

Authentic to What? Educative Growth and Life-Worlds

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Have progressive educators lost an important aspect of “authentic” practice by focusing educational tasks on the “real” world or community setting? Frank Margonis is rightly concerned that John Dewey’s progressivism has led some educators to overlook anti-assimilationist challenges to the status-quo of one’s society. In giving up a commitment to anti-assimilation, Margonis worries that progressive educational practice does little more than prepare children to take their role in an already defined world, and even worse, that “progressive pedagogy is a tool of colonization” itself.

I share this concern as well and am uncomfortable with the implications of Theodore Sizer’s tax preparation exercise, but I am not sure we can lay the fault at Dewey’s feet. As Margonis himself notes, Dewey asks educators to ensure that students are engaged in “real” acts and responsibilities, rather than those arbitrarily designed for an isolated classroom disconnected from the world. This points to an important distinction between Sizer’s exercise and Dewey’s call for connecting student learning to the world. Dewey’s progressivism encourages “real” acts and responsibilities and is not outcome driven in the same way Sizer’s exercise appears to be. Focusing on real acts and responsibilities in the Deweyan sense would still leave room in the educational experience for outcomes to be created and discovered as teachers and students go along, rather than having the assignment and outcome predefined by the teacher and/or curriculum.

So how does this help us respond to Margonis’s worry that Dewey has spawned an assimilationist concept of authenticity that provides no protection from “cultural imperialism?” If we take Dewey at his word, the ultimate measure of whether an experience is educative is whether or not it leads to growth. Recalling Dewey’s definition of growth, it is that which promotes growth in general, rather than retards it. Dewey wants us to measure our students’ experiences by asking, “Does this form of growth create conditions for further growth, or does it set up conditions that shut off the person who has grown in this particular direction from the occasions, stimuli, and opportunities for continuing growth in new directions?” Dewey concludes that “*only* when development in a particular line conduces us to continuing growth does it answer to the criterion of education as growing.”¹ In this passage, Dewey also gives us examples of growth that are non-educative by describing that becoming a better burglar or gangster or a more corrupt politician is growth, but it is not *educative*. In order to prevent assimilationist tendencies, progressive educators need to look beyond these dramatic examples and ask of our own daily pedagogies, are they truly providing students with *educative* growth? If we were to measure Sizer’s tax preparation exercise against Dewey’s criteria for educative experience, it would be found sadly lacking. When we ask students to fill out tax forms unreflectively in order to give them real life “authentic” experience, we are simply training them as workers for a market culture. The outcome is predicted, even if not explicit. This

exercise retards student growth because we are halting their opportunities for continuing growth in new directions. Conversely, if we were to take the same exercise, as an activity that is found in the students' "real" world, but ask them to explore questions such as, Who is the IRS? Why do we pay taxes? Who controls where the money goes? What happens to people who withhold tax for peaceful protest? then we are truly being Deweyan *and* anti-assimilationist. This challenging of the status-quo is anti-assimilationist and measures up to the standard of educative growth that Dewey holds as fundamental to learning and teaching.

In addition to recognizing that Dewey's work does, in fact, speak to that which prevents assimilationism, I believe that Dewey would also take issue with whether or not Jean-Jacques Rousseau's ontology leads to an anti-assimilationist educational stance. Dewey might criticize Rousseau for positing an ontology that bifurcates the educational preparation of "man" and "citizen." When these two tasks are seen as separate, both temporally and qualitatively, it makes little sense to speak of authenticity or anti-assimilation. If these preparations are such distinct processes, what is it that Rousseau's man is being authentic to? Instead, Dewey would reject Rousseau's dualistic notion of the education of man in contrast to the education of citizen. He might ask how one could develop the individual's "sentiment of existence" outside of the social setting that creates citizens, born as we are "in the social consciousness" of our time, that is "continually shaping the individual's powers, saturating his consciousness, forming his habits, training his ideas, and arousing his feelings and emotions."² One cannot name authenticity as being true to oneself or one's own basic sentiments, as if these sentiments stood in opposition to the demands of one's real world or society. We cannot truly ever stand in opposition to our work the social environment is that which has shaped us. We are part of the hermeneutic circle, and as such, attending to a notion of authenticity would look different than standing in opposition to one's society. Perhaps it would take a more phenomenological approach of bracketing out experience and determining meaning and/or exploring social action against the horizons of significance that have backdropped the development of our sentiments of existence.

Because Rousseau's bifurcated sense of the self and society does not ontologically make sense for Dewey, and because he is concerned with the betterment of society and not just its efficiency, he asks us to be inclusive of as many voices as possible and to facilitate experiences where communication among all its citizens occurs. This is another aspect of his educational philosophy that demonstrates it is not doomed to assimilationist education. Rather, he defines an undesirable society as "one which internally and externally sets up barriers to free intercourse and communication of experience." Conversely, a democratic society is one "which makes provision for participation in its good of all its members on equal terms and which secures flexible readjustment of its institutions through interaction of different forms of associated life."³ It is this free and liberal space for communication that will always challenge society to be better.

It is not the case that progressive educators are bound to assimilationism as a measure of authenticity, but they have not been careful enough to measure their

educational practice against Dewey's ultimate purpose: that for educative growth. If they were to do so, their practice, while drawing upon real world activities, would involve critical examination and multiple perspectives. This would provide the educational space that Margonis describes in the Navajo school, supporting the anti-assimilationist notion that Margonis wants to preserve. This is not because "man" as a free individual stands in opposition to his own society, but because Dewey sees that all persons in a given society must be included in real experiences, defining them as they go. What is authentic for Dewey is not that experiences are connected to the lifeworld of the student, but that they allow for his rich notion of educative growth. It is when progressive educators fail to use educative growth as their measure for educational experience, that we fall into the trap of assimilationism.

It is at this point that Dewey would appreciate Margonis's emphasis on the importance of the educational relationship. Dewey criticizes those who use assimilationist strategies when he says, "The ideal of using the present simply to get ready for the future contradicts itself. It omits, and even shuts out, the very conditions by which a person can be prepared for his future."⁴ Granted, we have to push Dewey himself away from his historically understandable fascination with science as a means of progress. But this is tempered by his most fundamental recognition that not only must the psychological and sociological aspects of the child be accounted for in education, but that the educational relationship itself is critical. There must be a give and take wherein,

all members of the group must have an equable opportunity to receive and take from others. There must be a large variety of shared undertakings and experiences. Otherwise, the influences which educate some into masters educate others into slaves. And the experience of each party loses in meaning, when the free interchange of varying modes of life-experience is arrested.⁵

This need for a "free interchange of varying modes of life-experience" provides the necessary wiggle room for us to ask an educationally important question in our talk of authenticity: authentic to what? Rousseau would say to a free man's sentiment of existence. Some progressives would say to the "real" world, but in actuality, Dewey would respond that we must be authentic to an educational relationship that must be deeply inclusive and truly educative in intent. This would provide a privileged space for the life-experience of girls and women, for example, that is so sadly lacking in Rousseau's work in particular. It would privilege the life-experience of those persons directly involved in the educational relationship. While these distinctions may appear subtle, their implications are not. The implication is that Dewey's educative experience does challenge the status quo.

Progressive education alters the role of the teacher from an authoritarian presence in the classroom to one where it is the "business of the educator to see in what direction an experience is heading."⁶ This is the wisdom the teacher brings, and when measured against the ideas that Dewey himself outlined, it mitigates the tendency for progressive education to be assimilationist in nature. The full meaning of the experience is a relational one. In other words, the teacher must know the student and his/her life experience and the larger context of the society in which we

are all embedded. Which direction teachers and students go defines whether an experience is authentically educative and democratic, and this direction can only be determined within the context of truly growth-enhancing and inclusive teaching and learning relationships.

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1. John Dewey, *Experience and Education* (1938; reprint, New York: Macmillan, 1963), 36.
 2. John Dewey, "My Pedagogic Creed," in *John Dewey: The Early Works 1895-1898*, vol. 5, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1972), 84.
 3. John Dewey, *Democracy and Education* (1916; reprint, New York: MacMillan, 1944).
 4. Dewey, *Experience and Education*, 49.
 5. Dewey, *Democracy and Education*.
 6. Dewey, *Experience and Education*, 38.