CHAPTER 5

THE TEACHER AS NAVIGATOR

Since learning is something that the pupil has to do himself and for himself, the initiative lies with the learner. The teacher is a guide and director; he steers the boat but the energy that propels it must come from those who are learning.

—John Dewey (LW 8: 140)

Another analogy? Well, this time Dewey gives us several in one sentence. He explicitly likens the teacher to a guide and a director and implicitly compares her to a helmsman and a navigator in the quoted extract from *How We Think* (1933). These analogies are probably woven together in his thinking, although there may be distinctive elements in each. We decided to use the word *navigator*, because we think it can cover all three major concepts, namely guiding, directing, and steering. On the other hand, we could miss an emphasis, probably the main emphasis, of Dewey's statement if we focus exclusively on

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Authors' Note: References to works by John Dewey are from the collection of his works published by Southern Illinois University Press: *The Early Works of John Dewey, 1882–1898; The Middle Works of John Dewey, 1899–1924;* and *The Later Works of John Dewey, 1925–1953.* References to these works are abbreviated as EW, MW, and LW, where, for example, EW 5: 94 indicates that the material cited or idea noted is in *The Early Works,* volume 5, page 94.

the teacher and ignore the student. He obviously wants us to understand three enormously important overlapping thoughts about the learner.

What are these thoughts? Before we answer this question, let's observe that the ideas cluster around the notions of learning and learner and convey beliefs about the student that are found infrequently in much contemporary educational literature. The first notion that Dewey stresses is that learning is something a student does and does for herself. Learning is an activity and, as such, is an engagement that may result in educative experiences by a student. The teacher can do her own learning in an educative manner, but she cannot learn for the student. She plays critical roles in the learning process of the student, but, ultimately, only the student can learn for herself. No amount of preparation or, even, enticement, therefore, by the teacher can secure learning without the active involvement of the student. The student, in a sense, is in charge of learning. There are times when this realization can be reassuring, just as it can be sobering.

This isn't the whole picture, however.

The second piece of news, good news if you think a particular way, from Dewey is that the impetus and initiative for learning natively resides in the child or youth. This news, of course, is not claiming that the teacher and school are insignificant. On the contrary, they are vital factors that affect the learning activities of students. But the teacher and the school are not alone in their interest in learning. They have a ready, interested collaborator in the learning process, the student. The student is not only interested in learning. She actually seeks to learn. Her initiative stems from what Dewey considers her original and cultivated impulses to learn. All of these tendencies to learn, of course, need to be nurtured and guided by the teacher and sustained by the student. Remember, nevertheless, that the student independently has the initiative to learn. If Dewey is correct on this point, important ideas flow from it: The teacher and student and other students become partners—co-partners—in the learning process. Dewey asks us to abandon any ideas that imply that the student is passive and disinterested in learning. Instead, she is an active, searching person (MW 7: 251). But we have to think of each student as an individual learner and decide how we can wisely guide her in the role of a co-partner or co-learner. Dewey identifies two steps in this process: establishing educative conditions and sharing educative activities:

> Setting up conditions which stimulate certain visible and tangible ways of acting is the first step. Making the individual a sharer or partner in the associated activity so that he feels its success as his success, its failure as his

> failure, is the completing step. As soon as he is possessed by the emotional attitude of the group, he will be alert to recognize the special ends at which it aims and the means employed to secure success. His beliefs and ideas, in other words, will take a form similar to those of others in the group. He will also achieve pretty much the same stock of knowledge since that knowledge is an ingredient of his habitual pursuits. (MW 9: 18)

We just said that we need to consider each student's distinct dispositions and abilities so that we can wisely guide her into the role of a learning co-partner. In light of what Dewey says are the two steps of guidance, we may wish to revise our statement to wisely and *ethically* guide her, especially since—as we learned earlier—Dewey thinks making wise decisions is a moral undertaking. Wisdom is needed to create conditions or an environment that will stimulate and direct the learning activities of a student, but a respect for the integrity and autonomy of the student is required if we want to create independently thinking and choosing people, not just students who absorb the attitudes and behaviors of her classmates. Take a moment to notice Dewey's reference to a "stock of knowledge." He believes we need a stock of knowledge that can be used in problem solving. He isn't interested in our graduating empty-minded students or students who cannot reflect on problems and issues, because they have neither a stock of knowledge nor a means of acquiring relevant information.

The third thing Dewey tells us is also delightful: that our learning vessel has its own fuel. The student has her own unending or renewal supply of energy and, as a result, there is no dependency on imported energy—just imported wisdom and guidance. She isn't, then, just the initiator of learning, she is also the energizer for the entire educational journey. Now, for the not-necessarily-so-good news: A student can initiate and energize learning in any number of directions, inappropriate and appropriate. Cruises upstream and downstream, trips across oceans and back again, and voyages from port to port can result in noneducative, uneducative, miseducative, and educative experiences (MW 7: 178; LW 13: 17–30). These four options are illustrated in Table 5.1.

A Teacher Snapshot

Recall a few school incidents that remind you of what Dewey says about educative, miseducative, uneducative, and noneducative experiences. Was it the teacher's navigation that made the most difference in educative experiences? What other factors were involved?

Table 5.1 Types of Learning Experiences

Types	*Explanations*	*Examples*
Noneducative	Learning or activity that leads to little or no immediate understanding and little or no growth in the future	Memorizing a name, date, or formula; learning to skip rope or sharpen a pencil
Uneducative	Learning or activity that fails to clarify educational ends and consider appropriate means for seeking ends	Studying history or literature without reflecting on personal or social purposes and relevant methods of inquiry
Miseducative	Learning or activity that is based on misunderstandings, confusion, or unethical behavior and that results in future misinterpretations	Picking up derogatory language and images of an ethnic, racial, or religious group
Educative	Learning that provides intellectual and moral growth in the present and the grounds for more growth in the future	Engaging in activities that provide understandings that prove useful in addressing present and future personal and social problems

A navigator, therefore, needs to know where the educative ports are located and how these ports may be entered most successfully by each student. The analogies of guiding, directing, and steering may now make more sense: Teachers are needed to ensure that energized students take educative excursions, voyages that are both growth producing and growth enhancing and enabling.

You may be wondering if Dewey is going to take us on a cruise of our own, perhaps to visit Delight Elementary School, Enchanting Middle School, or Fantasy High School where students happily paddle along with their teachers on their pleasant pedagogical pilgrimages. Teaching, after all, is easy

when we know the truth. Or is this the story that Dewey tells? He no doubt takes flights of fantasy now and then. But in his better moments, he stresses that the propensities of the student present challenges and that his view of teaching is more demanding than traditional approaches, not less (LW 13: 50). Left to herself, he recognizes that the student is unlikely to progress from native or socially shaped impulses to conscious desires and reflective purposes. The ignored, isolated, or spoiled student will be at the mercy of undeveloped inclinations and indiscriminate stimuli (LW 13: 43ff). A navigator, therefore, cannot carelessly allow a student's impulses to drive her onto educational shoals, ledges, or falls. Nor can she abandon the student to the stimuli and forces of an accidental or spontaneous environment. Miseducative shipwrecks are not an option for the caring teacher.

In *Ethics* (revised 1932), Dewey pulls together his thoughts about native impulses, environment, energy, and the educator:

> Stimuli from the environment are highly important factors in conduct. But they are not important as causes, as generators of action. For the organism is already active, and stimuli themselves arise and are experienced only in the course of action. The painful heat of an object stimulates the hand to withdraw but the heat was experienced in the course of reaching and exploring. The function of a stimulus is—as the case just cited illustrates—to change the direction of an action already going on. Similarly, a response to a stimulus is not the beginning of activity; it is a change, a shift, of activity in response to the change in conditions indicated by a stimulus. A navigator of a ship perceives a headland; this may operate to make him alter the course which his ship takes.
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> But it is not the cause or "moving spring" of his sailing. Motives, like stimuli, induce us to alter the trend and course of our conduct, but they do not evoke or originate action as such. (LW 7: 289–290)

Dewey's comments convey important subtleties about both the student and the teacher. The former does not need stimuli or motives to cause her to become active. Her fuel tank is full; she is already active; her engine is running; she is moving in some direction. While she is moving, the stimuli draw or repel her and are selected or ignored by her. When a stimulus or motive is selected by the student, because it creates questions, presents a problem, or generates disequilibrium for her, it works to direct her attention and learning. The teacher indirectly directs the student by prior planning of trips, presentation of possibilities, selection of materials, creation of activities,

construction of centers, placement of stimuli, design of questions, scheduling of projects, and smatterings of opportunities. The teacher also recognizes a "headland" that influences her to adjust plans and redirect the vessel to an unanticipated opportunity that leads to consummating aesthetic experiences. Together—the learner (teacher) and the co-learner (student)—have experiences that provide growth in the present and create opportunities for future development. The entire sequence of events, then, may be—if a positive scenario is described—as follows when viewed from a distance: Native impulses lead to instinctive or planned activity and are influenced by environmental stimuli as a child or youth learns to respond the environment and select new directions or activities. The entire process is infused with ethical decisions or selections by both the teacher and the student as they work and grow together.

What, then, do Dewey's analogies of the teacher as guide, director, and navigator suggest? Plainly stated, the teacher steers a vessel where she thinks it should go while considering the purposes of the craft. But this cannot be done if the teacher doesn't understand the student and her purposes. Dewey, as we might expect, offers us more than a path to understanding the student as he provides invaluable insight about what the teacher needs to know about each student, the process of education, and the general direction of education:

> The more a teacher is aware of the past experiences of students, of their hopes, [and] chief interests, the better will he understand the forces at work that need to be directed and utilized for the formation of reflective habits. The number and quality of these factors vary from person to person. They cannot therefore be categorically enumerated in a book. But there are some tendencies and forces that operate in every normal individual, forces that must be appealed to and utilized if the best methods of development of good habits of thought are to be employed. (LW 8: 141)

Understanding students and guiding, directing, and steering them to develop reflective habits, therefore, says a great deal but not all about Dewey's thinking. In his opinion, we need to take hold of student impulses, curiosities, and interests and assist them as they grow into independent thinkers and productive individuals. In this process, Dewey makes a case for getting students to move beyond their immediate personal interests of merely being thinking and productive people. We need to steer them toward social concerns, sympathies, and involvements. With appropriate social moorings, they can be active participants in building, expanding, and sustaining democratic policies,

institutions, communities, and governments (MW 9: 154–155)—all of which in turn mean richer lives for those involved.

QUOTES AND QUESTIONS

In another context, Dewey uses a different nautical metaphor that has applicability to our analysis of the teacher. He argues that a nautical almanac—whose parallel we might see in a curriculum guide, university course, district workshop, or teacher preparation program—however informative, cannot tell

> the sailor where he is nor how to navigate. It is an aid in his analysis of the required conditions of right navigation. In the supreme art of life the tools must be less mechanical; more depends upon the skill of the artists in their manipulation, but they are none the less useful. Our mastery of a required case of action would be slow and wavering if we had to forge anew our weapons of attack in each instance. The temptation to fall back on the impulse or accident of the moment would be well-nigh irresistible. And so it is well we have our rules at hand, but well only if we have them for use. (EW 3: 101)

A Reflective Opportunity

If you were designing a set of activities to cultivate the moment-by-moment thinking that Dewey urges, how would they differ from many of your past education or development experiences? Are these differences consistent with what Dewey suggests? That is, are your means consistent with your goals?

Unpacking this statement by Dewey is worth the endeavor, for he implies much about how the teacher who is an artist thinks and how prior learning and experience can help or hinder our efforts in new pedagogical circumstances. What does he say that is most meaningful to you as an aspiring or practicing teacher? Do you think he is correct when he adds that an educational rule or principle does not tell us how to act or teach in a specific situation but does provide "a most marvelous tool of analysis" and assists in clearing away distracting matters (EW 3: 101)? Can you think of an example to illustrate your point?

Before going to the next chapter, examining briefly a different but pertinent analogy is important. The reason we think it is important may seem like an unusual one: We think Dewey is dead wrong. Okay, so he isn't dead,

but he is incorrect or, at a minimum, incomplete because he stopped thinking too early. Let's look at what he says. In the same paragraph that Dewey speaks of the teacher as a guide, director, and navigator, he suggests that the teacher is also like a salesperson, claiming:

> Teaching may be compared to selling commodities. No one can sell unless someone buys. We should ridicule a merchant who said that he had sold a great many goods although no one had bought any. But perhaps there are teachers who think that they have done a good day's teaching irrespective of what pupils have learned. (LW 8: 140)

Today, we are all too familiar with this idea as well as the accompanying one that the student is similar to or actually a customer. The implications of this analogy or, perhaps, literalism appear to differ from writer to writer. Sometimes the salesperson illustration suggests that schools and districts are in competition with one another and that we need to compete for and keep students. A complementary idea is that the teacher needs to develop her art of selling the value of ideas and skills or schooling and education. Or the thought suggested may be that we need to know our merchandise (knowledge), our customers (students), and our sales approaches (methods) very well if we are to remain relevant and competitive in society today.

Dewey is not, however, speaking of these issues and ideas. He doesn't say the teacher is a salesperson and the student is a customer. Conversely, he is talking about the relationship between the concepts of teaching and learning and selling and buying. His very specific point is that we haven't taught if students haven't learned, just as a salesperson hasn't sold anything if customers haven't purchased anything. Or, more exactly, he dislikes the idea of our saying we have been teaching when our pupils' learning or lack thereof is ignored. Pupils need to be in the equation when we say that teaching has occurred.

This idea doesn't sound bad. But Dewey did not see how his idea might be misapplied. Thus, we may want to question whether it confuses as much as it enlightens. For example, isn't there an *attempt* sense to selling and teaching as well as a *success* sense? Don't we speak of both teaching and selling even if students haven't learned and customers haven't purchased? Should we expect a salesperson to answer the question, "What have you been doing today?" with "Nothing," if she didn't sell any computers? And what has a teacher been doing if not teaching when students fail to learn? Has she been

doing nothing? And if 2 students don't learn but 23 others do, has the teacher failed or succeeded at teaching? Or both? This analogy also illustrates that any comparison may be misleading or only partially correct: Things are alike only to a certain extent. Part of the art of thinking rests "in the power to pass judgments *pertinently* and *discriminatingly*" (LW 8: 211). And to be a good, critically thinking judge

> is to have a sense of the relative indicative or signifying values of the various features of the perplexing situation; to know what to let go as of no account; what to eliminate as irrelevant; what to retain as conducive to the outcome; what to emphasize as a clew to the difficulty. This power in ordinary matters we call *knack*, *tact*, *cleverness*; in more important affairs, *insight*, *discernment*. In part it is instinctive or inborn, but it also represents the funded outcome of long familiarity with like operations in the past. Possession of this ability to seize what is evidential or significant and to let the rest go is the mark of the expert. The connoisseur, the *judge*, in any matter. (LW 8: 213)

Only with an understanding of education that is based in or funded by pertinent bodies of knowledge and experiential understanding is the teacher well on her way to being prepared to become a pedagogical artist, for great teaching demands great thinking and imagination (LW 10: 52). Both thinking and imagination necessitate the teacher's becoming a judge and critic of what she reads, hears, sees, and does (MW 3: 260).

IMPLICATIONS FOR THE TEACHER

Navigating 25 to say nothing of 150 students each day is no simple matter. Guiding their interests, choices, and learning can be unbelievably challenging as the substitute and new teacher soon discover. Steering students in their acquisition of meaningful information and critical thinking—so that they attend to relevant factors and evaluate their meanings—calls for a great artist. The joys of teaching, then, require the joys—and sometimes traumas—of thinking. And not just thinking but thinking in such a way that it becomes part of our practice and shapes what we do as if it were second nature. Each teacher must think through issues, questions, and choices so that she is distinguished by having "pedagogical horse sense," as Dewey suggests:

> Judging is the act of selecting and weighing the bearing of facts and suggestions as they present themselves, as well as of deciding whether the alleged facts are really facts and whether the idea used is a sound idea or merely a fancy. We may say, for short, that a person of sound judgment is one who, in the idiomatic phrase, has 'horse sense'; he is a good judge of *relative values*; he can estimate, appraise, evaluate, with tact and discernment. (LW 8: 210)

This is how a teacher's knowledge transforms her practice and why we are able to say that theory and practice go together.

The teacher as a navigator, then, brings us face to face with several arts, including the art of thinking. Dewey hints at the beauty of this art:

> Thinking is preeminently an art; knowledge and propositions which are the products of thinking, are works of art, as much so as statuary and symphonies. Every successive stage of thinking is a conclusion in which the meaning of what has produced it is condensed; and it is no sooner stated than it is a light radiating to other things—unless it be a fog which obscures them. (LW 1: 283)

But thinking can be otherwise:

> In some cases the result is called unworthy, in others, ugly; in others, inept; in others, wasteful, inefficient; and in still others untrue, false. But in each case, the condemnatory adjective refers to the resulting work judged in the light of its method of production. (LW 1: 284)

Accordingly, thinking can be done well or poorly, as can our navigating. As teachers, we need to think—sorry about that word—and plan carefully so we can be at our intellectual and pedagogical best. We should cultivate the art of thinking as a part of the art of teaching. Moreover, we need to think like artists if we want to perform like them. What we do is too important to individual, group, national, and world progress to do otherwise. As we refine our artistic thinking, we find little help and no escape in traditional practices, approved textbooks, teacher-proof materials, or mandated curricula. On the other hand, teacher education programs, graduate studies, and other professional development activities ought to help us think more rigorously, critically, richly, and comprehensively—and, hence, more artistically. If they do, but especially if they don't, we need to find similarly minded artists to help us think beautiful thoughts and practice them in our classrooms and schools so that life and learning become "a never ending voyage of discovery" (LW 11: 502).

To be sure, teaching artistically is not the only or even the primary factor in developing the kinds of educated people and democratic societies we find desirable. A great teacher, even an educationally powerful school, is only a means to a more desirable community, society, and world. Just how influential a good teacher is is impossible to determine. We can safely assert, however, that she is both very important for individuals and communities and not significant enough to cure or avoid depressions, diseases, wars poverty, injustice, and tragedy. Dewey confesses in *Democracy and Education*, "Schools are, indeed, one important method of the transmission which forms the dispositions of the immature; but it is only one means, and compared with other agencies, a relatively superficial means" (MW 9: 7). Yet, we dare not underestimate the potential of schools and teachers. Isn't it better to fly artistically toward high ideals than to skim the treetops because of low expectations?

A SUMMATIVE EXERCISE

Table 5.2 The Artistic Teacher

Chapter	*Understandings*	*Qualities*	*Activities*
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READINGS

"The Philosophy of the Arts," (LW 13: 357–368).
"The Place of Judgment in Reflective Activity," in *How We Think* (LW 8: 210–220).
"The Varied Substance of the Arts," in *Art as Experience* (LW 10: 218–249).