

Habits of Improvisation: Towards a Freedom to Intelligently and Artfully Engage in an Uncertain World

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Why might jazz be an apt metaphor for education? It seems the reason is not so much that, loosely speaking, education is an art and so is jazz. Rather, the parallel between jazz and education, as the author of “Indeterminateness and ‘Going Beyond’: Education, Dewey, and the Blues” suggests, lies in the fact that jazz is an example of the emancipatory power of learning to think critically and creatively about society’s beliefs and customs. Jazz breaks free from habitual ways of conceiving, hearing, and doing music. It is also a form that invites a continual deconstruction and reconstruction of the form of music. Ideally, as the author puts forth, education should be something like this too.

The author writes, “Coltrane was changing the structure of the blues by going beyond its limits.” The author claims that it is in the “nature” of jazz to invite “going beyond limits,” and maintains that this “characteristic represents jazz’s first intersection with education” where education “involves a jump, a leap, a going beyond”¹ the present. “Going beyond” here is a Deweyan concept that means a break in the ongoing flow of experience that works as “an emancipation and enlargement of experience.”²

The author’s intent is clearly not to offer a fully developed account of the parallels between jazz and Dewey, indeterminateness, and education. The essay reads like a proposal in that it offers the suggestion that jazz is a powerful way for philosophers of education to think of Dewey’s work. The comparison emphasizes jazz as characterized by improvisation and group interaction, listening, and responsiveness. The essay teases out the uniquely intellectual and aesthetic, even ethical, dimensions of jazz and Dewey’s conception of learning.

As rich as the suggestion is, it raises a few important questions. For example, it is difficult to know what the author’s suggestion of “going beyond” and “jumping forward” means concretely, for education, in practice. Where might teachers and students be jumping to or what might they be emancipating themselves from? I also question the uniqueness of jazz for “going beyond.” Could we not say that “going beyond” is a practice, one that we see illustrated with Coltrane and Miles Davis? Moreover, as a practice, could we not also see it illustrated in other places too? We could say that the carpenter in Martin Heidegger’s *What is Called Thinking* is also “going beyond.” If we take “going beyond” as the possibility inherent in a practice, as I do, then jazz is one of countless illustrations of it. But what is the practice of more precisely? What does improvisation mean here?

DEWEY’S TERMS

I believe the notion of disrupting habits is a way we can understand the author’s argument about the indeterminateness, jumping forth, and going beyond qualities of education and jazz-making. First, I will look at the terms the author introduces and

then turn to understanding the relationship between habit and indeterminateness, offering examples. The author writes, “Uncertainty is the very basis of education.... reliance on a fixed concept of education, in which secure methods produce expected outcomes, is the best way to betray education.”³ This emphasis on education as resistant to fixed concepts strikes me as correct and in line with Dewey’s view of education. In order to “jump forward” or “go beyond,” we necessarily have to be flexible to change and to finding new avenues for growth. This requires that the individual is open to modifying old forms and renewing them in light of experience. For example, Coltrane did not completely do away with the form of jazz; there were parts of the form of jazz he renewed and held onto.

While we can agree that modifying and renewing is part of the improvisation and transformation process, we still must ask, what is being modified and renewed and how does it happen? We can turn to Dewey to understand this. The author writes, “Dewey, in a sense, makes the upsetting point that a lack of awareness and control are the very heart of thought.” If this were the essence of thought, this would be upsetting indeed. Yet, Dewey would in no way define thought to be this or any other one single thing. For example, Dewey also writes, in the same text, “Actual thinking is a *process*; it occurs, goes on; in short, it is in continual change as long as a person thinks.”⁴ He later writes, “In short, thinking is a continual appraising of both data and ideas.”⁵ Indeed, throughout *How We Think*, Dewey both notes that thinking is little understood and offers frameworks for how we can understand it. Moreover, Dewey exemplifies in his own work the constant modifying and renewing of his own habits of thinking, which he does with an intentional and cultivated awareness of his thinking. A core element of Dewey’s work, much like his educational philosophy, is constant change and modifying of the expression of his concepts and ideas through questions and reflections. What is being modified and renewed then is our habitual ways of thinking, or customs, and our beliefs.

RESISTING ACCOUNTABILITY: HABITS OF LEARNING AND THINKING

The author’s thesis is important given the current educational culture that focuses on fixed and unreflective routines that are easily measurable and facilitate summative assessment. The aesthetic and uncertain elements of education are resistant to this fixed view of education as is the idea of “jumping forth” and “going beyond.” As the author notes, citing Jim Garrison, disrupting habits is a central part of indeterminateness. Disrupting habits is indeed a concrete manifestation of the author’s argument. A close look at habits, as Dewey understands them, allows us to grasp what indeterminateness, jumping forth, and going beyond qualities of education and jazz-making look like.

How does the disruption of habits occur? In the author’s language, it is in the “gap,” and as I argue, it is in the gap that habit reconstruction occurs. For the author, Dewey’s “radical disparity” between experience and knowledge creates a gap, and this gap, for the author, is indeterminateness and the foundation of education. Another way of understanding the gap is as a gap between immediate sensed experience and intellectual, abstract knowledge. The author rightly points out that knowledge cannot encompass the infiniteness of experience and so must be constantly readjusting itself.

Further clarification of this idea will be fruitful here. In *Experience and Nature*, Dewey distinguishes between primary and secondary experience. Primary experience is pre-reflective and nonreflective. Aesthetics is always, at some level, a part of primary experience. We can understand aesthetics for Dewey as a kind of sensitiveness to immediate experience.⁶ The intellectual, or secondary experience, is the cognitive element, that is, the moment you begin to reflect. In *Experience and Nature*, Dewey writes, “it is literally impossible to exclude that context of non-cognitive but experienced subject-matter which gives what is *known* its import.”⁷ That is, without a sensitiveness to “crude experience” our purported knowledge is empty. Yet, there is a preference for intellectual knowledge. Individuals embracing indeterminateness and improvisation, however, are open to and sensitive to immediate experience. They prefer immediate experience because it affords us avenues for experimentation and growth — their sensitiveness to immediate experience and reflection on it allows for the reconstruction of habit. It also allows for an experimental growth that the author sees embedded in jazz.

GOING BEYOND AS RECONSTRUCTION OF HABITS

To understand the concepts even more concretely, it might help to look at an example. Let’s take the example of a musician. The musician is always balancing between immediate experience and rational reflection, understandings, and choices. While playing, the musician can rely on habits and be simultaneously present, spontaneous, as he “directs technique” in the process of creating of music.⁸ Even a musician, who plays the same piece of music, does so while remaining perceptive to the circumstance, the environment, and variations in texture and sound. That is, the musician is minutely modifying and renewing habits in the process of playing. On the one hand, his habit divests him of the worry of figuring out how to play the instrument. On the other hand, his habit is dynamic and responsive. It allows him to perform and pioneer new routes, as Dewey writes: “the intelligent or artistic habit is the desirable thing, and the routine the undesirable thing.”⁹ Coltrane’s ability to reconstruct the form of jazz requires both an attentiveness to immediate experience and an ability to intelligently modify ingrained habits of music playing.

Let’s take another example. In her essay, “Reconfiguring Gender,” Sharon Sullivan discusses culturally formed and value-laden habits.¹⁰ She points out that noticing and reflecting on one’s habits, such as habits of prejudice, is the beginning of change. Understanding the habit, and the ability to modify and control it, is a kind of power that allows an individual to be free.

The author argues that forms of art, like jazz, that “beg for revolution” are prime locations for individuals to reimagine customs, culture, and ways of doing things. This reimagining process involves a “jump forward,” experimentally to new plateaus.

CONCLUSION

The author writes powerfully, “Through Dewey, indeed, we may conceive of education not so much as the attempt to understand and predict experience but as the means to create new, unpredictable experience.” Improvisation, the author contends, is a way to embrace “radical newness.” Improvisation, as I see it, is a kind of freedom to intelligently and artfully engage in the process of reconstructing

habits in a necessarily uncertain world. This freedom is found in a person's ability to reflect critically on their habits, beliefs, and customs and modify them. Perhaps we can understand the author's "going beyond" project of seeking the uncertain and indeterminate qualities of education as a deeply aesthetic gesture. Emphasizing the aesthetic qualities of education would require teaching an openness to primary experience paired with an intelligent, reflective approach to one's customs, culture, and habits of learning and living that would allow teachers to cultivate an openness to "going beyond." By emphasizing the aesthetic, and the minute, and not just the macro way we jump forward and go beyond, we clarify and strengthen the view that jazz is a uniquely apt way to think about the project of education.

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1. John Dewey, *How We Think* (Boston: D.C. Heath, 1910), 26.
 2. Dewey, *How We Think*, 156.
 3. Regarding the difference between education, learning and socialization, see Gert Biesta's work, particularly, Gert J.J. Biesta, *Beyond Learning. Democratic Education for a Human Future* (Boulder, CO: Paradigm Publishers, 2006); Gert J.J. Biesta, "The Education-Socialisation Conundrum or 'Who Is Afraid of Education?,'" *Utbildning & Demokrati* 16, no. 3 (2007): 25–36; Gert J.J. Biesta, "Learner, Student, Speaker. Why It Matters How We Call Those We Teach," *Educational Philosophy and Theory* 42, no. 4 (2010): 540–552.
 4. John Dewey, *How We Think*, in *The Later Works of John Dewey, Volume 8, 1925–1953: 1933, Essays and How We Think Revised Edition (Collected Works of John Dewey, 1882-1953)*, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2008), 173.
 5. *Ibid.*, 216.
 6. "In both works, Dewey advanced a view of aesthetics that is sensitive to the role social class plays in traditional conceptions of aesthetics. He attempts to overcome this tradition by radically refocusing aesthetics from art objects to aesthetic experience. Aesthetic experience is marked by continuity, in which various aspects of our experience that are often separated, such as mind and body, reason and affect, and means and ends, are brought together." Nakia S. Pope, "Hit by the Street: Dewey and Popular Culture," *Education and Culture* 27, no. 1 (2011): 26.
 7. John Dewey, *Experience and Nature* (1925), in *The Later Works of John Dewey, Volume 1, 1925–1953*, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2008), 30.
 8. John Dewey, *Human Nature and Conduct* (1922), *The Middle Works of John Dewey, Volume 14, 1899–1924*, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2008), 119.
 9. *Ibid.*, 52.
 10. Shannon Sullivan. "Reconfiguring Gender with John Dewey: Habit, Bodies, and Cultural Change." *Hypatia* 15, no. 1 (January 1, 2000): 23–42.