

RUSSELL AND DEWEY ON EDUCATION: SIMILARITIES AND DIFFERENCES

Tim Madigan

State University of New York at Buffalo

John Dewey and Bertrand Russell were two of the premier philosophers of the Twentieth Century. During their long lives (each lived to be over 90), their paths crossed on several occasions. While cordial enough when in each other's presence, the two men were definitely not on the best of terms. Sidney Hook, who knew and admired them both once said that there were only two men whom Dewey actively disliked: Mortimer Adler and Bertrand Russell. Russell, for his part, never tired of making disparaging remarks about the pragmatists in general, and Dewey in particular, which irked Dewey immensely. Still, the two men shared many philosophical traits: an internationalistic outlook, a high regard for the scientific method, a concern for social matters, and a suspicion of dogma, especially religious dogma. In this paper, I will focus upon their educational theories, and the curious fact that each of them, for a short period of time, ran their own elementary schools. That the Dewey versus Russell debate is still going on can be seen in the Winter 1990 issue of *The Wilson Quarterly*, which contains a letter from Alan Ryan (author of a book on Russell's political philosophy) commenting upon a previous article which ran in that magazine entitled *John Dewey: Philosopher in the Schoolroom*. Ryan, comparing the two men, writes that:

The similarities, of course, are many and obvious: both were ardent defenders of an education in which the child learned by doing, both began by doubting the need for any authority in the classroom other than the discipline of the subject matter itself, and both came to think, in Hobbes' memorable words, that children 'are born inapt for society.'¹

But Ryan goes on to say that the differences between them are even more striking, and that an absolute barrier divided them: namely, Dewey's pragmatism. To quote again from Ryan:

For Russell, at any rate, pragmatism was a sort of secular blasphemy.

With God gone and most ethics shaky, all mankind had left was a concern for the truth - not a concern for what it would 'pay to believe,' but a concern for how things really were. By bringing philosophy back into the market-place, Dewey closed the breach that Russell had opened between the concerns of the intellectual and the duties of the plain man . . . Dewey's passion for closing all gaps and rejecting all dichotomies is ultimately less true to life than Russell's insistence on the tragic dimension of everyday life. A strong sense of the uselessness of truth and its unrelatedness to human affairs still strikes many of us as an indispensable element in the psychology of the serious philosopher.²

Ryan spells out quite well the bone of contention between the two men: the meaning of truth. But Russell was perhaps not as hesitant to bring philosophy into the marketplace as Ryan suggests. For Russell and Dewey are noteworthy in the annals of educational philosophy for attempting to practice what they preach: each of them, at different times, started their own schools for children. Russell, too, was - for at least a short while - a philosopher in the schoolroom.

The University Elementary School, popularly known as "The Laboratory School," was set up by the Department of Pedagogy of the University of Chicago and headed by John Dewey from its inception in 1896 to his resignation in 1904. The term "Laboratory School" was no accident, for according to Dewey the school had two aims: "To exhibit, test, verify, and criticize theoretical statements and principles, and to add to the sum of facts and principles in its special line."³

In this way, he felt that it would do for pedagogy what similar laboratories did for biology, physics and chemistry: it would provide an opportunity for experimentation. The school eventually grew to 140 students, aged 4 to 15.

Russell opened the Beacon Hill School in 1927, over 20 years after Dewey's experiment in education had ended. It originally had 12 boarders and 5 day students, aged 5 to 12. The school was run by Russell and his second wife, Dora. In 1932 Russell withdrew from any participation with the school, after filing for a Deed of Separation from Dora (they divorced 2 years later). She continued to run the school until 1943, and was always its staunchest supporter. The Russell's reason for starting a school is described in his autobiography:

We did not know of any existing school that seemed to us in any way

satisfactory. We wanted an unusual combination: on the one hand, we disliked prudery and religious instruction and a great many restraints on freedom which are taken for granted in conventional schools; on the other hand, we could not agree with most 'modern' educationists in thinking scholastic instruction unimportant, or in advocating a *complete* absence of discipline. ⁴

Dewey and Russell each wrote books that detailed to some extent the format of their respective schools, and what they hoped to achieve in them: Dewey's *The School and Society*, and Russell's *Education and the Social Order* and *On Education*. Examining these works, one can see another crucial distinction between the two men: their writing style. Dewey is earnest, dry and straightforward in his presentation, while Russell is not afraid to add playful digressions and pepper his approach with witty asides and colourful anecdotes, such as the following from *On Education*:

Every author who has had uneducated housemaids knows that it is difficult (the public may wish it were impossible) to restrain their passion for lighting the fire with his manuscripts. A fellow-author, even if he were a jealous enemy, would not think of doing such a thing, because experience has taught him the value of manuscripts. Similarly the boy who has a garden will not trample on other people's flower-beds, and the boy who has pets can be taught to respect animal life. ⁵

And in his later book, *Education and the Social Order*, Russell writes: "I found one day in school a boy of medium size ill-treating a smaller boy. I expostulated, but he replied: 'The bigs hit me, so I hit the babies; that's fair.' In these words he epitomized the history of the human race." ⁶ One would be hard-pressed to find such anecdotes in Dewey's writings.

While darkly humorous, the above story illustrates a concern of both Dewey and Russell: how can the school be used as a means of shaping the student to be a good citizen and a good individual? The two men found much fault with the existing school systems, which they felt were too geared towards regimentation, learning by rote, and inculcating an obedience to authority. In addition, they felt that too much educational theory was basically impractical, and was applied to students without first being properly tested. Hence, the need for "experimental schools." Neither Dewey nor Russell had any illusions that their schools would become models for universal education, but they did

hope to show how theories could be tested, and adapted, to fit the needs of individual students. As Dewey writes in *The School and Society*:

I heard once that the adoption of a certain method in use in our school was objected to by a teacher on this ground: 'You know that it is an experimental school. They do not work under the same conditions that we are subject to.' Now, the purpose of performing an experiment is that other people need not experiment; at least not experiment so much . . . We do not expect to have other schools literally imitate what we do. A working model is not something to be copied: it is to afford a demonstration of the feasibility of the principle, and of the methods which make it feasible. ⁷

The question arises: to what extent were the Laboratory and Beacon Hill schools successful working models? This is rather difficult to judge, given the short time that both schools were in existence and the precariousness of the support they received, but it seems that their achievements were spotty at best. I will briefly describe what both men hoped to achieve with their schools, and how close they came to reaching this.

Dewey had several key elements in his concept of the well-educated person: a pluralistic world view; acceptance of the fact that one can never fully know objective reality; acceptance of the consequences of one's actions; a concern for social action; and adherence to the scientific method as the best means for achieving knowledge. These elements, especially the last named, were also in accord with Russell's educational views. "Knowledge will not be viewed as mere knowledge, but as an instrument of progress, the value of which is shown by bringing it into relation with the needs of the world." ⁸ The preceding quotation is not, as one might expect, from Dewey - rather, it appeared in the prospectus Russell wrote up for the Beacon Hill school. But its view of knowledge is reminiscent of Dewey's instrumentalism.

Both men stressed the importance of understanding and utilizing the scientific method. Their schools sought to get the students actively involved in the educational process. As Brian Hendley points out in his excellent book *Dewey, Russell, Whitehead: Philosophers as Educators*, they each had a great deal of trouble finding the proper equipment to do this: the desks and chairs available for small children were made for listening, not for working. ⁹ The Laboratory and Beacon Hill schools got the children outdoors as much

as possible. Gardening, walks, cooking, and scientific experiments were the order of the day, and each school had a horror about keeping the young ones constricted and cooped-up in dusty classrooms.

The schools also tried to avoid heavy-handed discipline. This led to the charge against both men that they allowed anarchy to reign supreme. In *The School and Society*, Dewey answered this charge:

Upon the moral side, that of so-called discipline and order, where the University Elementary School has perhaps suffered most from misunderstanding and misrepresentation, I shall say only that our ideal has been, and continues to be, that of the best form of family life, rather than that of a rigid graded school ... If we have permitted to our children more than the usual amount of freedom, it has not been in order to relax or decrease real discipline, but because under our particular conditions larger and less artificial responsibilities could thus be required of the children, and their entire development of body and spirit be more harmonious and complete.¹⁰

Russell's Beacon Hill School followed roughly the same approach to discipline. The teachers at both schools, who were used to the more regimented approach, often had a difficult time putting this into practice. And, as Russell's illustration of the young boy striking the even younger boy shows, knowing when or when not to discipline a child is a tricky thing. In his *Autobiography*, Russell bemoans that "I found myself, when the children were not at lessons, obliged to supervise them continually to stop cruelty. [...] Young children in a group cannot be happy without a certain amount of order and routine. Left to amuse themselves, they are bored, and turn to bullying or destruction."¹¹ Russell came to feel that the Beacon Hill School had been rather too lenient in regard to discipline.

It should be pointed out that the Laboratory and Beacon Hill, schools were very much family affairs for the two philosophers. Dewey and Russell each sent their own children to the schools, and their wives were heavily involved in all aspects of running the schools. In fact, Alice Dewey and Dora Russell, due to their day-to-day work at the schools, had more influence on them than did their husbands, who had less time to devote to them. And it was this husband-and-wife combination that would lead, for

different reasons, to the two philosophers abandoning their efforts in regard to the schools.

In 1902, the Laboratory School merged with another prominent Chicago experimental school, the Parker School, which had a much larger budget and staff. Alice Dewey was appointed principal of this combined school in 1903. She did not get on well with the former members of the Parker staff. The President of the University of Chicago, William Harper, who oversaw the school, tried to pacify the warring factions by interpreting Mrs. Dewey's appointment as being for one year only, subject to annual reappointment. She felt differently, and promptly resigned. John Dewey sprang to her defense, and himself resigned as Director of the School of Education, and from his position as professor and head of the University's Department of Philosophy.

Russell's involvement with Beacon Hill also ended at least partly because of his wife, but in his case it was estrangement between the partners that led to the breakup. Each partner advocated free love. Once, when Dora returned from a trip, she was informed by her cook that Russell had been sleeping with the children's governess while she was away. Dora reacted by firing the cook! "I had to explain," she wrote in her autobiography, "that, though I loved her for her loyalty, we did not feel quite the same way about these things. I would have to let her go, because she and 'the Master' could hardly get on after this. And to the governess, who was a charming girl, I simply said that her job at the school was not cancelled."¹² Russell himself was a bit less sanguine when Dora gave birth in 1930 to a child fathered by Griffin Barry, a frequent visitor to the school. When she gave birth to another child by Barry in 1932, Russell had enough. It was at this point that he washed his hands of Dora and of the school.

While both Dewey and Russell's schools were short lived, one can still ask if they were successful on their own terms - namely, as working models for making innovations in the American and British school systems. Looked upon in this way, neither school seemed to fulfil this goal. In a way, this is not surprising. The students at each were rather atypical - for the most part, they hailed from upper class or professional households. And, at least in Russell's case, a good percentage were "problem children" who had been hopelessly spoiled by doting parents, and whose lack of discipline

preceded their introduction to the school. On a brighter note, the parents of the students were exceptionally supportive, and raised a great deal of money to help out each school's perennial financial woes. In addition, individual attention was stressed, something which was often a luxury in most school systems. And certainly the presence of the two remarkable founders was something which very few schools could hope to emulate. Dewey and Russell each complained bitterly about the amount of paperwork their experimental schools generated. Perhaps they had been overly optimistic in their hopes of avoiding this particular hurdle, which is the bane of all administrators. And their hopes of being truly innovative were tempered by their realization that the students would still have to face standardized testing and old-fashioned grading techniques once they entered the realm of higher education.

Perhaps the two main charges levelled against the schools were, first, that they were overly artificial, and second, that they did not live up to the standards of a real laboratory for education. The first charge is one that Dewey in particular took pains to counter:

There is a difference between working out and testing a new truth, or a new method, and applying it on a wide scale, making it available for the mass of men, making it commercial. But the first thing is to discover the truth, to afford all necessary facilities, for this is the most practical thing in the world in the long run. ¹³

So, while granting that his model was highly specialized, he nonetheless hoped to discover new techniques and new approaches to education that could be used under many different conditions.

Russell was perhaps less concerned with the charge that his school was elitist. While Dewey continually stressed the important connection between education and democracy, and the need to provide a school that would offer equal opportunities for all, Russell was ambivalent on the issue of just what his school was aiming to achieve. In *On Education*, he writes that "the ideal system of education must be democratic." ¹⁴ And, like Dewey, he sought to give the students an international, rather than parochial, education. Indeed, he went so far as to propose the formation of a committee which would oversee all textbooks and train teachers in a manner that would transcend narrow nationalistic

feelings. The committee would be composed of individuals from all walks of life, *except* those who rejected the idea of an international government. This hardly seems a democratic model.

Russell also gave more attention than Dewey did to the special student, the student of superior intellect who feels constrained by the democratic attributes of the school system. In *Education and the Social Order*, Russell observes that: "A great deal of needless pain and friction would be saved to clever children if they were not compelled to associate intimately with stupid contemporaries. There is an idea that rubbing up against all and sundry in youth is a good preparation for life. This appears to me to be rubbish. No one, in later life, associates with all and sundry."¹⁵

One need only compare this with Dewey's constant refrain that the American public school system, with its interaction of students from many different creeds, nationalities, and cultures, is an ideal forum for promoting social unity. Russell, unlike Dewey, was torn between the desire to offer equal educational opportunities for all students, and his perception that exceptional students would suffer under such a system. Beacon Hill, with its rather ragtag bunch of rambunctious children, did not reconcile this dichotomy.

The second charge levelled against both schools, that they did not live up to the standards of a good laboratory, is an apt one. Strangely, given the importance both men placed upon the scientific method, neither school underwent a rigorous scientific evaluation. Most of what we know about the schools comes from anecdotal evidence, some of which (such as Dora Russell's writings) is overly partisan. A few studies were done on the schools, but not the extent that one might expect. While it is, of course, difficult, if not impossible, to scientifically evaluate creativity and attentiveness, certainly there could have been systematic and objective studies done on the methods used in the schools, and the achievements of its students in their later lives. Perhaps the abrupt departure of Dewey and Russell from their respective schools had something to do with the lack of follow-up studies. How sad that these two rare occasions when professional philosophers attempted to practice what they preached should go, for the most part, unstudied. One feels that a golden opportunity was lost because of this.

As educational models, then, the Laboratory and Beacon Hill schools left something to

be desired. Their short life, their specialized clientele, their "family affair" quality, and their lack of follow-up studies and precise reports makes it next-to-impossible to objectively evaluate their overall effectiveness. Nonetheless, one cannot help but admire the willingness of Dewey and Russell to tackle concrete issues of education: from finding the right sort of equipment for the children to use, to planning lessons, to pleading with parents for financial support. One wonders how many other philosophers would be so willing to get their hands dirty in this way. How nice it would have been, for example, if Rousseau had tried to raise his own children by his educational principles, instead of giving them all up for adoption shortly after their birth.

Returning to what Allan Ryan calls the absolute barrier dividing Dewey from Russell, one gets a sense of this in the Afterward Alan Wood wrote for Russell's *My Philosophical Development*. He quotes from Russell's essay "Reflections on My Eightieth Birthday," in which Russell laments: "I wanted certainty, in the kind of way in which people want religious faith." Wood then adds:

I believe the underlying purpose behind all Russell's work was an almost religious passion for some truth that was more than human, independent of the minds of men, and even of the existence of men. ¹⁶

If this is correct, then it is no wonder that Russell could not abide the pragmatic philosophy of John Dewey, which criticized the "quest for certainty" as being ultimately fruitless, and who judged truths by their practicality. But while this may have been an unbridgeable gulf between them, they still had many remarkable similarities, especially in their wish to unfetter the human mind from hidebound dogmas, ideological prattle and nationalistic fervor. Their work on education ably demonstrates their humanistic concerns.

Endnotes

1. Alan Ryan, "Dewey and Russell," *The Wilson Quarterly*, Vol. XIVs No. 1, Winter 1990. p. 141.
2. Ibid.
3. John Dewey, "The University School" in *The Early Works of John Dewey*, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale, Il: Southern University Press, 1972), 5:437.
4. Bertrand Russell, *The Autobiography of Bertrand Russell, 1914-44* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1968), p. 222-223.
5. Bertrand Russell, *On Education* (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1933), p. 112.
6. Bertrand Russell, *Education and the Social Order*, (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd, 1961), p. 32.
7. John Dewey, *The School and Society* (Carbondale, Il: Southern Illinois University Press, 1980), p.56.
8. Dora Russell, *The Tamarisk Tree: Vol 2* (London: Virago Limited, 1980), p. 11.
9. Brian Hendley, *Dewey, Russell, Whitehead: Philosophers as Educators* (Carbondale, Il: Southern Illinois University Press, 1986), p. 57.
10. John Dewey, *School and Society*, p. 65-66.
11. Bertrand Russell, *Autobiography*, p. 226.
12. Dora Russell, *The Tamarisk Tree: Vol. 1* (London: Virago Limited, 1980), p. 198.
13. John Dewey, *School and Society*, p. 56.
14. Bertrand Russell, *On Education*, p. 16.
15. Bertrand Russell, *Education and the Social Order*, p. 100.
16. Alan Wood, "Russell's Philosophy," in Bertrand Russell, *My Philosophical Development* (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd, 1959), p.260.