WHAT IS EDUCATION?

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WHAT IS EDUCATION?

For Jo

Einstein:

"The conceptual basis of physics
is a free invention of the human mind."

Me:

"As goes physics,
likewise education."

Acknowledgments

The seed responsible for the ultimate flowering of this book was planted while I was a student at the New Jersey State Teachers College in Glassboro (now Rowan University). It was there that I was first introduced to the educational writings of John Dewey. I am grateful to the officials of that institution for awarding me a tuition scholarship that made it possible for me to attend. Without that aid I likely would never have gone to college. I am also grateful to my many fine teachers there, far too many to name in full, I am pleased to say. One of them, Leonard Mancuso, gave me his own hardbound copy of Dewey's *The Public and Its Problems* when I graduated. I treasure the memory of that generous gift and remain its proud owner to this day.

I also am deeply indebted to the faculty and staff of Teachers College, Columbia University, where I again received a tuition scholarship that allowed me to complete my graduate studies. There too I encountered several faculty members who not only had studied Dewey's writings but had known him. Their memories of Dewey and their indebtedness to his ideas helped make him a living presence in my life. Arthur T. Jersild, Harold Rugg, and Bruce Raup in particular contributed much to my budding interest not only in Dewey but in philosophical matters in general.

It was not until I joined the faculty of the University of Chicago, however, that my interest in Dewey really blossomed. When I arrived there in 1955 the university's Department of Education had several faculty members who were particularly interested in Dewey's work. They included, most notably, Harold Dunkel, Robert McCall, and Joseph Schwab. Dewey's bust was proudly displayed in the Education Library, which was then in Judd Hall. The university's Laboratory School, adjacent to Judd, stood as a vast brick-and-mortar monument to Dewey's philosophical foresight and a physical reminder of his enduring contribution to American education. In that environment a serious study of Dewey's vast oeuvre became almost mandatory. For years I engaged in that study, conducting seminars on several of Dewey's major works and encouraging graduate students to move in the same direction. I even, for a time, served as director of his widely acclaimed Laboratory School. I am grateful indeed to the university for the intellectual climate it provided and for the opportunity to undertake all those efforts.

Among the many students who attended those graduate seminars, several have since become close friends, and we continue to keep in touch. I have profitably discussed with each of them many of the notions contained in this book. Former students who have aided me in this way include especially Rene Arcilla, Robert Boostrom, Craig Cunningham, Maureen Donne, Mary Driscoll, David Granger, David Hansen, and the late Lauren Sosniack. I am deeply grateful for their loyal support and encouragement.

Catie Bell, another of my former students, now a close friend and currently a teacher of English at the university's Lab School, deserves special thanks. She not only helped nurse me back to health after a serious illness, which sets her apart from all but professional caregivers and family members, she also has been a faithful walking companion for the past several years. Three mornings a week, almost without fail, the two of us stroll along a route of a mile or more from my house to the shores of Lake Michigan and back. On many days lately the walk has also included a welcome stop at a nearby coffee shop. During those long hours of walking and chatting Catie and I

have discussed every aspect of this book many times over. I have gained beyond measure from those exchanges.

I thank Elizabeth Branch Dyson, my editor at the University of Chicago Press, for her strong support and encouragement. I also thank the three anonymous reviewers selected by the press. Their careful reading and thoughtful suggestions helped to eliminate several errors and greatly strengthened the manuscript. For those weaknesses that remain, I accept full responsibility.

Finally, this book is dedicated most sincerely to my dear wife. I owe her the greatest thanks possible for her steadfast companionship and loving support over the years.

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Introduction

What is there to learn about education that we don't already know? That question has one obvious answer: as educators we must learn to do whatever we do professionally better than we've done it to date. That straightforward answer points emphatically in an empirical direction: at one level it calls for more experimentation and research.

There is clearly much merit in that call. We surely do need to continue experimenting with practices and policies, large and small, seeking to improve on what we already know how to do moderately well. But is that all? Just continue to experiment empirically? Based on what one reads these days in the newspaper and also in a fair number of educational journals, the answer appears to be yes. A pragmatic spirit, bent on discovering "What works!" clearly dominates much of educational thought from classrooms to boardrooms, from policy think tanks to administrative offices.

But there's another answer. It posits that we need to learn not just how to improve on current practices but also how to *think* differently about education. We need to approach it afresh from time to time, to look at it from a new angle. This calls for reexamining many of our old ways of thinking, calling into question matters that we perhaps haven't bothered to consider for quite some time. In short, we need to *rethink* education from the ground up.

"Rethink education? Look at it afresh? What good will that do?" the skeptic asks. A truthful answer can only be, "We don't know." We can't know what good it will do until we've done it. That is so, moreover, by definition. New ways of thinking about education have unpredictable outcomes just because they are new. They may or may not translate into improved practices, either slowly or quickly. They may in fact do little more than reaffirm the soundness of many of our *old* ways of doing things. We may wind up right where we started. In fact, we're almost bound to do so, at least in part.

But even that lack of progress, should it happen, constitutes an advance. If all we do is refurbish many of our convictions, bringing them up to date, so to speak, by aligning them with other changes in our current ways of thinking, we at least will have done that. Even if their substance doesn't alter, freshly examined thoughts cannot help but leave us more firmly convinced, and a firmer conviction should always be welcomed. It is certainly not to be breezily dismissed; it may be fully as beneficial to our overall well-being as a spanking new idea.

Let's assume, then, at least at the start, that there may be some obvious merit, psychologically speaking, in trying to rethink education from the ground up. "Fair enough," the skeptic might reluctantly concede, "But how do you do that? Where do you begin?" In a sense, all that follows may be looked on as offering an answer to that question—a single, very tentative, and quite idiosyncratic answer. It traces my own effort to blaze such a path, with scant experience in such matters and with very little outside guidance save reading what others have said and trying to benefit from their words. I presume that many who join me in taking up the challenge will find themselves in a very similar position.

To reveal where that path led in my case is to run far ahead of the story, yet one or two preliminary generalizations set the stage for what follows. A couple of rules of thumb have served me well and might serve others who try to follow a similar path. Because of their generality I can safely divulge them here without giving away too much.

The first rule is to start with something you believe to be unequivocally true about education and gradually build on that, simply

by musing on where such a belief takes you. At the same time you should anticipate that that initial truth, no matter what it is, will have to be modified—made more truthful or less untruthful, whichever seems preferable. The comedienne Penn Jillette is said to have quipped, "One of the quickest ways to find out if you're wrong is to state what you believe."[1] Another way of putting it might be to echo Hegel, who was fond of observing that *a* truth seldom if ever turns out to be the *whole* truth. Patient reflection on almost any partial truth soon makes that clear.

That firm starting place is more or less the strategy I adopted in writing this book. I began by assuming that everyone already knows what education truly is, so I couldn't figure out why Dewey was asking a long-ago audience of listeners and later his readers to think once again about a question whose answer was so obvious. I soon discovered that there was much more to education's truth than I had ever considered, more than I had even begun to imagine.

The second rule is this: prepare for a round trip. That second expectation, incidentally, is simply a variant of the first rule, turned on its head. Another way of putting it might be, expect to wind up sooner or later where you started. Indeed, dêjà vu is almost bound to occur several times in the course of your thinking, because thought has a way of circling back on itself. It spins, one might say, on its axis.

The first line of T. S. Eliot's "East Coker," part of his *Four Quartets*, reads, "In my beginning is my end." The last line of the same poem declares, "In my end is my beginning." The poetic truth contained in those contrasting lines is familiar to anyone who has tried to think deeply about anything. Poets, at least the best of them, are especially aware of that ancient truth. Beginnings and endings, starts and finishes, belong together. They seek to be conjoined.

Perhaps those two methodological points offer enough hint of what is to come to get us under way. What follows from taking that hint seriously awaits imminent disclosure.

1. As reported in the *New York Times*, June 11, 2010, C25.

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Dewey's Parting Words

My writing this book was initially spurred by remarks John Dewey made before an audience of educators in 1938 at the close of a series of lectures sponsored by Kappa Delta Pi, an honorary educational society, and later published in a volume titled *Experience and Education*.

> I have used frequently in what precedes the words "progressive" and "new" education. I do not wish to close, however, without recording my firm belief that the fundamental issue is not of new versus old education nor of progressive against traditional education but a question of what anything whatever must be to be worthy of the name *education*. I am not, I hope and believe, in favor of any ends or any methods simply because the name progressive may be applied to them. The basic question concerns the nature of education with no qualifying adjectives prefixed. What we want and need is education pure and simple, and we shall make surer and faster progress when we devote ourselves to finding out just what education is and what conditions have to be satisfied in order that education may be a reality and not a name or a slogan. It is for this reason alone that I have emphasized the need for a sound philosophy of experience.[1]

1. John Dewey, *Experience and Education* (1938; New York: Collier Books, 1963), 96.

Those words puzzled me when I first read them, in the late 1940s or early 1950s, as I recall, a decade or so after *Experience and Education* was published. I was preparing to be a middle school teacher and had only recently learned that John Dewey was not the inventor of the Dewey decimal system. Why would the Dewey of educational fame end his book by asking his readers to devote themselves "to finding out just what education is"? Most of them were probably professional educators already, I reasoned, or like me were on the way to becoming so. Surely, even neophytes already knew the answer to that question. I certainly did! Why, then, urge them to rethink it? Indeed, the more I pondered Dewey's advice, the stranger it seemed.

It was not just the general request that troubled me. The way Dewey worded his advice was equally puzzling. He threw out not one but several questions for his audience to ponder, and some seemed downright baffling. The adjectives "pure and simple," for example, sounded odd applied to the noun "education." I couldn't figure out what those qualifiers meant. Was Dewey suggesting that if we put our minds to it we would ultimately arrive at the one *true* conception of education, the one every clear thinker would be virtually *forced* to accept?

That possibility struck me as improbable to say the least. If there were a single, true conception of education, I reasoned, it certainly would have been discovered ages ago. Surely by now, after centuries of educational thought and practice, any innermost secrets of education ought to have come to light. Moreover, wasn't that precisely what Dewey was presenting with such obvious enthusiasm throughout the pages of *Experience and Education*? Wasn't it at the heart of what he called "a sound philosophy of experience"? Also, wasn't he contradicting himself by making it clear through the sheer magnitude of his own effort, not just in that book but in lots of his other writings, that a true understanding of education was anything but pure and simple?

I had read very little philosophy when I first began puzzling over Dewey's words, but the little I had read led me to suspect that he was inviting his readers to think about education *philosophically*, the

way Socrates might have done. The trouble was, at the time I didn't know where to go with that thought. I have since read a fair amount of philosophy and come to a better understanding of what Dewey was asking his readers to do. Oddly enough, I have also come to believe that Dewey himself may not have been fully aware of exactly what he was asking. In fact, I'm sure he couldn't have been.

What Dewey was up to with his parting advice is something I've mulled over for quite some time. In fact, my search for an answer has occupied me almost constantly for years. That search has taken me on a much longer and more arduous journey than I ever dreamed of at the start. It has led, above all, to an in-depth reading of both Kant and Hegel, along with the writings of several of their illustrious contemporaries.

I concentrated on those two writers from the start not only because of their obvious prominence as philosophers but also because I knew that early in his career Dewey had been deeply influenced by neo-Hegelian thought. I also knew he remained indebted to Hegel even after that influence waned. I thought, therefore, that a close reading of one or two of Hegel's major works might hold the key to a better understanding of what Dewey was asking his 1938 audience to do. I had no idea at the time that the decision would lead to a prolonged study of both Hegel and Kant and that I would wind up becoming a more ardent Hegelian than Dewey himself was during most of his long career. More important, however, as the result of that study I ultimately came to think about education in ways that were new to me. I trust that some of what I learned might interest others—my chief reason for writing this book, which presents some of the highlights of my own journey and invites others to join me in reliving them.

TAKING DEWEY AT HIS WORD

The mere mention of my benefiting from reading Kant and Hegel runs far ahead of the story. Long before I turned to Hegel and his contemporaries for guidance, I first had to decide whether to take Dewey at his word, which not everyone I asked was willing to do.

When, for example, I confided to a friend who shares my long-standing admiration for Dewey that I intended to spend some time trying to figure out what the old boy was getting at in that final paragraph of *Experience and Education*, his reaction was quick and to the point. "It sounds to me," he said with a laugh, "as though our revered mentor, Big John, was just looking for an easy way to close his lecture. I'd bet he wasn't thinking very deeply at all about what he was saying at that point."

Of course I'd considered that possibility and had rejected it long before talking to my friend. I had done so for two reasons. First, I felt it would have been totally out of character for Dewey to conclude a series of lectures by taking an easy way out. That just wasn't his way of doing things, or so my reading of a fair number of his public lectures had led me to believe. He was far more likely to remain the patient expositor to the bitter end, even if he had to be a bit long-winded.

Second, I felt the thrust of Dewey's final paragraph was at least understandable, even if other things about it remained a bit puzzling. What he was asking his audience to do—think deeply about the meaning of education—was quite in keeping with what one might expect given Dewey's academic credentials. Philosophers through the ages have made it their business to prod others into thinking more deeply than they otherwise might about a host of familiar concepts—courage, love, and virtue, to name just a few. Dewey, it seems, was just living up to that age-old expectation. He was behaving as philosophers have done for centuries. That was reason enough, I concluded, to take him at his word.

In any event, I finally decided that the best way to judge the worth of Dewey's advice was to try following it for a time and see where it led. What follows constitutes a crude recounting of that journey, with a few explanatory asides along the way.

DEWEY'S FOUR QUESTIONS

One of the first things I struggled with was what to make of the four questions Dewey invited his 1938 audience to consider.