

Channeling John Dewey:

What Would Vermont's Philosopher Have to Say About Personalized Learning?

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I am assuming that most of you have some familiarity with Act 77, Vermont's landmark 2013 legislation aimed at the transformation of public schools. For those of you who might not be, I'll provide just a bit of background. For the experts in the room, I apologize for covering territory you know well. I'll soon move on to some pertinent questions that we can discuss at the end of my talk.

At the heart of the initiative are three interrelated components Personalized Learning Plans (PLPs), Proficiency-based Graduation Requirements, and Flexible Pathways to Graduation, which are considered the "three pillars of personalization." Personalized learning is an educational initiative that is picking up steam across the nation as more people come to understand that the one-size-fits-all education that shaped much of the 20th century no longer fits anyone. The idea that the time has come for education to be truly "personalized," for students to take ownership of their learning and to break down the walls that have separated school and community represents a genuine paradigm shift in education. The U.S. Department of Education characterizes it this way, as do a number of large corporate philanthropic organizations. This alone might give us pause, and suggest that we explore some of the conventional assumptions underlying these innovations.

While I make no claim of mystical communication with Vermont's own philosopher, social scientist, psychologist, high school teacher, political activist, and educational visionary, John Dewey, born in Burlington in 1859, I do feel confident inferring what he might have to say about these developments based on my abiding interest in his work. In this talk, I will situate Vermont's initiative in the larger context of educational change and

innovation, and issue some caveats that I think Dewey might offer, as we get swept up in the national wave of personalization.

In 1916, two treatises were published which have come to exemplify the competing paradigms of 20th and 21st century American education. One was issued by a superintendent of schools, Ellwood Patterson Cubberley, born in 1868, who would become the nation's first theorist of educational administration. Cubberley emphasized the role of education as a force for widespread literacy, equalization of opportunity, and the cultivation of citizens for a democracy. What's not to like? Well, he believed that the processes of schooling should be modeled on those of industry, which was successfully mobilizing capital and resources in this new era:

Our schools are in a sense, factories in which the raw materials are to be shaped and fashioned into products to meet the various demands of life. The specifications for manufacturing come from the demands of the twentieth century civilization, and it is the business of the school to build its pupils to the specifications laid down. This demands good tools, specialized machinery, continuous measurement of production to see if it is according to specifications... (1916, p. 338).

Cubberley's words provide an apt metaphor of schooling for the industrial age. It's worth noting that this idea is more than a metaphor however; it was literally the form of educational organization promoted by social engineers and school administrators for very specific purposes. In their efforts to "Americanize" the many immigrants flooding our shores, the elite managers of society decided that we needed a common curriculum

(though differentiated by social class), prescribed doses of academic subject matter measured in credit hours or “Carnegie units,” graded course work, periodic testing, and a sequential progression through the school curriculum. Mass schooling required these sorts of efficiencies, which were only possible with the standardization of all of the educational components. Cubberley’s words epitomize what curriculum scholars call the “standardized management paradigm.” Lest you think that this industrial model of schooling has disappeared, along with most of America’s industry, here’s a summary of its basic assumptions:

- that the best measures of improved teaching and learning are taking more academic subjects, scoring well on standardized tests, securing credentials, and moving into skilled jobs.
- that better management and rigorous academic standards would produce better teaching and learning and higher test scores.
- that penalties and rewards get teachers to teach better and students to learn more.

The key characteristics of this “factory model” of education are centralized planning, hierarchical forms of authority and management, an emphasis on procedures, the separation of school from the community, the standardization of curriculum and aims, and the production of identical results. One perhaps unintended outcome of the factory model has been “dehumanization,” the sense among students that they are merely numbers in a grade book, not individuals with real interests and concerns, and that their personal needs and perspectives need to be set aside when they enter the school. Talk to teachers in the U.S. today, and their most common complaint is that students are disengaged, bored, and

find much of the school curriculum irrelevant to their lives. The model survives, however, though not uncontested, in most United States schools today.

In contrast to Cubberley's industrial model of schooling, which was the dominant paradigm of the 20th century, John Dewey, first in his book *Democracy and Education* (1916) and later (when he wished to dispel the misconceptions resulting from misunderstandings of that text) in *Experience and Education* (1938), made the case for the democratization of education. While Dewey shared Cubberley's interests in literacy, opportunity, and democracy, their proposed methods of achieving these conditions are diametrically opposed. In Dewey's framework, the process and product are inseparable; achieving democratic ends cannot result from undemocratic means. The full humanization of people depends not upon externally imposed curriculum and management systems, but rather on responding to the intrinsic needs, interests, and powers of the individual to be educated.

Dewey was not a "social engineer" who believed that progress was best directed by elites. He equated self-initiated, collaborative inquiry with democratic culture building, and did not accept that this could be carried out through any form of reductionism or standardization. Freedom of thought and self-direction of inquiry are essential in Dewey's thinking, though he notes that "certain capacities of an individual are not brought out except under the stimulus of associating with others" (1916, p. 302). I'll return to this important point later.

Dewey challenged the philosophical notion of homo-economicus – the idea that humans are merely self-interested economic actors. He understood democracy not just as a political process between economic actors, but as a way of life characterized by human

association, mutuality, reciprocity, and problem-solving through collective inquiry.

Democracy is, he wrote in *The Public and Its Problems*, “the idea of community life itself” (1927, p. 122).

Prefiguring the findings of neuroscience by almost a century, Dewey was also an early and vocal proponent of the notion that rich experiences, not just book learning, needed to be at the heart of education, and that the needs and interests of the learner needed to be taken into consideration if education was to be effective. A careful study of his work reveals a close relationship between this idea of learner-centered, experiential education and the development of deeply democratic communities. Here we have the two overarching values that challenge the supremacy of the idea that education is mainly for economic ends: education for meaningful personal development, and education for social responsibility, sometimes termed education for citizenship. All three are important, but they need to be in balance. It’s worth noting that education for personal development and for social responsibility are two of the four “Vital Results” that came out of Vermont’s statewide focus forums in the 1990’s when citizens were asked their opinions on what “skills, knowledge, and abilities that ... all learners need” (Gross, 1996) for the 21st century.

How might we begin to realize Dewey’s dream for a well-educated, caring, and compassionate citizenry? How might we design learning environments for all young people that engage them in their own positive self-development, help them to become active citizens, provide them with the practical skills to create a sustainable, peaceful and just society *as well as* prepare them for meaningful jobs in a rapidly changing economy? What ancient assumptions about teaching, learning, knowledge, and the organization of schools need to be consigned to the wastebasket of history, so that we might move forward with an

educational process attuned to what we now know about the human brain? And perhaps most important, what sort of education is capable of responding to the scope and intensity of the multiple human created crises we currently face?

James Moffett, a well-known literacy scholar and educational visionary emphasized the urgency of these questions with a call for action:

The many interlocking problems of this nation and this world are escalating so rapidly that only swift changes in thought and action can save either. The generation about to enter schools may be the last who can still reverse the negative megatrends converging today. In order for these children to learn the needed *new ways of thinking* the present generation in charge of society must begin to set up for them **a kind of education it never had and arrange to educate itself further at the same time.**

(1994, p. xii).

This last line bears repeating: the present generation in charge of society (that's us) must begin to set up for our young people **a kind of education it never had and arrange to educate itself further at the same time.** And these words were written 24 years ago.

Vermont's response to this challenge, in part, has been Act 77, to move forward with innovations that may seem to have come about recently, but which have a long history in the state. Take a look at a 2002 report issued by Vermont's High School Task Force, and you'll find many of the components of the recent legislation. Going back even further, Vermont might be said to be the birthplace in the U.S. of personalized learning when in 1965, Tim Pitkin, the founding president of Goddard College, who was influenced by Dewey's thought, convened the presidents of nine other liberal arts institutions from across Vermont and the nation to discuss cooperation in educational innovation and

experimentation. They formed a consortium known as the Union for Research and Experimentation in Higher Education. This visionary group of progressive educators birthed plans for the “utopian university system” that came to be known as the University Without Walls, a nationwide confederation of undergraduate degree granting programs where students could design their own learning, choose their own teachers, and gain college credit for a variety of non-conventional academic experiences, which might include work, travel, volunteer service, political activism, the arts and performance, or spiritual exploration. The organizing concepts uniting these diverse, geographically dispersed programs were the ideas that learning need not be restricted to classrooms, but could happen in the community, that real life experiences, not just the academic disciplines, held value and importance in the learning process, that practicing professionals outside of academic institutions could contribute significantly to a student’s development, and that we needed to find new and more meaningful ways to document and evaluate student learning. In those days, these were truly radical ideas in higher education, which was very much bound by academic tradition. They are still somewhat radical ideas in K-12 education, more bound by convention and bureaucratic structures than private colleges, but Act 77 definitely paves the way for this transformation.

Though personalized learning is taking shape differently in different contexts, there are three identifying characteristics in state policy; I’ll return for a moment to those three pillars:

1) **Personalized Learning Plans**, required now by law for all students grades 7-12, are supposed to identify the unique academic *and experiential* opportunities necessary for individual students to complete secondary school successfully and be well prepared for

college or career; I would add “life” to that equation. Students work closely with advisors (and parents) who help them shape learning plans and curriculum maps that are customized to their interests and vocational plans. The resources of school and community are supposed to be mobilized to assist each student in carrying out their plans.

2) Proficiency-based Graduation Requirements, known in education lingo as PBGR’s, replace Carnegie units, mandated courses, and seat time with “proficiency demonstration” systems. Students, parents and teachers collaboratively set individual learning goals that are aligned with “transferable skills,” a set of general state standards calling for clear and effective communication, self-direction, creative and practical problem-solving, responsible and involved citizenship, and informed and integrative thinking. Students not only set their academic goals, they determine the rate and speed of their learning. Failure is no longer supposed to be an option, as each individual continues towards mastery at his or her own pace.

3) Flexible Pathways to Graduation recognizes that there are many different roads towards college or career readiness. With personalized learning, students are no longer limited to sitting in classrooms, but are free to design their own learning experiences in the community, in collaboration with teachers, parents, and community members. Internships, mentorships, service learning, employment, community-based action research, and participation in arts, activism, and sports outside the school all constitute worthy, credit-bearing experiences that can lead towards proficiencies. Online and blended learning opportunities can play a part, especially in remote rural areas. Qualified students can

partake in early college and dual enrollment opportunities in which they receive both high school and college credit concurrently and could conceivably graduate from high school with an associate's degree, ready to enter the workforce.

Personalized learning challenges all aspects of the traditional educational model, shifting from a teacher-led classroom to a student-directed, teacher-facilitated model. This requires major changes in understanding how students learn, what the role of teachers should be, how knowledge should be organized and accessed, and how learning should be assessed. The power of the 'personalized learning paradigm' is that it calls upon learners to set and attain their own academic and career goals and participate fully in the design of a curriculum of relevance and meaning to their lives, and it calls upon educators to provide the necessary supports and structures for them to succeed in this. I have been researching this initiative for the past five years, carrying out interviews with current students, graduates, parents, community mentors, and educators. I don't want to understate the challenges and difficulties faced by people attempting a systems change of such magnitude in what are perhaps our most conservative, inertia-bound institutions – schools. However, there is also great excitement as people come to understand the reality that our conventional way of educating students - discipline-based courses, textbooks, standardized tests, and Carnegie units – is not only inconsistent with what we now know about how people learn, it is an inadequate template for preparing people for the complexity and indeterminacy of the 21st century. A consensus is emerging in the research (see Clarke, 2013) about how schools need to change to really engage students and to keep pace with the explosion of information available to us with advances in digital technologies, and a careful reading of these points leads us back to Dewey:

- Students need to be at the center of their learning, with increasing choice, autonomy, and decision-making about what they learn and how they go about it.
- Learning tasks should connect with students' emerging interests, curiosities, questions, and passions.
- Learning should be characterized by interdisciplinary, integrated projects and authentic, meaningful tasks.
- Assessment should be formative, collaborative, and grounded in performances and exhibitions of learning.
- The student portfolio should be a repository of self-chosen work by which the student demonstrates what they have learned and how they have grown.
- Young people should have access to a wide range of mentors, both in the school and in the wider community.
- Advising students, building relationships with them, and connecting them to resources in the community should be as important to teachers' work as curriculum planning and instruction.
- Parents are important partners in the development of young people's learning plans.

Dewey was a creature of his time, albeit a visionary creature. He believed in progress, the preeminence of democracy as a superior form of political organization, the role of inquiry in human life, the fundamental sociability of humans, and the faith that people can, through the exercise of intelligence and good will, transform social conditions such as greed, oppression, and corruption into a society of compassion, cooperation and equality.

If I may be so bold as to imagine what Dewey would think about our progress towards these goals in the U.S. one hundred and two years since *Democracy and Education* was first published, I suspect he would be sorely disappointed. He might generously say that democratization is a work in progress, a vision that has been incompletely realized. Or he might more boldly posit that given the many delusions entertained by some people in the U.S. – that our planet is 6,000 years old, that climate change is a hoax, that investing in a lottery ticket is sound financial planning, or that President Obama was a Muslim socialist – that democracy and in fact, intelligence, are both endangered species. He would surely decry our seeming inability to dialogue across our differences, and see our acute political polarization as a threat to democratic processes. He might wonder why, after 100 years, his profound ideas about education and democracy have not taken hold. Dewey was not an armchair academic. He hoped to see his ideas translated into practice, and that these might influence the course of history towards more democratic social practices. Yet his ideas about education, though periodically influential, have failed to seriously challenge Cubberley's standardized management paradigm. So, what might Dewey have to say about our Act 77, a model with the potential to revolutionize the entrenched system? What follows are five problem-situations and questions that have emerged in my own research, which might merit his consideration:

1) The Cultivation of Democratic Community

While Dewey proposed that the classroom should in every way model itself after the community, the personalized learning movement goes further in that it acknowledges the community itself as a component of the classroom. In order for this to be successful,

businesses and the non-profit sector, as well as individuals with knowledge to share must respond with the resources, skills, expertise, time, and interest to contribute in significantly expanded ways to the education of young people. I think our esteemed philosopher might applaud the possibility of this robust relationship between the school and society, however, he might note, as he did during his lifetime, that the idea of community itself was a yet unrealized ideal (see Brosio, 1972). Scholars such as Robert Bellah (1985) have documented the ways in which our communities are losing their coherence and meaning, and point to individualism, isolation and fragmentation as root causes of the turn away from participation in public life. With the loosening of the boundaries between school and community, my hope is that a new generation of citizens might become more firmly rooted in community life, and be better equipped to engage in the forms of problem-solving inquiry that Dewey envisioned. In *The Public and its Problems*, Dewey stated that “Unless local communal life can be restored, the public cannot solve its more urgent problems” (1927, p. 216). And we do indeed face urgent problems. Vermont may be riper for this form of community development than most places, with its small size, tradition of democratic town meetings, thick webs of relationships, and perhaps more shared values than many places in the U.S. So, my first question for us is:

How can schools and communities forge the kinds of alliances necessary to rebuild “communal life” in ways that enhance learning, provide students a deep sense of connection and belonging, and enable them to make meaningful contributions to public life?

2) The Perils of the Personalized Playlist

Venture capitalists are investing billions in personalized learning software that they claim will transform classrooms (see Wexler, 2018). This version of personalization sits

uncomfortably close to the business model that consists of tailoring services and products to accommodate specific individuals. We are in the thrall of personalization when we are targeted with web-based advertisements that appear to know our deepest desires. This “semantic capitalism” is a key ingredient in Internet recommender systems that analyze our preferences through data mining and steer us towards books or films that we may enjoy, based on past purchases. In this sense, personalization might be understood as merely the latest weapon in the arsenal of late capitalism, branding our young people’s interests and mining their data in order to squeeze maximum profits out of future consumers.

Personalized learning, to many minds, depends on the increased utilization of digital technology for distance learning, blended learning, and as an organizing tool to track student progress in an individualized system. Software is a seductive fix, especially programs that promise to liberate teachers from the routine tasks that take up much of their day, to customize learning to each individual student’s needs, to offer content unavailable in small, isolated schools, and to replicate the fast-paced, hyper stimulating media environments that young people have grown accustomed to. It is perhaps telling that the designers of these products are tending to restrict their own children’s access to them, and limit or eliminate their children’s screen time, but that has not interfered with the rush to develop and market new products and to maximize profits.

Dewey had no way of anticipating the Internet, but we can surmise some of the questions he might pose when examining the educative relationship between young people and computers. Just as he subordinated book learning and subject matter to a status below embodied experience, he might ask if the technology was playing a primary or a supporting

role in the learning experience. I suspect he might worry about the many hours young people now spend affixed to their tiny screens, and propose that their precious time might be better spent observing nature in the fields and forests, communicating with other young people, playing active games, turning their hands to productive craft, cooking, gardening, art-making, or designing buildings or tools. I suspect he *would* appreciate the 3-D printer, however, and advocate for one in every school and I like to think he would applaud such innovations as Maker's Spaces. He would surely want young people to critically examine the impact of any technology on the environment, on thinking and on the social world. One of many questions that comes to mind concerning these perils:

*Question: How might we determine the appropriate role of technology in the personalized learning paradigm, so that it becomes not **a substitute** for experience, but a **supplement** to it?*

3) From Individual to Ecological Intelligence

Related to the former two points, the importance of community and the appropriate use of especially digital technology, is the problem of what some scholars call “psychologized individualism” in schools. This refers to the unexamined assumptions around the role of education to cultivate “autonomy, uniqueness, individuality, privacy, good self esteem and self confidence” (Kusserow, p. 460), assumptions that are related to pedagogies of personal expression, structures of competition and the emphasis on individual achievement. Despite some attempts to institutionalize various forms of cooperative learning, much of our modern education takes place in isolation, and if the purveyors of personalized learning software realize their vision, even more time will be spent in an enclosed bubble in front of a private screen, proceeding at one's own

individualized pace through common content. This vision negates the understanding of the individual as a social being, and neglects the importance of human interaction in the development of intelligence. The contemporary idea of social intelligence, often coupled with emotional intelligence, is a limited one, focusing on how to listen well, how to get along, and how to build relationships. While these things are important, most discussions of social intelligence neglect to examine the ways in which cognition is sharpened by the encounter with ideas that contrast with one's own, how ideas take shape through dialogue, how dialogue can force us to confront our biases and challenge habitual thinking, and how problem-solving in a society with democratic ideals is necessarily a collective effort. Even more important as we begin to comprehend the urgency of helping young people develop ecological intelligence, we must recognize the ways in which books and computer-mediated information marginalize the importance of contextual thinking and the networks of relationships involved in the production of knowledge (See Bowers, 2010). While the jury is still very much out on whether or not Dewey can be regarded as an "ecological thinker," and I tend to side with those who see some of him wanting in this regard, he certainly was a critic of isolated individualism. "Shared experience" he stated, "is the greatest of human goods" (in Jay, p. 295).

Question: How do we swim against the currents of hyper-individualism and consumerism to ensure that the cultivation of sociability, critical discussion, cooperative learning and collaboration are not pushed aside in the interests of highly individualized pursuits that have no potential social value?

4) The School-to-College-or-Career Pipeline

In their rush to ensure that their students are “college and career ready” some advocates of personalized learning are placing a developmentally inappropriate emphasis on early identification of interests that lead directly to higher education or employment. Young people are pushed to identify clear goals before they have had a chance to even explore their emergent interests and curiosities. This presents a number of problems. First, the problem of early tracking into career paths that may feel familiar to students, but which don’t allow for the kinds of possibilities that arise with wide and deep exposure to multiple options. Our educational system has long been beholden to the interests of business and economics, at the expense of the cultivation of creative and intellectually engaged learners. More importantly, given the uncertainties and unpredictability of the future, we really don’t know what it means to be “career ready.” In terms of college readiness, it must be noted that lovely an idea as it is, college is not the best option for everyone, and it is putting an increasingly high financial burden on many young people with minimal guaranteed returns. Dewey was clear that vocational education should not be a poor second cousin to college, and in fact, he argued for the non-hierarchical unification of “academic” and “vocational” learning, so as to lessen the undemocratic division of social classes. We ought not to discourage young people from cultivating alternative post high school paths: self-organizing, tuition-free universities, volunteer service, political activism, travel, work, life. The effects of such a pluralistic valuing of interests and pursuits would have more than individual benefits; philosopher Elizabeth Anderson, in her intriguing work on freedom and equality, suggests that “one basic way to expand equality is by expanding the range of valued fields within a society” (in Heller, 2018). Encouraging students’ multiple and flexible

postsecondary pathways could lead to a more equitable society. In one of J.D.'s more quotable quotes, he warns us to "Cease conceiving of education as mere preparation for later life, and make it the full meaning of the present life" (1967, p. 50). He might ask of us this question:

Question: How can we not become enslaved to the demands of "college and career readiness" and allow for the free play of inquiry and exploration, so that young people have opportunities to entertain many options for their futures?

5) The Elusive Quest for Equity

Personalized learning is enhanced when a student has access to social capital, networks of human and material resources necessary to support learning beyond the classroom.

Wealthier students have more access through family connections and resources to quality internships, travel abroad, music, dance, and art lessons, and other high-quality learning experiences that can, in this new paradigm, constitute the "curriculum." A big question for me, as well as the many other Vermont educators I know who are working on this problem, concerns how schools can mitigate the opportunity differential between students with these enhanced life chances, and those who for reasons of rural isolation, newcomer status, race, ability, language, or income, do not share the same possibilities. Dewey was clear, that "In short, each one is equally an individual and entitled to equal opportunity of development of his own capacities" (in Gouinlock, 1994, p. 266). What follows is only one of my many questions concerning equity.

Question: How will we equalize the educational opportunities available to all of our young people, so that every student can benefit equitably from enhanced and extended learning experiences?

Conclusion

Schools cannot solve the problems of democracy, and the problems of our democracy are enormous at this point in our history: what to do about global warming, species extinction, income inequality, human rights, racial injustice, mass incarceration, fake news, and the many people displaced from their homelands due to conflicts, poverty, or the ravages of a changing climate. Young people are the inheritors of this world we have created, and they have a vested interest in creating a more livable world than we have left them. In my experience, many young people are eager to get to work on these problems, and conventional schooling has not provided them with the outlets they need to fully exercise their intelligence. A number of recent studies suggest that young people yearn to find meaning and purpose in their lives, and to make a better world in terms of the environment and social justice. Personalized learning has the potential to connect young people with the means and the resources to get engaged with issues that they care about.

But perhaps more important, this approach to teaching and learning could maximize the utilization of the intellectual capital and practical wisdom of our Vermont communities, bringing forth as teachers folks who are on the cutting edges of social transformation, whether artists, solar engineers, musicians, organic farmers, yoga teachers, community organizers, socially responsible business owners, computer software designers, or holistic healers. We need to think outside the boundaries that have constrained our imaginations about teaching and learning. In contrast to mainstream trends in education—a national curricula with common standards and rigid systems of accountability—I get excited about diversified, decentralized, localized ecosystems of *personalized* educational opportunities. Just as small-scale, diversified agricultural systems are more resilient than industrialized,

monoculture systems, a system of schooling that is responsive to local and individual needs and interests may prove more resilient than standardized, industrial age schooling in the face of the enormous changes bearing down upon us.

We have only to decide that we wish to direct human intelligence towards ends that support meaningful human development, creativity, social justice, and the desire to live in mutually beneficial and sustainable ways with the rest of the planet. We must have the vision to prepare young people to imagine and design the tools and practices and systems capable of responding to our rapidly changing circumstances. Creativity is the new currency, say some futurists. And the cultivation of creative thinking, which includes the identification of problems, the discovery of personal relevance, experimentation, and engagement with multiple perspectives (Booth & Gambill), is absolutely central to the personalized learning paradigm. The successful people of the future will need to be nimble learners, forging their own paths, self-teaching, learning from peers, and networking in ad hoc groups. We have few models for what this looks like, but we need to adopt Dewey's experimental mindset and put our intelligences to work on the problem. We need to rid ourselves of the standardized management paradigm (the legacy of Ellwood Cubberley), so that in its place might emerge a genuine "learning society," in which people individually and collaboratively pursue those things they are passionately interested in, and declare their responsibility to one another, to the greater community of life, and to future generations. Act 77, and its embrace of personalized learning offers opportunities for reaching outside the boundaries of the school walls to foster the capacities and dispositions students need to become active, compassionate citizens. I believe that young people fortunate enough to have such educational experiences are likely to develop an interest in

what Benjamin Barber calls “strong democracy,” and to be creators of the loving and just society that Dewey hoped for.

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