



## Conference on the Legacy of John Dewey on Contemporary Pedagogy

10-11 February 2022 via Zoom

### Speakers and Abstracts

#### Day 1, 10 February

**Associate Professor John Quay, University of Melbourne**

***John Dewey's continuing legacy in education: from quantification, mechanization and standardization to democracy, association, and occupation***

Reading Dewey on education often leads to marvelling at how his descriptions ring true in a twenty-first century world. Many features of the educational situation of a century ago are central today: schools, teachers, students, subjects, methods, curriculum. The bones of education have not changed significantly, meaning that Dewey's work in education remains contemporaneous. Other features are also constants. Dewey highlights quantification, mechanization and standardization, positioning teachers as cogs in a vast impersonal machine. Dewey treated this as a problem to be resolved and introduced a way forward: education *through* occupations (that is not vocational education). Important connections between democracy and education, via integration and association, are key to education through occupations, which are modes of continuous purposeful activity, relevant because they capture shared interests. Dewey's legacy lies in this significant contribution to education, one which is still waiting to be sufficiently understood by teachers and incorporated into practice.

**Dr Amanda Niland and Dr Wendy Saeme Lee, Sydney School of Education and Social Work, Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, The University of Sydney**

***Connecting, exploring and creating through play: Dewey's influence on contemporary early childhood pedagogy***

John Dewey was arguably the most influential educational theorist in the early 21st century. His criticism of current practices brought an evolution of new perspectives on viewing children, education, learning and teaching. Today, Dewey's work also remains central to early childhood curriculum and pedagogy and its focus on learning through play. In this paper we will explore how Dewey's conceptualisations of children, their learning and the role of education underpin the Australian early childhood curriculum, The Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF). Dewey's philosophy of education is based on the belief that humans, like other animals, are born with instincts. However, these are not just about physical survival. Rather, they are social (desire to connect and communicate with others), active (desire to explore and construct), and expressive (desire to create). Given these instincts, Dewey recognised play as intrinsic to children's way of navigating their world. Dewey believed that children need concrete play,

exploration of natural and everyday materials, and interactions with teachers as facilitators. He regarded play and education as cultural and social, and saw educational settings as communities in which children should be active participants, in line with principles of democracy. Dewey's thinking has contributed to the international recognition of children's rights, leading to the UN Declaration of 1989 and consequent recognition in social and educational policies and laws in the 21st century. Dewey's recognition of children's rights and their competence to be active in their own learning through play and everyday experiences is central to Australian early childhood pedagogy.

**Dr James Harrison and Dr Jan Hendrik Roodt - Otago Polytechnic, New Zealand**

***The legacy of John Dewey: His contribution to cyclical and iterative processes and its potential for addressing contemporary problems using transdisciplinary approaches***

John Dewey is hailed as the father of experiential learning and yet it was his recognition of a long tradition of knowing how, when he challenged the new educational paradigm of theory preceding practice. Instead of just arguing for practice led education, he analysed its components and identified a cyclical process, where understanding from observation, analysis, synthesis and then trialling demonstrated how practice delivered theory. It is the cyclical process which underpins many processes of learning, problem solving and action-based research that remains prevalent today. In his recent PHD studies, Harrison (2021) identified that a cyclical framework of developmental practice and its iteration continued to underpin most vocational and professional practice and its ongoing stability. Engineers solve engineering problems, doctors medical problems, electricians electrical problems, and hairdressers hairdressing problems. However, due to human impact on the natural environment and resource needs, the nature and frequency of wicked problems are multiplying exponentially and people are finding that a solution from a single discipline is becoming increasingly difficult. The purpose of this paper is to acknowledge the cyclical and iterative nature of problem solving synthesised by Dewey but to explore how this may be evolved still further using transdisciplinary practice explained by a collection of work from Padmanabhan (2017). This provides the possibility of differentiating professional practice and pragmatic research from academic research and enhancing recognition of the former. Both authors will provide examples from their post graduate professional practice work undertaken at Otago Polytechnic.

**Professor Bill Green, Charles Sturt University.**

***Curriculum, Communication and Democracy: Learning from John Dewey***

John Dewey's *Education and Democracy* (1916) is a key document in the history and philosophy of education. A key element of *Education and Democracy*, as Gert Biesta (2006) argues, is Dewey's view of communication, which is directly related to his educational philosophy. Other works by Dewey (e.g., *Experience and Nature*) similarly thematise communication. This paper will look at the relationship between curriculum theory and the philosophy of communication, drawing specifically on Dewey's work, and more particularly his account of education and democracy, communication and community. It builds on earlier work on the relationship between communication studies and curriculum inquiry, on curriculum and representation, and on the history of 'progressive education' in Australia. It seeks to provide the basis for an informed sense of Dewey's work for better understanding the relationship between curriculum, communication, and democracy more generally.

**Ms Penny Robin Vlies, Doctoral Student, University of Sydney and Ms Tegan Xenos, NSW Department of Education**

***Dewey and Twilight thinking - Perceptions and enactments of useful and beautiful knowledge***

The long-term vision laid out in the 2020 NSW Curriculum Review is ‘to support teachers to nurture wonder, ignite passion’ for every young person’. A central theme in the reform report is the *practical* use of knowledge arguing for ‘students to put their subject knowledge and understandings to work’. The NSW Government response to the NSW Curriculum Review final report makes no reference to wonder or passion. In it, the lived experience of learning, the possibility of learning as joyful or that knowledge is uncertain is absent, rather students are temporal future somethings, most often contributors. We examine the language of curriculum reform and teachers’ enactment of this in classroom practice to understand the extent to which the vision of nurturing wonder is a reality for students in NSW. Using Saito’s (2015) description of John Dewey’s beautiful and useful knowledge three pedagogical models were analysed and the accompanying student work explored for Dewey’s ‘twilight thinking’ - somewhere between the known, the unknown and the imagined. The models were developed by teachers in NSW schools K-10 as part of a program to embed critical thinking in curriculum design. They illustrate the pedagogical decisions both teachers and students make when attempting to nurture wonder. In completing the intention of ‘nurturing wonder and igniting passion’ resolution of the distinction between what is useful to know and knowledge in the higher sense is considered. Dewey’s pragmatism presents an opportunity to resist the bifurcation of useful and beautiful knowledge in current educational discourse. We provide evidence of classroom practices that step away from the “narrowing sense of useful knowledge”. This is knowledge that resists being just accountable, empirical or practical and that is inseparable from the beautiful. In order to achieve the long-term vision of wonder and passion.

**Associate Professor Cathie Burgess, University of Sydney**

**Dr Katrina Thorpe, University of Technology, Sydney**

***Conceptualising experience through Aboriginal-led Country-centred learning.***

Dewey was critical of education systems that failed to include experiential learning beyond the classroom into the curriculum. Aboriginal-led Country-centred learning, where learners walk with and learn from Country is an experiential approach where knowing occurs through being and doing. Country-centred relationships are nurtured through deep listening to community voice where truth-telling emerges as a relational connection between past, present and future. These connections engage learners in new processes and knowledges and so facilitate healing, conscientisation, belonging and knowledge sharing. Dewey noted the transformative potential of experiential learning in democratic education. In Australia, acknowledging Aboriginal peoples’ ontological connection to Country shapes identity, foregrounds Indigenous sovereignty, and is critical to our democracy. As Country-centred pedagogies challenge knowledge ‘truths’ and deficit representations of Aboriginal peoples, students’ cognitive and affective responses transform the way in which they source, experience and think about knowledge. A Country-centred framework for analysing curriculum and pedagogy from a relationally responsive Indigenous standpoint subverts western approaches that prioritise knowledge over experience by positioning ethical processes of respecting and valuing before knowledge production. This mobilises Country-centred relationships and transforms knowledge into culturally sustaining practices as students’ value their cultural backgrounds and lived experiences as critical to their educational success.

**Dr Robert Stevens, PhD Candidate University of Sydney**

### ***How We Think***

Drawing on Dewey's 1910 book "How we think" I argue that while the roots of thought (or cognition) lie in the ability of animals to orientate themselves in space, and that these roots are clear in the way that Dewey characterised thinking, speech, a social competence, vastly energises thinking. While, as Dewey and Vygotsky realised, speech and thought cannot be equated we reason better together in a community of inquiry than we do on our own.

## **Day 2 – 11 February**

**Associate Professor Philip Cam, School of Humanities and Languages, UNSW**

### ***Thinking as Method***

Dewey is well-known for claiming that school education is all about developing the ability to think. There is nothing else for schools to do so far as students' minds are concerned. Thinking is not only the aim of education for Dewey, however, but the means of achieving it. This is not because it is the method to be preferred. Rather, as Dewey understands it, thinking is method so far as intelligent learning is concerned. In 'Thinking as Method' I examine these extraordinary claims and show how Dewey's own discipline of philosophy provides a model for them.

**Dr Britta Jensen, Co-director, Centre for Critical Thinking and Ethics, Newington College, Stanmore NSW**

### ***Thinking in NSW schools***

A central purpose of school education is to nurture and support students as thinkers (Dewey, 1910). In our modern Australian context, ACARA's General Capabilities behoove all teachers to engage with Critical Thinking; since no particular methodology or pedagogy is directly endorsed, teachers and schools are free to choose how to engage and cultivate students' thinking. Philosophy in Schools, (aka Philosophy for Children or P4C), a pedagogy whose genesis owes much to Dewey's influence, provides a clear and rich classroom model for supporting critical, creative and collaborative thinking, K-12, across all KLAs. Phil Cam, a leading figure in Philosophy in Schools, envisions that (philosophical) inquiry could become the "connective tissue that would enable the different parts of the curriculum to form a more effective whole" (Cam, 2010). In this talk I will showcase the successes of this approach where it has been taken up in NSW, highlighting its capacity to stimulate best practice in a variety of ways across a range of schools and initiatives.

**Dr Lorraine (Lorri) Beveridge, NSW Department of Education and Michael Murray**

### ***How is Dewey relevant to primary classrooms today?***

Underpinning Dewey's theory of learning is the belief that students learn best by doing- a ubiquitous constructivist view. We are educators who teach English and provide professional learning for teachers. Our niche is teaching English using the vehicle of quality texts. In this session we will outline how Dewey's theory of education coheres with our work in schools, including supporting schools in the implementation of integrated English units that incorporate knowledge across the key learning areas, emphasising the interconnectedness of learning

and the interdisciplinary nature of knowledge. Our integrated English units incorporate themes that prepare students for life- life as it is and as it may be in the future. We address themes such as caring for our world, wellbeing, racism, and growing and changing- big ideas that are relevant to students' lives both now, and into the future. Learning activities provide opportunities for students and teachers to collaboratively interrogate knowledge and contribute to dialogues that help them make sense of the world, seeing things from different points of view. Dewey's writing spans the late 1800s (*Psychology*, 1887; *My Pedagogic Creed*, 1897) to the 1950s (*Knowing and the Known*, 1949; *On Philosophical Synthesis*, 1951). Dewey brought teachers and students together in the learning journey. His progressivist views emphasise the need for learning by doing. Considering Dewey's significant contributions to education, we will address the question, "How relevant is Dewey's teachings in the contemporary primary classrooms in which we work"?

## **Brad Fuller and Dr James Humberstone, Sydney Conservatorium of Music**

### ***Everything new is old again: How Dewey predicted music education's pedagogical battles***

By the dawn of the 20th century, the battle of "old education" versus "new education" was well underway. The new education, as espoused by Dewey, decried students' "passive and inert recipiency" in the old model, in favour of a new student-centred "active work" approach that became the hallmark of constructivist education. The battle against the old education was still raging when Dewey passed away in 1952, and five years later, when Russia launched the first Sputnik satellite, the political shockwaves felt around the western educational world impelled a swing toward an even more technicist, rationalist curriculum. As music education approaches of the last 60 years have swung back toward constructivism, Comprehensive Musicianship, and Informal Learning, the political pressures to standardise and test to achieve "a comparison of results in... the examination to see which child has succeeded in getting ahead of others in storing up, in accumulating the maximum of information" have been pervasive. The latest swing of this tired pendulum, we argue, was set up in the late 20th Century with a constructivist vision for the 21st, one that is already being quashed by political and social pressure for schools to compete for students and rankings according to their published results in standardised tests. This study explores the tensions experienced by one music educator as they attempt to navigate the swing from 20th (or even 19th) century pedagogies to 21st, and back again, in an Australian secondary school. Through a series of narrative vignettes, we consider what "active work" looks like in this new model, and whether it can survive a return to "passive and inert recipiency".

## **Zhihang Li (Liz) Ph.D. Candidate, The University of Sydney**

### ***What does "the school as a community" mean? –The discussion based on the Dewey's theory of community***

How should we understand the school as a community? Focusing on the meaning of school as a community in educational background, this paper illustrates the social character of school as a community based on Dewey's theory of community. It reviews the application of community in different situations including the community based on common life, the community of meaning, and the imagined community, also refers to the social community proposed by Dewey. We then take the University of Chicago Elementary School as the case study. Schools as a place of experience communicated, curriculum as the carrier of experience, and teachers as cooperators, which are embodied in the Elementary School. The idea of school as a community reveals the value of the school on constructing democratic society.