Being on One's Way: Place, Technology, and the Moral Commodification of Education

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I

John Dewey was no aphorist, and he was famously a dispatcher of dichotomies. So it is curious to note that one of the most familiar ideas attributed to Dewey has come down to us as the aphorism that education ought not to be seen as preparation for life, but as life itself. What he actually wrote, was: "if I were asked to name the most needed of all reforms in the spirit of education, I should say: 'Cease conceiving of education as mere preparation for later life, and make it the full meaning of the present life.'"[1] Indeed, he is no aphorist. But in staging this dichotomy, Dewey succeeded in suggesting both the problem of school life spent in tasks only worthwhile, if at all, for some presumed future payoff, and the clear importance of present experience where education is concerned.

Although Dewey does go on in the essay to address the apparent dichotomy further, it is not difficult to see why the dichotomous form of the idea lingers and is often repeated. It is that uptake, as a dichotomy, that we will focus on here. Its appeal is a function in part of the reformer's zeal so evident in American educational history. The promise of revitalizing reform has long generated both sharp, even dismissive critiques of the deficiencies of current practices along with visions of what is possible, what would, in effect, generate (some version of) the kind of "full meaning" to which Dewey alluded.

It is clear that we have today as much reason as Dewey did to lament the drudgery of much school time. Classroom life is very nearly an oxymoron in many places, as story, imagination, open-ended questions, the arts, self-expression, moral inquiry, recess play, and other vital forms of life are squeezed out in favor of generic "skill-building" and deadly test prep and drill. Alas, children are gaining a rigorous preparation for life in many of its most deadening aspects.

And the promise of reform, the dichotomous break with tradition, is alive as well, only now in a dramatically heightened form. The reason is close at hand, namely, the range of digitally mediated communication and learning opportunities that is transforming the culture. In the quickening pace of digitally based initiatives — online courses, cyberschools, MOOCs, Khan Academy offerings, and so on — and in the dreams of reformers and educational visionaries, conventional educational settings fade from view. Millions of classrooms are still occupied daily, yet they sometimes seem like a remnant from a time soon to be recognized as past. Such places and the practices they generated have been sites of preparation for life; now the emerging digital culture serves up ways to get on with it, it seems, much more directly.

This way of framing things is clearly appealing, significant, and, we will argue, misguided. It appeals to various visions of possibility, while impacting actual flows

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of energy, resources, research and development, and other elements vital to the ongoing educational enterprise. Put very crudely, it is a question of priorities. Should we invest in the people and places where conventional practices still transpire, or in the revolutionary changes of the emerging digital age culture and the kinds of learner-centered opportunities it generates? In this essay, we want to contest this dichotomy. Returning to Dewey's formulation, we will argue that neither "mere preparation" nor the "full meaning" of educational experience falls neatly on the side of the issue where many would suppose it to be. Furthermore, against the grain of the dichotomous framing of the matter, the significance of preparation, we suggest, warrants further attention as a crucial category of concern precisely as it is bound up with what Dewey called the "spirit of education."

II

The temptation to dismiss much of what takes place in conventional school settings reflects a malaise that is a central feature of life in our culture more broadly today. A recent poem by W.S. Merwin, "Neither Here Nor There," captures the cultural moment in a reflection on airports.

> An airport is nowhere
> which is not something
> generally noticed
>
> yet some unnamed person in the past
> deliberately planned it
> to be there
>
> and you have spent time there
> again
> and are spending time there again …

This recurrence of time spent in a place that is "nowhere" is enervating for the traveler:

> you sit there in the smell
> of what passes for food
> breathing what is called air
> while the timepieces measure
> their agreement

Merwin concludes:

> you believe in it
> while you are there
> because you are there
> and sometimes you may even feel happy
> to be that far on your way
> to somewhere[2]

It is not too much to say that years of schooling can seem like an eternity in just such a state of suspended animation, life in a preparatory hub. The young are travelers with uncertain destinations; ones in most cases they have not chosen for themselves.

So it is not surprising that, sympathizing with the plight of these young travelers, many reformers place their faith in educational technology to provide an easy-to-use platform that more efficiently and painlessly supplies learners with what they need, distilled from the trials and tribulations, idiosyncrasies and outdated traditions of

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classroom practice. Larry Summers, former president of Harvard University, writes that the next twenty-five years will see more changes in higher education than we have seen in the past 300 years, as students leave the campus behind and engage more directly in the world.[3] Even Harvard students are too long in the old-fashioned limbo: if there is a lecture to attend, view it online. Why should students of the near future spend years in Harvard classrooms, getting some "mere preparation," he might well have added, if they can move out and on with their lives in a more efficient, streamlined, and stimulating way?

And what is true for Harvard must be true for the lower rungs as well. A definite cultural cache accrues to the most daring school managers with respect to technologically mediated reforms that personalize learning opportunities and reduce confinement in traditional classrooms, all that time spent hoping, at best, that you are on your way to somewhere. Instead, get on with being where you want to be. At all levels, students stand to be liberated — in Moe and Chubb's phrase — to learn what, when, and where they choose to an ever greater extent.[4]

And so the malaise Merwin records of airports, so readily extended to schools, fuels the movement underway, or at least quite compellingly under consideration, to shift our investment in education from the traditional places of learning, schools, and classrooms, to the kinds of digitally mediated learning opportunities that might carry, and in significant ways lighten, the pedagogical burden going forward. Perhaps it is time to downsize investments in the traditional places of preparation, and embrace the power and relevance of the new ways we learn.

III

We have suggested the fit between Merwin's airport and the school to understand the appeal of gaining release from such way stations. But can technological advances actually deliver on the promise of release? As learners and travelers, we are unavoidably on our way. Technological advances cannot free us from that basic condition. Technology matters of course, but for what and under what conditions?

If the poet provides a reality check, so too does the comedian. In a recent short set that went viral, the stand-up comedian Louis C.K. begins by noting the kinds of amazing, seemingly life enhancing, technologically delivered goods and opportunities that he finds wasted on what he dubs "the crappiest generation of spoiled idiots." We see that he is hostile, but why? C.K. relates how he hears someone groan as his cell phone takes a couple of seconds to complete its task, and finds himself wanting to say, "give it a second, it's going to space … give it a second to get back." And on the plane, he is delighted to find that it is among the first equipped with Wi-Fi, but when the signal is disrupted his afflicted seatmate groans and curses under his breath. C.K. notes "how quickly the world owes him something that he didn't know existed 10 seconds ago." He then takes up the complaints about flying one hears, how a twenty-minute delay spent sitting on the runway is recounted as a horror story, "they act like their flight was like a cattle car in the 40s in Germany." What happened next, CK asks, "did you partake in the miracle of human flight, you non-contributing zero? … you're sitting in a chair, in the sky! … ah, but the seat doesn't go back …," and so on.[5]

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C.K. was explicit as to his theme: "everything's amazing and nobody's happy." And this is telling, for although he skewers certain kinds of people, Louis C.K. has emerged as more than a put-down artist. The larger theme resonates, the disconnect between the wonders of what has emerged in our own lifetime and the sensed quality of our actual lives. Louis C.K. seems to get this point and help his audience register it; we laugh at ourselves as he displays the petty frustrations that preoccupy us as we negotiate the kinds of spaces and pathways we travel.

How does this bear on the educational journey today? At the cutting edge of reforms in education — that promise to liberate learners from the "preparatory hubs" of the traditional classroom, and that free them to learn to a much greater extent, when, where, and how they choose to do so, online and in the world — there is much that is amazing, and many who are unhappy.

What makes travel so often an empty, frustrating experience, one that typically has little or none of the feeling of a journey? And similarly, what makes today's nearly ubiquitous forms of learning online, with all the wealth of virtually unlimited opportunities and information, likewise barren much of the time? In the case of travel, linking the insights of Merwin and C.K., we might suggest that the irony is the importance for the traveler of being in a particular place (rather than neither here nor there). Efficiencies are irrelevant on that crucial score. So too are the anaesthetizing electronic diversions C.K.'s seatmate seems so much to desire. Does place matter likewise in education? Places of and for what?

IV

As an account of the spectrum of possibilities as to what places of education are like and what they are for, Dewey's dichotomy works to establish the parameters. For some, evidently, place only matters as a condition for getting somewhere else — "I don't care if you hate your school so long as it gets you to Harvard," or heaven. While others, grasping his point, want the present place their children inhabit to be richly satisfying in some way, much like what the most avid travelers want of a journey, they want a place that delights, enthralls, and transforms; a place where wonder and curiosity deepen as children grow and find themselves yet more drawn to the particular places that bring them to life, and which they bring their lives to, and thus enliven, in return.

Unfortunately, with respect to this end of the spectrum, we grope today for a suitable language to speak convincingly about such places. As Max Weber astutely observed over a century ago, our epoch is one of disenchantment born from the widespread belief that "there are no mysterious incalculable forces that come into play, but rather that one can, in principle, master all things by calculation."[6] The effects of disenchantment, captured by the impatience of Louis C.K.'s traveler and the synchronized, sterile ennui of Merwin's airport, extend to all aspects of social life. We see these effects in the contrast between the familiar if fleeting kind of enchanting moment, say sharing a heart-stopping story with a young child, and the commonplace role of arranging for that same child to partake of the latest, mass-marketed, "enchanting" Disney products.

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At the center of this disenchantment process and the general cultural malaise is what Albert Borgmann calls moral commodification. He writes, "A thing or practice gets morally commodified when it is detached from its context of engagement with a time, a place, and a community and it becomes a free-floating object."[7] Moral commodification always entails moral loss, though often the benefits outweigh the costs. Take for instance the highway system. With its introduction, the experience of meandering through sleepy towns and taking one's chances at dodgy mom-and-pop restaurants is replaced with a streamlined path of concrete and a predictable and indistinguishable line of one-stop stations for gas, fast food, and the occasional bathroom break. The moral gains are efficiency, convenience, and more time at one's destination; yet travel that was once a remarkable experience in its own right, is now increasingly distinguished less by the idiosyncrasies of the people, places, and things discovered on the way and more by the time and monetary investment required to get you to where you want to go and the electronic diversions that help you cope with or rather limit the inconvenience of it all.

Of course, public education in the United States has long been vulnerable to moral commodification. Our faith in freedom, choice, and the entrepreneurial spirit, our anti-intellectual distrust of academic ideals, and our increasing willingness to view education as a mere preparation for the marketplace of work and consumption have strengthened the hand of those who would break down schooling into detachable, saleable parts.

The process was slow for a long time, beginning with the curriculum and the rise of the textbook industry, but the pace has since quickened to intrude into all aspects of educational life. Powerful industries of assessment, marketing, and educational technology have emerged infusing our educational imaginary with the language and logic of the manager-scientist, thus, measurable and interchangeable learning outputs, value-added evaluation, standard-based and data-driven decision making.

The problem that comes into view is twofold. While it may be that the place of education still matters deeply, much about current classrooms, the particularities of place, goes, and perhaps must go, unnoticed. After all, the quickest way to undermine the conditions of engagement or transformative experience is to break it down into parts, overthink its pedagogical value, or subject it to exhaustive critical scrutiny. Meanwhile, what is attended to — that which is measurable and transferable — is precisely the kind of standardized outcomes and products that further underscores the sense that schools, like Merwin's airport, are neither here nor there. As a result, any attempt to weigh the meaning of place in education is deeply problematic; the measures we have only get at the kinds of things that can be generated anywhere and in all kinds of new ways, as cultural and technological developments displace classrooms further from the sites, often on the fly, where measureable learning takes place.

In this context, what sustains the objection of those still inclined to worry about and emphasize place in education?

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V

Many scholars, from a variety of ideological perspectives, do worry. The late Marxist historian David Noble, who scandalously refused to use email and encouraged his students to write their papers by hand, goes so far as to reject technology and commodification outright. Specifically, he warns against the category error of confusing training for education. Training, he writes, "involves the honing of a person's mind so that it can be used for the purposes of someone other than that person," thus encouraging "a radical divorce between knowledge and the self." In contrast, "Education is the utter integration of knowledge and the self, in a word, self-knowledge. Here knowledge is defined by, and in turn helps to define, the self. Knowledge and the knowledgeable person are basically inseparable."[8]

This fundamental difference has direct implications for educational practice. Education for "individual and collective self-knowledge" necessarily entails specific interpersonal relationships between people. He writes,

> Education is a process of becoming for all parties, based upon mutual recognition and validation and centering upon the formation and evolution of identity. The actual content of the educational experience is defined by this relationship between people and the chief determinant of quality education is the establishment and enrichment of this relationship.[9]

As education is dismantled into digestible, saleable parts and we lose the "sacred space" of the classroom, teachers become nothing more than "commodity producers and deliverers" and students lose the interpersonal bonds of the classroom and the intimate connection between knowledge and self.[10]

In a similar vein, though less the Luddite, Borgmann argues that the philosophy of technology should constitute a "love of truancy."[11] While we may applaud the introduction of the highway system — if its rewards outweigh its losses — we must be wary of the influx of technological innovations that lack favorable tradeoffs and "needlessly crowd in on contexts of engagement," flooding our lives with "frivolous commodities or their excessive use."[12]

But how to strike the right balance? Borgmann places his hope in what he calls focal practices. These are forms of activity that resist moral commodification. To see what he means, consider the family meal. While contemporary eating is thoroughly commodified with an endless display of products and options, the focal practice of the family meal depend on a rich, established context of focal traditions, things, and events. The dining table, the home-cooked meal, the dinner conversation all enrich and are enriched by traditions of food preparation, local customs, roles and relationships, the presence of family members, and an engagement that not only solicits but further develops the talents and virtues of participants.

What is gained from a focal practice often escapes our immediate estimation; its value cannot be neatly predetermined and standardized. Not only do participants bring to the table different roles, experiences, and levels of appreciation, but also the meaning and effects of a focal practice broaden and deepen over time as the family meal becomes a part of the participants' collective and individual identities. A child who does not understand why it is necessary that everyone eat their meal together

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may have to wait until she has a child of her own before she can fully appreciate the intimate moments spent with her family. At the same time, focal practices do not serve as "mere preparation" for what is to come or what one might one day become. Unlike the "ubiquity and instantaneity of commodities" that lead us away from the here and now, focal practices are distinguished by their fullness of presence and "moments of completeness." Borgmann writes, "Working out on a Stairmaster while watching a mountain valley on a plasma screen and talking to your partner via a Bluetooth headset seems to procure everything you can have on a walk in the Rattlesnake Valley with your spouse — except the commanding presence of the here and now."[13] This commanding presence of the here and now endows the family meal with a quality irreducible to its nutritional content or its functional role in propagating table manners and the rules of polite conversation. Its sheer irreducibility also suggests that focal practices do not suffer commodification well. When we disperse to eat at opposite corners of the house, order different entrees from a take-out restaurant, watch television or listen to our ipods, we diminish the impact of the here and now and threaten the integrity of what it means to share a meal together.

Of course, technology need not displace focal practices or lead to moral commodification; it can even heighten the experience. The father who consults the internet to discover the ideal temperature to roast a lamb, the child who uses an electric knife to slice the turkey, and the grandmother who adjusts her hearing aid to better listen to dinner conversation all participate in the family meal. Exceptions too, such as the occasional decision to eat out or take the meal into the living room to watch the Olympics, can highlight aspects of this focal practice that are otherwise subdued and marginalized. But these are beneficial innovations precisely because they enrich, rather than cheapen, the social bonds and reverence for the practice.

VI

In principle, schools are places set aside to prepare for, renew, and sustain the focal practices of education. We do justice to the practices of the classroom not by releasing students from the spatio-temporal bonds of the classroom, but by revitalizing overlooked aspects of learning already present in the context of schools. Noble's description of the conditions of education bears repeating: it is the "utter integration of knowledge and self," entailing "interpersonal (rather than interactive) relationships" that inaugurate a process of becoming for all involved. Such practices depend on people coming together in recognizable places of learning with a constellation of focal traditions, things and events, and thus, books, desks, and whiteboards, storytelling, classroom discussions and lectures, and the characteristic range of school experience, from spontaneous eruptions of laughter and excitement to bouts of repetition, boredom, and discomfort. All contribute to the ongoing, distinctive, and sometimes commanding presence of the here and now in schools.

At the center of an individual's full sense of presence in the "here and now" is the body. Often overlooked, underappreciated, and denied, the physical presence of both teachers and students together profoundly impacts educational experience in the traditional classroom. For one, the presence of here and now calls for heightened sensitivity on the part of the teacher. A shift in the mood of the class or the mere look

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of incredulity on the face of students may warrant a change of pace or the looping back to an earlier point. The teacher also draws from a stock of facial expressions, tones of voice, turns of phrases, and gestural habits to convey her message. Irony, for instance, is most effective when students can discern a difference between the words spoken and the tone and facial expression of the teacher. Sometimes a mere look speaks volumes. Paul Woodruff's point that an "unforgettable silence" may be the only way to bring attention to the enormity of the subject matter is only one among many possible uses of silence routinely utilized by experienced teachers.[14] As speech acts, of course, silence requires an audience to witness the one who chooses not to speak.

Such sensitivity is not reserved for the teachers alone. An integral part of the educative process is acquiring the ability to read the bodily gestures and expressions, moods and emotions of others, while developing one's own communicative cues and strategies. While there are certainly rules of engagement — raise your hand, don't interrupt others — the majority of situations calls for deeper recognition without the benefits of formulas. Experienced participants of classroom culture react to the social situation without internal deliberation — they feel the lived space of the classroom. This is Maurice Merleau-Ponty's point when he argues that we perceive "things" through the body[15] and experience the world holistically as lived space. It is also what Hubert Dreyfus means when he argues that the complex dynamics of learning *in situ* triggers in the learner a capacity to take risks, a readiness for surprise, and a commitment to meaningful learning that enable competent learners to make the qualitative leap beyond mere rule-following to embrace a fuller complexity of new challenges and demands.[16] Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi refers to the concentrated energy that responds to the commanding presence of here and now as "flow." (It is the very opposite of disenchanted distraction.)[17]

Being physically present with others in a classroom sets it apart from learning in isolation or in anonymity. As we are called to understand one another, we also, in doing so, come to better understand ourselves. Dialogue with others has an unpredictable, give-and-take quality that resists the attempt to control and predict outcomes. Hans-Georg Gadamer describes it as "not merely a matter of putting oneself forward and successfully asserting one's own point of view, but being transformed into a communion in which we do not remain what we were."[18] It is through this dialogic process of becoming that the intimate bonds between knowledge and self are established and strengthened.[19]

The spirit of education lies in the particular way that it discloses the full meaning of present life, the commanding here and now. We inhabit the place of education, to the extent we do, by dwelling in focal practices and engaging with people and things *in situ*. Education, as the interplay of being and becoming, is simultaneously a destination in itself and the preparation for other destinations, as yet unknown and unknowable.

VII

In sum, let us return to Dewey's dichotomy. Taking seriously Dewey's suggestion that, respecting the spirit of education, one needs to reflect deeply on the

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full meaning of present experience, we see the crucial importance of preparation, and hence what is misleading about the dichotomy itself. Rejecting "mere" preparation too readily shortchanges the place — and the places — of preparation. And when that path is taken — in celebrating the second part of the dichotomy — we risk losing our bearings with regard to what it is, other than whatever present experience happens to consist in, that we are considering as to its "full meaning." It is precisely the place and quality of preparation, its suitable enchantment, that matters most.

The danger in short is that, by embracing the endless present over and above the distinct places of preparation, the present loses its grounding. The many and multiplying devices for anaesthetizing ourselves to the sense of being neither here nor there come up ever-short, no matter how amazing they are. To be fully present takes a great deal of preparation. Optimal experience, or "flow," may be a kind of selfless now, just being in the moment, but what puts one on the way to be somewhere in that way? It is not, or at least not only, some set of skills and attainments more or less efficiently accumulated. It is, rather, that you have been somewhere before and those places — the particularity of the people and focal practices of *that* place, and *that one* — helped prepare you fully to be somewhere once again. Such is the journey of education.

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