

Putting the World in Peril: A Deweyan Aesthetic of Crisis in Social Justice Education

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INTRODUCTION

Social justice education seeks to disrupt patterns of thinking, commonsense beliefs, and even understandings of our places within the world. Kevin Kumashiro¹ argues that these processes lead to educational crises, and we hear evidence of them in student expressions of confusion, rejection, and even anger. For example, the need to resolve crises may explain the passionate frustration behind common calls for methodological templates: Don't just offer critique; teach us how to respond to the problems we're studying. Deweyan pragmatism helps us understand an important thread running through these crises. Within the context of our classrooms, students may find their resources for understanding themselves and the world around them unable to provide the surety and comfort such beliefs once did. As one of my own white students recently offered in an email after a challenging discussion of white supremacy: "I feel like I was just hit in the face (in a good way), and I don't know what to think anymore. What I thought for all those years just doesn't work." Dewey describes these crises as part of the process of growth. Encountering new ideas requires us to experiment with understanding, and we cannot know the outcomes of our efforts until they have concluded. Dewey argues that this experimentation puts the "world in peril and no one can wholly predict what will emerge in its place."² Of course, we cannot remain in such perilous places, we seek resolution of problematic situations. Within the context of social justice education, though, a considerable challenge arises: those with privilege risk closing off inquiry too soon and settling upon ways to resolve crises that help maintain comfort but nevertheless inadequately engage with the complexity of social injustice.

We hear this dynamic at work in Kumashiro's discussion of how crises might impel students to cease engaging in the difficult inquiry into injustice. Using himself as an example, he writes:

Although it is possible for my feelings of discomfort to lead me to want to address and challenge my own male privilege, it is also possible, and perhaps more likely for my feelings to lead me to want to conclude that challenging multiple forms of oppression simultaneously is impossible, or at least that I am already doing the best that I can.³

Risk, then, is a part of the social justice educational experiment. When confronting aspects of their lives that involve privilege, we put our students' worlds in peril, and they might resolve such crises in emotionally satisfying ways that ultimately inhibit socially just growth and also reinforce the very dynamics we seek to disrupt.

In this article, I ask a resulting question: How do we think about and create conditions that encourage growth and further engagement especially through periods of crisis? To craft an answer, I draw upon Deweyan pragmatism to argue that approaching the world-disrupting features of social justice education aesthetically,

and with Dewey's conception of growth in mind, leads us to focus on both creating the conditions that problematize, and offering opportunities to bring the world back together, and so to reconstruct that which is in peril in a way that leads to further inquiry, and not its premature end. I argue that considering these crises through a Deweyan aesthetic lens leads to an intensified focus on the details of the experience in the classroom simultaneous with the continued inquiry into the understanding of social injustice. In order to understand that conclusion, we must first situate these crises amidst Dewey's discussion of habits.

A CRISIS OF HABITS

While we often think of habits as unconscious responses to situations or stimuli that are often unwanted (e.g. smoking), Dewey expands upon that beginning and uses habit to describe an infinite variety of the ways we interact with the world. Habits can be unproductive and unwanted physical responses, such as unconscious nail biting, but they can also be much more positive resources that help us reach our varied aims. In this understanding, habits help us to interact with our world efficiently, so when confronted with routine situations, we rely upon previously developed response resources. A clear example is the set of habits associated with walking. Developing new habits each time one wishes to move would be both exhausting and inefficient. Dewey deploys habits to describe more than mere physical skills and responses; habit captures the resources we draw upon for thinking, feeling, and imagining, too. Habits, then, are a way of thinking about selfhood; we are best understood as being filled by habits, all the way down. We see this in Dewey's remarks that habits have "such a hold on us because we are the habit ... they constitute the self."⁴

It is important to stress, though, that habits emerge within the context of addressing new situations, problems, and dilemmas; we develop them because they fulfill needs, help us resolve problems, and aid us in reaching our desired aims. Furthermore, they are context dependent and arise in response to specific contexts and novel situations in which old habits do not adequately work:

It is the situation that has these traits. We are doubtful because the situation is inherently doubtful. ... Consequently, situations that are disturbed or troubled, confused or obscure, cannot be straightened out, cleared up and put in order, by manipulation of our personal states of mind. ... Restoration or integration can be effected ... only by operations which actually modify existing conditions, not merely "mental" processes.⁵

Thus, the crises we have been describing emerge out of specific contexts in which students experience ruptures in the ability of their habits to respond adequately to the challenges of understanding social injustice and their world understandings. Again, Dewey's emphasis on context here is essential because he pushes us to examine student crises as emerging in specific contexts. This will become key to answering our question about how to respond to these crises. Whereas we might be tempted to respond through a redoubled focus on arguments, evidence, and data that call into question the validity of previously held conceptual habits and encourage their replacement with ones deemed to be more accurate, our focus on context opens a different path forward: Dewey pushes us to alter the very conditions around which the crises emerge. An understanding of why that is important is tied to Dewey's conception

of growth because it involves features that put the importance of the context of the classroom within our understanding of the educational crisis into even clearer relief.

A CRISIS OF GROWTH

Like habits, the term “growth” has a common usage history that creates problems for Dewey. Rather than being a simple increase in some quality, growth is not directionless. Growth describes our increasing capacities to realize our aims as we are impacted by and exert influence on our environments. James Gouinlock aptly describes growth as a process in which “the organism enhances its ability to participate in its environment.”⁶ Likewise, Jim Garrison, Stefan Neubert, and Kersten Reich explain, “developmental growth occurs when we are better able to discriminate more characteristics of our environment in greater detail and respond more appropriately.”⁷ Thus, growth initially entails two intertwined parts: it refers to being able to adapt to and make change in one’s world, and to keep on growing. Drawing upon Roudy Hildreth,⁸ I argue that it also involves a normatively substantive third component, one that is often overlooked in discussions of growth: growth also entails the ability to harmonize our group memberships so that one group’s practices do not inhibit the growth of the members of another group.

Across three texts, *Democracy and Education*, *Experience and Education*, and *The Public and Its Problems*, we find this third aspect of growth in Dewey’s discussion of how being a successfully trained burglar is actually mis-educative and growth-constricting. In *The Public and Its Problems*, he discusses the conditions that would enable the emergence of a “great community” whose members freely associate and communicate with one another to resolve social problems and simultaneously support individual growth. He argues:

From the standpoint of the individual, it consists in having a responsible share according to capacity in forming and directing the activities of the 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. Since every individual is a member of many groups, this specification cannot be fulfilled except when different groups interact flexibly and fully connected with other groups.⁹

Members of groups who conduct illegal activities may develop habits that enable them to function well within those groups, but they do so at the cost of not developing habits that are developed through membership in other groups. As a result, these folks cannot function and interact well with others from those disparate groups; they thus isolate themselves and, as a result, fail to grow. Dewey is clearly pushing us to link growth to enhanced interdependence with others and the groups in which they are embedded. We also find this in *Human Nature and Conduct*. Because of our interdependence, our own individual growth is bound up with that of others: “To foster conditions that widen the horizon of others and give them command of their own powers, so that they can find their own happiness, is the way of ‘social’ action.”¹⁰

These three aspects of growth are important for the task of re-examining the educational crises that began this discussion, but there’s a final aspect of growth worth highlighting before doing so. Dewey argues that growth is a natural part of childhood; immaturity itself suggests the latent potential to grow. The model of youth, though,

also emphasizes that growth is an active process: “Growth is not something done to them; it is something they do.”¹¹ Moreover, an examination of youth approaches our radical interdependence from a different angle. When we are young, our dependence upon others is clear and, as we mature, our increased capacities for self-care can be misunderstood as an isolated individuality that belies the complexity of how we are always embedded in interdependent relationships: “It often makes an individual so insensitive in ... relations to others as to develop an illusion of being really able to stand and act alone - an unnamed form of insanity which is responsible for a large part of the remediable suffering of the world.”¹² To counter this mistaken sense of hyper-individuality, Dewey suggests we develop ways of thinking and interacting that support growth, what he describes as plasticity, or our ability to adapt: “essentially the ability to learn from experience; the power to retain from one experience something which is of avail in coping with the difficulties of a later situation.”¹³ Growth, then, captures the ideal of the ongoing human process of learning how to adapt and alter the circumstances in which we find ourselves embedded with others. It is an always emerging process of constant reconstruction of problematic situations in conjunction with interdependent others. It takes energy.

As we now rethink the nature of educational crises through the combined perspectives offered by habits and growth, a few key details emerge. First, social justice courses may offer new ideas and ways of engaging with issues such as racism and sexism that challenge the efficacy of habits that students learn in other contexts. Moreover, these habits not only allow students to resolve problems of understanding, but also they help them situate themselves with the groups of people in which they learn those habits. Thus, the notions of being socially just that inform a social justice education classroom might do more than challenge a student’s understanding of the facts of how the world works; they might also challenge the habits that sustain their membership in significant groups such as those associated with their families, friends, and local communities. Simultaneously, students may be challenged to develop new habits that help them harmonize with the specific people in their classrooms. There may be a crisis of growth, then, one in which students are challenged to develop new ways of understanding and interacting with others - both in the classroom and outside of it - simultaneously. A perilous position for many.

I raise these details to suggest that there may be more at work than differences in conceptual and factual understandings of how dynamics such as racism and sexism work when students become angry, confused, and resistant. Likewise, their calls for solutions may be about addressing a bigger problem that sits behind their experiences: How do we harmonize across differences in group memberships? While that might seem to be an ancillary issue, within the context of understanding growth, it becomes a pivot point upon which a response turns. Understanding why rests upon Dewey’s aesthetic theory and his discussion of consummatory experiences.

THE AESTHETICS OF GROWTH

In his discussions of the development of both habits and growth within the process of resolving problematic situations, Dewey directs our attention to the phase of resolution as being more than the return to a period of stasis. He differentiates what

he describes as a consummatory experience from one that is merely a cessation of crisis, in that the former remains an active phase:

We have an experience when the material experienced runs its course to fulfillment. Then and only then is it integrated within and demarcated in the general stream of experience from other experiences. A piece of work is finished in a way that is satisfactory; a problem receives its solution; a game is played through; a situation, whether that of eating a meal, playing a game of chess, carrying on a conversation, writing a book, or taking part in a political campaign, is so rounded out that its close is a consummation and not a cessation. Such an experience is a whole and carries with it its own individualizing quality and self-sufficiency. It is an experience.¹⁴

Consummatory experiences, then, are those places where we perceive that inquiry has resulted in the satisfactory resolution of problematic situations and, importantly, the integration of what came before with what we imagine will arise in the future.

Focusing on the forward-looking nature of consummatory experiences is important because it signals how they are linked directly to growth; they help us forge ties between the past and the future. This is particularly important within the context of the educational crises students might experience as a result of critical inquiry into social injustices, especially ones in which the inquiry itself induces emotional upheaval as it challenges the understandings of the world that help them fit into their families and home communities. Along this line, Haskins observes that a consummatory experience is special not just because it has “emotional or imaginative intensity but also a felt sense of unity among the phenomenological elements of experience, as well as between the present moment and other moments in one’s past or projected future history.”¹⁵

The felt unity is important, and can be best understood through Dewey’s aesthetics, especially because this pushes us to look at interactions. We find this in the way that Dewey reconstructs aesthetics, away from what had hitherto been a sole focus on the qualities in an art object, and onto our experience with the art object. In Dewey’s words: “Art is a quality of doing and of what is done. The product of art - temple, painting, statue, poem - is not the work of art. The work takes place when a human being cooperates with the product so that the outcome is an experience that is enjoyed because of its liberating and ordered properties.”¹⁶ Dewey democratizes art, and suggests that these liberating experiences can be had in our everyday interactions with seemingly non-artistic endeavors, such as pouring a cup of tea or taking a class. Moreover, making them commonplace is vital to human flourishing and growth. The key is perception: the power of the aesthetic experience is that it helps the familiar become unfamiliar, or that which is unfamiliar take on new-found meaning. As we discussed earlier, these experiences are always situated amid specific contexts, and the same is true for art; the art experience is bound to the medium of the piece of art itself. In a clear example in *Art as Experience*, Dewey makes this case in both artistic and non-artistic terms: The “bricks and mortar become the house they are employed to build; they are not mere means to its erection. Colors are the painting; tones are the music.”¹⁷ The aesthetic, then, is accessible to all people throughout their interactions and experiences with specific objects and in specific contexts. The aesthetic aim, then, is to help us live with an awakened perception in our interactions with these moments, ones that open our experiences to a richer completeness. Thus, a “tea cup

or a chair may be made and perceived with a far greater 'degree of completeness in living' than a painting; it is to that degree a fine or aesthetic object."¹⁸ Again, as Steven Fesmire notes, Dewey's emphasis here is that the aesthetic involves action: "The real work of art, he argued, 'is what the product does with and in experience'."¹⁹

Within the context of the crises in our social justice classes, then, the action involves participating in the process of growth, a process that entails three intertwined parts. The first is to develop habits of understanding that help students encounter issues of social injustice in such a way that helps them reach their desired aims. For example, if the aim is to live as socially just, white educators who teach amid racial injustice and a backdrop of white supremacy will need help to develop anti-racist habits – both of understanding and acting – that they can sustain and continue to develop as they learn more about racism into the future. These details are consonant with the first two aspects of growth. The third pushes us outward because it challenges us to harmonize across social groups and to create conditions in which others are able to harmonize, too. Considered through the frame of the consummatory experience, the challenge is to come to an understanding of oneself as a racially moral agent in a way that inspires further engagement and harmonization with our already existing group memberships, such as our families, but also with current memberships, such as those in social justice classrooms, and imagined future ones, such as being a teacher on a school staff. Haskins puts it well: "Art occurs when a consummatory experience with a marked degree of aesthetic quality leads, though the agency of the subject, to the production of further such experiences *not merely for the subject but for others as well.*"²⁰

In turn, let us draw an analogy between this artistic experience and what happens in a social justice classroom. The very substance of the texts read, conversations had, activities undertaken, the particular group members, the quality of the group dynamic all matter. This means that student rejection of information, frustration, etc. ... are not just with the material - the seemingly independent curriculum (e.g. evidence of white supremacy) - but rather are responses to the very particulars of this group and this conversation and this environment. These interactions can be deadened, or they can be experienced aesthetically, and the difference rests upon the energy brought into the interaction. Aesthetic engagement requires active participation, and that holds true across all three aspects of growth, including the focus on harmonizing across group memberships. As Dewey also argues, then, helping ourselves succeed in this process requires us to work not only on our own internal processes but also on altering the context itself.

RECONSTRUCTING A CONTEXT FOR AESTHETIC ENGAGEMENT

Focusing on growth and consummatory experiences leads us to a way to engage with student crisis that pushes beyond a focus on new evidence and argumentation as the solution. Along with curricular issues, a focus on such experiences brings careful attention to the relationships among people in particular situations that have given rise to these crises. Thus, the way forward may certainly involve facts and arguments, but it may be equally as important to create conditions that lead to consummatory experiences, where students actively explore how to harmonize experiences, across

their multiple group memberships, including those in the classroom, in which they connect their pasts to their imagined futures.

I must emphasize that I am not describing a naive process of helping people feel good about being with one another. When understood through the aesthetic, this harmonization, this learning to integrate across differences, is a moral action that refuses to obfuscate problems in the face of difficulty. As Dewey suggests, the aesthetic involves moral inquiry: The “moral function of art itself is to remove prejudice, do away with the scales that keep the eye from seeing.”²¹ This moral function, he insists, is tied to our interdependence: “To say that the welfare of others, like our own, consists in a widening and deepening of the perceptions that give activity its meaning, in an educative growth, is to set forth a proposition of political import.”²² Thus, the aesthetic way of engaging with students in the classroom that leads to consummatory experiences is not about stopping activity, but rather, and in keeping with a key aspect of growth, a heightened resolution that impels us forward with an understanding of the need to remain engaged, not only with the inquiry itself but also in the shared and interdependent nature of that inquiry.

In practical terms, the key features of this argument – a focus on aesthetic growth, which emerges in particular contexts that encourage consummatory experiences – call for social justice educators to see the particulars of the classroom environment as a laboratory for growth and for the development of new habits of interaction. Moreover, Dewey’s emphasis on action means that students themselves become energetic agents in such experimentation, that we help them explore the ways that different particular actions and ideas impact their abilities to harmonize with others, and that we simultaneously engage in social justice inquiry. It requires, then, that we help them make the familiar – the dynamics of a classroom – unfamiliar, and part of a co-created active experiment in reconstruction and change that leads to the creation of conditions that help all community members grow. Thus, there is a dual focus: on the shared understandings, and on the interactions that help people engage in (or disrupt) shared inquiry, so that students in crisis understand themselves as vitally connected to multiple groups, even when those groups do not share values, interpretations of events, or ideological commitments.

Growth is partially understood through this cross-group harmonization, and we can create conditions in which students are helped to grow aesthetically: by making the familiar unfamiliar. We do this when we help them to understand that the particular experiences they are having in their classrooms are ones that are had with particular people, that their actions and statements within our classrooms have impact, and that power moves in and through our classroom interactions in significant ways. Likewise, the process entails helping them to develop understandings of how what they are learning, and what they are doing with their peers in the classroom itself, are both tied to their outside past, present, and future group memberships. If our memberships in one context can inoculate us so that we resist questioning our understandings of social injustice, then developing significant ties to others in new classroom contexts may also call us to take seriously that which we might have rejected in the past, because we have developed new bonds with specific people

who call us to be members of new communities. The aesthetic task, then, requires the energy to seek ways to reconstruct our habits and to harmonize across those conflicting contexts and across conflicting group memberships. Doing so may lead us imaginatively into a future in which we understand how to continue to engage in the difficult inquiry that inspires socially just growth, not only for ourselves but for others as well.

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 4. John Dewey, *The Middle Works of John Dewey, Volume 14, 1899-1924: Human Nature and Conduct*, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1922), 21.
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 18. Dewey quoted in Steven Fesmire, *Dewey* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2014), 199.
 19. Dewey quoted Fesmire, *Dewey*, 199.
 20. Haskins, "Dewey's Romanticism," 111 (emphasis added).
 21. Dewey, *Art as Experience*, 325.
 22. Dewey, *Human Nature and Conduct*, 202.