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# Language, Literacy and Dewey: "Experience" in the Language Arts Context

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# Language, Literacy, and Dewey: “Experience” in the Language Arts Context

Jessica Masterson

## Abstract

Blending the Deweyan idea of “experience” with the work of contemporary literacy pedagogues and classroom examples, this paper explores the implications of Dewey’s principles upon today’s classroom contexts. If experience is a central component to education, how might Dewey’s ideas help to re-focus our scattered perceptions of what literacy learning “ought” to be in the 21st century? Furthermore, what possibilities are created therein for language arts teachers and students?

## Introduction

In *School and Society* (1990), John Dewey once advised, “Relate the school to life, and all studies are of necessity correlated” (p. 91). Though simply stated, this 100-year-old ideal is still elusive in public education. Amid the turmoil and uncertainty bred by political initiatives in public education over the past few decades, discussions concerning the philosophical foundations of education are all the more pertinent. Though

initiatives like the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 and the Race to the Top program introduced in 2009 have secured and even expanded the prominence of language arts education in public schools, these and other pieces of legislation have also narrowed the curricular possibilities of this discipline, effectively moving farther away from the close relationship between life and school as envisioned by Dewey (e.g., Kuhn, 2014; Ravitch, 2011; Spring, 2014).

Thus, as English teachers in the United States scramble to keep pace with new waves of education legislation as they replace older ones, it seems an appropriate time to reflect upon lessons of the past, with the ultimate intent of shining a critical light upon the future of public education. The work of John Dewey, which spans the fields of philosophy, psychology, and education reform, offers an intriguing, multifaceted conceptualization of progressive education. Though not known specifically for his ideas about literacy-learning *per se*, many of his larger philosophical points are instructive for the language arts classroom, and are thus deserving of our attention at this political moment. As such, how might Dewey's ideas – particularly those concerning experience – help to re-focus our scattered perceptions of what literacy learning “ought” to be in the 21st century? What are some of the implications of these ideas – and what possibilities do they create – for language arts teachers and students? With full knowledge that “A question well put is half answered” (Dewey, 2011, p. 85), I offer the aforementioned questions as launching pads from which deeper issues may be explored.

### **“Educative” Experiences, Continuity, and Literacy Education**

Before exploring Dewey's ideas, I want to first provide an example from the realm of language arts for the purposes of connecting Dewey's vision to everyday pedagogical practices.

At the start of a high school English class, students are given a copy of the poem, “The Boy Died in My Alley,” by Gwendolyn Brooks (n.d.; see Appendix A). The teacher has selected this poem in the wake of a spate of violent acts across the nation. The students read the poem to themselves over a few times, and are then asked to write a Creative Response (Kirby & Crovitz, 2013) about it in any form they choose – a poem, a drawing, a narrative, etc. After the students write, they switch papers with one

another and provide written responses to each other's initial writings, offering questions, suggestions, or affirmations in a "silent conversation." After a brief discussion about the evocative imagery in the poem and the mood and tone they establish, the teacher poses a question for group discussion: "What can this poem teach us about life?" The conversation is lively and emotional, and is enriched by a seamless interweaving of recent events in the country their connection to the school's community, and the powerful, haunting words of the poem. Near the end of class, the teacher poses another question, "In thinking about our experiences and knowledge as citizens of this community and as students of English, what action can we take?" After some discussion, students decide to write poems about times in their life in which they've been complicit in acts of wrongdoing (a la Brooks' poem), to be compiled and disseminated at community centers in the area.

### ***Experience and Continuity***

This example, while not meant to be an exemplar, is offered as a starting point from which we might think about the importance of experience in the lives of our students, and thus, its importance within the English curriculum. A continued refrain among many of Dewey's works is the immense importance of experience. The incorporation of the student's past experience, he notes, is critical to the success (or failure) of any educational program, and as a result, it deserves exploration for the purposes of this paper. A chief component of experience according to Dewey is that of continuity, or a sustained, meaningful connection among educational experiences; a veritable thread that connects one day's learning to yesterday's, as well as tomorrow's. While educational experiences ought to provide the impetus for future learning, Dewey (1997) notes that continuity of experience "applies in some way in every case, the quality of the present experience influences the *way* in which the principle applies" (p. 37). At its core, continuity rests upon the habits and dispositions of students, with special attention given to the myriad ways in which these habits are influenced by the past and, in their repetition, shape the direction of future experience:

[The fact of habit] covers the formation of attitudes, attitudes that are emotional and intellectual; it covers our basic sensitivities and ways of meeting and responding to all the conditions

which we meet in living. From this point of view, the principle of continuity of experience means that every experience both takes up something from those which have gone before and modifies in some way the quality of those which come after. (1997, p. 35)

If we accept that the principle of continuity plays a critical role in determining the quality of future experiences, it follows that some degree of discernment among different sorts of experience is needed. Thus, Dewey's formulations of "educative" and "mis-educative" experiences are intended to distinguish among those experiences that on the one hand, contribute to the growth of the individual, and on the other, those that slow growth or stunt it entirely. "Growth," of course, is its own heavy concept perhaps worthy of its own exploration, though Dewey (1997) pithily suggests that its presence is evident "when and only when development in a particular line conduces to continuing growth" (p. 36). Educative experiences, or those that promote continuing growth, are useful to broader discussions of curriculum and pedagogy across content areas; while mis-educative experiences promote "the effect of arresting or distorting the growth of further experience," educative experiences are ones that impel within the student a desire for further learning (p. 25).

For example, a colleague I knew sought to enliven vocabulary instruction (itself an often mis-educative endeavor when removed from any context) by re-branding it as a game he called "Pimp My Word," based on the then-popular MTV show, "Pimp My Ride." In the lessons I observed, though students were excited by the novelty of this exercise (as any occasion to use the term "pimp" in an apparently school-sanctioned way is a thrill), it seemed that students were more entertained by the premise of this activity than anything else, and I wondered whether students, based upon this experience, would be continually motivated to build their vocabulary as a result. Dewey (1997) accounts for this in noting that "experiences may be so disconnected from one another that, while each is agreeable or even exciting in itself, they are not linked cumulatively to one another" (p. 26). Without this crucial linkage, experiences fall into the realm of the mis-educative.

Many of Dewey's views on experience are echoed, in some ways, in Kirby's and Crovitz's (2013) descriptions of textual transaction:

Not only does someone read a novel, but the theme and characters from the novel are so compelling that the reader also alters

her point of view, thinking, or perception... Transactions with texts are perhaps the ultimate learning achievement: What we learn changes what we do, how we think, perceptions of ourselves or others, and insights about our own or another culture. (p. 251)

This idea of experience — here in the form of transaction — as something that expands our views and contributes to further growth would likely qualify as an educative experience in Dewey's view. In the aforementioned example, students are asked to transact with Brooks' poem in a way that connects and expands upon their lived experiences and propels further growth.

### ***Experience and Environment***

A final criterion of Deweyan experience concerns the social and physical environment in which learning is to take place. As he explains,

A primary responsibility of educators is that they not only be aware of the general principle of the shaping of actual experience by environing conditions, but that they also recognize in the concrete what surroundings are conducive to having experiences that lead to growth. (1997, p. 40)

The role of the teacher, then, is not one of authoritarian control, nor is it one of laissez faire indifference; instead, the teacher serves as the principal *curator* of educative, continuous experiences that attend to and make use of carefully-considered objective conditions.

As such, what sorts of environing conditions and surroundings are best suited for literacy learning as a Deweyan experience? Given the central importance of growth - aided by experience and interaction - in a student's education, which aspects of English education can be adapted to this end? In the example of the English lesson centered around the Gwendolyn Brooks poem, the teacher recognized not only the probable impact of recent events upon her students and how the events, as environing conditions in their own right, were likely contributing to the shaping of her students' experiences, but she was also cognizant of intentionally creating a few conditions within her classroom environment — the careful selection of the poem, the gradual transition from personal reflection to group discussion — in order that these experiences be educative ones. As

the importance of experience cannot be readily overestimated in Dewey's educational equation, literacy pedagogue George Hillocks, Jr. (1995) promotes the careful orchestration and implementation of "gateway activities" meant to "open up new journeys" and generate educative excitement among students (p. 149). More than simply "fun" projects that distract from the overall purpose of the lesson, gateway activities are necessarily bound to the educational objective at hand; in short, they are spaces in which pedagogical theories of literacy and its everyday practice merge:

Theories of discourse, inquiry, learning, and teaching are useless if we cannot invent the activities that will engage our students in using, and therefore learning, the strategies essential to certain writing tasks...Because writing involves both substantive and affective purposes, our activities will have to involve students in appropriate strategies of inquiry. (p. 149)

These ideas are not perfectly Deweyan, of course: While Hillocks calls for the "invention" of activities, Dewey may likely contend that the material and social conditions of real life offer abundant sources of authentic, educative activities, such that any "invention" is often unnecessary. Further, while Hillocks seems to suggest that inquiry is the ultimate end for students' writing, Dewey might position inquiry as something of a tool whose utilization ultimately proffers a deeper understanding of lived experiences. Still, in describing the purpose of inquiry in *How We Think* (2011), Dewey explicitly links intellectual education to the cultivation of inquiry:

No matter how much an individual knows as a matter of hearsay and information, if he has not attitudes and habits of [of inquiry and reasoning], he is not intellectually educated... And since these habits are not a gift of nature (no matter how strong the aptitude for acquiring them); since, moreover, the casual circumstances of the natural and social environment are not enough to compel their acquisition, the main office of education is to supply conditions that make for their cultivation. (p. 26)

Though Hillocks' and Dewey's ideas about experience in education are not perfectly aligned, both acknowledge the chief importance of inquiry in any educational endeavor. Moreover, though Hillocks seeks to "invent" activities rather than cull them from everyday life, Hillocks' conception of

teaching writing strives to engage students in writing processes and products that are reflective of real-world literary production, and not merely responsive to the literacy demands of high-stakes tests. The teaching example provided earlier was chosen because it anticipates a shared difficulty - perhaps a collective need to mourn and seek closure - among students in the wake of a tragedy. The teacher, anticipating the emotions of her students (as well as her own emotional needs), adapted the environment to address these aims, all while incorporating the various tools of literacy: reading, writing, analyzing, speaking, and listening.

In sum, literacy learning - and the educative, continuous experiences we design to this end - should be fully in step with the social, economic, and historical reality of students' everyday lives, a point which Dewey (1990) vigorously makes in *School and Society*, as elsewhere. But to what end? Although the authors discussed here more or less agree upon the importance of experience in education, what are the ultimate goals of such work? While for Kinloch (2010) and Freire (2000) experience is focused around the pursuit of social justice, Hillocks (1995) and Dewey (1938) believe the value of an experience is best determined by its utility and application to future experiences. These ends are not mutually exclusive, of course. Indeed, Dewey's focus upon the necessity of the future application of experience, if fully realized, would very likely contribute not only to an individual's growth, but also to the overall improvement of society. Says Hillocks (1995):

In a sense that is what real teaching is all about, helping students learn to enjoy the process of thinking through complex problems because that gives them the power and the confidence to undertake new problems in new situations without the structure of the classroom environment. (p. 75)

Compare Hillocks' emphasis on ensuring students possess "the power and the confidence to undertake new problems in future situations" with Dewey's (1997) attention to the importance of extracting meaning from future experiences:

What avail is it to win prescribed amounts of information about geography and history, to win ability to read and write, if in the process the individual loses his own soul: loses his appreciation of things worth while, of the values to which these things are relative; if he loses desire to apply what he has learned and, above



all, loses the ability to extract meaning from his future experiences as they occur? (p. 49)

While Hillocks is more concerned with thinking as it impacts future decisions and problems, Dewey links a “soul”-ful education to one that is also tied to future application, but “above all” allows individuals to draw meaning from experiences as they happen. Still, both Dewey and Hillocks lay out the value of education in terms of its capacity for use in future situations. Once more, these constructs incite us to wonder about the kinds of values we are cultivating at present in our literacy practices, whether a typical student in today’s English classroom feels a desire to apply their skills to different contexts, and what, if anything, is “taken up” by our pupils. Thus, in addition to considering the role of environment and continuity in shaping educative experiences, we must also contend with the question of the student, and more specifically, the extent to which they are actively involved in the task at hand.

### ***Experience and Occupation***

To this point, Dewey may well contend that the degree to which a student constructs meaning of his or her experiences is directly correlated to the amount of time the student was actively occupied in such experiences. In *Democracy and Education* (2012), Dewey writes, “Occupation is a concrete term for continuity” (p. 331). In addition to supplying the child with a “genuine motive” for learning, Dewey (1990) also argues that occupation engages learners in the raw material of social and historical values and scientific advancements. Much of what Dewey has to say about occupation involves a key connection between mind and body, such that suggestions of kinesthetic experiences are often woven into his examples. Though not a total facsimile for the “close and intimate acquaintance got with nature at first hand, with real things and materials, with the actual processes of their manipulation” demanded by Dewey (1990, p. 11), Kinloch’s (2010) re-formulation of 21st century literacies to include “the multimodal, multisensory, print, visual, linguistic, and cultural practices that youth and adults employ and are confronted with on a daily basis” (p. 118) invokes Bakhtin’s (1981) recognition of multivoicedness, or the acknowledgement of the interrelation between past, present, and future in literate acts. Indeed, the dialogical encounters in which Kinloch seeks to engage her students require an understanding of the present that extends beyond “a

sharp, narrow knife-blade in time” to simultaneously include “a pressure forward, a glance backward, and a look outward” (Dewey, 2002, p. 281).

Educative experience, as a harmonious interplay of continuity, environment, and occupation, is not only possible in a 21st century language arts context, it is vitally necessary. As the linkages between everyday life and the increasingly turgid curricular requirements of schooling grow weaker, students’ experiences in language arts are less likely to build upon “felt difficulties” (be they emotional and/or intellectual) and more likely to be subject to the alternating winds of education reform. But where there are challenges, there are also possibilities. Thus, where the previous section explored Dewey’s notion of experience, the second half of this paper seeks to reframe our thinking around a new path for literacy education that is grounded in everyday realities, but simultaneously strives toward Deweyan ideals.

### **Deweyan Possibilities for Literacy Education in the 21st Century**

In practice, progressive literacy educators such as Kinloch and Hillocks demonstrate that the fusion of culturally responsive, multimodal literacies and English can be effectively utilized to enliven language arts instruction through experience and continuity. Up until this point, Dewey’s writings about continuity, experience, and occupation have been extrapolated to suit the general context of literacy learning at present. However, a difficulty emerges in seeking to rectify Dewey’s ideas about literacy with the restrictive, or perhaps *prescriptive*, requirements many of today’s teachers face. In the spirit of Foucault’s (1984) notion of critique as an engagement with history that allows us to transcend its imposed limits, let us examine some of these historical limitations as well as a few Deweyan possibilities for literacy.

Dewey expresses necessarily complex views about the act of reading, as well as ideal purposes for different sorts of texts. In the case of informational texts, for instance, Dewey believes students are best served by them as they seek to extract additional meaning from their lived experiences. “Harmful as a substitute for experience,” he writes in *The School and Society*, “[the book] is all important in interpreting and expanding experience” (1990, p. 85). Following from this, the library or recitation

room is not so much to be viewed as a place in which experience is meant to occur; rather, it is a place for students to bring their experiences, problems, and questions in order for new light to be shed upon them. In the absence of a motivating experience that propels a student to pick up a book, warns Dewey (1990),

the child approaches the book without intellectual hunger, without alertness, without a questioning attitude, and the result is one so deplorably common: such abject dependence upon books as weakens and cripples vigor of thought and inquiry, combined with reading for mere random stimulation of fancy, emotional indulgence, and flight from the world of reality into a make-believe land. (p. 112)

While this passage seems almost dismissive of the value of fiction, Dewey's (2005) statements about literature in *Art as Experience* paint a more nuanced picture of his views. Here, he defines experience as "the result, the sign, the reward of that interaction of organism and environment which, when it is carried to the full, is a transformation of interaction into participation and communication" (p. 17). Defined in this way, and as the title of the text suggests, works of art, including literature, are experiences unto themselves. Undoubtedly, Dewey speaks quite fondly of literature throughout this text, noting that because of the sociohistorical and symbolic weight carried by words - both written and spoken - "its material thus has an intellectual force superior to that of any other art, while it equals the capacity of architecture to present the values of collective life" (p. 249). In addition, Dewey points to the power of continuity - and the dynamic experiences it engenders - present within literature by virtue of the art form's unique reliance upon language:

[C]ontinuity is not confined to letters in its written and printed form. The grandam<sup>1</sup> telling stories of 'once upon a time' to children at her knee passes on and colors the past; she prepares material for literature and may be herself an artist. The capacity of sounds to preserve and report the values of all the varied experiences of the past, and to follow with accuracy every changing shade of feeling and idea, confers upon their combinations and

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1. Archaic term for *grandmother*

permutations the power to create a new experience, oftentimes an experience more poignantly felt than that which comes from themselves. (p. 250)

Here, Dewey recognizes the potency of language and literature in creating new experiences, a nuance that appears to be overlooked in his earlier work. To wit, the ability of oral literacy (“sounds,” as he describes them) to convey not only the experiences of past people and events but also to evolve, in response to present circumstances and attitudes, into something else entirely is unique among the various art forms he discusses, and provides a strong argument for the promotion of literacy - in its most comprehensive sense - as a means of achieving such transformative experiences. We might look to literature as a viable way of exploring and engaging a diversity of experiences and questions of which, bound as we are to our singular lifetimes, we otherwise would have no knowledge. Booth (1988) suggests that these “tryings-out” via narratives

offer both a relative freedom from consequence and, in their sheer multiplicity, a rich supply of antidotes. In a month of reading, I can try out more ‘lives’ than I can test in a lifetime. (p. 485)

Though Dewey might counter such a claim with a reminder of the importance of quality over quantity with regard to experience, books *do* allow us vital windows into the innumerable ways of being in the world, and as such, they cannot be overlooked as potential sources for educative experiences.

While Dewey assigns different purposes for different sorts of texts, he nonetheless believes in the immense value of various forms of literacy to experience. However, the trend of contemporary education policy in language arts seems to be taking an altogether different tack. Though many recent education reforms, including the near-ubiquitous implementation of the Common Core State Standards and the passage of the Every Student Succeeds Act in 2015, have been rolled out in recent years, standardized tests persist. In the field of language arts, a renewed focus on STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Math) education has given rise to an explicit reduction in the number of fiction and literary texts students read from kindergarten through 12th grade, and a marked increase of exposure to informational texts. The Common Core State Standards, still widely utilized, dictate that by the end of high school, 80% of the literacy

curriculum is to be devoted to informational texts ([www.corestandards.org](http://www.corestandards.org)). Though perhaps Dewey would be in favor of such a curricular emphasis upon informational texts if each text was sufficiently preceded by a relevant, motivational experience that sent children running to the library, hungry for more information with which to interpret and/or expand upon that experience, the reality seems to be just the opposite. That is, while informational texts are accounting for more and more space in the English curriculum, the general compartmentalization of content areas remains intact, such that there is little to no continuity between the experiences gleaned in, say, social studies, and the informational texts students read in English. It is troubling, then, to witness the effective crowding-out of literature and all of its attending aesthetic possibilities for experience.<sup>2</sup>

In stark contrast to the unity and continuity promoted as the antidote to “traditional education,” Dewey highlights the disconnection between our ideals and our actions in American society. While known around the world for our idealism, in practice, materialism is *de riguer*.

“We live as if economic forces determined the growth and decay of institutions and settled the faith of individuals” says Dewey (1999), “Liberty becomes a well-nigh obsolete term; we start, go, and stop at the signal of a vast industrial machine” (p. 6). Though Dewey’s approach stresses connections across content areas, grade levels, and tasks, most public school organizational systems still take most of their cues from an industrial model of education that even pre-dated Dewey. Subject areas are taught in turn, rather than concurrently, and students still enter the school system in batches “as if the most important thing about them was their date of manufacture” (Robinson, 2010). If we accept that the teaching example presented in an earlier section, itself based upon the ideas of Dewey, Kinloch, and Hillocks, serves as an ideal model of an educative literacy experience in which continuity, environment, and occupation work together to produce growth, to what extent is this ideal a reasonable possibility, given the highly departmentalized, highly isolated nature of school systems today?

For Demetron (2002), Dewey’s pragmatism may in fact represent the *best* option for contemporary literacy education. When seen as a “symbolic midway point between structural-functional views of literacy linked

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2. Brandt’s (2001) framework of “literacy sponsorship” asks us to question the motives of the political actors who underwrite and/or produce curricular and pedagogical materials for literacy education.

to the stabilization of the status quo and more radical Freirian variants that seek substantial transformation of the social order,” Dewey’s conceptualizations of experience and growth, the latter being the ultimate goal of education, are particularly suited to current progressive aims for literacy (p. 34). Noting that literacy is, in part, an assimilative process, Demetrian believes that Dewey strikes the correct balance between working to humanize existing institutions and systems both from within and from without. In this analysis, Dewey’s pragmatism is most appropriately understood as “a form of meliorism or gradualism moving from the given to what is possible to construct” given the historical context (pp. 53-54). Demetrian writes from the vantage point of an adult literacy educator, and thus, “felt difficulties” of many sorts provide the spark that ultimately propels his students to sign up for literacy courses. He has witnessed firsthand the ways in which literacy attainment has paved the way for his students to “progressively realize present possibilities...and thus make individuals better fitted to cope with later requirements” (Demetrian, 2012, p. 62). A few reflections from one of Demetrian’s students beautifully illustrate the connection between literacy and the Deweyan ideas of growth, experience, and continuity:

I see now that even though I thought all I wanted for myself was reading and writing, I wanted more than that. A lot of doors opened. When you keep feeding the brain with new ideas, knowledge about reading and writing, and other learning skills, other doors open. (p. 48)

Though this student initially viewed literacy as an end, in the process he came to view literacy as a means to exploring various other “doors” that now lay before him.

O’Leary (2005), in comparing Dewey’s notion of experience with that of Foucault’s, emphasizes the “intimate” ways in which aesthetic experiences, and specifically, experiences with literature, might expand our view of the world. Dewey (and Foucault) both grapple with the necessity of interaction to experience. The necessity of interaction between the creator and the consumer is summed up in Dewey’s (2005) observation that “a new poem is created by everyone who reads poetically” (p. 106). Despite the radical differences in some of the two theorists’ ideas, O’Leary (2005) concludes that both agree upon the profound effects of the aesthetic experience in literature, if only as they impact the reader:

for the reader who is active in the doing and undergoing of the poem, a change becomes possible; a change in the way he or she experiences the world, and a change in the way he or she experiences his or her own past - and future. (p. 555)

### **Conclusion: Conceptualizing the Way Forward**

Our task as 21st century literacy educators, though far from clear, is given some direction by Dewey's notions of experience and art. Perhaps we might shift from our everyday focus on "what" to teach to a more nuanced examination of "how" to teach, especially in such a way that we might assist our students in thinking "poetically." The environment we craft must be conducive to such thinking, of course. We must also work to select evocative texts that will occupy our students as fully as possible, as Dewey (2005) insists, "it cannot be asserted too strongly that what is not immediate is not esthetic [*sic*]" (p. 106). Further, while Demetrios's adult literacy students have experienced firsthand the difficulties of moving through the world without the cultural capital yielded by print literacy, we might do well to interrogate the particular kinds of "felt difficulties" to which the study of literature is especially well-suited to respond, as in the case of the English lesson that thoughtfully employs a powerful poem to evoke a "truth" that, say, a newspaper report about the same event could not.<sup>3</sup> We must strive to find new ways of expanding our students' view of themselves and the world, and the aesthetic experience that literature and other art forms arouse is perhaps our most important asset to this end. Dewey (2005) reminds us that "the work of art is complete only as it works in the experience of others than the one who created it" (p. 106); similarly, our charge as literacy educators is to cultivate experiences that continue to "work" in the lives of our students long after they've left our classroom. For as Dewey (2007) writes in *Experience and Education*, "the most important attitude that can be formed is that of desire to go on learning" (p. 48). If we accept this statement as truth, we can begin to design educative literacy experiences to this end. Indeed, in

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3. I am here calling attention specifically to Nussbaum's (1990) assertion that "certain truths about human life can only be fittingly and accurately stated in the language and forms characteristic of the narrative artist" (p. 5).

the tumultuous political and social climate of today, our students demand from us a space in which to make sense of our shared and differing experiences as school, community, and global citizens. Unfortunately, there are fewer and fewer of these spaces in public education today, and the language arts context remains one of these rare sites. Though in a sense this article contributes to a century-long conversation regarding how best to implement Deweyan principles in education, in another sense it is a call to action; because the concepts of experience, continuity, and occupation are as critical to our students' growth today as they have ever been, we must work creatively and flexibly to imbue our curriculum – however proscribed and rigid – with these vital elements.

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## Appendix A

Gwendolyn Brooks, "The Boy Died in My Alley"

*to Running Boy*

The Boy died in my alley  
without my Having Known.  
Policeman said, next morning,  
"Apparently died Alone."

"You heard a shot?" Policeman said.  
Shots I hear and Shots I hear.  
I never see the Dead.

The Shot that killed him yes I heard  
as I heard the Thousand shots before;  
careening tinnily down the nights  
across my years and arteries.

Policeman pounded on my door.  
“Who is it?” “POLICE!” Policeman yelled.  
“A Boy was dying in your alley.  
A Boy is dead, and in your alley.  
And have you known this Boy before?”

I have known this Boy before.  
I have known this boy before, who ornaments my alley.  
I never saw his face at all.  
I never saw his futurefall.  
But I have known this Boy.

I have always heard him deal with death.  
I have always heard the shout, the volley.  
I have closed my heart-ears late and early.  
And I have killed him ever.

I joined the Wild and killed him  
with knowledgeable unknowing.  
I saw where he was going.  
I saw him Crossed. And seeing,  
I did not take him down.

He cried not only “Father!”  
but “Mother!  
Sister!  
Brother.”  
The cry climbed up the alley.  
It went up to the wind.  
It hung upon the heaven  
for a long  
stretch-strain of Moment.

The red floor of my alley  
is a special speech to me.