A Response to "Dewey and Vygotsky: Society, Experience, and Inquiry in Educational Practice"

by Leigh M. O'Brien

In the May 2001 *Educational Researcher*, Michael Glassman presented an interesting comparison between the theories of two towering figures in educational thought, John Dewey and Lev Vygotsky. However, Glassman, in his use of the project approach (Katz & Chard, 1989) to make Dewey's theory operational, misstates several points. This is unfortunate for at least two reasons. First, Glassman's description of "Dewey-inspired" education is problematic in that it calls into question the premises for his comparison of Dewey and Vygotsky's ideas. Second, and more troublingly, this interpretation perpetuates historical misunderstandings, misuses, and critiques of Dewey's theory and related practices.

Glassman's "Dewey and Vygotsky: Society, Experience, and Inquiry in Educational Practice" (2001) was a fascinating but troubling read for this early childhood–social foundations teacher–educator. The piece was broad, but I will focus my critique on Glassman's interpretation of "the Dewey-inspired model of long-term projects" (p. 4) because of my concerns regarding this aspect of the article. There are three main areas where my understanding of such projects differs from Glassman's: the connection to the larger society, the role of process and product, and the function of the teacher. I will attempt to explicate these differences and then posit implications of our differing interpretations.

Glassman first provides a brief overview of the project approach (Katz & Chard, 1989) because he sees this early childhood model as a good way to make Dewey's theoretical underpinnings operational as contrasted with Vygotsky's in his "Zone of Proximal Development." The project approach builds on the Dewey-inspired "project method" used in Dewey's lab school at the University of Chicago from 1896 to 1904 (Tanner, 1997) and so provides a useful, current example of Deweyan education. In his overview, Glassman contends that

> [t]he emphasis on process over product in the cause of free inquiry is reflected in one of the most important educational approaches to emerge from Deweyan-based educational philosophies, long-term projects . . . It is the students . . . who choose direction, set goals, and determine effort. The goal of the project itself is relatively unimportant and can be changed through the combined activity of the children. (2001, p. 6)

He also maintains, "the topic [of a project] need not be of any relevance to the demands of the larger social community, or even

have meaning for the teacher. As a matter of fact, the teacher should step back from the process once children display a relevant interest and act as facilitator rather than mentor" (p. 4).

Although I applaud Glassman's efforts to contrast Dewey's and Vygotsky's conceptions of the relationships between process and goals in education, I think his overview of the project approach often misses the mark. Unity was Dewey's lifelong quest. Therefore, Dewey-inspired projects ought to be connected with the larger social community, are best undertaken when linked to the teacher's interest, and require a very active teacher role. Further, process, content, and product are indivisible. Although somewhat artificial in that all pieces of the project approach are integrated, I will separate out and address each of these areas in turn.

The Connection of Projects to the Larger Society

Dewey maintained, "Only by being true to the full growth of the individuals who make it up, can society by any chance be true to itself" (1900/1990a, p. 7). He was adamant that the child not be left alone to "wander aimlessly" (1902/1990b, p. 198). Instead, he asked educators to serve as a bridge (Cuffaro, 1995) between the necessarily narrow world of the child and the larger world of his or her society. Dewey thought the importance of education was that it enabled the individual to look critically at previously accepted beliefs in the light of new experiences (Miller, 1997). Topics that are studied in school should not be separated from the children's lives; rather children should see real life in school (Katz & Chard, 1989). Therefore, projects should be based on relevant, meaningful problems in children's lives. In this form of education, students learn skills and content knowledge in a context where those skills and that content knowledge are useful. This context usually entails a complex, real-life problem or project, with many levels of embedded problems and solutions (Chard, 2000). A wonderful example is planting and maintaining a garden, which children did as part of Dewey's lab school (Tanner, 1997).

The Inseparability of Process, Content, and Product

As another example of Dewey's pursuit of unity, in Deweyan education process and product are inseparable and depend on worthwhile, educative content. "[P]roject work as an approach to early childhood education refers to a way of teaching and learning, as well as the content of what is taught and learned. . . . The content or topic of a project is usually drawn from the world that is familiar to the children" (Katz & Chard, 1989, p. 3). This description is clearly consistent with Dewey's insistence that the child's interests be melded with the curricula adults are responsible for

disseminating. Dewey wrote, "the child and the curriculum are simply two limits which define a single process," and contended instruction should be "continuous reconstruction, moving from the child's present experience out into that represented by the organized bodies of truth we call studies" (1902/1990b, p. 189). He argued that the "immature, undeveloped" child needs to be exposed to "certain social aims, meanings, values incarnate in the matured experience of the adult. The educative process is the due interaction of these two forces" (p. 182).

The trenchant question Dewey posed, which the inseparability of process, content, and product in the project method addresses, is this, "How shall the young become acquainted with the past in such a way the acquaintance is a potent agent in appreciation of the living present?" (1938, p. 23). He goes on to say that everything depends on the educative quality of experiences children have and that the educator's task is to select the kind of experiences that "live fruitfully and creatively in subsequent experiences" (p. 28). But, "[u]nless experience is so conceived that the result is a plan for deciding on subject matter, upon methods of instruction and discipline, and upon material equipment and social organization of the school, it is wholly in the air" (p. 28). These beliefs led the basis for the curriculum in Dewey's lab school. There, children learned about "fundamental occupations" in integrated, experiential ways grounded in their daily lives and community (Mayhew & Edwards, 1936/1965) as they cooked, sewed, and built houses. In the project approach, products similarly serve as a communal record of the project's progress. This leads us directly to the role of the teacher.

The Role of the Teacher

For preschool children, the project "is that part of the curriculum that the teacher intentionally guides" (Katz & Chard, 1989, p. 3). In Phase 1 of a project, the initial planning is usually teacher directed. As opposed to Glassman's contention that the project need not hold any meaning for the teacher, Katz and Chard maintain that the teacher's interest is one of the planning criteria to be considered. Indeed, especially with children new to the approach, the teacher often proposes project topics. Based on knowledge of the children, as well as resources available, time of year, and so forth, teachers can nominate or select topics of potential interest.

In Phase 2, the teacher retains control over types of fieldwork undertaken by the children. Further, notably in the internationally renowned Reggio Emilia, Italy schools where an especially creative version of the project method can be seen, the teacher plays a large role in helping children plan and execute their representations of fieldwork (Edwards, Gandini, & Forman, 1993). Throughout, teachers must document how the project progresses and they need to continue to monitor and support children as the culminating event is planned and executed in Phase 3.

Teachers using the project approach do primarily facilitate, but their role is crucial. They guide discussions and activities, monitor actions, become part of the discovery process, pose questions, record children's ideas, and in numerous ways mentor their charges. Although this is not an instructional role in the traditional sense, teachers do not "step back from the process" at any time. "The teacher is available to the children for consultation at all times and facilitates the work by maintaining a productive working environment through supervising and monitoring the children's progress" (Katz & Chard, 2000, p. 177).

Projects are child centered in that they build on children's interests; however, "children and teachers collaboratively select the project, plan the activities, and decide what materials are needed. . . . Upon completion of an activity, children and teacher collaboratively evaluate what they did and why, what they will do next, and how they will do it. . . . This approach does not mean the teacher is less involved in or less accountable for children's learning" (Trepanier-Street, 1993, p. 26). Projects are investigations of real topics in which the participating children actively negotiate with the teacher the questions to be answered, the experiments to be conducted, and all other features of the effort. "To suggest that learning evolve from the child's interest is not to propose an abdication of adult authority, only a change in the way it is exercised" (Silberman cited in Katz & Chard, 1989, pp. 8–9). As Dewey noted, basing education upon personal experience may mean multiplied and more intimate contacts between adults and children than ever existed in the traditional school, and consequently *more*, rather than *less*, guidance by others (1938, p. 8).

Final Thoughts

Glassman's emphases on process over product, the "free inquiry" of the child separate from the larger society, and the teacher as "facilitator rather than mentor," misrepresent the ideas of both Dewey and Katz and Chard. I see two main implications of this misleading presentation. First, a more thorough and accurate exploration of the purposes and practices of Deweyan projects most likely would have lead to different conclusions regarding the nature of the nuanced differences between Dewey's and Vygotsky's theories. For instance, the mentoring provided by Deweyan teachers closely resembles Vygotsky's notion of scaffolding; the importance of social context and goals likewise are shared foci.

Second, Glassman's take on Dewey-inspired education may perpetuate the long-standing misunderstanding of this wing of Progressive education (e.g., Miller, 1997; Westbrook, 1991). Dewey's educational philosophy was an extremely well balanced, insightful, and sophisticated one that has consistently been misunderstood and misapplied, then critiqued and dismissed. Deweyan education is rarely utilized outside of early childhood education in part due to this problem, but it could be and should be if we are concerned with the development of democratic character (O'Brien, in press). Because of the connections made with the wider community, the active role of the teacher, and the link between process, content, and product, Deweyan approaches can contribute to a view of education and pedagogy as challenging, multifaceted, and central to democratic life (Dewey, 1916). A clearer look at Dewey-inspired models of education might better help us get to this place.

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AUTHOR

LEIGH M. O'BRIEN is an associate professor of education, Nazareth College, 4245 East Avenue, Rochester, NY 14618-3790; lmobrien@naz.edu. Her research interests include teacher preparation for a democratic society, the role of narrative in education, women and education, and self-study of her pedagogy.

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