

**DEWEY AND EDUCATION  
IN THE 21ST CENTURY:  
FIGHTING BACK**

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# DEWEY AND EDUCATION IN THE 21ST CENTURY: FIGHTING BACK

EDITED BY

**RUTH HEILBRONN**

*UCL Institute of Education*

**CHRISTINE DODDINGTON**

*Homerton College, University of Cambridge*

**RUPERT HIGHAM**

*UCL Institute of Education*



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## Editor Biographies

**Christine Doddington** is Emerita Fellow of Homerton College, Cambridge, and was formerly a Senior Lecturer in Education at the Faculty of Education, University of Cambridge. She writes mainly in the field of Philosophy of Education with a particular interest in the arts and the work of John Dewey. Publications include chapters in *The Routledge International Handbook of the Arts and Education* (2015) and *Wellbeing, Education and Contemporary Schooling* (2017). She most recently co-authored a chapter entitled 'Dewey, Aesthetic Experience and Education for Humanity', with Andrea English in *The Oxford Handbook on Dewey* (OUP, forthcoming), and has a chapter in *Philosophy as Interplay and Dialogue* (LIT Verlag, forthcoming). She is an Elected Executive Member of the Philosophy of Education Society of Great Britain (PESGB) and of the International Editorial Board for *Education 3-13: International Journal of Primary, Elementary and Early Years Education*.

**Ruth Heilbronn** gained her PhD in Philosophy of Education at the UCL Institute of Education and has led teams in teacher education and secondary schools. Publications include research on the induction of newly qualified teachers for the Department for Education (Research Report 338, 2002) and articles and book chapters on ethical teacher education, values education, reflective practice and ethical deliberation. Relevant publications include *Teacher Education and the Development of Practical Judgement* (Continuum, 2008) and co-edited books: *Research-Based Best Practice for Schools* (Routledge, 2002); *Critical Practice in Teacher Education*, with John Yandell (IoE Press, 2010); *Philosophical Perspectives on Teacher Education*, with Lorraine Foreman-Peck (Wiley Blackwell, 2015); and *Dewey in Our Time*, with Peter Cunningham (UCL IoE Press, 2016). She is an Executive Member of the PESGB.

**Rupert Higham** is a Lecturer in Educational Leadership at the UCL Institute of Education and is Programme Leader for the Applied Educational Leadership and Management MA. His research seeks to enhance teacher and student agency through responsible leadership. Theoretically, he has explored Deweyan Pragmatism as a foundation

for democratic agency. Empirically, he has worked with schools in several countries on values-led improvement through the *Index for Inclusion*, and more recently, with an international network of schools on deepening democratic culture. Rupert is also a Founding Member of Cambridge Educational Dialogue Research, a new research centre dedicated to improving the quality of educational dialogue.

## Contributor Biographies

**Kathleen Knight Abowitz** is a Professor in the Department of Educational Leadership at Miami University in Oxford, Ohio. She is currently serving as Chair of the Department and has been on Faculty since 1995. Her scholarship uses political and moral philosophy to address questions of community, the public and democracy as these concepts relate to education and P-16 schools and institutions. Her books include *Publics for Public Schools: Legitimacy, Democracy and Leadership* (Paradigm Press, 2013), and *Engaging Youth in Leadership for Social and Political Change* (Jossey-Bass, 2015). She is Past President of the John Dewey Society and the Ohio Valley Philosophy of Education Society.

**Gert Biesta** is Professor of Education in the Department of Education of Brunel University London; Visiting Professor at NLA University College Bergen, Norway; and NIVOZ Professor for Education at the University for Humanistic Studies in the Netherlands. He jointly coordinates the Educational Theory SIG of EARLI (European Association for Research Learning and Instruction). From 1999 to 2014, he was Editor-in-Chief of the journal *Studies in Philosophy and Education*. He has written many books and journal articles. He is currently a Co-editor of the Routledge Book Series, *New Directions in the Philosophy of Education*, with Michael Peters, and of *Theorizing Education*, with Julie Allan and Richard Edwards.

**Bob Coulter**, EdD, is currently the Director of the Litzsinger Road Ecology Center, a field site managed by the Missouri Botanical Garden. Previously he was an award-winning Elementary Grade Teacher. He has published more than 100 articles and has chapters in more than a dozen edited volumes. He is also the author of two books: the Choice Award-winning *No More Robots: Building Kids' Character, Competence, and Sense of Place* (2014), and more recently *Building Kids' Citizenship through Community Engagement* (2018).

**Victoria Door** is the Director of CPD at the Professional Association of Alexander Teachers (PAAT). She first encountered Dewey through

reading *Human Nature and Conduct* and *Experience and Nature* when training as a Teacher of the Alexander Technique. Dewey continued to provide inspiration for her as she went on to combine her experience as a Teacher of the Alexander Technique with her work as a Languages Teacher in the UK secondary school system. In 2002, she moved to Keele University where she led the MFL PGCE and completed a PhD (Bath) in language learning and attention. Her books include *Developing Creative and Critical Educational Practitioners* (2014) and *Save Our Teachers' Souls* (2016). Currently, she is researching and writing on Dewey's contribution to, and support of, Alexander's work. As part of this, Victoria is exploring how Dewey's and Alexander's ideas can be practically incorporated in teacher education, in conjunction with PAAT.

**Brian Dotts** is an Associate Professor of Educational Foundations at the University of Georgia where he teaches undergraduate and graduate courses in Educational Foundations related to politics, policy, constitutional law, history, historical inquiry and research methods, sociology, social and political theories, philosophy and multiculturalism. He has published widely on the history of American education, specifically focusing on education and political theories during the American Revolution and early national period, common school politics during the Antebellum Era, John Dewey and Social Reconstructionism during the early twentieth century, and Educational Foundations as an academic field. His primary theoretical lens is Critical Theory. He is co-editor of *The Elusive Thomas Jefferson: The Man behind the Myths* (McFarland Publishing, 2017).

**Jenny Fox Eades** has worked in education since 1987. She qualified as a Special Needs Teacher and has taught children from 4 to 18 across the ability range. For 15 years, she worked as a Freelance Education Adviser, in the United Kingdom, Australia and Denmark, running workshops and projects on well-being in schools and speaking at conferences. Her PhD is in well-being in education and explores a more contemplative approach to educational research. Jennifer is the author of several education books and school programmes, including *Celebrating Strengths: Building Strengths-Based Schools* (Capp Press, 2008) and *Strengths Gym* (PPRC, 2011) a Personal, Social and Health Education (PSHE) programme for high schools.

**Sally Eaves** combines a depth of experience as a Chief Technology Officer, Director of Education, Practising Professor of FinTech and

Global Strategic Advisor, consulting on the application of disruptive technologies for both business and societal benefits. She is an award-winning thought leader in innovation, digital transformation and emergent technology, notably blockchain, artificial intelligence, machine learning and robotics. A Member of the Forbes Technology Council, she is an accomplished author with regular contributions to leading business, technology and education publications, and a new book *Edge of Disruption* confirmed for 2018. She is an international keynote speaker and respected online influencer across multiple social media channels, particularly in the fields of blockchain, artificial intelligence, technology for good and leadership in innovation.

**Juan Luis Fuentes** is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Theory and History of Education at Complutense University of Madrid. He has been a Visiting Scholar at Eastern Washington University (US), Roehampton University (UK), Freie Universität (Germany) and University of Birmingham (UK) and is a Member of the ‘Civic Culture and Educational Policies’ research group at Complutense University of Madrid. His principal research interests include theory and philosophy of education, character education, intercultural education and the use of Information and Communication Technologies in the educational sphere. He is an Associate Editor of *Educación XXI* and has received the ‘Antonio Millán Puelles Award’ and the ‘Young Researcher Award’.

**Stephen Harwood** is a Practitioner turned Academic, currently holding the post of Lecturer at the University of Edinburgh Business School. His interest in social complexity and the handling of complex social problems has led to research into how to teach management topics, as well as, specifically, how to deliver a research methods course. This shifts attention from the teaching of abstractions to how the real world of organizational practice can be embedded into the student’s learning experience, for example, how research has relevance to the management world of practice. This has resulted in an interest in the work of John Dewey along with others such as Charles Peirce and Lev Vygotsky. Much of this research has been written up in the form of journal, conference and working papers.

**Sue Ellen Henry** is a Professor of Education and Director of the Teaching and Learning Center at Bucknell University. Her scholarship focuses on social class influences on children’s experiences in schools,

## *xii Contributor Biographies*

the influence of emotion in the classroom and multicultural education. She is the author of *Children's Bodies in Schools: Corporeal Performances of Social Class* (2014, Palgrave) and her work has been published in *Teachers College Record*, *Educational Theory*, *Educational Studies* and *Emotion, Space and Society*. Her current research focuses on the body hexis that elementary teachers associate with children of various social class backgrounds.

**Neil Hopkins** is currently a Senior Lecturer in Education at the University of Bedfordshire, teaching undergraduates, postgraduates and supervising doctoral students. He also teaches on the PGCE/Cert Ed for Post-Compulsory Education at the University. He is the author of *Citizenship and Democracy in Further and Adult Education* (Springer, 2014). He is Bedford branch Secretary for the PESGB and is responsible for research in the School of Teacher Education at the University of Bedfordshire. He is currently an External Examiner for PGCE/Cert Ed Post-Compulsory Education at the University of Essex.

**Gonzalo Jover** is Professor of Education at the Complutense University in Madrid, where he was Head of the Department of Educational Theory and History of Education from 2006 to 2009 and Adviser to the vice chancellor of Postgraduate Programs and Continuing Education from 2010 to 2012. He also served as Adviser for the Spanish Ministry of Education during the ninth Parliamentary Term. At present, he holds the position of Associate Dean for Research at the Faculty of Education. He has been Visiting Scholar at Boston University, Teachers College of Columbia University and Queen's University (Canada), as well as Visiting Professor at several European universities. He is President of the Spanish Pedagogical Association and Associate Editor of the *Revista Española de Pedagogía*. He has authored more than 100 publications.

**Rosario González Martín** holds a PhD in Education from Universidad Complutense de Madrid where she is an Associate Professor in the Department of Theory and History of Education. She has held Associate Professorships in Philosophy of Education at the Universidad Autónoma de Madrid and Universidad de Santiago de Chile. She is a Member of the research group 'Civic Culture and Educational Policies', of the 'Phenomenology, First Philosophy Association' and of the 'Spanish Association of Personalism'. She is currently engaged in the project 'The Value of Civic Commitment in the University: Design, Development and

Evaluation of a Service-Learning Programme'. She has organized and directed an international conference on 'Emotion, Ethics and Education' and is Member of the Colloquium on Violence and Religion of the International Association of Scholars of Mimetic Theory.

**Valentine Ngalim** is the Chair of the Philosophy Department and a Senior Lecturer in Higher Teacher Training College, Bambili, of the University of Bamenda, Cameroon. He gained his PhD in the Philosophy of Education from the UNESCO Chair of Central Africa, under the supervision of the University of Marien Ngouabi, Brazzaville, Congo. His research interest centres on critical issues in education, with particular emphasis on educational politics, curricular issues and subject didactics. He has published several articles and a book titled *Lack of Harmonisation in the Curricula of Cameroon Secondary Education: Causes in Centre and Northwest Regions* (2014, Saarbruecken, Scholars Press).

**Clare Wilkinson** is currently the Special Educational Needs Coordinator in a secondary academy in Hertfordshire, England. She has previously held posts of Deputy Head of Learning, Head of Year, SenCo and has served on the school's Senior Leadership Team. She has taught for over a decade in the state sector, teaching history, religious education and child development at a range of levels. She has an interest in the writings of Dewey, especially the relationship between teaching and pedagogy, and the extent to which Dewey's philosophy is vital for the current teaching profession as it goes through yet another period of financial constraints.

**Malcolm Williamson**, BA (Open), Associate of the Royal College of Music (ARCM), studied at the Royal College of Music and played with several orchestras, including the National Orchestra of Iceland and the Royal Scottish National Orchestra. He was introduced to the Alexander Technique as a student and subsequently was trained to teach the method with Alexander's assistant Walter Carrington. He was Chairman of the main professional body (Society of Teachers of the Alexander Technique) from 1994 to 1996 and a Teacher-Trainer from 2001 to 2017. He campaigns for the Alexander Technique as a foundation to music education and has taught at the Royal Northern College of Music, Manchester, for over 30 years. He gave the Annual F. M. Alexander Memorial Lecture in 2016, 'Beyond Words', an exploration of the influence of William James's *Principles of Psychology* on the

evolution of Alexander's technique for greater Constructive Conscious Control and choice in an individual's reactions.

**Charlotte Woods** has almost four decades of international experience in education. Her early career was as a Language Teacher, Teacher Educator and Educational Manager, including 10 years with the British Council in Italy, Portugal and Morocco. This was followed by 20 years in academia, during which time she completed a doctorate investigating workplace emotion and well-being. In 2015, Charlotte retired from a Senior Lectureship in Education at the Manchester Institute of Education, University of Manchester. She trained for three years at the Manchester Alexander Technique Training School with Malcolm Williamson and qualified as a Teacher with the Society for Teachers of the Alexander Technique in July 2017.

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# Editors' Introduction: The Book, the Conference and Fighting Back

*Ruth Heilbronn, Christine Doddington and  
Rupert Higham*

## Abstract

This chapter introduces the book through discussing the context in which it came about, namely a conference to mark the centenary of the publication of Dewey's *Democracy and Education*. The first section relates to the book's subtitle by describing and analysing the context in which speakers at the conference engaged in a 'fightback' against educational policies found to be narrowly based on economic aims, and to have lost sight of the humanistic aims of education, aims which Dewey analysed and championed. The book is structured around three key areas, all related to Dewey's philosophy of education – the first concerns technology, the second, embodiment and the third, democracy and development. A discussion on the significance of each of these areas for contemporary educational theory is followed by detail on the individual chapters within them. This chapter concludes with an introduction to the cautiously optimistic and forward-looking epilogue by Gert Biesta on the matters and issues raised in the book.

*Keywords:* Dewey; *Democracy and Education*; aims of education; humanistic education

## Introduction

The year 2016 marked the centenary of the publication of Dewey's *Democracy and Education* with a plethora of books and centennial celebrations, including an international conference at Cambridge in October 2016<sup>1</sup>. The book sets out Dewey's philosophy of education in a succinct manner in 26 chapters, each with a chapter-ending summary. It may therefore act as an introduction to his vast body of work, on which we touch in the chapters of this book. Significantly in calling the conference, the planning group sent out 'a call to action' inviting interested people to consider the book's relevance within the current policy context that seems so at odds with Dewey's philosophy of education.

A major theme of this conference and all the celebrations of 2016 was this 'call to action', to fighting back against what is happening in several dimensions – political and social but also educational, in a globalized economic environment. Significantly in many education systems worldwide, we see the aims of education to be predominantly subsumed to economic ends, related to gaining skills, qualifications and employment in a global economy (Ball, 2001; Apple, 2004, 2005). In such systems, pupils are routinely audited to ensure that they achieve these skills, as are teachers to monitor their 'effectiveness' in curricular 'delivery'. Teachers are positioned as delivery technicians and students as deliverers of examination results.

Necessarily, assessment is based on audit and metrics: league tables and performance management are brought into play to control the 'delivery' of results. This has been defined as a performativity culture and there are many warnings about its effects in education (e.g. Davies, 2003; Ball, 2012; Murray, 2012). When assessment is put to the fore, this tends to drive curricula and pedagogy, and this can skew teaching and lead to the inducements of fear and bribery to motivate learning and an over-reliance on mechanical routines. As Ravitch warns,

It behoves us to take seriously concerns that the current emphasis on testing and inspection distorts the purposes

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<sup>1</sup>The conference was a collaboration between the Philosophy of Education Society of Great Britain (PESGB); the History of Education Society, UK; The Faculty of Education, University of Cambridge and Homerton College. It took place between 28 September and 1 October 2016. There were 150 papers from 25 countries.

of education. We no longer speak of education as a process of human development. (Ravitch, 2013, p. 265)

In focusing the conference and this book on the work of John Dewey in a twenty-first-century context we are fighting back against this interpretation of social and political life, and particularly of this view of the aims and purposes of education which Dewey termed ‘technical rationalism’ and has been later called ‘technicism’.

The book represents a view of education for humanistic not economic aims. Qualifications are only part of the preparation for becoming an adult in any society. Technological changes are bringing about social change to the extent that we cannot predict what kind of employment and challenges young people will have to face as adults, nor the kinds of jobs that will exist when they are adults. It follows that education should be broadly based in order to enable people to be flexible, adapt what they know and also to enjoy what they are able to do, as preparation for life in uncertain times. This suggests that basing educational aims on purely economic terms is not satisfactory.

Taking humanistic aims for education means not starting from the idea of skills and preparation for employment, although these are important, but from a question about what should count as an educated young person today. This question requires thinking about which human qualities we wish to nurture and develop and how education may foster them. Michael Oakeshott’s discussion is valuable here in arguing that education has no ‘extrinsic’ end or purpose (i.e. a qualification) outside the intrinsic end of becoming human (Oakeshott, 1972). Education should evidently develop the knowledge and understanding thought to be related to employability, but should aim more widely at educating people for managing life and relationships so that they may develop both practical capacity and the ability to make sensible and grounded decisions, given changing economic and social conditions. ‘Moral seriousness’ (Pring, 2012) is a quality that has been highlighted as important for the individual and for society. This would involve having a sense of responsibility for the community, which might include kindness and respect towards others. This takes us into thinking not only about the knowledge and the skills that schools should aim to inculcate but also about the qualities and dispositions we think pupils need to develop. Often, and perhaps increasingly, the language of ‘skills’ and knowledge eclipses these vital human qualities.

In resisting such a narrow and restricted view of education we draw on the work of John Dewey with particular reference to his own

engagement in the political and educational causes of his day. Not only was he an advocate for the kind of pedagogy implied by the chapters in this book, but he also took an active part in public life, for example his assuming the chair of a controversial commission into charges made against Leon Trotsky in Moscow in the 1930s (Dewey, 1937) and his defence of Bertrand Russell in relation to Russell's being refused appointment of the chair of philosophy in the City College of New York on grounds of immorality (Dewey, 1940).

The conference keynote speakers also brought out the notion of 'fight-back'. We briefly summarize below their talks, in order to point to their body of work and their wider field of educational research, since all are engaged in making a considerable contribution to the critique of educational policies and practices and what they have to say on the theme of 'fight back' is significant.

First, Barbara Stengel (2016) mounted 'a spirited defence of the possibility inherent in public schools and the potential of the teachers who work there to enhance those possibilities'. She sought 'to discover grounds for agency and constructive identity in what most construe as a dispiriting educational age' (ibid.) and identified:

[t]he central problematic of teaching today: a potentially crippling disjunct between teachers' self-understanding as educators and the systemic (political and institutional) orientation toward achievement construed so narrowly as to be anti-educational. (Ibid.)

Stengel deplores the fact that 'This disjunct locates educators in an emotional and action space that can be – and too often is – experienced as hopeless'. But she suggests, 'with the help of John Dewey, ... teachers may not be as "stuck" as it seems'.

Alison Peacock, chief executive of the Chartered College of Teaching, was also an advocate of the fight back against technicism. In her talk, she stated that 'too often the education system stops children doing amazing things by looking at children in terms of numbers and letters slapped onto their foreheads'.<sup>2</sup> She reported on the project *Learning without Limits*, in which nine teachers working in different schools ran

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<sup>2</sup>The citations are taken from this keynote talk, available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wfQB2RHuhLk>

classrooms on core principles of inclusion, co-agency and trust (see also Peacock, 2016).

Rosa Bruno-Jofré's keynote speech showed how the connections between discourses and political situations are relevant to work in our current context, through her example of Dewey's reception in Chile in the 1920s and other Latin American contexts. She traced a search for a political ethic of social change with Dewey at the centre which is significant for our times. (This builds on her work of Deweyan interpretation; see Bruno-Jofré, 2010 and Bruno-Jofré and Schriewer, 2012.)

Gert Biesta's keynote talk asked whether, in seeking to make a connection between education and democracy, Dewey was actually concerned about the political project of democracy and its educational demands, or whether he remained caught in European conceptions of education-as-formation (*Bildung*). This question needs posing in the context of the book, in which we are claiming for Dewey a relevance to understanding and acting on our current issues in education. The third part of the book is particularly concerned with the idea of democracy in education. The focus is on how Deweyan ideas of democracy connected to the way in which people relate to each other; to the respect for individual voice; for consensual decision-making and for a Deweyan democratic culture, rather than democracy as a political project. Such a culture differs from the current educational policy culture of top-down imposition of strategies and policies. The book returns to challenging questions raised by Biesta in the Epilogue.

The current context became the focus of the conference panel session, posed as a question: *John Dewey – Too Toxic for Policy?* Richard Pring started this session with a background on the positioning of Dewey's ideas in England, citing an influential government report into primary education (known as the Plowden Report), which argued for a Deweyan type of curriculum, in reaction against traditional learning disconnected from children's experiences (HMSO, 1967). Pring reported how the Plowden Report drew virulent criticisms and the accusation of John Dewey as 'the proximate cause of all our educational decline'.

Arguments between the so-called traditionalists and progressives in education still run deep in education today and this was picked up by Melissa Benn who talked on the theme of the profound and hostile rejection of progressive ideas in our time, and argued that there has always been resistance to a return to an arid traditionalism. In her journalism and activism she represents and supports a growing number of parents and 'a new generation of educators and parents who say "No! Enough! We want something else"' (see e.g. Benn, 2012).

Lynda Stone described a complex current culture in the United States today. There is seemingly total acceptance of the regime of standardized testing and a great emphasis on knowledge and achievement, over an education based on experience and the social good. She claimed that education has lost focus on ethics and ethos. But there are what she calls ‘small democracies’ from which we can draw hope, such as teachers working consensually in professional learning communities on areas that they choose, that are not imposed on them from the top down (see also Stone, 2016).

All the keynote speakers in one way or the other were arguing for a kind of education we might broadly call ‘Deweyan’. When we talk of ‘fighting back’ in the title of this volume, we have constantly in our minds the current context of not only the wider policy context we have called technicist, but the local choices that are made in consequence of high stakes assessment for the school curriculum, where the arts and the humanities are frequently sidelined to make time for Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics subjects, those which are internationally audited, because of the premium on a ‘knowledge based curriculum’. Warnings against a restriction of the school curriculum are many (e.g. Greene, 1981; Nussbaum, 2006, 2010; Benn, 2012; Pring, 2012; Ravitch, 2013).

Dewey stood for a humanistic curriculum that supported both individual development and social aims. In *My Pedagogic Creed*, his short statement of his beliefs regarding education, he tells us:

I believe that education is a regulation of the process of coming to share in the social consciousness; and that the adjustment of individual activity on the basis of this social consciousness is the only sure method of social reconstruction. ... I believe that in the ideal school we have the reconciliation of the individualistic and the institutional ideals. (Dewey, 1897, p. 93)

The current context of performativity in education takes the focus away from societal development. We draw on Dewey’s philosophy of education in the book to expand on our notion that commitment to fighting back against such a technicist view of education is necessary. The book is structured around three key areas, all related to Dewey’s philosophy of education – the first concerns technology; the second, embodiment and the third, democracy and development.

## Part One – Dewey and Technology

That Dewey had something to say to our times is clear in the first part of this book, concerned with technology and the issues and controversies that digital technologies raise in our time. Is the fear of young people engaged in social media justified? What are the dangers of life in a networked era and how does living in a technologically mediated world impact on social life, the development of individuals, education and culture? How can digital technologies support educational developments? These large questions are discussed in the chapters of this part.

Bob Coulter, in Chapter 1, tackles the familiar fear of young people spending much of their time on social media and the argument that this distances them from real-life experiences and is a bad influence on their development. In contrast to these fears, many adults, educators and parents think that young people must have access to these technologies and be familiar and at ease with their use, since the twenty-first century has increasingly complex information systems and social means of communication. He draws on Dewey's frame of experience as articulated in *Democracy and Education* and *Experience and Education* 'to craft a framework by which uses of digital technology can be assessed for their educational value'. This framework, he argues, can support positive educational and personal development, in what he identifies as 'experience-rich, growth-promoting uses of technology'. Importantly, as his numerous examples illustrate, these positive uses of technology can be linked to broader concerns for young people developing the capacities needed for democratic citizenship.

In Chapter 2, Sally Eaves and Stephen Harwood continue this exploration of the social and creative possibilities of digital technology for young people in their account of 'makerspaces', which offer accessible and affordable venues within communities and which, in turn, can make a contribution to those communities. Makerspaces can provide a resource for people to explore and experiment, as well as share information and knowledge. Through explicating Dewey's views on what constitutes a desirable learning space and his view of the empowered individual, the authors analyse the value of makerspaces in educative processes, within a social learning community and this means outside formal learning environments, which have certain limitations. Eaves and Harwood are optimistic about the educative and social possibilities that such makerspaces afford, and the chapter suggests how individuals using these spaces are enabled to be creative and innovative.

The final chapter in this part of the book, Chapter 3, by Gonzalo Jover, Rosario González Martín and Juan Luis Fuentes further illustrates how Dewey's ideas are pertinent to our generation of students and educators. In an innovative project, they have developed a course, studying classic texts using the Internet, with secondary education students from three schools in Santiago (Chile), Madrid and London. The project is based on an open reading of Sophocles's *Antigone* through an online application that enables students from the participating schools to interact. The chapter explicates the theoretical bases of the project. The first two sections of the chapter analyse the interpretation that Martha Nussbaum and Dewey each made of *Antigone*. The final section presents the Antigone project as a learning experience, promoting what Dewey called a creative democracy.

## **Part Two – Dewey and Embodiment**

One of the long-standing battles that Dewey fought throughout his work concerned the societal tendency to divide and 'dis' integrate features of humanity. He pursued a holistic view of human experience, stressing the need to understand persons as integrated and situated within their environment and in association with others. He famously argued against dualisms such as theory/practice or subject/object not necessarily because these are false starting points in philosophy but because sharp, fundamental splits 'oblige us to reach for antithetical principles to make sense of the world' (Fesmire, 2015, p. 46) creating inevitable consequences for our capacity to understand. Of these dualisms, mind/body was one split that is repeatedly challenged at a profound level in his work. Dewey suggests that 'false notions about the control of the body ... extending to control of mind and character, is the greatest bar to intelligent social progress' (Dewey, 1922, p. 23).

To signal the inclusivity he wanted to stress, Dewey coined the notion of body–mind but then amplified how he used the terms. At one level, he claims that embodiment is a straightforward indication that mind does not exist without body and that in health, the body does not live without mind. But the extent of this is far-reaching: 'body-mind simply designates what actually takes place when a living body is implicated in situations of discourse, communication and participation' (Dewey, 1925, p. 217).

Dewey is not combining the physical with the mental here but is suggesting that the body is not a 'thing' but rather our centre and source of

situated activity with mind intrinsic to activity as a way of making sense of our transactions with the world. Our initial transactions based on impulse, in time, become habits of both mind and action. Thus, as Sharon Sullivan explains, Dewey sees the:

... organic body as a collection of activities, characterized by habit and grounded in physicality that is constituted by its relationships with its various environments. For human bodies in particular, this means that bodies give rise to and participate in the meanings provided by their transactions. As transactional participants in meaning, human organisms often help secure existing habits and cultural customs but they are also capable of transforming them. (Sullivan, 2001 p. 40)

In Western culture, there has recently been a surge of interest in health and well-being associated with care of the body and mind. For example, the growth in practices such as yoga and mindfulness mark renewed interest in how breath and body awareness can have profound psychological effects. Schools have not been immune to this trend and a number of educational institutions now give space and credence to these activities, often as a gesture towards the well-being of students and staff. However, the extent to which education itself is seen as an embodied experience is much more limited. For Dewey, embodiment is highly significant for our understanding of educational experience and learning. Therefore, the implications for education reach far beyond an additional class in mindfulness. Enquiry and the capacity for growth are embedded in the situations and activities that create educational experience; therefore, the stress on action cannot be understood without acknowledgement of the importance of the body. In the current technicist climate, the worth and extent of this awareness for the quality of educational experience becomes invisible – hence the struggle in many schools becomes one of ‘what can we add on to our already crowded curriculum’, rather than ‘how should we think differently about the transformative experiences we give in the name of education.’

The chapters in this collection, which focus on the importance of understanding our lives as embodied, offer a number of clear calls for significant transformation, but all show an appreciation of the depth of Dewey’s ideas on embodiment. We bring together three different perspectives that indicate some of the transformative relevance of due consideration of embodiment. These range from the extensive possibilities

of the Alexander Technique, the very practice that helped Dewey deepen his own thinking related to the body, to the centrality of the body in racial inequality and its significance for democratic practice.

The theme of embodied habit emerges as a central tenet of Chapter 4 by Charlotte Woods, Malcolm Williamson and Jenny Fox Eades. They are practitioners of the Alexander Technique and, attracted by Dewey's own belief in the technique, they join Richard Shusterman in advocating that we should fight the academic dominance of the mind over the body in educational discourse and practice. This chapter reminds us of Dewey's beliefs and the somatic philosophy underpinning the Alexander Technique. Unconscious habits of the body that can be drawn into awareness and changed or corrected have transformational dimensions for our thought and receptivity to experience. This is part of the plasticity in our way of living that is so essential for growth and receptivity to other ways of being. Dewey was not only committed to his own practice of the Alexander Technique, but the writers suggest that his own regular experience helped him to articulate more clearly, the central role of body–mind throughout their work. The challenge to the anti-somatic stance of most educational discourse and practice is another dimension of seeing Dewey's work as a way of fighting the current dominant culture in education.

Corporeality resonates throughout Kathleen Knight-Abowitz's and Sue Ellen Henry's chapter (Chapter 5) and the need for transformation is all too clear. Their analysis of African American experience and disenfranchisement and the reality of 'fundamental plunder' of White classes over Black citizens, highlighted by Ta-Nehisi Coates, offers a striking and timely lens into the reach and subtlety of Dewey's sense of deep democratic participation in *Democracy and Education*. 'Black Bodies in Schools' reminds us how significant situated experience is for educating but also how the habitual and long-standing cultural environment of schools can unintentionally solidify racial constructs. Following Dewey, the writers see hope in that habits as 'embodied intelligences that typically harden into unconscious action and thought (that) can be brought to the light of reflective consciousness through the use of the mind'. They argue that the contemporary reality of the somatic experience of African Americans is a significant spur and resource for education and social justice, for 'inquiry around the status of bodies in any system, reveals personal and cultural truths'.

Christine Doddington's chapter in this part, Chapter 6, begins by looking at spaces and current trends that also offer alternatives to approaches that over-intellectualize the nature of education. The main

focus is on a distinctive change of physical environment for educational experience – that of taking education into the open, to places outside of rooms, walls and buildings. Dewey’s work on experience and habit is used to show how, building on the significance he gives the body, this change of place has richer potential than what mere physical relocation suggests. In particular, Dewey’s later stress on the aesthetic nature of experience comes into play so that ‘open’ situations can be seen to have increased value for growth. An understanding of the value and nature of aesthetic experience is a further move in fighting the dominance of technicist views, which can infect outdoor, just as much as indoor, education.

### **Part Three – Democracy and Development**

In recent years, the traditional versus progressive debate has been reinvigorated by interpretations of the work of an American scholar of Literature, E.D. Hirsch, by academics and teachers. In his 1988 book, *Cultural Literacy*, he criticizes Dewey’s claim that ‘accumulating information in the form of symbols’ devalues education; he argues that the progressive focus on student-led learning in primary education that Dewey helped inspire leads to divergent knowledge that fuels ‘cultural fragmentation’. The poor lose out the most because the curriculum does not require that they learn basic facts at home that enable more sophisticated participation within society – unlike their wealthier counterparts – putting them in a disadvantage in secondary and tertiary education. This has in turn shaped the rise of academies and charter schools in the United Kingdom, the United States and elsewhere with a focus on traditional curricula and discipline as a foundation for academic and personal success. In a nutshell, they suggest that there is a core of ‘powerful knowledge’, in Michael Young’s phrase, that inducts young people into language and culture without which they will be unable either to fully comprehend or to make effective connections between the things they learn. This core symbolic knowledge, it is claimed is best learnt within clearly defined subject disciplines, enabling students to think critically once the foundations are secure. Innovatively, this movement links the return to a traditional curriculum with reducing social inequality by promising to give all students a chance to a form of education which is traditionally the preserve of the elites.

To date this traditionalist stance has been held by relatively few – but catalysed to significance by two factors. First, the passion with which it is advocated in the face of a perceived progressive stranglehold over teacher training institutions and wider school cultures; second, the huge support it has received from conservative politicians who see it as justifying their long-held views that the elite education that most of them received should be the standard for others. This support is more than ideological: the recent round of the ‘Teaching and Leadership Innovation Fund’ in the United Kingdom revealed that nearly all of the £74 million allocated was to a range of companies, academy chains and teacher training organizations that promote highly directive approaches to the curriculum such as compulsory phonics, and highly prescriptive approaches to classroom behaviour emphasizing transmission and low student participation. In the United States, this process has progressed further. Doug Lemov’s *Teach like a Champion* – a book that advocates teachers setting up a regime of military strictness and uniformity within the classroom to create the best conditions for efficient transmission of knowledge – has been adopted as the basis of the curriculum for the Relay Graduate School of Education, a rapidly expanding teacher training programme that eschews college-based learning about education in favour of teacher techniques for behaviour and content control, and judges students principally on the basis of their students’ grades. Alongside this goes an increased blurring of the lines between public and private provision, with the justification that the money must follow the innovation, be it in the public or private sector, and that, by implication, the ossified progressive majority in the state system must be shaken up from the outside.

However, a deeper study of *Democracy and Education*, such as the authors in Part Three provide, shows us that Hirsch’s analysis of Dewey is flawed, and that the form of equality promised by this movement is both unrealistic and undemocratic. First, Dewey explicitly distances himself from key tenets of progressive pioneers such as Froebel and Montessori, despite his sympathy towards their intentions: for example, he rejects their naturalism (the belief that children’s true and unique nature is already embedded within them) and idealism (that there are perfect forms of knowledge that are ‘recognised’ and adopted by learners). Instead, he delineates a distinctive, pragmatist position that sees growth as the product of ongoing negotiation between teachers, students and society focused on real problems in a mutable world.

Second, chapter 21 of *Democracy and Education* (Dewey, 1916) gives a historical analysis of traditional divisions between ‘academic’ and

‘vocational’ curricula going back to the mind/body distinction made in ancient Greece, demonstrating how curricula for the elite have prized abstract knowledge as a positional good rather than for its practical utility. It is thus valued substantially because of its deliberate separation from vocational focuses on uses of knowledge, which has formed curricula for the majority. Aiming for ‘an elite education for everyone’, in the former UK prime minister David Cameron’s oxymoronic phrase, is thus not only politically implausible, but damaging for all parties since both educational routes are diminished in personal and social value by their separation. The increasing focus on transmitting and measuring the uptake of ‘powerful knowledge’, and the competitiveness, prescriptiveness and narrowing of the curriculum that it has promoted, has only increased such divisions – with the children of the wealthy and educated always at an advantage from the start. Further, it changes the nature of that knowledge from its inherent value, enabling students to act more powerfully in their everyday lives through its application, to instrumental value, where the principal use of knowledge is to demonstrate one’s superior command of it in examinations that lead to advancement at others’ expense. Finally, it normalizes equality of opportunity in education over more genuine equality: the belief that as long as a child has ‘had a chance’ to succeed academically and to join, say, an elite profession as a result, then the failure of the majority to do so is their own fault, and perhaps that of their teachers and families too. This is a recipe for the continued segregation of classes that Dewey fought against. He recognized that school-based education cannot overcome such inequalities alone, but can only do so as part of a wider society in which a diversity of unique, incommensurable interests and connections between people are promoted and enabled from the start, leading to personal and collective growth.

In this ongoing coup against broad-based, public sector teacher education, Dewey has been recast as bogeyman instead of talisman. His work, however, offers us ways to fight back that are not stereotypical of a romantic and insufficiently rigorous progressivism. Moving beyond such misinterpretations, the authors in Part Three draw on different aspects of Dewey’s work to demonstrate how a broader and forward-looking understanding of the curriculum can develop both students’ motivation to learn and the social bonds essential to a healthy democracy.

In Chapter 7, Neil Hopkins states that control of the curriculum is always political – and that Dewey leads a long line of educational thinkers who have argued against national governmental control over the

curriculum. Hopkins explores the English context, where a zeal to drive up ‘standards’ as measured by quantified tests has refocused teaching onto boosting performance both nationally and, through an increasing focus on the Programme for International Student Assessment, internationally. This, he argues, has both narrowed and homogenized the curriculum, sifting out the opportunities for adapting learning to local contexts and to individual students. Furthermore, it reimagines educational performance as an international currency in a competitive economic sphere. Students, if graded as comparable units, are stymied in the development of their unique agency. Instead, he gives examples of where ownership of the curriculum has been shared within the community, promoting a dialogue among all stakeholders about what should be learned collectively and individually. The resulting curriculum is a living, context- and problem-orientated agreement, rather than a top-down directive of approved content, which engages all parties in a democratic process that is educative in itself.

Brian Dotts (Chapter 8) deftly explores Dewey’s radical understanding of democracy as a living process, rather than a desirable form of state. He takes us on a highly informed tour of early modern political thinkers, drawing parallels between Dewey’s critique of their rigid conceptions of democratic states and Habermas’ analysis of how the individual is captured and restricted by bureaucracy. Dewey’s interpretation of democracy as an evolving framework for promoting diverse communication within and across societies, he argues, not only prefigured and influenced Habermas’s communicative action theory but went beyond it by extending this principle of humane and expansive communication to all fields of human life – not just political institutions. Dotts highlights that education requires the foundations of shared ways of life, language and values in order to operate – but must encourage learners to always be ready to question and reshape those foundations as part of their critical engagement with the unique present situation. Thus, democratic education, when it becomes a passive and factual topic, is stultified; this parallels exactly a fixed curriculum that does not encourage learners to see its precepts as ultimately fallible and adaptable.

In Chapter 9, Victoria Door and Clare Wilkinson build on this theme by exploring Dewey’s synthesis of relationships, attitudes and behaviour in education. Values and dispositions are not transmitted but rather learned through example, with teachers as powerful and vital role models for children. In particular, teachers have a duty to model openness to, and placing value on, the distinctive perspectives,

knowledges and activities of each student, as this ‘enlarges and enlightens experience, it stimulates and enriches imagination; it creates responsibility for accuracy and vividness of statement and thought’. Through the example of students’ challenging behaviour and personalized learning, they advocate teachers engaging with students’ subjectivities rather than imposing an inflexible line; through exploring underlying causes and consequences, the interaction becomes educational for both, and a model for how to engage with others in a democratic society. This open-mindedness is not a licence for poor behaviour or idiosyncratic tangents but a commitment to mutual realignment within a community’s members that respects the interests of all; it requires the cultivation of ‘intelligent sympathy for others’. It enables all parties to break the habits of thought and action that render relationships objective and mechanical, instead ingraining the desire to continue to grow through interacting with the distinctive qualities of others – which themselves form a substantial strand of a situated democratic curriculum.

Finally, in Chapter 10, Valentine Ngalim, exploring Dewey’s concept of ‘interest’ in the realm of mathematics education, explains that this does not mean that students should learn what they like, but that they should and must be helped to discover the power of mathematical thinking through tasks that provide rich and engaging experiences. He gives the use of maths to calculate the shapes, angles and sizes of plots on a school farm, overcoming the false division between abstract processes and embodied activity. This multidisciplinary activity exemplifies ‘interest’ as a goal-orientated, intersubjective social phenomenon. Growth in education is thus the fruit of rich experiences that integrate the shared abstractions of our cultural heritage with unique students and situations. The value of mathematics need not be proven through the promise of equal engagement with elites, but with its power to enhance one’s understanding and actions in the present.

## **Epilogue**

We conclude the book with a cautiously optimistic and forward-looking text by Gert Biesta, ‘The Persistence of Dewey’s Pragmatism: On Possibilities and Risks’.

Biesta believes that ‘the return of Dewey as an educational thinker has perhaps less to do with the intellectual dynamics of 20th century educational thought and more with the politics of education’, and he

queries how far the use of Dewey's name coincides with the actual substance of his thought. Biesta points us in the direction of the value of Dewey's work in providing an outlook very different from the reliance on economic outcomes. As such, Dewey remains a source of inspiration. Biesta sees contributions to educational debates, such as the chapters in this book as important in providing a thoughtful antidote against the direction of conservative policy in education.

Nevertheless, we should be mindful of the pitfalls of uncritical enthusiasm for Dewey's educational ideas. Biesta analyses these pitfalls as first a non-questioning acceptance of Deweyan pedagogy in a way which becomes dogmatic and rigid. This is counter to Dewey's own critique of 'the quest for certainty'. Biesta reminds us that Dewey's thought is 'not a set of (ontological) claims or beliefs, but a collection of specific answers to highly contextual questions and problems'. Further, there are issues arising from the fact that Dewey's is more a theory of learning than an educational theory. Biesta claims that a theory of learning is not automatically and not out of itself also a (sound) theory of education. 'The learning question is, in other words, not the same as the education question'.

We end the book with Biesta's words, with which the editors heartily concur, that 'the return to Dewey's educational thought cannot be a matter of repetition but requires thoughtful reconstruction – and Dewey would probably be the first to agree with this'.

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