks that describe the “subject” and “subjectivity” might be even more effective and better suited for addressing the liberal arts. Whereas it might work in the blues for “knowledge content and methods [to be] assumed and generally not available for conscious inspection,” this seems to run contrary to a core aim of the liberal arts, namely, to bring to light diverse ways of understanding the world and our place in it. Put simply, I understand the liberal arts to provide multiple disciplinary-based perspectives for exposing things like ideology, not promoting it. This is not to deny that we operate within a set of liberal arts ideologies, but rather to recognize that any semblance of a liberal arts ideology would be distinctly self-critical and, unlike the blues, would aspire toward conscious inspection of what might otherwise be generally assumed.

Hence, within a liberal arts ideology, I maintain that we have ways to give voice to the deeper, tacit levels of human experience that the author is addressing. But I suggest that we understand the innumerable doings that occur within primary institutions, which give rise to our “subjectivity” and status as “subjects,” as an essential dimension of education that we would do well to recognize and make explicit. Thus, I cannot agree that the solution to the problem that the liberal arts are facing

is that we need to be more effective “as an ideology that must locate and create its own subjects.” Rather, I propose that we need to be more effective in theorizing the “subject” and “subjectivity” in order to understand this profound realm of human experience as a dimension of *education*.

I have already suggested some ways in which I think Dewey’s theory is fitting in diagnosing the problem of the liberal arts and in approaching solutions, and I will now briefly extend this idea to suggest how we might approach the realm of subjectivity such that it is better suited for the liberal arts context.

Dewey offers the following characterization of an individual’s development in *Democracy and Education*:

every individual has grown up ... in a social medium. His responses grow intelligent, or gain meaning, simply because he lives and acts in a medium of accepted meanings and values. Through social intercourse ... he gradually acquires a mind of his own. The conception of mind as a purely isolated possession of the self is at the very antipodes of truth.⁵

Thus, Dewey allows for a way to address how it is that “we awaken to ourselves already made, already acting, in significant ways that are inherent in our functioning as subjects,” as the author maintains. By reading through Dewey’s corpus with particular attention given to his theory of habit⁶ and his aesthetic notion of self,⁷ I propose that we can theorize the “subject” through constructs that are more amenable to core values within the liberal arts tradition.⁸ In this, we might find a more convincing way to address the pedagogical subject within the context of liberal learning.

1. John Dewey, *The Child and the Curriculum*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1923).

2. For a fuller explanation of this view see John Dewey, *Experience and Education* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2007).

3. See John Dewey, “Play and Work in the Curriculum,” in *Democracy and Education* (New York: Free Press, 1916), 194–206.

4. For a description of Dewey’s account of inquiry-based learning see, Donald Schön, “The Theory of Inquiry: Dewey’s Legacy to Education,” *Curriculum Inquiry* 22, no. 2 (1992): 119–139.

5. John Dewey, *Democracy and Education*, 344.

6. See John Dewey, *Human Nature and Conduct: An Introduction to Social Psychology* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1922).

7. See John Dewey, *Art as Experience* (1934; repr. New York: Perigee, 2005).

8. Further analysis on this point can be found in Jane Blanken-Webb, “Expanding the Deweyan Self: Revisiting an Underexplored Past to Inform Future Inquiry,” *Philosophical Studies in Education* 45 (2014): 88–98; and Jane Blanken-Webb, “Educating the Self through Aesthetic Experience,” PhD diss., University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 2014.