Introduction

Let's begin head on by noting that while many educators speak well of John Dewey's theories, few have read the original works and have firsthand knowledge of what Dewey himself actually said. This gap likely stems from two factors. First, in the century since *Democracy and Education* was written, countless scholars have offered their own "translations" (or simplifications) of what Dewey said and meant. As a result, many have skipped reading the originals, forgetting that much is often lost in translation. But perhaps even more importantly, there is a longstanding perception that Dewey's original works are extremely difficult to read. In fact, as early as 1929 Professor Herman H. Horne wrote to Dewey himself asking how he would feel about Horne authoring a "companion volume" to *Democracy and Education*, to include an "expository analysis" of main points in the text.* With masterful tact, Professor Horne suggested that classroom experience had taught him that students in particular welcomed having someone else interpret what Dewey himself said. His implication was that students needed translations of the original work to help make sense of it. That the impression still stands is evident in a 2017 Centennial Handbook cited

* Horne, H. H. (1932). *The democratic philosophy of education*. New York: Macmillan.

below,* which offers not only introductory essays to each chapter, kin to Professor Horne's expository analyses, but also a series of longer essays exploring historical and contemporary elements of the work.

If the perception were accurate, if Dewey's own words were truly beyond the comprehension of so many readers, there would be no point to this edition of the classic. So let's address the "too hard to read" issue first by sampling the text itself. Consider the following quotes drawn from its early pages.

- On developing student dispositions: "The required beliefs cannot be hammered in; the needed attitudes cannot be plastered on."
- On dominant methodology: "It almost seems as if all we have to do to convey an idea into the mind of another is to convey a sound into his ear."
- On stressing self-reliance over community membership: It can produce "an individual so insensitive in his relations to others as to develop an illusion of being really able to stand and act alone—an unnamed form of insanity which is responsible for a large part of the remediable suffering of the world."

Is it really so difficult to see in these words that Dewey thought that simply *telling* students which understandings and dispositions they need was likely to fail? Is it really so difficult to see in these words that he thought an overemphasis on self at the expense of community leads to callous disregard for others' "remediable suffering"? Is it really so difficult to think about what kind of suffering is "remediable" and to come up with things like hunger and homelessness, problems born of callous disregard for others? And, can there be any doubt that his words are more powerful than my own "translation" here? Moreover, the complaint that Dewey is "too hard" becomes nearly laughable when we consider that today's educational philosophy typically employs such terms as "bricolage," "conscientization," and "ontological pluralism."

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* Waks, L. J. and English, A. R. (2017). *John Dewey's Democracy and Education: A centennial handbook*. Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press.

So no: this text is not too difficult for students or others who may pick it up. In fact, efforts to tell students what it means, even though Dewey himself agreed to Horne's request, seem ironic, given his insistence that simply telling students something is ineffective pedagogy. It is true that reading *Democracy and Education* requires time and considerable thought, but that investment pays off as readers develop a firsthand understanding of the text, which they can clarify and deepen in collegial discussions, in the social setting Dewey insists is integral to meaningful education. There is an enormous experiential difference between someone telling a student "The contemporary relevance of this idea is ABC" and a reader suddenly thinking "So **that** explains why I suffered XYZ when I was in school!" Similarly, a follow up discussion allowing peers to share connections they made to their own experiences and thinking is likely to produce a far richer understanding of "contemporary relevance" than some authority's explanation. In short, the investment of time, effort and original thinking that the text invites richly rewards readers with understandings that cannot be "hammered in" or "plastered on." This is especially true if readers pause to consider where the discussion aligns with or scrapes against their prior beliefs, forcing them to decide how to resolve discrepancies (or, as Piaget would say, to either assimilate or accommodate new ideas). Such experiences stretch and reshape minds rather than simply overstuffing them with more and more information.

Moreover, readers typically and quickly conclude that the situations and ideas Dewey details remain as relevant today as when he first drafted these ideas over a century ago. Unfortunately, many educators (or education "providers") are still ineffectively teaching primarily through telling as well as stressing individual success and prosperity over healthful communities. It is possible that no one has explained more thoroughly than Dewey the mistaken ideas underpinning such methods—and their dangers, most especially their dangers to a democratic society.

None of this is to say that there is nothing to be gained from sampling the many critical essays on *Democracy and Education* that scholars have authored over the years, and perhaps especially in recent years. (And, among those, perhaps especially the cited Centennial Handbook,

which is wide-ranging and thorough.) It is simply to say that other authors are best invited into conversation about the work only after readers have developed their own understandings and already begun a discussion among themselves.

In light of my own insistence that readers tackle the text for themselves, this essay does not contain the brief (and necessarily inadequate) summary customary in "critical introductions" to texts. Instead, I will offer readers some practical reading strategies to help them make sense of Dewey's own words more easily. But first, let's turn to the question of why it's worth considering any philosophy in the first place, and then why it's worth wrestling with Dewey's philosophy in particular.

Why Philosophy, and Dewey's Philosophy in Particular, Matters

Another longstanding idea that's worth reconsidering is this: philosophy is essentially head-in-the-clouds thinking that is fine for people who have time for such frippery, but it's a useless waste of time for people who have to attend to practical matters—like teachers deciding how to explain spontaneous combustion or dangling participles on Monday morning. But as I've been insisting for a couple of decades now, it is silly and often dangerous for teachers to focus on how to teach a subject before they are clear on how they intend their efforts to ultimately affect their students. Classroom actions (as well as school policies and procedures) embody stances on such philosophical issues as what constitutes "knowledge" as well as on such theoretical issues as what it means "to educate" someone. This is inescapably true, whether educators are aware of those stances or not. For example, in asking students to memorize as much information as possible, a teacher enacts what has been called the "banking" (or empiricist) theory of education as "depositing a lot of information" in students.* In this case "knowledge" means having information deemed "true" by experts. In contrast, in

* Freire, P. (1970). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. New York: Continuum.

line with what is called critical theory, another teacher might focus on helping students learn to ask questions like "What is the evidence for that claim?" or "Who gains, who loses, in this version of events?" Sadly, however, few teachers have ever been asked to consider what kind of person they hope students will become, and why, or what methods might encourage students in the intended direction. And yet, different methods lead to very different outcomes with long-lasting effects. The student taught to believe and obey authorities without question is highly likely to become a very different type of citizen than one taught to examine evidence and ask authorities probing questions without fear.

Despite a raft of factors that have conspired to push theory and philosophy farther and farther out of academic programs for professional educators, the fact is that atheoretical educators are dangerous. When they are not aware of the enormous responsibility of shaping the dispositions and habits of tomorrow's workers, neighbors and citizens, teachers who focus only on teaching biology or history are easily co-opted by others who *are* clear on their goals. For example, consider that Woodrow Wilson once said:

> We want one class of persons to have a liberal education, and we want another class of persons, a very much larger class of necessity in every society, to forgo the privilege of a liberal education and fit themselves to perform specific difficult manual tasks.*

To this day, many children still sit in rows and endure nearly unbearable boredom as they complete senseless worksheets in part because at one time the "very much larger class" of people needed to be prepared for the boredom of factory work. Sadly, schools in the U.S. are still very much in the habit of training a small group of privileged students for leadership as Wilson urged and training the masses of less-privileged others as loyal, obedient and unquestioning workers. The system works

* Wilson, W. (1909). Cited in Gatto, J. T. (2003). Against school: How public education cripples our kids, and why. *Harper's Magazine*. Retrieved November 15, 2017 from https://harpers.org/archive/2003/09/against-school/

well for corporations that need legions of workers for such jobs as cleaning toilets in hotels and bagging burgers at fast food restaurants; it works not at all for providing children with genuinely equal educational opportunity. Anyone doubting that might do well to read any one of Jonathan Kozol's books or to compare the curriculum at an elite boarding school with the curriculum in a typical public high school.*

Teachers who haven't considered the larger goals of schools become simply pawns in a game orchestrated far from their own classrooms. That game includes persuading students that the most important goal a person can have is to earn money in order to buy, buy, buy anything and everything promoted to them. Few educators would consciously endorse that goal as worthy of their efforts, but they may support it nevertheless if they fail to consider whether existing conditions align with or undermine goals they *would* endorse. There is, for example, a very long tradition of corporate interests influencing curriculum. An early example is the public burning—yes, the physical burning—of Harold Rugg's social studies textbooks in 1940, in part because they encouraged students to examine advertisers' claims critically.† Today's efforts include keeping topics like global warming out of schools because increased regulation would be costly for corporations. They also include injecting curricula into schools, as when the energy industries create their own curricula to shape student thinking on coal mining or on "fracking" in the gas industry.‡ Efforts to control curricula in order to protect corporate profit and a consumerist mentality have been in place

* Or see, for example: Carter, P. L., & Welner, K. G. (Eds.). (2014). *Closing the opportunity gap: What America must do to give every child an even chance*. Oxford, England: Oxford University Press.

† Spring, J. H. (2003). *Educating the consumer-citizen: A history of the marriage of schools, advertising, and media*. Mahwah, N.J.: Routledge.

‡ See, for example: Peterson, B. (2017). Climate deniers flooding schools with alternative facts—Educators are fighting back. *Rethinking Schools*. Blog post. Retrieved November 10, 2017 from https://www.rethinkingschools.org/blog/posts/climate-deniers-flooding-schools-with-alternative-facts-educators-are-fighting-back; Climate Science Watch. (2010, December 23). Corporate funding in public education—is anyone watching? Retrieved

for decades and are currently stronger than ever.* Teachers who think their only responsibility is to teach whatever turns up in textbooks fail to meet their professional responsibility both to students and to the democratic society that public schools purport to serve.

And that brings us to exactly why *Democracy and Education* is such a critical text. We are in a time when there is widespread lament that, while democratic ideals have never been fully realized, currently much of the population and its leadership have lost sight of those ideals completely. In recent years, members of a fractured and fractious Congress seem to have forgotten that the government is supposed to function of, for and by "the people," having been co-opted largely by staggeringly wealthy donors and corporate lobbyists. Gains in incorporating *all* citizens into a fair and just society have been further eroded by violent racist activism. And, rather than working toward communities as supportive, healthful places, countless Americans nationwide routinely carry guns, viewing everyone around them as potential threats rather than fellow human beings. Perhaps most alarmingly, increasingly deprived of mental health care or steeped in ideological hatred, mass murderers are exacerbating that trend.

How do we get out of this mess?

Dewey has relevant ideas, the most critical perhaps evident in the title linking *democracy* and *education*. While teachers worry about explaining iambic pentameter and administrators worry about staffing every classroom with a teacher (or even just a warm body), everything happening in classrooms and schools is shaping tomorrow's citizens—either consciously in line with some philosophy, or else willy nilly. This is particularly dangerous with the advent of commercial providers of "education." Such providers are increasingly offering online programs and ending daily face-to-face interaction among young community

November 10, 2017 from http://www.climatesciencewatch.org/2010/12/23/corporate-funding-in-public-education-is-anyone-watching/

* See, for example: Mahiri, J. (2005). From 3 R's to 3 C's: Corporate curriculum and culture in public schools. *Social Justice, 32*(3), 72-88. Retrieved November 10, 2017 from ProQuest database.

members, who have less and less chance to interact with others unlike themselves. Moreover, when schools are run by corporations pursuing profit and promoting consumerist values, it is foolish to expect those schools to educate students capable of becoming the corporate whistle blowers, critical consumers, or innovative artists that a healthful democracy needs.

The kind of citizens that schools educate will shape the kind of society the country becomes tomorrow. If what we want are concerned citizens who believe they have a responsibility to contribute to their communities, who understand the dangers of shutting certain segments of society out of democracy's promise of fair opportunities for life, liberty and happiness, then teachers need to think deeply about what they do in their classrooms and why, about whether memorizing formulas is more important than learning to question the claims of politicians, ads or journalists.

Reading Strategies for This Text

I suspect that there are at least three factors that contribute to contemporary readers' challenges as they work their way through this text. The first two are external to the work, while the third stems from the way that Dewey presents his thinking. However, these are not insurmountable difficulties if readers are armed with appropriate reading strategies. To smooth the road ahead, then, what follows is a look at the challenges, and then some useful strategies.

First, since the early years of this century, most public school students have been educated in schools where standardized test scores drove classroom activity. The need for high scores has emphasized a very specific style of reading: reading for the sake of answering test questions. This is a perversion of what many experts consider "reading." Whereas literacy experts say the point of reading is to make sense of a text for oneself, students in testing environments learn instead that the point of reading is to extract—often to guess—answers to questions posed by far distant faceless and nameless test makers, even

answers to questions and reading passages that themselves make no sense at all.* The result is that college classrooms currently teem with students who have little or no practice in reading as an effort to make personal sense of a text, and they are flummoxed when they are simply told "Read this."

A second issue, one related to an environment where "tweets" have been considered adequate for capturing thinking, is that contemporary "reading" often involves the written equivalent of hearing sound bites in media. Rather than reading an entire newspaper, for example, many people who still consume written news settle for morning and evening digests of the day's news containing only headlines and a sentence or two of detail. The effect is that as readers, the full public has largely become used to the idea that information can and should come in obvious, short bursts. *Democracy and Education* has neither of these qualities, and so it may appear forbidding; readers are products of their environment, not immune to it. This expectation of short and easy reading is a complication, since reluctant readers often spend more time resenting instructors and authors than wrestling with texts.

In addition, Dewey's structure for the text presents challenges for readers. For many years, standard advice for both informative writing and speaking has been "Tell them what you're going to tell them, then tell them that, then tell them again what you told them." In short, advice has been to build arguments deductively, first specifying the main point to be made and then providing support for that point, allowing readers and listeners to evaluate evidence along the way, and then reminding them at the end what point the evidence supports. But Dewey typically works in the opposite direction, inductively, poking into this or that corner of thinking and experience before essentially saying, "And so what all that adds up to is *this*."

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* See, for example: Hartocollis, A. (2012, April 20). *When pineapple races hare, students lose, critics of standardized tests say. The New York Times*. Retrieved November 13, 2017 from http://www.nytimes.com/2012/04/21/nyregion/standardized-testing-is-blamed-for-question-about-a-sleeveless-pineapple.html

Before he gets there, however, readers may feel themselves wandering aimlessly among topics even in a single chapter, at a loss to see where the author is heading.

In this situation, readers have much in common with people working on jig saw puzzles. If a picture of the completed puzzle is available on a box, the jumbled pieces can be grouped by color and assigned roughly to sections of the whole (sky here, zebra there, and so on). But, if the pieces are rediscovered in a plastic bag in a closet and no one remembers what the whole will look like . . . good luck putting it together. It's possible, but it can take a very long time.

Many "translators" try to help readers solve this problem by summarizing chapters and pointing out how some chapters group around a topic. However, that recreates the situation of telling readers what the author means instead of helping them make sense for themselves. Dewey himself does say that some chapters group into meaningful chunks, but he doesn't explain that until very late in the book. To avoid teaching by telling as well as to help readers track the course of Dewey's thinking, I offer three strategies for navigating the text. Readers who apply these strategies will find, I think, that they can make sense of the text much more easily than they may have expected when they first picked it up.

The first strategy is standard study skills advice: before beginning a chapter, readers should survey the main heading and subheadings to get a sense of what points the author plans to make. For example, the title of Chapter I is "Education as Necessity of Life." A reader can start there thinking "OK, in this chapter he will explain why he thinks education is an essential part of life. At the end of the chapter, that's what I should understand—what he means when he says education is necessary for life." The task then becomes to examine the subheads and see how they build to that point. The first subhead, for example is "Renewal of life by transmission." This can be rephrased "Life is renewed by transmission." Since the reader doesn't yet know what the author means by these statements, the best thing to do is to turn them into questions to guide the reading. Using these two examples, a reader might come up with the following:

What does "renewal of life" mean? What does "transmission" mean? How does transmission renew life?

Keeping such questions in mind is an invaluable aid to readers. For example, Chapter I opens with a discussion of living and not-living things, including rocks—a discussion that may seem bizarre to a reader who is expecting to find something about democracy and/or education. But the reader who has asked the above questions should be able to say "Oh, well: he's talking about life here, probably to be clear about what he means by 'life' before he explains what he means by 'renewal of life.'" Previewing headings and then turning them into questions is a way for readers to create their own frame—their own metaphorical picture on the box—to help them organize details in the chapter into a coherent whole.

A second suggestion is to ask a different type of question of the text. Surveying heads and subheads leads to questions about *what* the author will say; it's also useful to think about *why* the author takes up various topics—that is, to think about the larger goals of Dewey's writing. Every part of every chapter has a purpose, and readers will likely make sense of a discussion more easily if they ask "What larger goal is Dewey after here?"

For example, some readers might become adrift during a discussion of Plato or other early philosophers. But one of the things Dewey does repeatedly in the text is to clear the ground for his own thinking by explaining what earlier philosophers thought and illustrating how that thinking affected, and may still affect, what happens in schools. In such discussions, he points out both strengths and weaknesses of earlier thought, allowing the reader to see more clearly how his own ideas build on what was valuable in the past while trying to correct former wrong turns. In the case of Plato, for example, Dewey notes that the idea of educating people with different talents differently makes a great deal of sense, but since Plato was thinking primarily of masters and slaves, different types of education became associated with different social classes rather than with different student interests or aptitudes—a harmful idea still seen in tracking and in

the well-documented phenomenon of rich schools for rich kids and poor schools for poor kids. As Dewey points out, such a system works against, rather than for, the ideals of a democratic society offering truly equal opportunity.

Readers not practiced in thinking about an author's larger goals might benefit from a brief survey of those Dewey frequently pursues. So, here's a basic list, with examples (in italics). At various points, he wants the reader to understand

- the thinking of earlier philosophers: *Plato's starting point is that the organization of society depends ultimately upon knowledge of the end* [the purpose] *of existence.*
- how earlier thinking affected education: *An education could be given which would sift individuals, discovering what they were good for, and supplying a method of assigning each to the work in life for which his nature fits him.*
- what he believes was valid/useful in earlier theories: *We cannot better Plato's conviction that an individual is happy and society well organized when each individual engages in those activities for which he has a natural equipment . . . .*
- weaknesses he believes are in earlier theories: *But progress in knowledge has made us aware of the superficiality of Plato's lumping of individuals and their original powers into a few sharply marketed-off classes; it has taught us that original capacities are indefinitely numerous and valuable.*
- his own thinking: *Since education is a social process, and there are many kinds of societies, the criterion for educational criticism and construction implies a particular social ideal.*
- implications his own thinking has for reforming education: *It is not enough to see to it that education is not actively used as an instrument to make easier the exploitation of one class by another. School facilities must be secured of such amplitude and efficiency as will in fact and not simply in name discount the effects of economic inequalities, and secure to all the wards of the nation equality of equipment for their future careers.*

He is also generous in providing examples to illustrate his points, as when he says: *A person boxing may dodge a particular blow successfully, but in such a way as to expose himself the next instant to a still harder blow.* Since a discussion often moves from one goal to another in a segment of text, asking questions about Dewey's larger purpose can yield sign posts to help readers stay oriented in a particular segment of text.

These suggestions are staples of reading instruction, hardly new or novel ideas. However, few students have ever learned about, or had opportunity to practice, asking their own questions of texts. Instead, the need to provide "right" answers on exams and quizzes as well as on standardized tests has left many students unable to even imagine generating their own questions. It just might take a bit of time and initiative for readers to master these habits. Which may sound like a lot of trouble.

So why bother? Why not just default to expert interpretations?

Because, as suggested earlier, readers gain a deeper understanding of the author's thinking as well as their own thinking when they forge personal interpretations of and connections to a text. As I was working on this introduction, for example, I heard about research that suggests males do better than females with some lessons in physics. It seems that the way males urinate allows them to experiment with "projectile motion," a form of firsthand experience and experimentation unavailable to females.* As I began laughing about this point, it struck me rather forcefully that this is actually a terrific example of Dewey's insistence that "there is no such thing as genuine knowledge and fruitful understanding except as the offspring of *doing*." This connection to something I'd just heard made Dewey's words more alive, helping me understand both Dewey's point and the challenges of teaching physics a bit better. For me, other parts of the text prompted such thoughts as "So *that's* why I quit a factory job after only one shift" or, closer to the

* Turner, C. (2017, September 15). Boys are better at physics because they learn about 'projection' while going to the toilet, researchers say. *The Telegraph.* Retrieved November 13, 2017 from http://www.telegraph.co.uk/education/2017/09/15/boys-better-physics-learn-projection-whilegoing-toilet-researchers/

current discussion, "So *that's* why the College of Liberal Arts enjoys so much more prestige than the College of Education." For readers who actively try to make sense of the text and connect it to their own lives, there are countless *aha!* moments to reward their efforts. And, such moments themselves illustrate Dewey's definition of an educational experience as one that yields "connections" that were earlier "imperceptible."

Perhaps even more importantly, there is much to learn about how education can be—and I would argue *is* being—used to undermine the shared values and commitments that make democracy possible. I genuinely believe that every reader who walks away from this text with a good understanding of it will be one more citizen with the insights and ideals necessary to help get American education back on track as democratic education, helping to end what many feel is a current national nightmare of divisiveness and injustice. Any movement toward this goal is invaluable, and it cannot come a moment too soon.

DEMOCRACY AND EDUCATION:
AN INTRODUCTION TO THE PHILOSOPHY OF EDUCATION