

# Dewey's Charge to Resist Fatalism in Business and Education: From "The Way the World Is" to Creative Intelligence

Response to Boyles

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Reading Deron Boyles's excellent paper caused me to wonder: What might have happened if John Dewey, and not Alfred North Whitehead, was the guiding philosophical voice at the founding of the Harvard Business School? In 1931, at the invitation of Whitehead, Dewey addressed the newly formed school, emphasizing the ways in which the "prestige of the physical sciences has created... a kind of fatalism in the social sciences."<sup>2</sup> Boyles, through a close reading of Dewey's *Ethics*, suggests that resisting the fatalism Dewey warned of in the middle of the Great Depression remains our task today.

Boyles makes the case, I think correctly, that Dewey's ideals are at odds with the reality we are living in 2020 America. Boyles is certainly right to assert that "Dewey's view of basic economic justice runs counter to how public school operates," but I am not sure if I see this as a measure of Dewey being too optimistic. In fact, criticizing Dewey as overly optimistic is one way we can become fatalistic. Rather than seeing him as an optimist, I think we are better served viewing him as someone who believes that creative intelligence can transform the world. Highlighting this point is not meant to be a criticism of Boyles; it is meant to suggest that charging Dewey with optimism can put us in league with the fatalist.

I return to this point at the end of the paper and turn now to Dewey's charge that the Harvard Business School risked creating generations of fatalists. Dewey was critical of Whitehead's inability to appreciate the differences between prediction and control and worried that Harvard's newly minted MBAs would forget the power of human agency to shape the future to

human ideals. Captivated by the success of the natural sciences, MBAs might neglect the role of value in economics, leaving the market to run its course, even if this means destroying people and values in the process.<sup>3</sup> Instead of asserting control so the market frees us to realize human values, MBAs would demand freedom for the market, hoping to predict where the market was heading in order to turn a profit, whatever the cost to humans and human values.

The celebrated case study method at Harvard has recently come under scrutiny in the management literature as business scholars are realizing the harm of acting as if business operates in a fixed world.<sup>4</sup> By fixed world I mean a fatalistic world that isn't amenable to human agency. Case studies often make it appear as if a business leader has to decide between a fixed set of options; the case method rarely encourages managers to consider whether or not the entire system of assumptions they are operating under may need to be fundamentally rethought and reconstructed.<sup>5</sup>

To make this point more concretely, we can imagine a case on improving higher education. A college President or board is given a problem—declining enrollment, shrinking endowment, increasing operating costs (sound familiar?)—and forced to make a decision: raise tuition, cut programs, cut benefits, etc. In this scenario, leadership is narrowed to reacting to a fixed set of options. What is lost in the process is another option. A school might instead choose to invest in talent development, empowering individuals to start programs that attract students who so love their school experience that they donate money back to the school while creating a pipeline of new jobs for students; jobs that could never have been imagined before those students had the educational experience offered by the new programs.

Surely this feels idealistic, but I think Dewey is right to warn us against seeing prediction, and not creative intelligence, as the task of business. Instead of using prediction to narrow our choices to fixed options, we can activate agency to create new possibilities. When we narrow our vision, we normalize the status quo and foreclose possibilities that are only disclosed through creative intelligence in the service of human values. Boyles's won-

derful paper reminds the reader that teaching in our time “is essentially telling students ‘the way the world is.’” Instead of encouraging students to envision the future they hope to live in, schools are telling students they must fit themselves to the limited and limiting options that we predict—and thus ensure, without taking any responsibility—will be available to them.

What is to be done? As Boyles notes, schools must move “from acceptance to critique.” More, resisting fatalism “requires re-imagining the function of schools to be places where ethics become central to various fields of inquiry.” Making ethics central, I suggest, means re-asserting the importance of ideals, teaching students the use of creative intelligence to realize ideals. Importantly, the business literature may help us do this.

Though I am tempted to say, with Dewey, that “I don’t know anything about business,”<sup>26</sup> I think it is important that philosophers of education begin the work of exploring the business literature so that we might use it to help us resist fatalism, especially when it comes to how education is managed. In addition to an expansive and ever-growing literature on business ethics, I’ve learned a great deal from management literature that draws on Dewey, notably Peter Senge’s *The Fifth Discipline* and *The Wise Company* by Hirotaka Takeuchi and Ikujiro Nonaka. These thinkers are central to the business school curriculum, and yet they are also committed to fundamentally reconstructing “the way the world is” in business and business education. I suggest philosophers of education may find more of interest in this work than they might expect.

Senge, Takeuchi and Nonaka would heartily endorse Boyles’s contention that “the more materialist our lives become, the less likely we are to enjoy what it means to be more fully human,” and they would encourage philosophers of education to disrupt the narrative of fatalism that operates to hinder the development of creative intelligence in schools. As Boyles demonstrates through his close reading of *Ethics*, Dewey remains a central resource as we do this work.

To close, there are at least two things we can do to resist the per-

vasive fatalism of our time. First, we need to more fully appreciate Dewey's thinking on the meaning of preparation.<sup>7</sup> We don't prepare a student to live fully as a human by narrowing her or his schooling to mere preparation for what we predict will be the jobs of the future. To prepare a student well, we must teach them to activate their agency to create the types of work worthy of their humanity. Second, we can begin building bridges to the business literature inspired by Dewey so that we can reclaim management of education from mere predication and choosing between what we take to be fixed options and to the type of intelligent control that frees us to realize values. Neither of these steps require naïve optimism, but they will take courage and hard work, and it is important to realize the difference. Our students often believe that they can dismiss Dewey—or people inspired by Dewey like Peter Senge—as too optimistic, as if that were the end of the conversation. Oftentimes they do this because they are afraid of asserting an ideal and seeing it not come to fruition. Even if they know the status quo is deadening, it is difficult to take the risks of creative intelligence.

The task ahead is resisting the fatalism that is all too pervasive while activating the creative intelligence necessary to reclaim a future worthy of our humanity. Dewey teaches that human intelligence in the service of human values can transform the world. It is easy to lose faith and side with those who dismiss criticism of the status quo as mere optimism, but to do this would be to forget the power of education to reconstruct what we take to be fixed options into possibilities for growth. This ideal should animate the present our students experience in school, not the fatalism that nearly ensures a diminished tomorrow.

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1 Brian Hendley, "Whitehead and Business Education: A Second Look,"

*Interchange* 31, no. 2-3 (2000): 179-195.

2 John Dewey, "The Drift and Control of Business," in *The Collected Works of John Dewey, Supplementary Volume 1* (1931), 53.

3 Elizabeth Anderson, *Value in Ethics and Economics* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993).

4 Todd Bridgman, Stephen Cummings, and Colm McLaughlin, "Restating the Case," *Academy of Management Learning and Education* 15, no. 4 (2016): 724-741.

5 Philosophers of education at Harvard are reviving the case method for education; it is worth considering the ways this liberates creative intelligence or constrains it.

6 Dewey, "The Drift and Control of Business," 52.

7 Jeff Frank, *Teaching in the Now* (West Lafayette, IN: Purdue University Press, 2019).