

Experience is Not The Whole Story: The Integral Role of the Situation in Dewey's *Democracy and Education*

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The central objective of Dewey's Democracy and Education is to explain 'what is needed to live a meaningful life and how can education contribute?' While most acquainted with Dewey's educational philosophy know that 'experience' plays a central role, the role of 'situations' may be less familiar or understood. This essay explains why 'situation' is inseparable from 'experience' and deeply important to Democracy and Education's educational methods and rationales. First, a prefatory section explores how experience is invoked and involved in pedagogical practice, especially experience insofar as it is (a) experimental, (b) direct, and (c) social-moral in character. The second and main section on situations follows. After a brief introduction to Dewey's special philosophical use of 'situation', I examine how situations are implicated in (a) student interest and motivation; (b) 'aims' and 'criteria' in problem-solving; and (c) moral education (habits, values, and judgements). What should become abundantly clear from these examinations is that there could be no such thing as meaningful education, as Dewey understood it, without educators' conscious, intentional, and imaginative deployment of experience and situations.

INTRODUCTION

The central objective of Dewey's *Democracy and Education* (DE), on my reading, is to explain 'What is needed to live a meaningful life and how can education contribute?' Everyone acquainted with Dewey's educational philosophy knows that 'experience' plays a central role. But the role of 'situations' may be less familiar or understood; readers are not often Dewey specialists, and Dewey doesn't single out 'situation' for definition. In DE, it is mainly enlisted to support and justify educational proposals. This essay will explain why 'situation' is (a) inseparable from 'experience', and (b) *deeply* important to DE's educational methods and rationales. For Dewey, these *two* concepts are the existential nexus of all meaning-making, in all

spheres of life. We need them to answer the question ‘What is needed to live a meaningful life and how can education contribute?’

My essay proceeds along the following lines. Because ‘situations’ and ‘experience’ are so closely connected, a prefatory section takes up experience in DE. It reviews several ways experience is invoked and involved in pedagogical practice, especially experience insofar as it is (a) experimental, (b) direct and (c) social-moral in character. The next and main section is on situations. After a brief introduction to Dewey’s special philosophical use of ‘situation’, I examine how situations are implicated in student interest and motivation; ‘aims’ and ‘criteria’ in problem-solving; and moral education (habits, values and judgements). What should become abundantly clear from these examinations is that there could be no such thing as meaningful education, as Dewey understood it, without educators’ conscious, intentional and imaginative deployment of *experience* and *situations*.

EXPERIENCE IN *DEMOCRACY AND EDUCATION*

Experience, in DE as well as throughout Dewey’s corpus, is of signal importance. DE explores this much-misunderstood term, explaining what experience is and why it is significant, especially for educating children. Dewey uses ‘experience’ to replace dualisms (such as mind/body, reason/emotion, individual/ society) with *continuities* that more adequately express the dynamism of actual life. The substitution of continuities for dualisms accomplishes some of Dewey’s metaphysical purposes, certainly, but it also advances what he takes as our common, *human* project of trying to live more meaningfully. For, if we could relinquish dualisms that pretend to be ‘ultimate’—authoritative *beyond* experience—and think, instead, in terms of continuities, we might re-dedicate our practical energies toward particular situations, problems, and people struggling to find safety and happiness in a changing world.

DE’s Chapter 11, ‘Experience and Thinking’, focuses on the nature and importance of experience for education. When educators misunderstand experience, they also misunderstand child psychology, short-changing children of their social, emotional and intellectual needs. As a term of art, experience helps us re-envision our relationship to the world—and to one another. It is an evolutionary and ecological rebuttal to traditionalists bent upon categorising and ordering the main and static elements of being (e.g. substances, properties, relations, subjects, objects) and then organising the school to fit. As revealed in various endeavours (science, art, play), experience is never a passive report from objects radically external to agents, but rather shows us already enmeshed in on-going events, already invited toward future interactions with our environment. Reason, Dewey writes, ‘operates within experience, not beyond it, to give it an intelligent or reasonable quality’ (Dewey, 1980 [1916], p. 233).

I discuss ‘situations’ in the next main section, but first a brief caveat. I can only separate these terms (‘experience’ and ‘situation’) for purposes of discussion. We know that, for Dewey, experience doesn’t happen willy-nilly, in atomistic little bursts. Rather, experience unfolds *in* a variety of

situations; situations are comprised of experiences. But it is useful for educators to think *both* about the *kinds* of experiences wished for students and how situations can foment such experiences in the classroom and, more generally, in the *institution* of schooling. That is part of the purpose behind discussing them *as if* distinct.

Let me turn, now, to three ways experience is indispensable to education: (1) as experimental, (2) as direct and caring, and (3) as social and moral.

Experience as Experimental

Experience, Dewey said, is *not* primarily the cognitive contents of consciousness; it is 'an active-passive affair' which involves both 'doing' and 'undergoing.' We try something—we see (or suffer) the consequences. Such alternating phases of experience begin to be made 'experimental' once we relate the details of what is tried with what happens. Dewey writes,

'Mere activity does not constitute experience . . . Experience as trying involves change, but change is meaningless transition unless it is consciously connected with the return wave of consequences which flow from it. When an activity is continued into the undergoing of consequences, when the change made by action is reflected back into a change made in us, the mere flux is loaded with significance. We learn something' (Dewey, 1980 [1916], p. 146).

Experienced connections between 'doing' and 'undergoing' are not just between concepts or sentences, but between lived experiences—past and present, mine and yours. And this, of course, is not limited to children. *Anyone*, in virtue of being a live creature, is already engaged in a context—a continuous circuit of activity.

Because students' worlds *precede* and *exceed* the classroom, information must be pertinent to be learned; the burden, then, is upon educators to appreciate the rich background of students as individuals. When educators can provide experiences in which students *act and undergo* something, *and* when the subject matter utilises previous needs and interests, there is, Dewey says, an 'urgency, warmth, and intimacy' to the experience (Dewey, 1980 [1916], p. 241).

Experience as Direct and Caring

Another crucial aspect of experience in DE Dewey names 'direct' or 'had' experience—it contrasts with 'indirect' or 'reflective/known' experience.¹ In contrast to indirect experience—for example, memorisation tasks coupled with external rewards or punishments—direct experience is qualitative and *felt*—it engages motivations and interests *already* possessed. Engaging the direct experience is, for Dewey, also a *moral* obligation because that form of connection—between teacher and student, whatever their ages—is tantamount to an acknowledgement of the real dignity of the *learner as present* right now. 'Living', Dewey writes, 'has its own intrinsic quality and . . . the business of education is with that quality' (Dewey, 1980

[1916], p. 56) Tantamount to ‘respect’ in a Kantian sense, care is also radically empirical because attention is paid to *this* person, present in *this* particular way, at *this* particular time. The learner is a *Thou*, to use Buber’s term. Put in temporal terms, this is a pragmatism not of future consequences, but of the radically existential present moment.

Experience as Social and Moral: Shared, Social Situations as a Crucial Source of Knowing

This moral acknowledgement of the present person naturally leads to a third connection, viz., experience with sociality and morality. Dewey rejects all rigid dualisms between the ‘moral’ and the ‘non-moral’ (acts, values, or characters). *All* deliberative choice is a comparison between *better* and *worse*, so what we call ‘morality’ involves, potentially, *all* our acts. Humans must accept, then, that ‘deliberation’ is *our* constant burden; and schools must accept that teaching ‘deliberation’ is a mission *both cognitive and moral*.

The operative question becomes *how* this should be done. Again direct experience is crucial, especially in social encounters. Education—about values, about moral inquiry—is best accomplished, Dewey thought, not by mere information, rules of inference, or reason-giving but via direct experiences which offer occasions for sympathy and participation in *another’s* experience. This happens both by communicating and through circumstances which stretch imagination. Crucially, words alone cannot create this, for as Dewey put it, ‘Meaning depends upon connection with a shared experience’ through ‘joint activity by the *use of things*’ (Dewey, 1980 [1916], pp. 19, 33). This clear requirement of moral education—direct experience—amplifies DE’s argument that schools create *community*. For only an interacting community can provide the situations in which direct experience can help students develop moral character.

THE ‘SITUATION’ IN *DEMOCRACY AND EDUCATION*

Origins and Definition of ‘Situation’

Let’s turn to ‘situation’, a pivotal concept in both DE and in Dewey’s wider corpus. As with the term ‘experience’, Dewey used ‘situation’ in both colloquial and technical senses. One of the earliest philosophical uses of ‘situation’ is in connection with Leibniz’s monads (1888); much more relevantly, it also appears in 1891’s *Moral Theory and Practice*. There, Dewey is already telegraphing much later works (such as his 1930 *Three Independent Factors in Morals*) by denying the usefulness of grand moral nouns (Justice, Love, Truth) in favour of adverbial modifiers about how moral acts must respond to the ‘whole situation’ (justly, lovingly, and truly). ‘Situation’ is used extensively in *How We Think* (1910), in DE (of course), and then appears regularly in later texts. The most conspicuous appearances—those doing most to develop the term, philosophically—are in *Experience and Nature* (1925), *Art As Experience* (1934), and *Logic: The Theory of Inquiry* (1938).

What is a situation? While DE is not a metaphysical book, and there are no extended analytical treatments of situations, the term appears often and diversely enough that one can glean a lot, nevertheless. 'Situation(s)' is paired with numerous modifiers, depending on a given discussion's broader purposes. Modifiers may assign to situation dimensions that are ontological (*whole situations*, and also: *concrete, actual empirical, real, genuine, life-, complex, complicated, novel, new*), temporal (*developing, changing*), psychological (*reflective, intellectual, practical*), inquiring (*incomplete, indeterminate, uncertain, doubtful, confused, perplexing*), social (*social, inclusive, common, joint, shared*); normative (*significant*), and sociological (*industrial, out-of-school*).

So, while DE does not overtly *define* 'situation', its uses, consonant with uses in other texts, suggest the following rough definition: a 'situation' may be understood as the 'episodes' which envelop and inform our experiences, supplying them with a dramatic valence—a pervasive, qualitative character. They are the background, the context, the permeable and environmental conditions, which shape the elements of experience into what—and *how*—they are.

Consider the difference between 'dropping a dinner fork' at your kitchen table versus at an elegant dinner. The same event manifests profoundly differently. Why? Because different situations contextualise and characterise those experiences differently. Indeed, the *ways* a situation organises and characterises experiences can be quite diverse. Situations may be predominantly *emotional* and *personal*; they may be *calculative* and *political*; they may be foreshortened—or richly informed by a background of history and culture. DE describes many different aspects of situations—ontological, psychological, as they relate to inquiry or our social relations with others.

Intersections and mixtures are common. As Dewey puts it:

'[A] situation stands for something inclusive of a large number of diverse elements existing across wide areas of space and long periods of time, but which, nevertheless, have their own unity' (Dewey, 1985 [1949], p. 281).

A 'situation,' he writes in the *Logic*,

'[is *never*] a single object or event or set of objects and events. For we never experience nor form judgments about objects and events in isolation, but only in connection with a contextual whole. This [contextual whole] is what is called a "situation"' (Dewey, 1985 [1938], p. 72).

I want to stress that the difficulty we face in defining a 'situation' comes from an old reflex: to try to reify—to nominalise—everything. Situations, it seems clear, are *real*. Indeed, we help create them all the time. But their reality consists in their *function*: in framing, collecting, and dramatising experiences. We should not be discouraged by this. As Dewey puts it, just as a 'quart bowl cannot be held within itself or in any of its contents' a 'situation as such is not and cannot be stated or made explicit' (Dewey, 1985

[1930], p. 247) Such a disposition—to nominalise everything or dismiss what cannot be nominalised as ‘unreal’—is rooted in a view of reality as composed of substances and fixed categories, a world full of objects cognitively appropriated by names. Trying to set the record straight with Bertrand Russell—who couldn’t make sense of ‘situation’ because it was not defined in advance of inquiry—Dewey wrote,

‘Anyone who refuses to go outside [mere] discourse—as Mr. Russell apparently does—has of course shut himself off from understanding what a ‘situation’, as directly experienced subject-matter, is [A]ll discourse is derived from and inherently referable to experiences of things in non-discursive experiential having’ (Dewey 1985 [1939], p. 31).

Let us move to more practical issues, now, and ask what *work* is done by Dewey’s term, ‘situation’ in DE? Mainly, it provides educators with a justification (a logical, psychological, pedagogical and moral rationale) to reconstruct curricula and methods to be radically experimental, interpersonally caring, and socially relevant to actual students. Let us look at three ways this worked.

1. *Situations: Student interest and motivation*

Let us first consider student interest and motivation. Teachers typically pose problems for students to solve. The timeworn challenge has been inspiring and sustaining interest. Often, students are blamed for lack of interest—they’re labelled ‘lazy’, ‘distracted’ or ‘unmotivated’. Sometimes, lack of interest is medicalised and prescriptions become an integral part of the ‘learning strategy’. The timeworn ‘solution’ has been some form of conditioning (a mixture of carrots, sticks) which is institutionalised (grades, ranks, awards, etc.) to affirm this over the long term.

Dewey believed the problem to be rooted *not* in student attitudes, but in educators’ ignorance about the *origins* of interest. Remedying this avoids blaming students *or* inventing more powerful carrots and sticks; rather, educators must understand that ‘the stimulus resides in the situation with which [students are] actually confronted’. Educators who grasp this are liberated to create situations in which ‘objects and modes of action . . . [are] connected with [students’] present powers’ (Dewey, 1980 [1916], pp. 54, 133).

Cultivating such situations requires planning. Curricular content, all agree, must be conveyed and will play a part; but equally important will be a sympathetic understanding of students’ personality, social and intellectual backgrounds, tastes and even emotional temperaments. Is it not reasonable to think that in our contemporary age (of remote, online ‘distance learning’, ‘MOOCs’ and technologically ‘flipped’ classrooms) that now, more than ever, Dewey’s point is *especially* salient? For as we become distracted by new *mediums* of transmission, we often forget that the goal is not necessarily *transmission* at all; it is, rather, *the creation of a situation* which is broader and deeper than any quantum of information. No technology that merely states an idea—whether live lecture, book reading,

interactive computer program, etc.—can match the efficacy of genuine, shared situations. Dewey writes, ‘Only by wrestling with the conditions of the problem at first hand, seeking and finding his own way out, does [the student] think’ (Dewey, 1980 [1916], p. 167).

Creating genuine situations requires profound care; conditions must reflect participants’ individuality or pedagogy fails. For various reasons (driven especially by economics and class), there is precious little opportunity for this kind of education. As a result, conditions become more alienating: students become more inured, teachers suffer a loss of autonomy (to standardised tests, administrators, bureaucracy), and even, Dewey says, lose their sense of humour!²

2. Situations: ‘Aims’ and ‘criteria’ in problem-solving

The next connection is between the situations created by teachers and the source of the aims and criteria used to assess students’ solutions. Consider what a sceptic might say, here. ‘Pose a problem. Fine. But from where could the *means* for a solution come? Mustn’t the teacher *reveal* to the students what the *specific* means are?’ Indeed, the sceptic might continue, ‘Isn’t education *all about* the methodical revelation of already understood connections between means and ends?’

Dewey argued that while rehearsing such connections has a place in pedagogy, learning involves students imagining the situation which *gave birth* to the problem; they must attempt to answer, for themselves, ‘How did *those* inquirers—in *their situation*—derive *their* clues?’ Let me offer an illustration. In fictional murder mysteries, often one clue (a suspect, a motive, a proposed sequence of events) is over-emphasised; this myopia sidelines the detectives until they realise they need to revisit the initial situation (e.g. crime scene). (Usually, the audience has been screaming for them to do this for some time!) The source of missing clues (or means or fresh possibilities) are to be sought from the initial indeterminate situation itself. As Dewey put it, ‘the perplexities of the situation [suggest] certain ways out’ (Dewey, 1980 [1916], p. 154). Dewey’s earnest advice (to go back to the situation) applies to all inquirers, whether they are in education, the sciences, or your local police.

A second illustration comes from Dewey’s own Lab School. As Michael Tiboris and Scot Danforth (Tiboris and Danforth, 2016) point out in a recent paper about Dewey’s use of ‘occupations’ in the curriculum, the Lab School used a situation-based approach to help students become autonomous—both self-possessed in their own sense of identity as well as better able to take on the responsibilities of the larger society they would soon inherit. The autonomy that schooling aims at, they point out, is of a ‘substantive’ type and not merely ‘procedural’. It is substantive because it conveys determinate values (about self-determination, community, productivity and democratic participation) not merely procedural values (skill-sets for later activities). In their recounting, the Deweyan school contributes to such ‘substantive autonomy’ by using situations deployed within two dramatic and pedagogical roles: ‘scientific sociologist’ and ‘practical community builder’.

The first role, ‘scientific sociologist’, works using the subjects of history, science and technology, but in a way that connects these subject matters to values. In this process students would study history, especially the material and social conditions leading to their present, with a special eye toward how challenges were overcome and how this had shaped present social attitudes. In other words, by creating situations of historically-situated problem solving (e.g. making candles to create light at night) students had to ‘inhabit others’ situations; this creates a sympathy with the internal logic and challenges of others’ situations (in this case, their own ancestors’) which could provide students with a wider sense of their own relation to society across a longer temporal span than their immediate world. ‘Instead of simply being told how others had thought about solving social problems, they performed the tasks themselves in order to inhabit the reasoning of other societies’ (Tiboris and Danforth, 2016, p. 646).

By inhabiting that historical situation, students could come to see the degree to which it was contingent to a certain pattern of life. The larger lesson was for students to gain greater purchase on the ways of life unfolding around them, and to be better equipped to assume ‘a fallibilist and pragmatic attitude about the conditions of their social world’ (Tiboris and Danforth, 2016, p. 647). Such an attitude, Dewey thought, was a prerequisite to democratic citizenship. Society is not merely an unchangeable background in which students live, but is an active site in which they are increasingly agents, capable of changing meaning for themselves and others by maintaining or changing the ways material and social resources are distributed (Tiboris and Danforth, 2016, p. 650).

The second way DE’s use of situations could inculcate autonomy was via the role of ‘practical community-builders’. Here, Tiboris and Danforth point out, students and teachers in Dewey’s school did ‘hands-on experimentation with the industrial, agricultural, and domestic occupations of their society’ to understand challenges related to food, housing, transportation, clothing, etc. This cooperative work, ‘thrust children into active participation with our ‘fundamental relations to the world’ doing the ‘types of the processes by which society keeps itself going’ (Tiboris and Danforth, 2016, p. 647, quoting from Dewey’s *The School and Society*). This role is:

‘... meant to teach children to prefer activities that contribute to meeting shared social needs. A world in which students approach the world scientifically, applying their knowledge in concrete ways to solve real collective social challenges through their work, is one in which they will be more likely to find meaning in what they do’ (Tiboris and Danforth, 2016, p. 648).

The point, here, is that situations are crucial sources of the means, criteria and clues to solving problems. (This includes, as Tiboris and Danforth point out, ‘occupations’, which are just a special kind of pedagogically-designed situation). Any problem we face happens at a novel point in time, and is always to some degree unique. Pedagogies which provide stock-solutions or provoke overly-speculative ‘brainstorming’ bypass a better

method—namely, that of directing students to direct concentrated observation and imagination toward actual situations.

3. Situations: Moral education (habits, values, and judgments)

The last connection is between situations and the way we convey and pass along our values—call it ‘moral education’. As explained earlier (in connection to direct experience), education has a vital role to play in moral development. But this is not, as DE points out, a *specialised* part of the curriculum—the ‘morality course’!—but rather is integral to education’s general mission. ‘Morals’, as Dewey puts it, ‘concern nothing less than the whole character’ (Dewey, 1980 [1916], p. 366). Character, of course, is shaped interactively—via created or encountered situations; the challenge is to deal with situations in deliberate intelligence. When one is ‘in charge’ of children—say, in a mathematics or language or biology class—one is simultaneously responsible for delivering content *and* for their development as human beings. This latter, moral, responsibility is operative no matter *what* the subject is. Morality is *taught* insofar as one is always shaping habits. ‘All habits’, Dewey writes in *Human Nature and Conduct* ‘are demands for certain kinds of activity; and [habits] constitute the self’ (Dewey, 1978 [1922], p. 21). Attitudes (or virtues, to use an older term) such as compassion contribute to growth; understood as comprised of habits, these can be reinforced and developed with certain situations. Attitudes destructive of growth (vices), also understood as habits, can be reconstructed. For example, habits of social exclusion—for example, on a playground, of a child who is new to the school—can be addressed by situations in which those perpetrating the exclusion themselves become estranged; such an experiment might induce sympathy, be explicated (in discussion or writing), and then the situation of earlier exclusion might be explored. Such a process might lead to a reconstruction of the attitudes (habits) involved and the prevention of future exclusionary acts.

Let me quickly clarify the connection between ‘situations’ and ‘habits’. Habits are not like personal property, exclusive to a self. A habit is *transactional*—it comes from and is ingredient to situations. As Dewey said, ‘Habits enter into the constitution of the situation; they are in and of it, not . . . something outside of it’ (Dewey, 1978 [1911], p. 120). So, I may have a habit of eating sweets after dinner, but this habit isn’t isolated; my body’s chemistry, the family who joins in, or the properties of the food all constitute the situation and reinforce the behaviour we happen to isolate as ‘David’s sweet-tooth-habit’.

Because an individual’s habits are enmeshed in many transactions beyond that individual, schools and teachers *must* take their task to be the nature of the *situations* they are creating for their students. Dewey writes:

‘A curriculum which acknowledges the social responsibilities of education must present situations where problems are relevant to the problems of living together, and where observation and information are calculated to develop social insight and interest’ (Dewey, 1980 [1916], p. 200).

Creating genuine situations can help students understand the meaningful implications of different kinds of conduct, but this cannot come from a lecture or (in a religious context) a sermon; genuine knowledge can only be created through situations.

Values and Valuation

To round out this discussion about moral education, consider the connection between situations and values (and value judgments). One profound and shared misapprehension is that values are somehow independent of everyday conduct. On that assumption, education mistakenly takes its challenge to be inducing (persuading, cajoling, coercing) students into following moral codes or rules. DE argues that moral values (and aims) are the results of past inquiries, which themselves emerge from (and return for application to) new problematic situations. The challenge is to develop or modify habits (or dispositions) which can serve to mitigate or resolve the problem at issue.

Consider a child given two pieces of a candy while his brother has none. For many children, this presents a problematic situation; the child may be ‘ill at ease’ and forced to think about what to do. The situation is ‘indeterminate’—a quandary. He may, of course, apply the rule (or value) handed down from his parents—which says ‘always share’. But while this solution provides one route (from indeterminacy to determinacy), it requires neither personal investment nor perspicuous analysis of the ‘actual empirical’ situation (as Dewey calls it). This solution lacks authenticity; no personal habits are modified or changed. An authentic solution involves inquiry—observation, hypothesis, reflection, testing out, implementation in action—not generally different from other inquiry-situations. In this instance, a parent might intervene to ask how a child who did not want to share would feel if his sibling had the candy, to initiate an inquiry aimed at a more authentic solution. More dramatically, at a later time, a parent might try offering the deprived child candy without also giving the other child any; once the other child who had not shared protests, the parent can use the created situation as a teachable moment which refers back to the earlier episode.

Dewey’s approach here is in no way new. Twenty-three years earlier, in a piece entitled ‘Teaching Ethics in The High School’ (1972 [1893]), he lays out the situation-based method. Present students with a case of apparent misery, he writes, and ask the pupils how they would decide . . . *whether* to relieve it and, if so, *how* This should be done without any preliminary dwelling upon the question as a ‘moral’ one,

‘Above all . . . it should be made clear that the question is not what to do, but *how to decide what to do*. . . . [T]he whole object of the method I am bringing forward is not to get children to arguing about [which moral rules to deploy in a given case but rather] . . . to get them into the habit of mentally constructing some actual scene of human interaction, and of consulting that for instruction as to what to do The whole point, in a word, is to keep the mental eye constantly upon

some actual situation or interaction; to realize in the imagination this or that particular needy person making his demand upon some other particular person' (Dewey, 1972 [1893], pp. 56–57).

The ultimate purpose, Dewey adds, is to form,

'... in the mind of the person taught, the habit of realizing for himself and in himself the nature of the practical situations in which he will find himself placed ... the formation of a sympathetic imagination for human relations in action' (Dewey, 1972 [1893], p. 57).

It is easy to underestimate how radical Dewey's suggestion is—how dramatically we must shift attention onto the present *process* of judgment. For even in those cases where the end seems inviolable—such as 'Don't murder'—Dewey emphasises the dominance of the *present*, not the future, as determinative:

'Foreseen ends are factors [for control] in the development of a changing situation. ... [Ends] are subordinate to the situation ... not the situation to them. They are not ends in the sense of finalities to which everything must be bent and sacrificed. They are, as foreseen, means of guiding the development of a situation' (Dewey, 1980 [1916], p. 182).

These two facts about values—that (a) they are authentic insofar as they are *ingredient* in inquiry, and (b) that their prospective power is relative to their *deployment* in present situations—yields another important conclusion in DE. As Dewey puts it, 'In the abstract or at large, apart from the needs of a particular situation in which choice has to be made, there is no such thing as degrees or order of value' (Dewey, 1980 [1916], p. 248). This rejection of a fixed hierarchy of values is present in works that both precede and follow DE.

The Constructive Transvaluation of Values

This last point of Dewey's—his denial of fixed degrees or orders of value—leads nicely to a final way in which situations can play a role in schools' value education. In a recent piece entitled 'The Educational Community as Intentional Community' Igor Jasinski and Tyson E. Lewis develop an imaginative conception of community to which situation-based pedagogy can contribute. By drawing upon Dewey in conjunction with Giorgio Agamben, Gert Biesta, and others, they propose that schools can use 'situations' not only to further learning—in the sense of delivering content, skills, and other instrumentalities—but to also create 'disruptions' or 'exposures' that focus on those present in order to facilitate what they call an 'intentional community,' right there and then. They write,

'An intentional community ... interrupts the taken-for-granted logic of means and ends that underlies how learning communities are more often than not depicted and justified, thus opening up a different kind of educational space and time' (Jasinski and Lewis, 2015, p. 373).

Their disruption is countenanced by a more fundamental distinction they offer, one between schools' typical approach to community (a 'community of inquiry' dedicated to dialogic pedagogy) and what they term a 'community of infancy'. The key difference, they explain, is that 'the community of infancy' temporarily suspends the ritual of teaching in which the teacher commands the authoritative, knowledgeable, voice. In this mode, the teacher stands neither above nor amidst their students but *beside* them—and allows their typical voice of 'reasonableness and truth' to 'fall silent' (Jasinski and Lewis, 2015, p. 374 and 377).

This burden-shifting is necessary to enable the students to create 'an experience' which is truly theirs:

'As long as the voice of the teacher, as the voice of reasonableness, is present, the students are looking to the teacher for validation and confirmation, which means that the students' voices will continue to manifest themselves in reasonable speech. Once the voice of the teacher is removed, the students are left to their devices' (Jasinski and Lewis, 2015, p. 374).

In other words, the teacher creates a situation which must be fully and energetically entered into by students and teacher together, with the aim of strengthening communal bonds. The goal is to create education via 'an experience' (to use Dewey's aesthetic phrase) rather than just 'an exercise' which might just happen to educate. As Jasinski and Lewis put it, this approach 'thus interrupts the focus on actualisation (realisation of aims or purposes), and instead allows for the experience of contingency and indeterminacy at the heart of the process of communal inquiry' (Jasinski and Lewis, 2015, p. 374).

As I understand it, Jasinski and Lewis are not recommending that educators dispense with the more traditional problem-solving and instrumental kinds of learning communities where 'identity is solidified, ranks established, interests collectivised, shared problems overcome' (Jasinski and Lewis, 2015, p. 376). Rather, the idea is that by *also* creating situations where students can have a 'communal experience of openness and indeterminacy' educators can help students locate and own what Agamben calls the 'power of community' (Jasinski and Lewis, 2015, p. 376).

While such an approach may seem quite radical, given the very traditional roles that even progressive teachers must still play in the classroom, it is actually an experiment quite in keeping with the more significant *social* role Dewey affords the school, *per se*. For *if* our world (including our experience and interpretations of it) is in perpetual change, and *if* it the goal of the school to equip students for that change—to reinvent democracy to suit each coming cohort of generations—*then* students really do need experience with indeterminate situations where they can feel and confront the existential burden of choice. The alternative is to deny that such precarious change is endemic in existence; to encourage habits much more imbued with passivity; and to rest, tacitly if not explicitly, upon the illusion that facts and goals are already known in advance, and all that is required,

really, are new technologies of implementation. From Dewey's perspective, down that road lies not authentic human freedom, but authoritarianism and enslavement.

CONCLUSION

By all accounts, John Dewey lived a meaningful life which integrated philosophy, education and politics. DE provides a good look into the principles and insights which informed his life. Because change is the only constant, Dewey knew that each generation must reinvent democracy to respond to novel conditions, needs and challenges. Education's job, Dewey said, went beyond the delivery of the facts and meanings that those controlling society want to imbue in coming generations. Our greater duty was to 'liberate the young from reviving and re-traversing the past' (Dewey, 1980 [1916], p. 79). It takes flexibility and courage to simultaneously educate-and-let-go. But 'let go' we must, for 'letting go' means 'setting free'. And really, there is no higher love.³

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NOTES

1. While the had/known (direct/indirect experience) distinction appears in many of Dewey's works, some especially important places to look include—'The Postulate of Immediate Empiricism' (Dewey, 1980 [1905]); 'Qualitative Thought' (Dewey, 1985 [1930a], especially pp. 211–212); *Experience and Nature* (Dewey, 1985 [1925], especially pp. 26–27), and *Logic: The Theory of Inquiry* (Dewey, 1985 [1938], especially pp. 74–75). Dewey puts the point nicely in 'In Reply to Some Criticisms' (Dewey, 1985 [1930]): 'Things that are *had* in experience exist prior to reflection and its eventuation in an object of knowledge; but the latter, as such, is a deliberately effected re-arrangement or re-disposition, by means of overt operations, of such antecedent existences' (p. 212).
2. Dewey captures the plight of teachers burdened by authoritarian pedagogies here: 'Experiences are had under conditions of such constraint that they throw little or no light upon the normal course of an experience to its fruition. "Methods" have then to be authoritatively recommended to teachers, instead of being an expression of their own intelligent observations The effect of this situation in crippling the teacher's sense of humor has not received the attention which it deserves' (Dewey, 1980 [1916], pp. 175, 345–346).
3. This essay adapts, with some modification, a presentation given at the conference on *John Dewey's Democracy and Education 100 Years On: Past, Present, and Future Relevance*, held at the University of Cambridge, 28 September–1 October 2016. It also draws upon material presented in my article 'The Paramount Importance of Experience and Situations in Dewey's *Democracy and Education*' (Hildebrand, 2016). The main aim of the modifications has been to orient the accounts of Dewey's theoretical philosophical ideas even more toward pedagogy and practical technique than previously.

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