

Manifesting Change Through a Creative and Adventurous Mind

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“A possibility of continuing progress is opened up by the fact that in learning one act, methods are developed good for use in other situations. Still more important is the fact that the human being acquires a habit of learning. He learns to learn” (Dewey, 2004, p. 43).

Teachable moments – organic situations where conversations between student, teacher, and content align for students to “get it”; events where one moment takes hold and education emerges real and relevant, resulting in wonderful, unplanned opportunities that take learning in new, unknown directions. I believe the pandemic is such a moment; one where educators could reconceptualize education in new and unknown ways. The pandemic provided me an opportunity to realign with my deepest Deweyan principles and renew my commitment once again to the cause of experiential, active, and meaningful education. My story does not start in the pandemic, however, but instead begins in my own teacher education program.

Educational Foundations

“It is the business of educators to supply an environment so that this reaching out of an experience may be fruitfully rewarded and kept continuously active” (Dewey, 2004, p. 206).

My Deweyan alignment began during my social studies methods courses: reading, experiencing, and then using his words to complete assignments - writing about creating “a Deweyan environment” where students “learn by doing” as they “discover” learning. Reductionist in nature, but the start of a yet unfinished journey that still informs my philosophy. I had no grasp then of just how his words would impact my overall career trajectory – initiating a fundamental shift from a vision of the lecturing football coach to social studies methods technology professor. Dewey undergirded my pedagogy as I created an “experiential environment” for students at multiple levels of education.

Pandemic Context

“The school system represents not thinking but the domination of thought by the inertia of immemorial customs” (Dewey, 2009, p.1).

Teaching throughout the pandemic, shifting to an emergency remote posture, my thoughts returned to Dewey’s 1922 essay, “Education as Engineering,” where he explored the importance of concrete experience to break free from what has become habitual traditions in

education. He suggested that should schools be wiped from existence; they could be rebuilt exactly as they had been, compared instead to wiping away bridges, which would be more difficult to rebuild due to the science and engineering involved (i.e., the “thinking” required). Dewey posits that we have only just begun to think about education, and in fact, what we consider education is so deeply embedded in memory that it seems “natural.” As I observed the experiences of my teacher candidates and their mentors teaching online, working so hard to recreate a brick-and-mortar school experience, I realized the truth of the essay, even asking myself – what am I doing differently? This lack of true thinking in education creates challenges for any teacher who wishes to make a difference and be different as these habits of tradition ultimately work to prevent experimentation or growth. Despite new knowledge that shows the promise of an evolved education, specifically a purposeful use of digital tools, we continue to see little sway towards anything new. Reflecting, I considered how I may be contributing to the very problem I had hoped to address as pandemic teaching continually proved Dewey true.

Technology Integration Observations

“The most optimistic soul, if candid, will admit that we are mostly doing the old things with new names attached. The change makes little difference—except for advertising purposes” (Dewey, 2009, p. 4).

The teacher candidates I interacted with shared stories of how technology was being used to deliver a “school” experience. Multiple choice tests set to music, colors, and images and teacher-controlled slide delivery of information confined environments reborn online to fit new tools into old methods, reproducing drills, tests, and engaging in behavior control. Peers spoke of recreating the “classroom experience” online, while fretting about cheating, looking to catch plagiarism, and keeping students “focused.” Often institutionally required programs, these digital tools prescribe how teachers would use them, depriving them of their development towards a professional intellect—or what Dewey would consider actual thinking about teaching—in any different way. The result was doing what was habit—implementing traditional approaches. Facing this unknown pandemic-induced situation led them towards an efficiency mindset, and prescribed best practice with existing digital tools, relying on promised learning gains and hoping to make up for a lack of “training” or professional development by instead trusting outside forces working on the inside.

My question became: “Why must we recreate schools as they currently existed into the new digital spaces provided?” Dewey seems prophetic; without a concrete foundation of something different, there can be no true change, even when school itself is suddenly wiped (in a way) from existence.

Reconceptualizing Through Dewey

“In short, at present, both students and teachers of education are excessively concerned with trying to evolve a body of definite, usable, educational directions out of the new body of science” (Dewey, 2009, p. 5).

Vexed, I started to reconsider how to better engage teachers to ensure more fertile and experimental minds to take advantage of this pandemic moment; harnessing it in a way that did not recreate but transform. It was here I realized that I had also fallen into a similar situation in my courses, binding myself to “Discussion Board” post/respond protocol tradition. How was this providing concrete experience upon which to build a new education? In this pandemic provided moment where technology is no longer an option but required, I needed to reassess my own approach and experiment. I needed to model seizing opportunities to experiment within a realm of necessity that could allow my students to break free from traditions that constrain our minds and engage in real experimentation. So, I returned to my root beliefs, reconsidering what true experimentation means:

...something other than blindly trying one’s luck or messing around in the hope that something nice will be the result. Teachers who are to develop a new type of education need more exacting and comprehensive training in science, philosophy and history than teachers who follow conventionally safe lines (Dewey, 2009, p. 3).

I needed to take action that built on thought and developed further thinking to attempt an experience that might generate shifting thought, allowing each student to engage the complicated educational conversation in ways previously unknown within online habit/tradition, both authentic and relevant (Pinar, 1975). Conversing anew with students, content, and teacher, they might adjust their disposition while standing upon new lived experiences as they exit my course.

Intellectual and Courageous Pioneers

“...a new personal attitude in which a teacher shall be an inventive pioneer in use of what is known and shall learn in the process of experience to formulate and deal with those problems which a premature ‘science’ of education now tries to state and solve in advance of experience” (Dewey, 2009, p. 4).

The pandemic opened doors for educators, like myself, to rethink my approach. If I was going to encourage my own students to begin building a new foundation of evidence upon which to stand while considering content, method and pedagogy in a holistic manner for authentic and relevant learning, and if I truly believed in the need to return educators to a philosophical foundational focus that encouraged moving beyond mechanical efficiency of best practice, then I needed to act as the curriculum instructional gatekeeper I wanted each of them to embody (Thornton, 2005). I had to select content and pedagogy that engages a reflective consideration of their own lived experiences as teachers, feeding their future decisions as practitioners acting in the same way. I tossed my preplanned discussion board, giving birth to Operation Watershed, A PBL WebQuest. Engaging students in emergent experimental and potentially imaginative ways, I attempted to provide a model for looking into the content for pedagogy, and within the pedagogy, as an emergent opportunity for the use of digital tools to engage, enhance, and extend learning (Kolb, 2017). Through this experience, they could return to a view of the teacher as an

intellectual (Giroux, 1988), engaging in true reflective thought as I nurtured their educational imagination (Eisner, 2001), and to envision teaching with a conscience (Ayers, 2016).

Reflecting on the pandemic through Dewey reminded me what is needed to usher in change; a willingness to pioneer new ideas rooted in an intellectual consideration of opportunities, developing an imagination to blaze trails, and experimenting to produce concrete experiences upon which that change can be built. Dewey's words from 1922 still provide relevant conceptual insight into education today. It is incumbent upon professors of education to give proper attention to philosophy, history, and curriculum writ large, returning teacher preparation to authentic visions instead of the current mechanical focus which handcuffs itself to technology use for efficiency and recreation. Until educational imagination and intellect is reclaimed, our teachers are susceptible to assumed best practice and limited views. Dewey reminds us the call in teaching "is to the creative adventurous mind" (Dewey, 2009, p. 4).

References

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