# Essays on Teaching Excellence

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## The Legacy of John Dewey

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The influential legacy left by the world-renowned philosopher and educator John Dewey is so vast and so complex that it is necessary to be selective in our approach to it. His vision of things typically features connectedness and interaction, aspiring at all times to be inclusive and unitary.

With this in mind, the remarks that follow will focus first on the nexus of teaching, learning, and training and secondly on the relationship, for educational purposes, between emotion and imagination.

### Teaching and Learning

When Dewey inquires into the relationship between learning and teaching, he posits, in effect that you can teach and you can learn because – and only because – you can communicate. It would be hard to overemphasize the importance that Dewey places on that last term.

Through communication it becomes possible to bring together things, such as teaching and learning, that are too often separated from one another. He wrote, "there is a natural bridge that joins the gap between existence and essence; namely, communication, language, discourse" (1925, p. 133).

Indeed, Dewey's educational vision draws motive power from the sheer wonder of our ability to communicate: "Of all affairs, communication is the most wonderful. That things should be able to pass from the plane of external pushing and pulling to that of revealing themselves to man, and thereby to themselves, and that the

fruit of communication should be participation, sharing, is a wonder by the side of which transubstantiation pales." (1925, p. 132)

Through communication, the "immediacies" of worldly events and things, hurrying by too fast to be appreciated, become susceptible to "survey, contemplation, and ideal or logical elaboration; when something can be said of qualities they are purveyors of instruction. Learning and teaching come into being, and there is no event which may not yield information. . . . Even the dumb pang of an ache achieves a significant existence when it can be designated and descanted upon; it ceases to be merely oppressive and becomes important; it gains importance, because it becomes representative; it has the dignity of an office." (1925, p. 133)

Two comments are in order here. One involves the convergence of teaching, learning, and instruction, based on the self-evident assumption that these kinds of performance necessarily belong together. Had Dewey come back during the long stretch of time when, at least in the United States, learning got shuttled off to one side in our haste – long overdue, to be sure – to improve pedagogy, he would most assuredly have been provoked to further thought and recommendations for action. A second comment is that Dewey offers, in the term "office" as used above a way of figuring the inherent unity of the educative performances – teaching, learning, and instruction. "Office" implies not only a competence but a duty, a genre of service and at the same time a position of authority and a mode of professional operation.

Are there other offices or functions belonging to this same nexus? From much of what Dewey has to say elsewhere, the answer must be "yes", and its name is training. Not surprisingly, this sometimes appears in connection with training for jobs or professions – more or less what was traditionally called vocational training. Here again, Dewey's inclination is not exclusive but inclusive: practically speaking, all of the offices may be thought of as a single overarching office. Dewey turns to these and related considerations when he examines "the laboratory, as distinct from the apprentice ideal" of education.

**(Teacher) Training**

In this context Dewey questions: "whether we, as educators, keep in mind with sufficient constancy the fact that the problem of training teachers is one species of a more generic affair – that of training for professions. Our problem is akin to that of training architects, engineers, doctors, lawyers, etc. Moreover, (since shameful and incredible as it seems) the vocation of teaching is practically the last to recognize the need of specific professional preparation, where is all the more reason for teachers to try to find what they may learn from the more extensive and matured experience of other callings.

It seems noteworthy that Dewey here shows the teacher in, at least potentially, a learning mode: to be a better pedagogue, the individual instructor may inquire into, possibly emulate, the procedures conventionally grouped under the heading of training.

Dewey rejects any notion that teaching or instruction are somehow superior to training and the correlative notion that there exists an impenetrable barrier to this training. Or, if there is a barrier, he renders it transparent. His attitude precisely complements the point he makes repeatedly about the school in relation to the society, i.e., that the two should be brought together as closely as possible.

The complacent view that training is essentially a lower-order function limited to business and industry reveals a lack of historical grounding. The influential philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer (1986) reminds his readers that the concept of training is at least as old as Plato: "Plato's entire *Republic* may be viewed as a program of *training*, leading not only, and not even primarily to insight into what the good is, but to an inculcated disposition (*hexis*, *ethos*) to hold to the good in practice" (p. 173). Another modern luminary, Ludwig Wittgenstein (1953), broadens the terminological range by acknowledging the importance, not only of teaching (*Lehren*) and instruction (*Unterricht*, which can also mean training) but training per se (*Abrichtung*) (pp. 4-6.)

**Emotion and Imagination**

"I think one could go through the defects and mistakes of teaching and learning generally and find that they are associated with failure to secure emotional participation" (Dewey, LW 6, p. 15) — an idea

which we might easily relate to our current discussions about active learning.. Teaching practice too often assumes that functions of intelligence are almost entirely intellectual and are related to affective functions, if at all, only peripherally. In *A Common Faith* (LW, vol. 9) Dewey espouses a larger and more inclusive view and one that provides a partial historical framework for the current interest, especially in business and industry. This view was exemplified in a recent conference on "Leading with Emotional Intelligence" sponsored by the Stanford Center for Professional Development.

"There is such a thing as passionate intelligence, as ardor in behalf of light shining into the murky places of social existence, and as zeal for its refreshing and purifying effect. The whole story of man shows that there are no objects that may not deeply stir engrossing emotion" (Dewey, 1932, p. 52).

Dewey differentiates between, then brings together and unifies two basic types of emotion: "No matter how much evidence may be piled up against social institutions as they exist, affection and passionate desire for justice and security are realities in human nature. So are the emotions that arise from living in conditions of inequality, oppression, and insecurity" (1934, p. 53).

The unification of these emotions at critical times in history can be both explosive and creative: "combination of the two kinds of emotion has more than once produced those changes that go by the name of revolution. To say that emotions which are not fused with intelligence are blind is tautology. Intense emotion may utter itself in action that destroys institutions. But the only assurance of birth of better ones is the marriage of emotion with intelligence" (1934, p. 53).

Coming together on these terms may also be seen in terms of a related office; for what is the marriage of emotion with intelligence if it is not imagination? This is indeed the concept to which Dewey appeals in an essay on "Appreciation and Cultivation"(LW, vol. 6): "with respect to imagination I should approach its definition, educationally, through the spontaneous carrying power which information and ideas sometimes possess. . . . The connection of emotion and imagination is not accidental. Emotion provides the

carrying impetus. Imagination denotes that to which we are carried when the emotion is not so coarsely organic as to lead to direct overt action."

To illustrate his point Dewey draws a contrast between, on the one hand, a man in a rage and a man full of resentment with, on the other hand, a man capable of imagination. "Whereas the first two men spend their time flailing about or brooding, the third man, with a more refined indignation may set to work to explore imaginatively the source of a public wrong and to construct measures of remedy. Or a Dickens may be led to an imagination which discloses the situation to others through the medium of a novel" (1931, p. 114).

## Conclusion

This brief discussion of only two aspects of the complex body of thought left to us by John Dewey can remind us of the importance of his body of thought and of the relevance of this thought to higher education as we move into the next century. We can benefit by rethinking the nexus of teaching, learning, instruction, and training as well as the connection between emotion and imagination in the context of our educational world.

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