

A Pedagogy of Freedom: John Dewey and Experimental Rural Education

by Nathan Crick with David Tarvin

English Abstract

In John Dewey's philosophy of education, schools would use experimental methods to cultivate the creative intelligence, independence of character, and social ethic necessary for individuals to find a meaningful and productive place within both their local community and ever-expanding global society. However, up until 1926, Dewey had focused most of his attention on reforming the educational system of the United States. Only in 1926, when he encountered the newly founded rural schools in Mexico, did he articulate the possibility that his experimental methods of education might apply not only to urban cities like Chicago but also to smaller villages and towns in developing nations. This essay attempts to construct a working model of such an educational project, which I call a "pedagogy of freedom," that expands access to and breadth of education without imposing a new set of hierarchies. Instead, a pedagogy of freedom increases the ability of students to move between the local and the global contexts in a way that enriches their connection to place while expanding their imaginative horizons, thereby providing them the means to determine and to achieve their own ends.

Resumen en español

En la filosofía de la educación de John Dewey, las escuelas utilizarían los métodos experimentales para cultivar la inteligencia creadora, la independencia de carácter y de ética social necesaria para individuos a encontrar lugar significativo y productivo dentro de ambos su vecindario local y una sociedad global creciente. Sin embargo, hasta 1926, Dewey había enfocado más de su atención a reformar el sistema de enseñanza de los Estados Unidos. Sólo en 1926, cuando se encontró con las nuevas escuelas rurales fundadas en México, expresó la posibilidad que sus métodos experimentales de educación quizás apliquen no sólo a ciudades urbanas como Chicago, pero también a aldeas y pueblos más pequeños en países en vías de desarrollo. Este ensayo procura construir un modelo de trabajo de tal proyecto educativo al que llamo " pedagogía de libertad," una pedagogía que expande el acceso y la amplitud de la educación sin imponer un nuevo conjunto de jerarquías. En lugar, un pedagogía de libertad aumenta la capacidad de los estudiantes de moverse entre los contextos locales y globales de una manera que enriquezcan sus conexiones para expandir sus horizontes imaginativos, así les proporcionaran los medios para determinar y lograr sus propios fines.

Resumo em português

No contest da filosofia de educação criada por John Dewey, as escolas deveriam usar metodos empirimentais, para cultivar a criatividade da inteligencia, independente do carater e ética social necessária, para que o indivíduo possa encontrar o significado e produtivo lugar na comunidade local e a expansão da sociedade a nivel global. Porem, ate 1926 Dewey focalizou o máximo de atenção na reforma do sistema educational dos

Estados Unidos. Somente em 1926, quando ele encontrou uma nova escola rural fundada no México, Ele articulou a possibilidade dos seus metodos experimentais de educação nao seria apenas aplicável para cidades urbanas como Chicago, mas tambem pequenas vilas e cidades em nações em desenvolvimento. Esta pesquisa tem a intenção de construir um modelo de trabalho como projeto educacional, no qual ele chamou de projeto educacional de liberdade. Uma pedagogia na qual expande acessos para ampliar o sistema de educação sem imposição, e um novo conjunto de hierarquias. A pedagogia de liberdade cresce a abilidadade dos estudantes se moverem entre o local e o contest global, no jeito que enriquece as conecções to local, expandindo suas emaginações horizontais, provando entao o significado para determinar e alcançar seus próprios fins.

As the summer of 1926 drew to a close, John Dewey found himself on the road to Guadalajara with his daughter Evelyn and a Spanish translator. It was the end of his short stint as a guest lecturer at the National University in Mexico City where he had been invited to speak on “Contemporary Philosophical Thought” and “Advanced Educational Problems” to a group of approximately 500 largely U.S. teachers and students.[1] Yet he was fascinated by the stories he heard from the Mexican teachers who came to his lectures. In the midst of the turmoil of the Mexican Revolution, as the new constitutional government struggled to build a nation, pockets of creative education were springing up in the newly founded rural schools. Consequently, although originally tasked primarily to lecture on “philosophy to a largely academic audience,” by the end of his trip Dewey had requested a car and a translator in order to tour these schools and speak with the primarily indigenous population of teachers and students who taught and learned there.[2] This experience, however brief, left a lasting impression upon him and culminated in an insight that I believe has lasting significance for international educational development, particularly in the developing world. In short, Dewey caught a glimpse of the progressive potential of a communicatively networked system of rural schools that integrated, through experimental method, the practices and traditions of local culture with the aesthetic and scientific resources of global cooperative intelligence.

Given the short time Dewey spent in Mexico, the significance he placed on his experience is startling. He writes that the rural school movement “is not only a revolution for Mexico, but in some respects one of the most important social experiments undertaken anywhere in the world.”[3] His initial justification for this evaluation is the fact that the schools, for the first time in Mexico's history, are attempting to “incorporate in the social body the Indians that form 80 percent of the total population,” and who until a few years earlier were “economically enslaved, intellectually disinherited and politically eliminated.”[4] But even more important was “the spirit and aims which animate the rural schools.”[5] For Dewey was not so naïve to view the incorporation of native peoples into

a nationalistic structure as lacking its own logic of domination. True incorporation done in a democratic spirit was achieved not through top-down disciplinary structures, but through voluntary communication and interaction between different communities. It was this latter spirit that Dewey saw in embryo in the rural schools at their time of origin and bolstered what he called a “pet idea” that he had been developing for some time:

[T]here is no educational movement in the world which exhibits more of the spirit of intimate union of school activities with those of the community than is found in this Mexican development. I have long had a pet idea that “backward” countries have a great chance educationally; that when they once start in the school-road they are less hampered by tradition and institutionalism than are countries where schools are held by customs which have hardened through the years. But I have to confess that I have never found much evidence in support of this belief that new countries, educationally new, can start afresh, with the most enlightened theories and practices of the most educationally advanced countries. The spirit and aims of Indian rural schools as well as all of the normal schools of Mexico revive my faith.[6]

In other words, what impressed him the most was not the bureaucratic structures or nationalistic aims of the schools, but rather the fact that each individual school was given the resources and freedom to act as a medium through which previously marginalized populations were able to express their vitality and creativity through shared experience and cooperative practice. Indeed, the two characteristics often worked together. Because resources were so few and administration relatively uncoordinated, the schools relied heavily on local volunteers and the arts and practices they carried with them as part of their shared culture. Dewey's description of the typical rural school captures its heterogeneous character, in which myths and language of nationalism stand side-by-side with indigenous traditions as well as conventional academic disciplines:

Much of the actual work is, it goes without saying, crude, as crude as are the conditions under which it is done; but it is the crudeness of vitality, of growth, not of smug conventions The simplicity of the buildings and the genial climate make for a simple curriculum: reading, writing and, when necessary, the speaking of Spanish as a matter of course; some “figuring,” local geography, national history with emphasis upon the heroes of independence and the revolution, and then for the remainder, industrial education, chiefly agricultural, and such home industries, weaving, pottery, etc., as are characteristic of the neighborhood... In many places there is much attention to music and to design in the plastic arts, for both of which things the Indians display of marked genius If the rural schools can succeed in preserving the native arts, aesthetic traditions and patterns, protecting them from the influence of machine-made industry, they will in that respect alone render a great service to civilization.[7]

Rather than applaud the effort to bring the idea of the “Mexico” to the diverse peoples who inhabited the new nation-state, Dewey praises the nation for acting as a vehicle by which individual communities and cultures can finally begin to share their unique skills, perspectives, and wisdom with the rest of civilization and be enriched in return.

This essay seeks to trace out the practical implications of Dewey's reaction to Mexico's early educational initiatives by using his larger philosophy to construct a method that does justice to the original spirit and aims of the rural schools. This experimental model of the rural school involves the entire community in the educational process, incorporates local arts and practices within the curriculum, and recognizes the conventional educational imperative to cultivate a more global perspective on the world using the latest knowledge of the sciences and humanities. By drawing from what he calls the "native arts, aesthetic traditions and patterns," experimental rural schools would actually constitute the "laboratory" setting out of which would grow questions and problems that could then be informed by scientific knowledge and tested in practice. Whereas this experimental model had been difficult to implement in the past because of the human and physical resources required, advances in communication technology allow rural teachers and students to be immediately connected with specialists in multiple fields, all of whom can bring their knowledge to bear on helping students resolve some shared problem or overcome some collective challenge. In this way, I argue that Dewey's philosophy of education can be supplemented with scientific and technological advances to articulate a vision of experimental rural education that can preserve and enrich local culture at the same time that it widens the scope of imaginative vision beyond the bounds of the provincial. In what I call a pedagogy of freedom, the goal of education is not to impart information or train students to fit into pre-established categories, but to use the arts of communication to cultivate pragmatic attitudes of mind and body that enable students to meaningfully participate in an ever-expanding social and political environment through the process of conjoint inquiry into the objects and events that characterize our shared experience in the world.

I. Connecting the Local and the Global

The challenge of creating a system of rural schools in developing nations in many ways symbolizes the crisis of the modern era, which is the attempt to bridge the gap between the local and the global. On the one hand, the rural school represents a gathering place for the community, an ideal site for reproducing and celebrating rich traditions unique to a particular culture. On the other hand, the rural school is often seen as an extension of a larger national or international institution charged with integrating these cultures into a larger functional system. In the nationalistic model, the latter impulse dominates, as the pressure to create a uniform political economy creates an imperative to replace the intimacy of local oral communities with a faceless system of mechanical organization established for purely external ends. One predictable outcome is that the centrifugal influence of "enormous organization" leads to the "substitution of impersonal bonds for personal unions" and culminates in "a flux which is hostile to stability." [8] Educationally, this results in mechanical forms of thought and action becoming ends in themselves, "hampering the free play of artistic gifts, fettering men and women with chains of conformity, conducing to abdication of all which does not fit into the automatic movement of organization as a self-sufficing thing." [9] As with the

Mexican rural school movement, all that does not fit within the industrial imperatives of the nation quickly find themselves purged from the curriculum.

However, Dewey does not believe such a fate is inevitable. Organizations need not be driven by such single-minded tendencies and structured on the rigid demands of 19th century nationalism. Rather than having to exist only as an end-in-itself, “organization as a means to an end would reënforce individuality and enable it to be securely itself by enduing it with resources beyond its unaided reach.”[10] However, for social organization to become a means to an end rather than an end in itself it has to be put in the service of community life rather than exploiting its resources for purely material gain. More democratic forms of organization might preserve the best in what Dewey calls the “contiguous associations of the past” while being “responsive to the complex and world-wide scene” in which they are now enmeshed, thus simultaneously enriching local associations while bridging them in interest and purpose with far-flung others.[11] According to Bruno Latour, Dewey suggested that a genuine public must “possess the ability to loop back from the few to the many and from the many to the few,” and this ability is made possible by an emphasis on interactive communication in science and in art.[12]

To understand the relationship between the local and the global in experimental rural education, one can look to how Dewey understands the multiple layers of the “public” in contemporary political culture. Here we find Dewey recognizing both the importance of sustaining local oral traditions and communities while also acknowledging the necessity of connecting them, through electronic and print technologies, to a networked global society. In Dewey’s ideal of democracy, the public is not a single monolithic entity, but is instead made up of many publics interacting through a flexible network of public spheres. These networks would then be linked together through communication technologies, thereby giving them interactive access to common resources of cooperative intelligence to which they would contribute and from which they would draw. In this way, Dewey envisions a series of local communities committed to preserving their unique cultures while at the same time participating in a common enterprise in the development of art, science, and industry. “While local, it will not be isolated. Its larger relationships will provide an inexhaustible and flowing fund of meanings upon which to draw, with assurance that its drafts will be honored.”[13] Under such a situation, Dewey hopes that “the vast, innumerable and intricate current of trans-local associations” will “pour the generous and abundant meanings of which they are potential bearers into the smaller intimate unions of human beings living in immediate contact with one another” culminating in local communities that are “stable without being static, progressive without being merely mobile.”[14] Rather than the rural school being a means to impose nationalistic hegemony upon indigenous communities, in this model it becomes a site of linkage, a place to connect productively with other communities and to deposit in and draw from a trans-local resources of cooperative intelligence and creativity.

A central motivating factor behind this proposal is Dewey's desire to preserve, as much as possible, the vibrancy of the oral tradition. For Dewey, our continued commitment to face-to-face communication, even in the electronic age, can be explained by the naturalistic premise that humans are biological beings perfectly adapted to extracting the maximum amount of meaning from oral communication in which we speak with our whole being in the context of some shared experience. As he explains, "vital and thorough attachments are bred only in the intimacy of intercourse which is of necessity restricted in range," and that enduring satisfaction "can only be found in the vital, steady, and deep relationship which are present only in an immediate community." [15] This does not mean that Dewey is slipping into a metaphysics of presence, claiming that face-to-face communication is a transparent bridge between minds; he is saying that face-to-face communication, because of the experience of physical closeness, has the practical effect of building emotional ties to other people and environments that make for a deeper, richer, and more lasting impact on our thoughts, habits, and feelings. Ideally, then, the intimate relationships one builds through face-to-dialogue create the possibility of human understanding that is necessary if one is to become a sympathetic member of a more global community. As Dewey explains, "[I]t has also been said that if a man love not his fellow man whom he has seen, he cannot love the God whom he has not seen. The chances of regard for distant peoples being effective as long as there is no close neighborhood experience to bring with it insight and understanding of neighbors do not seem better." [16] Thus, a rich community life, particularly when it includes a diverse membership, is vital for the creation of a larger social organization that requires an ability to sympathize with and understand people of different backgrounds.

As important as oral communication is to the development of community, it alone cannot deal with the complex challenges of a global age. These challenges can only be met through a scientifically informed and artistically enriched form of mass communication. He writes that "we have reached a critical point in the development of our national life" when dealing with matters of national and cultural significance has become "mainly a question of getting the machinery of investigation, of inquiry, of discussion, of distribution of ideas, and of experience, organized and into effective operation; of getting the expert knowledge and the expert ability of the nation focused, not in the way of a Providence from above, but in a way that will come to the aid of every community that is dealing with a particular problem, so as to enable it by information, consultation, inspiration, advice and persuasion, to work out its problems." [17] As characterized by Daniel L. Czitrom, Dewey's solution was to "combine modern means of communication, social science techniques, and artistic presentation to provide a continuous, systematic, and effective exposition of social and political movements." [18] This proposal is the substance of Dewey's assertion that democracy "will have its consummation when free social inquiry is indissolubly wedded to the art of full and moving communication." [19] The isolated improvement of the practices of inquiry, art, and communication was not the answer to democracy. The active *wedding* of all three within an interconnected democratic social organization provided the answer.

From this perspective we can see how the Mexican rural schools captured Dewey's imagination precisely because he recognized in them a vibrant interaction between the local and the global. On the one hand, these schools during their early development represented collaborative efforts by local citizens to celebrate aspects of their community in a way that had been previously denied or suppressed. On the other hand, the schools were connected to a national system of education that invited international artists, scientists, and philosophers, such as Dewey himself, to bring their knowledge and insight to bear on the challenge of connecting these communities to a wider global culture. As I shall show, in Mexico's rural schools we can find the precursor to schools that use networked communication technologies to bring trans-local perspectives, in the form of artists, scientists, and intellectuals, to the rural classroom as a means of enriching the students' experiences with their own local cultures.

II. Experimental Education

We can construct a model of how a rural school might function by building on Dewey's general model of a progressive education. Specifically, Dewey provides an experimental method that integrates physical activity and cognitive reflection within a communicative environment capable of bridging the divide between local and global environment and knowledges. Although originally developed to be applied in the context of a single classroom, it is a model that can easily be expanded once we understand communication to occur in and through various media. At the same time, Dewey's framework does not make a fetish of new media technologies. For him, the starting point of education must always remain the engagement of the student bodies within an immediate environment in which physical and mental energy can be exerted toward a common aim. It is the importance of this starting point in shared experience that is the central contribution of Dewey's philosophy for rural school movements internationally.

The radical nature of Dewey's pedagogical method is embodied in his description of the classroom as a laboratory. Opposed equally to dogmatic, recitation-based classrooms and romantic notions of learning through undisciplined play, the "method of the laboratory is an experimental one. It is a method of discovering through search, through inquiry, through testing, through observation and reflection – all processes requiring activity of mind rather than merely powers of absorption and reproduction." [20] For Dewey, genuine learning occurs only in situations in which bodies and minds act together within shared communicative and creative environments that offer both challenge and reward. The metaphor of the laboratory conveyed this attitude insofar as the "first great characteristic of the laboratory is that in it there is carried on an activity, an activity which involves contact with technical equipment, as tools, instruments and other apparatus, and machinery which require the use of the hands and the body." [21] Experimentalism and education thus collapsed traditional binaries by focusing how embodied minds learn to work and think together through communication.

In practical terms, implementing experimental method necessarily requires equipping schools with physical laboratory spaces, in which "laboratory" was taken

broadly to mean any sphere in which students were physically involved with the manipulation of things in order to develop, test, and verify ideas. Consequently, he believed, “[W]here schools are equipped with laboratories, shops, and gardens, where dramatizations, plays, and games are freely used, opportunities exist for reproducing situations of life, and for acquiring and applying information and ideas in the carrying forward of progressive experiences.”[22] Importantly, Dewey did not restrict the idea of a laboratory to a specific subject matter. He believed, “[A]ny subject, from Greek cooking, and from drawing to mathematics, is intellectual, if intellectual at all, not in its fixed inner structure, but in its function – in its power to start and direct significant inquiry and reflection. What geometry does for one, the manipulation of laboratory apparatus, the mastery of a musical composition, or the conduct of the business affair, may do for another.”[23] Consequently, laboratory space had to be tailored to meet the intellectual and emotional needs of the subject matter, not the other way around.

However, mere laboratory equipment arranged in a space with which students can tinker does not establish a laboratory. To ensure that the laboratory setting featured more than “simply trying,” or what he called “the bare fact of the omnipresent uncertainty of trial in all action,” Dewey consistently emphasized the need for applying the five stages of experimental method in the classroom[24]. These stages, which Dewey believed reflected the process of thinking in general, can be represented by the five activities, each done in succession: 1) *arousing interest*, such that “people have a genuine situation of experience – that there be a continuous activity in which he is interested for its own sake;” 2) *engaging a problem*, such that “a genuine problem develop within the situation of the stimulus to thought;” 3) *acquiring data*, so that students possess “the information and make the observation needed to deal with it;” 4) *suggesting solutions* that students “shall be responsible for developing in an orderly way;” and 5) *testing ideas* “by application, to make their meaning clear and to discover...their validity.”[25] In short, the longest lasting lesson learned in the experimental classroom is not the “content” of the lesson – how plants grow, the density of water, the probability of dice games, or the proper musical score for a school play – but the experimental habits of thought and action by which students acquire this content.

Of these stages, that of arousing interest provides the foundation for all the others; without proper construction of a problem-situation, all of the subsequent stages will either disintegrate into unorganized “trying” or be rigidified into a series of mechanical steps. To be effective, then, a problem-situation must both arouse interest as well as suggest an attainable aim. By “interest,” Dewey means a psychological state in which “one is identified with the objects which define the activity and which furnish the means and obstacles to its realization,”[26] and by “aim” he means “to foresee a future possibility,” to “have a plan for its accomplishment,” and “to note the means which make the plan capable of execution.”[27] Dewey gives as an example a man considering jumping across a ditch:

If he were sure he could or could not make it, definitive activity in some direction would occur. But if he considers, he is in doubt; he hesitates. During the time in which a single overt line of action is in suspense, his activities are confined to such redistributions of energy within the organism as will prepare a determinate course of action. He measures the ditch with his eyes; he brings himself taut to get a feel of the energy at his disposal; he looks about for other ways across, he reflects upon the importance of getting across. All this means and accentuation of consciousness; it means a turning in upon the individual's own attitudes, powers, wishes, etc.[28]

Whether one's "ditch" is a mechanical, artistic, economic, personal, or scientific problem is irrelevant; what matters is that the problem-situation bring about similar feelings of doubt, curiosity, hesitation, suspense, measurement, preparation, reflection, and expectation. Absent these feelings, a ditch is not a problem but merely a hole in the ground.

It is precisely this necessity of beginning with a problem-situation that engages the interest of students while simultaneously challenging them with an aim that makes experimental education so demanding. Whereas traditional modes of education simply begin with established subject matter and try to find ways of channeling it into students' minds, experimental education begins with a problem-situation adapted to student experience and allows the subject matter naturally to accrue to it within the process of inquiry. Consequently, Dewey writes, "[A] large part of the art of instruction lies in making the difficulty of new problems large enough to challenge thought, and small enough so that, in addition to the confusion naturally attending the novel elements, there shall be luminous familiar spots from which helpful suggestions may spring." [29] *In The School and Society*, [30] Dewey gives as examples the challenges of growing plants in a school garden, of using raw materials of flax, wool, and cotton, to spin thread to make clothes, or of designing a smelting out of clay large enough to heat iron. By starting with physical and practical challenges that inspire activity and imagination, one allows the situations naturally to call out for inquiry into more complex subject matters with which to construct the solution. This process ideally produces interest in the subject matter itself along the way as its relevance to students' life experience is disclosed.

Genuine inquiry, however, is only made possible through an increasingly complex and structured communication environment. In his description of the elementary classroom, Dewey constantly assumes a lively oral atmosphere in which students excitedly exchange ideas and feelings with the teacher as well as each other in a playful but also structured environment. In fact, Dewey identifies communication as one of the three core interests of the student. He writes there is first and foremost "an interest in communication, that is, in social conversation leading to exchange and enrichment of experiences; an interest in construction, which brings about a modification, a manipulation of the world materials [which are] instrumental to carrying out some idea or thought of his; and the interest in expression, which might be said of the interest in communicating an idea or feeling through a certain amount of construction," such as works like "pictures, and little stories, and poems." [31] Of these three interests,

communication is clearly the most important. Indeed, a student often sees that “inquiry is one way of keeping up his interest in communication.”[32] A child will thus ask questions as a way of keeping “up the feeling of social relationship,” meaning that the child likes to “find out things just as he likes to tell stories, or call attention to what he has done, or as he likes to play with the objects that he finds around him; it makes simply an enlargement of his experience.”[33]. The challenge to experimental education, however, is to transcend the purely social rewards of inquiry into a love of inquiry itself.

Approached as a means to inquiry, communication facilitates the creative and cooperative construction of shared meanings that deepens and broadens the significance of events and objects while disclosing new potentialities in action. “When communication occurs,” writes Dewey, “all natural events are subject to reconsideration and revisions; they are re-adapted to meet the requirements of conversation, whether it be public discourse or that preliminary discourse term thinking.”[34] With communication, “natural events become messages to be enjoyed and administered, precisely as our song, fiction, oratory, the giving of advice and instruction. The events come to possess characters; they are demarcated, and noted.”[35] To be truly “meaningful” in more than the dictionary sense, meanings must be put into practice. For the heart of language is not the transmission, expression, or possession of purely verbal symbols; “it is communication; the establishment of cooperation in an activity in which there are partners, and in which the activity of each is modified and regulated by partnership.... Meaning is not indeed a psychic existence; it is primarily a property of behavior, and secondarily a property of objects.”[36] In experimental education, therefore, communication becomes part of the environment itself; it represents the social process whereby meanings are applied, invented, rearranged, discarded, and transformed, through interaction with events and objects, as a means of bringing a shared problem-situation to satisfactory conclusion.

Taken as a whole, the “democratic” character of Dewey’s experimental model of education is found in the attitude it cultivates rather than any explicit content that it teaches. For Dewey, education for a democracy was not synonymous with the traditional class in “civics” whereby one learned about the three branches of government and the mechanisms of voting and representation; rather, its goal was to cultivate democratic attitudes capable of adjusting the great problem of any pluralistic society: “to combine a maximum of different values, achieved by giving free play to individual taste and capacity, with a minimum of friction and conflict.”[37] By teaching students how to address shared problems through communicative exchange of diverse ideas and perspectives, the experimental method, according to Dewey, solves this problem as no other method can. He writes: “The experimental method is the only one compatible with the democratic way of life, as we understand it. Every extension of intelligence as the method of action enlarges the area of common understanding. Understanding may not ensure complete agreement, but it gives the only sound basis for enduring agreement.”[38] The experimental attitude, in other words, is not merely

one facet of democracy; its cultivation within a public is the culmination of democratic social life itself.

III. Experimental Education in the Rural School

Dewey's model of the experimental school offers a progressive approach to designing rural education in the developing world. It begins by imagining the school and its surroundings as the actual "laboratory" that forms a core of active, shared experience and provides the problematic-situation that students will investigate through many layers of communication. By making the school itself the laboratory space, and by allowing local teachers and communities to envision their immediate natural and cultural environs as resources for stimulating creative inquiry, this model counters the institutional and disciplinary imperatives that often come with rural schooling, thereby making it continuous with the pedagogical vision of Paulo Friere. Too often, rural education simply becomes one more opportunity to institute what Freire has called the "banking model" in which education becomes "an act of depositing, in which the students are the depositories and the teacher is the depositor." [39] Freire proposes instead a dialogic model where knowledge is something that emerges only through "invention and reinvention, through the restless, impatient, continuing, hopeful inquiry human beings pursue in the world, with the world, and with each other." [40] Dewey's pedagogy follows in this same spirit.

Returning to the model of the Mexican rural school, there were two facets that particularly interested Dewey. On the one hand, he saw the rural school as a bottom-up movement in which local communities invested their own energies not only in building the schools themselves but supplying it with unique cultural resources – in this case, a garden. Dewey provides the following account of his experience:

Of these thousand federal rural schools open during the last year almost every one was furnished without cost to the nation by the people of the locality, mainly by the parents who wanted their children to have the opportunities at present denied them... In an Indian village not far from Mexico City, six grades were housed in six different adobe dwelling houses offered by the parents in lieu of any available building. Every school has a garden attached, and it is characteristic of the aesthetic temperament of the Indian that although the vegetable section may be neglected, the flower garden is sure to be gay and well cared for. [41]

Irrespective of Dewey's point concerning the particular characteristics of the indigenous people of Mexico, one can see here his admiration for the way that local communities took ownership of their schools and invested them with characteristics of their own culture and temperament. Additionally, he equally admired the way that specialists from all across the nation became committed to the cause of training teachers in professional techniques. He writes:

One of the most interesting features of teacher training is the “cultural missions.” The “missionaries” (this is their title) go to some country town, gather the rural teachers of the immediate district, and for three weeks the staff give intense instruction. The work is not theoretical pedagogy. There is always an instructor in physical training (almost every school in Mexico, no matter how remote, now has a playground and a basketball field). A social worker is present, usually a woman, who gives instruction in hygiene, first aid, vaccination, and the rudiments of care of children. There are also a teacher of chorus singing, a specialist in hand industries, instructed to employ as far as possible local materials, and finally, a specialist in school organization and methods of teaching.[42]

When combined with the first description, this account presents a picture of the schools as being built and sustained by the local community and culture while at the same time being informed and guided by the latest in scientific knowledge and methods drawn from national or international resources and brought to communities by “missionaries.” With the final addition of libraries, Dewey identified the aim of the rural schools as making “each one the center of a new life for its neighborhood, intellectual, recreational and economic.”[43]

Bringing this promise to fruition, however, required an interactive and reciprocal model whereby local interests, traditions, and resources were not seen as mere appendages to a “core” curriculum brought by missionaries and contained in their books. When Dewey speaks of gardens, playgrounds, basketball courts, artist studios, and performance spaces, he does not praise them simply for giving the students fun activities that are to be considered separate from “real” learning. They are the laboratory spaces out of which students develop problems that can serve as a site for inquiry. For instance, Dewey speaks of the possibility of a curriculum centered around the spaces involved in food production and preparation:

That the dining room and kitchen connect with the country and its processes and products is hardly necessary to say. Cooking may be so taught that it has no connection with country life and with the sciences that find their unity in geography. Perhaps it generally has been taught without these connections being really made. But all the materials that come into the kitchen have their origin in the country; they come from the soil, are nurtured through the influences of light and water, and represent a great variety of local environments. Through this connection, extending from the garden into the larger world, the child has is most natural introduction to the study of the sciences. Where did these things grow? What was necessary to their growth? What was their relation to the soil? What was the effect of different climatic conditions? And so on ... [A] real study of plants takes them in their natural environment and in their uses as well, not simply as food, but in all their adaptations to the social life of man. Cooking becomes as well a most natural introduction to the study of chemistry, giving the child here also something which he can once bring to bear upon his daily experience.[44]

What applies to agriculture and cooking also applies to any traditional arts and practices that are involved in sustaining community life. The simple flower garden tended outside

the school thus becomes a site by which to study the flora of the region, its relationship to the aesthetic traditions of indigenous culture, and the relationship of that tradition to contemporary politics and economy. Instead of being a merely pretty appendage in the front of a school building, the garden becomes a site of inquiry that draws connections between formal knowledge and the things which students “see, feel, and touch every day.”[45]

In experimental education, the challenge is less to “translate” complex knowledge into accessible terms than it is to find ways of tracing connections from local experience to specialist forms of knowledge and then back again. This is no easy task. There is a reason why Dewey says that the typical botany class involves “partly collecting flowers that were pretty, pressing and mounting them; partly pulling these flowers to pieces and giving technical means to different parts, finding all the different leaves, naming all their different shapes and forms.”[46] This type of pseudo-laboratory activity attempts to connect students with their surroundings, but does so mechanically and somewhat tyrannically. Instead of finding ways to grow plants or appreciate their habitats, students merely yank them out of their natural context in order to label them properly according to a pre-established diagram. Yet this exercise is popular precisely because it is easy. One simply needs a chart of local flora and a nearby park in which students can pick plants to pin to boards. The fact that these diagrams serve no functional purpose after they are created is not given a second thought precisely because there is no underlying question they are being asked to address. It is simply one more mechanical exercise to perform.

Therefore, to make living connections possible not only requires forethought on the part of the instructor but also an extraordinary amount of flexibility and creativity. This is because a completely preplanned inquiry will inevitably stifle the imagination of the students once they depart from the predicted course. Exercises which are simply written out as step-by-step methods may begin well but become mechanical as soon as the students feel they are being forced to follow a procedure in which they have no investment. In the ideal, a teacher will be able to enable student impulses by progressively charting paths of research adapted to each phase of the inquiry process. To return to the example of the flower garden, a group of students who wish to experiment with growing plants in different soils would chart a different path than those students who want to understand the flower’s role as a symbol in local religions. The first would require guidance from literature in soil science and ecology while the second would combine on-site ethnographic research with insights from anthropology and religious studies. Teachers would neither be dictators nor followers but guides, adapting to the circumstances in the interest of the students yet continually moving them along a path toward greater understanding and enrichment.

The challenge of rural schooling, of course, is that teachers often do not have the training or resources to have this kind of flexibility—hence the necessity for the “missionaries” of which Dewey spoke in the context of Mexico. As communication technologies advance, the necessity for actually transporting and housing teachers,

trainers, and specialists within local communities decreases. Not only does distance-learning connect rural communities to a variety of specialists who may be working in urban centers and/or other countries, but perhaps more importantly new media technology, when combined with scientific methods, comes to constitute a resource for cooperative intelligence that Dewey believed was central for connecting different communities with each other through the sharing of knowledge. This resource should not be confused with simply the infinity of disparate information available on the internet, however. Although the Internet makes it possible, his idea of a cooperative intelligence carries with it the organizational structure and reflective methods of a scientific community. It is a gathering place for collaborative inquiry which preserves local knowledge while abstracting from multiple experiences common methods that can be employed in diverse situations. Yet by acting as a guiding resource, rather than a disciplinary mandate, this resource allows rural schools to develop their own curriculums and chart their own paths rather than all crowding on one highway.

One can thus imagine a contemporary rural school movement that ultimately allows a community to inquire about itself while simultaneously expanding its horizons by bringing global perspectives and specialist knowledge to bear on local problems and characteristics. A school would be developed and designed by community artists, parents, and volunteers, and its curriculum would use the surrounding natural and social environment itself as a laboratory. Students would study chemistry through researching groundwater, ecology by studying corrosion patterns, anthropology by investigating their own cultural history, and economics by tracing the origins of what is bought and sold at the market. In making this a scientific inquiry, local teachers would follow Dewey's five step method and look for guidance by specialists in these subject matters linked to these local communities through communication technology. Rather than providing merely informative lectures, they would dialogue with students and determine the best course of action based on their own expertise. Students would then create summary reports of their experiences to be preserved and made available in a common resource from which other schools could draw upon when designing their own curriculum. The result would be a realization of truly democratic education, an education that combined what Dewey called the "highest and most difficult kind of inquiry in a subtle, delicate, vivid and responsive art of communication" for the aim of "free and enriching communion." [47]. Here would be the actualization of the possibility that Dewey first glimpsed in the Mexican rural schools.

IV

Criticism of this model of education undoubtedly will take its traditional expression: that experimental education does not enforce discipline, that students need to learn the basics before they are encouraged to think for themselves, that it reinforces parochialism, that it favors vocational training over abstract thought, that genuine science cannot be taught as a form of practice, and so on. The shared assumption of these criticisms is that experimental education— focused more on "playing" rather than making education a serious business—does not provide students the knowledge

required in a modern society. Dewey's response to that is unambiguous: "To organize education so that natural active tendencies shall be fully enlisted in doing something, while seeing to it that the doing requires observation, the acquisition of information, and the use of constructive imagination, is what most needs to be done to improve social conditions." [48] In other words, critics of experimental education make a fetish of "information" while deemphasizing the importance of developing character, curiosity, community, self-knowledge, and judgment that make genuine growth possible. For Dewey, the greatest of all pedagogical fallacies is the idea that students can only learn one thing at a time. But the opposite is true:

The most important attitude that can be formed is that of desire to go on learning... We often see persons who have had little schooling and in whose case the absence of that schooling proves to be a positive asset. They have at least retained their native common sense and power of judgment, and its exercise in the actual conditions of living has given them the precious gift of ability to learn from the experiences they have. What avail is it to win prescribed amounts of information about geography and history, to win ability to read and write, if in the process the individual loses his own soul: loses his appreciation of things worthwhile, of the values to which these things are relative; if he loses desire to apply which is learned and, above all, loses the ability to extract meaning from his future experiences as they occur? [49]

From Dewey's perspective, the schism in education is not between those who have knowledge and those who do not; it is between institutions committed to freedom and those resigned to slavery. But freedom and slavery had very particular meanings for Dewey. To be free did not mean to simply be without constraint just as to be a slave did not mean to be physically bound. These terms had deeper significance. He writes:

It is, then, a sound instinct which identifies freedom with power to frame purposes and to execute or carry into effect purposes so framed. Such freedom is in turn identical with self-control; for the formation of purposes and the organization of means to execute them are the work of intelligence. Plato once defined a slave as the person who executes the purposes of another, and, as has just been said, a person is also a slave who is enslaved to his own blind desires. [50]

Schools teach the discipline of slavery when it inculcates students in obedience to the methods and purposes imported from an outside source without regard to their interests and aims, even if done for their own liberation. Local communities must be enriched with a perspective from beyond the confines of the village; this much is obvious. But this enrichment must come as a friend and not a tyrant. It must enrich the student and the communities by enabling them to pursue their own desires and satisfy their own curiosities about themselves and their world. Only through this interaction can democracy become a reality in the world, not because it is a mechanical system of government but because it is a natural expression of character and the desire to go on learning with others about their common world; and that is what it means to practice a pedagogy of freedom.

Nathan Crick
Associate Professor of Rhetoric
Louisiana State University
Department of Communication Studies
136 Coates Hall
Baton Rouge, LA 70803
Email: crick@lsu.edu

David Tarvin
Doctoral Candidate
Louisiana State University
Department of Communication Studies
136 Coates Hall
Baton Rouge, LA 70803
Email: dtarvi1@lsu.edu

Notes

[1] Jay Martin, *The Education of John Dewey* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 341.

[2] Alan Ryan, *John Dewey and the High Tide of American Liberalism* (New York: Norton, 1995), 202.

[3] John Dewey, "Mexico's Educational Renaissance," in *The Later Works of John Dewey*, edited by Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1984), 200.

[4] Ibid, 201.

[5] Ibid, 202.

[6] Ibid.

[7] Ibid, 202-203.

[8] John Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems*, (New York: Henry Holt, 1922), 215

[9] Ibid, 216.

[10] Ibid.

[11] Ibid.

[12] Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 261.

[13] Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems*, 216-217.

[14] Ibid.

[15] Ibid.

[16] Ibid.

[17] John Dewey, "Organization in American education," in *John Dewey: The Middle Works*, edited by Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press; Original edition, 1917, 1980), 410.

- [18] Daniel J. Czitrom, *Media and the American Mind from Morse to McLuhan* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1982), 110.
- [19] Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems*, 184.
- [20] John Dewey, "Education as Politics," in *John Dewey: The Middle Works*, edited by Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1983), 109.
- [21] John Dewey, "Monastery, Bargain Counter, or Laboratory in Education?," in *John Dewey: The Later Works*, vol. 6, edited by Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1985), 109.
- [22] John Dewey, *Democracy and Education* (New York: The Free Press, 1916), 161-162.
- [23] John Dewey, *How We Think* (New York: Dover, 1997), 39.
- [24] John Dewey, "The Underlying Philosophy of Education," in *John Dewey: The Later Works*, vol. 8, edited by Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1986), 94.
- [25] Dewey, *Democracy and Education*, 163.
- [26] Ibid, 137.
- [27] Ibid, 104.
- [28] Ibid, 347.
- [29] Ibid, 157.
- [30] John Dewey, *The School and Society and The Child and the Curriculum* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press. 1990).
- [31] John Dewey, *Lectures in the Philosophy of Education: 1899* (New York: Random House, 1966), 232.
- [32] Ibid.
- [33] Ibid.
- [34] John Dewey, *Experience and Nature* (New York: Dover, 1929), 166.
- [35] Ibid, 174.
- [36] Ibid, 179.
- [37] Dewey, "The Underlying Philosophy of Education," 102.
- [38] Ibid.
- [39] Freire, *Pedagogy*, 72.
- [40] Ibid.
- [41] Dewey, "Mexico's Educational Resistance," 202-203.
- [42] Ibid, 204.
- [43] Ibid.
- [44] John Dewey, *The School and Society*, 83-84.
- [45] Ibid, 76.
- [46] Ibid, 82.
- [47] Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems*, 184.
- [48] Dewey, *Democracy and Education*, 137.
- [49] John Dewey, *Experience and Education* (New York: Touchstone, 1938), 48-49.
- [50] Ibid, 67.