

Engaging Dewey's Vocationalism

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Professor Marshall's argument is that John Dewey's treatment of the vocational is inadequate to the task of explicating a "new vocationalism" in education. As Professor Marshall reminds us, Dewey's work originated from within a particular social and ideological context and was a response to early twentieth century social, industrial, and economic conditions. Professor Marshall's point is that these conditions have changed. In his view, our current situation is characterized by a "new vocationalism" in which all education is permeated by technocratic and "busnocratic" values, information (especially through electronic media) has displaced knowledge, and students, while discursively positioned as "autonomous choosers" of educational and vocational alternatives, actually have no choices at all.

According to Professor Marshall, Dewey's understanding of vocationalism, in contrast, was articulated in response to a dualism or, to use a favorite Deweyan term, a "bifurcation," that no longer exists. Unlike our contemporary educational situation, in Dewey's time a liberal education aimed at humanistic cultivation had been separated and set against a vocational education aimed at producing well trained and efficient workers. Dewey's educational project was to "collapse" this bifurcation, introduce training through occupations, "harness technology for the development of the intellect," and thus vocationalize public schooling in the interests of democratic transformation. In this reading, since Dewey focused his critique on "a narrow vocationalism," retained the pragmatist's faith in the democratic potential of technology, and did not foresee the development of the "new vocationalism," his arguments "are not applicable in the last decade of the 20th century." Although not fully explored in the paper, Professor Marshall also suggests that the work of Michel Foucault may provide greater insight into an education that has now been thoroughly vocationalized.

The most interesting aspect of Professor Marshall's paper, it seems to me, is not his dismay at finding Dewey wanting in heuristic power, but rather the thought provoking suggestions he makes, about how educational practices construct/reconstruct, produce/reproduce, identities, knowledges, and selves. So before turning to his Deweyan disappointments, I want to pose some of the questions that occurred to me as a reader.

- Is the disembodied heterogeneous and fragmented nature of *information* technology (power without a subject) consistent with Dewey's understanding of technology?
- How do we distinguish between "busno-power" and "bio-power?" How is "busno-power" connected to the formation of identities? Does it operate differently on classes, races, and genders?
- In the United States, perhaps comparable to the New Zealand situation, one of the largest federal appropriations to education has been for School-to-Work

programs that provide resources for school and business partnerships. Is this an example of “busno-power” and how does “busno-power” circulate in and through educational institutions and persons?

- Is Dewey’s concern with process and interdisciplinarity consistent with a decentering of subject matter knowledge and the valuing of consumer information and satisfactions?
- Can a Foucaultian archeology of knowledge and power provide a model for schools that, following Wirth, would “help men and women humanize life under technology?”

Now to the Deweyan disappointments. Clearly, Dewey *did* intend to collapse what he called the intellectual bifurcations of “labor and leisure, theory and practice, body and mind” which he saw as culminating in “the antithesis of vocational and cultural education.”¹ Like Russell, he believed that all education is essentially vocational “in fact if not in name.”² He understood vocations not as narrowly conceived trades or modes of waged employment but as broadly conceived life activities that result in consequences of significance to the self and to others. For example, he wrote that “The dominant vocation of all human beings at all times is living — intellectual and moral growth.”³ Further, he argued that vocations are not “distributed in an exclusive way, one and only one to each person.”⁴ Human beings, he asserted, have several vocations that overlap including — interestingly — being a member of a family, a friend, and a companion. Thus while Dewey was certainly critical of a narrow vocational education that reinforced and perpetuated class divisions, he conceptualized vocationalism more broadly as an inclusive educational principle that would require changing the ways in which curriculum and pedagogy were conceptualized and practiced.

Central to the educational changes Dewey envisioned was the introduction of occupations, or the student’s constructive engagements with subject matter. With the introduction of occupations, Dewey argued “the whole pupil is engaged, the artificial gap between life in school and out is reduced, motives are afforded attention to a large variety of materials and processes distinctly educative in effect, and cooperative associations which give information in a social setting are provided.”⁵ Further, “active occupation includes both work and play. Both involve ends consciously entertained and the selections and adaptation of materials and processes designed to effect desired ends.”⁶ The interplay of ideas, he maintained, then becomes concretely embodied in logical action. Thus “training through occupations” for Dewey is not conceived as a presentation of, or orientation to, possible employment options that will be freely chosen, but as social experience which, very like contemporary feminist models,⁷ engages the mind, heart, and hand.

For Dewey, the student’s use of technology was situated within constructive “occupations.” Dewey defined technology as a human invention, a means for solving problems, and a technique that may be embodied in a tool. He explained that technologies arise “within a cultural matrix which is ultimately determined by the nature of social relations,” that they “depend upon the state of material and intellectual culture,” and that “they have profound and extensive consequences upon human relations.”⁸

As Professor Marshall points out, Dewey looks forward to a time when access to technology is democratized and technologies are used towards democratic ends. However, when Dewey discussed technology in classrooms, his stress was not on the mastery of technology itself but on the student's rediscovery and experimentation with historical technologies. Drawing on the classroom work in spinning and weaving of the teachers and children at the Chicago Laboratory School, for example, he illustrated how solving the problems of production, investigating the efficacy of the technologies involved, led to a multifaceted and interdisciplinary inquiry that incorporated history, sociological analysis, literature, mathematics, geography, art, poetry, and drama.⁹ Thus in Dewey's model, technology was not harnessed uncritically but tested and appraised in social as well as instrumental terms.

Within this educational context, Dewey also treated the issue of individuation and choice, both of which I take to be major concerns in Professor Marshall's paper. While Dewey believed in the need to reclaim and articulate the vocational nature of education, he resisted practices of imposed vocational guidance that would prescribe "a definitive, irretrievable and complete choice."¹⁰ Instead — and this is the point at which I think Professor Marshall wants to see Dewey as colluding with, or providing the grounds for, the deception of the "autonomous chooser" who is "continuously making consumer style choices" — Dewey argues that "the vocational preparation of youth should engage them in a continuous reorganization of aims and methods."¹¹ In any case, Dewey understood choice, desires, aims, and standards as "socially conditioned phenomena" and maintained that "the idea of a natural individual in his isolation possessed of full fledged wants, of energies to be expended according to his own volition, and of a ready-made faculty of foresight and prudent calculation is...a fiction."¹²

In my view, Dewey's argument for an education that recognizes the correlative and interdependent nature of self and society, mind and body, thought and action, and theory and practice, despite its location in a more optimistic cultural past, retains some cogency even "in the last decade of the 20th century" especially as a model for classroom practices. Foucault's work, I think, gives us a way of looking at how power ebbs and flows within classroom practices, regroups to accommodate resistances, and normalizes the inhabitants of educational institutions.

I end this response with the reflections of Lucy Larcom, reflections situated within a nineteenth-century North American New England landscape, contoured by the industrial revolution, a transition away from an agrarian culture, and the development of a mass manufacturing technology, and framed by new social identities for women as waged laborers. Larcom attended a district grammar school in Massachusetts until she entered the textile mills at Lowell in 1835 when she was thirteen. She can be seen in Walt Whitman's figure of "the cleanhaired Yankee girl" in *Song of Myself* who "works with her sewing-machine or in the factory or mill."¹³ Looking back, Larcom writes,

[W]e did not call ourselves ladies. We did not forget that we were working girls....I was there from choice....I had naturally some elements of the recluse, and would never, of my own choice, have lived in a crowd. I loved quietness. The noise of the machinery was particularly distasteful to me. But I found that the crowd was made up of single human lives, not one of

them wholly uninteresting, when separately known. I learned also that there were many things which belong to the whole world of us together, that no one of us, can claim or enjoy for ourselves alone. I discovered, too, that I could so accustom myself to the noise that it became like a silence to me. And I defied the machinery to make me its slave. Its incessant discords could not drown the music of my thoughts if I would let them fly high enough. Even the long hours, the early rising, and the regularity enforced by the clangor of the bell were good discipline for one who loved her own personal liberty with a willful rebellion against control.¹⁴

Larcom, I think, echos many of the concerns of Professor Marshall's paper as she takes up, in narrative, questions of identity, corporate and autonomous selves, and the technologies of power.

1. John Dewey, *Democracy and Education* (New York: Free Press, 1966), 306.

2. Ibid, 311.

3. Ibid, 310.

4. Ibid, 307.

5. John Dewey, *The School and Society* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 195.

6. Ibid, 202.

7. Nel Noddings, *Learning to Care in Schools* (New York: SUNY Press, 1993) and Jane Roland Martin, *The School Home* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992).

8. John Dewey, *Logic: The Theory of Inquiry* (New York: Holt Rinehart and Winston, 1938), 490.

9. Dewey, *The School and Society*, 17-24.

10. Ibid, 311.

11. Ibid.

12. John Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1954), 102-103.

13. Walt Whitman, *The Complete Poems* (London: Penguin Books, 1986), 698.

14. Lucy Larcom, *A New England Girlhood Outlined From Memory* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1986), 182-83.