
Democracy & Education

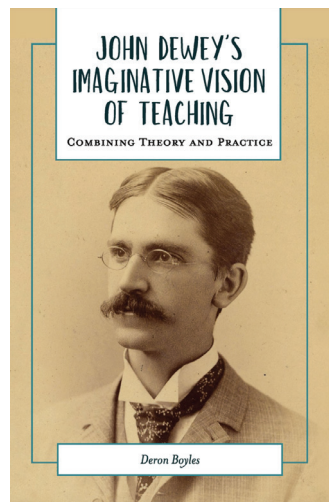
Democracy in Action

A Book Review of *John Dewey's Imaginative Vision of Teaching: Combining Theory and Practice*

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OVER THE COURSE of his distinguished career, John Dewey refined his unique brand of pragmatism, instrumentalism, at the intersection of education and democracy. For Dewey, philosophy had strayed from a practical usefulness due to a myopic focus on theoretical considerations. Arguing for a *reunion* of theory and practice in the field of philosophy, Dewey (1917) wrote, “Philosophy recovers itself when it ceases to be a device for dealing with the problems of philosophers and be-comes [sic] a method, cultivated by philosophers, for dealing with the problems of men [sic]” (p. 65). Further, rejecting technocratic interpretations of democracy, Dewey (1927) insisted it was incumbent upon the people to act to improve their circumstances. In this way, instrumentalism would be a literal instrument for navigating indeterminate situations (Dewey, 1938a). As a radical contextualist, though, Dewey (1916, 1938b) ardently rejected absolutism, binaries, universality, and fundamentalism, insisting, instead, that nothing is fixed (Bohman, 2010). In doing so, he stressed the importance of considering the local context when implementing progressive measures. In a participatory democracy, then, for Dewey (1927), education is the primary means for ensuring the people are prepared to act within their own sphere in service of the public good.

With his new book, *John Dewey's Imaginative Vision of Teaching: Combining Theory and Practice*, Deron Boyles (2020) sets out to explore the confluence of these Deweyan ideas. Arguing there is a dearth of books analyzing Dewey's pedagogical philosophy in real-world educational settings, Boyles details and clarifies



Dewey's *imaginative vision of teaching* via the blending of theory and case studies. Each chapter begins with a theoretical foundation of Deweyan thought before turning to its practical implications. Writing for undergraduates, Boyles specifies this book is meant as an introductory text for those interested in exploring the nature and implications of Deweyan theory. By frontloading theory in each chapter, Boyles is seeking to provide a clear and concise overview of relevant

Deweyan concepts. From there, the author draws upon his own experience at Chrysalis Experiential Academy in Roswell, Georgia, his own schooling experience, and examples from Dewey's Laboratory School at the University of Chicago to analyze the real-world applications of Dewey's instrumentalism.

In Chapter 1, Boyles (2020) begins by covering Dewey's rejection of “teaching as transmission” in favor of a “teaching as transactional” model. From there, Boyles extends this overview to articulate just what an imaginative vision of teaching can be. Here,

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Acknowledgment: Thank you to Sarah Stitzlein for reviewing the article and offering feedback prior to submission.

the Deweyan educator develops a social- and inquiry-based learning environment in which students take the lead in the management, instruction, and content of their own education. Boyles specifies that instead of the educator maintaining a position of authority and omniscience, Deweyan teachers are coparticipants whose primary responsibility is to create educative experiences (i.e., growth) for students. While this is the ideal of Deweyan education, Boyles argues that its actual execution is quite challenging. Referencing *Chrysalis*, Boyles next outlines those barriers to the effective implementation of Deweyan pedagogy, concluding that teachers are not prepared or supported to engage in this sort of work. Explicitly condemning the many external influences negatively impacting schools (e.g., preservice teacher education programs as training sites, the role of corporate interests and privatization in schools, teachers' lack of authority and independence, and standardized curricula and assessments), Boyles insists educators trust themselves and their students enough to take risks in pursuit of changing what it means to teach and learn. Guided by Dewey's promotion of democracy and democratic principles, Boyles states that the Deweyan educator is one who cultivates a classroom learning environment that is an extension of nature and undergirded by notions of community life and living.

Boyles (2020), in Chapter 2, next turns to an analysis of Deweyan theory at the confluence of policy, practice, and philosophy, establishing Dewey's position that art should be a central component in education and not sacrificed for a myopic focus on utilitarianism (e.g., test scores or career preparation) or "core" subjects such as those within the STEM-STEAM movement. Boyles uses these initiatives as foils as he delves into the nature of Deweyan inquiry in schools. Cogently arguing for a holistic education undergirded by democratic values, Boyles writes, "It's my view that defining teaching and learning in terms of jobs, careers, and economics reinforces the idea that we are merely workers for an owning class and that we should not consider the value of a fulfilling, creative, happy life outside material comforts" (p. 46). Therefore, Boyles insists upon a pragmatically instrumental arts-centered inquiry that merges theory and practice and is guided by students' authentic experiences, imagination, freedom of thought, and the goal of producing more educative experiences for students. Since instrumentalism is utilized to address the contemporary social needs of living in a democracy, aesthetic inquiry, then, is developed for use in the present and not simply situated for use in some distant future.

In Chapter 3, Boyles (2020) explores Dewey's epistemology. Characterizing Dewey as a fallibilist and not a relativist, Boyles cogently argues Deweyan knowledge represents an individual and not some universal understanding. People's subjective understandings, or *warranted assertions*, are developed via inquiry to solve problems within specific contexts. They are constructed via an active process of knowing in which people are "making, inquiring, imagining, and contesting knowledge claims linked to their experiences" (p. 63). Turning to the educational implications, Boyles situates Dewey's fallibilism as a rejection of the spectator theory of knowledge (or knowledge transfers) as tools that "reinforce order, control, and power" (p. 60). Instead, the Deweyan

educator embraces active knowing that exists at the confluence of process and product. In other words, Deweyan inquiry is employed to facilitate learning due to its merger of the means and the ends. Educators can allow indeterminate situations to arise in the classroom and then navigate those challenges with their students. By operating as co-learners and allowing students to interrogate knowledge, educators are working to develop what Dewey termed "intelligent habits." Knowing, then, is an interrelated process in which inquiry leads to more inquiry in a continuous and profound way. With this in mind, the fluid and unstructured realities inherent within knowing means that it cannot be prearranged. From here, Boyles takes aim at contemporary schooling practices. First, he condemns professional development that seeks to indoctrinate educators with "best practices" and standardization. Second, he argues that schools are structured in a way that is conducive to the flow of transferring knowledge from the knower to the student. In response, Boyles vehemently insists that teachers take control of their educational spaces and implement a Deweyan engagement with knowledge. As a collaborative enterprise, this enactment of associated living enables students and teachers to practice democratic education for democratic living (Dewey, 1916).

In Chapter 4, Boyles (2020) argues that the interconnection between people and their surroundings forms the basis on Dewey's ecology. Characterizing Dewey's theories as both biocentric and transactive, Boyles argues that Dewey holds humans responsible for caring for all life, including the planet itself. This extends to individuals' social responsibilities in a democratic world. In pursuit of this, Dewey's transactive ecology is characterized by an active back and forth between individuals and the environment. Here, individuals are making meaning of the world relationally and contextually. Boyles writes, "Dewey wants us to consider whether our actions in the world (in nature) negatively influence the world" (p. 88). In this way, Dewey's realism is a transactional realism that clarifies individuals' roles as interacting with and in the world as opposed to doing things to the world. Situating the individual within the environment, Boyles argues that the Deweyan classroom embraces a productive implementation of imagination and inquiry, connects students' lives outside of school to the classroom, emphasizes interdependence, is not standardized, doesn't accept prescriptions, utilizes social situations to create educative experiences, and should be spaces for inquiry. Allowing students to learn by doing via trial and error means they are actively and imaginatively engaging in their own learning.

In Chapter 5, Boyles (2020) extends his analysis of Dewey's naturalism by dovetailing it with ethical considerations. Broadly, Boyles states that Dewey's ethics are not universal but practical, circumstantial, developing, and diverse. However, in a more nuanced analysis of Dewey's economics ethics, Boyles argues that Dewey insists upon a type of economic justice characterized by a universal basic income with opportunities for further earnings. To pursue this, Dewey saw schools as a public resource that should help individuals to solve social problems in pursuit of the public good, or democratic living. Boyles, here, explicitly excoriates the proliferation of the corporatization of public schools and its corresponding exploitation of students, educators, and schools

themselves. Boyles then applies his idea of imaginative teaching to this scenario, arguing that educators can learn to fight back against this exploitation by turning the tables on their exploiters (i.e., exploiting their exploiters). In this way, schools and teachers are prioritizing democratic living and not some myopic obedience to consumerism.

In the final chapter, Boyles (2020) explores the role of diversity in Dewey's imaginative vision of teaching. Here, Boyles draws upon his own experiences as a fifth-grader to analyze religious diversity in the context of character education. The application of case studies, such as these, leads Boyles to conclude that teachers and students should collaboratively explore diversity to further develop their critical thinking. He ends the chapter with the following powerful claim: "Imaginative teaching and learning should be characterized by the continual inquiry represented by young people everywhere. We just need to set standardization, accountancy, and capitalist assumptions aside" (p. 173). Said another way, we can learn to embrace diversity and democracy via an active engagement with these concepts in our schools.

Imagination, hope, meliorism, and democratic living are central components within Boyles's book. However, what distinguishes it, as Boyles himself argues, is that while many scholars have engaged with the theoretical elements of Dewey's work, few

have undertaken the challenge of analyzing Dewey's work in real-world contexts. This approach honors the merger of theory and action that characterizes Dewey's unique brand of pragmatism. Here, Boyles is giving credence to Dewey's claim that philosophy can be recovered by applying it to our own, real-world problems. This easily accessible book is useful for those searching for an introduction to Deweyan philosophy as well as for educators seeking to revitalize their practice with democratic notions of education. In short, this reviewer highly recommends this book.

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