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Education as Communication: The Pragmatist Tradition

Chad Edwards
Gregory J. Shepherd

Not only is social life identical with communication, but all communication (and hence all genuine social life) is educative.

John Dewey (1916, p. 5)

Basic communication course textbooks often justify communication pedagogy by pointing to linkages between communication practices and democracy (Zarefsky, 1996). We are all familiar with such claims: vibrant democracies require citizens capable of engaging in public discourse; healthy democracies demand citizens educated in the ways of rhetoric, proof, and argumentation; strong democracies are populated by engaged and informed voters, skilled in analyzing the issues of a given day. And indeed, the obvious character of this association might speak to its firmness. But in *Democracy and Education*, John Dewey long ago pointed us to a more important association:

The devotion of democracy to education is a familiar fact. The superficial explanation is that a government resting upon popular suffrage cannot be successful unless those who elect and who obey their governors are educated. . . . But there is a deeper explanation. A democracy is more than a form of government; it is

primarily a mode of associated living, of conjoint communicated experience. The extension in space of the number of individuals who participate in an interest so that each has to refer his own action to that of others, and to consider the action of others to give point and direction to his own, is equivalent to the breaking down of those barriers of class, race, and national territory which kept men from perceiving the full import of their activity. (1916, p. 87).

It is this second, deeper explanation, which informs our approach to teaching the basic course. Fundamentally, we take the basic course in public speaking to be a site where associated living is experienced, and where a social actor practices the democratic art of understanding and articulating his/her own behaviors and beliefs in terms of the behaviors and beliefs of others, even as those behaviors and beliefs join with and provide direction for others while others' behaviors and beliefs make sense of and influence the behaviors and beliefs of said social actor. This democratic practice of associated living is, as Dewey insisted, communication itself—"conjoint communicated experience."

In the pages that follow, we provide a quick overview of this pragmatist educational metaphysic, discuss a few consequences of metaphysical beliefs about education, and offer brief concluding remarks.

THE PRAGMATIST'S EDUCATIONAL METAPHYSIC

Because all belief structures regarding teaching imply corresponding ideas about life, learning, the relation of teachers to students, and the aims of education; and

because they are consequential not only for instructors and students, but for societies and cultures as well, we prefer the term *educational metaphysics* to that of *teaching philosophies*. The latter seems to privilege instruction and instructors to the neglect of student experience, relationships and educational structure, while the former more fully captures the integrative, non-dualist, and melioristic spirit of the pragmatist tradition which sought to transcend the worn dichotomy of the practical and the ideal.

In recent years, the transmissive approach to education has been heavily challenged from various academic paradigms; most notably perhaps, from feminist-women's studies (see, e.g., hooks 1994; Maher & Tetreault, 2001) and neo-Marxist philosophy (see, e.g., Apple, 1993, Friere, 1970, Margonis, 1993). However, despite the soundness and prevalence of critique regarding the transmissive educational metaphysic, it has maintained its entrenched place in the typical university classroom. Armbruster (2000), for instance, noted that listening to lectures occupies nearly 80% of students' time in class. In short, despite mounting calls for active learning, critical thinking, and engaged education, mainstream practice continues to embrace transmission models.

Mainstream, or "transmissive," educational philosophies position the instructor as one whose job it is to effectively impart disciplinary information. The educational experiences of students may then be assessed with tests designed to measure their comprehension and retention (Doll, 1996). Because the instructor is the sole possessor of knowledge, it becomes important for students to accept and remember these "truths" with

minimal resistance, and unnecessary (and undesirable) for students to critically evaluate or challenge the “givenness” or “facticity” of claims made by the instructor or to hold course material accountable to their stock of lived experience. Palmer (1998) has characterized mainstream educational philosophy as that which:

centers on a teacher who does little more than deliver conclusions to students. It assumes that the teacher must give and the students must take, that the teacher sets all the standards and the students must measure up. Teacher and students gather in the same room at the same time not to experience community but simply to keep the teacher from having to say things more than once. (p. 116)

Because communication is handed a menial role of classification and transmission in this traditional metaphysic (i.e., as a vehicle for the transference of knowledge — a troubling theoretical characterization in its own right, see Shepherd, 1993, 1998, 1999), the instructor and students never fully realize an educational community. Put simply, social actors fail to create together anything in communication. In contrast, creating something in communication is the defining activity of the educational experience in the pragmatist’s metaphysic.

Though the pragmatist educational metaphysic was first forwarded more than three quarters of a century ago, it has not much been realized in educational practice. Indeed, until quite recently, pragmatism has been systematically suppressed both within and outside academia (Minnich, 2002). The socio-cultural conditions of the present, however, warrant revisiting the pragmatist tradition, which anticipates post-modern influences on

pedagogy (e.g., co-construction, relationality, and contingency), but does so without requiring wholesale adoption of the post-modern project and its most debilitating critiques (e.g., those regarding relativism and nihilism, cf., Shepherd, 2001).¹

Understanding the pragmatist's educational metaphysics requires appreciation for Dewey's belief "that the measure of the worth of the administration, curriculum, and methods of instruction of the school is the extent to which they are animated by a social spirit" (1916, p. 358). He was not, of course, referring here to the need for pep rallies and ever-present cheerleading squads, but rather to his insistence that while "Informational statements about things can be acquired in relative isolation . . . realization of the *meaning* of the linguistic signs is quite another matter. That involves a context of work and play in association with others" (1916, p. 358, italics in original). Essentially, pragmatist educational beliefs rest on the premise that the classroom is a "learning environment that is a practical, simplified version of society" (Jacobsen, 1999, p. 231), or in Dewey's terms, "a community life in all which that implies" (1916, p. 358). Education, in this view, is more about the co-construction of beliefs, the making of social ties, the working out of all manner of things together, the *experience of communication*, than it is about the teaching of content, the acquisition of knowledge, or the development of mental or behavioral skills.

¹ The third anonymous reviewer's insights were instrumental in the formation of this argument.

One result of this metaphysic is an instructor and classroom of a very different sort from one born of mainstream educational philosophies. If individuals “regard truth as something handed down from authorities on high, the classroom will look like a dictatorship” but if instructors “regard truth as emerging from a complex process of mutual inquiry, the classroom will look like a resourceful and interdependent community” (Palmer, 1998, p. 5). Dewey defined education as “that reconstruction or reorganization of experience which adds to the meaning of experience, and which increases ability to direct the course of subsequent experience” (1916, p. 76). Dewey’s model of instruction thus maintained that the instructor be seen as a resource and guide person for learning--the educator’s main role is to provide advice and assistance to the students in their quest for meaningful experience. Ozmon and Craver (1999) argued that the pragmatist instructor’s undertaking is to aid students in directing, controlling, and guiding personal and social experiences so that the student can be a good community member in a democratic society. It is in this guiding through experiences, that praxis or “a union of theory and practice in reflective action” can start to develop and productively inform and change future action for the both the instructor and students (Schubert, 1991, p. 214). In this way, the educational aims belong to the students and not the institution or the instructor.

Because of the centrality of experience and the goal of praxis, the pragmatist educator maintains that a productive classroom requires an open environment and an attitude toward instruction that encourages experimental inquiry of socially constructed and contingent beliefs, values, and truth claims (Gutek, 1988). “Learning,” ac-

ording to Palmer (1998), “does not happen when students are unable to express their ideas, emotions, confusions, ignorance, and prejudices. In fact, only when people can speak their minds does education have a chance to happen” (p. 75). Instructors must embrace the freedom to experiment with a variety of techniques and choices of content designed to assist students in developing productive ways of knowing, constructing truths, and testing ideas for their practical consequences. This requires a relinquishment of the notion that the role of teachers is to dispense absolute answers to abstract problems. For if we, as educators, view truth as a social construction with intersubjective agreement, and our own existence as precarious and potentially uncertain, we have to examine each social and human problem as it arises instead of attempting to locate permanent and stable solutions.

CONSEQUENCES OF EDUCATIONAL METAPHYSICS

Consistent with the pragmatist belief that the goodness of an idea is to be judged by the practical consequences of its adoption, we present several empirical and theoretical advantages of the pragmatist educational metaphysic. All too often, the connection between educational philosophy and educational practice is overlooked (Ozmon & Craver, 1999). In one attempt to affirm and empirically articulate the link between educational theory and practice, Edwards (2003) investigated the outcomes associated with various educational belief systems and demonstrated that both instructors and students ascribing to a pragmatist metaphysic of

education garnered a number of educational advantages over those ascribing to more traditional (or “transmissive”) philosophies of education.

In Edwards’ study, student and instructor participants completed a modified version of the Witcher-Travers (1999) survey of educational beliefs and a host of educational and communicative outcome measures. Results showed that pragmatist instructors were more satisfied with teaching as a career. This association is important, because as Bess (1977) suggests, “[u]nless faculty members perceive the teaching enterprise as a continuing source of profound satisfactions in life — satisfactions arising out of the fulfillment of deep-seated human needs—they will rarely have the sustained role commitment that is necessary for creativity and excellence in performance” (p. 244). And Bess’ argument received support in Edwards’ study, as instructors embracing a pragmatist metaphysic were found to have won significantly more teaching awards and honors than were their more transmissively-oriented counterparts. Such honors and awards are undoubtedly related to the greater career satisfaction pragmatist educators express, but they are also certainly attributable to another of Edwards’ findings: pragmatist instructors were rated by their students as more nonverbally immediate than were transmissive instructors. Of course, nonverbal immediacy has been linked with a plethora of desirable educational outcomes including teacher effectiveness (Sanders & Wiseman, 1990), student motivation (Christophel, 1990), student perceptions of instructor attractiveness (Rocca & McCroskey, 1999), student affective learning (Christensen & Menzel, 1998; Frymier, 1994), student perceptions of teacher caring

(Teven, 2001), and instructor clarity (Chesebro & McCroskey, 2001), and continues to be lauded by instructional communication scholars as one of the most consequential factors in teaching/learning encounters.

Students in Edwards' study who held a pragmatist educational metaphysic also fared better along a number of lines. Most notably, they exhibited higher levels of affective learning and greater motivation to learn. Interestingly, their perceptions of the nonverbal immediacy level, caring, and attractiveness of their instructors were higher (regardless of the educational philosophy of the instructor) than were those perceptions among students who embraced a transmissive metaphysic. This result accounts some for the greater communication satisfaction pragmatist-oriented students reported experiencing between themselves and their teachers.

The pragmatist educational metaphysic not only enables a richer and more effective practice, it represents a justified theoretical move (if such a division can be made). If the Communication discipline is to evolve from theorizing communication as transmission and toward a conception of communication as constitutive and ontological, (a move that seems to be well underway), so too must our theories of education reflect a greater understanding of the role of communication in calling into being both relations and relata.

Take, for instance, the typical mainstream transmissive model of education, which holds that the purpose of education is for instructors to deposit their knowledge and expertise in the minds of students. Such a belief is probably related to a corresponding model of communication as transmission, or as a vehicle for the expression of one's thoughts, feelings, ideas, and beliefs to another.

If the role of education is transferring knowledge from one individual to another, then communication has to take on the role of transferrer — it must serve as a vehicle or vessel for the transmission of the knowledge. Pragmatist educational beliefs, on the other hand, emphasize the mutual interplay between students and instructors and the co-created and value-laden nature of knowledge and truth. If education is a joint construction of participants, then communication must be something other than a medium for relaying truth or knowledge. Individuals with pragmatists educational beliefs likely have beliefs about communication that stress the role of communication in constituting social selves and realities that enable people to enter into authentic human relationships, or dialogue.

PRAGMATISM AND THE BASIC COURSE

Generally speaking, communication education embodying a pragmatist metaphysic would appear quite different from most current instructional practices. Instructors would care more about student *engagement with* than *absorption of* course material. That is not to say, of course, that educational content must be subordinated to educational process. The rather sharp distinction now drawn between pedagogical content and process has not always existed; the two previously being conceived as comprising an “indistinguishable body of understanding” (Friedrich, 2002, p. 374). Pragmatism, with its characteristically non-dualistic spirit, promotes a classroom enlivened by the active intersecting of lived everyday experiences and traditional course material

(canonical, disciplinary understandings). Instructors in such a classroom are interested primarily neither in imparting stand-alone course “knowledge,” nor mostly in the use of pedagogical techniques aimed at eliciting positive student evaluations. Rather, students and instructors in the pragmatist classroom are urged to confront and test the utility of the belief in one truth claim over another, and to keep education centered not on student or teacher, content or process, but on a “subject” co-constructed by all involved and held accountable to both stocks of lived experience and academic theorizing.

More specifically, the pragmatist communication classroom would feature assignments that maximize students’ opportunities to creatively engage in civic affairs and participate in community life. A customary assignment in most mainstream basic communication courses requires students to single out a topic of their interest and prepare/deliver a speech to be assessed along a number of standard (objective) criteria produced by the instructor. Consider the ways in which this assignment might be transformed in a pragmatist course. For example, students might not even deliver a prepared speech, but instead partake in a small group discussion with other students and the instructor in which a creative solution to a community or civic problem is developed. Or, the student might engage in a simulated press conference, in which classmates and the instructor ask questions about the issue at hand. One advantage of such an approach is that it refuses a construction of audience and classmates as passive recipients of information or targets of persuasion, recasting them, instead, as active collaborators in communication and classroom community.

This is not to say that an individual speaking assignment has no place in the pragmatist classroom; rather, if and when a student delivers a stand-alone speech it would not, ever, be experienced as “stand alone.” Instead, the speech would be done only in the context of other speeches already given or about to be given, never in presumed isolation from the experiences of others in the classroom community. This would, at the very least, reanimate the rather stale notion of audience analysis that often appears in our basic course textbooks and classrooms.

One obvious way to facilitate an engaged and connected speaking situation is to center attention and energy on a general problem or topic of interest. For example, a consequential social issue of general concern (e.g., healthcare or new technologies) might be selected as a focus of assignments, thereby allowing students and the instructor to share ideas and solutions to various problems about a general concern of interest.

Additionally, students and instructors, as a situated community of learners and teachers, could create the grading criteria for assignments together. Collaboratively designed rubrics could replace standard grading criteria, facilitating engagement with course material, critical thinking and evaluation skills, and a feeling of ownership and responsibility to meet co-constructed standards of performance.

In the pragmatist’s classroom, the purpose of each assignment is never the transmission of information (or persuasion of that information), but rather the encouragement of a collective and creative endeavor designed to rely on the array of experiences present as it reconstructs and reorganizes those same experiences. The

community of learning is enhanced in such classrooms because all parties have a stake in the significance of problems addressed, the goodness of solutions derived, and the creation of truths collectively tested. Dewey (1916) argued:

In final account, then, not only does social life demand teaching and learning for its own permanence, but also the very process of living together educates. It enlarges and enlightens experience; it stimulates and enriches imagination; it creates responsibility for accuracy and vividness of statement and thought. (p. 6)

CONCLUSION

John Dewey is, arguably, the most significant and recognized philosopher of education in American history; yet the core of his educational metaphysic has not been much realized in American schools (cf. Ryan, 1995), and especially not in American Universities and Colleges. Dewey believed that education, as he defined it, was critical for democracies, and could only and necessarily be achieved in communication. It is in our nation's classrooms that individuals of diverse demographics and backgrounds have the too rare opportunity of coming together to form conjoint experiences. Where, we might wonder, is the possibility of this occurrence more obviously likely than in the basic communication course where interaction itself is the featured subject? We have been given the time, space, and resources in our classrooms to provide students with experience in associated living. The pragmatist tradition reminds us

of this gift and calls us again to its concomitant responsibility.

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