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Developing Dewey's Sociocultural Vision Toward Educating Citizens in the 21st Century

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Abstract

The work of John Dewey continues to challenge educators whose work is to put theory into practice in the classroom. In the United States and elsewhere, a popular impression of Dewey and progressive education is that of inductive, child-centered pedagogy, but his writings in Democracy and Education—as well as in subsequent re-writings of previous works such as in How We Think (1910) — demonstrate that his earlier notions of inductive methods and a child-centered progressivism were supplanted by a pragmatism that was more akin to today's social constructivism in terms of consideration of experience, subject matter, community, and the inherent tension between public and private and objective and subjective knowledge (Garrison, 1995, Prawat, 2000). Contrasting the current resurgence of a myopic psychological behaviorism ushered in by neoliberal testing and the standards movement over the past 25 years, Dewey's turn toward recognizing the social and interactive continues to provide sustenance and hope for the development of more educationally robust schooling, both reflective and leading to a social and civil society that is more democratically infused. Here we attempt to explain how ideas Dewey first laid out in Democracy and Education have been seminal in our own pursuit and development of more philosophically vigorous contemporary constructivist theorizing whose philosophical anthropology, in contrast to most cognitively defined and confined versions, embraces and engenders a critical, creative, and emancipatory education. We will pay particular attention to the educative and emancipatory potency emanating from Dewey's emphasis on community and communication, and exemplified in our descriptions of actual classroom practice.



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Intelligence is not a peculiar possession which a person owns; but a person is intelligent in so far as the activities in which he plays a part have the qualities mentioned.
 ~ John Dewey, *Democracy and Education*, 1916

Introduction

The work of John Dewey continues to challenge educators whose work is to put theory into practice in the classroom. In the United States and elsewhere, a popular impression of Dewey and progressive education is that of inductive, child-centered pedagogy, but his writings in *Democracy and Education*—as well as in subsequent re-writings of previous works such as in *How We Think* (1910) — demonstrate that his earlier notions of inductive methods and a child-centered progressivism were supplanted by a pragmatism that was more akin to today's social constructivism in terms of consideration of experience, subject matter, community, and the inherent tension between public and private and objective and subjective knowledge (Garrison, 1995, Prawat, 2000). Contrasting the current resurgence of a myopic psychological behaviorism ushered in by neoliberal testing and the standards movement over the past 25 years, Dewey's turn toward recognizing the social and interactive continues to provide sustenance and hope for the development of more educationally robust schooling, both reflective and leading to a social and civil society that is more democratically infused. Here we attempt to explain how ideas Dewey first laid out in *Democracy and Education* have been seminal in our own pursuit and development of more philosophically vigorous contemporary constructivist theorizing whose philosophical anthropology, in contrast to most cognitively defined and confined versions, embraces and engenders a critical, creative, and emancipatory education. We will pay particular attention to the educative and emancipatory potency emanating from Dewey's emphasis on community and communication, and exemplified in our descriptions of actual classroom practice.

Contemporary Context: A Transformed Philosophical Anthropology of Education

Since the early 1980s, a combination of neoliberal and neoconservative ideologies has reshaped the characteristics of education in the United States and other nations, particularly the ethical and political value of what it means to be a human being, how humans should relate to each other, and how decisions affecting society can and should be made together. As a result, a highly profitable education industry has arisen compiling mounds of statistically reliable data, but lacking any demonstrated educative or social validity (Ravitch, 2013). Despite the lack of validity, a fundamental educational transformation has come about through the everyday pressure of principals and teachers doing their best to do their jobs well. Hartnell and Harden (2016) note, "...as teachers, schools and districts are increasingly faced with punitive consequences for not meeting narrowly defined measurable objectives, concepts of teaching have unsurprisingly narrowed to focus on the specific metrics that serve to define teaching effectiveness." The objectification and hardening of formal school knowledge into disciplines for the purposes of testing and "accountability" to standards conceals the dynamic and permeable borders of subjects and discourages students from finding or creating new conceptual relationships through inquiry, critical questioning, problem-posing, and imagining. Further, the political clamor for higher standards, accountability, and delivering a technologically adept workforce both ignores and misses the greater need for a well-educated citizen-force to mitigate the ongoing devastating loss

of the planet's biodiversity and destruction of the life-support system. In discerning "Natural Development and Social Efficiency as Aims," Dewey states:

When social efficiency as measured by product or output is urged as an ideal in a would-be democratic society, it means that the depreciatory estimate of the masses characteristic of an aristocratic community is accepted and carried over. But if Democracy has a moral and ideal meaning, it is that a social return be demanded from all and that opportunity for development of distinctive capacities be afforded all. The separation of the two aims in education is fatal to democracy; the option of the narrower meaning of efficiency deprives it of its essential justification. (p. 122)

Despite Dewey's forewarning, we seemed to have arrived at a dangerous point in the trajectory of education and democracy, with a narrower meaning of "social efficiency" and a "depreciatory estimate of the masses". Any educated society must ask: what forces and what kind of educational thinking has brought us to this point?

A Dim or Distant Hope?

Concurrently with, and contrasting to, the combined neoconservative and neoliberal corporatist reforms of the past four decades, various forms of "constructivism" have come forth in educational theorizing (Philips, 1995). It seems an accurate observation that in the United States, as in most industrial nations, the standards and accountability movement reigns as hegemonic; and unfortunately, to the best of our knowledge, there has been little, if any, significant or enduring effects of constructivism on educational thinking, practices or student learning (Ravitch, 2013, Cuban, 2013). By "significant and enduring" we mean the type of fundamental change in educational ideas that encompasses a more comprehensive cultural understanding. For example, in visiting schools, one frequently hears the chant that students "construct their own knowledge" or are provided "student-centered activities," but the actual practices amount to little more than the rote-discovery of predetermined knowledge. Unfortunately, researchers report that traditional didactic teaching methods (e.g., lecture, rote memorization, teacher-centered instruction) still dominate in a lot of classrooms in the U.S. and abroad. This dominance is often reinforced by accountability systems, standardized testing, and curricular mandates (NCES, 2018; Mehta, 2013; Au, 2007). Bereft of a sociocultural understanding of learning, growth, development and experience such as that expounded by Dewey in *Democracy and Education*, much contemporary rhetoric on educational constructivism is tantamount to a trivialized and decontextualized theory of human cognition yielding disembodied classroom practices. What still maintains as the norm is that, "Most teaching prepares students for docile acceptance either of facts and norms of behavior, or of dominant belief systems, or of dominant assumptions about what is possible and what is desirable." (Lemke, 2002).

Sharing the premise that how we know is inextricably related to how we live, and that proper enculturation for every student is our common educational obligation (a set of relationships that forms our understanding of Dewey's connections among science, democracy and formal education), the present authors have long collaborated with a group of educational theorists who promote and advance a more critical and creative social constructivism, with educational concepts both informed and enriched by those Dewey first lays out in *Democracy and Education*.

Searching for Meanings Deeper Than Name Calling

A brief description of three terms often used in critiquing modern education reforms will help set the stage for a better understanding of why we draw upon Dewey's work in promoting a more robust critical and creative social constructivism. For this purpose we employ a philosophical-anthropological analysis to help clarify the meanings loosely affixed to the evocative terms "neoliberal" and "neoconservative" (and to the less evocative "classical liberalism") when describing contemporary educational thinking and practices. This kind of analysis is appropriate for the work at hand, for it seeks to identify in different bodies of knowledge and ways of knowing the ethical and political value of what it means to be a human being, how humans should relate to each other, and how decisions affecting society can and should be made together.

With the Enlightenment, *Classical Liberalism* replaces the concept of "soul" with that of "individual," and "God" with "Natural Laws." God still exists, but having created natural laws and placing them in motion, God can now retire to the backseat, leaving individuals both free and morally responsible to negotiate the best relationships with others, including economic and political ones. It is important to note that negotiation involves the *deliberation* of free individuals and is in accordance with natural laws. Consequently, in a society aspiring to democracy and growth, formally educating citizens of these Natural Laws becomes very important, i.e., yielding most Western notions of a Classical Education and, particularly in the United States, Jefferson and Mann's visions of public education and its crucial role in the promotion of science and democracy. The classical liberal belief that Individuals and the social systems in which they are involved can become "more perfect" are words that resonate in the foundations of our political institutions and structures and are especially important in the rationale for public education. Educational reformers such as E.D. Hirsch, considered a conservative critic with his publication of *Cultural Literacy* (1988), most accurately represents classical liberal ideas (and probably so does Dewey when he was still a Sunday school teacher in Vermont.)

Neoliberalism might be considered "classical liberalism on steroids," with little concern—or need—any longer for democracy. Natural Laws, especially in reference to economic and business models, are invoked as Absolute, with a nearly evangelical preference for *calculation* over *deliberation*, and *accountability* over responsibility—thus the contemporary reliance on standardized testing as a means to evaluate students, teachers, school systems, and nations. Placing the highest value on metrics for decision-making makes a clear-cut case for efficiency, narrowly defined, but not for social efficiency as Dewey defined it experientially, involving learning and providing growth—important tenets of democracy.

The richness of the intersubjective and communicative nature of deliberation and responsibility for promoting learning, growth and democracy in *Democracy and Education* cannot be overstated. Rooted in Latin (*delibrare*), "deliberation" involves balancing, weighing, slowly, consciously, and unhurriedly; "responsibility" is metaphorically an "ability to respond" to others and with the environment with intentionality and direction. Both deliberation and responsibility are socially interactive experiences of human growth—though considered wasteful, unreliable, and inefficient by the tenets of neoliberalism. Additionally, neoliberalism's insistence on calculation and accountability positions the onus and center of political power away from the "conjoint experiences" of individuals who, lacking experiential growth in the social and intersubjective, develop delimited capacities for what Dewey referred to as *adaptation*, that is intelligently responding to and with their environment.

Neoconservativism, rooted in pre-Enlightenment thinking, is characterized by a deep distrust of the goodness of human nature--in fact, a true neoconservative sees human nature prone to evil. Holding a dualist conception of Reality, only the metaphysical embodies Perfect Forms — which are unattainable in human experiences as the imperfect physical world is deficient, declining, and decaying. Within this set of conceptions, Plato propose a class-stratified *Republic* as the most socially just governance arrangement to promote democracy for the deserving few.

This dim social and political vision is not a relic of the past, but remains an active and motivating rationale for political movements today. Despite historically bountiful resources, there are many in the United States today who fear the rise of the economic underclass and view the expansion of equal rights in any direction (especially racial, ethnic, sexual, and gender identification) as a further signal of cultural decay and ultimate end of life as they prefer it. Neoconservative leadership, influenced by the political philosophy of Leo Strauss, was embodied in the U.S. administration of George Bush the younger, with legions of subscribers remaining pervasive and active in many legislative, judicial, academic, military, and lobby offices. And among notable educational reformers shaping the past three decades of educational policy and practices, Allan Bloom's *The Closing of the American Mind* (1987), stands as the most clearly articulated educational statement of neoconservativism. Mistakenly equated as a contemporary bookshelf compliment for the aforementioned *Cultural Literacy* (1987), Bloom's criticism of education involves a rejection of an expanding, inclusive public education, an increasingly pluralistic society, and—notes political scientist Benjamin Barber—the tenets of the Enlightenment itself (Barber, 1988).

One can discern the beliefs, dispositions, and characteristics of today's educational reforms in the above summaries of prevailing ideological forces. The pervasive machinery of “testing and standards” owes its justification to the neoliberal invocation of metrics as an Absolute obedience to natural laws. The distrust of teachers and students to do good work without the threat of punishment by authorities is a neoconservative inheritance (“a depreciatory estimate of the masses”). In its overemphasis on accountability and efficiency, Neoliberalism confuses the means for the ends of education. In distrust of human growth and development, Neoconservatism provides complicit support for narrowing educational ends. Separately, each challenge the promotion of educational growth and development of society; in concert, they threaten the viability of democracy.

The Common Educational Narrative on Constructivism

The relatively recent nomenclature and writings on “educational constructivism” (circa 1980s) is variously allied to the work of many earlier educational theorists, but especially Piaget, Vygotsky, and, less frequently, Dewey. The narrative on constructivism is generally that the individual is not a blank slate (*tabula rasa*) but brings previous experiences and cultural influences to a situation, and that there is no such thing as knowledge “out there,” independent of knowers. It is not, as Plato suggested, remembering vaguely perceived perfect ideas, nor the discovery of some ontological reality. Rather one comes to know as the result of a personal and social construction of meaning from perceptions which have no inherent order or structure, other than those meanings which we personally and socially fabricate for them in our minds. As Ernst von Glasersfeld points out, “Concepts cannot simply be transferred from teachers to students - they have to be conceived.” (von Glasersfeld, 1995, p. 5)

While “epistemological constructivism is neither a teaching model nor a learning model” (Laroche, 1994), as educators our task is about translating its notions, articulating the connections between them and providing them contexts. One fundamental notion is that understanding and knowledge results through experience, interacting with others, and reflection. We are active creators of our conceptions. Curiosity and interest lead to questions, exploration, and continuous assessment. In education, constructivist theorizing about learning leads teachers to view themselves less as a “sage-on-stage” and more as facilitator, favoring certain teaching practices over others, though through practice most teachers develop personal “best-fit” repertoires of instructional strategies. Typically, science learners are encouraged to problem solve, use manipulatives, and do investigations, and then to reflect on and engage in discourse with peers and teachers about what they did and how they are thinking about it. The teacher considers the students' prior knowledge because students can learn most easily when they already know enough to have organizing schemas (Resnick & Klopfer, 1989). S/he plans and uses a mix of teaching strategies and activities which engage minds as well as hands and, always paying attention to student responses, encourages them to analyze, interpret data and information, and construct defensible meanings from evidence. Discourse is important: open-ended questions and dialogue among students and among students and adults figure prominently in such classrooms. Peer-to-peer “science talk” encourages students to question their prior understandings and also build on their prior understandings..

Most of the underlying theoretical concepts associated with constructivism in educational practices do not seem overly complicated nor controversial. Our argument, however, is that precisely *because* most educators are not aware of the complicated and controversial issues involved, constructivist practices become simply an alternative means—no better, and in some cases, less effective—than traditional educational practices, and thus do not serve as an effective bulwark to the neoliberal and neoconservative ideological assault dominating educational thinking, policy, and practices.

In the contemporary narrative on educational constructivism, Piaget is frequently credited with the idea of knowledge constructivism, providing a scientific nomenclature of cognitive constructs inferred for mental processes and the equivalent to stages of biological development (if not actual stages), where each individual solos (genetic epistemology). The addition of Vygotsky's thinking offers the zone of proximal development, enriching the narrative with an understanding of the co-construction of knowledge between and among individuals. These selected cognitive aspects readily assimilate into traditional educational practices and policies without challenging the underlying philosophical-anthropological premises of education. In fact, taken in this way, their use reinforces the dualism of mind/body that is so essential to neoliberal and neoconservative ideologies. Once dualism is posited and accepted, the logical derivations of educational practices from rote-memorization to high-stakes testing make perfect sense. This is what Dewey rejects and what his ideas enduringly challenge, providing the basis for our promoting a more critical, creative, social constructivism.

Towards a Creative and Critical Social Constructivism

Following Dewey, our own common thread is that education is a cultural endeavor, and as such, a sociopolitical one as well. To the best of our reading, Dewey never referred to himself as a “constructivist” or “social constructivist” but his writings in *Democracy and Education* clearly depict learning, growth and development as experiential processes with learners forming habits of

beliefs, dispositions and behaviors in co-dependence with environmental forces, including the habits and behaviors of other individuals and social institutions. Acknowledging that direct inculcation is not possible, Dewey queries how the young can “assimilate the point of view of the old”? His response reveals both constructivist and behaviorist dispositions:

The answer, in general formulation, is:

By means of the action of the environment in calling out certain responses. The required beliefs cannot be hammered in; the needed attitudes cannot be plastered on. But the particular medium in which an individual exists leads him to see and feel one thing rather than another; it leads him to have certain plans in order that he may act successfully with others; it strengthens some beliefs and weakens others as a condition of winning the approval of others. Thus it gradually produces in him a certain system of behavior, a certain disposition of action. (p. 11)

Thoughtful educators who consider themselves constructivists will agree with Dewey that knowledge cannot be “hammered in” or “plastered on” -- a claim later echoed in Freire's criticism of the banking metaphor of education and “depositing” knowledge (Freire, 2000). The same constructivist educators may also express alarm that Dewey's constructivism emanates from *behaviorist* premises, i.e., that one's beliefs, attitudes, plans arise *in response* to the environment, but it would be anachronistic to impose a “stimulus-response” model of psychological behaviorism on his much more expansive and pragmatically influenced understanding of behaviorism: “The words “environment,” “medium” denote something more than surroundings which encompass an individual. They denote the specific *continuity* of the surroundings with his own active tendencies” (p. 11). Correctly understood in *Democracy and Education*, environment is fluid, interactional, and encompassing of life and growth. Dewey's richer and more comprehensive social behaviorism is further demonstrated in describing traditional notions of mind and subject matter as “mythical conceptions”:

Too often, mind...is regarded as something existing in isolation, with mental states and operations that exist independently. Knowledge is then regarded as an external application of purely mental existences to the things to be known, or else as a result of the impressions which this outside subject matter makes on the mind, or a combination of the two. Subject matter is then regarded as something complete in itself; ...to be learned or known.... (p. 130)

Dewey does not deny mind, but he does make it more useful, concrete, and observable in defining it pragmatically and experientially:

Mind appears in experience as ability to respond to present stimuli on the basis of anticipation of future possible consequences, and with a view to controlling the kind of consequences that are to take place. (p. 130-1)

...mind is not a name for something complete by itself; it is a name for a course of action in so far as that is intelligently directed; in so far, that is to say, as aims, ends, enter into it, with selection of means to further the attainment of aims. (p. 132)

It becomes clearer from his disavowal and redefining of these traditional educational concepts how Dewey's behaviorism is a social behaviorism involving mindful constructive processes—actions resulting in the building and useful testing of knowledge in fulfillment of intentional aims. His

further explanation of culture, habits and communication provides the conceptual basis for developing a more robust, critical and creative understanding of constructivism in our own times.

Culture, Habits & Communication

Beginning with the largest possible educational view, Dewey posits that, "Society exists through the process of transmission quite as much as biological life. This transmission occurs by means of communication of habits of doing, thinking and feeling from the older to the younger." (p.3) *All of culture* is involved in an educative process, though Dewey is careful to distinguish between the education one receives incidentally from others, and that provided deliberately through formal education processes. While it is all of culture involved in the individual's development of habits of thinking and feeling, the institution of schooling has a special role and ethical responsibility to carefully select and judiciously present to learners those environmental influences which best direct their continuing growth, and eliminate those influences which do not. A formal and intentionally planned education is thus a *socio-political endeavor*:

Mere physically growing up, mere mastery of the bare necessities of subsistence will not suffice to reproduce the life of the group. Elaborate effort and the taking of thoughtful pains are required. Beings who are born not only unaware of, but quite indifferent to, the aim and habits of the social group have to be rendered cognizant of them and actively interested. Education, and education alone, spans the gap. (p. 3)

Having placed habits in the central educative role, Dewey anthropologically mines the meaning of "habit" to reveal processes resembling those of pragmatism and science. Individuals have an ability to "carry over from prior experiences" factors to help them "modify subsequent activities." The inherent flexible capacity of individuals to "acquire habits" plays a central role in human growth and development (p. 49). The habits to which Dewey refers are not those of static, fixed routines, but rather intellectual dispositions and skills to control one's environment in an efficient way, involving modes of observing, responding, thinking, feeling, reflecting and producing:

Education is not infrequently defined as consisting in the acquisition of those habits that effect an adjustment of an individual and his environment. But it is essential that adjustment be understood in the active sense of control of means for achieving ends. If we think a habit simply as a change wrought in the organism, ignoring the fact that this change consists in ability to effect subsequent change in the environment, we shall be led to think of adjustment as conformity to environment. (p. 46)

Habit formation and reformation involves interactive processes between the individual and environment, enabling further growth and development and simultaneous modification to the environment. Habits play a more proactive role in the intentional progression of our lives and of society than we usually consider. For this to fully occur, we need to consider the role of language and communication. Dewey says that: "Society not only continues to exist *by* transmission, *by* communication, but it may fairly be said to exist *in* transmission, *in* communication." (p.4) It is the sharing of ideas, beliefs and aims *in common*, which takes place only through communication, that distinguishes a group as a society, as social versus merely being an aggregation of individuals

who are in proximity. Explaining the educative thinking process involved in communicating, Dewey says:

Not only is social life identical with communication, but all communication (and hence all genuine social life) is educative. To be a recipient of a communication is to have an enlarged and changed experience. One shares in what another has thought and felt and in so far, meagerly or amply, has his own attitude modified. (pp. 5-6)

Communication in the manner described above would justify traditional didactic teaching methods, but Dewey bores deeper into the communicative act, again revealing its educative importance:

Nor is the one who communicates left unaffected. Try the experiment of communicating, with fullness and accuracy, some experience to another, especially if it be somewhat complicated, and you will find your own attitude toward your experience changing; otherwise you resort to expletives and ejaculations. The experience has to be formulated in order to be communicated. To formulate requires getting outside of it, seeing it as another would see it, considering what points of contact it has with the life of another so that it may be got into such form that he can appreciate its meaning. (pp. 5-6)

It is not language alone which helps produce common meanings and understandings. In fact, too much of schooling, for Dewey, consists of empty words and passages. It is through participating in activities together—conjoint activities—by which words assume meaning, whether the activities are real or imagined. In conjoint activities, “both persons are engaged as partners in an action where what each does depends upon and influences what the other does” (p.15)

And so Dewey provides the conceptual framework to justify an interactive, experientially-based educational constructivism for our times, a constructivism fostering creativity and critical imagining and thinking, a constructivism unbound by the abstract conception of mental stages and subject matter that currently restricts the success of the “testing and standards” reforms, and a constructivism whose understanding and use of communication in conjoint classroom experiences is the practice of democracy itself.

Pedagogy Informed by Creative, Critical Social Constructivism

We call our position “creative critical constructivism,” a form of social constructivism emphasizing the social and communicate nature of all knowledge construction, and therefore valuing the cultivation of critical communities of inquiry and achievement of a democratic social order. We begin with the posit that all knowledges are uncertain and contingent, and that teaching is an ethical act. Further, teaching cannot be reduced to the “colonization of student’s knowledge by that of scholars”. (Laroche, 1994, p. 10) Every day, in planning and enacting the classroom curriculum, teachers are faced with moral, social, and political questions, among which the most fundamental may be whether or not to let students in on the knowledge game itself. The decision to involve students in the communicative, knowledge and meaning making experiences effectively changes their *rappor au savor* (understood as “a relation to meaning”), which in itself is an emancipatory practice of democracy. Strict attention to the communicative symmetry of the

classroom and involvement of students' indigenous knowledges - constructed from participating in their cultures - are crucial for such emancipation to occur. Thus, the teacher must pay attention to language. Science knowledge, being privileged in our Western culture, often is presented in school language as *knowledge of*, as if it doesn't pose any problems, eliminating the observer for its descriptions and how different views of science can be transmitted when teaching the same material, e.g., compare these two goals of an exercise to students:

1. "Learn to observe nature scientifically [...] The scientist carries out numerous measurements, notes and samplings; he [or she] attempts to understand the functioning of his [or her] natural environment."
2. "Learn to utilize observation techniques that biologists use in the field [...] The scientist carries out numerous measurements, notes and samplings, he [or she] tries to understand the response of this environment toward specific experiments or projects." (Larochelle, 1994, p. 16)

The latter language conveys a different idea of scientific procedures, that knowledge is always *someone's* knowledge - never anonymous knowledge. Used consistently, appropriate use of language can effectively change the student's *rapport au savoir*.

We recognize that teacher education also must be addressed. The neoliberal inspired focus on quantifiable accountability in public education has become the main way schools have come to define progress, and this mind-set has also afflicted teacher preparation programs. Pre-service teacher education programs have framed their curricula to government certification mandates and employer desires which privilege "the technocratic, methodological aspects of teaching assumed to produce more effective and more efficient teaching (i.e. greater knowledge transfer at less cost)." (Hartsell & Harden, 2016) With the priority on maximizing scores on quantifiable student assessments, teacher education today has come to overemphasize technical skills, like developing lesson plans and tests. Instructional strategies get addressed out of context, with little recognition of the situated nature of learning (Zygmunt & Clark, 2015). In many teacher education programs, course work that focuses on methodology and quantifiable assessment have replaced classes in educational foundations such as philosophy and sociology of education, courses more likely to foster discussion and critical thinking about teaching and learning. Students in teacher education programs have less opportunity to develop their own *rapport au savoir* much less learn about pedagogical issues within the lives of students and values in a democratic society. Questions such as the purpose of schooling or about the individual and societal consequences of different approaches to teaching get left out of teacher education when technical questions of how to increase student performance become the chief focus. Yet, philosophy lies at the heart of every curriculum endeavor (Schubert, 1986). What we advocate is for programs that educate "teachers capable of critically reflecting on the existential consequences of the institution of education and the role teachers play in both defining and helping students achieve a better life." (Hartsell & Harden, 2016)

We are interested in education illuminating all aspects of the production, justification, and ownership of knowledge in society—scientific knowledge in particular because of its status in contemporary culture, and its rootedness and shared values with democracy. In opposing a scientism that accompanies the West's legacy of cultural colonization, we promote a pedagogy that does not rank knowledges/forms of knowledge, but rather promotes a pluralistic epistemological democracy favoring the enrichment of possibilities for student learning. We agree with von

Foerster's words (1984), that the aim of education is the "multiplication of potentialities", encouraging knowledge development which shows potential for spin-off, i.e., toward invention and research.

As our creative, critical constructivist colleague Marie Larochelle (1994) points out, constructivism in education should emphasize a process of "dialecticizing" and not subordination:

We are not of course working with 'any old' subjects but rather with actors; neither is it the case that we are working with 'any old' educational tools, since these tools, whether they be programs or text books, also belong to a category of actors in as much as they are the expression of those who invented them, and that because they can impose a certain type of interaction on other actors. At that point, what is at stake here is our ability to make viable choices...for which one is ready to assume, simultaneously, epistemological, ethical and social responsibility. (p. 13)

Thus the constructivism we advocate becomes a powerful ethical project, placing its emphasis on the social consciousness and democratic citizenship students co-create as they experience communicative classroom acts. Such educative experiences don't happen randomly, but through the teacher's careful planning, a teacher who himself or herself understands and acts within a sociocultural perspective, co-creating with students habits of mind for constructing contingent categories/knowledges and re-constructing those that have been wrongly reified throughout their own educational biographies. The ultimate goal such a teacher always would have in sight would be a more conscious, just and democratically-permeated social and civil society capable of tackling the daunting challenges now facing our planet politically and environmentally.

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Michael L. Bentley retired from science and environmental education at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville. Thereafter he directed the Elementary Science Institute at Hollins University, and was Education Associate for the Virginia Museum of Natural History. Bentley served on the expert panel for Educatio.com and has written two-dozen books and chapters in books, including *Connecting Children to Nature*, with Mueller and Martin (Woods & Barnes) and *An Educator's Field Guide* with Edward and Christine Ebert (Corwin).

Stephen C. Fleury died unexpectedly in February 2025. He taught at Le Moyne College in Syracuse, NY for 27 years where he was Professor and Chair of the Education Department. He began his education career as a social studies teacher in upstate New York. After completing his doctorate at Syracuse University, he was a professor at Hobart and William Smith College and then taught and served as Associate Dean in the School of Education at SUNY Oswego for eleven years. He was an advocate for high quality teacher education and a defender of faculty rights and responsibilities as well as an activist for progressive education as a school board member and co-founder of the Rouge Forum. His scholarly interests and research focused on sociology and politics of knowledge, especially the nature of science and its impact on social knowledge. Beyond his scholarly work, Dr. Fleury was a life-long farmer, with passions for playing music, genealogical research, and storytelling.

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