

Viewpoint

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Is the Practicum Practical?

The exaggerated emphasis on student teaching
in higher education

*Theory without practice is dead,
and practice without theory is blind.*

– Anon

Virtually everyone I have known in education thinks the most important and relevant part of teacher education is student teaching, or the **practicum**. It is one of those unquestioned orthodoxies in our profession. When it comes to the conventional wisdom of modern educators, however, I tend to be an infidel; I think the emphasis on the **practicum** is exaggerated and ultimately misguided.

The **practicum** as such is not a problem. The problem is the exaggerated emphasis put on it in the preparation of future teachers. Field experience need not be abolished from teacher preparation, but we should consider the case for reducing it.

Those that would have the **practicum** continue to dominate teacher education are invited to contend with some of the following considerations.

When I was a student at St. Joseph Teachers College in 1966-67, we were required to do three weeks of student teaching. When I came to the Faculty of Education at McGill in 1973, the policy was seven weeks of

student teaching. Later this was raised to nine weeks, and recently McGill designed a new, improved 1-G program with 14 weeks' teaching. And the Ministry of Education in Quebec is now thinking about raising it to 700 hours during training! In other words, in my professional lifetime the duration of student teaching during teacher preparation has more than quadrupled. Just during my stay at McGill it has doubled.

I would not deny that everyone learns a little by doing in many endeavours – including teaching. What I question is the assumption that field experience is the best or only mode of learning how to teach and that there need be no limits to its duration. How to understand this conventional wisdom?

The emphasis on student teaching in teacher education is related to the disagreement about the role of theory and practice (*praxis*), content and method, principle and procedure, thought and action in education. It is related, therefore, to philosophy, and particularly to epistemology, which deals with the theory of knowledge.

The theory of knowledge which has gained ascendancy among contemporary educators is that which informs utilitarianism, pragmatism, and progressivism. It holds that man learns only by trial and error, practice, activity, and experience. To modern educators it came primarily from John Dewey (1859 - 1952) and his ideas. This is important because, as Richard M. Weaver said, "Ideas have consequences" (1948, 1984).

Dewey and the Separation of Content and Method

Traditionally teachers were trained in the Catholic St. Joseph Teachers College and in the Protestant Macdonald Teachers College. When the Quebec government decided to modernize Quebec education in the early 1960s, the blueprint for the modernization was the Parent Report. A reading of the report shows that it was completely infused by progressivist thinking. The Parent Report was but John Dewey writ large. So, a familiarity with John Dewey's philosophy is essential to an appreciation of contemporary educational thinking.

In the traditional university both content and pedagogy (method) were part of one indistinguishable body of understanding (Ong, 1958, pp. 153-4). Ironically, it was the antitraditional and antidualist John Dewey who dichotomized content and method and made method, process, procedure, manipulation, and change central to this theory of knowledge (Clark, 1957/1985, pp. 517-533). Dewey never disproved or improved upon previous theories of knowledge. He simply infused a bowdlerized version of empiricism into modern educational thought.

How disinterested was Dewey when he promulgated his doctrine? My contention is that Dewey was less scientific and objective than he portrayed or was reputed to be. Dewey was, frankly, an ideologue.

Gordon Clark, an historian of philosophy, says [Dewey's] pragmatism was a form of irrationalism in which epistemology – or the theory of knowledge – was considered a pseudoproblem. Pragmatism rejected dualism and essentialism of classical philosophy, and it rejected the role of ideas in education. Yet, it constructed a theory of knowledge which was connected to the post-Hegelian tradition articulated by Feuerbach and Marx. While claiming to be scientific, it was not science, but scientism (Clark, pp. 518-521).

Dewey's focus was not on reality, but on experience; not given or received experience, but active experience "taken with a purpose." He believed in activism and change. He saw the scientist as an initiator of change. Scientists were to tamper and experiment with reality. Ideas, then were instruments — a set of manipulations or statements of acts to be performed.

Sydney Hook, a Ph. D. student of Dewey, consistently denied that Dewey was a Marxist, but he was deeply indebted to Marxism, particularly the Marxist dictum: Philosophers have hitherto only described the world; the point, however, is to change it (Hook, 1987, pp. 111, 138-140). Dewey may not have been a Marxist but his philosophy and educational theory were profoundly connected to it.

Dewey lived a long life and wrote much on education. He studied at Columbia University, which had a strong Marxist presence when being a Marxist or declaring oneself a committed socialist was not fashionable or politically prudent, and he had a lively interest in the non-Western Third World and in his lifetime visited and taught in Japan, Mexico, and China (Hook, pp. 80-101).

After the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917, Lenin invited him to visit the Soviet Union. There he visited schools and was a consultant to Lenin (Hook, pp. 123-4). He served as the chief justice on ~~the~~ the international tribunal (the "Dewey Commission") established by the Comintern to adjudicate on Trotsky's deviance from Stalinist orthodoxy (Hook, pp. 176, 220, 224-5, 227). Among his many writings, not a few were on the Soviet Union, the economic crisis of the capitalist world and the great depression, on teacher unionization and the need for a third political party in the United States. He was also a signatory of the first *Humanist Manifesto*, which promulgated a new secular humanism based on Feuerbach's teaching that Man created God rather than God creating Man (Nobel, 1991, pp. 33-34).

Dewey was a lifelong critic of two major intellectual traditions: the European intellectual tradition represented by Plato and Aristotle and the eighteenth-century *laissez-faire* liberal tradition of competitive capitalism. His revolt against traditional philosophy was joined by a hostility toward classical liberal democracy and free enterprise economics.

He rejected traditional education for two reasons: first, because traditional education educated for a “static social order” and he was for change; and, second, because it imposed absolute “adult standards’ upon children while he accepted Rousseau’s doctrine of rebellious adolescence (Ulich, 1968, pp. 315-339).

The Dethronement of Theory

In articulating his philosophy Dewey turned to Hegelian and Marxist thought and their revolutionary programs. It was Marx who first proposed the unity of theory and practice. Mere talk needed to be subordinated to real *praxis*. Marxism was the most elaborate edifice dedicated to the dethronement of theory and the demystification of the “superstructure” which hid the economic substructure and material reality.

Robert Ulich (1968) wrote:

Though Dewey makes little mention of Karl Marx in his main books, there is no doubt that the latter’s conception of culture as being the superstructure of economic life, and Auguste Comte’s doctrine of positivism have moulded his thought. But it was probably Darwin who most of all thinkers influenced Dewey’s interpretation of civilisation. (p. 322)

This was similar to the effect Darwin had on Karl Marx.

In other words, Dewey was an adversary to his contemporary culture and educational institutions and turned to Darwinism, Marxism, materialism, and secularism to articulate his theory of “progressive” education, including its acceptance of the centrality of *praxis* as espoused by Marx and his disciples.

The increasing ascendancy of this progressivism occurred simultaneously with the professionalization of teaching and the transformation of normal schools into faculties of education at universities. Hence, progressivism and its hostility toward traditional philosophy and its emphasis on *praxis* entered into our faculties of education, and modern progressive education became increasingly socialistic.

The Place of Field Experience

The centrality of field experience in teacher training is not a self-evident truth no matter how unscrutinized by conventional thinking. Nor did field experience become central to teacher education due to empirical findings. My thesis is that it is an unquestioned opinion, often "dressed in drag," which became central to modern educational thought simply because this was considered to be progressive.

To be sure, student testimony has it that field experience is the most "worthwhile" aspect of teacher training, and the most relative component of teacher education. But that may simply be because what it stands beside pales in comparison. It has been demanded by students and we have provided it because we have been demand-side educators catering to the alleged needs of our students.

Since student teaching has been expanded under pressure of student demands and the doctrine of "student centredness" and "learning by doing" from John Dewey, the question is: What students? The mature young men and women called education students or the **more voiceless and much younger students in public schools?**

Quebec's school year is comprised of 180 days. Fourteen weeks of student teaching is 14 times 5 which equals 70 school days. This represents 38 per cent of the school year. The Kantian question is, What if every teacher accepted a student teacher every semester of every year? Should a young student's academic year be comprised of 38 per cent experimentation? In elementary school teacher preparation the percentage may be even higher.

May the unexamined tendency to increase the **practicum** in teacher education not give the impression that **little of value is learned** or can be learned in a professional faculty of education and that the theory taught in faculties of education is dispensable?

It is interesting that faculties of education most often compare themselves to other professional schools and student teaching most frequently to medical internship programs. But medicine is not the only analogy. Law faculties have no internships until after graduation. By way of practice, law students only have contrived "moot courts," and even the medical analogy is flawed. Interns do not conduct surgery alone. Medical internship is really a training in diagnosis and not practice.

The **education practicum** is based on the assumption that all or most of the schools are "good" and the lessons learned by student teachers are

educative. This, of course, is not true. By sometimes sending our students for longer periods to bad schools, we may be teaching them bad lessons.

Finally, our **practicum** is based on the myth that our student teachers do not know **what it is really like out there**. This may be the biggest swindle. This underestimates our students' intelligence and our common knowledge about the impressionability and absorptive powers of youngsters. Education students, and prospective teachers in faculties of education, for the most part have completed (in Quebec) between 13 and 16 years of public instruction in educational institutions which in their essential procedures and culture are the same, be it elementary, secondary, tertiary school or university. They know exactly what it is like out there and it is nonsense to claim otherwise.

Student teaching and field experience are ultimately theory-laden. Their prestige and centrality come not from scientific finding and systematic study, but from the doctrine of *praxis*, which is central to Marxist and progressive philosophy and thought. In other words, it is a derived article of faith.

The doctrine of *praxis* was borrowed by Dewey and translated into the notions of "learning by doing," "active enterprises," and "the project method," all imbued with a disdain for philosophy and the role of theory in education. Inherently these notions are hostile to a philosophical pedagogy.

We are, now, getting our just desserts: a general crisis in progressivism which will reverberate upon all the details of its thinking, including the doctrine of *praxis*. This will evoke a major re-examination of progressive assumptions, including the opinion that field experience and student teaching are the most important and best component of teacher education.

University teacher-graduates will have the opportunity to gain experience and practice teaching for the rest of their professional lives. So the question is, Is the one or two years of university teacher training best spent in the field, or in the proper pursuit of the mission of the university, i. e., the advancement and dissemination of knowledge?

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