

Editorial for the Series of Three Issues: Progressive Education: Past, Present and Future

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When we issued the Call for Manuscripts on “Progressive Education: Past, Present and Future” we failed to anticipate the enthusiastic response. Even after selecting only the best submissions, we soon realized the need for a second, and then, a third issue. The first issue focuses on the Past (Volume 9, Number 1, co-editor: John Pecore; February, 2013); the second on the Present (Volume 9, Number 2, co-editor: Brian Drayton; June, 2013), and the third on the Future (Volume 9, Number 3, co-editor Maureen Hogan; October, 2013). This reflects not only a widespread interest in understanding what progressive education has meant and what it can mean, but a yearning for better ways to think about pedagogy in these times.

Complexity, Chance, and Change

The Past/Present/Future classification recognizes our living in a complex and evolving world. Progressive education ideas can be traced back to the earliest writing on education. But these ideas received a renewed interest in the 19th century, as the developing sciences portrayed a universe of complexity and change. Among others, Charles Sanders Peirce (1892) was deeply impressed by the role of chance in developing diversity and complexity in the world, especially in the human mind: “I have begun by showing that *tychism* [Peirce’s term for irreducible chance and indeterminism] must give birth to an evolutionary cosmology, in which all the regularities of nature and of mind are regarded as products of growth (Peirce, 1892, p. 86). These views were consonant with those of the emerging sciences, especially Darwinian theories of evolution and the new physics.

Peirce’s theories, first articulated in the early 1870’s in a Cambridge, Massachusetts philosophical discussion group known as the Metaphysical Club (Menand, 2001, p. 227), were a major influence on William James, John Dewey, and other pragmatists, whose work in turn influenced progressive educators. Dewey (1938) showed that complexity and change meant that education could not be reduced to a formulaic preparation for life, it needed to be life itself, messiness and chaos included. Progressive educators sought to realize Dewey’s vision through valuing diversity, building on the interests of the learner, organizing learning in larger, more holistic units, connecting school and society, and developing citizenship. Progressive educators combined an awareness of the past with a recognition of change and future possibilities (Benedict, 1947a). The pragmatists and progressive educators in the US had influence around the world, but they were far from the only developers of progressive education ideas, as can be seen in this series.

Historical Perspective

A division such as Past/Present/Future is somewhat arbitrary, especially so given that many of the articles explicitly incorporate a longitudinal or diachronic perspective. Moreover, the emphases in progressive education on reflection, on integrating inquiry of the child with that of cultural heritage, and on the forward-looking, growth aspects of learning make it risky to relegate any of the articles into one box of past, present, or future. Moreover, any division is problematic. Progressive education saw learning as occurring throughout the lifespan, Sites for learning include schools, but also work and play. The usual dichotomies such as theory versus practice, thinking versus action, science versus art, or formal versus informal were exactly what many progressive educators have sought to counter. The Past/Present/Future distinction is similarly problematic.

In a recent essay, Lewis Lapham (2012) shows some ways around dichotomous thinking about the past, which is often conveyed in schools and popular discourse. One of

those is between the view of history as a detailed, and verifiable account of past events with little room for interpretation and of history as a consensual hallucination. Lapham reminds us that history requires both careful attention to detail and continual reconstruction. He makes an effective case for the idea that history is necessary for a critical, socially engaged intelligence in our lived times. This means history that grows out of meticulous study of the details, along with an openness to counter-intuitive or disturbing ideas, and investigation of the curious gremlins that challenge our preconceptions. He cites Faulkner's "The past is never dead. It's not even past" (Requiem for a Nun), on the way to showing how making sense of the past is part and parcel of making sense of the present.

We use the present to construct our past, just as we use our past to construct our present. For Lapham, then, the past is the phoenix in the attic. No matter how we engage with it, our uses of history shape what is to come. As he puts it, "History is work in progress, a constant writing, and rewriting as opposed to museum-quality sculpture in milk-white marble." This does not mean anything-goes relativism. Instead, it is a call to realize that our past journeys and future maps are embedded in who we are right now. Unfortunately, that realization seems lacking, and the desire to learn from our past is all too meagre for the needs of today.

The Eight-Year Study

Few parents, or citizens, would be satisfied if children could successfully answer multiple-choice questions requiring narrowly focused skills, but failed to develop intellectual curiosity, cultural awareness, practical skills, a healthy philosophy of life, a strong moral character, emotional balance, social fitness, sensitivity to social problems, or physical fitness. What a tragedy then, if the focus on skills per se (as with the US's No Child Left Behind) were not even necessary! What if one could help the whole child develop, including teaching basic skills? What if our current irrational obsession with testing actually stood in the way of the things we truly value?

Instead of narrowly defined subjects, schools based on progressive education used broad themes of significance to the students, in which "[t]he starting point of the curriculum would be life as the student saw it" (Benedict, 1947, p. 14). Here, students would be engaged in inquiry as a way to make sense of themselves and the world around them. We can see variants of the core ideas in many disciplines and learning settings today, e.g., language learning (Brown, 2004), agriculture and web-based learning (Bruce, Dowd, Eastburn, & D'Arcy, 2005), the sciences (Edelson, Gordon, & Pea, 1999), university learning (Prince & Felder, 2007), and geography (Spronken-Smith, et al., 2008).

Moreover, progressive schools were community-based. This idea of community-based schools was key to the Progressive Education movement, especially in its later years, as members realized they needed to do more than promote child-centered learning in an individual sense. Benedict (1947, p. 17) says that "The schools believed they belonged to the citizens of the community". Progressive educators spoke of two visions for schools. In one, the old school, there is a fence surrounding the building; activities of the school are separate from those of the world around it, and as a result, schooling is separated from the actual life of the children. In the new school, the building is substantially the same, but it is connected to sites for recreation, housing, jobs, health, government, and by implication, all aspects of life. Rather than simply supplementing schools or being a venue for future activity, the community would become the center of learning. Jane Addams (1910) had seen Hull House as a protest against a restricted view of education and as an institution attempting to learn from life itself (Cremin, 1988). This was all part and parcel of a commitment to democracy in Dewey's sense of a continually reconstructed idea of associated living (1939), and of schools as microcosms of democratic institutions.

The societal view was true not only for “community schools” per se (Clapp, 1939), but for all schools, urban or rural, large or small, primary or secondary. Today, many of these ideas have survived under rubrics such as “civic engagement,” “public engagement,” “community-based learning,” or “service learning.” But often those ideas are seen as one-way or limited in scope, as in a single course. It’s worth revisiting the earlier progressive visions to understand better how schools and universities could better fulfill the high hopes we place upon them.

One of the best program evaluation studies ever conducted was the Eight-Year Study of progressive education conducted between 1932 to 1940 (Aiken, 1942). Thirty high schools participated. The students from the experimental schools did only slightly better on standardized test scores, but they showed major improvement in other areas, including intellectual competence, cultural development, practical competence, philosophy of life, character traits, emotional balance, social fitness, sensitivity to social problems, and physical fitness. Students from the most progressive schools showed the most improvement, more than those in the somewhat-progressive schools, and much more than those in traditional schools.

Outcomes of the study included better forms of student assessment, innovative research techniques, new ideas for curriculum, instruction, and teacher education. But above all, it provided an answer to the questions above: It is possible to help the whole child develop, without losing basic skills. In fact, schooling can be conceived in such a way that teachers and community members are learners as well. Doing that appears to be the best way to help the individual learner, not drilling on perceived deficits, as we do now. And yes, the irrational obsession with testing actually stands in the way of teaching the things almost every parent, teacher, or citizen truly value. No one advocates replicating the schooling of the 1930’s in the US, much less in diverse contexts around the world. But the lessons of those innovative progressive schools may still be relevant today.

This Series

This series is timely given current debates about the purpose and form of education in an era of rapid technological change, globalization, demographic and political shifts, and growing economic inequities. Across a wide range of topics, age or grade level, area of the curriculum, and setting, the articles ask, “What have we learned about pedagogy that can support democratic, humanistic, and morally responsible development for individuals and societies?” It is a natural followup to the Special Issue on Education for Active Citizenship (International Journal of Progressive Education, Volume 8, Number 3, 2012).

Many of the articles show how progressive education has evolved. They address questions such as: What has progressive education been? What is it today? What could it become? Some articles focus on particular approaches as exemplars of challenges or opportunities for progressive education. Others focus on the historical or philosophical basis for progressive education. Some articles focus on progressive education as it was enacted in early 20th century US, but others extend that view in interesting and important directions. There are also critiques of progressive education in general, or of particular efforts to realize it. The special issues develop these and related ideas, considering both the past successes and failures of progressive education, as well as current work and future possibilities. Authors present their own conception of progressive education as well as a justification for why the particular examples or issues chosen fit within that conception.