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## De-Platonizing and Democratizing Education as the Bases of Service Learning

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*The theoretical bases of academic service learning are examined, with particular attention to John Dewey's contributions. The service learning movement is conceptualized as part of an ongoing—and still unsuccessful—effort to “de-Platonize” and democratize American higher education in particular and American schooling in general.*

## De-Platonizing and Democratizing Education as the Bases of Service Learning

*Ira Harkavy, Lee Benson*

Academic service learning is a pedagogy derived from a theory of democratic education and schooling developed by John Dewey to replace Plato's aristocratic theory of education and society. At minimum, Dewey's theory asserts four propositions:

1. “Reflective thought is an active response to the challenge of the environment” (Smith, 1983, p. 124).
2. Individuals learn best when they participate “in the formation of the purposes that govern their activities” (Nicholls and Hazzard, 1995, p. 114).
3. All individuals can contribute to knowledge.
4. The fundamental purpose of knowledge is to improve human welfare.

Although Dewey did not originate all four propositions, he developed a theory of instrumental intelligence and democratic education that significantly advanced and integrated them. It can fairly be said: In the beginning there was Dewey. Dewey's work, however, is not the sole source of current practice and theory. Important predecessors, related but generally independent thinkers and doers, and latter-day Deweyans have also contributed to academic service learning.

To overestimate the impact of Platonic thought on Western philosophy would be nearly impossible. A proposition asserted by A. N. Whitehead

succinctly captures Plato's preeminent influence: "The whole later development of Western philosophy can be regarded as a series of extended footnotes to Plato" (Margetson, 1994, p. 7). Uncompromisingly aristocratic and antidemocratic, Platonic thought has had perhaps its greatest (and most pernicious) impact on Western education.

For Plato, learning occurred through contemplative thought, not through action and reflection. Dividing the world into ideal and material universes, Plato viewed knowledge as deriving from the ideal, spiritual universe of permanent and fixed ideas. He conceptualized the material world of objects and actions as merely "a shadowy, fleeting world" of imperfect imitations (Butts, 1955, p. 46).

Just as ideas were fixed and permanent for Plato, so too were society's classes and their characteristics. Knowledge could not be attained by the vast mass of people who did society's basic work; and the warrior class could attain only imperfect knowledge since its members' thoughts were tied to the material world. True knowledge was the province of the ruling class, those few men capable of going beyond the sensate and material world to the eternal world of ideas. Plato designed an educational system that would sort people into one of the three classes, with major attention and resources provided to those destined to become philosopher-kings. Fixed truths, rigid classes, and advanced education for the few are concepts that fit well with the antidemocratic, aristocratic form of society that Plato advocated to overcome the "evils" of Athenian "democracy."

Academic service learning can be conceptualized as an attempt to release the vice-like grip that the dead hand of Plato has had, and continues to have, on American schooling and education. Although anti-Platonic precursors of service learning can be found as early as Cicero in the first century B.C., Francis Bacon provides a more useful starting point for our discussion (Sullivan, 1996, pp. 17–18).

### **Francis Bacon and the Production and Use of Knowledge**

Bacon's work contributed powerfully to the seventeenth-century Scientific Revolution and the idea of progress it helped to inspire. He promoted the idea that replacing ancient scholastic science with a modern experimental science of inquiry and effective organization for collaborative work would greatly advance knowledge for "the relief of man's estate," that is, continual human betterment (as quoted in Benson, 1978, p. 429).

Dewey praised Bacon as "the great forerunner of the spirit of modern life," the "prophet of new tendencies," and the "real founder of modern thought" (1948 [1920], pp. 28–32). In Dewey's view, Bacon's far-reaching proposition that knowledge is power provided the pragmatic criterion needed to test, assess, and demonstrate the relative effectiveness of traditional (Platonic) and modern modes of inquiry.

For Bacon, progress is dependent upon both the production and use of knowledge. If production were isolated or separated from use, the results

would not be beneficial. For knowledge to function as power for good, effective organization must dynamically and systematically plan for the integrated production and use of knowledge. Undertaken for the wrong (amoral or immoral) reasons, the production of new knowledge, moreover, could have dreadful consequences. Knowledge, Bacon contended, should be pursued “for the benefit and the use of life,” not “for pleasure of the mind, or for contention, or for superiority to others, or for profit, or fame, or power, or any of those inferior things” (as quoted in Farrington, 1949, pp. 88–89).

Bacon’s challenge to Platonic thought included a rejection of the ancient Greek aristocratic false dualism between “superior” pure theory and “inferior” applied practice. As Benjamin Farrington has emphasized: “Bacon insisted again and again on the virtual identity of scientific truth and practical utility. What is most useful in practice is most correct in theory. . . . The improvement of man’s mind and the improvement of his lot are one and the same thing” (1949, p. 98).

Bacon’s promotion of progress as the standard to judge inquiry, his emphasis on both the production and humane use of knowledge, and his linkage of practice and theory all constituted “a sustained attack on traditional philosophy” (Box, 1989, pp. 2–3). That attack also included a participatory democratic conception of the organization and conduct of scientific inquiry, one radically at odds with Plato’s elitist, antidemocratic theory and plan. For Bacon, (almost) all human beings continuously have to try to solve problems affecting their well-being. If the mass of human beings were educated, therefore, to engage in their real-world problem-solving in the spirit of, and with the methods of, modern experimental scientific inquiry, *and if scientific inquiry were appropriately organized*, then the results of their daily problem-solving could contribute measurably to “new facts and new truths.” Or, as Ian Box emphasized in his *Social Thought of Francis Bacon*: “The project did not depend on the unique genius of a Plato or an Aristotle, but was open to every man’s industry. *Everyone could contribute to the progressive interpretation of nature* [emphasis added]” (1989, pp. 2–3; Benson and Harkavy, 1994, pp. 68–69).

Bacon strongly argued that the effective organization of inquiry was necessary if knowledge was to be produced and used for humane ends. In his Utopian fable, *The New Atlantis* (1627), Bacon sketched a comprehensive organizational system for the increasingly progressive, integrated production and use of knowledge. Bacon’s vision of the appropriate organization of research was so radical and comprehensive that, even today, it remains far from realization. It would be an eighteenth-century disciple of Bacon, Benjamin Franklin, who would propose creating a college devoted to public service. In so doing, Franklin identified an institutional vehicle capable of putting Bacon’s noble vision into practice.

### **Franklin’s Contribution: Service and the Reformation of Higher Education**

Contemptuous of scholasticism and devoted to Bacon’s modern experimental philosophy, Franklin acted on the proposition that effective organization was

mandatory if knowledge was to function as power and help achieve the “relief of man’s estate.” In 1743, Franklin proposed the establishment of two Bacon-inspired organizational innovations in Philadelphia. One eventually became the present-day American Philosophical Society for Promoting Useful Knowledge, the other, the University of Pennsylvania.

Franklin’s ideas focused on a course of study that would include English grammar and composition, public speaking, history, geography, mathematics and accounting, natural history, scientific experiments, and ethics. Most centrally, the curriculum would be infused with public service; it would be an education for citizenship and service. The college would be an institution of higher education to train an elite, teach them useful knowledge, and develop their capacity to learn and to produce useful knowledge. Above all, however, it would inculcate the Baconian ideal of acquiring and pursuing knowledge for the “benefit and use of life.”

Franklin’s ideas were never adopted at the University of Pennsylvania. To some extent, however, during the 1890s, Seth Low, president of Columbia University, put them into practice by consciously intertwining Columbia with New York City; and John Dewey at the University of Chicago developed a theory of instrumental intelligence that served as the philosophical basis of academic service learning.

### **Seth Low’s Columbia as a Cosmopolitan, Democratic, Civic University**

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Columbia, like other leading urban universities—for example, Johns Hopkins, the University of Pennsylvania, and the University of Chicago—seized the opportunity to advance knowledge, teaching, and learning by working to improve the quality of life in American cities experiencing the traumatic effects of industrialization, immigration, and large-scale urbanization (Benson and Harkavy, 1997a; Harkavy, 1996). Seth Low, Columbia’s president from 1890 through 1901, is notable for his enthusiastic embrace of New York City as the source of the university’s greatness. He not only brought “the College into closer touch with the community,” but he also significantly improved Columbia by successfully encouraging faculty and students to focus their intellectual work on helping New York solve its problems (Low as quoted in Kurland, 1971, p. 53).

A mediocre institution in the 1870s and 1880s, Columbia was widely viewed as a snobbish school for rich young men. In his inaugural address, Low echoed Bacon’s and Franklin’s proposition that the purpose of scholarship is service for the betterment of humanity, and actually went beyond by posing and answering the question, “Knowledge for what?” He called on students and professors to become engaged directly with the city and its communities and people. Engagement with, and study and action in New York City, according to Low, would produce liberally educated and moral students, as well as

“worldly,” “unpedantic” professors inspired and equipped to contribute profoundly to the advancement of knowledge (Cary, 1897, pp. 10, 40–41).

No other university president had so clearly articulated a morally inspired, instrumental, active approach to research, teaching, and learning. In effect, repudiating Plato’s notion of the groves of academe with its physical and intellectual separation of town and gown, Low linked town and gown, identifying a mutually beneficial, interactive relationship between Columbia and the city as crucial to intellectual and institutional advancement. Low even went so far as to invoke Bacon’s standard of progress as the test of inquiry and research. In Low’s case, the specific test was Columbia’s ability “to influence the life of New York” (Bender, 1987, p. 284). That influence would not result, moreover, from the authoritative, elitist, university-dominated approach advocated by many of the most “progressive” Progressive-era academics. To the contrary, Low’s approach was decidedly democratic in dealing with the city and its people. Learning would be, he emphasized, reciprocal and interactive: “Workingmen of America . . . [should know] that at Columbia College . . . the disposition exists to teach the truth . . . without fear or favor, and we *ask their aid to enable us to see the truth as it appears to them* [emphasis added]” (Bender, 1987, p. 283).

Low’s extraordinary contributions to Columbia and to the practice and theory of instrumental education have largely been forgotten. His vision of a cosmopolitan, democratic, civic university was significantly ahead of its time. Moreover, the brevity of his tenure, the forty-three year imperious reign of his successor (Nicholas Murray Butler), and the dominance of Plato’s aristocratic, scholastic, “liberal” educational theory in American colleges and universities also account for Low’s limited impact. In recent years, increasing critiques of the performance of internally directed, solipsistic ivory towers and the concomitant call for higher education to help solve the serious problems confronting American society have led to a nascent interest in Columbia during the Low years. These same factors have contributed to the “Dewey revival” affecting scholarship across many disciplines, simultaneously shaping educational practice through academic service learning and related pedagogies.

### **Dewey’s Theory of Instrumental Intelligence and Democratic Instrumental Education**

Though he never wrote directly about service learning, Dewey’s contributions to academic service learning are so varied and rich that it is a subject worthy of many books. Summarized succinctly, Dewey developed a theory of instrumental intelligence and democratic instrumental education that provides the underpinnings for the growing democratic “crusade” against Plato’s aristocratic, idealist, contemplative philosophy. Dewey explicitly conceptualized his work as a critique of the philosophy and methods of the “Old Education,” when “learning was a class matter,” and “a high priesthood of learning . . . guarded the truth and . . . doled it out to the masses under severe restrictions” (1990 [1900], pp. 24–26). Existing American schools, as Dewey viewed them, were

largely derived from and dominated by those antiquated, highly dysfunctional, aristocratic, monastic models. In 1899 he wrote: “The ideals of this period are still largely in control, even where the outward methods and studies have changed . . . our present education . . . is . . . dominated almost entirely by the medieval conception of learning” (1990 [1900], pp. 24–26).

Dewey’s critique of the “almost entirely . . . medieval” American public school system had two interrelated dimensions: the system was radically dysfunctional for industrially advanced American society; it was radically antithetical to American democratic ideals. For Dewey, if there were no democratic education and schooling system, there could be no genuinely democratic society. An aristocratic, idealist, scholastic Greek “liberal” theory of education was appropriate for and supportive of an aristocratic social order—but highly inappropriate for a democratic social order. Dewey further argued that traditional schooling created “passivity of attitude,” with devastating effects on a child’s ability to learn, to develop his or her own talents, and to become an active, participatory citizen (1990 [1900], pp. 31–34).

Dewey’s theory of democratic or “New Education” emphasized that students should be able to help shape their own learning, help form their curriculum, and reflect on its value. Democracy and learning, for Dewey, would both be advanced if human beings were engaged in active real-world problem-solving that entailed ongoing “intelligent judgment and action” (as quoted in Westbrook, 1991, p. xv). In 1938, Dewey emphatically asserted that “there is . . . no point in the philosophy of progressive education which is sounder than the emphasis upon the importance of the participation of the learner in the formation of the purpose which directs his activities in the learning process” (Nicholls and Hazzard, 1995, p. 115).

At the heart of Dewey’s approach is a theory of instrumental intelligence that rejects Platonic dualisms that counterpose practice and theory, material and ideal, and so on. To quote Donald Schön: “In the domain of practice, we see what John Dewey called *inquiry*: thought intertwined with action—which proceeds from doubt to the resolution of doubt, to the generation of new doubt. For Dewey, doubt lies not in the mind but in the situation. Inquiry begins with situations that are problematic—that are confusing, uncertain, or conflicted, and block the free flow of action” (1995, p. 31). Put another way, genuine learning, according to Dewey, only occurs when human beings focus their attention, energies, and abilities on solving genuine dilemmas and perplexities—and when they reflect on their experience and, therefore, increase their capacity for future intelligent thought and action. Intelligence does not develop simply as a result of action and experience, it develops as a result of *reflective* action and experience (Benson and Harkavy, 1997b).

If we use the Baconian test of progress both in society and scholarship, we find that Dewey’s work has had a mixed result. Dewey’s Laboratory School at the University of Chicago, the primary means for putting his ideas into practice, certainly did not revolutionize the American public school system. It did, however, serve as the most important vehicle for disseminating the ideas of the

University of Chicago's philosophy department. The work of the department produced an extraordinary achievement—the development of Chicago Pragmatism. Hailed by William James as so “wonderful . . . [that] it deserves the title of a new system of philosophy,” the Chicago School emerged from the action-oriented engagement of Dewey and his colleagues in the real-world problems of the city in which they lived and worked (Rucker, 1969, pp. 3–4). Indeed, from the University of Chicago's founding in 1892 through and beyond Dewey's departure to Columbia in 1904, the city's reform movement was closely tied to the university. Dewey, James H. Tufts, and George Herbert Mead, for example, all played leading roles in the efforts to improve education and politics in the city (Shils, 1988). According to a leading authority on the Chicago Pragmatists, moreover, these “practical endeavors were encouraged as fitting for a university providing a broad field of testing ideas and theories” (Rucker, 1969, p. 9).

There are obviously striking parallels between Low's Columbia and Dewey's Chicago. The city, with its problems and rich opportunities, served in both cases as the focal point and wellspring of action, learning, and scholarship. In both cases, a real-world, action-oriented academic strategy produced significant institutional and intellectual advances.

In 1927, many years after he had left Chicago, Dewey unequivocally identified the existence of “neighborly community” as indispensable for a well-functioning democratic society: “There is no substitute for the vitality and depth of close and direct intercourse and attachment. . . . Democracy begins at home, and its home is the neighborly community.” In that same book, *The Public and Its Problems*, he also noted that creating a genuinely democratic community is “in the first instance an intellectual problem” (pp. 213, 147).

Dewey in effect identified the central societal problem (and therefore central intellectual problem) of human societies in the twentieth century to be the actual construction of what we have termed “cosmopolitan neighborly communities.” The discussion of community in *The Public and Its Problems*, along with the extraordinary success achieved by “progressive academics” at Chicago and Columbia (and other urban universities) at the turn of the twentieth century, provide a powerful case for a community problem-solving focus for college and university research, teaching, and service. Thus, strategic, academically based community scholarship and service—a particularly significant variant of academically based service learning—can also be traced to Dewey's seminal activities and writings. Strategic, academically based community scholarship and service involves the integration of research, teaching, and service, and aims to bring about structural community improvement (for example, effective public schools, neighborhood economic development, strong community organizations) rather than simply to alleviate individual misery (for example, feeding the hungry, sheltering the homeless, tutoring the “slow learner”). It has as its primary goal contributing to the well-being of people in the community, both in the here and now and in the future (Harkavy, 1996; Lawson, 1997).

Notwithstanding Dewey's far-reaching contribution to current practice and theory, he never systematically explored how to get from a Plato-inspired, aristocratic, idealist schooling system to a system of democratic instrumental education. Dewey's writings, however, do contain a wide variety of fruitful general ideas, insights, and propositions that, when appropriately applied in practice, can be used to put the "New Education" into practice. Dewey's work, for example, adumbrates the method of participatory action research, which has played an increasingly significant role in academic service learning. It was the eminent social psychologist, Kurt Lewin, however, who labeled and operationalized the approach.

### **Kurt Lewin and Action Research**

A true heir of Bacon, Lewin held that "research that produces nothing but books will not suffice" (as quoted in Turner, 1986, p. 201). His most well-known aphorism, "there is nothing so practical as a good theory," is a clear rejection of Platonic dualism and a call for connecting scholarship and the real world (Lewin, 1964, p. 169; Marrow, 1969). Lewin worked toward the development of "actionable theory"; that is, theory constructed, applied, tested, and revised in "particular situations of practice" (Schön, 1995, p. 31).

Lewin's commitment to action research in service to a better society is evident in the connection he made between the Research Center for Group Dynamics at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, which he created and directed, and the American Jewish Congress's Commission on Community Interrelations (CCI). The CCI conducted action research on community affairs, focusing on minority problems, ethnocultural conflict, and discriminatory attitudes and behavior. Lewin's work with the Commission strongly resonates with Dewey's theory of instrumental intelligence while providing a research strategy that embeds and integrates both action and reflection (Harkavy and Puckett, 1997).

In effect, Lewin developed a method to help extend and realize Dewey's philosophy and theories. David Kolb's work on experiential education (1984) and Donald Schön's study of the professions and the "reflective practitioner" (1983) both discuss the similarities between the work of Dewey and Lewin. Indeed, Kolb and Schön are two important contributors to the practice of academic service learning. Their writings, as well as those of Ernest Boyer (1994), have helped in different ways to bring the ideas of Bacon, Franklin, Low, Dewey, and Lewin into current discussion and use.

### **Conclusion**

We conclude with Dewey's brilliant observation that "the true starting point of history is always some present situation with its problems" (1916, p. 251). The present situation informing this essay is the increasing development of academic service learning in colleges and universities haunted by the "living ghost" of

Plato—a living ghost that functions as an incubus on the body of the entire American system of schooling. The core problem embedded in that situation is: How can academic service learning, particularly academically based community scholarship and service, help overthrow the aristocratic Platonic theory of “liberal education” and institute a democratic Deweyan theory of “instrumental education?” The history sketched above aims to help service learners and practitioners/theorists better use and understand the work of their predecessors so that they (we) might speed the radical, long overdue, “de-Platonization” of American higher education in particular and American schooling in general.

“Overthrowing Plato and instituting Dewey” should constitute the categorical imperative—the revolutionary slogan—of the service learning movement in the twenty-first century.

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