What Kind of Inquiry Today?

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In "Whatever Happened to Dewey and James? Discourse, Power, and Subjectivity in the Age of Standardization," Matthew T. Lewis argues that the contemporary standardization and accountability movement fosters forms of discourse that create passive and dependent subjects. In contrast, a Jamesean or Deweyan approach, now largely forgotten in the rush to standardize and compete, would support forms of discourse more likely to foster active, expressive, participatory subjects.

Let me briefly paraphrase Lewis's argument while stating it in everyday terms. Curricular standardization at an institutional or policy level reinforces content-centered forms of discourse in the classroom. Those forms of discourse, in turn, help constitute dependent, mindless subjects. Curricular standardization does this by legitimizing the notion that knowledge consists of merely getting the right answer, as specified by external standards. Participation in classroom discourse guided by such norms leads students to act as passive "subjects," such as by competing to be good students in these narrow terms. In so doing they turn themselves into standardized "commodities" to be bought and sold cheaply on the labor market.

Lewis puts this "regime" in historical context by suggesting that the current standards movement was the product of developments that began in the post-1980 Reagan era. I agree, but a longer-run perspective might add to this, seeing the current movement as a generalization and intensification of previous standardization movements beginning in the early 1900s at the city level, gradually moving to the state level, and now being extended to the national and global levels. Viewed in this way our "postmodern" situation is, in part, the latest phase of this process of rationalization, the iron cage of our own construction that Weber warned us of, plus reactions to this process. Insofar as there is a difference between what is happening now and what happened previously it arises from the fact that, thanks to the computer, routinization and standardization today affect the middle classes while previously only the working classes were affected. Admittedly, this also means that cognitive issues — issues relating to knowledge and inquiry — are more central than they were previously, since lower level cognitive skills are being automated today.

The remedy for this standardized production of mindless subjects, Lewis suggests, is a form of educational discourse like that favored by William James and John Dewey. James and Dewey propose adopting a more particularistic stance, sensitive to the uniqueness of each student, as opposed to the universalism adopted by the standards movement. Doing so would foster the development of "an identity which embodies and expresses the highest ideals of education and society: civility, responsibility, independence, and, ultimately, freedom," as Lewis states.

As a fellow admirer of James and Dewey, and fellow opponent of mindlessness, I share many of Lewis's sympathies. On the other hand, I would be more cautious

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in portraying James or Dewey as favoring a particularistic as *opposed to* a universalistic approach. Admittedly, James tended to be the more nominalistic or particularistic of the two, as suggested by his great emphasis on individuality. However, neither James's nor Dewey's work fell neatly on one side of this dichotomy. As Dewey argued, James's work was marked by continual struggle over this issue:

> All the determining *motifs* of his philosophy spring from his extraordinarily intense and personal feeling for the work of the individual, combined, however, with an equally intense realization of the extent to which the findings of natural sciences (to which he was loyally devoted) seemed hostile to rational justification of the idea that individuality as such has any especial value …[1]

Yes, James argued that teaching is an art that cannot be deduced from psychological laws. But he also argued that psychological principles, such as the effect of interest on attention, are of enormous help in developing a teaching strategy.[2]

Dewey was also not against universals, but against imposing them on local situations without interpretation and judgment, since every situation is unique when considered as a whole and generalizations based on experience with previous cases will not hold in the present case. The argument was not against generalization but against mindless rule following, treating generalizations as infallible laws, thinking that one way of describing things was the only way, and confusing one's description with the way things really and essentially are prior to description. Put otherwise, both James and Dewey sought a *via media* with respect to the universalism/particularism issue.

Differences between James and Dewey also make me cautious about portraying them as adopting the same educational attitude. James was ever the psychologist, both in his practical sensitivity to others and in his emphasis on the importance of the individual. As one who opposed the "PhD octopus" and "bigness in all of its forms,"[3] he certainly would have been against the present standardization movement. Dewey would also have opposed it since it reduces the living to the mechanical. But Dewey, ever the social psychologist, tended to focus on relationships rather than individuals, admitting that his early work underemphasized the importance of individuality.[4] The two shared many attitudes toward inquiry, emphasizing the exploration of live issues and the testing of ideas in practice, but James tended to focus more on the individual inquirer while Dewey tended to focus more on the scientific community. Without painting either in stereotypical terms, since each stated his views in diverse ways and changed over time, one gets the sense that James was more liberal and Dewey more socialistic. This raises questions about which attitude Lewis favors. Is he, for example, for a child-centered form of education or a collaborative form? I am unclear about his answer.

But the larger question is what conception we should institutionalize, support in educational discourse, and foster for our youngsters today. Lewis does not speak to issues at the political or institutional level. In fact he adopts an institutional perspective only when criticizing the current standardization movement. I think he may be led to omit discussion of changes at this level by Foucauldian rehetoric, which is not uncommonly used to impute nasty "power" relations to any form of

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organization. However, we can admit that we are political beings without viewing all forms of governance or organization as equally undesirable. As I have argued elsewhere, "power" is too blunt and mechanical a word to capture more collaborative forms of "direction."[5] When people work collaboratively on a team, taking each other's attitude into account, it is not clear that "power" is a useful word to characterize what is going on, although the activity is certainly under some form of "control." This is what led Dewey to talk about "direction" in education.[6]

As Dewey emphasized, education, science, and democracy have a great deal in common. In fact, he tended to treat them as virtual synonyms. What they have in common is a spirit of inquiry that is open to experience, open to others, and open to revision.[7] I think this is still not a bad ideal. But to make it more practical we need to consider concrete institutional changes, and not only changes in moment-to-moment discourse. If we avoid this by treating all politics, all coordination, all organization, as equally unsavory we will only ensure our own powerlessness.

But to return to the issue of curricular standardization, I see no reason that curricular guidelines at state, national, or even international levels might not be helpful. Some suggestions can be helpful about what it is important for students to know and be competent in today, especially if there is room for local interpretation and adaptation. Even the teachers in the Laboratory School felt they had underemphasized subjects in their enthusiasm for some of Dewey's early ideas.[8] Again, the issue is not universals versus particulars but an interplay in which theory and practice can inform one another.

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1. John Dewey, "The Philosophy of William James," in *Problems of Men*, ed. John Dewey (New York: Philosophical Library, 1946), 379–395.

2. William James, "Talks to Teachers," in *William James: Writings 1878–1899* (New York: Library of America, 1992).

3. William James, *Memories and Studies* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1968).

4. John Dewey, *Individualism Old and New* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1929).

5. Eric Bredo, "Some Problems with Power/Knowledge Analysis," *Educational Foundations* 11, no. 4 (1997): 61–73.

6. John Dewey, *Democracy and Education* (New York: Macmillan, 1916), 23–40.

7. John Dewey, "Unity of Science as a Social Problem," in *International Encyclopedia of Unified Science*, eds. O. Neurath, R. Carnap, and C. Morris (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1955), 29–38.

8. Katherine C. Mayhew and Anna C. Edwards, *The Dewey School: The Laboratory School at the University of Chicago, 1896–1903* (New York: Atherton Press, 1966).

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