

# *Education as Meaning-Making and the Development of Critical Thinking*

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**I**n 1983, we were declared a nation at risk. Now, over a decade later the declaration seems to ring even more true, but for different reasons. Our communities have become killing fields, and the assassins that stalk our streets are our children. We sit frozen in horror as the daily news bombards us with the images of children murdering other children and adults for the thrill of it, as a rite of initiation, as an act of racial hatred, for profit, and in anger and retaliation.

As the specter of Hobbes' brutish state of nature looms over us, we react. We feverishly try and salvage the fabric of our humanity. We cling to the hope that if we can heal the fractured family, if we can restore traditional values we can stem this epidemic.

We turn, as we have often done in the past, to our schools. Historically, we have placed great faith in the educational system to solve our social problems; indeed, as John Dewey suggests, education is the means by which society shapes itself in the direction it wants to move. Subsequently, as we explore ways of teaching critical thinking, we also infuse into the curriculum anti-gang, anti-drug, and anti-bigotry programs. In addi-

tion, we mandate curfews for teenagers; we install metal detectors at schools; and we proclaim zero-tolerance for gangs. But for all our efforts, the fabric, thin and frayed, rips again and again.

Cornel West (1993), however, argues that these efforts prove futile because we have misdiagnosed the disease. He suggests that if "we delve...into the murky waters of dread and despair that now flood the streets," we find individuals whose lived experience is one "horrifying meaninglessness, hopelessness, and lovelessness" (pp. 12-15). This nihilistic threat, as West refers to it, produces individuals who are detached from others and who have a destructive disposition towards themselves and the world. Simply, "life without meaning, hope, and love breeds a cold-hearted, mean-spirited out-look that destroys both the individual and the world" (p. 15).

Although West is writing primarily to and about the destruction this threat is having on the African-American community, we can see, if we look hard at society in general, that his notion of nihilism is not situated in particular social, political, or economic ideologies nor in certain ethnic or racial groups, but rather the threat permeates the whole of our society. In other words, West is making the claim that there is within the individual a hunger for meaning, and that hunger, if satisfied, allows the individual to survive and possibly thrive under adverse conditions. However, if that

hunger is not abated, then life, for many individuals, is worthless. In turn, this sense of worthlessness and hopelessness is played out in actions that underscore a blatant disregard for life and property.

West further argues that the nihilistic threat is not something new, that society, in order to fend off the threat, creates buffers or "cultural armor." These buffers consist of social, political, and economic structures, such as family, religion, government, schooling, and so on, that enable the members of the society to make-sense of their experiences. If, as West states, these buffers no longer function as meaning-making structures, or if the meaning that is constructed is distorted, then we must critically examine them and restructure them and/or create new ones.

Here, because of space and time limitations, the remainder of this paper will focus on one of those structures, schooling, but, it is hoped, that this discussion will also provide a way of examining the other meaning-making structures in our society.

## EDUCATION AS MEANING-MAKING

Traditionally, the chief function of education, or schooling, has been to prepare the immature members of society for their role or place in the society. In particular, schooling has emphasized the transmission and accumulation of information and the honing of certain skills (namely literacy and problem-solving skills) that allow the individual to function within society — hold a job, fulfill responsibilities of citizenship, and so on. This is not to suggest that these goals are not important; in fact, from a historical viewpoint, we have educated for God, home, country, and the labor market. And when a crisis has risen in a particular area, the educational system has implemented programs that focused on the issue. For example, early schooling emphasized religious and moral training, while the post-industrial era focused on fitting the individual for the job market. More recently, social issues, such as teenage pregnancy, dropout rate, AIDS, gangs, have demanded an immediate plan of action. There is a danger, however, in focusing on simply what education is "for." If we view these issues and implement programs to address them without first giving thought as to how the solutions fit within our definition of what education is, then we may find ourselves in the business of training and indoctrinating rather than educating. If this is the case, as West seems to suggest, then we must ask ourselves how do we go about creating an educational system that develops individuals who are able to make-sense of a

very complex world. We can begin by turning to the writings of John Dewey.

In 1897, Dewey wrote a short pamphlet "My Pedagogic Creed," in which he outlined his thoughts on education, how that aim is accomplished in schools, and the role schooling plays in social progress. For Dewey, education is, to use his telling phrase, the continual reconstruction of experience. In other words, education is growth and the capacity for more growth:

*Since growth is the characteristic of life, education is all one with growing; it has no end beyond itself. The criterion of the value of school education is the extent to which it creates a desire for continued growth and supplies the means for making the desire effective in fact (1916, p. 53).*

Education, then, is the process of an individual creating and/or discovering meaning. In this sense, the school provides a simplified environment in which the complexities of life are mined, where individuals gain practice in coming to reasoned judgements about what to think and how to act. It is a process which takes what the individual finds problematic, strange, puzzling and assists her/him in connecting it with her/his own personal experiences, beliefs, and knowledge. This is not to imply that new experiences are merely incorporated into previous ones; rather, the process of creating meaning reverberates — it expands, enriches, and, at times, changes what the individual knows and believes. It is through this process that society develops a citizenry who not only thinks well but who also judges well. It would be a citizenry we would call creative and critical thinkers. These individuals would exhibit certain characteristics: 1.) They would be sensitive to the context of a situation. In other words, they would be aware of and understand what is going on in a particular situation. 2.) They would be respectful of criteria. Although the individual is not ruled by criteria, she/he establishes criteria that is appropriate to the situation and then uses it. 3.) The individual would strive to be self-correcting. She or he would look at her/his behavior and evaluate it with an eye towards getting rid of mistakes. 4.) The individual would be disposed to using thinking skills when appropriate. 5.) The individual would value the entire endeavor.

The question, now, is how do we develop this individual — how do we create an educational system than values meaning-making. Again, I suggest we turn to John Dewey.

Dewey argues that education as meaning-making is not something that can be conveyed or transmitted directly from one individual to an-

other; rather, what an individual knows and believes and how the individual translates that knowledge and beliefs into action is shaped by the interaction that occurs between the individual and the environment. The educator's task, then, is to create an environment in which certain responses, such as intelligence, creativity, compassion, not only are called out but also are nurtured and developed. It would be an environment we would call, with a nod toward Charles Sanders Peirce, a community of inquiry.

### COMMUNITY OF INQUIRY

In order to unpack the Deweyan notion of community of inquiry, it might prove helpful if we briefly define what he means by "experience" and "community."

#### Experience:

Dewey's educational philosophy is founded on a reverence for experience:

*We always live at the time we live and not at some other time, and only by extracting at each present time the full meaning of each present experience are we prepared for doing the same thing in the future* (1938, p. 115).

Here, Dewey is not equating experience for the sake of experience as educative; indeed, he argues that any experience which produces a callousness (a lack of sensitivity and responsiveness to ideas), which stunts an individual's power and capacity to judge and act intelligently, and which limits or restricts the growth and connectedness of future experience is miseducative. What is important is not the quantity of experience, but the quality of experience — to see it as a moving force whose value is judged on what it moves toward and into (p. 31).

The educator is then faced with the "central problem of education based on experience" — "to select the kind of present experiences that live fruitfully and creatively in subsequent experiences" (p. 17), and to organize them in such a way that "arouses curiosity, strengthens initiatives, and sets up desires and purposes" within the individual (p. 31). Moreover, these fruitful experiences direct the educator in her or his decisions concerning the subject matter, methodology, discipline, materials and equipment, the social structure of the classroom as well as decisions concerning the teaching of critical thinking.

#### Community:

Dewey continually reminds us that mere associated or collective activity does not constitute a

community. Individuals who simply live and work in close proximity to each other or, in the case of the educational setting, teacher and children who inhabit a classroom do not necessarily form a community. Only as the members of the group observe and think and reflect upon their experiences and the experiences of others, and then translate those experiences into ideas and aims (they construct meaning and then decide upon a course of action), only then is an aggregate transformed into a community. In other words, a community holds many aims and values in common, or, to use Dewey's phrase, they have likemindedness.

If we seriously consider Dewey's definitions of experience and community and we read hard Dewey's *Democracy and Education* and *Experience and Education*, then we can, using his description of the busy workshop of skilled craftsmen, translate his ideas into practice: (1.) individuals are engaged in an activity which interests them; (2.) they have a stake in the outcome of the project or activity; (3.) they must exercise intelligence and judgement in planning and implementing the activity as well as in the selection and utilization of materials; and (4.) they must listen to each other and work in a spirit of unity in order to accomplish their goals. For example, a fifth grade teacher began with a topic that she/he knew would be of general interest for the group, and one that would lend itself to authentic subject-specific projects and/or activities. In this case, the teacher selected the subject of games. After allowing the students to participate in a variety of games, the teacher brought the group together and asked them to comment upon the activity: What is a game? (The children needed a little assistance so the teacher asked that they make a chart that compared the games they played — how were they alike and how were they different — making distinctions.) From that activity the students generated the following questions: (1.) Why do people play games? (2.) Do children and adults play games for the same reasons? (3.) Do all cultures play games? (4.) Are there games, or variations of games that all cultures and/or other civilizations play or have played? (5.) What are rules? (6.) Are rules necessary to a game? (7.) How are the rules decided? (8.) If you change the rules do you change the game, is it still the same game? (9.) Can some games promote biases, stereotypes, or anti-social behaviors, such as violence, and so on. The questions were then discussed in a large group session, a community setting, and from the information and knowledge constructed in the group as well as the need to have additional information, the students then pursued, individually and in small groups, specific areas of research.

These areas of research included a history of games, how technology has changed games, violence and video games, a survey of games people play and why, and games played around the world. Following their research, the children decided on how they would present their findings, a project that would include an oral as well as a written presentation. In this case, the survey was presented in chart form, in addition the members took photographs of various individuals playing their favorite games. The project on games around the world focused on hopscotch. The group presented various models of hopscotch (some were drawn on the playground and the students participated).

What becomes apparent as we study this model is that there is a change in three distinct areas of the classroom environment: (1.) the role of the teacher, as well as the student; (2.) the function of the disciplines, or subject areas; and (3.) the nature of classroom talk.

Within the community of inquiry, the teaching relationship is viewed as a scholarly endeavor. Rather than being the all-knowing purveyor of knowledge, the teacher becomes a co-inquirer with the students. It is a relationship that Whitehead (1976) characterizes as "scholarly ignorance" (p. 36). This is not to imply that the teacher feigns ignorance; students quickly recognize this charade and then take the attitude that inquiry is simply a game to be played. Instead, because the teacher values the endeavor, because she/he values inquiry, the teacher, along with the students, willing submit their views to the self-correcting process of further inquiry, i.e., although I hold  $x$  to be true, I will subject that  $x$  to further inquiry. In doing so I run the risk that what I now believe or know may prove to be untrue, wrong, or uncertain. It is through this process, that the members of the community, both teacher and students, come to see knowledge as a social element that is rooted in human interest, activities, and conditions, something that is created, that can be evaluated in light of supporting evidence or counter-examples, and that can be recreated as new theories and new propositions are explored.

The teacher's primary function, then, is to orchestrate the inquiry. In doing so, the teacher, utilizing her/his expertise and experience, assists the students in making-sense of what they find problematic. At times, the teacher aids the students in translating their stated interests, which are, at times, stated in an inchoate manner. For example, a group of high school students were involved in a comparative study of judicial systems. During their study their interests turned to the riots in Los Angeles that occurred following the Rodney King trial. The students argued that our judicial

system had failed to treat King fairly or justly. At this point, the teacher could have allowed the discussion to have a very narrow focus, Rodney King. However, she moved the discussion to a wider focus; she translated their interest in a particular case to a general case. Simply, she helped the students see that their real interest was in the notions, the philosophical notions, of what is "justice" and what is "fairness."

This example also underscores other characteristics the teacher must possess. In order for translation to occur, the teacher must listen attentively to the members of the community, assuring that each member is heard and understood. Likewise, the teacher insures that there is an emotional balance within the community. Often discussions, like the one involving Rodney King, can become emotionally charged; the teacher must be sensitive to the situation and diffuse it without bringing the inquiry to a halt. This is exactly what the teacher did in the previous discussion.

Although the teacher's role is drastically different within the community of inquiry, there are those functions the teacher performs which are traditional in nature, such as providing specific information, resources, and instruction in particular skills. The difference is in when the information and skills are presented. Within the community of inquiry, the teacher lectures or instructs the students in certain skills as a means of aiding the inquiry, as a way of enabling the community, both individually and collectively, to experience progress. In the traditional classroom, information and skills, too often, are presented as discrete pieces that are to be learned simply because they are considered important. It is also this distinction, how students perceive subject matter and skills, that sets the community of inquiry a part from other "innovative" models.

In order for students to critically examine issues, they must have something to inquire into and to think about. Within the community of inquiry, the disciplines are seen as active avenues of inquiry as well as the tools we use to make-sense of those issues we find puzzling. Too often, the disciplines are presented as repositories of information, as only so much information to be memorized and repeated. Rarely, are students given the opportunity to wrestle with the problematic issues that are inherent within a particular discipline.

If the high school students in our previous example attended a more traditional school, they would find that political science is taught as a series of courses in which the governmental structures are presented and analyzed. Students take notes, memorize the structures and rationales, give the information back on a number of tests,

and then quickly forget what they “learned.” However, when students inquire into the discipline, when the teacher provides experiences, such as a case study, that allows the students to feel the force and tension of a problematic issue, and they work together to try and understand and solve the issue, then students have the opportunity to engage in meaningful learning experiences. Such was the case of our high school students. Their struggle with the notion of justice and fairness produced a criteria by which they not only evaluated the Rodney King situation, but also provided criteria by which they could then evaluate the judicial systems they were studying.

Within this model, the inquiry, for the most part, is done publicly and through a linguistic medium that is, at times, dialogical and, at other times, conversational. The teacher values conversation and dialogue not only as pedagogic tools but also as a “device for communication; a tool through which one individual comes to share the ideas and feelings of others” (Dewey, 1981, pp. 449-50). As was stated before, transforming an aggregate, such as a classroom, into a community demands more than mere associated activity; it demands likemindedness. And as Dewey reminds us, likemindedness demands communication — communities exit in communication. Moreover, the process of transformation demands a viable and expedient mode of communication — one of personal interaction — individuals talking with one another.

The talk that Dewey is suggesting, however, is not conversation and dialogue in the conventional sense where, as in the case of conversation, the teacher wallows in or drifts along aimlessly with the interests of the students, or in the case of dialogue, the goal is to win or prove you point, or where the rigor and structure of the dialogue obscures or ignores other important elements within the discourse. He is suggesting, I think, a kind of critical conversation, one in which individuals not only share their ideas and feelings with the other members of the community, but also one in which individuals analyze and evaluate the worth of the conversations in which they partake.

In this sense, talk is a powerful tool in the classroom. As the teacher talks **with** students, as opposed to talking **to** them, she/he puts them in a position not only to voice what they think but also to reflect upon what they think. Within the community a premium is placed on giving good reasons for opinions and beliefs, but, and just as important, on understanding for oneself the reasons why one thinks as one does, and the criteria one uses to establish and justify those reasons.

Likewise, there is the recognition that the community consists of persons, speakers and listeners,

who have come together to talk and listen and learn from each other. As they inquire together, they gain a sense of personal identity. They see themselves as persons whose thoughts and ideas are valued even when they are in opposition to other members of the community. The members do not feel threatened when their ideas are challenged, recognizing that it is important not only to justify one’s claims, but also to understand what those reasons suggest and mean to the other members.

It is through the discourse that the members become cognizant not only of the words they use and their definitions, but they also begin to develop communicative competency. In other words, they become sensitive to the context in which an issue is set and within that context they know what constitutes as a rule, what counts as following a rule, what counts as a question, a good question, and how speakers and listeners function. (Young, 1992, p. 34). As a result of this process, not only are their perceptions enhanced and, at times, changed, but the members also develop an attitude of fair-mindedness, respect, and tolerance toward differing opinions. Moreover, the members also begin to see that how something is said and how we come to agree on claims of validity is often more important than the search for and the possession of truth (Rorty, 1979, p. 359).

Although the notions of inquiry, interest, community, conversation and dialogue are integral to the construction of a community of inquiry, at its heart is the Deweyan belief that philosophy and education are one in the same. Philosophy in this sense is not just another subject to be taught; rather, as Dewey (1916) argues, it is an armature around which all subjects can be organized, in that it aims to improve a “disciplines internal structure,” to provide the “model of discovery and participation that can be utilized by teachers for many different subjects,” and to reveal “its effects upon and in the everyday world of events” (p. 305). Yet, it is more; it is a public form of life. As Dewey (1916) states:

*if we are willing to conceive of education as the forming of fundamental dispositions, intellectual and emotional, toward nature and fellow men, philosophy may even be defined as the general theory of education* (p. 328).

In other words, philosophy is a way of life. It is what we do when we wrestle with issues and questions that are significant; questions that individuals have asked through the ages: what is good, what is true, what is beautiful. It provides a way of assisting individuals in constructing meaning

through the naming and renaming of shared experience (Johnson, 1990).

### CONCLUSION

If we take Dewey's admonition that education is a matter of life and death for a society, then our cries for a citizenry who not only thinks well and who judges well, but who also cares about the other members of the community demands that we examine our educational system — transforming it or reconstructing it into one that enables all individuals to make-sense of their lives. As Dewey writes:

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

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