Footnotes to Dewey: Everyone Learns

Kelvin S. Beckett
Purdue University Global

Dewey criticized "conservative," teacher-centered conceptions of education and "progressive," learner-centered conceptions.[1] In his "new order of conceptions," however, there are still teachers and learners: teachers teach, learners learn, and the aim is to increase learner knowledge.[2] Education, for Dewey, was the means of social renewal. Teachers represent established custom, while learners experiment with new ways of doing things. Implicit in Dewey's criticisms, however, and explicit in the later work of R. S. Peters and Paulo Freire, is the idea that "teacher" and "learner" are roles people play in educational activities: everyone teaches, everyone learns, and the aim is to increase everyone's knowledge. Here, education is the means of creating society: people share and attempt to agree on the kind of society they want to live in together.

One chapter in the history of philosophy of education in the twentieth century can be read as an attempt to escape the limitations of conservative conceptions of education. Conservative teachers assume that the aim of education is to increase learner knowledge. That is their purpose as teachers and learners' purpose as learners. But, philosophers asked, what is the aim of education itself? Is it aimless? Does it have only extrinsic aims? Why increase learner knowledge? Dewey, Peters, and Freire argued that conservative teachers limit the aim of education to their aim as teachers.[3] Objective observers see teachers and learners contributing to educational activities. Teachers contribute what they know; learners contribute what they learn; and the aim is to increase everyone's knowledge. In a process that also involves teachers assessing learner learning, learners assessing teacher teaching, and their coming to a shared understanding on some topics and agreeing to differ on others, everyone teaches and everyone learns.

To escape the limitations of conservative conceptions of education, twentieth century philosophers considered but ultimately rejected progressive conceptions. Progressive teachers focus on what learners are learning rather than what they (teachers) are teaching and on procedural rather than propositional knowledge. The aim is to increase learners' ability to learn. But, philosophers realized, progressive teachers still see "us" and "them" (teachers and learners) and they still assume that the aim of education is to increase "their" knowledge. Objective observers see participants contributing to educational activities. Teachers contribute learning strategies known to be generally effective; learners contribute strategies that prove to be effective for them with the task at hand; and the aim is to increase the group's ability to learn. In a process that also involves learners assessing teacher strategies, teachers assessing learner strategies, and their agreeing to make use of some but not others, everyone teaches and everyone learns.

In Dewey's new order of conceptions, an original analysis of the concept of education begins to emerge. Education is seen from the perspective of an objective observer. Teachers and learners are participants in educational activities in which everyone teaches, everyone learns, and the aim is to increase everyone's knowledge. The classroom is seen as a kind of laboratory where researchers test hypotheses, or as a caucus room where party members decide who will represent them. It is a space where, as Joseph Betz puts it, "the shared, cooperative, open spirit of both science and democracy" thrives.[4] The primary role of the teacher is to transmit established knowledge (and preserve society). The primary role of the learner is to discover new knowledge (and improve society). Working together, they aim to create a body of foundational knowledge for a new society, a society that they can share.

DEWEY, PETERS, FREIRE

Dewey's new conceptions are also found in the work of R. S. Peters and Paulo Freire. All three philosophers emphasized an aspect of education they felt teachers were neglecting—learner experience (Dewey), learner understanding (Peters), learner belief (Freire)—and they argued that educational activities had to be reconceived to make room for it. What they didn't do was pause and reflect on the new conceptions themselves, and as a result they

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didn't fully appreciate the significance of one of them. For Dewey, Peters, and Freire, teachers still teach, learners still learn, and their aim is still to increase learner knowledge. Evidence of success, however, now comes from increased teacher knowledge. Dewey taught us that students experience teacher teaching based on their previous experience; and because that experience is uniquely theirs what they learn is new to teachers. Education, Dewey said, is "that reconstruction or reorganization of experience which adds to the meaning of experience, and which increases ability to direct the course of subsequent experience."[5] One implication of this conception is that if students can only repeat what teachers teach, and as a result teachers only learn that students can repeat it, because the teaching has not engaged students' previous experience, it has been, for Dewey, only minimally educational. It has, as he said, produced only "'sharps' in learning."[6]

For Peters, the old conceptions emphasize teaching facts and skills. He argued that the emphasis should be on teaching for understanding and cognitive perspective. Evidence of successful teaching comes when learners can apply what they learn in new contexts. Given that understanding involves aligning new knowledge with existing knowledge, which is unique to students, and adapting the new knowledge to fit contexts which are different from the contexts in which it was learned, the result will be new to teachers. Students develop their own understanding and join teachers in what Peters called "the shared experience of exploring a common world."[7] Students who can only repeat what teachers teach, even those who can repeat the rationale given for teaching it, know what teachers taught but do not, according to Peters, understand it. There is no indication that the teaching has engaged students' existing knowledge or that it has been adapted to fit the new contexts.

For Freire, the old conceptions emphasize teaching "ignorance" and submission.[8] He argued the emphasis should be on teaching for belief and action. Evidence of successful teaching comes when learners take what they learn in a "theoretical context" (the circulo de cultura) and apply it to life in a "concrete context" (their "slum reality").[9] Given that belief is achieved only after objectifying, interrogating, and overcoming perceived ignorance, and that it is applied in contexts which learners know better than teachers, the result will be new to teachers. "Teacher–student" and "students–teachers" are, as Freire says, critical co-investigators "jointly responsible for a process in which all grow."[10] Students who only repeat what teachers say and resume their lives unchanged, far from having overcome their ignorance, show signs of having it strengthened, seeing teachers not as potential liberators (as ignorant as they are) but as new, all-knowing oppressors. There is no evidence that students are prepared to share responsibility for their own (let alone the teachers') education.

Dewey, Peters and Freire leave us with work to do. Each merely sketched, and as a result failed to fully appreciate the significance of expanding the aim of education to increasing everyone's knowledge. Dewey mentions the "privilege" of teacher learning, but it appears to be a side-effect not an aim of education; while in historical accounts of the University Elementary School in Chicago we hear the voices of teachers but not those of teacher-learners.[11] It's as if teachers were not members of the society being renewed, and that the direction renewal takes was not as new to them as it is to students. For Peters, teacher learning is a consequence of educational activity. Learners teach teachers but only after being initiated into "forms of thought and awareness" and mastering their "standards of appraisal."[12] But initiation is a process in which everyone learns. While students master the standards by applying them in new contexts, teachers are learning more about the contexts in which the standards can and cannot be applied. Students are, in effect, testing the standards' generalizability. For Freire, teacher learning is preparation for educational activity. Teachers begin literacy campaigns by researching students' "linguistic universe," looking for trisyllabic "generative words" such as FAVELA (slum).[13] The words then become the subjects of dialogue in the culture circles. But teachers' understanding of the words are not the same as students'; and the aim of dialogue between teachers-students and student-teacher is, presumably, the creation of a shared linguistic universe, something which will be as new to teachers as it is to students.

Dewey's, Peters' and Freire's unique contributions to our understanding of education are well known and continue to be discussed, analyzed, and criticized.[14] Less well known, because they didn't emphasize it, is their shared

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understanding of the aim of education. This understanding—the context in which they saw an important aspect of education being neglected and which justified placing greater emphasis on it—needs further consideration. Given that teacher learning is a necessity not a privilege; that learner initiation does not just apply but tests teacher knowledge; and that dialogue challenges teachers' as well as learners' linguistic universe; is it not time to remove the limitations Dewey, Peters and Freire left us and consider the possibility that the aim of education is to increase everyone's knowledge?

DEWEY'S NEW ORDER OF CONCEPTIONS REVISITED

In conservative conceptions of education, teacher learning is an aspect, but not an aim of education. Teachers need to know if students are learning what is being taught. They continually assess student learning. But what students learn is always new to teachers. Even when they can only repeat what teachers say, that this group of students can repeat it now is new to teachers. Is teacher learning limited in scope? Yes and no. It's true that the teachers only concern is that students learn what is taught, but given that learning never aligns exactly with teaching, and that what students learn might be almost anything, teacher learning is unlimited. Is teacher learning as important as learner learning? Possible but unlikely: it depends on what learners learn. In most cases, learner learning either aligns with teacher teaching or it's wrong. Teachers may remember insights students had which caused them to reconsider what they thought they knew, but these are special memories because they recall events that don't happen very often.

In progressive conceptions of education, teacher learning is an outcome (but not an aim) of education. Teachers teach learning strategies by presenting students with problems to solve. Students "learn by doing," that is, by trial and error. Teachers help if students need help, if for example they become blocked or their interest flags.[15] Do progressive conceptions expand the scope of teacher learning? Yes. The strategies students finally settle on will be at least in some respects new to teachers. Is teacher learning as important as learner learning? Possibly. It depends on the problem. If there is no proven solution to a problem, the strategies students come up with could well be as effective as any strategies tried before. If, on the other hand, the problem has only one possible solution, and the students did not find it, then the most teachers can learn is that students have found a new way of going wrong.

In Dewey's new order of conceptions, as understood here, teacher learning and learner learning are equally important. When "teacher" and "learner" are conceived as roles everyone plays, and the aim is to increase everyone's knowledge, it is just as important that teachers learn from students (and on their own) as students learn from teachers. Learners are no longer limited to teaching what they know about teacher-assigned topics or what they learn trying to solve teacher-assigned problems. Their interests as learners are just as important as teachers' interests as teachers. Given learners' unique perspectives on topics and problems they helped define and challenged to make original contributions to the group's knowledge, which is all teachers can do, learners become partners with teachers and may contribute as much as or more than they do to the success of their activities.

DEWEY'S NEW MODES OF PRACTICE REVISITED

Participants in educational activities are people, people with different backgrounds and different life experiences. The knowledge they possess is uniquely theirs. Participants can and should teach each other. They have something unique to contribute, something which, as participants, they should contribute; and they can and should learn from each other, if needed, by helping others understand what their unique contribution can be. The aim of educational activities is to increase everyone's knowledge, without limitation. Participants challenge each other to clarify what they know and don't know; teach and learn from each other; learn and teach additional knowledge; and agree on what is and what is not objectively known. It is a process in which limitations are identified in order to be overcome.

The experience of participants is limited and fragmentary, but it is the

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only foundation they have for understanding the topics being studied. What's true for them is what's true to their experience; everything else they assume (at least at first) to be false. The challenge participants face is that learning something new involves unlearning the assumption that, because it's new, it must be false. The challenge teachers face is that, having learned in the past from experts and now (being experts themselves) on their own, in the new modes of practice they must learn from students, that is, from amateurs. Freire taught us that "learning" and "unlearning" are different descriptions of the same process, and he demonstrated in his practice (and suggested in his writing) that this lesson can be applied equally well to the learner *and* the teacher's unlearning. The topic discussed in the culture circles was students' slum reality. Students contributed personal experience. Literacy teachers contributed an understanding of the language students used to describe their experience. Neither knew what the other knew. Both were experts and both were amateurs. Teachers (we can assume) had as much to unlearn about students' lived reality as students had to unlearn about the language they used to describe it; and unlearning must have been as challenging for teachers as we hear it was for students.[16]

In the new modes of practice, teachers, as learners, welcome instruction from learners but as teachers they resist being corrected. Learner teaching either contradicts what they know or, when complementing it, contradicts their assumption that nothing more can be known. Teachers challenge learner teaching. They might reject it on the spot (because they are teachers) and explain why. Or they might reserve judgment and require students to provide supporting evidence. As learners, however, teachers welcome instruction. They may accept it as is and ("showing their work") explain why, or ask students to clarify it, proceeding from the assumption that it is true to them and (given how little experts might know) that it is likely true in fact. The learning environment is complex: negative and critical at one moment, positive and creative the next. Teachers learn from learner teaching and learn how to help learners with their teaching.

In the new modes of instruction, teachers do not just learn, they model learning. Students must learn how a "stranger"—someone without their personal experience—can help them increase knowledge which is based on their personal experience. Teachers help just by learning, and they help even more by learning self-consciously, that is, by calling attention not just to what they are learning but how they are learning it, thus giving students the opportunity to reflect on their own learning. Teachers might describe the connections between what they are learning from students and what they learned from teachers when they were in school, demonstrating how teaching which seemed strange at first and had little impact became more familiar the more they thought about it and ultimately upended their previous assumptions. Similarly, learners do not just teach, they model teaching. For the new modes of practice to be effective, teachers must teach in new ways, not just as experts teaching established knowledge but as amateurs who have learned something new, something which has yet to be verified. Students help by teaching what they've learned, and they help even more when they explain how they learned it and invite teachers to confirm or disconfirm it based on their personal experience. Teachers are reminded that in the new modes of practice all knowledge construction begins with personal experience. The teachers' experience as well as the students'.

DEWEY'S LEGACY

Dewey expanded conservative and progressive conceptions of teaching and learning and made more room for teacher learning, but at the same time he limited its scope and by implication its importance. In *The Child and the Curriculum*, he sees teachers, map in hand, guiding students through territory which is new to students but not to them.[17] If students notice things teachers have overlooked new details can be added to the map. Dewey does not see teachers and students exploring territory which is new to all of them and mapping it for the first time. If this had been his metaphor of choice he might have paused and considered the possibility that teachers are as much followers as they are guides. Regardless how limited the territory that students previously explored, based on the similarities and differences between it and

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the new territory, they have an unlimited store of beliefs and assumptions they can teach; and regardless how extensive the territory that teachers previously explored, they do not have more beliefs and assumptions than students have.

In *Democracy and Education*, Dewey imagines (or perhaps remembers) an infant learning the meaning of the word "hat" when his mother says "hat" as she puts something on his head before they go outdoors.[18] The example illustrates Dewey's point about the role the social medium plays in human learning: the fact that meaning is communicated from one participant to another in the context of activities they share. But is communication of meaning ever one-way? And is new meaning ever not created? To modify and update Dewey's example, a father might reflect that, when he saw his daughter smile as he put a hat on her head, and realized she wanted him to put the same smile on his face, from that day on he associated "Hat" with an activity to be enjoyed (rather than a chore to be endured); and on those occasions when his smile seemed to her (and felt to him) a bit forced, father and daughter realized that going outdoors was a joy that required some effort.

In the new education, teacher learning is not limited to learner "teaching," that is, to learners reacting without much thought as teachers deliver the curriculum. Just as babies learn through trial and error to help parents understand what they want, students learn how to help teachers understand their perspectives on the curriculum. At first, students may indicate resistance to unfamiliar knowledge by drawing attention to themselves with displays of frustration and anger; but when teachers perceive them to be disruptive and respond accordingly students learn to draw attention specifically to what they are unsure of by making a comment or asking a question at an appropriate time. It is truer to say that teachers fail to teach when they do not take the time to understand and respond to learner resistance. They may assume that students will work things out for themselves, but if that becomes their default reaction they are no longer teaching, because the intention can no longer be interpreted as trying to help others learn.

Expanding the concept of education to include and place equal emphasis on teacher learning arguably increases the chances of success by increasing the ways participants contribute to educational activities. No longer solely dependent on the altruism (and professionalism) of teachers (whose role is to help students learn) and the selfishness (and emerging professionalism) of learners (Dewey's "egotistic specialists"), an avenue is opened for the selfishness in teachers and altruism in learners.[19] When participants have more ways to contribute and are motivated in more ways to make contributions, educational activities will likely be more successful. Dewey conceived the University Elementary School as a "cooperative society on a small scale," a society which teachers and students created together and which they renewed each year.[20] At first, the school was new to everyone, including the teachers. And everyone, again including the teachers, had to keep up as it changed year-to-year. Teachers were motivated to learn what students made of the school (each day began with "group conversation"), because it was the teachers' school, too; and students were motivated to do their best for the school because the teachers (unlike most adults) listened to them.[21]

Expanding the concept of education will also increase the chances of success by increasing the control participants have over their teaching and learning. In conservative and progressive forms of instruction, what students learn from teachers cannot be predicted in advance. Though teachers may have good reason to believe students are ready to learn the curriculum, given all the connections students might make between it and their previous learning, what they learn might be almost anything. In Dewey's new modes of practice, teaching is just the first step. Teachers share their knowledge with students (and students teach what they learn from it). Students also share their knowledge with teachers (and teachers teach what they learn from it). Finally, teachers and students seek agreement on what the group does and does not objectively know (and on what they still need to learn and teach). When compared with conservative and progressive forms of instruction, the new modes of practice involve additional steps, giving participants additional contexts in which to understand, and thus gain greater control over, what they are teaching and learning.

CODA

Dewey developed his philosophy of education during a period of rapid social change: American history's Progressive Era. We live in another period of

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rapid social change, now on a global scale. Our homes and classrooms are changing, driven largely by new technologies, with even young children having direct access to information on the internet and a seeming need to share it on social media. Online discussion boards are new forums for teaching and learning. In the U.S. and internationally, they are conceived as Communities of Inquiry (CoI) in which teachers and learners are participants in educational activities working towards a common goal. The CoI approach to online discussions was developed by a team of Canadian researchers.[22] It is based on Dewey's *How We Think* and more generally on *My Pedagogic Creed*.[23] Participants share their knowledge and learning with the aim of creating new knowledge to meet the challenges of a new world. Given the unique perspectives students bring to discussions, their contributions *can be* as important as instructors' contributions; and because the aim of the discussions is to create a body of knowledge all participants can share, student contributions are *always* as important as instructor contributions.

CoI instructors do not just teach. They teach to learn. They assume that students are participants who have a responsibility to contribute to the discussions, the instructor's associated responsibility being to provoke original contributions from them. Instructors typically ask students to base their initial posts in part on the latest research, research the instructor may not be familiar with; but when an original contribution is only hinted at in what students write, a prompt from the instructor is needed to clarify it, the assumption being that the students became "blocked." Students are also encouraged to learn from each other by comparing what they write, and these contributions may be less well-thought-out. The instructor's associated responsibility here is to ask students to justify their posts, as their interest appears to have "flagged."

Students in CoI do not just learn, they learn in order to teach. At the beginning of online courses students are typically asked to introduce themselves by giving a brief sketch of their personal, educational and (in graduate courses) professional backgrounds. Then in the discussions, which are often based on scenarios or role plays, students are asked to base their contributions in part on their personal experience. Students may begin a course holding a conservative or progressive conception of education and limit their participation accordingly. The aim is that by the end of the course they will have gained some experience of and appreciation for a new mode of practice based on a new order of conceptions. The course has, in effect, modelled what it aims to teach; and one measure of its success is how much students have taught instructors.

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1 John Dewey, *Democracy and Education: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Education* (New York: The Free Press, 1916), 69.

2 John Dewey, *Experience and Education* (New York: Collier, 1938), 5.

3 See Kelvin S. Beckett, "R. S. Peters and the Concept of Education," *Educational Theory* 61, no. 3

(2011): 239-255; "Paulo Freire and the Concept of Education," *Educational Philosophy and Theory* 45, no. 1 (2013): 49-62; "John Dewey's Conception of Education: Finding Common Ground with R. S. Peters and Paulo Freire," *Educational Philosophy and Theory* 50, no. 4 (2018): 380-389.

4 Joseph Betz, "John Dewey and Paulo Freire," *Transactions of the Charles S. Pierce Societ*y 28, no. 1 (1992): 114.

5 John Dewey, *Democracy and Education: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Education (New York: The Free Press, 1916)*, 76.

6 Dewey, *Democracy and Education*, 9.

7 R. S. Peters, *Ethics and Education* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1966), 53.

8 Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Penguin, 1970/1996), 72.

9 Paulo Freire, *Cultural Action for Freedom* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Review, 1970), 53.

10 Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Penguin, 1970/1996), 80.

11 John Dewey, *Democracy and Education (New York: The Free Press, 1916), 71;* See especially, Katherine C. Mayhew and Anna C. Edwards, *The Dewey School:*

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The Laboratory School of the University of Chicago, 1896–1903 (New York: Appleton-Century, 1936).

12 R.S. Peters, *Ethics and Education* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1966), 31.

13 Paulo Freire, *Cultural Action for Freedom* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Review, 1970), 53.

14 See for example Stefaan E. Cuypers and Christopher Martin, *Reading R. S. Peters Today: Analysis, Ethics, and the Aims of Education* (London: Wiley-Blackwell, 2015); Jim Garrison, Stefan Neubert, and

Kersten Reich, *Democracy and Education Reconsidered: Dewey After One Hundred Years* (New York: Routledge, 2016); Peter Roberts, *Paulo Freire in the 21st Century: Education, Dialogue, and Transformation* (New York: Routledge, 2016).

15 Katherine C. Mayhew and Anna C. Edwards, *The Dewey School: The Laboratory School of the University of Chicago, 1896–1903* (New York: Appleton-Century, 1936).

16 See Peter Mayo, *Liberating Praxis: Paulo Freire's Legacy for Radical Education and Politics* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2004).

17 John Dewey, *The Child and the Curriculum* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1902).

18 John Dewey, *Democracy and Education: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Education* (New York: The Free Press, 1916), 15.

19 Dewey, *Democracy and Education,* 9.

20 John Dewey as quoted in Katherine C. Mayhew and Anna C. Edwards, *The Dewey School: The Laboratory School of the University of Chicago, 1896–1903* (New York: Appleton-Century, 1936), 5.

21 The school was, by all accounts, a success, per Mayhew and Edwards, *The Dewey School*, 75; See especially, Lawrence A. Cremin, *The Transformation of the School: Progressivism in American Education, 1876-1957* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1969).

22 D. Randy Garrison, Terry Anderson, and Walter Archer, "Critical Inquiry in a Text-Based Environment: Computer Conferencing in Higher Education," *The Internet and Higher Education* 2, no. 2–3 (1999): 87–105. Here I correct what I wrote in, Kelvin S. Beckett, "Dewey Online: A Critical Examination of the Communities of Inquiry Approach to Online Discussions," *Philosophical Studies in Education* 50 (2019): 46-58: the CoI approach was not based, at least not initially, on Dewey's *Logic: The Theory of Inquiry* (1938).

23 John Dewey, *How We Think, A Restatement of the Relation of Reflective Thinking to the Educative Process* (New York: D. C. Heath, 1933). John Dewey, "My Pedagogic Creed," *School Community Journal* 54, no. 3 (1897): 77-80.

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