The Theoretical Roots of Service-Learning in John Dewey: Toward a Theory of Service-Learning

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As interest in service-learning research multiplies, there is a concomitant need for a theoretical base for service-learning. In this article the authors review aspects of John Dewey's educational and social philosophy that they identify as relevant to the development of a theory of service-learning, including learning from experience, reflective activity, citizenship, community, and democracy. The article concludes with a set of key questions for research and theory development.

Service-learning, as a relatively new social and educational phenomenon, suffers from the lack of a well articulated conceptual framework. This is reflected in criticism of service-learning as "fluff" (see citation in Markus, Howard, & King, 1993) and in the lack of research in this area (Eyler & Giles, 1993). Because service-learning is related to experiential education, it also shares the question of whether it is a field or a social movement (Moore, 1988).

Part of the transition from a movement to a field involves the challenge of developing a clearly defined and commonly shared body of knowledge. It is our observation that this process has occurred slowly in service-learning for at least three reasons. Perhaps the foremost reason is that the practitioners of service-learning are more oriented to action than scholarly pursuits, and thus their writings have tended to be focused more on processes and program descriptions. (See Galura, Meiland, Ross, Callan, & Smith, 1993; Howard, 1993; Kendall & Associates, 1990). Secondly, service-learning, at least until very recently, has been quite marginal to the academic enterprise, and thus educational theorists outside of service-learning have ignored it as a potential area of conceptual as well as empirical inquiry. Finally, it seems that there is a general resistance to theorizing in service-learning, as exemplified in a critique of an earlier article linking Dewey and service-learning (Giles, 1991): "Progress will be made through a series of successful and unsuccessful programs, and it will be this extensive work in the field - and not the

further proliferation of philosophical discourses...that will validate or invalidate Dewey's ideas" (Korowski, 1991, p. 92). This represents a kind of anti-intellectualism that is long on concrete action and practice and short on theory.

In this paper we argue that it is necessary and desirable for service-learning to develop theory both as a body of knowledge and as a guide for pedagogical practice. We then develop two central themes from the writings of John Dewey that might contribute to a theory of service-learning. Finally we illustrate how this theoretical approach can be useful in formulating testable hypotheses and questions for service-learning research.

Theory and Service-Learning

We are not arguing that theory is a good for its own sake or that service-learning needs theory simply for the purposes of social and political legitimacy. Nor do we believe that theory development is a natural step in the evolution of service-learning. While all of these are probably true, it seems to us that theory is necessary, first and foremost, for developing and refining a solid research agenda for service-learning (Eyler & Giles, 1993; Giles et al., 1991; Moore, 1993). Over the past four or five years there has been a dramatic increase in the focus on research in service-learning. Two national Wingspread conferences have been held on developing a research agenda and a number of studies have begun to

appear in the literature (Cohen & Kinsey, 1994; Eyler, 1993; Eyler & Giles, forthcoming; Giles & Eyler, in press; Krug & Kraft, 1994; Markus et al., 1993).[1] In the last two years we have seen sessions on research become a standard feature of most conferences on service-learning. More telling perhaps is that many of these sessions have been full or standing room only. This year's annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association included sessions, apparently for the first time, on service-learning research. This interest appears to be driven by a number of factors, such as funding availability, institutional accountability, as well as a genuine interest in what we know about service-learning.

It is striking, therefore, that there have been no similar calls for theory; in fact, this topic seems markedly absent from conferences in the field (for an exception, see Shumer, 1993b). It is our judgment, however, that the call for research leads to the call for theory. If we are to know about the social phenomenon of service-learning, we need a systematic way of generating and organizing our knowledge. In discussing the relationship between theory and research and the need for theoretically derived research hypotheses, Robert Merton (1949) wrote, "By providing a rationale, the theory introduces a *ground for prediction* which is more secure than mere empirical extrapolation from previously observed trends" (p. 94).

The Conceptual Basis of Service-Learning

Coining the term "service-learning" in 1967 was a major first step toward providing conceptual clarity; this term grew out of the work of Robert Sigmon and William Ramsey at the Southern Regional Education Board (Sigmon, 1990; Southern Regional Education Board, 1973). But in subsequent years the efforts in this field have focused more on principles of good practice in combining service and learning and in developing a common, agreed upon definition (Honnet & Poulsen, 1989; Kendall & Associates, 1990; Shumer 1993a; Sigmon, 1990; Stanton, 1990). The National and Community Service Acts of 1990 and 1993, especially the latter, also reflect the results of this twenty-five year period of searching for a definition. Another area of important thinking in service-learning has been linking service-learning to the mission and philosophy of higher education (Stanton, 1991). In all of these writings the central tenet is the one that is stated in the preamble to the "Principles of Good Practice in Combining Service and Learning" (Honnet & Poulsen, 1989), "Service, combined with learning, adds value to each and transforms both" (p. 1).

Indeed considerable activity has focused on defining service-learning along these lines; Kendall's review of the literature revealed 147 different terms and definitions related to service-learning (1990). Following Stanton's discussion of a service-learning definition (1990), Kendall concluded that the definitions of service-learning could be grouped into two categories: service-learning as a kind of education and service-learning as a philosophy (1990).

In an effort to contribute toward an undergirding theory of service-learning, we have turned to the writings of John Dewey. While any extended discussion of Dewey is a separate study, we believe that his philosophy is a legitimate source (among others) for developing a theory of service-learning. The background of our analysis is Robertson's very comprehensive review of the debate about using Dewey. Entitled, "Is Dewey's Educational Vision Still Viable?," the article gives a balanced and detailed review of both Dewey's defenders and his critics (1992). Given this broader debate, it seems appropriate that service-learning be part of the effort to understand and apply one of the unquestionably most important educational and social philosophers of the 20th century.

An additional reason for probing Dewey is that it appears that service-learning reflects, either consciously or unconsciously, a Deweyian influence. Making that influence explicit can help determine if the theory is truly relevant and useful. Also, because neo-Deweyians such as David Kolb exert an influence on service-learning as one form of experiential learning, knowing about Dewey's theory on experience and education also seems important (see Kolb, 1984).

We will divide our analysis of Dewey's relevance to developing a theory of service-learning into two parts. First we will examine his relevance to learning in service-learning and then turn to his relevance to the service side of service-learning. By dividing our analysis of Dewey into two sections, we run the risk of creating a false dichotomy between the ideas related to learning and those related to citizenship and democracy. For Dewey, pedagogy and epistemology were related—his theory of knowledge was related to and derived from his notions of citizenship and democracy. As Robertson notes, *experimental-*

ism and radical democracy are "two central and intertwined strands of Dewey's social and political philosophy" (1992, p. 337).

Reflection, Inquiry, and Experimentalism: Learning from Experience

While there appears to be no evidence that the concept of service-learning was part of Dewey's formally stated philosophy of education, his philosophy of experience is central to his early works on pedagogy and his later philosophical works concerning epistemology. We will focus on two primary works by Dewey, *How We Think* (1933) and *Experience and Education* (1938). We examine Dewey's experimentalism with an emphasis on the principles of experience, inquiry, and reflection as the key elements of a theory of knowing in service-learning. The contributions here to a potential theory of service-learning are about how learning takes place, what the learning is, and the relation of learning to action.

The central question for Dewey in developing what he called a philosophy of experience is "how is it that experiences are educative?" In posing this inquiry, Dewey noted:

> The belief that all genuine education comes about through experience does not mean that all experiences are genuinely or equally educative. Experience and education cannot be directly equated to each other. For some experiences are mis-educative. Any experience is mis-educative that has the effect of arresting or distorting the growth of further experience. An experience may be such as to engender callousness; it may produce lack of sensitivity and responsiveness. Then the possibilities of having richer experience in the future are restricted. (1938, p. 25)

For Dewey there were two aspects of the quality of experience: agreeableness and effect on later experiences. If an experience had one of these but not the other it was not educative. For example, an experience could be agreeable or pleasurable in itself and not have a positive effect on future experiences (1938, p. 27). In specifying how experiences were educative Dewey proposed two principles which form the core of his philosophy of experience, the Principle of Continuity and the Principle of Interaction.

1. *Principle of Continuity*—All experience occurs along a continuum called the experiential continuum. This is the idea that experiences build on previous ones and they need to be directed to

the ends of growth and development. It is the rol of the teacher to shape and direct experiences tha fit on this continuum. This is the temporal or linear dimension of experience and the learning derived from the continuity of experiences.

2. *Principle of Interaction*—This is the lateral dimension of experience where the internal and objective aspects of experience interact to form a **situation** (1938, p. 42). Learning results from the **transaction** between the individual (learner) and the environment (Shumer, 1993b). Learning for Dewey is "situational learning" (Giles, 1991).

These two principles interact and unite to form the "longitudinal and lateral aspects of experience" (Dewey, 1938, p. 44).

One implication of these principles for Dewey is that for knowledge to be usable through recall and application it has to be acquired in a situation; otherwise it is segregated from experience and is forgotten or not available for transfer to new experiences. This means that acquisition as well as application of knowledge is dependent on the context, a key element of which is the interaction in the situation.

The purpose of the interaction is to derive learning from experience through reflective thinking which led to inquiry or what Dewey called the scientific method. As Dewey noted in discussing how both ideas and evidence came into play in thinking, "reflective thinking impels to inquiry" (1933, p. 7). Dewey's definition of reflective thinking is

> *Active, persistent, and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form knowledge in the light of the grounds that support it and the further conclusions to which it tends...*(Italics original, 1933, p. 9)

Inquiry, as the scientific method, involved problematization of experience, or creating an uncertainty of belief or knowing that "perplexes and challenges the mind" (1933, p. 13). Once experience was problematized, then the process of inquiry could occur. Not surprisingly, Dewey perceived the role of a teacher

> ...to provide the materials and the conditions by which organic curiosity will be directed into investigations that have an aim and that produce results in the way of increase of knowledge, and by which social inquisitiveness will be converted into ability to find out things known to others, an ability to ask questions of books as well as of persons. (1933, p. 40)

The final element of Dewey's ideas about learning and knowledge that we find relevant to theorizing about how learning occurs in service-learning is his idea of *reflective thinking*. It is interesting to note that Dewey uses the term "reflective thinking" to connote a type of thinking, and he uses the term "reflective activity" to mean the complete set of activities related to reflection. It seems to us that the specific emphasis on reflective thinking is Dewey's crucial point here; where he uses the term reflective activity it seems to be in a more general and possibly less precise way. What is central for Dewey is that thinking and action are inextricably linked. Evidence of this is that Dewey stated that "reflection includes observation" (1933, p. 102), this being the empirical basis of knowing and also being the link between what is experienced and how that experience is processed to produce learning. "Data (facts) and ideas (suggestions, possible solutions) thus form the two indispensable and correlative factors of all reflective activity" (1933, p. 104).

While full explication of Dewey's Five Phases or Aspects of Reflective Thought (1933, pp. 107-115) is beyond the scope of this work, they are listed below with some elucidation about each.

1. *Suggestions*—this is the inhibition of tendency to act, to pursue what ever suggestion arises from the situation by stopping to consider more than one course of action.
2. *Intellectualization*—this is the definition of a problem and the raising of questions about the nature of the problem and possible solutions.
3. *The hypothesis*—this is the development of the guiding idea based on observation and previous knowledge.
4. *Reasoning*—this is the development of the hypothesis by applying knowledge and by developing the linkages in the sequence of ideas.
5. *Testing the hypothesis in action*—this is the verification through further observation or experimentation in which the problem is solved or a new problem is presented.

In reviewing these phases it is important to note that Dewey did not see them as linear. In fact, he specifically wrote that the "sequence of the five phases is not fixed," and that they could be collapsed or expanded, but that they were "the indispensable traits of reflective thinking" (1933,

pp. 115-116). One important implication of this is that there is no linear movement from the concrete to the abstract any more than there is a preferred movement from the abstract to the concrete. In rejecting both of these dichotomies, Dewey argued that the realities of life demanded a mix of the two, depending on life circumstances, and that the end of education was "to secure a working balance" (1933, p. 228) between the two. This was to be done with respect to individual dispositions toward concrete and abstract thought in the context of social life. Perhaps this reflects an application of the principles of continuity and interaction that were noted above.

To close this section, we return to Dewey's central question that we posed at the beginning—how is it that experience is educative? Dewey's practical answer in applying his philosophy of learning and knowledge was in the form of using **projects** as a means for producing learning from experience. He set forth four criteria (1933, pp. 217-18) that were necessary for "projects to be truly educative:"

1. must generate interest
2. must be worthwhile intrinsically
3. must present problems that awaken new curiosity and create a demand for information
4. must cover a considerable time span and be capable of fostering development over time

Application of these criteria involves linking the principles of continuity and interaction, the process of problematization and inquiry, and the phases of reflective thought. These criteria are probably the clearest example of how to apply Dewey's theory to service-learning.

Citizenship, Community and Democracy

This section draws upon Dewey's social and political philosophy. The primary works considered here are, *Democracy and Education* (1916), *The Public and its Problems* (1946b), *The School and Society* (1900) and *Problems of Men* (1946a) (While the latter is an anthology of earlier works, it contains an introduction written specifically for the collection). As we move from Dewey's educational philosophy to his social philosophy it is important to note that the major works in this latter area were attempts to link the two; the use

of *and* in these titles reflects Dewey's frequent admonition to move beyond "either-or" thinking.

Key themes here are: The Great Community (in contrast to the Great Society), democratic participation, and the relationship of knowing to overcoming social ills. We begin with the theme of the Great Community (1946b) because it is both central and because it is also the area of Dewey's philosophy that seems most often to foster critique and even rejection. Of course Dewey was bound to his time. even though his life spanned the halves of almost two centuries (1859-1952). As many have noted, his birthplace in Burlington, Vermont was influential in the formation of his views about community, society, and democracy (See Dearborn, 1988; Robertson, 1992).

Part of the research for this article involved visiting Dewey's birthplace and grave site in Burlington. As one stands in front of the large but relatively modest frame house with a large yard and a street lined with trees and similar houses, one begins to get the image of home and community that Dewey probably carried with him even though he spent the bulk of his adult life in New York and Chicago, and travelled often all around the world. Only a few short blocks from the Dewey birthplace on South Willard Street is the University of Vermont where, beside the chapel, Dewey is buried beneath a simple gray granite headstone. Walking this short distance brought to mind the symbol of community as a "cradle to grave" social entity which seems to permeate Dewey's social philosophy, particularly his notion of the Great Community.

This influence seems important to take into account because it reflects an application of Dewey's own method of knowing in context and because it appears that this same notion of community is prevalent in the major views of service-learning. For example, the Clinton administration has explicitly used a communitarian model in framing the National and Community Service Program.

Near the end of his life Dewey wrote the following about what he saw as the role of philosophy: "It may turn to the projection of large generous hypotheses which, if used as plans of action, will give intelligent direction to men in search for ways to make the world more one of worth and significance, more homelike, in fact" (1946a, p. 20).

The Great Community

While Dewey acknowledged (and lamented) the demise of local community, at the same time he called for its reestablishment or replacement. At one point he argued that, "Unless local communal life can be restored, the public cannot adequately resolve its most urgent problem; to find and identify itself" (1946b, p. 216). Part of Dewey's lament was that industrialization, or "the machine age" as he called it, had destroyed local community and had created the "Great Society" without creating an accompanying "Great Community" (1946b, pp. 126-127). This was significant because Dewey's view of democracy was predicated upon a process of participation that viewed face to face association as the mechanism for uniting and balancing interests (See Robertson, 1992).

On a more metaphysical level, community was important to Dewey as a basic human drive, perhaps even as an instinct. In one passage he qualified his social and constructed notions of community to argue that community was built upon this natural drive to associate: "...association itself is physical and organic, while communal life is moral, that is emotionally, intellectually, consciously sustained" (1946b, pp. 151-152). For Dewey, community was a core concept of his social philosophy. It was the communal association that gave rise to the moral, intellectual, and emotional aspects of life as well as the foundation of democracy.

Not surprisingly, this view also strongly influenced Dewey's idea of organizing the school as a form of social life to resemble a "miniature community" (1916, p. 418). Dewey envisioned that "...the school itself shall be made a genuine form of active community life, instead of a place set apart in which to learn lessons" (1900, p. 27). School and society were linked through community, both miniature and great.

Citizenship

As community was the locus for the practice of democracy for Dewey, overcoming social ills through the creation of social intelligence was the process. Inquiry was not only to be used as a pedagogical method in the schools; rather it was to be the means by which citizens became informed, communicated interests, created public opinion and made decisions. Dewey's fundamental critique of education is that it had not led to a

more humane or moral society (1916, p. 331).

One reason Dewey wanted to democratize the schools was to have students experience the mutuality of social life through service. On this point he wrote,

> Where the school work consists in simply learning lessons, mutual assistance, instead of being the most natural form of cooperation and association, becomes a clandestine effort to relieve one's neighbor of his proper duties. Where active work is going on, all this is changed. Helping others, instead of being a form of charity which impoverishes the recipient, is simply an aid in setting free the powers and furthering the impulse of the one helped. (1900, p. 29)

One further point on Dewey's view of citizenship and its fundamental connection to society is that the schools did not simply prepare people for that life, rather they modelled it (1916, p. 417). In his vision of how citizenship was created in the community of the school, Dewey wrote:

> When the school introduces and trains each child of society into membership within such a little community, saturating him with the spirit of service, and providing him with the instruments of effective self-direction, we shall have the deepest and best guarantee of a larger society which is worthy, lovely, and harmonious. (1900, p. 44)

While Dewey wrote this in his early and more optimistic days, even his writings after World War I retained the core of this vision. The difference in his later vision was the harsher critique of how education had failed to achieve these ideals and a sense of how difficult they would be to attain.

Democracy

As the above analysis indicates, democracy was not really a separate category of philosophy for Dewey. It was the goal and the means that infused all of his thinking; it is this pervasiveness that is reflected in Robertson's use of the term 'radical democracy' (1992). Dewey called this the "democratic idea in its generic social sense," which he defined with the following description:

> From the standpoint of the individual, it consists in having a responsible share according to capacity in forming and directing the activities of groups to which one belongs and in participating according to need in the values which the groups sustain. From the standpoint of the groups, it demands liberation of the potentialities of members of a group in harmony with the interests and goods which are common. (1946b, p. 147)

It was the breadth and inclusiveness of this idea that led Dewey to describe it as the search for the Great Community. It was not only a radical view of democracy, it was also a transcendent one that had not yet been manifested in existing social structures (1946b, p. 143). From this faith in democracy, Dewey derived his notion of community, his belief in the possibility of citizenship as a mutual enterprise that addressed social ills, and his faith in the school as the potential model of democracy.

Theory and Research in Service-Learning

From the above analysis, we have been able to identify several dimensions of theory building and testing. We present these in the final section of this article to stimulate further discussion and development in the field. In reviewing these theoretical elements that we have derived from Dewey, it appears to us that they can give greater specificity to service-learning research and theory. While the existing principles of good practice and research agendas have identified the general areas, now we need to develop specific questions within a consistent theoretical framework. It is apparent to us that Dewey's educational and social philosophy, as we understand it, is a very good fit with the general understandings and claims of service-learning and with its potential to contribute to a theory of service-learning.

Based on the themes from Dewey, we suggest the following nine areas for theory development and testing. Under each one we suggest some key questions and propositions.

> 1. *The continuity of experience.* Is there a developmental continuum of service-learning experiences? What kinds are more likely to be educative in early stages of development? Is there an appropriate sequence of activities? What life histories and developmental biographies can be developed to illuminate this continuum, if there is one? Does this continuum last into adulthood? If so, how does it influence citizenship behaviors?

2. *The principle of interaction.* Do different service-learning experiences have different impacts because of individual characteristics? Can we identify these characteristics of both the individual and the service experiences? Will knowledge about the principle of continuity illuminate our understanding of interaction?

3. *Inquiry.* Does involvement in service-learning lead to the need or demand for further knowledge? Does it lead to independent inquiry or selection of opportunities for advanced study? Do successive service-learning experiences lead to more complex problem-posing and problem-solving capacities? Can we find evidence of lifelong learning or the social intelligence that Dewey postulated?

4. *Reflective activity.* Given Dewey's notion of this as central, can it be empirically demonstrated that reflection creates learning by linking experience and education? Can Dewey's five phases be used to discriminate between more and less effective forms of reflection? Can these forms of reflection be demonstrated to be cognitively focused? Can programs be developed that model these phases? Can complexity in problem-solving be demonstrated as an outcome of reflection in service-learning?

5. *Truly educative projects.* Can Dewey's four criteria for educative projects be demonstrated and tested? Are all four criteria equally important? Is there a relationship between the nature of the learning and the service under this set of criteria?

6. *Concrete and abstract knowledge.* Do participants in service-learning develop and demonstrate a balance of concrete and abstract knowledge? Can they transfer knowledge from one experience to another using both forms of knowledge? Can movement between these two forms be demonstrated? Is there a connection between these two forms of knowledge and types of reflection? Is the acquisition of knowledge in service-learning more detailed than that acquired only through classroom activities?

7. *The Great Community.* Does participation in service-learning lead to a valuing of community? Does it promote the creation of community? Is the creation of commu-

nity important for citizenship as Dewey had hypothesized? Will involvement in community-focused service-learning lead to lifelong community involvement?

8. *Citizenship.* Does service-learning promote the development of social intelligence? Does it foster a belief in the ability to solve social problems? Can involvement in inquiry-focused service-learning lead to a committment to citizenship? Does service-learning promote moral development and civic responsibility through social engagement? Can a sense of mutuality be fostered and, if so, under what types of service-learning experiences?

9. *Democracy.* Can the ideal of democracy be applied to service-learning programs? With what effects? Do democratized programs lead to different understandings of social structures and problems? Does exposure to this ideal have long term positive effects? Can this ideal be developed in contexts of diversity and potential conflict?

These questions, while suggestive rather than exhaustive, point to the areas for further thinking and for linking theory, research, and practice in service-learning. To apply Dewey to this enterprise, we need to problematize service-learning so that we can balance concrete and abstract knowledge. We believe that the field is ready for this inquiry, evidenced by the growth and interest in service-learning research.

Notes

[1] See also the research studies included in this volume and the special issue of the *Journal of Adolescence* edited by Novella Keith that is devoted to service-learning (Vol.17, 1994).

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