

## FORUM

This is the last in a series of responses to an article by Gary Peltier which appeared in the Forum section of the August, 1991 issue of the *Journal of Educational Thought*.

### **Sheriff Dewey and Another High Noon Scenario**

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John Dewey was a sophisticated theorist who had a considerable impact on education in North America. Dewey's critics have tended to ignore his theories or to treat them superficially while they make pejorative claims about the practical results of progressive education. Scholars who are persuaded by Dewey's work tend to respond with careful explanations of his theory and its broad application to educational practice. In this brief paper the tables are turned. An attempt is made to reveal how an appreciation of Dewey's work could have avoided the mistreatment of aboriginal Canadians during the first half of this century — in other words, an illustration of how progressive theories could have ameliorated the results of conservative practice.

It is hard to imagine John Dewey as a denizen of the wild west but Peltier's (1991) article may have been aimed at producing a dramatic response, a kind of dual at high noon, as suggested by the title of the work by Benson and Griffith (1991). Instead of a tense confrontation he received a careful and reasoned reply from Benson and Griffith which would have done credit to a sophisticated scholar such as Dewey. Curiously, the careful response in some ways fails to do justice to Dewey's influence because it emphasizes the theoretical and scholarly but does not emphasize a specific and striking issue that suggests the promised high noon scenario. Indeed, Benson and Griffith presented the kind of argument that Dewey's critics have ignored for years.

If they had "come out shooting," to continue the wild west metaphor, they

might have driven home some important points about the practicalities of Dewey's work. Such an approach might even have persuaded some of Dewey's perennial critics to rethink their argument; however, while such rethinking is necessary, it will require some kind of shock treatment to start the process. Perhaps this was the motive behind Peltier's use of the apparently inappropriate metaphor. How, then, would a latter-day Dewey with aggressive tendencies have dealt with the problem of "lack of public confidence in anything Deweyan" (Peltier, p. 152)?

Very early in his career, Dewey (1969) analyzed the moral theories of his erstwhile mentor, Thomas Hill Green. Green (1883) had argued that moral behavior was instilled in English youth through the efforts of certain great institutions. First, Green identified the elite and misnamed Public Schools as a kind of arm of the State-Church and second, he perceived the aristocracy as a kind of superclass that maintained and perpetuated the great traditions of the Western World as interpreted by the English. Green had considerable respect for the striving middle classes but he ignored the great mass of the population. He held the view, common among the educated classes in England during the 19th century, that the great majority of the population was not yet ready to benefit from education and, by implication, that they were not yet ready for democracy because democracy and education were closely related (Green, 1900; Lamont, 1934).

In a series of careful arguments Dewey (1969) criticized the idea that a church or a class could dominate the function of education. His labored and complex critique prepared the way for his attack on "education as imposition" (i.e., the view that there are functionaries in institutions who really know what education is about and that they should have the authority to do the job). Hence, in established churches and aristocratic societies, ministers, priests, lords, commissars, or their designates have the right to impose their truth on the young through their control of the school system.

Dewey rejected these notions for many reasons, not the least being that truth is chimerical, especially when used by powerful and privileged groups. For Dewey truth was tenuous, best exemplified in its scientific form, and always open to revision. While this concept is essential to education it is not merely imposed, for it has to be carefully learned and experienced (Dewey, 1938).

Such arguments subjected Dewey to considerable criticism especially from religious philosophers like Maritain (1943). The latter's critique of a version of progressive education was, like truth itself, received as indubitable by believers. Hence, the church (and it really does not matter which church) continued in its age old tradition of imposing the truth on all children within its aegis. Those parents who accept this religious position, or some variant of it, have nothing to complain about; however, parents who do not hold these truths have every right to be angry at church or state authorities who force such absolutes on their

children. Thus, there is anger in Canada over the terrible tragedy of generations of aboriginal children who have been subjected to the horrors of the Great Western Tradition at its worst (Acoose, 1991). The postmortems are under way and the results of court cases, public inquiries, and public relations campaigns are commonly reported in the various news media.

The distasteful fact is that familiarity with Dewey's work could have avoided these tragedies. Dewey's approach to curriculum requires knowledge of, and respect for, the pupil. Learning is not a process of imposing facts or values on the young but a matter of interaction with them so that children may come to appreciate their nature. There are facts and values inherent in a democratic culture that children must learn but they must not be learned in such a way as to destroy the individuality of the children, their families, or their culture. Among other things, the curriculum is the adaptation of sophisticated scholarship in order to enable children to learn. Learning involves empowerment and the development of individuals within their culture. Dewey's emphasis on human growth is the antithesis of subduing children to one "truth" or another (Dewey, 1937).

For all his effort, Dewey's work was of no avail to aboriginal Canadians. Once under the control of the state or religious institutions, children were abused. Some of their masters are now paying the price for their abusive behaviors. Nevertheless, it is not the individuals who are being criticized here but the institutional dogmas that advocate the propagation of absolute truth regardless of the impact on the child. Teachers were merely reflecting the values of institutions that did not respect children because they were considered less important than the truth to be propagated. It is not difficult to understand why teachers abused children under these circumstances.

The really sad thing is that Dewey's work was around long before the systematic mistreatment of native Canadians. It was ignored or criticized because it attacked the idea of an absolute and unchanging truth. The humanity and rationality of Dewey's view were obscured because of the energy expended in trying to impose this curious abstraction on innocent children and to justify this imposition.

Of course, there is more to it than this. However, if Dewey's influence is as pervasive as is commonly believed, then Dewey's critics had better be presented with some issue upon which they *must* focus. The education of aboriginal peoples in Canada during the first half of this century is one clearly demarcated issue that may be laid at the feet of Dewey's critics. This moves the argument from vague references to the general problems of progressive education and the declining standards it is purported to have produced to a terrible tragedy that could have been avoided if Dewey's work had been treated with respect.

If Dewey were a sheriff today he could have precipitated this kind of

confrontation but he was far too gentle and far too careful for such behavior. Unfortunately, too many of his critics were not possessed of such qualities. This has led to many an ambush by academic cowboys. It is time the tables were turned and a few of Dewey's boys started shooting from the hip. Perhaps Peltier's wild west metaphor is not so inappropriate after all.

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