

# The Flipped Curriculum: Dewey's Pragmatic University

Aaron Stoller<sup>1</sup> 

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**Abstract** Recently Graham Badley (Stud High Educ 41(4):631–641, 2016) made the case that the “pragmatic university” represents a viable future for the post-modern institution. In his construction of the pragmatic university, Badley largely draws upon the vision laid out by Richard Rorty (Philosophy and social hope. Penguin Books, London, 1999). While Rorty’s neopragmatism offers an important perspective on the pragmatic institution, I believe that John Dewey’s classical pragmatism offers a richer and more capable vision of the university. The aim of this paper is to develop a view of the pragmatic university drawn from Dewey’s philosophy. His writings on the university offer a unique and viable path forward because he directly engages a reconstruction of the relationship between knowledge and experience in the context of post-secondary education.

**Keywords** John Dewey · Higher education · Pedagogy · Curriculum · Inquiry

Recently Graham Badley (2016) made the case that the “pragmatic university” represents a viable future for the post-modern institution. Badley (2016) argues that the pragmatic university is as important a concept as Ronald Barnett’s (2011) view of the “ecological university.” He justifies this claim by illustrating how the pragmatic university meets the five criteria of adequacy that Barnett recommends as a litmus test for future conceptualizations of university theory and practice (p. 631).

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Aaron Stoller is the author of *Knowing and Learning as Creative Action: A Reexamination of the Epistemological Foundations of Education* (Palgrave MacMillan, 2014). He lives in Colorado Springs, CO, USA, where he teaches at Colorado College and directs the first year experience program.

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✉ Aaron Stoller  
aaron.stoller@coloradocollege.edu

<sup>1</sup> 14 E. Cache La Poudre St., Colorado Springs, CO 80903, USA

In his construction of the pragmatic university, Badley primarily draws upon the vision laid out by Richard Rorty (1999), ultimately concluding that “Rorty’s view of the pragmatic university is...to help individuals and society develop a better democracy with better institutions such as better universities and with better access to social justice for all” (Badley 2016, p. 631). While I agree with Badley’s assessment that the pragmatic university represents a significant opportunity for the future, I would like to offer an alternative vision for the aims and structures of the pragmatic university. I believe that John Dewey’s classical pragmatism, which is grounded in what Jim Garrison (1995) calls *pragmatic social behaviorism*, offers a richer and more capable vision of the university than Rorty’s linguistic pragmatism, grounded in what Rorty himself calls *epistemological behaviorism*.<sup>1</sup>

Where Rorty and Dewey align is in a rejection of the idea of knowing as conceptual representation. They both reject, in other words, the psychological behaviorism which has long dominated the discourses of educational research (Garrison 1995, p. 720). For Rorty and Dewey, knowledge is a tool through which we coordinate meaningful social behavior and is justified in social practice. Objectivity is intersubjectivity and there is no distinction between facts and values: our practices, including scientific practices, are always value- and theory-laden.

The key difference is that where Rorty’s epistemological behaviorism concerns itself exclusively with cognitive meanings (e.g. knowledge claims), pragmatic social behaviorism is also concerned with the construction of aesthetic and moral meanings (Garrison 1995, p. 720). Rorty’s epistemological behaviorism stops short of Dewey’s pragmatic social behaviorism because it reduces *experience* to *discourse*. As such, Rorty’s epistemological behaviorism is not equipped to cash out language in terms of what Garrison (1995) describes as *tools* and *labor*. Rorty’s pragmatic university, as Badley (2016) correctly claims, “abandons the discourse of objectivity and works toward *human consensus*...[s]uch an achievement would be the outcome of processes of communicative reason, of *conversational persuasion*” (p. 633, 635). The problem with such an approach is that it cannot move beyond competing discourses into the co-construction of normative values and, therefore, growth (individual and communal). Education within a Rortian framework takes place exclusively at the level of language and is reduced to a process of discourses seeking consensus.

Dewey’s view of education is like what Garrison (2007) calls *the education of eros* which, in essence, is to claim that the highest virtue in education is the cultivation of desire toward a meaningful end (p. 169). For Dewey, the central aim of education is cultivating *unique, productive capacities* which allow students to engage in the world through reconstruction of the world. Rorty’s behaviorism is not antithetical to Dewey’s, but it is not equipped to move beyond the discursive into education as existential and embodied *transformation* of both the individual and the collective.

The aim of this paper is, then, to develop a view of the pragmatic university drawn from the philosophy of John Dewey. Although Dewey did not articulate a theory of higher education and in fact was skeptical of attempts to do so (Dewey 1930/1984, p. 156), his writings on the university offer a unique and viable path forward because he directly engages a reconstruction of the relationship between knowledge and experience in the context of post-secondary education. This essay is an attempt to develop the components of

<sup>1</sup> For a more robust articulation of the differences between Dewey and Rorty on this issue, see Garrison (1995) and Johnson (2014).

a Deweyan theory of higher education which to-date has largely been ignored in favor of Dewey's philosophy of primary and secondary education.

## From Epistemology to Inquiry

Dewey's most widely known engagement in the philosophical foundations of higher education was his exchange with Robert Maynard Hutchins following the publication of *The Higher Learning In America* in (1936)<sup>2</sup>

In his text, Hutchins' argues in favor of a Great Books approach to education, concluding that a proper view of higher learning is the study and refinement of first principles (metaphysics). Although Dewey shares many of Hutchins' concerns, particularly for the maintenance of the college as a cultural site that does not operate directly in the service of industry, he disagrees with a number Hutchins' central claims.

Dewey is particularly critical of the epistemological foundations of Hutchins' conceptualization of the curriculum. Hutchins' proposal is based on what Dewey labels the *spectator theory of knowledge*, which is the assumption that knowledge is self-contained and independent of the knower, and that knowing is a kind of mental representation of the object by the subject (Dewey 1937/1987, p. 399; Dewey 1944/1989, p. 277). In both his epistemology and curricular proposals, Hutchins can be seen as an apologist for a long-standing tradition which began with Aristotle's theory of knowledge as pure contemplation and developed through the medieval curriculum into the seven liberal arts (Waks 1997).

While a Great Books curriculum in the manner Hutchins' suggests is no longer in vogue, its philosophical presuppositions still dominate the imaginary of contemporary Western higher education. A similar position to Hutchins' is manifested, for example, in the claim that institutions of higher learning exist for a narrow epistemic end: the creation, preservation, and transmission of knowledge. Epistemological foundationalism is also located in the learning outcomes movement in which pedagogy and curricula are intended to imprint skills and/or content knowledge so as to "fit" students into a particular view of reality (see Osberg and Beista 2008; Stoller 2015). The primary objects of education in the traditional model are the decontextualized bodies knowledge, facts, or skills that make up the curriculum. Faculty largely teach *what* they know (content) decoupled from *why* they know it (values), *how* they know it (technological practices), and *who* knows it (identities and social contexts). The curriculum is not only decontextualized, but also dehumanized as its center of gravity prioritizes *subjects* over *students*.

For Dewey, knowledge is not a thing-in-itself but instead is a tool crafted by and for particular situations through a systematic process of inquiry: it is a transactional construction and a sub-function of inquiry. Larry Hickman argues that, for Dewey, knowing is a technological artifact (Hickman 1990, p. 17). Dewey writes that "knowing is literally something which we do...analysis is ultimately physical and active...meanings in their logical quality are standpoints, attitudes, and methods of behaving toward facts, and ... active experimentation is essential to verification" (Dewey 1916/1980b, p. 367). All things—including physical tools, logical objects, poems, and even selves—come into being as creative products that emerge from action in the environment. Dewey's philosophical system dissolves what he calls the *epistemology industry*, replacing it with a rich

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<sup>2</sup> I am regrettably unable to offer full analysis of the debate. I would refer readers to Heldke (2005) and Johnston (2011) for excellent analyses of the contours of Dewey and Hutchins' arguments.

theory of inquiry that is broader and more capable than the traditional epistemological project.

For Dewey, the primary object of education is not disciplinary subject-matter, but the transactional relationship that exists between persons (i.e. inquirers) and the world. As Walter Feinberg (2016) argues, “Dewey’s educational subject is ... the social order itself and the opportunities it might create for democratic social-self reproduction” (p. 7). This is because education is the *education of* evolving organisms adapting to an evolving world in a constant and ongoing process of reconstruction. Knowledge is a necessary but not sufficient condition for the aim of higher education because it does not contain the wider intuitive, empathetic, and creative capacities necessary to engage in meaningful action in our social and natural environments.

Dewey begins his conceptualization of education with a transactional view of knowing and knowledge construction, as well as a deep commitment to the creative capacity of all people, including students (Dewey 1925/1981, p. 210). The role of educational theory and practice is to design institutions that catalyze and sharpen a student’s ability confront, inquire into, and collectively change reality for the purposes of meaningful growth.

While the bulk of Dewey’s writings on education are devoted to primary and secondary education, he was clear that colleges and universities should be conceptualized as distinct from K-12 schools. This claim is based on both their unique cultural role and the structural conditions that establish the nature of their work.

Dewey argued that colleges have a unique relationship and obligation to culture due to their core mission of active and engaged research (Dewey 1899/1976a, p. 48). Dewey understood colleges and universities as spaces where we go to reconstruct self and world. This reconstructive aim of the university exists within both its pedagogical function and in its research function. In both instances, it is charged with contributing to collective, reconstructive action in culture (Dewey 1931/1985b, p. 262). Dewey (1944/1989) argues that the “function of the liberal arts college, in my belief, is to use the resources put at our disposal alike by humane literature, by science, by subjects that have a vocational bearing, so as to secure ability *to appraise the needs and issues of the world in which we live*” (p. 280, italics added). The primary concern of the college should be the cultivation of the processes and practices of inquiry, when *inquiry* is understood not simply as the analytic application of disciplinary-specific methods to problems, but as a central vocation of social beings. Inquiry is not solely an epistemological enterprise, but it is a human enterprise that engages the collaborative pursuit of meaning. As a result, the school should mirror, contribute to, and engage the emergent democratic process (Dewey 1931/1985c, p. 421).

While Dewey is light on concrete suggestions of how to manifest his educational philosophy within the context of higher education, he does advance three criteria against which we can evaluate practice at the collegiate level. Like his criteria for effective democracy (Dewey 1916/1980a, p. 92), his criteria for effective colleges (Dewey 1899/1976a, p. 38) are vague but point in a useful direction:

1. Do the structures of the institution purposefully cultivate desire and motivate authentic student interest?
2. Do the institutional structures allow for an emergent path such that students may cultivate their unique interests?
3. Do the paths, cultures, and contexts in which students engage ultimately yield growth and the construction of meaning?

Dewey’s critique of the college is robust because it challenges us to think about the creation of coherent, inquiry-driven collegiate education which integrates three different

domains of university practice: the curriculum, the classroom, as well as the co-curriculum (i.e. activities, programs, and learning experiences that fall outside curricular content).

## Coherence in the Curriculum

Curriculum theory and design continues to be dominated by the “curriculum as map” metaphor (McEwan 2001, p. 261). In this conceptualization, the curriculum is a “map” of disciplinary knowledge. The teacher plays the role of a guide for students who are led through a landscape of information to be mastered, achievement of which is measured through the attainment of particular cognitive ends (Hall and Smyth 2016, p. 11).

From a Deweyan perspective, this view of the curriculum is grounded in three central philosophical mistakes. The first is the assumption that a discipline (i.e. the “terrain”) is an ordered body of objective epistemic material. The second mistake is the view that the aim of curriculum (i.e. the “map”) is to distill and transmit the epistemic products produced or deployed in the discipline. The third mistake is its view of the mind as a representational system. Here, students are viewed largely as “talking heads” (Garrison 1995, p. 727) who “know” when they are able to reproduce the information presented through the curriculum (i.e. the “map”). The map metaphor is ultimately premised on the idea that education is a purely cognitive, quantitative increase of facts or skills (an additive property).

For Dewey, the opposite is the case. Disciplines (i.e. “terrains”) are not collections of epistemic *products*, but vibrant, heterogeneous, and value-laden ecosystems of human social *practices* that are shaped by critical histories. Second, the aim of the curriculum (i.e. “the map”) is not retention of epistemic data, but instead the cultivation of capacities that might enable creative, reproductive action. Lastly, students “know” not when they are able to reproduce factoids, but when they have developed the capacity for self-directed and meaningful creative action.

Education is, therefore, an ongoing process of personal and cultural maturation (a reconstructive, hermeneutic capacity) rather than a quantitative increase of facts or skills. Dewey (1897/1972) argues that the progression of the curriculum should not be “in the succession of studies but in the development of new attitudes towards, and new interests in, experience” (p. 232). Education does not simply change what we know, it changes what we *want to* know. The purpose of the curriculum is about gaining deep, embodied familiarity for our environment, the cultivation of critical agency, and sparking passionate desire to create meaningful change.

Dewey is frequently cited as the inspiration for and origin of many contemporary learner-centered pedagogies, yet his philosophical system presents a much more complex challenge to the dominant paradigm than commonly imagined.

The flipped classroom, which is one of the most discussed contemporary pedagogical approaches in higher education (see Bishop and Verleger 2013), traces its roots to the experiential learning theory of Donald Kolb (see Lage, Platt, and Treglia 2000), which is largely derived from Dewey's theory of inquiry (Kolb 1984/2014, pp. 4–7). The flipped classroom in its broadest terms simply “means that events that have traditionally taken place inside the classroom now take place outside the classroom and vice versa” (Lage, Platt, and Treglia 2000, p. 32). Most flipped approaches focus on the deployment of group-based, interactive learning activities inside the classroom, and intensive reading or video lecture-style learning outside the classroom. While Dewey would likely have appreciated the flipped classroom in the same way he felt some affinity toward different modes of

problem-based learning, to imagine this as the extent of his pedagogical and curricular imaginary is to ignore his most radical philosophical insights.

Dewey argues that education is not preparation for life, but is the very act of life itself (Dewey 1893/1971, p. 50). This idea is perhaps one of the most quoted lines of Dewey's educational philosophy. It is also the most misunderstood and least acted upon.

This insight from Dewey demands that we organize the very architectures of education in such a way that they allow students to directly experience the kinds of ambiguous, value-laden, and relationally complex problems that are constitutive of both democratic life and the very practices of inquiry that constitute the disciplines, themselves. The flipped classroom limits our ability to achieve this goal because it assumes the curriculum is equivalent to communicating particular bodies of subject-matter to students in an order defined by subject-matter experts (i.e. classrooms illuminate points on the map). Dewey's educational philosophy, on the other hand, demands not that we simply flip the classroom, but that we *flip the curriculum*.

For Dewey a curriculum becomes coherent insofar as it engenders and enables larger processes of inquiry and reflection organized from the standpoint of learners and learners-in-community. Dewey (1933/1986a) argues that "the problem of *method* in forming habits of reflective thought is the problem of establishing *conditions* that will arouse and guide *curiosity*; of setting up the connections in things experienced that will on later occasions promote the flow of *suggestions*, create problems and purposes that will favor *consecutiveness* in the succession of ideas" (p. 157, italics in original). The curriculum, in other words, should be an emergent pathway of hermeneutic growth through and within which one might reconstruct self and world. Dewey was clear that the only way to prepare students for life within a democratic context was not simply to shift the *content* of the classroom, but the *practices and structures* of the school must be reimaged to support this aim.

The curricular "path" students take finds its axis not in the material itself (i.e. how experts organize the material), but instead from the larger concepts driving the emerging processes of inquiry undertaken by student themselves (i.e. the processes of discovery undertaken by students) (Dewey 1931/1985c, p. 417). The curriculum must be coherent, therefore, in terms of the central questions driving students' quest for meaning.

The flipped classroom suggests that "problems" become a centering point for classroom practice (e.g. the material is organized around central problems, case studies, or questions). Such a practice is not antithetical to Dewey's pragmatic university, but it simply does not go far enough. Dewey suggests that we locate central problems or questions in the curriculum, itself, such that the curriculum becomes a mechanism for coherent identification, exploration, and reconstruction. The curriculum should mirror the process of design and discovery as it exists in the world. Here *curriculum as map* is replaced by the *curriculum as question*, in which the students organize and engaged courses and experiences around a central, emerging process of inquiry.<sup>3</sup>

In such a model, course choices must be fluid across the curriculum and disciplinary domains because questions that students are inquiring into are not located within the confines of a single discipline, but exist inside within wider networks of social, cultural, ethical, political and natural contexts. Dewey (1931/1985a) writes that:

<sup>3</sup> There are interesting discussions arising around the notion of the distributed curriculum that have a particular resonance with this aspect of a Deweyan view of higher education. I would refer readers to Robert J. Starratt's notion of *community as curriculum* (Starratt 2002) and Dave Cormier's concept of *rhizomatic education* (Cormier 2008).

the mentally active scholar...roams far and wide. All is grist that comes to his mill, and he does not limit his supply of grain to any one fenced-off field. Yet the mind does not merely roam abroad. It returns with what is found, and there is constant exercise of judgment to detect relations, relevancies, bearings upon the central theme. The outcome is a continuously growing intellectual integration. (p. 87)

The flexibility of such an approach allows students to more deeply conceptualize the limitations and politics of knowledge, the struggle of tracking a problem and working through ambiguity, and the realities of the social nature of knowledge creation.

Such a conceptualization of the curriculum is antagonistic (if not antithetical) to many of the core assumptions of the map metaphor. Perhaps its most central point of opposition is a claim about the relationship between knowledge and experience. In a traditional curriculum, *fundamental knowledge* is determined in advance by a group of experts and is organized based on their understanding of the relationship of the material to itself. Dewey's reconstruction of epistemology to inquiry, on the other hand, suggests that knowledge may be considered *fundamental* only insofar as it is necessary to a particular inquirer approaching a specific problem. Dewey (1916/1980a) argues that, "to be informed...is to have at command the subject matter needed for effective dealing with a problem, and for giving added significance to the search for solution and to the solution itself" (p. 196). *Fundamental knowledge* is equivalent to that which is knowledge necessary to perform a certain action or solve a particular problem. What is fundamental can be identified *only after* a problem has been engaged and only insofar as knowledge suggests particular courses of action to be taken along an arc of an inquiry that yield fruitful results (Dewey 1931/1985a, pp. 77–79). Deborah Osberg and Gerta Biesta (2008) argue that in an emergent curriculum of this type, "the meanings that emerge in classrooms cannot and *should not be pre-determined before the 'event' of their emergence*" (p. 314, italics added). It is only in reflection that particular elements stand out as fundamental and, even then, these "fundamental" elements are likely to change and be revised over time within context of present experience.

It is for this reason that a Deweyan curriculum would not be designed strictly around what faculty believe students should know in some distant future, but instead must begin by inviting them to engage in communal questions in and through the communities of inquiry that comprise our colleges and universities.

## Coherence in the Classroom

Dewey is widely considered to be the originator of inquiry-based learning and credited with bringing it into the classroom (Barrow 2006, p. 265). While Dewey was clear that inquiry- and problem-based pedagogies embody many desirable pedagogical values, he was also careful not to argue strictly in favor of a problem-based approach to all forms of instruction, particularly at the college level. Dewey (1931/1985a) writes that:

I have referred, as already indicated, to the 'project' method because of these traits which seem to me proper and indispensable in all study by whatever name it be called, not because this method seems to be the only alternative to that usually followed. *I do not urge it as the sole way out of educational confusion ...* though I think experimentation with it is desirable in college and secondary school. But it is possible to retain titles and still reorganize the subject-matter under them, so as to

take account of interdependencies of knowledge and connection of knowledge with use and application. (pp. 87-8, italics added)

Dewey's interest in the problem-based method of instruction was based on its ability to achieve something that traditional education was not: (a) illuminating the holistic relationship between domains of knowledge typically understood as disparate and (b) connecting the products of knowledge with the processes, practices, and communities from which they emerged. Dewey saw problem-centered learning as a powerful tool for re-contextualizing and making vital what was eliminated in a traditional classroom, but he did not see it as the only way to empower and enable student growth.

Dewey's skepticism of an exclusively problem-based approach to pedagogy is grounded in the view that the curriculum is a constellation of pedagogical situations intended to cultivate creative capacity.

Whether problem-based classroom instruction becomes an asset or a hindrance is dependent on the student's goals, background experiences, and capacities (Dewey 1916/1980a, p. 228). Students at early stages of study might particularly benefit from problem-centered classrooms, because such approaches to instruction tie the analytic reduction presented in textbooks to the synthetic environment from which knowledge emerges (Dewey 1916/1980a, p. 242). These kinds of classrooms place major emphasis on the processes and skills of inquiry, such as learning how to problematize and inquire, as well as the limitations and mechanisms of disciplinary practice (Dewey 1916/1980a, p. 196). Such experiences work to divest students of the assumption that a field of study is a static body of information by and for experts, and illuminate how and why it is a living, breathing discourse (Dewey 1916/1980a, p. 295). In such an environment, the student begins to understand how their own desires are connected to the process of schooling, as well as the relationship between disciplinary practices and lived situations.

It is also clear that problem-based learning is not without its drawbacks as a pedagogical tool. One of the major issues of problem-based classrooms is that they are often (though not always) orchestrated and administrated by the interests and aims of the teacher (e.g. the flipped classroom). In this case, the student never undergoes the experience of *problematization* which is the first element in the process of successful inquiry. Dewey (1938/1986b) writes that "a problem is not a task to be performed which a person puts on himself or that is placed upon him by others—like a so-called arithmetical 'problem' in school work. A problem represents the partial transformation by inquiry of a problematic situation into a determinate situation" (pp. 111–112). Students are cheated of their own learning when they are not allowed the experience of turning a truly indeterminate situation into a problematic one. Students must encounter the very existential process of an emerging problematic if they are to learn how to creatively solve problems and reconstruct their environment.

A second challenge in deploying problem-based learning in post-secondary environments is that advanced students who have already developed a rich sense of the process of inquiry might, in fact, benefit more from intensive, self-directed study of a particular concept or body of information. This is because they might have developed the intellectual maturity necessary to put knowledge in context and relate it to central problems (Dewey 1916/1980a, p. 312).

More important than deploying inquiry as a pedagogical method is that a teacher learn to develop pedagogical situations (whatever they may be) that provide a bridge between, on one hand, cultivating the experiences and aims of the learner and, on the other, allowing the teacher to exercise his or her expertise to cultivate student growth (Dewey 1916/1980a,



pp. 191–192). Dewey resists the idea that “good” pedagogy can be reduced to a singular methodical principle, but instead argues that pedagogy is a framework for thinking about how learning is best facilitated. For Dewey, teaching is nothing more and nothing less than creating an environment in which learning may occur.

The paradigmatic classroom in the traditional college is the lecture hall. The flipped classroom reverses the traditional style classroom by providing lectures in the evening and engaging students in collaborative exercises during class. While the flipped classroom foregrounds the possibility of identifying where students are struggling to grasp a concept, it is designed without consideration for the interests of students.

I would claim that the paradigmatic college classroom in a Deweyan view of higher education is not the flipped classroom, but the creative writing workshop because it embodies the kinds of pedagogical values that are central to *educating for eros*. These include, but are not limited to, the following:

1. Workshops foreground the notion that to teach is to facilitate students process of becoming more themselves. Richard Hugo, the former director of the creative writing program at the University of Montana writes to his students that “You’ll never be a poet until you realize that everything I say today and this quarter is wrong. It may be right for me, but it is wrong for you” (Hugo 1979/1992, p. 3).
2. The experience of the students is situated at the center of the classroom. Students engage and hone the craft of writing through direct application to ideas and experiences in their own lives.
3. The faculty member is often situated both as an expert facilitator and as a participant. It is common for writing faculty to bring their own projects into the classroom for discussion and critique.
4. Students are situated such that they are not producing material for the teacher, but learning how to participate as a member of a community. Developing the capacity to creatively inquire for themselves includes developing the capacity to receive feedback at different stages of their own process and offer feedback by becoming constructively empathetic to the arc of someone else’s work.
5. Students are actively encouraged to draw vocabularies, experiences, ideas, or questions from other domains of activity into the work taking place in the workshop. There is a rich sense that the class is not taking place in a vacuum, but overlaps in direct and indirect ways with other aspects of a student’s experience.
6. While the project—the construction of a poem—is focused in scope, students experience the entire arc of creative inquiry from inception through production, peer critique, reconstructive completion, and often public engagement.

It could be argued that such a conceptualization of classroom pedagogy does not translate into other fields that deal with more “objective” or stable bodies of content, such as mathematics or chemistry. This concern again misunderstands Dewey’s reconstruction of knowing. Dewey (1916/1980a) writes that “‘Knowledge’ ... means the working capital, the indispensable resources, of further inquiry... Frequently it is treated as an end itself, and then the goal becomes to heap it up and display it when called for. This static, cold-storage ideal of knowledge is inimical to educative development” (p. 165). This kind of tyranny of content is a danger because it gives the impression that the aim of education is the ability to reproduce information. Dewey (1916/1980a) writes that this view of knowing actually swamps thinking because it prevents any capacity for understanding the *use* of the information learned (p. 165). Instead, Dewey suggests that in pedagogical situations content should never be divorced from the critical contexts from which it emerged and in

which it will find its vitality. The traditional content-driven view is equivalent to viewing *sailing instruction* as teaching weather patterns, nautical terminologies, typologies of sailing crafts, and the physics of buoyance. All of these skills and content are necessary but not sufficient conditions for the true aim of sailing instruction: which is learning to sail.

## Coherence in the Co-curriculum

If Dewey's central educational concern is dissolving the dualism that exists between knowledge and experience, then one of its most undertheorized yet most significant manifestations in the traditional American four-year, residential college is the relationship between the curriculum and co-curriculum. The "co-curriculum" is a fuzzy term but refers to the kinds of activities, programs, and learning experiences that fall outside traditional, curricular content.

While Dewey does not have a tremendous amount to say about the relationship between these domains, he is clearly concerned about the nature of their separation. Dewey (1931/1985c) writes that:

the parts of college life that seem to be most actively engaged in by a great many of the students are the so-called student activities, which have nothing to do with the activities of the student, in the ordinary sense of the word; and that question of taking advantage of these outside...activities and of getting the advantage of momentum and independent organization on the part of the students themselves, is bringing that into more organic relations with college life itself, seems to me a very important thing. (p. 417)

Despite the recent concern regarding the administrative bloat of student life activities on most campuses (see Ginsburg 2011; June 2017; Leef 2017; Marcus 2016), the co-curriculum as a concept and administrative structure is not recent invention, but emerged as a result of the movement away from the *in loco parentis* model of the college. There are two moments that are generally pointed to as pivotal in this shift, which concurrently began a move toward the professionalization of student affairs administrators who were responsible for the lives of students outside the classroom.

The "first wave" in American student affairs came in 1890 when Lebaron Russell Briggs, an English instructor, was appointed as "student dean" of Harvard College in order to preserve the educational values of the college as faculty interests increasingly turned toward their own scholarly pursuits (Sandeem 2004, p. 28). The "second wave," which is perhaps more significant, followed in the aftermath of the 1964 Berkeley sit-ins in which student affairs professionals were called on to manage and direct student behavior on campuses across the country (Bloland et al. 1994, p. 4). This "second wave" marked a turn from student affairs as *service provider* to student affairs as *educator* (Bloland et al. 1994, p. 4). The last 50 years have seen an explosion of professional organizations, theoretical writings, and educational degree tracks in support of this goal (Bloland et al. 1994, pp. 5–6).

Far from overcoming the separation between knowledge and experience, the bifurcation of this professional organizational structure serves to create and reinforce the very dichotomy Dewey was attempting to overcome. In most American colleges and universities today, faculty and student life professionals are so professionally fragmented that it is no exaggeration to claim they hold a different understanding of the purpose of the university and speak a language that is largely incongruent (if not incompatible) one another (Philpott and Strange 2003, pp. 90–91). Jeff Philpott and Charles Strange (2003) argue that

“on all too many campuses today, that relationship is characterized by infrequent contact, a lack of knowledge and interest on the part of each about the purposes and functions of the other, and frustration over what appears to be skewed priorities in the distribution of institutional resources. Although these two groups work at the same institutions with the same students, they sometimes act as if they were in different worlds” (p. 78). This professional balkanization is not value-neutral, but impacts the quality and depth of learning on campuses. It also presents a very real hidden curriculum that socializes students into a particular kind of way of inhabiting the practice of their own education.

One of the clearest descriptions of this reality and its impact on learning is Rebekah Nathan's (2005) ethnographic account of American student culture, *My Freshman Year*. Nathan, a cultural anthropologist, took her sabbatical year to live and study as a first-year student on her own campus. Nathan (2005) quickly discovered that there are two cultures governing the university: the formal, which “stressed advice, academics, and warnings” and the informal which “stressed sociability, fun, and humor” (p. 23). She found no space in which a rich in-between (i.e. the life of the mind) exists. Rather than active and sustained involvement in the process of learning, the goal for most students was to keep these two realms as distant as possible.

One of the more significant findings of her experience was that within a few short weeks of becoming a student, Nathan discovered she had transitioned from being actively interested in the material of her courses to viewing classes as brute utilities. Nathan (2005) writes that, “most professors and administrators overestimate the role that academics play in student culture...I'd suggest, student-teacher relationships play a relatively minor role in the experience of undergraduate life...” (p. 140). Overall, Nathan found that most students translated opportunities for learning into defined tasks for the purposes of achievement. Nathan's observations of this phenomenon bear a striking resemblance to the findings of Benson Snyder's (1971) landmark text *The Hidden Curriculum*. Both Nathan and Snyder conclude that this process of translation from learning opportunity to academic task was not a character flaw in the students, but largely the result of socialization into a college system which was designed to educate in a fragmented, utilitarian way.

Nathan's ethnography also parallels the findings of Richard Arum and Josipa Roksa's extensive study of American college campuses, *Academically Adrift* (2011). Arum and Roksa conclude that undergraduates are simply not learning enough once they arrive at college. They locate a major source of this problem in what Steven Brint terms the “new progressivism” in which there is increased pressure to emphasize student engagement at the expense of active commitment to the academic life of the institution (Arum and Roksa 2011, p. 132). Arum and Roksa's concern is not with the activities, themselves, but with the fact that in most cases “high-impact” co-curricular experiences are deployed on college campuses without a direct tie to the academic mission of the institution, therefore perpetuating low levels of intellectual engagement. Arum and Roksa (2011) note that these activities are modeled after the insights of John Dewey, but de-emphasize “Dewey's insistence on rigor and frequent assessment” in favor of attending only to the activity, itself (p. 132).

Ultimately, Arum and Roksa (2011) argue that “[a]t the core, changing higher education to focus on learning will require transforming students' curricular experiences...” (p. 131). For them, this curricular transformation means shifting the center of gravity of university education away from service, leadership, and engagement and back toward the academic curriculum, including things like placing more time studying, holding higher expectations of students, and more emphasis on reading and writing.

Arum and Roksa's appeal to Dewey is intriguing. They are correct in claiming that Dewey's aim was the development of a robust curricular and pedagogical theory that would transcend the limits of the traditional system to more actively engage students in the learning process. They are also correct in claiming that the high-impact experiences being deployed on campuses only vaguely resemble Dewey's educational vision and are typically unattached to his views on learning and growth.

Yet Dewey would be deeply critical of their claim that the problem of limited learning can be solved by more sustained emphasis on—and therefore a retreat into—"traditional" academic activities. A Deweyan theory of higher education would instead work to overcome the fragmentation of the academic and social through a reconceptualization of the relationship of knowledge and experience. It would be grounded in a rich theory of inquiry and ultimately widen (rather than reduce) the boundaries of teaching and learning.

This reconceptualization is not simply a call for faculty to rethink the scope of their pedagogies (e.g. via experiential learning opportunities), but also to be sharply aware of the limitations of their knowledge and teaching practices. *Education for eros* requires a recognition that disciplinary expertise is a necessary but not sufficient form of knowledge to educate students for creative agency within environments that in no way resemble disciplinary communities. The curriculum simply does not begin and end in disciplinary knowledge professed in a classroom, but takes the form of an ecosystem that must be organized to help students face the true complexities of the contemporary world.

Achieving this goal requires much more than a conceptual reconstruction of the curriculum, but requires a reconstruction of the very organizational, political, economic, and professional foundations of our institutions toward the cultivation the kind of rich democratic spaces that might catalyze meaningful, open-ended communal inquiry. From a Deweyan standpoint, this means reconstructing our campuses into platforms which support deep, democratic forms of inquiry. We cannot ignore the fact that the curriculum as a concept and a structure is situated within an organizational context that is designed to fragment learning into discreet parts and tasks.

There are few contemporary practices that offer models for beginning to engage Dewey's critique, such as the residential college movement in the US, but in large part truly holistic approaches to higher education remain largely unthinkable due to the conditions that establish university labor. Faculty are rarely supported or rewarded for meaningful engagement in student life, and student life professionals are largely barred from any meaningful discussions regarding the academic core of the institution.

In the final account, the co-curriculum—as a very idea—is antithetical to a Deweyan understanding of the institution. This is because, as Shane Ralston (2011) argues, “for Dewey, the whole person benefits from education, not through learning a stock of fundamental ideas but through exposure to a diverse range of experiences, whether intellectual, aesthetic, or other.” To truly grasp a Deweyan “curriculum” is to erase the binary between the curricular and those activities, support systems, and experiences that fall “outside.” There is no longer “academic” content, but simply experience and its tools in the service of reconstructive, democratic inquiry.

## Conclusion

Preparing students to thrive in the post-modern world, or what Barnett characterizes as the age of “supercomplexity,” demands that we abandon the idea that answers from the past will be sufficient to engage an unknown future (see Barnett 2004).

While problem-based pedagogies such as the flipped classroom improve the learning conditions for students, they remain a timid and largely anemic response to the broader challenges of the post-modern world. They do little more than domesticate their own radical possibility by remaining entrenched in traditional curricular and departmental architectures which rely on a view of knowing and learning that is narrow, epistemic, cognitive, and expert-driven. They also fail to acknowledge that disciplines, as singular paradigms and methodologies, are insufficient to engage and solve the very same super-complex problems and situations for which we are educating our students. Without the capacity to problematize ambiguous situations, work empathetically, imaginatively, and collectively, and creatively integrate a wide range of knowledges and practices, the next generation will be simply unprepared to face the challenges presented by the contemporary world: global climate change, systemic poverty, water access, and the fact that the carrying capacity of the earth will soon be exhausted.

Dewey offers a way out of what he calls our “educational confusion” via a robust reconstruction of knowing, as well as a reconceptualization of the university structures that facilitate meaningful inquiry. He challenges us to organize curricula and the architectures that support them in such a way that they allow students to directly experience the kinds of ambiguous, value-laden, and relationally complex problems that are constitutive of both democratic life and the very practices of inquiry that constitute the disciplines, themselves.

Dewey's pragmatic university shifts the institutional center of gravity away from the faculty and their disciplines and toward the *students* who must gain critical self-understanding and the creative capacities necessary to engage in a supercomplex world. This is what it means to *flip the curriculum*: to meaningfully engage students in the practices that drive our work as intellectuals, and to allow students to craft the very questions which will direct their own processes of higher education. The central challenge of the pragmatic university is, therefore, designing institutional architectures that are not only *radically* holistic but that connect a student's emerging concerns to learning environments that empower authentic participation in inquiry and reconstructive action (Dewey 1931/1985c, p. 416).

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