

## John Dewey, *Eros*, Ideals, and Collateral Learning Toward a Descriptive Model of the Exemplary Teacher

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### INTRODUCTION

In his text *Dewey and Eros*, Jim Garrison argues that the education of *eros* should be the supreme aim of each level of teacher education.<sup>1</sup> In this way we would not only cultivate exemplary teachers who “desire the good” — the essence of his meaning of *eros* — but presumably we may also promote the development of *eros* among the elementary and secondary students with whom our teachers will ultimately come into contact. On this account, I find myself in complete agreement with Garrison. Without nurturing this emotional component to judgment and evaluation among our prospective teachers, their teaching is likely to become little more than an exercise in seemingly purposeless content through the application of “appropriate” pedagogical strategies. Yet, precisely what is involved in this process of nurturing *eros*? It is on this account that I wish to supplement the arguments advanced by Garrison. While he does not explicitly delimit the full range of experiences which may successfully foster *eros*, Garrison’s primary recommendations appear to focus on a direct, active, explicit educational encounter: most notably the reflective, deliberative encounter afforded by the themes embedded in literary works. His theory is what he terms a “critical-creative theory of intelligent deliberation and the education of *eros*.”<sup>2</sup> Yet, what is inadvertently omitted is an acknowledgment and appreciation for an element of human experience that is best described as subtle, tacit and indirect. That is, it is a decidedly *non*-deliberative experience. This aspect of human experience is accounted for within the work of Dewey and may be most explicitly understood as a component of what he once termed *collateral learning*. I maintain that much of the exemplary teacher’s most vital lessons — including the education of *eros* — operate through the mechanism of collateral learning.

In this essay I wish to introduce a consideration of this subtle and indirect dimension to the education of what Garrison terms *eros*. In doing so, I seek to outline a readily overlooked feature of the exemplary teacher. While this essay is primarily descriptive and speculative, I hope to demonstrate nonetheless that it is consistent not only with some of Dewey’s most neglected insights, but also with research on the brain which has begun to explore the subliminal dimension of what has been termed our *emotional unconscious*. In doing this I hope to depict an account of those qualities which teachers inadvertently and unwittingly bring into the classroom: qualities which nonetheless have a profound bearing on the cultivation, or obstruction, of those positive emotions Garrison associates with *eros*.

### GROWTH

Nurturing the form of *eros* with which Garrison is concerned may also be profitably understood as part of the process by which Deweyan ideals are themselves

conceptualized and advanced. It is, after all our imaginatively conceived ideals which, according to Dewey, are capable of arousing “steady emotion.”<sup>3</sup> More importantly for Dewey, ideals are specifically concerned with the kind of emotions or eros with which Garrison is also preoccupied. In drawing this distinction, what must be kept in mind is Dewey’s own conception of the function of ideals. As he wrote, “Ideals are like the stars; we steer by them, not towards them.”<sup>4</sup> Consequently ideals may be deemed the guide posts that direct emotion or eros in such a way as to sustain growth. This, of course, is life’s ultimate purpose for Dewey and perhaps his most important conceptual legacy.

I believe there is much that is valid in Dewey’s reading of what constitutes educational growth. Indeed, as Steven Rockefeller as well as Garrison have each pointed out, Dewey’s concept of growth is not simply a significant part of his educational theory, but a central element of his philosophy in general.<sup>5</sup> It is, in effect, life’s consummate ideal. Growth is for Dewey the all-inclusive human good because it is intrinsically and instrumentally worthwhile. That is, growth is intrinsically satisfying and instrumentally valuable insofar as it is distinguished by an increased capacity to meet the challenges of living in our social and natural environments. While growth may thus be deemed the primary ideal, it is rendered more deliberate through a host of secondary ideals such as intellectual, moral and democratic ideals. Intellectual ideals, as Garrison has also suggested, may be seen to emerge through a proper blending of reason, emotion and imagination for the purpose of inquiry. Their intrinsic value is derived from the satisfaction that accompanies a new understanding. The instrumental value of these intellectual ideals is derived from their capacity to resolve problems we encounter in our natural environment. Moral and democratic ideals, on the other hand, blend judgment, emotional responsiveness and force of action in the service of resolving challenges that emerge in our social environment. Applying these ideals to problematic situations sustains the ultimate ideal: growth. Thereby, they make life meaningful and worthwhile, evoking the development and exercise of all of our powers that are relevant to the advancement of such specific democratic ideals as individual freedom and the community experience.

Consequently, for Dewey the central goal of life as well as education is this enhancement and expansion of the process of *growing* so that it flourishes in an unimpeded fashion: thereby benefiting the individual and society. In addition, while the direction this growth must take is pertinent to the lives of all individuals, it is especially pertinent to the vocation of teaching. That is, if, as Dewey asserted, “the dominant vocation of all human beings is intellectual and moral growth,” then it would appear that a distinguishing feature of the exemplary teacher is an unambiguous commitment to their own intellectual and moral growth as well as to that of their students.<sup>6</sup> Clearly, if teachers are not prominent models of this “dominant vocation of all human beings” then who should be? Again, this also appears to be the rationale underlying Garrison’s thesis when he suggests that the education of *eros* is the supreme goal of teacher education. What I wish to add is that teachers not only foster growth in their students by overtly challenging their students to construct new understandings, but that they also play a vital collateral or incidental role as *models*

of growing human beings themselves. For this reason it is all the more important that teachers (and professors of education) be committed to the ideal of growth.

If teachers are, as I believe, necessarily models for the students with whom they interact and are thereby obligated to be committed to the ideals of intellectual and moral growth, then we need to be clearer about what this precisely means since it is central to our appreciation of the significance of collateral learning. A consideration of the relation between growth and Dewey's conception of self-knowledge will help clarify these ideas, and their implications.

#### SELF-KNOWLEDGE

The active, dynamic nature of Dewey's conception of self-knowledge is best illustrated by this principle: the self is found *in work*.<sup>7</sup> For Dewey the meaning of self-knowledge can only be understood through a consideration of the *activity* to which one is drawn — activity that is found intrinsically worthwhile (that is, is conducive to personal growth). The activity to which one is drawn is a reflection of one's *interests*. Interests, according to Dewey, are particularly significant in so far as they betray the "active or moving *identity* of the self."<sup>8</sup> For Dewey there is a clear connection between our native interests, self-knowledge and the work or vocation to which we should ultimately be engaged. Implicit here is the assumption that one should pursue a career that fulfills one's deeper interests — much as was traditionally expressed in the notion of following one's "calling." This is the only guarantee to long-term, continued personal growth.

The implication of our consideration of self-knowledge to our discussion of the role of *eros* in the life of a teacher is perhaps obvious. An individual's motivation to pursue a career in teaching should reflect much more than an *interest* in — or competence with — subject matter. Neither would a desire to master observable pedagogical skills capture this central element of exemplary teachers. What teachers must possess is, as Garrison also argues, an unequivocal passion (*eros*) for growth — intellectual and moral — in the lives of themselves as well as their students. This implies a desire to meet the intellectual and moral challenges of our social environment, not only by exercising and applying appropriate ideals, but in assisting young people in their capacity to meet these challenges as well. Such an exemplary teacher finds the growth of these ideals in themselves and in their students equally fulfilling.

Among the most revealing insights Dewey provides regarding his own conception of an exemplary teacher is the apparent lack of focus on pedagogical skill and subject matter competence (although clearly those could not be entirely neglected). This is revealed in his observation that even if a teacher's "methods of instruction and discipline...are technically faulty" they "may be rendered practically innocuous by the inspiration of the personal method that lies back of them."<sup>9</sup> It is this "inspiration of personal method" which I believe is best characterized as a teacher's deep-seated underlying passion for intellectual and moral growth on both a personal and professional level. Furthermore, it suggests, as I will argue, that an important indirect element of the educational encounter lies within the emotional qualities that a teacher inadvertently brings to the classroom. As suggested, this relation between

emotion and ideals was clearly recognized by Dewey. He noted within his conception of ideals that emotion plays a major role not only in directing our interests, and our sense of purpose, but also — and more importantly — in sustaining our efforts toward improving the actual social and physical environments in which we live: that is, applying intellectual and moral insights to problematic situations and thereby resolving the problems with which we are faced.<sup>10</sup>

An appreciation of this role of emotion among exemplary teachers is implicit in the recent observations of historian Richard Traina who examined the autobiographies of some one-hundred twenty-five prominent Americans in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in order to discover what these individuals said about the teachers they valued. Traina observes that an extraordinarily consistent pattern in the descriptions of these exceptional teachers emerged from his research. Among these descriptions there was noted “a palpable energy that suffused the competent and caring teacher, some mark-making quality.”<sup>11</sup> I believe the basic implication that emerges from Traina’s research and Dewey’s theories is that it is through the *emotional inspiration* of a teacher that the most valuable dimension of any lesson is advanced. This, it should be clear, is not simply a matter of any emotional feeling, but of particular emotions which emerge as timely undercurrents to the sincere application — and subsequent transmission — of the intellectual, moral and democratic *ideals* which themselves sustain and inspire growth. Such transmission, I wish to emphasize, may be a necessary precondition to the cognitive transaction by which a new, explicit conscious understanding becomes constructed in our awareness.

In sum, Dewey’s vision of an exemplary teacher (a teacher in possession of self-knowledge) encompasses what can best be described as an enthusiastic, contagious passion for pursuing the development of a classroom, a school, and a society in which our intellectual, moral and democratic ideals are enlivened. It should be clear that this is not to suggest that the development of academic knowledge and skills is unimportant. As Dewey once felt compelled to emphasize when addressing some of the excesses in child-centered schooling, the organization of subject matter is not hostile to the student.<sup>12</sup> However, it is the narrow focus on this one aspect of schooling that is positively injurious to *educational growth*. After all, as Dewey would remind us, teachers are “above all others...the consecrated servants of the democratic ideals.”<sup>13</sup> And, ultimately, being a servant of these ideals is to be a *model* and a transmitter of them as well; and to a large extent, being a transmitter is to be genuinely inspired on an emotional level by these ideals.

As suggested, a teacher’s potential for shaping the interests and ideals of students implies that teachers must first consciously endeavor to pursue these ideals in their *personal* as well as their professional lives. In some respects, this is a fundamental application of Dewey’s principle of *continuity* of experience that he elucidated in *Experience and Education*.<sup>14</sup> It is unrealistic, on the basis of Dewey’s principle of continuity, to expect a teacher to undergo a change of ideals and character each morning he or she heads for the classroom. If Dewey’s constellation of intellectual, moral and democratic ideals become a lifetime pursuit for the teacher

— personally and professionally — it is then, and only then, that he or she brings more to the classroom than mere subject matter competence or pedagogical skills. Once again, I believe these qualities are the basis of the “inspiration of personal method” which, as Dewey suggested, may obviate “technically faulty methods of instruction and discipline.” It is only in this way that the teacher avoids being merely a model of subject matter competence. A model of teacher competence based too narrowly on the mastery of subject matter and pedagogical skill, Dewey would maintain, is a clear threat to the social and moral integrity of a school insofar as it overlooks — and undervalues — the personal, emotional investment a teacher must make. These are qualities and ideals that come into play *while* a teacher exercises pedagogical skill and demonstrates mastery of subject matter. For this reason, we are compelled to draw our attention more closely still to the “personal method” of a teacher and what may be his or her subtle, tacit or inadvertent influence. After all, it is through this influence that a teacher brings into the classroom his or her “mark making qualities” — qualities that shape the social and emotional climate of the classroom and constitute the essential ingredient behind the transmission of ideals. This represents the most significant aspect of what Dewey once described as *collateral learning*.

#### COLLATERAL LEARNING

It was in *Moral Principles in Education* that Dewey most forcefully distinguished between *direct* and *indirect* instruction. In making such a distinction, Dewey sought to emphasize the extent to which *indirect* instruction had a more profound influence on the lives of young people than formal, direct instruction. While direct instruction might involve a conscious, deliberate discussion *about* moral ideals, indirect instruction was that which was conveyed by the incidental circumstances of life in a classroom and a school. As Dewey wrote it was the “larger field of indirect and vital moral education” which had the most profound impact on the child. Such development proceeded through “all the agencies, instrumentalities, and materials of school life.”<sup>15</sup> Today, some of the efforts that have proceeded under the banner of “character education” have attempted to accommodate this idea insofar as they have sought to address those issues — such as school rituals — which may affect the school climate and culture. These efforts reflect an implicit appreciation of Dewey’s observation that “[t]he analysis of character into aspects of wise judgment, sensitive emotional responsiveness, and force in action reveals how largely character forming must be indirect, slow, gradual, and unconscious.”<sup>16</sup> Because of these largely “unconscious” factors, Dewey pointed out “that educational methods and materials which, on their face, have little to do with securing moral results, may nevertheless be so treated that character formation is their more abiding and significant end, albeit largely an unconscious and indirect end.”<sup>17</sup> While only moral ideals have been addressed here, this principle is equally applicable to intellectual ideals as well. I believe that what underlies the transmission of either set of ideals is the notion that they are most effectively transmitted in a slow, gradual, indirect, largely unconscious process by a *teacher* who aspires to these ideals and constantly endeavors to apply them at appropriate intervals during life inside or outside the classroom. It should be clear that enthusiastic application of ideals during

problematic situations (moral or intellectual) is not the same as explicit, direct instruction *about*, or deliberation on, these same ideals.

While Dewey's work is seldom associated with ideas of the unconscious, he was clearly sensitive to how non-cognitive, unconscious forces play a central role in the development of our attitudes, values and, ultimately, our ideals as well. Indeed, I would like to suggest that the transmission of *eros* and ideals in the classroom and in life involves a process that is (as Dewey suggested) "slow, gradual and unconscious." Here I wish to underscore the idea that this is a different, albeit complementary process to the conscious, cognitive construction of knowledge and understanding. Furthermore, these ideals — inadvertently transmitted by a teacher and acquired by a student — emerge as the attitudes and emotional responses that are in many respects a central consequence of *collateral learning*: learning that occurs while a teacher is engaged in the more traditional tasks of teaching content and skills in the classroom. Once again, this is precisely why "technically faulty methods of instruction" may be overcome by a "personal method." Nowhere is this idea made more clearly or forcefully by Dewey than in *Experience and Education* where he writes:

Perhaps the greatest of all pedagogical fallacies is the notion that a person learns only the particular thing he is studying at the time. Collateral learning in the way of formation of enduring attitudes, of likes and dislikes, may be and often is much more important than the spelling lesson or lesson in geography or history that is learned.<sup>18</sup>

Furthermore according to Dewey, "these attitudes are fundamentally what count in the future." This is because they determine whether the desire to learn, to grow itself has been imparted; and this, as we have seen is *the* fundamental, all-inclusive ideal of life: *growth*. In essence, as Dewey wrote elsewhere, school provides a significant arena for the abiding influence of the habits of others — especially our teachers. This may not always be a positive influence, of course. In some instances, as Dewey wrote, "a teacher's best conscious efforts may be more than counteracted by the influence of personal traits which he is unaware of or regards as unimportant."<sup>19</sup> This observation underscores the importance of continuity between the ideals a teacher aspires to in his or her professional *and* personal life. Today we possess stronger evidence than ever before of the extent and power of the unconscious — inadvertent influences of others upon our morals, manners and character — and consequently on our attitudes, ideals and *eros* as well. Dewey, of course, would have welcomed such research. Indeed, in many respects, it represents something he clearly anticipated. I will now briefly consider some of the ideas to emerge from this research.

#### THE EMOTIONAL UNCONSCIOUS

In the research examined by Joseph LeDoux in *The Emotional Brain*, we find an empirical basis upon which to advance our consideration of the relation between *eros* in the form of emotional impulses, ideals and the inadvertent, unconscious processes that underlie classroom encounters. As LeDoux has pointed out, there has been over recent years an expansion of research on both *subliminal stimulation* and the often hidden, implicit emotional impact of what is otherwise a clear, conscious perception. This research has gone a long way toward establishing the reality of what

has been termed our *emotional unconscious*. For instance, it has demonstrated how unconscious factors affect our thought and behavior when we least suspect them. Indeed, as remarked by one researcher, unconscious influences have their largest effect precisely when they are least expected — explicitly.<sup>20</sup> Most important, this research has demonstrated that “emotions, attitudes, goals, and intentions can be activated without awareness, and that these can influence the way people think about and act in social situations.”<sup>21</sup> This, it would appear, is what Dewey was suggesting when he identified collateral learning, as well as the slow, unconscious processes that define character formation — and, I would add, the formation of *eros*. The influence of teachers as providers of a “collateral learning experience” corresponds to what LeDoux discusses in his text as the role that “priming stimuli” play in establishing what will become a potent influence on our subsequent behavior. According to these studies, stimuli with emotional connotations that remain either implicit or subliminal can profoundly influence subsequent behavior. In the classroom setting, teachers whose conduct is accompanied by those positive emotions or *eros* that reflect a genuine and abiding appreciation and respect for important intellectual, social and moral ideals, create a basis upon which these ideals themselves are genuinely nurtured. In effect, I believe that Dewey’s own discussion of the influence of teachers through collateral processes may be deemed to exemplify an implicit grasp of the manner in which the teacher transmits enduring attitudes and ideals. In other words, exemplary teachers are, in effect, “priming stimuli” for important intellectual and social ideals: complete transmission of which is effected by subsequent exposure to the explicit, cognitive aspect of these ideals. It is, I believe, the explicit, conscious, cognitive element with which Garrison’s thesis is ultimately concerned. In contrast, I believe collateral learning processes provide the proper foundation upon which ideals and values are *later* cognitively reconstructed and integrated into conscious understanding following subsequent experience. It is this *subsequent* experience in the form of narrative explorations that Garrison has well described.

A proper consideration of the subliminal, collateral processes embedded in the educational encounter suggests that regular, close, personal contact between a teacher inspired by compelling ideals and a student is critical to the transmission of these ideals. I believe that this is the reason why Dewey predicted that in the kind of “progressive” school he envisioned there may be “*more* multiplied and *more* intimate contacts between the mature and the immature than ever existed in the traditional school, and consequently *more*, rather than less guidance by others.”<sup>22</sup> Regular, sustained, intimate contact between the student and a teacher animated by deep seated ideals — that is, a teacher of *eros* — is the basis for the transmission of ideals *while* knowledge is acquired. The challenge, as Dewey well understood, was how these contacts between teacher and student can be established without violating his principle of learning through *personal* experience. I believe this paradox may be resolved by attending to the *quality* of experience, provided by a teacher motivated by the ideals of growth: intellectual, moral, and democratic — thereby overcoming so-called “technically faulty methods of instruction.” A teacher with a sincere commitment to these ideals brings an inspiring *emotional* quality — that is, *eros* —

into the classroom. This is a quality that may remain subtle and tacit but nonetheless determines whether the experience afforded in a classroom is fully educational in the Deweyan sense — that is, conducive to the continued growth of the student, not just knowledge competence. And ultimately, as Dewey wrote: “The criterion of the value of school education is the extent in which it creates a desire for continued growth and supplies means for making the desire effective in fact.”<sup>23</sup>

#### CONCLUSION

I believe it is fair to say that the exemplary teacher is a teacher with an abiding faith in or vision of the intellectual, moral and democratic ideals that optimize individual and social growth. This faith or vision is, of course, the “common faith” of which Dewey wrote. It is a vision conceived by imagination and founded upon “a clear and intense conception of a union of ideal ends with actual conditions.” Such a vision, Dewey continues, “is capable of arousing steady emotion.”<sup>24</sup> Once again, I believe it is this “steady emotion” built on a vision of both intellectual and widely shared democratic ideals, that is at the heart of what Garrison terms *eros*. Such emotion or *eros* not only sustains a teacher through the challenges of teaching, but is also the basis of the teacher’s “personal method” which more than compensates for otherwise deficient methods of instruction.

Given my thesis, I believe that the most prominent obstacles to nurturing *eros*, Deweyan ideals and the “common faith” which define them, are negative *emotions* like cynicism and pessimism, which, by their very nature, undermine the ideals, faith and vision Dewey recognized as so important to human growth. Consequently, I believe our principal challenge as educators if we wish to make the education of *eros* our supreme aim, is one of overcoming widespread cynicism, pessimism and a sense of impotence in the face of influential cultural forces. In his own day, Dewey found the spread of cynicism and pessimism deplorable and lamented that “it has even become in many circles a sign of lack of sophistication to imagine that life is or can be a fountain of cheer and happiness.”<sup>25</sup> For this reason I believe our efforts would be incomplete if we simply attended to Garrison’s recommendations and engaged students and prospective teachers in the exploration of important narrative works or even Dewey’s writings that cover the intellectual and moral ideals that should inspire us. Neither may it be sufficient for prospective teachers to receive the attention of college professors and teachers who themselves are animated by these ideals and moral faith: although this *does* constitute a very important implication of our discussion. Rather, in so far as we need to integrate the ideals guiding our personal and professional lives, prospective teachers may need to consider some strategies for neutralizing the cynicism and pessimism so prevalent today. In one way or another, these strategies to overcome such negative emotions must touch upon our personal lives and the emotional dispositions we consciously or unwittingly bring to the classroom. To do this, these strategies must invariably touch upon the personal habits and beliefs of our future teachers. This admittedly controversial proposal may be the principal challenge involved in any effort to make the education of *eros* the supreme aim of education.



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1. Jim Garrison, *Dewey And Eros: Wisdom and Desire in the Art of Teaching* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1997).
  2. *Ibid.*, 127.
  3. John Dewey, *The Collected Works of John Dewey, 1882-1953* The Electronic Edition, "A Common Faith," ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1981), 35.
  4. *Ibid.*, "The Study of Ethics," 262.
  5. Steven Rockefeller, *John Dewey: Religious Faith and Democratic Humanism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991).
  6. Dewey, *Democracy and Education*, 320.
  7. *Ibid.*, 361.
  8. *Ibid.*, 362.
  9. Dewey, "How We Think," 217.
  10. See Dewey, "Human Nature and Conduct," 180.
  11. Richard Traina, "What Makes A Good Teacher?," *Education Week* 18, No. 9 (20 January 1999): 34.
  12. Dewey, "Essays," 264.
  13. *Ibid.*, 210.
  14. Dewey, *Experience and Education*, 13-22.
  15. Dewey, *Moral Principles In Education*, 268.
  16. *Ibid.*, 388.
  17. *Ibid.*
  18. Dewey, *Experience and Education*, 29.
  19. Dewey, "How We Think," 217.
  20. Joseph LeDoux, *The Emotional Brain* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996), 63.
  21. *Ibid.*, 61-62.
  22. Dewey, *Experience and Education*, 8 (emphasis added).
  23. Dewey, *Democracy and Education*, 58.
  24. Dewey, "A Common Faith," 35.
  25. Dewey, *Experience and Nature*, 41.