Chapter IV
Computers and the End of Progressive Education

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ABSTRACT

Multiculturalism is an essential tool for democratic citizenship in a world made ever more closely interconnected by information technologies. In this paper, I propose a model for progressive multicultural education in the computer age. I begin by describing the Pragmatic Progressive model of learning implicit in Dewey’s writing on education. I then discuss two revisions to the model in light of technological developments and theoretical work over the last few decades. Taken together, these revisions suggest that we might profitably revisit—and revise—Dewey’s ideas in the post-industrial era. I bring these ideas together to describe a theory of pedagogical praxis that offers an opportunity to move from multiculturalism to multisubculturalism: a view of education that focuses on diverse educational goals rather than diverse pathways to a single pedagogical end—and thus a view of learning more suited to the diverse ways of thinking and living that characterize our increasingly integrated world.

INTRODUCTION

As information and communication technologies bring people, places, and events from around the world to our desktops, telephones, and televisions, the economic, social, and cultural issues of the globe are becoming increasingly, unavoidably, our own (McLuhan, 1964). The concept of diversity is thus a broader and more complex concept than ever before (Ladson-Billings, 2001a), and preparing young people for citizenship in such an interconnected world necessarily means helping them develop the ability to understand complex cultural issues from multiple perspectives. Multiculturalism is an essential tool for democratic citizenship in an interconnected world.

This is not a new idea, of course. Over a century ago the Pragmatists—including perhaps the
best-known Pragmatist in the field of education, John Dewey—saw the essence of democracy in the idea that there is no one truth. Personal beliefs—however deeply felt—were but one possible perspective among many, and as Menand (2001) explains, the central political tenet of Pragmatism was that “the moral justification for our actions comes from the tolerance we have shown to other ways of being in the world” (p. 440). Dewey’s Progressive pedagogy, which—based on this Pragmatic view of truth—emphasized learning as a process linking personal interest with activities meaningful in the world outside of school, would therefore seem to be a likely candidate for the development of a multicultural education for the digital age.

In what follows, I will argue that this is both true and untrue. It is true in the sense that computers and other new technologies can help make learning engaging and relevant in some of the ways Dewey suggested. But it is also untrue in the sense that while Dewey embraced diversity philosophically, his pedagogy allowed for only a weak form of multiculturalism. Dewey’s multiculturalism celebrated multiple pathways to understanding, but multiple pathways to a single form of understanding. His multiculturalism, I will argue, was a multiculturalism of means, rather than a multiculturalism of ends.

In what follows, I make this distinction between multiculturalism of means and multiculturalism of ends for three purposes. My first purpose, rather transparently, is to argue that a multiculturalism of ends provides the political and epistemological underpinning for a new structure of education suited to a world made broader and more complex by new technologies. My second purpose is to use this critique to understand why, despite numerous attempts to implement it, the Progressive agenda that Dewey outlined beginning with School and Society (1915) has not transformed American education in the century since it was first articulated. My third purpose builds on these first goals to suggest that two important changes at the close of the century—one technological, and one epistemological—provide an opportunity to reinvigorate the Pragmatic Progressive educational agenda as we enter a new social and cultural era.

I begin by describing the model of learning implicit in Dewey’s writings, and then discuss two significant revisions to the model in light of technological and theoretical developments over the last few decades. I bring these ideas together to describe my own theory of pedagogical praxis (Shaffer, 2004b) that revisits Dewey’s ideas in the post-industrial era. In the final section of the paper, I return to the theme of multiculturalism, and argue that pedagogical praxis offers an opportunity to move from multiculturalism to multisubculturalism—and with that move, to shift focus from pedagogical means to pedagogical ends as a first step toward a system of education more suited to the diverse ways of thinking and living that characterize our increasingly interconnected world.

Throughout, I hope it will be clear that my purpose is neither to praise Dewey nor to bury him. Rather, I use his work to outline some of the logic that underlies much of Progressive pedagogy. This outline is a basis for critique (in part) but even more serves as a foundation for a new and potentially more inclusive approach to education for the information age.

My hope in providing such an outline and critique is, of course, that it will be of use to instructional designers, developers, and practitioners who are concerned primarily with the application of information technologies in education. To that end, in what follows I provide some examples of these ideas in practice, but the intent of this chapter as a whole is more philosophical in nature: to show that while advances in technology now let us engage students in active learning in a way not possible before, the challenge is not only how to do use technology well, but what to use technology for in the first place.
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