RECONSTRUCTING DEWEYAN DEMOCRATIC EDUCATION FOR A GLOBALIZING WORLD

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Abstract. As democratic citizenship education gains importance worldwide, one wonders whether common civic education practices in the United States, such as mock elections, are adequate models for other countries, or whether they fall short of realizing the goal of promoting democracy in different regions and cultures. Despite various controversies, one fundamental question remains: How should we teach democracy? Should we teach it as a system of government or as a way of life? Jessica Ching-Sze Wang finds inspiration in Dewey’s life and works. She draws on Dewey’s experience during the First World War and his insights into the connection between democracy and education to reconstruct a culturally and morally robust form of democratic education, as opposed to the politically dominated one currently being practiced. Wang concludes that Deweyan democratic education thus reconstructed can help us better realize democracy as a way of life for our globalizing world.

Making the World Safe for Democracy

Nearly a century ago, the First World War was fought to “make the world safe for democracy.”[1] Even though the last two decades have witnessed the downfall of many authoritarian regimes and the emergence of free, democratic societies, the world apparently has not been made any safer, and wars continue to be fought in the name of democracy. This fact points to some important questions: Is democracy a universal value or a Western anomaly?[2] Or is it “the God that failed” and the source of decivilization?[3] The conflict between those who insist on spreading the “gospel of democracy” and those who resist being “freed” has led to what Samuel Huntington aptly calls the clash of civilizations.[4] Clearly, the key to resolving this clash does not lie in increased military budgets but in a vigorous intellectual inquiry into the moral significance of democracy as a way of life. Most importantly, this inquiry has significant implications for how we envision and foster democratic education in various parts of the world — hopefully, to make the world really safe for democracy.

This intellectual endeavor has already been undertaken by the American philosopher John Dewey. Writing in the 1920s, Dewey foresaw a steady and recognizable trend toward democratic governance, but he did not feel vainglorious about it. Instead, Dewey cautioned against the “conceit” of those “advanced”

1. In his speech to Congress on April 2, 1917, U.S. president Woodrow Wilson declared war on Germany, adding, “The world must be made safe for democracy.”
nation-states for assuming that “they were so near the apex of evolution as to wear the crown of statehood.”

Dewey’s greatest insight lies in his insistence that the meaning of democracy “must be continually explored afresh; it has to be constantly discovered, and rediscovered, remade and reorganized.” Although Dewey did not provide a cookbook recipe for democracy, he left two enduring legacies that remain profound and relevant today, namely, liberating democracy from established political thinking and linking democracy more broadly to education and culture. Dewey’s first legacy has been completely ignored, and democracy has become like a god that cannot be questioned. Dewey’s second legacy, fortunately, has resonated with many generations of enthusiastic educators who believe in education as “the fundamental method of social progress and reform,” despite the difficulty of the task.

The close association of education with democracy is a familiar fact in the history of American public schooling. Long before Dewey, Thomas Jefferson and Horace Mann both recognized the importance of education for democracy. However, as Gert Biesta argues, common assumptions about education for or through democracy often rest on instrumentalist reasoning. Thus education becomes subservient to the democratic state. In this line of thought, democratic education means democratic citizenship education, which aims to equip students with the required knowledge, skills, and attitudes to be effective citizens of a democracy. Accordingly, students should gain knowledge about the institutions of democratic government and the rights and responsibilities of individual citizens, acquire skills in communication and deliberation, and take pride in their country. Moreover, schools often hold mock elections for students to directly experience and participate in the democratic process. Mock election is the most regular form of extracurricular activity used to promote democracy in school. However, this model of democratic citizenship education has apparently failed in its goal of producing citizens who regularly go to the polls and take part in deciding


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community matters. Regardless of the frequent setbacks of democratic citizenship education, a wide consensus still exists in the United States that schools are responsible for teaching about democracy and preparing students to participate in the democratic process. In addition, nearly two-thirds of all Americans think that schools should teach that “democracy is the best form of government.”

In recent years in the United States, the issue of the relation between education and democracy has taken on a new dimension and a new urgency owing to the approach to education of George W. Bush’s administration, as evidenced by the No Child Left Behind Act. The price paid is democracy left behind. As John Goodlad remarks, the American system of public schooling has long lost its commitment to democracy and has succumbed to the pressure of economic utility and the demands of consumer satisfaction. The atrophy of democracy and the interest in returning it to the center stage of public schooling are clearly indicated by the large number of recent publications related to this topic. Indeed, many scholars and educators have called for concerted action to strengthen democracy in schools by emphasizing critical thinking, public deliberation, service learning, constructivist teaching, critical pedagogy, and critical teacher education.

The problem of democratic citizenship education is no longer just an American one, but has increasingly become an international challenge. An interesting contrast is worth drawing: Whereas educators from established democracies such as the United States are struggling to revive democracy through innovative programs and pedagogies, educators from new and emerging democracies are seeking to implement U.S.-originated policies and programs to produce a democratic citizenry. One wonders whether U.S.-originated practices, when applied outside the American context, lead to a “distortion” or a “skeletal appropriation with little regard for democratic substance.” Can U.S.-based

10. Ibid., 67.
programs of democratic citizenship education be an adequate model for other new and emerging democracies? Or should we encourage local innovations of democratic education that seek to address local problems and needs — even though they may look very different from anything we normally associate with “democracy”? Indeed, as the practice of democratic citizenship education becomes more widespread, its meaning and relevance may become more questionable and problematic.

The challenge of democratic citizenship education in the international context is evident in the case of international donor agencies’ increased involvement in civic education programs that aim to promote democratic governance in developing countries. However, donor agencies often have a narrow and superficial conception of democracy promotion, focusing on the knowledge domain of civic education but neglecting the cultivation of civic skills and virtues. What they promote is “big D” democracy, which benefits the local elites, not “small d” democracy, which “relates to local-level problem-solving around issues of daily concern to the disadvantaged.” Donor agencies also tend to make local institutions mirror the preconceived images of the donors rather than help local people make distinctive decisions about their particular problems. Therefore, one finds a “startling sameness” in the activities donor agencies organize and the language they use “across countries and even continents.”

Ayman Alsayed’s case study of donor efforts in Palestine concludes that “civic education should not be based on a minimalist conception of democracy and its related focus on behavior such as voting, but should foster skills for analysis and problem solving, and provide people with experience in political action for change.” Apart from donor activities in developing countries, the international challenge of democratic citizenship education is also evident in cases of large-scale civic education reform in some new and emerging democracies. In their case studies of Mexico and Indonesia, Bradley Levinson and Margaret Sutton discuss how dominant models of U.S. civic education get redefined, reinterpreted, and transformed through different cultural, political, or religious matrices.

In this essay, I would like to move the topic of democratic education beyond the American scene to an international arena in which the issues are more

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complicated. This will help us to see more clearly the problem of democratic education under the impact of the sweeping trend toward globalization and universalization. I intend to delineate the possibility of a culturally and morally robust vision of democratic education, as opposed to a politically dominated one. As Sor-hoon Tan argues, “citizenship must be more than a legal status” that allows us to enjoy basic rights and have a say in government; it “needs a cultural component so that being a citizen could be an integral part of who we are as well as how we choose and act.”

However, I am not concerned with providing specific suggestions for macro institutional reform that can be readily implemented; I do not think any such suggestions will be meaningful without a clear conception of democratic education as its guide. Undoubtedly, John Dewey’s life and works are a profound source of inspiration. Dewey not only talked about democracy, but also lived a life based on democratic values and principles. He thought hard and deep about the various meanings of democracy in relation to the economic, social, cultural, educational, religious, and political problems of his day — both at home and abroad. Since Dewey had visited many different parts of the world, his thinking is internationally oriented and culturally informed rather than narrowly nationalistic. Most importantly, Dewey’s fundamental approach is a philosophical one. To create a viable vision of democratic education for a globalizing world, we can follow Dewey’s pathbreaking work to reexamine our thinking about the meaning of democracy, the meaning of education, and the connection between the two. In this Educational Theory symposium celebrating the 150th anniversary of Dewey’s birth, it should be a worthwhile topic to revisit one of Dewey’s central concerns in life and to discuss its relevance for today’s globalizing world.

**The Meaning of Democracy**

Today it may seem commonsensical to say that democracy is more than a form of government, but essentially a way of life. It is difficult to understand all the ramifications that follow from this statement. Sometimes one cannot help but marvel at the leap of imagination and profoundness of faith in Dewey’s conception of democracy. How did he transform the Greek idea of “rule (kratos) by the people (demos)” into his own version of democracy as a moral and spiritual way of life? As he claimed, “faith in democracy is all one with faith in experience and education.” Perhaps Dewey had a magic wand. But does Dewey’s work overstretch the meaning of democracy? Would it have been better if he just dropped the term “democracy” and used another word in its place? Would it have caused less confusion and created less obscurity?


Democracy is here to stay. One cannot find a better term in the Western intellectual tradition that signifies a shared hope for a just and humane society — not until we have a new poet-prophet to enlighten us with a new term. Even so, our shared understanding of the term is still being created, and replacing ‘democracy’ with another word will not solve the problem. In fact, ‘democracy’ is adequate for the present world because it allows us to talk about our hope for a just and peaceful human society without having to refer to any established religions.

Dewey proclaimed, ‘the democratic ideal, in its human significance, provides us with a [unified] frame of reference.’23 Despite its controversial nature, this unity itself, ‘in its human significance,’ is precious. Nevertheless, Dewey certainly did not mean that democratic political institutions ‘constitute a model upon which a clear idea of democracy can be based.’ Rather, he said, ‘the frame is not filled in, either in society at large or in its significance for education.’ For Dewey, the problem is to ‘find out what democracy means in its total range of concrete applications; economic, domestic, international, religious, cultural, and political.’24 On another occasion, Dewey admitted that he just did not know the answer: ‘I make this humiliating confession the more readily because I suspect that nobody else knows what it means in full concrete detail.’25

At least Dewey knew that he did not fully know. Such insight constitutes true knowing for Confucius as well as for Socrates, who always claimed that he did not know anything except his own ignorance.26 Unlike Socrates, Dewey was not interested in formulating universal definitions that stand for all time and that have no internal contradictions. Dewey wanted to fill in his understanding with concrete examples and details so that he could transform ideas into plans for action, test them out in real life situations, make necessary revisions, and then reconstruct and enrich his understanding. Few can reach this high intellectual and moral standard Dewey held for himself. If we could, we would also understand and embrace the meaning of democracy as indeterminate and something to be continually reconstructed.

**Democracy and Democratic Politics**

Dewey found it hard to grasp the meaning of democracy in concrete operation, but at least he was sure of one thing — the very idea of democracy has little do with democratic politics as it is practiced. Throughout his long career, Dewey’s writings contained various statements about the distinction between democracy and democratic politics, but a change in his attitude toward this distinction is worth noting.

24. Ibid. (emphasis in original).
26. Confucius wrote in the *Analects* that “To know that one knows what one knows, and to know that one doesn’t know what one doesn’t know, there lies true wisdom.”
At the beginning of his career, Dewey said that to conceive of democracy as a form of government is “like saying that home is more or less [a] geometrical arrangement of bricks and mortar.” In his *Democracy and Education*, he restated the distinction by saying that “democracy is not merely a form of government” but “a mode of associated living, of conjoint communicated experience.” Later, Dewey began to criticize democratic politics. In *Reconstruction in Philosophy*, Dewey mentioned in passing that “the identification of democracy with political democracy” is “responsible for most of its failures.”

In his later works, most notably in *The Public and Its Problems*, Dewey redefined democracy by stripping away its political connotations. According to Dewey, “regarded as an idea,” democracy “is the idea of community life itself.” He elaborated, “Wherever there is joint activity whose consequences are appreciated as good by all singular persons who take part in it, and where the realization of the good is such as to effect an energetic desire and effort to sustain it in being just because it is a good shared by all, there is insofar a community.” Dewey contended: “The clear consciousness of a communal life, in all of its manifestations, constitutes the idea of democracy” (*PIP*, 328).

To further debunk the sanctity of democratic politics, Dewey urged his readers to consider, “What has counting heads, decision by majority and the whole apparatus of traditional government” to do with important matters in community life (*PIP*, 313)? Dewey argued that “the influence upon community life of Socrates, Buddha, Jesus, Aristotle, Confucius, Homer, Virgil, Dante, St. Thomas, Shakespeare, Copernicus, Galileo, Newton, Boyle, Locke, Rousseau and countless others” has been far greater than that of anyone ever elected to government office (*PIP*, 253). Dewey even said that “one of the most regular activities” performed by elected leaders and officers “has been waging war” (*PIP*, 245). In Dewey’s mind, “the world has suffered more from leaders and authorities than from the masses” (*PIP*, 326).

In terms of the distinctions Dewey made over the years between democracy and democratic politics, his earlier focus was on pointing out the insufficiency of democratic politics to represent the idea of democracy in its entirety. His later focus, however, was on challenging the sanctity of the political system of democracy and to sever as much as possible the presumed link between democracy and democratic politics. Indeed, Dewey’s later writings are filled with frequent and overt denunciations of democratic politics — juxtaposed with his more nuanced and subtle portrayal of democracy as a moral and spiritual way of


life. Interestingly, Dewey’s impatience with the fixed processes and institutions of democratic politics is detected by his biographer, Robert Westbrook. According to him, “a familiar impatience crept into Dewey’s discussions of the institutions of political democracy in The Public and Its Problems, as if somehow consideration of such matters was really beside the point or at least not properly at the heart of a democratic philosophy.”

As Dewey approached the last few years of his life, his cautions against the blind attachment to democratic politics became all the more urgent: “we have taken democracy for granted; we have thought and acted as if our forefathers had founded it once for all.” Instead, he argued, democracy “has to be enacted anew in every generation, in every year and day, in the living relations of person to person in all social forms and institutions.” On a different occasion, Dewey repeated the same point: “To my mind, the greatest mistake that we can make about democracy is to conceive of it as something fixed, fixed in idea and fixed in its outward manifestation.” On his eightieth birthday, Dewey urged his readers again to “get rid of the habit of thinking of democracy as something institutional and external” and “to acquire the habit of treating it as a way of personal life.”

With all of these reminders and cautions, Dewey wanted to emphasize that the creation of democracy as a form of all-encompassing culture and as a personal way of life will gradually lead to better answers to the question of political governance. Therefore, instead of refining political institutions, we would do better to consolidate and revitalize local communities, since a democratic way of life is fundamental to creating better ways of democratic governance.

Now the question arises: Is it really so hard to think outside of the political box when we think about democracy? Jim Tiles provides an interesting analogy. Asking one to “stop bundling democracy with Western political systems” is like asking one to separate Explorer from the Windows Operating System. An example from one of Dewey’s critics illustrates the case in point. Philip Jackson takes issue with Dewey’s claim about the relation between democracy and education in The School and Society. Dewey said, “What the best and wisest parent wants for his own child, that must the community want for all of its children. Any other ideal for our school is narrow and unlovely; acted upon, it destroys our democracy.” Even though Jackson shares Dewey’s concern about the inequalities of schooling,

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34. This analogy is taken from the back matter Jim Tiles wrote for Democracy as Culture: Deweyan Pragmatism in a Globalizing World, eds. Sor-hoon Tan and John Whalen-Bridge (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2008).

Jackson disagrees with Dewey by saying that “I am not sure that the future of our democratic way of life depends on their [inequalities'] disappearance.” As Jackson reasons, “If it did, it would seem that by now such an effect would be evident.” He continues by saying,

I suppose the present low level of participation in national elections could be taken as a sign of the gradual erosion of the privileges and responsibilities of citizenship in a democracy, but to blame that phenomenon on the inequalities of schooling seems to me to call for a much greater inferential leap than the data warrant.36

I hope it is clear that when Dewey mentioned the danger of democracy being destroyed, he did not mean the destruction of the democratic political system, but the essence of democracy as an ethical idea. I shall return to this point later in the essay. Here it suffices to say that Jackson mistakes democracy for democratic politics and fails to understand the deeper moral implications in Dewey’s claim.

**JOHN DEWEY’S DEMOCRATIC LESSON IN THE FIRST WORLD WAR**

In fact, Dewey himself paid a high price in learning how to liberate democracy from democratic politics, especially with regard to his support for U.S. participation in the First World War. In his book *Media Control*, Noam Chomsky chides Dewey for falling prey to state propaganda in his support for the war and for failing to meet the responsibilities of intellectuals to expose the lies put forth by the American government.37 Thus it is evident that at that time Dewey was still quite inexperienced in international politics.

However, unlike those single-minded patriots who endorsed such high-sounding slogans as saving democracy for America, Dewey was concerned about a democratic world at large, not merely a democratic America. Dewey eschewed isolationism and embraced internationalism because he understood that the destiny of any one nation in the modern age was invariably linked to the rest of the world. Therefore, he saw an urgent need to establish a political body that would mediate disputes and facilitate communication among nations. Dewey considered the war as a legitimate means for realizing the possibility of “a democratically ordered international government” and “the consequent beginning of the end of war.”38

Throughout the war years, the idea of a democratic international government dominated Dewey’s thinking about internationalism, for which he can be rightly characterized as politically rather than culturally oriented. His writings at the time implicitly assume that international democracy begins with a democratic international government. Dewey later realized that he should not have taken political leaders’ professed ideals for granted, stating that “the type of man


brought forward by war is not the type needed to make peace.’’ He also learned that the prospect for international democracy does not lie so much in the establishment of political organizations, but more importantly in the foundation of cultural understanding. Dewey expressed this realization vividly when he wrote that Americans had a genuine “preference for” but “not adequately enlightened” attachment to “democracy in politics” and to the ideals of “responsible government and publicity.”

Dewey’s support for the war taught him a huge lesson and spurred him to rethink what international democracy really means and entails. Dewey later shifted his attention to the cultural, as opposed to the political, manifestations of internationalism, advocating the importance of intercultural understanding for avoiding international conflicts. For example, he wrote that “the atmosphere that makes international troubles inflammable is the product of deep-seated misunderstandings that have their origin in different philosophies of life.” He foresaw these misunderstandings as being greater “between oriental and occidental peoples.” The way to “fire-proof international relations” is to “begin with an attempt at an honest understanding of one another’s philosophy of life.” In order to understand one another, we need to liberate ourselves from our own accustomed habits of thought and feeling. This is why Dewey continually urged his readers to liberate their thinking about democracy from established political systems.

However, liberation of thought is always difficult, particularly where our deepest thoughts and most cherished ideas are concerned. Yet this task is extremely important for educators. For, if we fail in the task, we will continue teaching democracy merely as democratic politics and end up planting in future generations more seeds of misunderstanding and conflict.

**Teaching Democracy as Democratic Politics**

A recent award-winning Chinese documentary, Please Vote for Me, tells just such an alarming story. As part of a documentary project using ten films to start a global conversation about democracy, Please Vote for Me has been aired in forty countries in the world, including the United States. The film is shot in an elementary school in Wuhan, the capital city of China’s Hubei Province. The story is about a class of third graders holding a democratic election to select a

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39. Ibid., 182.


43. Please Vote for Me also won the 2008 Grierson Award in London. For more information about this film, see the Web site at http://pleasevoteforme.org/.
class monitor, the first time in their schooling they have had such an activity. Three candidates were chosen by the teacher to compete against each other for the prestigious position. In the film, the children were completely at a loss when asked about what democracy is and what it means to vote. Then they started to engage in a series of malicious verbal attacks, mean-spirited tricks, and even bribery, all in an effort to win the election. One male candidate said to his friend, “Vote for me. I'll make you Study Committee Officer.” He also asked his supporters to heckle other candidates when they were making their campaign speeches. After showing how these children behaved meanly toward each other during the campaign and how their parents provided them with tips and tricks to win the election, the documentary presents a surprise ending: an originally weaker candidate wins the election because of the holiday gifts his father bought in his name for the entire class and distributed to the class just minutes before the voting began.

For the producers, the purpose of this documentary is to understand how democracy would be carried out in China, if it ever becomes a reality. The film asks the audience to ponder whether democracy is a universal value that fits human nature and whether elections invariably lead to manipulation. For me, this documentary raises other serious questions: What idea of democracy gets taught and transmitted in schools? Do we want our children to believe that democracy is tantamount to political elections?

In Taiwan, “campus democracy” has been a trendy concept for many years, and is often associated with mock elections in which students vote for “Little City Mayor” or “Best Student of the Year.” However, scandals relating to these annual school events have sometimes been reported in the news. One news story describes these elections as “competitions among the rich,” in which the candidates’ parents were so anxious to help their children win the elections that they spent huge sums of money creating and distributing campaign flyers. These flyers contained absurd slander and false accusations that caused the school to become deeply divided into oppositional camps. To prevent future conflicts of this sort, the Ministry of Education even attempted to set limits on campaign budgets so that these student elections would not be about money.44 Another news story reports that a high school civic education teacher threatened to give students lower grades if they failed to go to the polls to vote for their favorite candidate.45

American readers may think that these are distorted practices of democratic education in China and Taiwan that have no immediate relevance for American education. My purpose in presenting these examples is not to show whose democratic citizenship education is more advanced or backward. My intention is to provoke a few questions: How do we teach about democracy in schools? Do we,

in one way or another, teach democracy as democratic politics? And do we teach children that democracy is the best form of government?

As noted earlier, democratic education in mainstream educational research and in actual school practice is closely associated with civic education. Dewey’s broader and more enlightened understanding of democracy and education exerts little influence, which is understandable. As Westbrook notes, “Dewey himself... had relatively little to say about the particulars of civic education, though most of what he had to say about ‘democracy and education’ is at least indirectly relevant.” Westbrok also asserts that Deweyan democrats have not paid sufficient attention to civic education in schools. The “most satisfying extended treatment” Westbrook found is Richard Battistoni’s *Public Schooling and the Education of Democratic Citizens*. According to Battistoni, the goal of education for democratic citizenship should be to develop “in students skills and attitudes necessary to direct participation in political affairs, as well as a set of substantive values underlying our political institutions and procedures.” Westbrook believes that the critical task awaiting Deweyan democratic educators is “to figure out what civic education in the public schools for a more expansive citizenship would look like.”

I wonder whether we can create “a more expansive citizenship” for democracy if we continue to think along the lines of “political affairs” and “political institutions and procedures”; if we continue to allow democratic politics to direct and dominate our thinking about democratic education; and if we continue to emphasize student councils, student autonomy, and public deliberation as the quintessential elements of democratic education. I wonder whether Dewey would consider student government as the essential manifestation of democratic education, and whether he would regard public deliberation as the best way to create and consolidate a community.

In fact, Dewey rarely talked about student government in his writings, nor did he establish a student parliament in his laboratory school. What seems more important for Dewey, as far as democracy is concerned, is that the entire school is organized around the idea of community life. In this respect, it seems rather artificial to set up a student parliament if it is not really necessary. Communication and deliberation develop naturally when students learn to work with others to solve problems and complete tasks. Moreover, without “a clear consciousness of a communal life” as its basis, public deliberation can often lead to fierce debate between oppositional groups who are only interested in making themselves heard rather than hearing others. This form of deliberation tends to divide rather than unite a community.

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49. One finds a vivid illustration of the workings of student government in A.S. Neill’s Summerhill School, not in Dewey’s lab school.
community. As Catherine Audard points out, “deliberative democracy runs a serious risk of providing only a non-critical defense of dialogical virtues,” forgetting that “individual morality” is a determining factor in the outcome of deliberation.50

In addition, if we always rely on formal institutions and external mechanisms, and ignore informal, private interactions and exchanges between people on a daily basis, we will always fall short of including everyone in the democratic process. Gert Biesta also indicates that public deliberation is “only one of the ways in which individuals can act, can be a subject, can come into the world — and it is not necessarily the way that fits everyone.”51 Besides, deliberation not only may not suit everyone, but it can never include everyone. As Aaron Schutz indicates, “we do not live in a world where all hold equal power, where everyone’s voice will be ‘listened’ to equally.”52 However, should we come to Schutz’s conclusion that “Dewey's model of democratic schools” cannot empower minority groups, and “is inadequate to serve the varied needs of a diverse and contentious society”?53 Or should we ask: Do we adequately understand Dewey’s vision of democratic education?

Reconstructing Deweyan Democratic Education for a Globalizing World: The Creative Task Before Us

Dewey never used the term “democratic education.” Instead, he wrote about “the democratic conception in education”; in fact, this is the title of chapter 7 in Democracy and Education. This choice may have been deliberate and is significant for the discussion of our theme. First of all, using the term “democratic education” may run the risk of narrowing his vision, and the vision Dewey intended to express by “democracy and education” encompasses far more than democratic citizenship education. In fact, Dewey was not concerned about producing dutiful citizens for a democratic state, for he was well aware of the potential danger of nationalistic sentiments in causing international conflicts. Dewey was concerned about the creation of fully developed human beings for a flourishing human community. Moreover, the term “democratic education,” like moral education, peace education, or environmental education, makes one think of a particular academic curriculum or program. However, for Dewey democracy is not an academic subject, but a moral outlook on life. Democratizing our lives is more important than merely democratizing schools. In this respect, Lynda Stone may be right to posit a missing link in the triad she calls “Dewey, democracy, and schools.”54

51. Biesta, Beyond Learning, 140.
53. Ibid., 267.
However, I choose to write about Deweyan democratic education because I think it is important to reconstruct Dewey in our own terms and for our own times. As Jim Garrison notes, “Those who claim to understand Dewey yet do not reconstruct him for their time, place and purpose fail to appreciate what was perhaps his most profound message.” Even though I do not adopt the same expression as Dewey, I embrace Dewey’s unique rendering of democracy as synonymous with education, and I attempt to expand on his profound insights about democracy as a moral and spiritual way of life. In the concluding section of this essay, I will delineate some moral principles concerning Deweyan democratic education. I hope that with these general moral principles in mind, we can create a more viable vision of democratic education for a globalizing world.

The first place, Deweyan democratic education is learning from life itself. As Dewey explained, it requires “the essential moral interest” to learn “from all the contacts of life.” This moral interest lies in the belief that “the very process of living together educates.” One cannot complete this education alone; we need others to stimulate us, challenge us, and help us along the way. Dewey wrote about the need to receive and incorporate others into our own lives, including those we love or hate, those with whom we agree or disagree, and those with whom we spend a lifetime or only a few minutes. To quote Dewey, we should treat “those who disagree — even profoundly — with us as those from whom we may learn, and in so far, as friends” because it is “a means of enriching one’s own life-experience.” As David Hansen contends, for Dewey “the art of living and the art of democracy are symbiotic.” The moral art of democratic living demands that we not turn away from interpersonal problems or social disputes but accept them as opportunities for learning. It demands that we artfully turn conflict into harmony, narrowness into openness, and shallowness into depth.

Second, Deweyan democratic education is an education about ourselves and our humanity. We learn many things from our association with others, but the most important thing we learn about is ourselves — our strengths or weaknesses, our intelligence or prejudice, our fear or desire, our joy or sorrow. In short, we learn about our humanness. Dewey often warned against the illusion that one can complete one’s education — meaning learning to be more fully human — by ignoring and excluding others. As Dewey contended, “An environment in which some are limited will always in reaction create conditions that prevent the full development even of those who fancy they enjoy complete freedom for unhindered

growth." This relates to our earlier discussion of Dewey’s claim in *The School and Society* about the connection between democracy and education. When Dewey referred to the danger of democracy being destroyed if we cannot provide quality education for all, he intended to emphasize the symbiotic relation between one’s own education and that of others — a kind of mutual enrichment of life.

This enrichment of life does not mean merely acquiring more knowledge or acquiring more skills, but increasing the depth and fullness of our humanity. We tend to live superficial lives if we do not care about the education we gain through our interactions with others; as a result, our humanity remains stunted. Let me give a simple example. If I see a shabby old man fall off his motorcycle in the middle of the road (because the motorcycle was overloaded with goods he intends to sell in the market) and yet do not bother to help him get up, I have lost an opportunity to learn to be kind and sensitive to another’s suffering. I also run the risk of becoming accustomed to insensitivity or indifference toward the suffering of others. In my failure to help the old man, my humanity is in some way arrested or impaired. On the contrary, if I rush to give the old man a helping hand and receive a grateful look in return, my humanity is enhanced and made fuller because I am more likely to help others in similar situations in the future.

In fact, all of the people Dewey pointed to as having made a tremendous impact upon community life — such as Buddha, Jesus, Aristotle, Confucius, Shakespeare, Copernicus, Galileo, and Newton — serve to inspire others because each of them in his own way completed his education from life itself and lived a fully developed human life. I believe Dewey himself was one of them.

Last, Deweyan democratic education allows everyone to make a contribution in creating a more just and humane world. This requires that we shift the language of rights and responsibilities to that of communication, cooperation, and contribution. Dewey stressed the importance of communication by saying that “democracy is not concerned with freaks or geniuses or heroes or divine leaders but with associated individuals in which each by intercourse with others somehow makes the life of each more distinctive.” The democratic way of life also values “the habits of amicable cooperation” as “a priceless addition to life.” Finally, the idea of contribution is no less important than that of communication and cooperation, as can be seen in many places of Dewey’s writings.

In “The Need for a Philosophy of Education,” Dewey argued, “A society of free individuals in which all, in doing each his own work, contribute to the liberation and enrichment of the lives of others is the only environment for the normal growth to full stature.” In “Democracy and Education in the World of

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Today,” Dewey contended, “Every individual becomes educated only as he has an opportunity to contribute something from his own experience, no matter how meager or slender that background of experience may be at a given time, and finally that enlightenment comes from the give and take, from the exchange of experiences and ideas.” Dewey concluded the article by stating that the cause of democracy is the moral cause of the dignity and the worth of the individual. Through mutual respect, mutual toleration, give and take, the pooling of experiences, it is ultimately the only method by which human beings can succeed in carrying on this experiment in which we are all engaged, whether we want to be or not, the greatest experiment of humanity — that of living together in ways in which the life of each of us is at once profitable in the deepest sense of the word, profitable to himself and helpful in the building up of the individuality of others.

Indeed, the Deweyan language of communication, cooperation, and contribution, as opposed to the language of rights and responsibilities, helps to “give our interdependence... a moral meaning,” which, according to the sociologist Robert Bellah, is a crucial task for us in the twenty-first century.

Let me quote a long passage from Dewey’s “Philosophy and Education” to pave the way for my conclusion:

How often in the past have we depended upon war to bring out the supreme loyalties of mankind. Its life and death struggles are obvious and dramatic; its results in changing the course of history are evident and striking. When shall we realize that in every schooling-building in the land a struggle is also being waged against all that hems in and distorts human life? The struggle is not with arms and violence; its consequences cannot be recorded in statistics of the physically killed and wounded, nor set forth in terms of territorial changes. But in its slow and imperceptible processes, the real battles for human freedom and for the pushing back of the boundaries that restrict human life are ultimately won. We need to pledge ourselves to engage anew and with renewed faith in the greatest of all battles in the cause of human liberation, to the end that all human beings may lead the life that is alone worthy of being entitled wholly human.

Indeed, the enemy of Deweyan democratic education is not necessarily communism or terrorism. Any education that fails to ensure the equal opportunity of all students to communicate, to cooperate, to contribute, to grow, and to realize their humanity is in need of democratic intervention and improvement. Deweyan democratic education also urges us to watch out for all barriers to communication and interaction among people. These barriers may be different in different locales and cultures. Schools in some cultures may have serious barriers between different races and classes; schools in other cultures may suffer from barriers brought about by exams and grades. My reconstruction of Deweyan democratic education calls


64. Ibid., 303.


attention to the need to foster certain local processes that address local problems and needs. After all, we cannot realize our global aspirations for democracy without learning to act locally, and without creatively translating global beliefs and principles into creative local practices.

To conclude, we may not need a democratic education in a strictly Anglo-American political sense, but we do need a democratic education in a Deweyan humanist sense in order to learn to be more fully human. I believe Deweyan democratic education thus reconstructed can help to make the world safe for democracy. However, there is no set curriculum, no ready-made textbook, no prescribed procedure, and no definite format to follow. It is a creative task that stands before us, a task that requires the joint efforts of people from all walks of life and from all over the world who share an unyielding faith in uplifting our common humanity.

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