

## Decentering for Dewey Studies: A Contemporary Dialogue Between Interactive Constructivism and Deweyan Pragmatism

Megan Mustain  
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In this presentation, I will discuss the interaction and influence between Deweyan thought and the philosophical and educational ideas developing in contemporary Germany. Though the newly opened Dewey Center in Köln evidences the influence of American pragmatic thought, the question becomes in what way might German thinking provide similar influence and impact on the pragmatic tradition in America. In recent years, such thinkers as Kersten Reich and Stefan Neubert have sparked a new dialogue between constructivism and pragmatism. This paper will attempt to bring to light aspects of this collaboration, exploring the origins and contexts that have made this possible. Following a brief introduction to the overlaps and tensions brought to light in the dialogue between Neubert and Reich's constructivism and Deweyan thought, I will turn to an elaboration of the impact that this conversation might have for Deweyan pedagogical strategies in contemporary American society.

### *A glimpse at the dialogue*

Reich and Neubert's "interactive constructivism," which emerges as a result of what they describe as the cultural turn in constructivism philosophies, places a great deal of emphasis on the situatedness of the constructing observer in a multi-faceted social context. Such attention to context leads interactive constructivism to amend the traditional constructivists' regard for the observer to include the overtly Deweyan insight that observation involves agent participation and is never mere spectatorship. Thus world-making—the construction of our realities—is seen as occurring socially and not merely on the individual level.

The implications for constructivist philosophies of education are numerous. In shifting the locus of pedagogical concern from a purely cognitive notion of creating meanings to a transactional and participatory co-construction and co-reconstruction of meanings, education becomes a matter of dialogue within a community of discourse. Included in this community of discourse are the voices of students, teachers, as well as the society at large with its various cultural traditions. Hence, students are encouraged to engage in the imaginative construction of meanings not as blank slates, but as living beings *in medias res*. Through dialogue within and about the various cultural perspectives—including both their borders and their overlaps—students are encouraged to reconstruct their realities rather than attempting construction *ex nihilo*. This active process of making and remaking meanings together, Reich and Neubert claim, is at the heart of educating for democracy. Through an infusion of Deweyan theories of democracy, education, communication, and experience, Reich and Neubert undertake to reconstruct constructivism for an increasingly multicultural world.

And yet it is not only constructivism that might benefit from this collaboration. As such, I will offer an appraisal of the new possibilities for the continued growth of American pragmatic thought which might result from this interaction. Chief among the possible benefits are Neubert and Reich's appropriation of recent philosophies of power relations in the production and sanctioning of knowledge and the means of knowing. In much of their work, Neubert and Reich draw upon notions of power relations to criticize more "naïve" versions of constructivism. Naïveté regarding the historical constructedness of its own practices and norms has, Reich and Neubert claim, blinded constructivism to the ways in which its educational theory may have a hand in the further perpetuation of already long-standing power asymmetries. Drawing from the work of Foucault and poststructuralist thinkers, and in keeping with its understanding of

construction as a process of participation *within* social contexts, interactive constructivism seeks to attend to its own situatedness.

In this vein, Neubert and Reich criticize Dewey's philosophy of communication as idealized in its presentation of a free-flowing discourse across differences. They claim that Dewey neglects the many ways in which power relations work to shape our conversations, creating and maintaining many of the differences Dewey would have us speak across. By offering only "holistic," consensus-driven solutions to difficult social conflicts, they claim, Deweyan philosophy loses plausibility in the postmodern world. Hence Neubert and Reich call for a reevaluation of pragmatism's discursive strategies—a reevaluation informed by interactive constructivism's reconstruction of such pragmatic ideals as consensus, equality, and pluralism. As Dewey's pedagogical ideas largely revolve around his philosophy of communication, these criticisms weigh heavily upon the problems and techniques of progressive education. Let us then turn to a more detailed discussion of these criticisms in the hopes of determining the prospects for an enlivened Deweyan pedagogy.

#### *Discourse-based critiques of Deweyan theories of communication*

Neubert and Reich's reconstruction of constructivism proceeds by rethinking the process and possibilities of discourse. Over and against other forms of constructivism which privilege the individual cognitive aspects of human experience, Neubert and Reich suggest that 'world-making' is a social process which is intimately tied to interpersonal communication. They point out that this discursive element involves a certain degree of "fuzziness" and incompleteness in all of our world-making. To flesh out this "fuzziness," Neubert and Reich develop an account of discourse that draws on the Lacanian notions of the *symbolic*, the *imaginative*, and the *real*.

These notions serve to provide interactive constructivism with a way of speaking about the limits of discourse. First, speaking of the symbolic dimension of discourse, Neubert and Reich point to the notion that language involves the articulation of meanings through the use of signs and symbols. In short, to express what you mean to me, you employ the symbolic resources available to you through language. Important here is that, as Neubert writes, “symbolic meanings and representations are on principle characterized by over-determination.”<sup>1</sup> He continues, “there is an arbitrary relationship between signifier and signified that allows for a potential excess of meaning in every cultural use of signs.” That is to say that in expressing what you mean to me, you can rarely if ever get your whole meaning into symbolic form; you often mean more than you can even be aware of. Symbolic meanings are forever “fringed,” in James’s terms, by a meaningful “more.”

The imaginative dimension of discourse focuses on the interplay between what you mean to say and what I take you to mean. I cannot get wholly inside your meaning, for it is always displaced to some extent by my own imaginative (and often unconscious) apprehension of you. That is, what I take you to mean is never quite commensurate with what you take yourself to mean. This, coupled with the over-determination of your meaning in the first place, “renders all forms of symbolic understanding incomplete.”<sup>2</sup>

Through the notion of “the real,” Neubert and Reich denote the fact that there are often events which impose themselves upon us, disrupting both what you mean and what I take you to mean. Events happen which “do not ‘fit.’” They are the real in its obstinate eventfulness that cannot be easily integrated and transformed into elements of a culturally viable understanding.

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<sup>1</sup> Neubert, “Pragmatism, Constructivism, and the Theory of Culture,” 4.

<sup>2</sup> Neubert, “Some Perspectives of Interactive Constructivism on the Theory of Education,” 10.

They astonish us....”<sup>3</sup> Such events, both natural and manufactured (I’m thinking here both of sudden events such as Hurricane Katrina and slower developments like the scientific revolutions which caused John Donne to lament that the world was cast into doubt), expose the fact that our meanings are always vulnerable to obsolescence in the face of sometimes dramatic changes in the world.

Power relations, too, are woven throughout these three intersecting themes of discourse. Power asymmetries contribute to and exacerbate each of these discourse-limiting factors. For power enters into the process of over-determination, the process of imaginative mirroring of self and other, and the production and interpretation of intrusions of the “real.”

Framing discourse in this way allows Neubert and Reich to contribute to the ongoing critique of Deweyan philosophies of communication. They join with other commentators, many of whom formulate their criticisms within feminist approaches (Nancy Fraser, Charlene Haddock Seigfried), to suggest that Deweyan pragmatism does not deal adequately with “power relations, dissent, antagonisms, and hegemonic struggles.”<sup>4</sup> These criticisms of Dewey are not new, however. Much effort has been put into attempts to answer these objections both by defending Dewey against them and by retooling Deweyan philosophy to deal with them. What special weight, then, does Neubert and Reich’s version of these critiques have? I think *an* answer to this question comes to us through the overarching interest that Deweyan pragmatism and interactive constructivism share in education.

### *Re/Deconstructing Progressive Education*

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 10.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 7.

In recent years, educators at all levels have faced two often-incommensurate tendencies in educational discourse. On the one hand, we have the increasing movement toward assessment in the service of what is called “accountability.” Through standardized testing and curricula geared toward the achievement of over-specified “learning outcomes,” educators are drawn into a decidedly un-Deweyan world of static aims and materials to be imposed upon students from above. Lamentably absent in this scheme is a concern for the particular, real, grow-ing student. Education viewed as merely preparatory violates Dewey’s pedagogical insight that “We always live at the time we live and not at some other time, and only by extracting at each present time the full meaning of each present experience are we prepared for doing the same thing in the future. This is the only preparation which in the long run amounts to anything.”<sup>5</sup>

On the other hand, recent developments in curriculum design and instructional methodology have filtered into the mainstream of our conversations about education. I’m thinking here specifically of such ideas as cooperative learning and active learning. These techniques have become a large part of pedagogical discussions on many campuses. Not only are they widely discussed among college and university faculty interested in more effectively helping their students to learn, these techniques have become a staple of many primary and secondary teacher education programs. Based explicitly upon the Deweyan tradition in educational philosophy, these techniques are popular not only because they seem to work, but also because they serve to resist the tides (or better, tsunamis) of assessment-based education noted before. I won’t dwell on the first point here, except to note that although the research does show that students retain information at dramatically higher levels in cooperative classrooms, there remains an open question as to what exactly we should mean when we say that an

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<sup>5</sup> Dewey, *Experience and Education*, 49.

instructional technique “works.” For something can “work” quite well and still retard growth. The second point—that these techniques are excellent weapons in the resistance—is most interesting to me.

In his *Experience and Education*, Dewey addresses a very similar situation. His progressive suggestions for education had been, in his own day, adopted largely for what they weren't—traditional—rather than for what they were (or could be). Dewey criticized this, writing “There is always the danger in a new movement that in rejecting the aims and methods of that which it would supplant, it may develop its principles negatively rather than positively and constructively. Then it takes its clew in practice from that which is rejected instead of from the constructive development of its own philosophy.”<sup>6</sup> Dewey saw many progressive teachers who, in rejecting the external imposition of subject-matter, swung to the opposite extreme of having no subject-matter at all. He saw teachers who reacted against the over-disciplined classroom by eliminating discipline entirely. He saw that in the name of democracy and freedom, teachers were abandoning all forms of authority and control.

For Dewey, the problem here is that techniques were employed without critical understanding of the educational philosophy they derive from. Accordingly, his book *Experience and Education* is in large part a rejoinder to critics of progressive education and a thoroughgoing criticism of many of those who were employing it reactively.

Today we have something of a reiteration of this problem. Cooperative learning techniques are also often used somewhat uncritically, at least if my own anecdotal evidence counts here. I have seen group activities run completely unmonitored by teachers, and subject-matter presented arbitrarily for fear of imposing any structure on learning from the outside. I

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<sup>6</sup> Dewey, *Experience and Education*, 20.

have heard a teacher boast of how democratic his class was by explaining that he wrote no syllabus and used no schedule. What is worse is that this person had read Dewey!

In short, what this tells us is that the problem that Dewey spent so much time attempting to deal with is *still here*. Dewey's own critiques didn't hit home. And we might ask why. Perhaps Dewey's voice fell short because his very name had been dragged through the mud in many circles. Perhaps his terminology had been co-opted. Regardless, the practical failure of his attempts to ameliorate the situation leave us lacking a critical voice strong enough to deal with the real problems facing progressive education today.

Here is where I think interactive constructivism could make a huge impact. Faithful to the Deweyan educational project but allied to the discourses of postmodernism (Foucault, post-structuralism, feminism, etc.), interactive constructivism stands poised to reach a much wider audience. Connected to this is its emphasis on power relations. With a robust philosophy of discourse and power, Neubert and Reich provide a fresh way to critique the reactive use of educational techniques. Holding as they do that all discourse involves power relations, interactive constructivists call for a constant critical avowal of the fact that their own discourse – with its positions, goals, and methods—is shot through with power. Thus, as I recently heard Nel Noddings say in a lecture (and I paraphrase very loosely here): You can be as democratic as you want in your classroom, but the students know, and you should know, that it is all at your whim. That is, you could, at any time, say “that’s not how we’re doing things any longer” and they would have no choice but to comply.

Cooperative learning has been widely billed as the sorts of democratic means to democratic ends that Deweyans are always on the lookout for. And they may indeed be democratic when used correctly. But, if we take Reich and Neubert's suggestion to examine our



own reliance upon power, we might find that our use of these techniques may serve to mask asymmetrical power relations, and may place “contrived collegiality” in the place of more genuine relationships.<sup>7</sup> Neubert writes, “Constructivist education is not an ‘innocent’ discourse beyond power relations; it is itself part of the hegemonic struggles that constitute the historically changing discourses of education.”<sup>8</sup> That is, without constant self-criticism, we run the risk of unknowingly recapitulating the problems of external authority, imposition of subject-matter, and de-subjectifying assessment practices with our seemingly democratic techniques. This was exactly Dewey’s point in *Experience and Education*! He writes,

The ideal aim of education is creation of power of self-control. But the mere removal of external control is no guarantee for the production of self-control.... It is easy, in other words, to escape one form of external control only to find oneself in another and more dangerous form of external control. Impulses and desires that are not ordered by intelligence are under the control of accidental circumstances.<sup>9</sup>

But, for better or worse, Dewey did not have the postmodern discourse of power relations at his disposal. Furthermore, (and again, for better or worse) the people of his era were not as accepting of the postmodern notion that communication is always incomplete. They were not fluent in the notions of ‘differánce,’ ‘ethnocentrism,’ and the ‘Otherness of others.’”

It is thus that, particularly in education, Neubert and Reich’s work in interactive constructivism provides Dewey with a bridge to the contemporary scene. Their philosophy, as they put it, goes both “beyond Dewey, with Dewey,” and, sometimes, “beyond Dewey, without Dewey.” What they share of his outlook, his aspirations, and his fidelity to experience is, I think,

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<sup>7</sup> Zeller Mayer, Michal, “When We Talk About Collaborative Curriculum-Making, What Are We Talking About?,” 187.

<sup>8</sup> Neubert, “Some Perspectives,” 17.

<sup>9</sup> Dewey, *Experience and Education*, 64.

precisely what compels Neubert and Reich to depart from him in places. It is this non-dogmatic fidelity to the Deweyan project that I find so refreshing in their work. Professors Reich and Neubert, by initiating a dialogue between interactive constructivism and Deweyan pragmatism, enact the very cross-boundary experiment in radical democracy that they suggest in their writings. Consensus, again, is not the ultimate goal. Instead, the provisional goal of mutual exposure of the inadequacies of our discourses provides us all with an arena for growth—individually, culturally, and philosophically.