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## Richard Rorty's Social Hope and Community Literacy

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## RICHARD RORTY'S SOCIAL HOPE AND COMMUNITY LITERACY

*Thomas Deans*

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This essay explores how the philosophical tradition of American pragmatism, especially Richard Rorty's work on social hope late in his career, could be relevant to community literacy. Pragmatism does not prescribe a particular approach to community literacy but, unlike many kinds of critical pedagogy, affirms a role for patriotism and liberalism in social change movements. Pragmatists such as Rorty prefer cooperative participation and incremental reform to either idealism or ideological critique

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In his final interview, a few weeks before he died in June of 2007, Richard Rorty reflected on the reception of his work in Iran, where he has garnered a readership and where he had lectured in 2004. He credited his popularity there as due in large part to how his work in philosophy imparts the vision of "a social democratic utopia." Rorty explains, "In this utopia, many of the functions presently served by membership in a religious community would be taken over by what Habermas calls 'constitutional patriotism.' Some form of patriotism—of solidarity with fellow-citizens, and of shared hopes for the country's future—is necessary if one is to take politics seriously." He goes to explain that his "views on these matters derive from Habermas and John Dewey. In the early decades of the twentieth century Dewey helped bring a culture into being in which it became possible for Americans to replace Christian religiosity with fervent attachment to democratic institutions (and equally fervent hope for the improvement of those institutions)" (Postel). In an earlier interview when asked about the role of higher education in the twenty-first century, Rorty responded that it should be "to make people more aware, through the study of alternatives to present institutions and ways of thinking, of the possibility that the future might be better than the present" (Mendieta 98).

This hopeful civic posture on the part of Rorty may sound odd to those who think of Rorty as a detached ironist more focused on debates about truth and language than agendas for social reform. But just what might his thinking mean for those of us involved in community literacy efforts?



I was smitten with the word *pragmatic* long before I had any clue that it was associated with a philosophical movement. Its very sound suggested to me purpose and relevance, and it resonated an intellectual timbre missing from words like *practical*. I have since come to appreciate the philosophical tradition of American pragmatism, and I have especially come to value how this strand of philosophy can inform our understanding of and priorities for

academic and community partnerships that hinge on writing and rhetoric. Pragmatism pairs well with community literacy in part because both put a premium on experience, community, language, democracy, participation, and hopeful action. In this essay I focus on pragmatist Richard Rorty's notion of *social hope*, particularly on how he develops and deploys that term late in his career.

I argue that Rorty helps us contextualize certain kinds of literacy projects and university/community partnerships, and at the same time I aim for what he calls a "redescription." Seeing philosophy as both a game of language and a kind of utopian politics, Rorty recommends philosophical inquiry as a method for redescribing "lots and lots of things in new ways, until you have created a pattern of linguistic behavior which will tempt a rising generation to adopt it, thereby causing them to look for appropriate new forms of non-linguistic behavior" (*Contingency* 9).<sup>1</sup> Rather than supply a grand theory, pragmatism offers a process of mediation—mediation of theory and practice, belief and action, individual and community, education and experience—much as the terms *community literacy* and the hyphenated *service-learning* suggest commitments to mediating two domains. To argue that Rorty or any of the earlier pragmatists offer first principles that should guide or regulate our thinking about either pedagogy or community work would violate the core logic of pragmatism. Pragmatists look to consequences more than theoretical orthodoxies—to the "fruits" rather than the "roots," as in William James' organic analogy. Furthermore, arguing for the primacy of theory would betray my experience. After all, my commitment to community-based writing didn't follow from reading Dewey or Rorty. Only after knee-deep in practice did I backload their philosophy into my thinking, but now I have come to realize how their pragmatist tradition can enrich the vocabulary we use to discuss community literacy.

Not all pragmatists believe, however, that social action can or should have a place in academic life. Stanley Fish, for example, who claims the title of pragmatist, has of late argued that academics—and especially writing teachers—should not just banish ideology from the classroom (a position with which Rorty would be sympathetic) but also withdraw community engagement or student ethical development from university missions and eschew attaching any hope for social change to our teaching or research (*Save*). He thinks that academic work should be circumscribed by the intellectual methods and questions that traditionally drive disciplines. Given that, community literacy would be out of bounds, except, perhaps, only insofar as it could help compositionists better teach and research writing.

Yet practitioners of community literacy—teachers, students, and local citizens alike—constantly dive into the messiness of experience, operating in a spirit of inquiry, experimentalism, and social hope. That suggests an intellectual posture similar to what Hephzibah Roskelly and Kate Ronald paraphrase as Charles Sanders Peirce's original vision for pragmatism: "action based on belief continually tested by experience in a spirit of readiness and perpetual inquiry" (87). And it recalls for me a remark that a professor of

Public Health who was piloting a community-based learning course made during a service-learning workshop I was attending: “I feel like I’m galloping on horse—and while I have a sense of where I’m going, and like it—I have only a loose hold of the reins.” This edgy, galloping spirit is not just the mark of a beginner, for the most seasoned instructors and community organizers know that ceding a fair share of control to community members is wise and that expectations will be continually up-ended and reformed by the contingencies of community life. And giving up some control even while mustering the faith to gallop in to participate are also marks of trusting one’s collaborators and projecting the very idea of democratic collaboration. Ultimately, they signal an investment in democracy as Dewey defined it: not as a form of government or a menu of civil rights or a set of outcomes, but as a creative process of hopeful, open-ended exchange.

Moreover, if we were to recast Dewey and Rorty in terms of writing and rhetoric, we might say that they are promising guides for community literacy because they combine a *rhetoric of possibility* (faith in community and democracy and an abiding hope in the future), a *rhetoric of the practical* (doing effective work in the here-and-now, toward practical “aims-in-view,” to use Dewey’s term) and a *rhetoric of contingency* (individuals, working in a thoroughly social community, forging ever-revisable beliefs rather than holding out for either Platonic truths or revolutionary certainties). I will, therefore, focus on how those rhetorics are gathered into Rorty’s term *social hope* and how social hope might inform certain approaches to community literacy, especially those that bend more toward liberalism than liberatory pedagogies and focus more on democratic participation than ideological critique.

### **Composition, Pragmatism, and Community Writing**

I came to pragmatism through composition studies, where it is not especially prominent but where its genealogy can still be discerned. As composition studies was self-consciously shoring up its disciplinary status in the 1970s and 1980s, Janet Emig confirmed John Dewey’s work as part of the interdisciplinary “tacit tradition” of the field. She remarked that “Dewey is everywhere in our work” (12), suggesting that Dewey—even though he wrote nothing specifically about writing instruction—grappled with many of composition’s central questions about teaching and curriculum. He also anticipated the progressive and reformist spirit that animates composition studies. In the twenty-five years since Emig’s casual reference, pragmatism has been a quiet but persistent voice in the field. (See, among others, Fishman, “Explicating”; Fishman and McCarthy, “Teaching” and *John Dewey*; Jones; Mackin; Olson, “Social”; Phelps; Roskelly and Ronald; Russell; Zepetello).

Following composition’s habit of borrowing strands of theory from other disciplines and putting them to work for its own purposes, several compositionists have drawn on pragmatism to leverage social constructionist approaches to knowledge. In the 1980s we appropriated Stanley Fish’s work on anti-foundationalism and interpretive communities, and the resulting

scholarship contributed to the field's shift toward conceptualizing writing as shaped by discourse communities (Fish, *Doing*; Scholes; de Beaugrande; Harned; Fontaine; Schilb; Olson, "Fish"). Likewise, Richard Rorty's work lent

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a hand to Kenneth Bruffee's case for social constructivist theory, and by extension such classroom practices as collaborative learning, peer workshops and peer tutoring (Bruffee, "Collaborative" and "Social Construction"; Olson, "Social"). Arguments against foundationalism and for social rhetorics certainly

came from other camps that did not tap pragmatism as an influence, but still, pragmatism played a supporting role.

Speaking directly to the potential links between pragmatism and writing instruction is Hephzibah Roskelly and Kate Ronald's *Reason to Believe: Romanticism, Pragmatism and the Teaching of Writing*. In this book Roskelly and Ronald supply the most sustained and convincing plea that I have found for composition studies to recuperate the history and spirit of pragmatism. Here is how they justify their project: "For most of pedagogical history, teachers have not been able to name—and so to claim—a philosophy that embraces both idealism and practicalism, individuality and social responsibility, inquiry and faith. To examine the history of romanticism and pragmatism—to put them together as *romantic/pragmatic rhetoric*—is to recover a history and philosophy that teachers can use to question their own practices and beliefs and to give them theoretical support for the beliefs they continue to hold" (3). It is easy to see how such a rallying cry could appeal not only to college writing teachers but also to those experimenting with community-based writing pedagogies. Roskelly and Ronald undertake something akin to what Cornel West does in *The American Evasion of Philosophy*—that is, they sketch a genealogy of pragmatism that runs from Ralph Waldo Emerson through the late twentieth century. However, they modulate their approach so that it draws on the discourse of composition and responds to the particular circumstances of college writing teachers. In recounting the entwined histories of American romanticism and pragmatism, they assert that these movements supply both precedents and exemplars for current teaching and theory. By tracing a romantic and pragmatist usable past for composition, they leverage an alternative to the cynicism endemic in much postmodern critical theory and much post-process composition theory. As its title suggests, *Reason to Believe* is inflected with optimism, with what the authors celebrate as "hope, mission, and passion" (1).

Still, Roskelly and Ronald's project departs from mine here in some key ways. They are more concerned with redressing the quarrels between expressive and social epistemic camps in composition studies by presenting

a hopeful, integrative approach to mediating the personal and the academic, individual exploration and ideological critique, and practice and theory. They want to recuperate a romantic sense of the self and combine it with a pragmatic approach to contingency and inquiry. I wholeheartedly endorse Roskelly and Ronald's aims but add that a pragmatic approach insists on looking to the broader community, much as community literacy and service-learning look not only to writing in and across the curriculum but to writing beyond the curriculum. Some have already started such an appropriation of pragmatism—particularly John Dewey—to contextualize initiatives that hinge on writing, rhetoric, and community literacy (Deans; Flower; Goldblatt; Peck, Flower and Higgins). Yet community literacy is still something of an upstart in the field, and is still finding its philosophical footing.

### **Dewey's Education for Democracy**

Richard Rorty habitually claimed John Dewey as his hero, and it is worth pausing to consider Dewey's influence before moving on to an extended discussion of Rorty's social hope. Compositionists have called on Dewey to help think through teaching, learning, and student development as those unfold *within* the writing classroom. That is, many have used Dewey to validate student experience, support cooperative learning strategies, define student growth, introduce pedagogies keyed to a social constructionism, or reconcile the student/curriculum dualism (Fishman; Fishman and McCarthy; Jones; Russell). Service-learning advocates from a range of disciplines have also made greater use of Dewey and emphasized additional aspects of his opus, particularly his writings on democracy, ethics, and the relation of school to society—indeed, for many of them, Dewey has become the central figure for historicizing and theorizing their work (Giles and Eyler, "Theoretical"; Hatcher; Jacoby; Morton and Saltmarsh; Saltmarsh). He proves appealing for several reasons: his emphasis on the socially constructed nature of truth; his deliberations on the relationship of education to democracy; his faith in the power of civic participation and social action; and his advocacy for pedagogies that value experience, cooperation, and community. Moreover, Dewey's own record of scholarly activity—ranging from philosophy to psychology to education—mirrors the multi-disciplinary character of the service-learning community, and his life serves as an exemplar of an academic who championed social change: he led efforts to organize teacher unions, for example, and spoke as a public intellectual on concerns ranging from public schooling to the nuclear predicament.

Dewey's work has also long been cited as the key source for experiential and project-based education. He saw learning as an experimental mode of inquiry, usually sparked by confusion or doubt, then moving through a recursive process of reflection and action; at the same time he is ever emphasizing the social aims of education. This leads Dewey to conclude that "educational institutions should be equipped so as to give students an opportunity for acquiring and testing ideas and information in active pursuits typifying social situations" (*Democracy* 169). He also writes that education

should “saturate” students with the “spirit of service” (“School and Social Progress” 20), arguing that the “growth of the child in the direction of social capacity and service, his larger and more vital union with life, becomes the unifying aim [of education]; and discipline, culture, and information fall into place as phases of this growth” (*School* 92; also see Deans 38). Such reflections on service are embedded in Dewey’s larger project of reconciling schooling with student experience, the classroom with the social world beyond the classroom, and ultimately the pair of terms captured in the title of his most important book on this topic, *Democracy and Education*.

The moral dimensions of Dewey’s pragmatism are also consistent with certain kinds of community literacy. One of Dewey’s most famous maxims, “Growth is the only moral end” (*Reconstruction* 141), suggests that we would be wrongheaded to involve students in community work if our goal were to leverage their experience to encourage a particular ideology. He also says truth and justice are directions of change rather than metaphysical or universal ideals. And growth, for Dewey, is an open-ended process of experimentation. That does not mean, of course, that all experiments are equally valuable: we bet on those that will lead to better futures, to moral and social progress, and we attend to the consequences. Deweyan growth is, in large part, what Rorty means when he uses the term “social hope,” a hope in the social process of democratic interaction, on small and large scales. Students typically engage in such growth when they enter the fray of community organizations to undertake projects.

Ultimately Dewey’s educational philosophy—like his broader pragmatic philosophy—returns to democracy. For Dewey democracy is not the machinery of electoral government, a catalogue of civil rights, or a social contract but rather “a way of life” (“Creative” 226) and “the very idea of community itself” (*Public* 148). Since Dewey’s sense of democracy is more cultural than political, he emphasizes social interaction, civic participation, and “a working faith in the possibilities of human nature” (“Creative” 226). Open dialogue and effective communication—and thus rhetoric and literacy—are fundamental to that sense of democracy.

### **Bringing Rorty into the Conversation**

While Rorty stands on Dewey’s shoulders, he may seem, at first blush, exactly the *wrong* person to call on to lend support for community literacy efforts. Across most of his career, Rorty seemed little interested in Dewey’s commitments to bridging schooling and social action, democracy and education. Moreover, the core tenets of community literacy stand at odds with several themes that run through the early and middle stages of Rorty’s career: Rorty steers away from Dewey’s emphasis on experience in favor of the linguistic turn in pragmatism (Kloppenber; Westbrook); he imagines education as a mode of edification that should attend to what Kenneth Wain terms “ironic self-formation” rather than a mode of helping students participate in a democratic community (“Politics”); and he bifurcates private intellectual pursuits from public works (Bernstein). In the 1989 essay “Education Without Dogma,” one of the few

essays in which he addresses, head-on, the role of education in a liberal society, Rorty traces two fundamental ambitions of education—truth and freedom—and the processes by which each is sought: socialization and individualization. Rorty neatly assigns to secondary education the task of socialization and to higher education the task of individualization. He imagines college as a place where some students grow restless enough to challenge, in unpredictable ways, the “normal” thinking and shared cultural wisdom internalized during high school. Rorty claims that this version of education is Deweyan and democratic, but his conception of democracy here hinges on a free marketplace of ideas and ignores the call to cooperative action and civic participation that is so central to Dewey’s educational theory. Moreover, Rorty imagines that only an elite few will really travel the path of individualization far enough to help us redescribe received traditions in novel ways.

Rorty’s view of composition seems similarly disheartening. In a 1989 *JAC* interview he remarked on the role of first-year college writing courses: “I think the idea of freshman English, mostly, is to get them [students] to write complete sentences, get the comma in the right place, and stuff like that” (Olson). Clearly Rorty lumps composition with the socializing forces of education that he reserves for high school. In a 1990 commentary Rorty even remarked, “I’m dubious about the relevance of philosophy to education ... The best that us philosophers can do is to develop a suitable rhetoric for the presentation of ... new [practical] suggestions—making them a bit more palatable” (“Dangers” 41).

However, if familiar only with Rorty’s 1998 book *Achieving our Country*, one would be hard pressed to find the Rorty described above. *Achieving our Country* is an upbeat, Deweyan affirmation of public duty and civic life, as well as a rousing call for academics to become hopeful agents in political projects rather than cynical spectators of culture. In it Rorty scolds academics for retreating into a posture of national self disgust and cultural criticism; he goes on to challenge them to adopt an attitude of national pride and social hope as exemplified by John Dewey and Walt Whitman. Rorty seems to stretch beyond his earlier articulations of education’s purpose as fostering conversational reason and edifying selfhood (Arcilla). He urges *agency over spectatorship* and recommends that in working for social justice we participate in grounded campaigns (for such things as universal healthcare and tax reform) rather than deliberate on abstract movements (such as Marxism or postmodern critique). Rorty makes a general call for academics to adopt a future oriented, action-oriented stance that, I posit, bodes well for advocates of community writing. Not all—perhaps not even most—academics involved in community literacy may want, as Rorty proposes in *Achieving our Country*, to put a “moratorium on theory,” but they can at least understand his frustration with the distanced critique of much academic scholarship and his tilt toward hopeful action.

So what is happening here? Where does this “new” Rorty come from? John Pettigrew divides the trajectory of Rorty’s career into three stages: first working squarely within the analytic tradition in philosophy; then refuting this tradition by turning to pragmatism with *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*

and subsequent works; and, late in his career, turning his attention to civic engagement. Pettigrew concludes, “There is reason to believe ... that since the early to mid-1990s and as if in response to his pragmatist critics, Rorty has entered a third stage of his career, one marked by an issue-oriented turn towards political efficacy and social engagement” (Pettigrew 10).<sup>2</sup> Indeed, when asked, in his final interview, if he had moved to the left over the past few years, Rorty replied, “I’m not aware of having moved to the left, and am curious as to why I might seem to have done so.” But then he registers his support for policies that would fairly radically redistribute wealth and his more recent decision to support gay marriage (Postel). Rather than rehearse critiques of Rorty’s earlier work, I focus here on the third stage of his career, looking particularly to how proponents of community literacy can leverage Rorty’s thinking in his books *Achieving our Country* and *Philosophy and Social Hope*.

Shortly before the publication of *Achieving our Country* Rorty chided academics for participating in the “America sucks sweepstakes” (a term he borrows from Jonathan Yardley) and posited that America, “despite its past and present atrocities and vices,” stands as “a good example of the best kind of society so far invented” (“Trotsky” 4). Those kinds of pronouncements prompted some critics to label Rorty a parochial, nationalistic, or complacent, and the publication of *Achieving our Country* instigated more such criticism. In that book Rorty unapologetically takes the academy to task for its anti-patriotic habits. The opening paragraph of the book sets the tone:

“National pride is to countries what self-respect is to individuals: a necessary condition for self-improvement. Too much national pride can produce bellicosity and imperialism, just as excessive self-respect can produce arrogance. But just as too little self-respect makes it difficult for a person to display moral courage, so insufficient national pride makes energetic and effective debate about national policy unlikely. Emotional involvement with one’s country—feelings of intense shame or of glowing pride aroused by various parts of its history, and by various present-day policies—is necessary if political deliberation is to be imaginative and productive. Such deliberation will probably not occur unless pride outweighs shame.” (3) Rorty goes on to argue that since the Vietnam War academics have traded too heavily in cynicism, spectatorship and national shame. In contrast, Rorty holds up Whitman and Dewey, along with “old Left” progressive era intellectuals, as exemplars of American pride, experimental possibility and social hope. Rorty pits this “pragmatic, participatory Left” (38) against the “new spectatorial left” of Foucault and his followers, and makes no secret of his allegiance to Dewey and company. Even in his post-9/11 writings, which vigorously protest the Patriot Act and other erosions of civil liberties (“Post-Democracy”), Rorty has not shied from the discourse of patriotism, as evident in the excerpt his final interview quoted at the start of this essay: “Some form of patriotism—of solidarity with fellow-citizens, and of shared hopes for the country’s future—is necessary if one is to take politics seriously.”

Rorty’s versions of hope and patriotism, plus his incrementalist liberal politics, prioritize reformist projects over revolutionary fervor and reflective

participation over distanced critique. His stance also resonates with the ways mainstream service-learning is typically promoted and supported in higher education by federal programs such as the Corporation for National Service and national associations such as Campus Compact. While not stridently nationalistic, these organizations are patriotic (if with a liberal bent) and frame much of their work in the rhetoric of America as a democratic prospect that can be realized through the efforts of individuals and institutions, including higher education. Such organizations wince at radical agendas for revolutionary change not only because they scare legislators and funders but also because they leave participants huddled in cynical critique rather than motivated to serve. Likewise, even though Rorty admires Nietzsche and Foucault for

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their brilliant and graceful articulations of anti-foundationalist philosophy, he sees the consequences of their largely pessimistic critical theory as debilitating.

While we should not see Rorty as supplanting Dewey as the paragon of pragmatist educational philosophy, we can, I think, extrapolate some teaching practices from his laments about the ways that intellectuals and academics since the 1960s have fashioned a spectatorial cultural left rather than an active political left. For example, if grounded reformist campaigns are indeed preferable to abstract revolutionary movements, shouldn't we get our students involved in projects that contribute to such campaigns? If we celebrate social hope as something worth encouraging in students, faculty and citizens alike, might we give students a taste of not just social hope but also grounded action in their coursework? If we can assume that what is good for faculty is for good students, then *Achieving our Country* gestures toward a more civically engaged curriculum even if it does not explicitly advocate for one.

Rorty's reflections on national self-pride are embedded in a broader investment in social hope. Rorty's social hope has some resonances with the ways hope is used in critical pedagogy (Freire; Jacobs), but it remains qualitatively different, a pragmatist hope keyed less to revolutionary outcomes than to liberal reform and progress. Rorty borrows his use of "social hope" from Dewey's essay "Philosophy and Democracy," in which Dewey writes, "Philosophy is not in any sense whatever a form of knowledge . . . It is, instead] a social hope reduced to a working program of action" (43); he revives it in his 1989 collection of essays, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*; he develops it more robustly through essays collected in *Philosophy and Social Hope*; and he applies it to politics and academic culture in *Achieving our Country*. While the term is largely absent from the philosophical papers collected in Rorty's 2007 book, *Philosophy as Cultural Politics*, in the preface Rorty again points to Dewey's original remark on philosophy as social hope.

When articulating the dimensions of social hope, Rorty follows Dewey's sense that "the quest for certainty be replaced by the demand for imagination" ("Truth" 34). Cautious of being preachy but still wanting to inspire, Rorty claims, "I think that the most one can do by way of linking up pragmatism with America is to say that both the country and its most distinguished philosopher [Dewey] suggest that we can, in politics, substitute *hope* for the sort of knowledge which philosophers have usually tried to attain" ("Truth" 24). That statement may be particularly resonant in the current political moment, when Barack Obama has made so much of hope and his supporters have responded so vigorously to his articulation of it.

The moral dimensions of Rorty's social hope affirm cooperative projects with nonprofits and community groups. When students engage in literacy work for and with local organizations, they testify to not only having gained insights about writing but also about having connected with people and problems that are new to them or of which they were only vaguely conscious before their community experiences. Putting more energy into widening the scope and diversity of *connections* rather than on trying to teach students ideological analysis or dismantle their false consciousness is especially consistent with a pragmatist approach to moral development. As Rorty reflects, "So it is best [to] think of moral progress as a matter of increasing *sensitivity*, increasing responsiveness to the needs of a larger and larger variety of people and things ... [Pragmatists] see moral progress as a matter of being able to respond to the needs of ever more inclusive groups of people" ("Ethics" 81). He continues, ever cautious of moral absolutes: "Pragmatists think of moral progress as more like sewing together a very large, elaborate, polychrome quilt, than like getting a clearer vision of something true and deep ... The hope is to sew such groups together with a thousand little stitches—to invoke a thousand little commonalities between their members, rather than specify one great big one, their common humanity" ("Ethics" 86-87). Community literacy work of a pragmatic bent is less about a commitment to a metaphysical sense of social justice (which is typical of much critical pedagogy) than about the process of getting off campus to work cooperatively with a range of local organizations on purpose-driven projects, each an opportunity for students, teachers, nonprofit administrators, and local citizens to sew those little stitches.

If we apply this same moral vision to the metaphor most often associated with Rorty's earlier philosophical work on knowledge-making—that of *conversation*—we see that community literacy and service-learning can be transformational not so much because they aspire to certain ideals of social justice but instead because they widen the number and experience of interlocutors. For pragmatists, the more open and diverse the conversation, the better, just as in the natural world (and Dewey was strongly influenced by Darwin), the larger and more diverse the gene pool, the stronger the offspring. This approach certainly has its downsides, as pointed out by Louis Menand in *The Metaphysical Club*, a history of the interlaced histories of early pragmatists William James, Charles Sanders Peirce, Oliver Wendell Holmes, and John Dewey. In the epilogue Menand remarks on the limits of

pragmatism by pointing to how some people, such as Martin Luther King, Jr., are willing to give their lives for ideals rooted in religious faith or metaphysical belief. He uses the civil rights movement as an example of when the Deweyan moral imperatives of interaction and growth or Rortyan inflections of those as sensitivity and tolerance lose traction: “The great movement to secure civil liberties in the United States during the Cold War arose out of a religious community, black Southern Baptists, and it was founded on the belief that every individual has an inalienable right to those freedoms by virtue of being human—precisely the individualism that Holmes and Dewey felt they needed to discredit. Martin Luther King, Jr., was not a pragmatist, a relativist, or a pluralist, and it is a question whether the movement he led could have accomplished what it did if its inspirations had come from Dewey and Holmes rather than Reinhold Niebuhr and Mahatma Gandhi” (441; see Diggins for a related critique). Some, especially Cornel West, have sought to redress the relationship between religious belief and pragmatism, but it remains a knotty problem.

Pragmatism may have a process to champion, but it cannot supply the kind of moral certainty or idealistic vision that often anchor social action. What it can supply—or at least what Rorty’s later work supplies—is a philosophical vocabulary for those who think ideological critique is less vital than involvement, who gauge moral progress more by our responsiveness to a wider and wider variety of people rather than by our distance from a particular vision of social justice, who emphasize not just the dangers of patriotism but also its benefits, and who are suspicious of revolutionary ideals but still have social hope.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> I’m struck by how Rorty’s notion of *redescription* as a means of social reform is akin to Paulo Freire’s “naming the world” as an instrument for changing it. As Freire writes, “To exist, humanely, is to name the world, to change it. Once named, the world in turn reappears to the namers as a problem and requires of them a new naming” (77).

<sup>2</sup> Kenneth Wain likewise sees Rorty’s recent work as more civically robust: “[H]e now affirms himself as a philosopher with both a private task of ironic self-creation and a public one of utopian writing, on the lines of Marx, Mill, Dewey, and Rawls. What he continues to reject is not philosophy but ‘metaphysics.’ Only a society run by tyrants and therefore uninterested in social change and reform, he now says, can dispense with philosophy. Philosophy as utopian writing, he says, is important in helping societies redescribe their political and, one could add, educational, aspirations in light of change, and in redescribing those aspirations, more specifically, from the point of view of the oppressed within the society it serves” (“End” 173). We should recognize that even Rorty’s “old” philosophical self could inform community writing, albeit in a different way than I am arguing in this essay

Much of Rorty's work since *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* emphasizes the radical contingency of knowledge and language, exemplifying what many have called the “linguistic” or “ironic” turn in pragmatism. Such an emphasis on contingency and language resonates in key ways with the kinds of writing that my students do with community-based organizations. When doing projects for nonprofits, students find themselves caught between modes of writing expected by school and those expected by the workplace. By experiencing a juxtaposition of academic and workplace genres, purposes and practices, students often come to see a bit more clearly the contingency of rhetoric and language. For example, when community partners deliver to students writing advice that flies in the face of what they have been taught across years of schooling, they often experience dissonance. They often arrive at a greater awareness that the kinds of writing that succeed in school (thesis-driven essays to demonstrate subject mastery) generally fail in the workplace and the public sphere (where a range of genres—and almost never the essay—are deployed to achieve practical ends). Language and authority are revealed as made rather preordained, dynamic rather than static. The contingency of teacher knowledge is also put on display.

When teachers employ community-based pedagogies, they reveal that their knowledge is bound to the context of the academy. Suddenly they don't set the assignments; they don't have all the answers. And they struggle with students to figure out the needs of the community partners. We are reminded that there is no transcendent measure of good writing to which I can point and toward which students can strive. Instead there are effective rhetorical and social strategies for particular contexts. In the pragmatic spirit, community projects confirm that the “goodness” of writing is driven by its *usefulness* and its *consequences*. Rorty the ironist might smile and nod at how the contingent, context-driven nature of teaching, writing and rhetoric are thrown into relief by community work. Meanwhile, the Rorty of *Achieving our Country* might appreciate that academics are functioning as agents rather than spectators.

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