

Whatever Happened to Dewey and James? Discourse, Power, and Subjectivity in the Age of Standardization

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John Dewey was an unequivocal critic of the idea of a standardized curriculum. He once wrote, “A single course of studies for all progressive schools is out of the question; it would mean abandoning the fundamental principle of connection with life-experiences.”¹ William James, too, believed that productive schooling must begin with the child. He wrote of a “proper pedagogic moment” wherein the skilled teacher could seize upon the native impulses and interests of a child — a moment that could not be divined through “specific rules,” but rather “depend[ed] on close observation in the particular case.”² Moreover, James warned presciently about deducing “definite programs and schemes and methods of instruction” from the field of psychology. “Psychology,” he wrote, “is a science, and teaching is an art” (*TLK*, 3).

In the current educational climate, the words of these two eminent scholars seem unfortunately anachronistic — quaint encomiums to a bygone era, perhaps, but incongruous with an educational machinery increasingly consumed with uniformity and standardization. Take, for example, these words from E.D. Hirsch on Common Core State Standards (CCSS), which have been adopted by forty-nine U.S. states and territories, as an index of our historical moment:

The Common Core Standards could presage a breakthrough ... a real advance on even the best of existing state language-arts standards. If they are indeed accompanied by a coherent curriculum that ensures students accumulate needed knowledge starting in the earliest grades, they will form a platform on which we can finally address the literacy crisis in this country.³

Forty-one years after Paulo Freire identified the banking model of school knowledge and nearly 250 years after Rousseau bemoaned an education bereft of experience and expression,⁴ we find ourselves in a peculiar period of uniformity and standardization, wherein a monolithic, culturally specific body of knowledge is held up as yardstick for the measuring of our nation’s schoolchildren. As Stanley Aronowitz has written, “Where once ... educators insisted that education be at the core an activity of self-exploration in which ... the student attempts to discover her own subjectivity, now nearly all learning space is occupied by an elaborate testing apparatus that measures the student’s ‘progress’ in ingesting externally imposed curriculae.”⁵ To be sure, Aronowitz’s words stand in stark opposition to Hirsch’s vision of universality and echo the particularism of Rousseau, Dewey, and James. Moreover, they galvanize, to my way of thinking, a critical question: If current practice precludes self-exploration, what are the constitutive elements involved in formulating the contemporary educational subject? To answer this question, I will historicize and critique the standards-based movement, examining the deployment of particularly pernicious discursive strategies that configure power in predictable

ways and constitute the postmodern educational subject. Having positioned the subject, I will then return to the work of James and Dewey, in particular to two ideas culled from their respective works — namely, *fields of consciousness* and *educative experiences* — as nostrums for our current predicament.

To begin, it is necessary to underscore a substantial body of scholarship examining the ways in which curricular choices reflect positions of power and perpetuate extant social, economic, racial, and gender inequalities. Within this conflict approach to schooling, various scholars have argued that schools are essentially conservative institutions that reproduce current configurations of power.⁶ Moreover, recent studies have applied this framework to curricular concerns, demarcating standards as sites of socio-cultural exclusion and racial hegemony.⁷ However, these studies, while all works of great import, have yet to qualitatively delineate the multifarious discursive strategies subsumed under standards as nexuses of historical oppression, negotiation, and contestation. Acknowledging theories of reproduction and the power-laden dyad of inclusion/exclusion, then, I wish to move toward a nuanced view of academic standards as ideas, as ontological problems.

Following the work of Michel Foucault, we may begin to evince the contours of this problem by examining the discursive strategies resulting in “the historical construction of a subject.”⁸ As a point of departure, we must situate the discourses of the standards-based movement within its apposite historical contingencies, and then evince the ways in which power/knowledge inheres in such discourses. We may position the historical nascence of the standards movement (at least in its current, ossified form) in the mid-1980s view of schooling as a means of bolstering the U.S. economy and ensuring national sovereignty and security.⁹ In particular, the publication of *A Nation at Risk* in 1983 galvanized a period of unrelenting standardization of the educational apparatus, which has reached a current terminus in the zealous push for CCSS.¹⁰ The 1980s and 1990s, then, were defined by “numerous national reports on American education ... underscoring the importance of high standards and uniform basic curricula in education to ensure our society’s political and economic survival in the world ... with renewed emphasis on high standards and accountability.”¹¹ Within these historical contingencies, we can extrapolate overlapping discourses: global economic hysteria, education as a panacea for economic woes, xenophobia, and jingoism. We can, moreover, locate a new *episteme* in which school knowledge has been reconfigured in such a way that its truth or falsity has come to depend upon its exchange value — that is, we have a new field of knowledge defined by commoditization and mercantilization. To be sure, these discursive strategies and concomitant systems of power/knowledge have impacted schools and students in significant ways. For one, we have witnessed a corporatization of American schools, wherein knowledge has been transformed into bits of digestible information and students have transmogrified into consumers.¹² Relatedly, Michael Apple has warned that “a national curriculum and national testing is an ideological attack that is ... truly damaging to those who already have the most to lose in this society.”¹³ Apple has cogently demonstrated the emergence of a new power alliance

in education (a congeries of business interests, the New Right, and neoconservative intellectuals) and a connection “between a national curriculum and national testing and the larger rightist agenda.”¹⁴ David Labaree, too, has underscored the transformation of education into a private good within this time period, arguing that such a reconstitution of knowledge has resulted in students who see the pursuit of high credentials as the sole purpose of education — what he terms “credentialism.”¹⁵ In addition to these theoretical critiques, Richard Allington and Anne McGill-Franzen have demonstrated that high-stakes testing and public accountability have resulted in higher rates of remediation, retention, and referrals for special education.¹⁶

Having established the historical contingencies and temporal discourses implicated in the reification of standards, what remains to be evinced are the phenomenological discourses of standards, the ways in which power inheres in said discourses, and the construction of the postmodern educational subject. My contention is that a standard is problematic insofar as it containerizes its own legitimation and defines truth via an elicitation of statements that conform to its own internal logic. Foucault has offered a conceptual lens for understanding this process. At a basic level, Foucault defined power as “a way of acting upon one or more acting subjects by virtue of their acting or being capable of actions. A set of actions upon other actions.”¹⁷ In the realm of sexuality, Foucault demarcates a form of power that does not work via repression, prohibition, and taboo, but rather through an enticement of the subject to speak, thereby producing discourses that individuate new sexualized subjects, implant new apparatuses for knowing, and constitute sex as a problem of truth. With respect to children’s sexuality, for example, he wrote the following: “It would be less than exact to say that the pedagogical institution has imposed a ponderous silence of the sex of children and adolescents. On the contrary, since the eighteenth century it has multiplied the forms of discourse on the subject; it has established various points of implantation for sex; it has coded contents and qualified speakers.”¹⁸

I believe we are currently witnessing an analogous form of power deployed by educational standards. As we have seen, standardization is a historically constituted discourse — with its epiphenomenal strategic deployments of such power-laden terms as *standards-based*, *accountability*, and *proficiency*, for example — but it also produces a form of discourse via an enticement to speak. This confined speech of the student, and the monitoring thereof, works to normalize and police the subject by encouraging the internalization of external mechanisms of surveillance. The argument, then, might be articulated as follows:

1. A standard for learning, in its articulation (in whatever form: the manual, the curriculum guide, the CCSS), codes the validity of a statement that it will, at some future point in time, elicit. It is, then, a prognostication of a future discourse and a process of legitimation (legitimation of the type articulated by Lyotard).¹⁹
2. What the standard articulates is a history of agonistic narratives and claims to truth. Its method of articulation, its elocution, is tantamount to a

resolution of competing narratives. Its ethics are the apotheosis of the historical victor (that is, the oppressor). The counter-narrative is tacit and residual, but perceptible to those who are the residual side of this apotheosis.

3. This is a way of saying that lives have been expurgated, erased.

4. Students' statements elicited by standards are partial statements, discursive simulacra produced through this mechanistic winnowing of narrative truth. Statements recognized as truth-statements are those that conform to the internal logic of the standard. These statements constitute the phenomenological discourse of the standard.

5. Within this economy, statements are afforded a morphology (the test, the piece of evidence, the artifact) via elocution. Insofar as the statement forbids polyvocal elocution, it is a commodity, a discrete bit of knowledge that eschews criticism. The morphological mechanism is a form of surveillance insofar as it performs a policing action on the statement; after a time, this control is internalized.

6. In sum, this process equates to a subjectification of the school subject.

If this is the process of subjectification, what are the contours of the subject? Nicholas Burbules, in advancing a relational understanding of power, has argued that power resides in a dialectic between actors: a dynamic performance that ultimately circumscribes the possibilities of all those involved.²⁰ Adapting Burbules's work to the current situation, it could be suggested that the discursive exchange between a child and standardized knowledge is a mutually reinforcing, albeit differentially empowering, process: the standard, in defining the limits, form, and truth of the statement is a discursive subterfuge that limits the child; but the child, in turn, in reacting with pleasure at having attained an academic benchmark, ossifies the standard and, thereby, affords it additional power in the official discourse of the school. What this amounts to is an intensification of power in the realm of public education, the construction of discursive interstices that are singular to our historical moment, and the appearance of students who are individuated in predictable ways. Unfortunately, the resulting subject is an intellectually passive consumer of bits of commodified information, who is vouchsafed the traditional markers of an education but denied any real learning. To wit, she is perfectly prepared for the "low-paying jobs of the new global marketplace."²¹

While proponents of the standards movement espouse the traditionalist belief that learning should originate with a knowing authority, William James ascribed primary significance to the inner life of the individual, delimiting the field (more accurately, fields) of consciousness as the most immediate and "primal fact of our science" (*TLK*, 7). He suggested that such fields are constant — that some sort of consciousness is always happening — and enormously broad and reticulated, consisting of bodily sensations, feelings, memories, thoughts, and so on *ad infinitum*. Moreover, he limned a consciousness consisting of a center — that is, mental

stuff pronounced in a given moment — and a surrounding margin that forms a nebulous backdrop. These two components share a fluid and dynamic relationship: the frequency, degree, and direction of their permutations are various and unpredictable.

James employed sundry tropes — streams, fields, waves, and the like — to connote consciousness. Despite the fluidity of his language, however, his idea is afforded precision via two related “laws of association”: the *Law of Contiguity*, which suggests that coming and parting waves at a given moment of consciousness were, in some previous experience, located next to one another as “neighbors in the mind”; and the *Law of Similarity*, which suggests that the coming wave bears some resemblance to the parting wave (*TLK*, 40). That is, the individual consciousness is not an ever-shifting mass of indeterminate stuff, but rather a sensible, if unpredictable, series of waves determined by either their mental proximity — that is, an established and grounded place in one’s mental constitution as a result of a prior paring in a disparate, past experience — or by their similarity; that is, a novel arrangement based not on locality but sameness.

What all this amounts to is a structural rendering of the inner life of the individual. To my way of thinking, this is significant insofar as James’s conceptualization and adumbration of consciousness is tantamount to a topology of the mind, enabling a sort of cognitive archaeology by which we may excavate overlapping theories of epistemology and pedagogy. In addition, this structure can be employed to illuminate implicit issues of power and subjectivity in James’s work, which may be examined vis-à-vis those same phenomena in contemporary education.

Given James’s construction of consciousness via laws of association, I would argue that conscious experience is directed toward some external object (not, necessarily, material) and imbued with meaning via an association with that which is already possessed and internal. This is, essentially, a phenomenological understanding of consciousness, and it contains a lucid, if tacit, epistemology. In short, it suggests that knowledge is created through a constant series of mental associations, via “a sort of fusion of the new with the old” (*TLK*, 78). The result of this fusion is an entirely new field of consciousness — new knowledge, to be sure, but indeed more than that as well. In fact, given the breadth and complexity of this new field of consciousness, I struggle to find a precise descriptive language for this process. Albeit not perfect, labeling this process a “psychology of knowledge” approximates the essence of the thing and affords an opportunity to excavate some pedagogical considerations based on an associating consciousness.

If knowledge is produced via association, with students acting as “little pieces of associating machinery,” then the teacher’s role is rather clear: she must act as a guide, “building up useful systems of association in the pupil’s mind” (*TLK*, 41–42). Although James offered a description of this role, he remained reticent on the particulars of a corresponding methodology. The implicit assumption seems to be that the teacher must realize fruitful associations via an intelligent — that is, based

on the nuances of her students' prior experiences—organization of the external conditions of the classroom. Insofar as James's epistemology is essentially the confluence of the external with the internal, then the teacher must actuate associative learning by focusing on one of these poles — ostensibly the external — as the only point of access. I would argue, then, that a Jamesian pedagogy requires a teacher to acquire an approximate knowledge of her students' stocks of ideas and to construct authentic experiences that facilitate new connections — experiences that, as we will see momentarily, mirror Dewey's concept of "occupations" insofar as they involve working with clay, wood, and metals.

A Jamesian pedagogy may be conceptualized as an educational discourse. As a discourse it is, of course, characterized by a power differential and is constitutive of a singular sort of individuated subject. Of interest here is the discursive mechanism by which subjectivity is implanted, as well as the qualitative nature of this subjectivity, which I will argue is a veritable antithesis to the postmodern subjectivity we have previously explored. To provide but one example, James illuminated the autonomous subjectivity of the student in a book chapter he wrote on the subject of the will, wherein he argued that, in a situation of moral ambiguity, it is only through a student's mental fortitude and sustained attention that a proper conception can be brought into the focus of consciousness and remain there until its effects are realized. In his words, a moral act "consists in the effort of attention by which we hold fast to an idea ... To think, in short, is the secret of the will, just as it is the secret of memory" (*TLK*, 91). James's pupil, then, is a thinking actor, an agent in his own education, an interlocutor in a public classroom discourse. The discourse and subject of a Jamesian education, then, may be understood vis-à-vis the standardized education delineated above (by which I refer to standards, curricula, and tests) through two descriptive dyads: the controlled, monopolized discourse of standardization versus the shared, public discourse of James; and the repressed, passive subject of standardization versus the expressive, empowered subject of James.

Dewey's concept of the "educational experience" affords theoretical extrapolations that closely parallel the preceding discussion of James. Dewey's critique of traditional education was not that there existed a dearth of experiences, but rather a glut of experiences of the wrong sort.²² These experiences, which Dewey termed "mis-educative," were deficient insofar as they vitiated the conditions necessary for future growth. Conversely, educative experiences were those that promote the conditions necessary for future growth and lead to additional, connected educative experiences. When experiences promoted such connected growth, they were congruous with Dewey's *Principle of Continuity*, the first of two defining criteria for an educative experience. The second criterion is the *Principle of Interaction*, which asserts that any given experience consists of the internal state of the individual coming into contact with the external conditions of the situation. In an educative experience, these two factors are in balance, and a sort of educational equilibrium prevails, in which the teacher affords equal attention to her student's internal state and the external conditions of the experience. When such a balanced is attained, the experience has met Dewey's second criterion.

Many significant pedagogical implications follow from Dewey's conception of the educative experience. To begin with, all of education must be firmly rooted in experience; this much is obvious. An experiential pedagogy assumes a teacher who must first understand something about the prior experiences of her children; she must then create authentic experiences that connect to the prior experiences in a meaningful way and promote growth, broadening the field of future experiences. Dewey argued for employing occupations that would either recapitulate or parallel work being done in the outside world. In this way, the student would learn and grow through the continual interplay of ideas "inherent in occupational work."²³ The emphasis of such experience was learning in the educative moment, not the end result of the child's work. The pedagogical moment, then, centralizes the child, reconfigures the teacher as something of an expert guide, and minimizes the importance of the external utility of the task (which, I believe, we may equate with adult standards or objectives). To be sure, this is a fairly radical pedagogy, but even more interesting to me is the question of a progressive organization of curriculum. That is, what exactly are children going to learn?

As we saw in the opening statement of this essay, Dewey remonstrated against the idea of a standardized curriculum. I believe the standardization of curriculum reflects what Dewey refers to as the "Either-Or" philosophy. That is, proponents of universal standards ostensibly make the assumption that all students must learn the exact same body of knowledge lest education devolve into classrooms defined by arbitrary decisions, capriciousness, and improvisation. But isn't this an egregious dichotomy? I would argue, and I think Dewey would agree, that universal standards are problematic in that they are tantamount to bodies of knowledge that represent the acme of a knowledge trajectory of particular groups of people; they are externally imposed and deemed significant for all young people, lacking any connection to the lived experiences of particular students. This is not to say, however, that teachers should not reflect upon where educative experiences should lead their children; quite the contrary. Rather, teachers must reflect upon the prior, present, and future experiences of their children, and then formulate experiences that lead to the accrual of knowledge and more precise mechanisms for ordering and using experiential knowledge. In short, subject matter as it is conceptualized today is problematic insofar as it remains external to the child, whereas a subject matter formulated *in situ*, based on the experiences of children, and guided by a competent teacher, represents, in my estimation, a viable and certainly more liberating, alternative. This leads directly into my final point of significance: the relationship between Dewey's concept of the educative experience and power and subjectivity.

Following one of Foucault's definitions of power, we may qualify Dewey's conception of the relationship between a teacher and her students as a power relation, for a teacher, in guiding the experiences of pupils, acts not directly on them, but rather "upon their actions... on possible or actual future or present action."²⁴ And so we have an asymmetrical power relation (which is to say, we have a social arrangement, for in all social intercourse there exists a power differential), but not a situation of oppression and repressed subjectivity such as that formulated in the

elicitation of the standardized half-truth. Rather, it is instructive to remember that Dewey situated the beginning of the relationship within the child — within the experiences the child brings to the educative moment. Moreover, Dewey specified the teacher's responsibility in an incontrovertible way: she is to "direct the experience of the young *without engaging in imposition*."²⁵ I would argue, then, that the power relation between teacher and student inherent in Dewey's work, when juxtaposed with the power relations inherent in the apparatus of modern education, is one characterized by mutual autonomy. I find this truth to be the most significant aspect of the educative experience. It presupposes and structures an empowering power dynamic, resulting in a new form of subjectivity for pupils, an identity which embodies and expresses the highest ideals of education and society: civility, responsibility, independence, and, ultimately, freedom. As we move farther away from Dewey's sort of educative experience, I fear we may move closer to a baneful form of subjectivity that embodies and expresses the nadir of education and society: truculence, passivity and entitlement, dependence, and, ultimately, oppression.

This is but an initial sketch. As such, it perhaps raises more questions than it answers. For example, although the work of James has influenced current pedagogical practices such as active learning, learner-centered lessons, and the importance of a child's prior knowledge,²⁶ it remains to be seen if these productive practices can sustain an incessant assault from standardization and testing. Moreover, although I have given a nod toward resistance in my discussion of discourse, power, and subjectivity, I have been unable to give this important issue the attention it deserves. Nevertheless, I believe this framework offers a way to locate and interpret the life of a child within an educational apparatus that all too often ignores her.

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 4. Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Continuum Books, 1993); and Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Émile* (North Clarendon, VT: Tuttle, 2000).
 5. Stanley Aronowitz, "Introduction," in Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of Freedom: Ethics, Democracy, and Civic Courage* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2001), 1–19.
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23. John Dewey, *The School and Society and The Child and the Curriculum*. (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 2001), 83.
24. Foucault, "The Subject and Power," 340.
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26. James Korn, "The Teaching Spirit of William James," *Teaching of Psychology* 30, no. 1 (2003): 44–45; and Wilbert J. McKeachie, "William James's *Talks to Teachers* (1899) and William McKeachie, 'Teaching Tips' (1999)," *Teaching of Psychology* 30, no. 1 (2003): 40–43.