Foreword

Like the Gutenberg revolution of the mid-15th Century, which initiated and made possible a democratization of learning by making mass produced, inexpensive texts widely available, the internet has expanded the amount and kinds of information and the audiences for information beyond the scope or imagination of any previous era. Gutenberg and his successors put printed texts within the reach of a rising middle class, thereby transforming western culture and pedagogy from predominantly oral-aural and visual-oral models to an increasingly literary model. The Internet has closed the circle in this transformation by making images, sounds, and texts widely and immediately available to anyone who can or cares to obtain a public library card or purchase a computer. As the infrastructure for supporting internet communication expands and the costs decline—in other words, as access to the World Wide Web increases—the opportunities for individuals to construct knowledge about the world around them and beyond their immediate physical surroundings also increases. Moreover, as the formats for communication on the internet expand—e-mails, list serves, Wikis, and Weblogs—the opportunities for exchanging knowledge, analysis, and opinion expand as well. These enormous advances in the democratization of knowledge present great opportunities and great challenges for educators and those who seek knowledge.

Traditional models of education have quickly and easily (if at great expense) adapted to the new technologies. The 2005 edition of *Peterson's Guide to Distance Learning* lists more than 4,800 online learning programs at more than 1,000 accredited schools in the United States and Canada. The number is growing, if not exponentially, then surely steadily as colleges and universities everywhere scramble to diversify their programmatic offerings and attract new constituencies of students by adding distance learning opportunities to their more traditional face-to-face classroom schedules. Even traditional residential colleges and colleges that had long ago begun to experiment with brief, intense residencies as alternative models to twice or thrice-weekly class meetings are now also entering the field of online education, where students and teachers meet only on the computer screen or in what are called "blended" formats of virtual classrooms and face-to-face meetings. The fairly straightforward and technologically sophisticated procedures of recording faculty presentations, posting syllabi and assignments, sharing documents, administering examinations, and devising ways to receive, grade, and assess student learning have enabled colleges and universities to emulate or many features of the traditional lecture hall model of education. More complicated are the methods for facilitating interaction between students and instructors or among students; but here, too, information technology has provided opportunities and formats for interaction through threaded discussion, asynchronous online forums, and real-time "chat rooms" that strive to emulate the intimacy of the seminar room.

For progressive educators, especially, the new technologies raise new questions about how students will learn individually and together, and how teachers will participate in student learning.

Among the principles to which educators in the progressive tradition of John Dewey cling most fervently and persistently three are important to consider in relation to the problems and possibilities of distance learning through enhanced technologies. The first is the firm conviction that education must begin with what Dewey himself called “insight into the [student’s] capacities, interests, and habits (“My Pedagogic Creed,” [1897], 430). This is often now restated as “student-centered learning,” where the student is challenged to approach each subject, academic discipline, or assignment through the lens of her or his interests and experiences and where the faculty’s role is in part to encourage and guide the student in formulating significant questions and problems that engage and address those interests and experiences. The technologies for communication we now possess can make this process of exploration and discovery possible at a distance as well as face to face, online in one to one communication as well as in more open forum formats. But as anyone who has participated in this form exploratory discussion will attest, doing so at a distance and online is far more time consuming and requires overcoming many more barriers of verbal and nonverbal communication than talking informally across a table. What is required to make this student centered approach to education work in an online or partially online learning platform is a commitment on both sides to the arts of verbal communication.

A second principle of progressive education that deserves some attention—and receives attention in this volume—is what Dewey called the social dimension of education. In “My Pedagogic Creed” Dewey writes: “The school is primarily a social institution. Education being a social process, the school is simply that form of community life in which all those agencies are concentrated that will be most effective in bringing the child to share in the inherited resources of the race, and to use his own powers for social ends” (“My Pedagogic Creed” [1897] Article II—What the School Is). This observation is no less true for post-secondary education than it is for primary education, which was Dewey’s primary focus. The Gutenberg revolution helped create a community of scholars not only by making accessible standard texts to which all participants in scholarly dialogue and debate could refer—chapter and verse, page and line—but also by making possible at relatively low cost printed commentaries, responses, and replies that spread rapidly across the continent. The Internet offers promise to revive and revitalize this community of scholarship with enhanced possibilities for communication, comment, editing, and links to resources that are instantly available for reference, use, commentary, and—in some cases—correction.

A third principle of progressive education that needs to be kept in mind as we continue to develop the use and possibilities for technology in education is the insistence that the goal of education is reflective practice. There is, as Dewey reminds us frequently in his writing, an intimate and complex relationship between product and process that is the distinguishing philosophical mark of progressive education. The emphasis on reflective practice depends on this relationship but also on maintaining a distinction between product and process in the construction and application of knowledge and learning. The tools and resources now available via the internet to all students, at all levels and stages of education, make it increasingly easy for an individual student to assemble information into varied and academically rich products. What is harder (but not impossible) to replicate or emulate through information technology is the dynamic of exchange—between student and teacher and among students themselves—that constitutes the matrix for education as a social transaction. And in some sense what is at stake in the future development of online or distance education is the perpetuation of communities of learners. The millions of scholars, bloggers, Wiki contributors and editors who now add their knowledge, information resources, and opinions to the World Wide Web have democratized learning far beyond anything Gutenberg and his successors in the printing trade would have—or could have—imagined. It remains for our generation of

post-Gutenberg learners and teachers to devise the ways to meet Dewey's challenge to make education a reflective activity that engages individuals in the social exchange and use of knowledge. This book presents some of the recent reflections and experiments that move us in that direction.

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