

Education and Rhythm: A Short Refrain

Deborah Kerdeman

University of Washington

“What happens to the quest for knowledge when it moves closer to music? Do we as educators need to consider the muse more seriously in our ‘knowledge’ work?” Posing these intriguing questions, Jared Kemling voices a concern that also worried John Dewey: Education is suffocating under the weight of externally imposed ends that are divorced from life’s aesthetic and emotive dimensions. A dualistic split between knowledge and experience pervades contemporary educational discourse. Isolating knowledge from experience produces a host of ethical, intellectual, and practical difficulties, Dewey argues, such as “deficit” thinking that undervalues human agency and imagination.

To reframe our view of education, Kemling turns to music, and specifically to rhythm, to help us understand Dewey’s idea that education is a process of growth. “Since growth is the characteristic of life, education is all one with growing; it has no end beyond itself,” Dewey famously writes. “The criterion of the value of school education is the extent in which it creates a desire for continued growth and supplies means for making the desire effective in fact.”¹ Understanding what Dewey means by “growth” is notoriously difficult. Analyzing growth in terms of rhythm, Kemling hopes to make the meaning of growth determinate without subverting Dewey’s idea that growth is a dynamic ongoing experience.

Music and education are not simply analogous, he states. Rather, “there is something constitutive about rhythm and growth for both music and education.” In other words, music is or can be educative; education, in turn, is or can be a musical experience. “Can the growth-inducing classroom model itself on a Coltrane solo? Does the improvisation of a jazz soloist teach us anything about the way to inquire into the world: how to inquire as a group?,” Kemling asks. I love these questions. I agree with him, however, that he has not yet made a definitive case for the convergence of education and music.

My comments focus on a problematic assumption that is evident throughout the essay. The problem concerns how Kemling conceptualizes the phenomenon of understanding meaning. I hope my discussion will help him develop the fascinating ideas that he “plays with” in this essay.

My analysis focuses on the following passage that appears near the beginning of the essay:

It is important to remember here that growth is a process; it is not an object. Why should this be important in our quest to understand growth? What we generally mean by “understanding” is that something that is indeterminate has been made determinate. By determination, I mean that process by which we take a vague or indeterminate experience and bring it into relation with that which is already understood (determinate). This process of identifying and establishing relations is all that we mean by understanding: it is the process of identifying unities and holding those unities in relation to one another so that the whole (which changes depending upon the project at hand) might be understood by means of its parts.

Before I explain why I believe this passage is problematic, I want to underscore the profundity of the issue with which it wrestles. Western epistemology tends to conceive of understanding in terms that “fix” the present. That which is to be understood thereby becomes an object. On one level, the fact that determinations of meaning tend to assume spatial metaphors makes sense. The point of understanding is to clarify that which is indeterminate and vague. Because objects in space can be seen and grasped, they can be observed, inspected, and examined.

But when it comes to understanding the meaning of growth, conceptualizing meanings as objects-in-space won't do. The reason is that growth for Dewey is a dynamic never-ending process. It therefore is a temporal experience, not a spatial object. The challenge is to understand growth in a way that does justice to the temporality of this phenomenon. “How then,” Kemling asks, “are we to make growth determinate in a non-spatial way, in a way that does not eliminate the temporal from our understanding?” Wilhelm Dilthey, Martin Heidegger, and Hans Georg Gadamer also sought to highlight the temporal dimension of understanding. In so doing, these thinkers reframed understanding as an ontological experience, not an epistemological achievement. Kemling's analysis of musical rhythm suggests intriguing comparisons between Deweyan pragmatism and philosophical hermeneutics.

But while his analysis of understanding is promising, I take issue with the last sentence in his discussion: “This process of identifying and establishing relations is all that we mean by understanding: it is the process of identifying *unities* and holding those *unities* in relation to one another so that the whole (which changes depending upon the project at hand) *might be understood by means of its parts*” (emphasis added). I detect two problems in this sentence. First, the meaning of “unity” is unclear. Does “unity” refer to “parts,” or does it refer to “wholes”?

Second, in claiming that a whole is “understood by means of its parts,” Kemling problematizes how we understand the meaning of the whole. The way we understand the meaning of each part is not problematized, however. This oversight suggests that the meaning of each part can be determined prior to and independently of its situation within a whole. The meaning of the whole thus does not appear to be constitutive for the meaning of its individual parts in the same way that the meaning of individual parts is constitutive for the meaning of the whole.

Conceiving of parts as discrete units the meaning of which escapes examination serves to privilege parts over wholes. It also implies that there is nothing organic or integral about the relationship between parts. Relations between parts instead are deliberately forged. Relationships that can be forged also can be sundered. The whole consequently can split apart; the relationship between parts and also between parts and wholes is prone to the sort of dualistic fracturing that concerned Dewey.

In sum, the way that Kemling conceptualizes the experience of understanding meaning fails to capture the organic quality of Deweyan relations and also serves to value parts over wholes. His emphasis on individual parts appears throughout the essay. For example, he writes, “Remember that any method of determination (bringing to understanding) will involve *seeing the qualitative whole as a system*

of related parts: this will be true for any experience that has ‘meaning,’ as Dewey defines it” (emphasis added). Toward the end of the essay, Kemling writes, “I believe that considering the case of rhythm and its *decomposition into units of measurement* called beats might profitably help us understand what Dewey means by growth” (emphasis added). Finally, he focuses on John Coltrane’s solo but is silent about the other musicians with whom Coltrane is playing.

To address this oversight, I encourage Kemling to add the following words to his discussion of understanding: “the whole (which changes depending upon the project at hand) might be understood by means of its parts,” *even as understanding the meaning of each part also clarifies the meaning of the whole*. My proposed addition highlights the idea that understanding as a cyclical temporal experience of ongoing clarification.

It also reflects Dewey’s argument that individuals are integral to the communities in which they live, even as the meaningful institutions, stories, and moral orientations of communities shape individual self-understanding. “As matter of fact every individual has grown up, and always must grow up, in a social medium,” Dewey explains. “His responses grow intelligent, or gain meaning, simply because he lives and acts in a medium of accepted meanings and values.”² On Dewey’s view, individual souls don’t simply “rub up against” other souls, as Kemling imagines. Like a good jazz session, the part that each musician (student) plays in a “growth-inducing classroom” *makes no sense* without other musicians who play off each other to improvise melodies that no musician could produce on his or her own. At the same time, the meaning of a musical score always changes, depending on the real-time performances of individual soloists.

1. John Dewey, *Democracy and Education* (1916; repr., New York: The Free Press, 1944), 53.

2. *Ibid.*, 295. Also see Dewey’s discussion on pp. 30–31.