

## **Humanistic Administration: Rethinking Educational Leadership for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century**

Charles T. Vehse (Ted), Resident Faculty Leader, Lincoln Hall Residential College and Lecturer in Humanities and Religious Studies, West Virginia University

### **Abstract**

The approaching centennial of John Dewey's seminal work, *Democracy and Education*, presents educators worldwide with a valuable opportunity to reflect critically on their profession and on the state of education throughout the human community. If we have learned anything about teaching in the century or so since Dewey wrote, it is that there never can be truly successful progressive education in the absence of progressive educational administrative theory and some practical conception of progressive educational leadership. On these matters, unfortunately, John Dewey's *Democracy and Education* is largely silent.

More recently, Eugenie Samier's interesting article, "Toward Public Administration as a Humanities Discipline: A Humanistic manifesto," critiques contemporary new managerialism in public administration, comparing its form, content, and results to the aesthetics of kitsch. Viewed through a focusing and filtering lens of the writings of *avant-garde* artist, Phillippe Petit, and world-renowned physicist, Richard Feynman, Samier's critique suggests a possible future for educational leadership that would fulfill in the realm of organizational form, John Dewey's original mandate for progressive educational content.

*The beautiful in nature and art is to be supplemented by the whole ocean of the beautiful spread throughout the moral reality of mankind.*

Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*<sup>1</sup>

The approaching centennial of the publication of John Dewey's seminal work, *Democracy and Education*, presents educators worldwide with a valuable opportunity to reflect once again critically on their profession and on the state of education throughout the human community.<sup>2</sup> Much has transpired in the more than nine decades since this once canonical work made its initial appearance, so it is perhaps appropriate at this time to seek to draw a balance, to reckon up accounts, and consider, among other things, what the great thinker, mover-and-shaker, and, of course, educator, John Dewey, might have to say, were he with us here today.

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<sup>1</sup> Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*. Second, Revised Edition, revisions translation by Joel Weinsheimer and Donald Marshall, (New York: The Continuum Publishing Company, 1999), 38-39.

<sup>2</sup> I am honored to dedicated this article to my colleague and friend, Bill Taft. Bill took his doctorate in philosophy and education from the University of London in 2003 where he wrote on Hans-Georg Gadamer's hermeneutical theory as applied to education. Bill has dedicated the entirety of his long, distinguished career to teaching the young people of West Virginia at both the high school and collegiate levels. As Robert Seymour Bridges once wrote, "That discipline which corrects the eagerness of worldly passions, which fortifies the heart with virtuous principles, which enlightens the mind with useful knowledge and furnishes to it matter of enjoyment from within itself, is of more consequence to real felicity than all the provisions which we can make of the goods of fortune."

An appropriate place to begin such a critical review would seem to be with the work itself. Dewey remains in many respects his own finest expositor, so we should ask first what this fundamental relationship between democracy and education is in his thought? Following is a brief sketch in quotes:

Dewey begins by observing that the growth of democracy is linked, "with the development of the experimental method in the sciences, evolutionary ideas in the biological sciences, and [the] industrial reorganization." These developments have profound implications for both the subject matter and method of education.<sup>3</sup> However, democracy remains the pivotal issue for Dewey. It is more than a mere form of government. It represents "a mode of associated living, of a conjoint communicated experience."<sup>4</sup> In this mode of living, a self-aware, active, participatory way of life,

all the members of the group must have an equable opportunity to receive and to take from others. There must be a large variety of shared undertakings and experience. Otherwise, the influences which educate some into masters, educate others into slaves."<sup>5</sup>

The opposite of education, for Dewey, then would appear not to be just ignorance but slavery, outright. Plato, he writes:

defined a slave as one who accepts from another the purposes which control his conduct. This condition obtains even where there is no slavery in the legal sense!<sup>6</sup>

On this topic, Dewey then digresses. Undertaking an oblique attack on contemporary educational theory and practice, he criticizes a prevalent view of the relations between personal motivation and work. In some respects, his judgment is like Marx's and Engels' analysis of the fateful division between mental and manual labor in capitalism.<sup>7</sup>

Much is said about scientific management of work. It is a narrow view which restricts the science which secures efficiency of operation to movements of the muscles... The tendency to reduce such things as efficiency of activity and scientific management to purely technical externals is evidence of the one-sided stimulation of thought given to those in control of industry—those who supply its aims. Because of their lack of all-round and well-balanced social interest, there is not sufficient stimulus for *attention to the human factors and relationships in industry*. Intelligence is narrowed to the factors concerned with technical production and marketing of goods... Efficiency in production... is reduced to a mechanical routine, *unless workers see the technical, intellectual, and social relationships involved in what they do and engage in their work, because of the motivation furnished by such perception*.<sup>8</sup>

Such a description and critique very well might apply in a large majority of cases, were Dewey writing about the schoolroom or the university classroom today. In any case,

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<sup>3</sup> John Dewey, *Democracy and Education*, "Preface," Free Press (New York: 1916), iii.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 72.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 69.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 70. Punctuation mine.

<sup>7</sup> Karl Marx, *The German Ideology*, 1845.

<sup>8</sup> Dewey, 70. Italics mine.

science and education go hand in hand, because together they make realization of a lofty goal possible: the well socialized, fully realized human individual.

The chief opportunity for science is the discovery of the relations of a man to his work—including his relations to others who take part—which will enlist his intelligent interest in what he is doing.<sup>9</sup>

However, the relationship between science and education is by no means guaranteed.

No doubt, a very acute and intense intelligence in these narrow lines can be developed, but the failure to take into account the significant social factors means none the less an absence of mind and a corresponding distortion of emotional life.<sup>10</sup>

Deliberate steps accounting for these “significant social factors” must be taken in all spheres of education to insure the true goal’s attainment. It is not enough, writes Dewey, merely:

to see to it that education is not actively used as an instrument to make easier the exploitation of one class by another. School facilities must be secured of such amplitude and efficiency as will, in fact and not simply in name, discount the effects of economic inequalities and secure to all the wards of the nation equality of equipment for their future careers.<sup>11</sup>

The imperative for such particular, educational action is humane, moral, and universal.

It is not enough to teach the horrors of war and to avoid everything which would stimulate international jealousy and animosity. *The emphasis must be put upon whatever binds people together in cooperative human pursuits and results, apart from geographical limitations.* The secondary and provisional character of national sovereignty in respect to *the fuller, freer, and more fruitful association and intercourse of all human beings with one another* must be instilled as a working disposition of mind.<sup>12</sup>

What, for Dewey, would seem to be questions of *management* in relation to industry, i.e. the rational application of scientific principles to the world of work, turn out to take the form of *administration* when transposed to the sphere of educational leadership, especially in the case of public or state-sponsored education.

Accomplishment of this end demands... such modification of traditional ideals of culture, traditional subjects of study, and traditional methods of teaching and discipline as will *retain all the youth under educational influences until they are equipped to be masters of their own economic and social careers.*<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 70.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 80.

<sup>12</sup> Dewey, 80.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid. Italics mine.

At this point, Dewey tacks away from an implicit discussion of educational *form* toward a more explicit wrestling with problems of instructional *content*. It is, understandably, the contribution to educational theory and practical reform for which his work is most widely referenced. I would argue, however, for a rebalancing of accounts on this issue. If we have learned anything about teaching in the century or so since Dewey wrote, it is that *there is no such thing as formless content!* The ways in which material is brought to the table matter as much as the material itself. In other words, there never can be truly successful progressive education in the absence of progressive educational administrative theory and some practical conception of progressive educational leadership. On these matters, unfortunately, John Dewey's *Democracy and Education* is largely silent.

Where, then, shall educators turn? On what authority shall they rely as a springboard or foundation for future practical advancement and thought, if some of the groundbreaking minds in education apparently provide so little guidance?<sup>14</sup> This author proposes as a point of departure preliminary reflection upon a concept of *humanistic administration* as suggested by Eugenie Samier in her very interesting 2005 article, "Toward Public Administration as a Humanities Discipline: A Humanistic manifesto."<sup>15</sup>

Samier argues that contemporary, "new managerialism is grounded in norms of individual self-interest, utility, productivity, profitability, and efficiency."<sup>16</sup> This approach to administration ultimately rests upon a theory:

dominated by rational models, overly instrumentalized concerns, a structuralist approach excluding processes, and a positivist understanding of knowledge acquisition that *failed to integrate explanation, understanding, and critique. Additionally, it failed to provide a moral context for personal action in organization addressing concerns practitioners had for values of freedom, justice, and equality associated with democratic responsibility.*<sup>17</sup>

In other words, the new managerialism, as a model and the predominant contemporary *form* of educational administration, fails to live up to precisely those ideals advocated, in the first instance, as the core of progressive educational *content*, by John Dewey, himself, namely the essential qualitative values of the modern culture of science and of democratic self-governance! Samier notes, however, that, "the groundwork for a humanistic discussion of administration was laid already in the 19<sup>th</sup> century by a broad range of social and political theorists, whose work provides the conceptual touchstone for current humanistic critics."<sup>18</sup>

The humanist tradition, beginning with Greek rationalism, departed from ancient mythologies and the authority of the clergy, has produced a political heritage consisting of the Magna Carta, which challenged the authority of the

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<sup>14</sup> My own field of the history of religions is an inherently eclectic discipline, so I am perfectly comfortable with and accustomed to searching far afield; indeed, I view it as a veritable intellectual imperative!

<sup>15</sup> Eugenie Samier, "Toward Public Administration as a Humanities Discipline: A Humanistic Manifesto," *Halduskultuur*, 2005, vol 6, pp. 6–59.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 11. Italics mine.

<sup>18</sup> Samier, 15.

crown, Enlightenment proclamations of liberty, equality, fraternity through such documents as the US Declaration of Independence and Bill of Rights.<sup>19</sup>

The seeds of humanistic administration already having been sown, it remains the challenge for the present to develop practical tools to construct what Samier calls, a life of meaning on the basis of individual decision and choice, applied to all administratively encountered situations, events, objects, and relationships.<sup>20</sup>

Such an approach necessarily is one in which administration will be, "viewed as worlds that are humanly created and, therefore, alterable."<sup>21</sup>

What are the prospects for this approach? Samier argues it must begin with a moral re-evaluation.

what principles one uses to inform decisions and actions, what one's notion of professionalism is, how one judges the consequences of one's actions, and what dilemmas one recognizes and faces. This means redefining the administrator as a moral agent, rather than one who defers to superiors or (to) a rationalized code of conduct.<sup>22</sup>

As a trial cut, questions of moral agency may be reduced to the problem of evil, or what Samier calls "causing harm through human agency."<sup>23</sup> Administratively speaking, this problem is Janus-faced; on the one hand, it features an active dimension:

In administrative terms, evil translates into harm done by those holding an organizational position, by virtue of their position and access to resources and influence.<sup>24</sup>

On the other hand, it features a perhaps more insidious dimension which Samier describes as "abrogating one's moral responsibility."

given the organizational conditions in a bureaucracy that support or encourage passivity through obedience to authority, inclination to groupthink, and the diffusion of responsibility, *the ethics of doing nothing is a pervasive problem.*<sup>25</sup>

Samier makes interesting, albeit cursory suggestions for theoretical discussion of these issues. She mentions, in particular, the modern, Western, Christian—one might add, Protestant—theologies of Rinehold Niebuhr and Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Thinkers from other traditions, cultures, and times undoubtedly would be apposite, as well. This area clearly is one in which there remains plenty of room for innovative and important work to be done.

Samier, then, embarks on what the present author happens to find her most intriguing inquiry, into the potential for a constructive *aesthetic* critique of administration.

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 25.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 26.

<sup>24</sup> Samier, 26.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid. Italics mine.

The underlying principles of an aesthetic critique include: the construction and representation of administrative activity and organizational form, both by its membership and the outside world; the acceptance of social reality as heterogeneous, dynamic, and conflictual or even contradictory (since significant organizational and subjective change is inherent to the phenomenon); and viewing organizational activity as creatively and continuously evolving—symbols, myths, and customs are themselves the products of processes borne out of a continuous flux.<sup>26</sup>

Aesthetic critique, according to Samier, coherently would reveal and begin to address, “an over-reliance on scientization at the expense of the more traditional humanities-based disciplines, whose *raison d’être* is value analysis and the critical construction of meaning.”<sup>27</sup> Reductive “scientization,” she argues, has a tendency to transform meaningful, authentic human experience into something, “cheap, trashy, crass, vulgar, saccharine, gaudy... and indicative of bad taste.”<sup>28</sup>

Using behavior scales, reducing complex human interactions and experiences to statistical representation, is an example of what Husserl called the ‘ontological reversal.’ This notion of taking the abstract mathematical models of phenomena as more real than the phenomena themselves is part of the underlying logic of kitsch.<sup>29</sup>

The hard-edged, pseudo-scientific, reductionistic, administrative rationalism of the present threatens imminently to descended, in Samier’s view, into this low-brow realm. Sanitized administrative models and ideologies, “systematically avoid the human toll both for organizational members and society at large,” and “display an aesthetic ideal akin to kitsch, defined by [Milan] Kundera as: ‘categorical agreement with being in a world in which shit is denied and everyone acts as though it did not exist.’”<sup>30</sup>

Though Samier, herself, does not expressly offer it, a meaningful response to this lamentable state of affairs would seem to be constructively asserting both the moral and aesthetic aspects of administration, as say over against its bureaucratically and numerically-obsessed counterpart; asserting, in other words, the moral and aesthetic dimensions, in the present case, of contemporary educational administration and leadership. Unfortunately, the moral facet of this discussion and task simply exceeds the scope of currently available space and time, so it is the intention of the present author to offer preliminary suggestions relating to a constructive aesthetic of contemporary educational administration. The bottom line for these considerations, reduces to the follow general point: to wit, resource-allocation, decision-making, administrative and organizational principles and process *must* take into consideration as a matter of daily practice—not to mention, as a matter of *outcome*—not only whether a particular decision or group of decisions results in greater “efficiency,” usually defined in terms of more desirable or simply higher numerical results, but whether

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 29

<sup>27</sup> Samier, 40.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 36.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 39.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

said decision(s) may be characterized as, in some sense, “right,” good, just, humanly *beautiful* or, possibly even *elegant*.<sup>31</sup>

These judgments are of *values*. They are matters of *quality*; hence, they do not lend themselves to brute quantitative reduction. Considerations of *quality* and of *values* must lie at the heart of any vision of adequate educational administration and leadership in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, if humans living in this era hope to fulfill their inborn potential and refine the process of education that renders such fulfillment possible, in the first instance.

Whither, then, the aesthetics of administration and educational leadership? Perhaps, the place to begin is with an actual artist. The entertainer, rigging and knots expert, magician, juggler, visual and high-wire artist, autodidact, and all-around Renaissance man, Phillipe Petit, has written in his charming, if idiosyncratic memoir, *Cheating the Impossible*:

Maybe I have an advantage over the classically educated. Often, students are encouraged to abandon the problem in the cold and to rush to warm themselves at the table of contents of thick books of knowledge. I cannot stress enough the importance of learning to unknot the problem (I’m tempted to say “the streetwise way”) as opposed to focusing on acquisition of the right answer—possibly one major flaw of what I would refer to as a “formal education.”<sup>32</sup>

Petit’s arguably neo-Luddite approach to meaningful knowledge acquisition points poignantly and clearly in the direction of a radical smashing up or dismantling of the old order in the service of a more elegant future result.<sup>33</sup>

Is it my unorthodox way of life that permits me, once I assemble a display of clever solutions, to know for sure that the best one is undoubtedly the most pleasing, the one exuding simplicity, elegance and poetry?<sup>34</sup>

One could be tempted to write such musing off tolerantly as the mere fantasies of a dreamer or, somewhat less charitably, as the slapdash ruminations of a crack-pot, were it not for the recent appearance of, perhaps, more conventional monographs making essentially the same point. In his book, *Why School?* former public-school educator and noted blogger, Will Richardson, has written, describing the educational value of an unorthodox, hands-on approach to teaching science:

Five or 10 years from now, most of those students will have forgotten how to build that generator. But, they will still have the skills and dispositions they need to solve whatever hard problems come their way, and they’ll know how to go about creating something of value and sharing it with the world. That wouldn’t have happened if Matt and other teachers at SLA hadn’t been willing to *transfer the power and responsibility of learning to the learner*.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> I note that almost always in mathematics, and very often in the natural sciences, the technically correct solution to a problem may be rejected as inadequate on the grounds that it is “inelegant.” Only referring to such a solution as “trivial” is considered more devastating.

<sup>32</sup> Phillipe Petit, “Intellectual Challenge,” *Cheating the Impossible: Ideas and Recipes from a Rebellious High-Wire Artist*, (New York: TED Conference, LLC), 2012.

<sup>33</sup> Petit offers suggestions for appropriate music, literature, and even wine to accompany reading of the various sections of his text.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>35</sup> Will Richardson, “6. Transfer the Power,” *Why School? How Education Must Change When Learning and Information are Everywhere*, (New York: TED Conference, LLC), 2012. Italics mine.

Moving beauty and elegance, of course, are inherent in such a creative educational endeavor and its eminently satisfying results; however, *the transfer of power is the salient point*. Yes, teachers, but more particularly administrators and other educational leaders of the 21<sup>st</sup> century who cling desperately to the inherited traditional systems of hierarchy and power, with their rigid vertical flows of authority, resources, and accountability, risk not so much losing them, as losing *their very reason for being*, namely the hope of educating future generations. No amount of statistical analysis, and no new avalanche of so-called objective testing is *ever* going to get around the fundamental, glaring truth staring everyone straight in the eyes, that our current approach to educational leadership and administration simply is *not* going to work, and it already is *not* working!<sup>36</sup>

Compelling evidence that the anti-humane, superficially quantitative, statistically obsessed, bureaucratic, hierarchical, authoritarian approach to educational administration and leadership is, in fact, *the exact opposite of what it claims to be*, namely scientific, may be drawn from the work of a world-renowned scientist: the Nobel Prize-winning physicist, Richard Feynman.

Feynman writes:

So, I found things that even *more* people believe, such as that we have some knowledge of how to educate. There are big schools of reading methods and mathematics methods, and so forth, but if you notice, you'll see the reading scores keep going down—or hardly going up—in spite of the fact that we continually use these same people to improve the methods. *There's* a witch-doctor remedy that doesn't work. It ought to be looked into; how do they know that their method should work?... Yet, these things are said to be scientific. We study them. And, I think ordinary people with commonsense ideas are intimidated by this pseudoscience. A teacher who has some good idea of how to teach her children to read is forced by the school system to do it some other way—or is even fooled by the school system into thinking that her method is not necessarily a good one... So, we really ought to look into theories that don't work and science that isn't science.<sup>37</sup>

Feynman calls it "Cargo Cult Science," and obviously he seems particularly concerned that it so deeply has infected education, perhaps especially American education.<sup>38</sup> But, in another essay, he offers his description for a positive solution, an alternative approach more closely resembling the actual values and processes of science. Feynman calls it simply "muddling through."

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<sup>36</sup> For insightful discussion of some alternatives that *might* work, as well as further evidence of what already is not working, see Ted Sizer's oeuvre, in particular *Horace's School*. Theodore R. Sizer, *Horace's School: Redesigning the American High School* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1992). The contemporary situation among, perhaps, a majority of educational administrators and other educational leaders reminds me not a little of the scenes from Alfred Hitchcock's movie, *Psycho*, in which Norman Bates speaks with the corpse of his mother, as if she were still there. The patient, as it were, is long since dead, but the doctors of education still are talking to her as if she could answer. It's crazy!

<sup>37</sup> Richard P. Feynman, *The Pleasure of Finding Things Out: the Best Short Works of Richard P. Feynman*, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Perseus Books, 1999), 207—208.

<sup>38</sup> One easily could stretch Feynman's argument to include education throughout the Anglophone world or, indeed, most of contemporary Western civilization. However, it stands to reason that, in all likelihood, the same principles apply worldwide.



What, then, is the meaning of the whole world? We do not know what the meaning of existence is. We say, as the result of studying all of the views that we have had before, we find that we do not know the meaning of existence; but in saying that we do not know the meaning of existence, we have probably found the open channel—if we will allow only that, as we progress, we leave open opportunities for alternatives, that we do not become enthusiastic for the fact, the knowledge, the absolute truth, but remain always uncertain—[that we] “hazard it.” The English who have developed their government in this direction, call it “muddling through,” and although a rather silly, stupid sounding thing, it is the most scientific way of progressing. To decide upon the answer is not scientific. In order to make progress, one must leave the door to the unknown ajar—ajar, only.<sup>39</sup>

It may seem odd, but it seems equally plain that here, by implication at least, Richard Feynman is arguing for an approach to the organization, administration, and conduct of education that is devolved, decentralized, anti-hierarchic, and ultimately, in all likelihood, very messy and possibly expensive. In the ideal, this style of educational organization and administration, with its probably loosely associated forms and structures of leadership, *should* look something like the noisy, joyful, roiling, chaotic discussion and debate of the modern House of Commons. A further, crucial component of this approach necessarily also will be a rigorous, brutally honest, self-referential type of personal and institutional introspection:

It’s a kind of scientific integrity, a principle of scientific thought that corresponds to a kind of utter honesty—a kind of leaning over backwards. For example, if you’re doing an experiment, you should report everything that you think might make it invalid—not only what you think is right about it: other causes that could possibly explain your results; and things you thought of that you’ve eliminated by some other experiment, and how they worked—to make sure the other fellow can tell they have been eliminated.

Details that could throw doubt on your interpretation must be given, if you know them. You must do the best you can—if you know anything at all wrong, or possibly wrong—to explain it. If you make a theory, for example, and advertise it, or put it out, then you must also put down all the facts that disagree with it, as well as those that agree with it. There is also a more subtle problem. When you have put a lot of ideas together to make an elaborate theory, you want to make sure when explaining what it fits, that those things it fits are not just the things that gave you the idea for the theory; but that the finished theory makes something else come out right, in addition.

In summary, the idea is to try to give *all* of the information to help others to judge the value of your contribution; not just the information that leads to judgment in one particular direction or another... the thing I’m talking about is not just a matter of not being dishonest, it’s a matter of scientific integrity, which is another level... [a] kind of care not to fool yourself.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Feynman, 114–115.

<sup>40</sup> Feynman, 209–210.

It is precisely this type of honesty and integrity that is missing, in his view, from current educational theory and systems of educational leadership and administration. However, an important ancillary consequence of Feynman's thoughts on the subject also would seem to be, that should education and educational administration and leadership ever manage to assume such a difficult and unexpected form, it also *finally* will become democratic, as well as scientific. This result, of course, finally *also* would fulfill in the realm of administrative process and organizational form, John Dewey's original mandate for progressive educational content. As Dewey observed, now almost one century ago:

The ideal may seem remote of execution, but the democratic ideal of education is a farcical yet tragic delusion, except as the ideal more and more dominates our public system of education.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Dewey, 80. On Thursday, September 6, 2012, Michael S. Roth, president of Wesleyan University in Middletown, Connecticut, published a thoughtful guest editorial in the Op-Ed section of the *New York Times*. Roth cited Dewey in support of the view that, "learning in the process of living is the deepest form of freedom." To the extent that conceptions of democracy and freedom long have been associated in the West, Roth's essay represents further food for thought in connection with issues raised by the present article. Michael S. Roth, "Learning as Freedom," *New York Times*, September 6, 2012.