Dewey's Problem

David K. Cohen
University of Michigan

Abstract

John Dewey's contribution to educational thought and practice has been identified with child-centered schooling; the problem he is thought to have addressed was how to eliminate rote teaching and learning and adapt instruction to students' interests. Some applauded this while others consider it a disaster. But Dewey was no less dismayed than his critics about what passed for child-centered education. Though he was repelled by rigid, rote teaching and learning, the problems he worried most about did not arise in schools and reached far beyond education. They included the growth of industrialism, increasing economic inequality and the political inequality that resulted from concentrations of wealth and poverty, and the collapse of organic communities as social bonds were torn by capitalist economic relations. These were the problems that Dewey sought to solve in School and Society and much other writing. In that volume he sketched a scheme in which schools would create a counterculture that would correct the human and social devastation of industrial capitalism. The power of the new scheme would arise from a new system of curriculum and instruction that rooted academic learning in scientific, social, and technical problem solving and required democratic social relations. These countercultural agencies would make over American society by making over its children. The schools he proposed were not child centered in the conventional sense, for Dewey had very firm ideas about what students should learn, and he sketched a psychology of work and learning that he thought would guarantee students' fascination with school. His proposals were child centered chiefly in the sense that children's schooling would be the key to social, political, and cultural renewal. But Dewey never tried to solve the problem of how such countercultural institutions could thrive in the society they were to make over.
ing. The problem that Dewey wanted to solve is supposed to have been rote teaching and learning, and his solution was to adapt instruction to students’ interests and to use interest-centered activities as the engine of education. Some regard this as a signal accomplishment, while others, including no less a scholar than Richard Hofstadter, consider it a disaster. But few disputed that Dewey sought to make schooling more humane and engaging by centering it on students’ interests and activities.¹

Unhappily for both Dewey and our understanding of his thought, this view is as incorrect as it is common. Dewey was no less dismayed than his critics about what passed for child-centered education. Though usually more temperate than the critics, at one point he referred to efforts at child-centered schooling as “stupid.” Though he was repelled by rigid, rote teaching and learning and wanted to make education more available to children, that was not the main problem he wanted to solve. In fact, at the beginning of his long career of writing about education he derided many contemporary efforts to make school “interesting,” portraying them as pedagogically limited and intellectually foolish.

The problems that Dewey worried most about did not arise in schools and reached far beyond education. One was the growth of industrialism, increasing economic inequality, and the political inequality that resulted from concentrations of wealth and poverty. Another was the collapse of organic communities as social bonds were torn by capitalist economic relations, mass migrations of agricultural workers to cities, and new patterns of factory work. Still another was the greater importance of knowledge to economic and social life owing to scientific and technical progress but the rapidly diminishing knowledge required from individual workers owing to increased specialization. These were the same problems that had preoccupied Karl Marx and many other nineteenth-century thinkers. Dewey did not discover them, for they were the intellectual chatter—and fear—of the century, discovered and rediscovered more times than anyone could count. His diagnosis of modern social ills was in no sense original.

If anything was unusual, it was Dewey’s idea that schools could solve such problems, but even that was far from original. Horace Mann and other common school crusaders for state sponsorship of schooling had fretted about industrialism, economic and political inequality, and the collapse of community decades before Dewey was born. Like many other early nineteenth-century figures in Europe and the United States, Mann had been deeply worried about the ravages of industrialism, the loss of social solidarity, and the effects that growing inequality had on the body politic. Though he saw the origins of these problems as largely economic, he worried most about the loss of community, social solidarity, and moral coherence. The term “social capital” had not yet become a vogue, but the loss of solidary social bonds and civil society was prominent in what terrified Mann about the new America that was taking shape as he watched—and helped to develop by promoting railroads. The symptoms on which the leader of the Common School Crusade particularly focused were the collapse of shared values, the increase of crime, the neglect and abuse of children, and growing political apathy, complaints that were as familiar to Americans then as now.

With such a diagnosis it is not surprising that Mann saw schools as an agency that could repair the damage, for schools acted on knowledge, beliefs, and sentiments. The view that schools could solve social problems by shaping what children knew and believed was distinctively American, a set of ideas so widespread before Dewey was born that he probably inhaled them as a young man. And if anyone doubts that the ideas were distinctively American, consider Karl Marx. He was roughly a contemporary
of Mann's, and he worried about many of the same problems. But unlike Mann, he argued that only radical economic change could remedy growing alienation, inequality, and social dislocation. In Marx's view the problem was not only economic in origin—unequal ownership of the means of production—but also depended on a revolution in ownership for its solution. He held that efforts to produce social change by changing hearts and minds could have no useful effect—only economic change could lay the foundations for cultural, moral, and intellectual democracy.

For another perspective, consider the great French sociologist Émile Durkheim. He, too, saw the pathologies of urban, industrial society as social and moral in character and built the foundations of an entire line of sociological research on those ideas. Durkheim devoted the prime of his career—coinciding roughly with the first 3 or 4 decades of Dewey's life—to detailed investigation of the rootlessness, loss of community, and social disorganization that he saw as inevitable aspects of modern social organization. Social capital was much on his mind as well, but he seemed to see no relief from these modern pathologies.

Marx was more hopeful than Durkheim, at least in the sense that he thought revolutionary economic change would create democratic ownership, which would turn production toward social rather than private uses and enable the growth of a culture that would be a popular resource rather than an elite amusement. Violent though the transition probably would be, a better world would ensue. But Dewey was the most hopeful of this nineteenth-century Pantheon, for he believed that reformers could solve basic economic and political problems by acting directly on minds, morals, and culture. He argued that, if schools were reorganized as intellectually serious and cooperative communities, students would learn well and equally. Having learned to respect each other, to work together, and to be productive members of a decent small society, students would grow up differently, making a quiet social revolution because of their more generous habits, ideas, and values. Alienation, inequality, and exploitation could be repaired with much education but little dislocation. Schooling counted for Dewey chiefly as a way to repair the great problems of modern life.

It would be easy to poke fun at Mann and Dewey for believing that little children's schools could solve problems that led giants of European thought to revolution or resignation. But these two Americans were not simpletons: they envisioned nothing less than fundamental change in mind, culture, and morality. Dewey knew that many ravages of modernity could be traced to economic change and believed that economic redress was needed; he described himself as a socialist and often acted politically in that vein. He nonetheless also thought that culture, knowledge, and morality could move the world, ascribing the same power to mind and its creations that Marx saw in economic organization.

**Mind, Experience, and Learning**

*School and Society* begins with a capsule history of education. Before the Industrial Revolution, education was rooted in meaningful work, in what Dewey termed "occupations": "The educative forces of the domestic spinning and weaving, of the sawmill, the gristmill, the cooper shop, and the blacksmith forge, were continuously operative." As a result, learning was "a matter of immediate and personal concern" (p. 11). Learning was grounded in social practices that were both authentic and entirely available. "The entire industrial process stood revealed from the production on the farm of the raw materials till the finished article was actually put to use.... The clothing worn was for the most part made in the house: the members of the household were usually familiar also with the shearing of the sheep, the carding and spinning of the wool, and the plying of the loom.... Not
only this, but practically every member of the household had his own share in the work” (p. 11). Dewey believed that when learning was so situated it had an irresistible immediacy and motive force: “We cannot overlook the factors of discipline and character building involved in this kind of life: training in habits of order and of industry ... and ... of obligation to do something, to produce something” (pp. 10–11).

The main thread in Dewey’s history of education therefore concerned the relationship between experience and learning. In preindustrial America, children learned because learning was essential to work that had to be done, to people who children cared deeply about, and to survival itself. In such small and simple economies, learning was rooted in “having to do things with a real motive behind and a real outcome ahead. ... Practically every member of the household had his own share of the work: The children ... were gradually initiated into the mysteries of the several processes. It was a matter of immediate and personal concern” (p. 12).

Necessity was pedagogy, and work a curriculum. The situatedness of learning was central for Dewey because “we learn from experience, and from books or the sayings of others only as they are related to experience” (p. 17). Work experience was the curriculum for children growing up on farms and agricultural villages. But when learning grew isolated from work, because industrialism tore labor out of family and village settings and relocated it in factories, learning was sent to school and so became artificial. That was the central problem of education in an industrial age: “Schools have been so set apart, so isolated from the ordinary conditions and motives of life” that they are “the one place in the world where it is most difficult to get experience” (p. 17). This was a direct result of the great transformations associated with industrialism. As the growing social division of labor and the rise of markets eroded self-sufficient rural economies, they eliminated children’s opportunities to learn from experience. In 1899 Dewey could write that, “at present, concentration of industry and division of labor have practically eliminated household and neighborhood occupations—at least for educational purposes” (p. 17).

The Industrial Revolution thus was no less central in Dewey’s history of education than in Marx’s history of Europe. For Marx it changed the relationship between working and ownership, between working and knowing, and between work and its satisfactions. Dewey roughly agreed that the Industrial Revolution was pivotal, for it entailed social and economic changes that entirely transformed the modern world: “The change ... that overshadows and even controls all others is the industrial one—... great inventions that have utilized the forces of nature on a vast and inexpensive scale: the growth of a world-wide market ... of vast manufacturing centers ... of cheap and rapid means of communication and distribution” (p. 9). Those changes had had immense effects on population movement, commerce, and even religion, and Dewey wrote that it was inconceivable that they would not also have affected education.

Unlike Marx, though, Dewey focused mostly on changes in the relationship between experience and learning. Industrial capitalism changed work radically: “Plato somewhere speaks of the slave as one who in his actions does not express his own ideas, but those of some other man” (p. 23). But in the industrial division of labor, “many of the employed today are mere appendages of the machines which they operate!” (p. 24). Like Marx, Henri St-Simon, Auguste Comte, and many others, Dewey represented industrial work as a species of slavery, in which the worker was driven by his machine and could not “see within his daily work all there is in it of large and human significance” (p. 24). Technology and the organization of work drove workers, and thus driven they learned little from
work save how to perform as passive slaves, how not to think, and how not to relate their efforts to those of others—a curriculum that was as disastrous for workers as for democracy.

Education also changed dramatically as it was wrenched away from work: adult workers went away from home and domestic industries to ply their trades elsewhere, whereas children were sent to schools. Education became formal and artificial and, therefore, also pathological. The curriculum became reified knowledge rather than the fruit of immediate experience, as textbooks replaced learning from specific work with printed, logical syntheses of knowledge in various fields. In The Child and the Curriculum, Dewey argued that knowledge was reorganized as a “formulated result” of inquiry (p. 22), a “shorthand of actual experiences” (p. 24). Students had to learn “bare or mere symbols[s]... dead and barren.” Instruction became the presentation of these facts “known by others, and requiring only to be studied and learned, by the child... it condemns the fact to be a hieroglyph... an idle curiosity... a dead weight to burden... [the mind]” (p. 25).

In this situation, learning became a matter of “passive and inert recipiency,” focused on the “mere absorbing of facts and truths” (p. 25). Learners were “treated passively as... everything is on a ‘listening’ basis [so you can have uniformity of method and material]” (p. 25). This reconstruction of learning as encounters with such “ready-made” materials was undertaken on a mass scale, as cities grew and populations mushroomed. Schools dealt with “as large numbers of children as possible... en masse, as an aggregate of units.” Classrooms everywhere looked alike, with their “rows of ugly desks placed in geometrical order... almost all of the same size” (p. 25). This was batch-processing, an industrial approach that took the very possibility of life out of education.

There was no “natural motive” (p. 25) for children even to use language in school, in such circumstances. In School and Society, Dewey wrote in the same vein that, “when language is used simply for the repetition of lessons, it is not surprising that one of the chief difficulties of school work has come to be instruction in the mother tongue. Since the language used in schools is unnatural and artificial” (p. 56), students’ ability to speak and write well became stilted. Dewey portrayed schooling in industrial America as the cause of intellectual disfunction, much as we now know that hospitals can cause disease.

Schools also created social disfunctions, as learning under industrialism became the responsibility of individual students. For that atomistic regime “tends very naturally to pass into selfishness... almost the only measure for success is a competitive one, in the bad sense of that term... So thoroughly is this the prevailing atmosphere that for one child to help another in his task has become a school crime. Where the school work consists [merely] in learning lessons, mutual assistance, the most natural form of cooperation and association, becomes a clandestine effort” (p. 56).

If students learned nothing in school, Dewey might have been less troubled, but he fretted about what they did learn from inauthentic education: that learning was rote memorization, that knowledge was useless things memorized and soon forgotten, that education was painful and irrelevant, that selfishness worked, that cooperation was unwise and to help others was cheating, and that money was the reason to work. These evils of schooling were not the result of poor pedagogy but of the industrial division of labor, capitalist competition, and the school system that grew up in their wake. In this Deweyan picture, poor pedagogy was not the cause but one of many effects of there being an agency called “school” that had been set apart from the main streams of life and work by economic and social change. Contrary to what many of his acolytes and enemies imagined, Dewey did not believe that the villain of the
schooling drama was bad teaching. Deplorable though such teaching was, the villain of the piece was industrialism and the social and educational pathologies that it spawned. Bad teaching was simply the institutionalized consequence of those pathologies. If one wished to repair schools, one had to focus on repairing the pathologies, not just the dismal teaching. Dewey persistently derided the idea that better teaching or more interesting assignments could be of any fundamental use.

But no sooner had he delivered his sharp indictment of schools than Dewey insisted it would be “useless to bemoan the departure of the good old days” (p. 12). One reason was that modernization had brought many advantages, including increased tolerance and cosmopolitanism, the easy availability of inexpensive printed materials from which to learn, and rapid transportation and communication. All of that added up to a crucial fact for anyone concerned with education: “learning has been put into circulation ... knowledge is no longer an immobile solid [the possession of a priestly class]; it has been liquified. It is actively moving in all the currents of society itself” (p. 25).

Dewey celebrated technical progress and the Industrial Revolution because both had helped to democratize opportunities to learn. Despite his evident affection for preindustrial society, he proposed to invent a new education, not to reinvent the old. The key to such invention was knowledge of what existing schools lacked: “The tragic weakness of the present school is that it endeavors to prepare future members of the social order in a medium in which the conditions of the social spirit are eminently wanting. . . . In the schoolroom the motive and cement of social organization are alike wanting. . . . the present school cannot organize itself as a natural social unit because just this element of common and productive activity is absent. . . . A society is a number of people held together because they are working along common lines, in a common spirit, and with reference to common aims [that] . . . demand interchange of thought and unity of feeling” (pp. 14–15, emphasis added).

Schools lost any possible authentic mission and organization at their creation, when they were hived off to focus on mere academic learning. He proposed therefore to recreate schools as productive social units in which real occupations, “which exact personal responsibilities and which train the child in relation to the physical realities of life” (pp. 12, 14), would situate learning. The reform that Dewey proposed was neither better pedagogy nor instruction centered on children’s interests but a reformation of schools to repair the damage done by the Industrial Revolution. His central idea was to organize schooling around the “occupations” that once had been central to work and learning. In an unmistakably American spirit, the same philosopher who depicted schools as an educationally useless and damaging agent of industrialism argued that those same schools, suitably reconstituted, could save America from the pathologies of the very industrial regime that had spawned them.

The key to this educational reformation would be to reinsert real experience in the life of schools, and “occupations” would be the vehicle for such experience. In Dewey’s parlance, occupations referred to a limited set of activities by means of which “man-kind has made its historical and political progress” (p. 19). He referred especially to those transformations of nature by means of which humanity changed the earth and made it home by creating new technologies, knowledge, and social organization, in the process changing humanity itself. He sketched these ideas in a remarkable passage that mixed celebration of technical and intellectual progress with something approaching pantheist awe: “The earth is the final source of all man’s food. It is his continual shelter and protection, the raw material of his activities, and the home to whose humanizing and idealizing all his achievement returns. It is the great field, the
great mine, the first great source of the energies of heat, light, and electricity; the great scene of ocean, stream, mountain, and plain, of which all our agriculture and mining and lumbering, all our manufacturing and distributing agencies, are but the partial elements and factors” (p. 19).

Among the sorts of work that Dewey titled “occupations” were agriculture, exploration of the earth by land and sea, mining, cooking, and sewing. These had enabled humanity to make itself over many times, fabricating civilization in the mutual transformations of earth and humankind. He wrote of these that “the activities of life are of necessity directed to bringing the materials and forces of nature under the control of our purposes... Men have had to work in order to live. In and through their work they have mastered nature, they have been protected and enriched the condition of their own life, they have been awakened to the sense of their own powers—have been led to invent, to plan, and to rejoice in the acquisition of skill” (pp. 136–137).

Dewey did not limit his conception of occupations to those in which men and women mixed their labor with soil, trees, minerals, animals, and plants. He completed the passage above by including occupations through which “the intellectual and emotional interpretation of nature has been developed. It is through what we do in and with the world that we read its meaning and measure its value” (p. 29). The transformation of nature could not have been accomplished without understanding and interpreting it, so occupations must include such intellectual practices as mathematics, chemistry, astronomy, and literature.

Dewey thus sought to situate school learning and teaching in what he regarded as the central dramas of humanity—our effort to carve homes and a measure of security out of the wild world, to be productive, and to build civilization. Dewey wanted schools to adopt a curriculum of occupations in order to focus students’ studies on this, the greatest work of being human. He envisioned an ambitious intellectual adventure: “These occupations in the school shall not be mere practical devices or modes of routine employment, the gaining of better technical skills as cooks, seamstresses, or carpenters, but active centers of scientific insight into natural materials and processes, points of departure whence children shall be led out into a realization of the historic development of man” (p. 19, emphasis added).

Dewey was not talking about vocational education or what then was called “manual training,” which he found “unnecessarily narrow.” He had something much more profound in mind:

We must conceive of work in wood and metal, of weaving, sewing, and cooking, and methods of living and learning, not as distinct studies... [but] in their social significance, as types of the processes by which society keeps itself going, as agencies of bringing home to the child some of the primal necessities of community life, and as ways in which these needs have been met by the growing insight and ingenuity of man; in short, as instrumentalities through which the school itself shall be made a genuine form of active community life, instead of a place set apart in which to learn lessons. (P. 14)

He offered an example of sewing and weaving, drawn from the University of Chicago’s Laboratory School, in which students began with the raw materials—cotton, flax, and wool. First they studied their adaptability to use as fabric. They compared the natural fibers, discovered how difficult it is to separate seeds from cotton, how different the fibers are—cotton only a third as long as wool—and thus different in their adaptability for spinning. All this the children “worked out for themselves with the actual material, aided by questions and suggestions from the teacher” (pp. 20–21).

The next step was fabrication: the students “followed the processes necessary for working the fibers up into cloth. They reinvented the first frame for carding the wool.
... they *revised* the simplest process for spinning the wool. ... Then the children are introduced to the invention next in historic order, working it out experimentally ... and tracing its effects, not only upon that particular industry but upon modes of social life" (pp. 20–21, emphases added).

The prose is telling, partly because it makes plain that Dewey wanted students to retrace steps that men and women had taken to solve the crucial problems of humanity—in this case turning raw materials into clothing and mastering the agricultural practices, fabrication processes, and the technologies and science that underlay such problem solving. His reasoning was that "this work gives the point of departure from which the child can trace and follow the progress of mankind in history, getting an insight also into the materials used and the mechanical principles involved" (p. 20).

Such a curriculum would radically re-situate students' school work in several different ways. To begin with, it would center it in students' reenactment of certain crucial human practices and historical processes and their "revising" certain critical technical, scientific, and social discoveries. At this level the curriculum would be a practical history of civilization, centered in the grand story of how men and women won a living from nature but focused in the use of materials and the development of appropriate tools and technologies. Dewey's rationale for that focus was in part that those were things that children could reenact and, through the reenactment, gain access to the larger story of civilization. Breaking the soil, growing wheat, grinding flour, and baking bread—and learning about water, fertilizer, plant germination, the seasons, heat and temperature, and the chemistry of foods—was typical of the "fundamental" cycles of work and study that Dewey envisioned. His curriculum was history remade and reenacted.

If Dewey wanted to focus instruction on solving practical problems, he did not want to consider only the practical. He proposed to use the children's problem solving to open up "the application of science ... in the study of the fibers, of the geographical features, the conditions under which raw materials are grown ... the physics involved in the machinery of production" (pp. 21–22). To situate children's studies in occupations was also a way to situate science, history, and the other humanities in practical problem solving. To help students figure out how to get from lambs and seeds to cotton, wool, and flax, and from there to fibers and fabrics, and from there to clothes, was a way to help students figure out the economic geography of fabric production, the chemistry of fabric dying, and the physics of mechanical looms. He reasoned that such resituated work would help them to learn geography and physics by giving them access to what some now term "authentic" practices—that is, chemistry that makes sense because students would be solving real problems of great consequence for their work.

To situate learning in occupations thus was to also resituate disciplinary knowledge in efforts to solve the great practical problems of history, prominently including our struggles to win security, productivity, and prosperity. Dewey's program for authentic learning was hardly just a scheme for little children's studies. It embodied both a theory of history in which humanity's social and technical progress transformed itself and the world and a theory of knowledge in which intellectual life arose from and transformed practical activity and was validated by practical utility. The relations between knowledge and practice were critical in Dewey's educational program. Though he rejected the traditional teaching of academic subjects, he argued that disciplinary knowledge—the "command of the social or conventional symbols—symbols of language, including those of quantity"—was "one of the most important agencies or means in extending and controlling experience. ... They represent the tools which society has evolved ... as
instruments of its intellectual pursuits...the keys which will unlock to the child the wealth of social capital which lies beyond the possible range of his limited individual experience" (p. 111).

Contrary to the ideas of many critics, Dewey was no enemy of the disciplines: his curriculum of occupations was not designed to reduce the importance of disciplinary knowledge but to restate it in order to improve children's access to humanity's intellectual treasures. He wanted to ensure that "the child shall have in his own personal and vital experience a varied background of contact and acquaintance with realities, social and physical. This is necessary to prevent symbols from becoming a purely second-hand and conventional substitute for reality" (p. 112). Students would know what knowledge was for and where it applied if they derived and applied it themselves in practical situations. The situated curriculum would ensure that the "ordinary, direct, and personal experience of the child shall furnish problems, motives, and interests" (p. 112). Dewey understood quite well the fundamental importance of mastering disciplinary knowledge: his educational project was to situate that knowledge in a set of activities that would make the content and significance of such knowledge clear to all.

Dewey also firmly believed that his curriculum would solve the chronic problems of students' weak motivation, diffuse interest, and boredom with school. If school work was centered in solving practical problems that were crucial to humanity, the work would be intellectually compelling and psychologically engaging. Such lively interest and motivation would "necessitate recourse to books for...solution, satisfaction, and pursuit" (p. 112). Dewey thought that children would be virtually driven to learn chemistry, mathematics, and history by the experiences that his curriculum would engage them in. Lacking the tight connection between motive, interest, and studies that he thought his scheme would create, "the child approaches the book without intellectual hunger, without alertness, without a questioning attitude, and the result is...such abject dependence on books as weakens and cripples vigor of thought and inquiry" (p. 112). A curriculum of occupations would cure such pathologies, making disciplinary knowledge and skill more central than in traditional schools, both by their placement in the course of studies and by giving students reason and motive to learn. A student would "feel the need of resort to and command of the traditional social tools—furnish him with motives and make his recourse to them intelligent...work in language, literature, and number will not be a combination of mechanical drill, formal analysis, and appeal, even if unconscious, to sensational interests; and there will not be the slightest reason to fear that books and all that relates to them will not take the important place to which they are entitled" (p. 113). Students could not help but be motivated and interested, simply because they were driven by what Dewey termed universal "instincts" of human curiosity (p. 47).

Dewey was arguing that the ways in which the mind worked required that learning be situated in what contemporary psychologists call authentic performance; otherwise it would not be real learning. His program for school reform was tied closely to a view of cognition and cognitive development: "No number of object lessons...can afford even the shadow of a substitute for acquaintance with the plants and animals of the farm and garden, acquired through actual living among them and caring for them. No training of sense-organs in school, introduced for the sake of training, can begin to compete with the alertness and fullness of sense-life that comes through daily intimacy and interest in familiar occupations" (p. 11).

School professionals were scrambling to "interest" students in their assigned work, but Dewey contemptuously dismissed their efforts as gimmicky and superficial. These
appeals to interest were based on no deep connection among the interest generated, the material to be learned, and learners. But he saw such a connection in his proposed curriculum. While all interests grow out of some "instinct or habit," they are not all of equal value: "The instincts which find their conscious outlet in occupations are bound to be of an exceedingly fundamental and permanent type" (p. 136). Interests that arise from occupations "gathering about man's fundamental relationship to the world in which he lives ... must be of the worthy sort" (pp. 136–137). These passages reveal that a social psychology underlay Dewey's curriculum of occupations:

These interests as they develop in the child not only recapitulate the past important activities of the race but reproduce those of the child's present environment. He continually sees his elders engaged in such pursuits. He daily has to do with things which are the results of such occupations. He comes in contact with facts that have no meaning, save in relation to them. Take these things out of the present social life and see how little would remain ... The child's instinctive interests are, therefore, constantly reinforced by what he sees, feels, and hears going on around him ... it is not unreasonable to suppose that interests which are touched so constantly, and on so many sides, belong to the worthy and enduring type. (Pp. 137–138)

The curriculum could not fail to engage students because it would respond to interests that were tied psychologically to certain occupations and because students' interests would be "constantly reinforced" by the importance that such occupations played in social life. Students' academic studies would connect them with what was deepest in their own beings, in the history of humanity, and in life all around them. Dewey contrasted such authenticity with ordinary schools, which were "only a place to learn lessons having an abstract and remote reference to some possible living to be done in the future" (p. 18). He cautioned, in the chapter on "The Psychology of Occupations," that the curriculum of occupations would offer an academic frame, "a consistent skeleton with a firm backbone" (p. 138) for students' work. Lacking such a well-defined frame, he doubted that it would be wise to "give the principle of 'interest' any large place in school work," precisely because the gimmicky and superficial approach would fragment continuity and consistency in students' work (p. 138).

Dewey's curriculum thus was not child centered in the sense, so dear to both acolytes and critics, that it "began where children were." He detested and repeatedly ridiculed such ideas. His curriculum was child centered in the somewhat ironic sense that Dewey was convinced that it would work for all children. He thought that his curriculum of occupations was both universal and irresistible because it was based on the psychology of Everychild. It also was child centered in the sense that Dewey saw children developing in stages and requiring, as most stage theorists say, more concrete work at younger ages and more abstract work in later years of school. But this, too, was a Universal Developing Child and had nothing to do with the ephemeral "interests" that children might express on a Tuesday afternoon. His curriculum was not child centered either in the sense of beginning with individual children's varied interests at any moment or in the sense of focusing on the activities that children might desire. Dewey instead envisioned a serious program of study that he was absolutely sure would engage all children because it would focus their instincts on activities that were quintessentially and irresistibly human. He had definite ideas about what students should learn and had no patience with educators who would begin by trying to titilate students' "interests." But the child on whom Dewey proposed to center his curriculum was Everychild, a package of universal instincts and interests, not the particular and varied children found in many of the child- and activity-centered
classrooms whose intellectual emptiness so distressed Dewey.¹

Society and School
I have pointed out a central paradox in Dewey’s ideas about school: on the one hand, he saw schools as an educationally useless and socially destructive expression of industrial capitalism; yet on the other, he was convinced they could be the central agency in reconstructing society. One might reasonably ask: If industrialism was so powerful as to be able to create these sad and damaging institutions, how could new curriculum and pedagogy turn them into agencies that would save democracy in America from industrialism?

The paradox becomes even sharper as one pushes further into Dewey’s view of educational reformation, for, while it would occur in schools, it was aimed at society. He wrote that his curriculum would enable schools to “affiliate ... with life ... [to] become the child’s habitat, where he learns through directed living ... [in] a miniature community, an embryonic society” (p. 18). These schools would be little communities whose “primary business ... is to train children in co-operative and mutually helpful living; ... to foster in them the consciousness of mutual interdependence; and to help them practically in making the adjustments that will carry this spirit into overt deeds” (p. 117).

Looking inside the schools thus imagined, Dewey explained that such learning would occur because students would have to work “cooperatively” if they were to till soil, plant seeds, harvest grain, mill flour, and make bread, for those could not be individual projects. They would have to be done jointly to be done at all; students would have to share the work and be “mutually helpful” if they were to succeed. Students would learn “mutual interdependence,” and teachers could cultivate “consciousness” of that interdependence. Dewey opined that the experience would “saturate” students with “the spirit of service” (p. 29).

But Dewey always was looking outside as much as inside such schools because the point was to change social relations in America. Cooperation, mutual respect, and mutual dependence were his answers to the industrial division of labor, to the pairing of workers’ ignorance and isolation with industrialists’ extraordinary knowledge and influence, and to the damage such things do to democracy. Writing of workers who were “mere appendages of ... machines,” he contended that their ignorance and isolation “is certainly due in large part to the fact that the worker has had no opportunity to develop his imagination and his sympathetic insight as to the social and scientific values found in his work ... the impulses which lie at the basis of the industrial system are either practically neglected or positively distorted during the school period.” Schoolwork that cultivated “cooperation” and “mutual interdependence” would enable educators to “systematically [lay] hold of ... the instincts of construction and production,” to train them “in social directions” and thus “locate the source of our economic evils,” and “deal with them effectively” (p. 24).²

This was no small mission for schools, but it loomed large in Dewey’s mind. School and Society was not just the sketch of a new approach to curriculum and instruction but a proposal to change America, root and branch. He wrote that “when the school introduces ... each child into ... such a little community ... we shall have the deepest and best guaranty of a larger society which is worthy, lovely, and harmonious” (p. 29). This mild-mannered philosopher proposed nothing less than to turn schools into a counterculture, in which children would be taught knowledge, values, and social relations that would immunize them against the evils of modern life and enable them to make it over as they grew up, ultimately replacing it with a better social and economic order.
Dewey's belief that schools could remake society is evidence of just how American a thinker he was, but it also is the most troubled feature of his scheme. One opening into the trouble is his argument that the curriculum of occupations would be more compelling because it would be more realistic, "vitalizing" instruction by importing real work. The trouble is that these occupations were not real in the ordinary sense of that term. The small-scale, schoolyard-blog cultivation of wheat or cotton, the hand-manufacture of fabric or milling of wheat, the complete-in-one-enterprise cycle of agriculture-to-production-to-use were vividly real in Dewey's metahistory of humanity, for they were at the core of human production, intellectual invention, community building, and civilization. Yet he knew perfectly well that they rapidly were becoming quite unreal in 1900, on their way to oblivion in a large-scale industrial economy. That other reality - of industrial wage slaves who were chained to and crippled by machines - haunted Dewey precisely because their fragmented work quite effectively situated their learning, breeding ignorance, unequal economic position, political apathy, and social isolation.

Dewey's scheme in this little book was to make one reality, the one he saw in the great history of human progress, an antidote to the other more troubling reality that he saw everywhere around him. School and Society proposed to ground children's learning in one sort of experience, real to Dewey in some essential sense, so as to overcome the effects of other learning from experience that was so painfully real in the everyday sense. That is both the central point and the great paradox of Dewey's educational thought. He wanted schools to create the seamless connections between experience and learning that once had existed in "organic" societies, but industrial capitalism had destroyed those wholesome links. How could schools that were an expression of industrial capitalism create an educational regime that would radically change and even subvert industrial capitalism? Even if schools could somehow devise and operate the curriculum he proposed, how could it be sustained in a society that already had demonstrated its hostility to such things?

Considered from this angle, his proposal to situate learning in authentic practices has a strained, almost Augustinian quality: if the occupations on which he wished to center curriculum were disappearing, they would not be socially or economically authentic, for they would correspond little or not at all to the work actually done and the learning required in the society all around them. Even if we grant, argendo, that his occupations were authentic in some higher sense, their reality would be historical or philosophical, not sociological or economic. And if the occupations were not authentic for students, parents, and teachers, why would they teach and learn from them, or support others to do such work?

Marx faced the same sort of question as he considered how oppressed workers might triumph over the industrialists' immense economic power and the political and military power of their governing allies. His answer was a species of miraculous transformation, in which steadily worsening conditions for workers would ignite revolutionary movements that would somehow be irresistible. All radical reformers or revolutionaries face a version of this question, as they try to imagine how their relatively weak but virtuous causes can overcome the might of established powers. Though Dewey did not put my question directly, it seemed to have been on his mind as he composed the lectures that became School and Society, for he offered a variety of answers to it.

One was that the schools he envisioned would not be tied to the industrial order. Though their curriculum would be real, it would be "freed from all economic stress. The aim is not the economic value of the products, but the development of social
power and insight” (p. 18). If schooling was not vocational, schools and students would be liberated from a pedagogy of necessity: “It is this liberation from narrow utilities, this openness to the possibilities of the human spirit, that makes the practical activities in the schools allies of art and centers of science and history” (p. 18). Here Dewey considers learners’ relation to the curriculum and claims that if they worked to learn rather than to earn, broad education would ensue. But even when families are not pinched by economic need, students and parents often keep a sharp eye on learners’ prospects after graduation and how schools prepare them for it. Such concern has regularly eroded support for less radical innovations than Dewey’s; recall how parents’ worries about the New Math’s effects on students’ chances for college admission eroded support for a much more modest curriculum innovation in the 1950s and 1960s.

Dewey acknowledged such parental worries elsewhere in the book, but he offered no strategy for dealing with them. More surprising, he never asked whether the schools he envisioned could be created and sustained in the damaging society he wished to repair. One question that he seems not to have asked was why America would support schools that were educating students in and for occupations that were real only in Dewey’s metahistory and social psychology. He never asked why students would be engaged by work that few of them ever might do, and why parents would support their children’s effort in a curriculum that would prepare them for a society that seemed not to exist. Nor did he seem to consider why public and private decisionmakers in an industrial capitalist society would support an emphasis on “cooperation,” “mutual interdependence,” and learning how to grow flax and cotton, rather than learning to operate machinery, take shorthand, or keep accounts. All of these would be crucial questions for a strategist of reform, but there is no evidence that Dewey asked any of them. He certainly did not try to ask and answer them in print.

In fact, he appears to have been strangely indifferent to the issue behind these questions. For instance, despite the radical sweep of his proposals, he wrote that “there should be organic connection between the school and business life . . . a natural connection between of the everyday life of the child with the business environment about him” (p. 76). He did not want to train students as bookkeepers but to enable them “to become acquainted with the bank as a factor in modern life, with what it does, and how it does it” so they might better understand what bookkeeping was, how commercial arithmetic was important, and the like (p. 78). But why would bank officials want a connection with schools that taught little children how to cure the evils of capitalism?

Though Dewey considered the social relations of pedagogy from the historical angle that I discussed earlier, he did not seem to consider them from other angles. For instance, he did not ask how and why schools would enlist in the change effort he envisioned, or what it might take for them to succeed. Those schools were, after all, invested in the deeply misguided teaching and learning that he had described: why would they want to change? Even if they did want to, what might it take to encourage them to begin? And if they did enlist, everyone working in such schools would know the wrong things and would require considerable reeducation to learn how to devise the needed curricula: what would it take for them to learn how to do so and, then, learn how to work differently with students and each other? If schools were as bad as they appeared in Dewey’s politely damning diagnosis, there would be a great deal to do; anyone hoping to change schools would require a strategy to stimulate enlistment, to support professionals’ learning, and to keep schools on the path to fundamental change. All that seems plain, yet Dewey’s writing offers nothing faintly re-
sembling such a strategy or even a discussion of the issues it might address.

Those are peculiar omissions for such an ambitious reformer. Given his account of the effects of industrial capitalism, how could he have ignored its threats to the reforms that he envisioned for American schools? Part of the answer may be his assumption that his new curriculum would be irresistible: students' learning would stick because it was so satisfying and so well attuned to their nature. Such a belief could have deflected his attention from the sharp contrast between the schools he envisioned and the society in which they would have to work.

There are examples of this belief in the book. One occurs in a passage in which he wrote about the power of curriculum: if schools were able to "lay hold upon the rudimentary instincts of human nature" and let them play out in a proper medium, educators could "control their expression" (p. 59). In another passage, he discussed existing schools in which manual training was the center of the curriculum: "Where active work is going on, all this [routinized, individualistic rote instruction] is changed. Helping others, instead of being a form of charity which impoverishes the recipient, is simply an aid in setting free the powers and furthering the impulse of the one helped. A spirit of free communication, of interchange of ideas . . . becomes the dominating note. . . . In an informal but all the more pervasive way, the school life organizes itself on a social basis" (p. 16). This fulsome account is especially telling in light of Dewey's view that manual training was hopelessly limited.

Another explanation for Dewey's detour around such issues was his apparent belief in the historical necessity of his proposals. Writing of the "complete transformation" that public schools required, he argued that it was "not something to appear suddenly, to be executed in a day by conscious purpose. It is already in progress" (p. 28). Here the philosopher appears in the rhetorical garb of the prophet, and, as prophets often do, he sought to lay bare the hidden meaning and direction of seemingly prosaic events: "Those modifications of our school system which often appear . . . to be mere changes of detail . . . are in reality signs and evidences of evolution. The introduction of active occupations [in manual training], of nature-study, of elementary science, of art, of history; the relegation of the merely symbolic and formal to a secondary position; the change in the moral school atmosphere, in the relation of pupils and teachers—of discipline; the introduction of more active, expressive, and self-directing factors—all these are not mere accidents, they are necessities of the larger social evolution" (pp. 28–29).

These are amazing words for a thinker whose reputation was made as a pragmatist and a democrat and who later proved to be an articulate enemy of totalitarianism. But like Marx, Dewey began his intellectual career as a Hegelian. Continuing in the role of prophetic interpreter of history, he wrote that "it remains but to organize all these factors, and to put the ideas and ideals involved into complete, uncompromising possession of our school system" (pp. 28–29). Whatever else we may think of these assertions, they help to explain why Dewey may have been untroubled by the lack of a serious strategy for educational and social change; such work would be a waste of effort for anyone who saw such strong tides flowing.

Still another explanation for Dewey's inattention to strategies for change is that he was writing from the swirling middle of an experiment and was focused on the complex press of matters that arise in such circumstances. School and Society began its long life as a set of lectures to parents and friends of the University of Chicago Laboratory School. Though the printed paragraphs and bound pages may seem final to readers now, the book began as a set of occasional pieces. There is considerable evidence in the text that he interpreted the occasion partly
as an opportunity to situate and interpret experience with the school for a friendly audience, explaining developments, arguing for understanding of dismaying problems, and offering encouragement to supporters while making the case for more of their help. In that vein he reports that it is "easy to lay down generalized propositions" about instruction, "easy to use them to criticize existing school conditions; easy . . . to urge the necessity of something different. But art is long. The difficulty is in carrying such conceptions into effect . . . [and] there is no answer in advance to such questions." He went on to say that the results of the Lab School experiment were "tentative" and definitive only in making plain "what the problems are" (pp. 104–105). It would be impossible to count the thousands of innovators who have made just that report to friends and sponsors: The results are mixed, less than we expected, but now we can see the problems more clearly.

Another familiar move for innovators of a progressive persuasion—Horace Mann and others had faced just this problem—was to acknowledge worries about whether the reforms eroded traditional academic skills and knowledge. In discussing the Lab School's need to "balance" students' constructive work in occupations with learning academic subjects, Dewey reported that "the problem is not yet solved." He acknowledged the "common complaints that the children's progress in these traditional school studies is sacrificed to the newer subjects" and agreed that it was "sufficient evidence that the exact balance is not yet struck" (p. 113).

These cautious reports are far from his prophecy of inevitable triumph a few chapters earlier. He went on to complain that the experiment actually had not even had a fair trial: "It has not as yet been possible, in many cases, to act adequately upon the best ideas obtained, because of administrative difficulties, due to lack of funds—difficulties centering in the lack of a proper building and appliances, and an inability to pay the amounts necessary to secure the complete time of teachers in some important lines." So far was he from certain historical triumph in these unhappy passages that he concluded by saying that "it is becoming a grave question how long it is fair to the experiment to carry it on without more adequate facilities" (p. 105).

Dewey's complaint about the lack of a fair trial is another familiar claim in the rhetoric of social innovation, and it is no mere figure of speech. One way that established regimes impede change without even thinking about it is to place the burden of mobilizing resources, establishing operations, achieving legitimacy, and proving the value of change on those who have the temerity to criticize and seek improvement. The obstacles thus inattentively arranged are formidable; even the best ideas will not overcome them without careful plans, ample resources, long hard work, and much good fortune. Dewey was struggling in these passages with precisely the sort of strategic and tactical problems that reformers typically face, but somehow he did not seem to recognize that there would be many more such difficulties, and a desperate need to deal artfully with them, if his proposals for school improvement ever were to get much beyond Chicago's Hyde Park.

A fourth explanation for Dewey's inattention to such matters is that he thought they were irrelevant to the work at hand. In several passages he presents himself as the Man in the White Coat, the experimental scientist who enables society to advance by developing and testing new ideas. As justification for the Lab School, he asserted that "laboratories lie back of all the great business enterprises of today, back of every great factory, every railway and steamship system" (p. 94). Positioning his work in such experimental science, he wrote that the purpose of any laboratory experiment is that "other people need not experiment; at least need not experiment so much, may have something definite and positive to go by" (p. 93). Experimental scientists make
broad improvement possible for everyone else, benefiting society with their special inventions and demonstrations.

But Dewey even hedged that claim for broad improvement: "there is a difference between working out and testing a new truth, or a new method, and applying it on a wide scale, making it available to the mass of men, making it commercial." The work of the laboratory was different than that of diffusing innovation. He disclaimed any responsibility for the issues that reformers today refer to as "scaling up": "The laboratory is not a business enterprise; it does not seek to secure for itself the conditions of business life." His task was to devise a "working model" of the new education. Figuring out how to get it more broadly adopted would be someone else's worry; his assignment was only to "afford a demonstration of the feasibility of the principle, and of the methods which make it feasible" (p. 94). He would only "demonstrate the feasibility" (p. 94) of the sorts of schooling that he envisioned. If that was his assignment, then strategies for broader change were beyond his terms of reference.

In each of these explanations, Dewey offers a reason why he gave no explicit attention to a strategy for broad change in education and why he seemed untroubled by great differences between the schools he envisioned and the society he wished them to repair. The first two explanations suggest that broad change was imminent and that the problems would solve themselves, either because the new education would be so potent or because the required social changes would fall into place of their own accord, or both. In any case, there would be no need to worry about a strategy for change since change would occur if reformers just pushed ahead. America would not reject a system of schooling designed to revise capitalism and industrialism since any such obstacles would be overcome by the superior forces of compelling instruction and history.

In contrast, the third explanation sug-

gets that the innovation had not really been fairly tried, in which case it would be premature to consider broader change, and the fourth defines his endeavor as experimental and thus prior to any consideration of broader change. Both of these draw back from the idea that general change in schools and society is imminent and suggest that consideration of strategies for broad diffusion would be irrelevant.

That last point seems particularly to beg the question of larger strategy, for the Chicago philosopher and his entourage of talented supporters had enormous problems in getting the Lab School running decently and were unable to sustain it once it was running at all. It that were the case in the privileged and protected confines of Hyde Park, what would it take to do such work in Harrisburg or Peoria, where there were no John and Alice Dewey, no Mr. and Mrs. George Herbert Mead, no Ella Flagg Young, and many others? That is a problem on which an experiment could quite fairly shed more than a little light, but Dewey chose never to address the question explicitly. His failure ever to turn his hand to another such experiment might have been a sort of answer, nonetheless. Either the Laboratory School had been such a stunning success that no more work was required, or it had been so difficult and discouraging that he wished no more work of that sort. His recognition, at the time and later, that much still remained to be learned, tends to rule out the first alternative.6

The coexistence of these four very different explanations in a tiny book also suggests that Dewey was all over the map in thinking about the relationship between his proposals for a new education and the Lab School, on one hand, and the schools and society that he wanted to reform, on the other. As he lectured to the Lab School's friends and parents, and by implication to other interested Americans, he trumpeted his ideas about reform and promised great change. But when he reported on what had been learned about the new curriculum and
instruction, and thus on what he might be held accountable for, he was much more tentative, confessing that things had not gone as easily as had been imagined and almost despairing that the needed money, teachers, and facilities would be found. To say that a reformer of Dewey's ambition was all over the map is no fundamental criticism, for reformers' work takes them there. The varied problems on which such reformers must work impel them to work on all the levels that Dewey's varied comments suggest and more, overpromising success and defending against disappointment in a single breath, acknowledging generosity with one hand while scratching for more money with the other, worrying about how to meet the next payroll and finding one's place in history in adjoining paragraphs.

If all that is par for the school reform course, the melange of Dewey's ideas about the relation between school reform and society suggests that the issues remained quite unsettled in his mind. School and Society mixes enormous ambitions for reforming American society and its schools with almost equally great caution and uncertainty about the reform enterprise. Dewey's vision of school reform is breathtaking in its sweep, but the lack of any attention to systematic strategy for change also is a little breathtaking. Despite his intellectual and social ambitions, he seemed unprepared to think through the relations between improving schools and reforming society, to consider how his vision of better schools might be achieved in the society he saw around him, despite the fact that his purpose in school reform was to reform society. Even when he wrote about the problem much later, in the appendix that he contributed to Mayhew and Edwards's book on the Laboratory School (Dewey, 1936), his memo made no reference to the relations between schools and social change. Though Dewey did not invent that omission, it became an unfortunate tradition in later school improvement efforts. Few of those who have tried to improve education—like curriculum reformers—pay much attention even to the classroom or school organizations in which their improvements would occur. And few school reformers seem to pay any attention to the relations between their efforts to change schools and the schools' social and economic circumstances.

Conclusion
Writing as I have, mostly in the past tense, may lead readers to think that Dewey's ideas are quaint, a relic of an older and more hopeful time, interesting as an academic museum piece but irrelevant to our time. That would be incorrect, for Americans continue to embrace his conception of schools as a prime agent of social improvement. Consider most recently William Julius Wilson, Leon Dash, and many others' pleas for better education to solve problems of the urban underclass. Consider also the unprecedented efforts of academic reformers like Anthony Bryk, James Comer, Henry Levin, E. J. Hirsch, Robert Slavin, Lauren Resnick, Theodore Sizer, and others to transform city schools from prisons of failure to shining successes, in roughly the same cause that Wilson has in mind. In fact, Dewey's view is only a grand version of the position that any teacher takes when she or he tries to help students lift themselves above the educational and social destination that, by social and economic inheritance, would likely be their lot. It is the position that any teacher educator takes when trying to improve teachers' capacities to do just such work. It is the position of any school administrator who tries to enable such work by teachers. The problems with which Dewey dealt are our problems, as are those he ignored.

Dewey hated dualisms and spent much of his professional life arguing against them. But several run through his early educational writing, and he left them unresolved, even unconfronted. For instance, he insisted that Romanticism was a failed attitude, that one could shed no tears over
loss of the old community, and that the loss brought many gains in liberty, opportunity, cosmopolitanism, and sophistication. His reform program was nonetheless an effort to make the seamless education-from-experience of that lost community work in an industrial society. His endeavor was not romantic in the conventional sense, for he genuinely celebrated things that offended most Romantics—the technical and scientific triumphs of industrialism and its potential for enriching life and culture, especially for those less privileged. He thought industrialism had enormous potential for democratization of life and culture, and in that sense was as much an enemy of the Romantic dream of lost community as was Raymond Williams's *Culture and Society* (1958). But Dewey's endeavor was Romantic in a deeper sense: he proposed to make the Romantic vision—of whole lives in a whole society, of communities in which we care for our fellows and respect the glorious earth—possible in the very society that he and most other Romantics thought could destroy everything noble, wise, and beautiful.

That is a great promise, one that liberals and radicals still struggle to redeem, and one that Dewey's vision can inform. But in matters of this world, at least, redemption requires more than vision. Dewey's scheme for social reform through schools brought him face-to-face with one of the great dualisms in education and, indeed, in all Western social thought: the one between schools and society as they are and as they might be. Saint Augustine introduced us to this distinction, and social theorists, reformers, and revolutionaries have reformulated the relationship between the cities of Man and God ever since, trying to figure out whether we might realize the second in the first and, if we might, how to do it. Augustine believed such efforts to be both essential and impossible, but Dewey accepted the effort as both possible and essential. His picture of schools recreated as countercultural agencies, preparing students to change modern life while immunizing them against its evils, is amazing in its ambitions for education, in its vision of the ties between schooling and social problems, and in its implications for learning and teaching. These new schools would be the modern versions of the City of God, but they would be firmly planted in the City of Man and charged to make it over in their own image. If that does not raise acutely the old dualism of realizing a new order in the old, I cannot imagine what would. Dewey seemed not to notice.

The common view is that Dewey's program for school reform failed, that dreams of child-centered education were lost in conflict with the realities of practice. But the common view has been wrong, and Dewey was right: his scheme went far beyond child-centered education, at least as that has commonly been understood. He had an abiding distaste for child-centered schooling conventionally understood, but Dewey's educational thought was deeply child centered in this very different sense: children's learning would be central to solving the great modern social problems. His program of school-as-social-reform-community-and-source-of-democratic-culture was a modern children's crusade. The ideas have been tried only in bits and pieces by thoughtful primary-grade teachers in a handful of public schools and in a few precious private schools. His proposals were far too radical and, to judge by their usual interpretation, far too difficult to understand ever to have been tried extensively. If Dewey committed any intellectual crime, it was to have left this central dualism untouched, not to have followed through on his remarkable proposals, and not to have carefully investigated the problems of achieving change in schools, the problems of using schools as an agent of social change, and the possible strategies for dealing with such problems. After the collapse of the Laboratory School—which Dewey did not investigate, and about which he seems to have published nothing—he never ventured into this terrain.
I cannot restrain myself from wondering why. Readers of Dewey will notice that few of his sentences end in question marks; if he had questions he kept them to himself. By doing so he missed a great opportunity to define the issues of school change and social reform, to turn them into an agenda for inquiry and practice, and thereby to open the enterprise that he envisioned to broader participation. Unlike his eminent contemporary, E. L. Thorndike, Dewey created no research agenda, either by defining significant issues for investigation or by recruiting younger researchers and allies to work on them. This is especially puzzling in a philosopher who placed such a premium on practical problem solving and who stressed that knowledge arises from practice. Had he created such an agenda around the issues of school change and social reform that his little book and the Laboratory School raised so acutely, there would have been at least a modest chance that reformers and researchers would have enlisted. If that had happened we might have developed a more thoughtful tradition of reform in the decades since the Lab School collapsed. It is a vain and lost hope, but much might have been learned in consequence.

Such lost opportunities are the reformers’ stock in trade. They originate partly in the sort of hope with which good teachers must begin every lesson, if they are to have any chance of helping students to overcome large problems and make real progress. Hope that flies in the face of “realism” helps to sustain practice and, in some cases at least, enables more improvement than brute realism would permit.

But inspiring visions and hope also can keep reformers from building the intellectual and social infrastructure that is needed for abiding reform: devising strategy and tactics, making plans and building organization, systematically investigating the process and progress of reform and its impact, and thus creating opportunities to learn from experience. Reformers need “unrealistic” hope as much as teachers do, but such vision alone can enable them to ignore the difficult work in which hope would be given legs and direction, in which hope could be informed by systematic learning and thus be given means to sustain itself and improve through the inevitable frustrations and failures. There is no shortage of teachers who are similarly strong on vision and hope but weak on everything else. One distinguishing feature of more exemplary teachers is that they not only hope but also devise the strategies, make or adapt curriculum, consider classroom tactics, learn from students’ work and their own, and in other ways create the intellectual and social infrastructure that enables their students to capitalize both on the visions that inspire their practice and on the hope that sustains it and that enables them to learn from their work. Dewey’s inattention to such teacherly work, like that of many reformers who have followed in his visionary footsteps, is one sad and self-induced reason that we repeatedly learn the same lessons about school improvement over and over again and why so many promising ideas for change “fail” before ever gaining much headway.

Notes

I owe thanks to Deborah Loewenberg Ball for several helpful comments on an earlier draft of this essay, and to Joseph Featherstone for a continuing casual seminar about Dewey.

1. See, e.g., Cuban’s (1984) discussion of Dewey’s pedagogical ideas.
2. Unless otherwise noted, all quotes are from the University of Chicago’s (1956) combined edition of Dewey’s The School and Society and The Child and the Curriculum.
3. Contemporary ideas about situated cognition tend to stress either the notion of situating students’ work in authentic disciplinary work (little mathematicians and scientists) or the notion of situating their studies in real-world problems. Dewey, who was one of the (typically forgotten) great-grandfathers of situated cognition, thought the two could only work if they worked together.
4. It is useful to compare Dewey’s ideas with those of his great forebear, Horace Mann.
Mann's view of how minds worked and could be changed was quite straightforward. Like many Enlightenment and early nineteenth-century thinkers, he believed that mind was created by its environment, and he saw the long history of moral depravity, ignorance, and oppression in Europe as simply the result of bad environments—that is, political and religious tyranny. And as a liberal Protestant he thought humanity was more good than bad, if given a decent chance. A good society could create good minds simply by exposing the malleable raw material to the right influences. Mann did not think that his America was entirely benign: he wrote as though terrified of industrialism, immigration, and inequality. But he also wrote as though he was convinced that some social agencies could counteract or cure the effects of others. Specifically, he argued that children's common exposure to a common curriculum, taught by caring and humane teachers, would do the trick. So powerful would such school environments be that they could make or remake the mind. Mann saw the mind as a social construction and argued tirelessly for institutions that, by acting early and generously on youth, could create knowledge, values, and behavior. The rest would follow easily. Dewey shared Mann's estimate of the power of the social environment and his view of mind as a social construction. But he did not accept Mann's view that democratic values would follow simply from exposure to a common curriculum, humanly taught. As these passages suggest, Dewey believed that an elaborate curricular infrastructure, combining simulated work, academic learning, and socialization, would be needed to achieve democracy.

5. Auguste Comte and other Continental thinkers had imagined that popular education could accomplish these things, but none had envisioned them as the schools' mission.

6. He later returned to discuss the Laboratory School, in related publications in the 1930s. As he helped the Camp sisters (A.C. Mayhew and K.C. Edwards) prepare their book, *The Dewey School*, he (1936) wrote a memorandum titled "The Theory Of The Chicago Experiment." The piece makes plain that the experiment terminated well before the desired learning was complete.

7. He amplified that idea in the memorandum that he wrote several decades later to Mayhew and Edwards (1936). Dewey allowed that he had had an exaggerated idea of how easy it would be to invent new curriculum in the Lab School. In the memorandum to Mayhew and Edwards and in several other places, he wrote that the sort of teaching he envisioned turned out to be much more difficult than he had expected. It seems that Dewey's thought about this was evolving, but for some reason he never addressed the problem directly.

References


