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One Perspective on Harriet Cuffaro: A Story of Engagement and Experience

by Celia Genishi

In order to find a beginning point for this essay, I took Harriet's book, *Experimenting with the World: John Dewey and the Early Childhood Classroom*, off my shelf. I thought I would reread sections of it to help structure what I would write. What naïveté—Harriet's written thoughts about teaching and John Dewey are not ordered in neat linear sections. Instead, they are of a piece, continuous, interwoven, and challenging, like the work of teaching and of understanding the work of John Dewey. Here I present my learning process in creating this essay, by highlighting some of Harriet's many insights, which she offers within the context of an unfolding story. Although I have not had the privilege of working alongside Harriet as a close colleague, I take the liberty of weaving my story together with hers, interwoven with aspects of John Dewey's philosophy.

First, a bit of background: The story of my relationship with Harriet began in the 1980s. If I remember correctly, it was our late and dear friend Professor Leslie R. Williams who brought us and many others together on the ambitious project of creating an encyclopedia of early childhood education. This was an enterprise that I cherish to this day because I met so many colleagues, now friends, in the profession, as the encyclopedia developed and was eventually published (Williams & Fromberg, 1992). This personal and professional confluence strikes me as a fine example of an educative experience, in Dewey's terms, that continued over time as people on occasion changed geographic locations and/or professional positions. The profession of early childhood education and the personal, relational threads that were spun during the encyclopedia project provided for me a deep and warm continuity of friendships and ideas. Harriet's geographic location did not change, but I think she would agree that her ideas evolved, and some foundational ideas are intricately woven into *Experimenting with the World: John Dewey and the Early Childhood Classroom*.

In my own experimenting with the world of academe, I often assigned Dewey's *Experience and Education* (1938/1963) or *EE* (as Harriet refers to it) to classes in early childhood education. I did not aspire to have students fully grasp Dewey's ideas, but I hoped that they would have an incipient understanding of education as something other than sequenced objectives or discrete lessons, units, or school years. I also wanted my students to read Dewey in his own words, so I opted for the shortest yet most representative selection—or so I thought until I reread Harriet's book. In it, we are introduced to many works that intersect with and elaborate upon the ideas in *EE*, and I no longer know which of them is “most representative” of Dewey.

Teaching as the Framework

The story of the book I have chosen as my central focus is aptly embedded in its title. Its essence is “experimenting with the world,” and it embraces a philosopher and a place close to the heart of teachers, the early childhood classroom. Life in classrooms is not easy, nor is the telling of stories that unfold there and are interwoven with a philosophy that grounds one teacher’s practice. Throughout the book, Harriet’s wording is so precise and apt that it is tempting to present her thoughts by stringing together numerous quotations, but that linear string would not show how the ideas in the book invite engagement—even intellectual struggle—with multiple facets of her story. Having said that, I nonetheless conclude that some of her statements are essential cornerstones—for example, the opening sentence (p. 1):

A basic assumption of this book is my belief that it is essential in teaching that practice be grounded in a consciously held, critically examined philosophical framework created by the teacher.

This single sentence tells me that any new understanding I gain of the philosophy of John Dewey will be framed within—or, perhaps more fittingly, woven into—the activities of teaching, shared by a teacher, Harriet, who has a deep familiarity with and understanding of teaching and Deweyan philosophy. It is she, the teacher, who has created a “critically examined philosophical framework.”

One of Harriet’s insights is that it is possible to teach without having a *formally* articulated philosophy of teaching. She herself illustrates this possibility, since she encountered EE during her last year of teaching young children. This means that a teacher may plan a curriculum *as if s/he* were a follower of Dewey without first examining his philosophical ideas. In other words, the basic principles of a theory may be applied without knowledge of a specific theorist. Thus we can appreciate Harriet’s sense of enlightenment after reading *EE* when she states, “In an astonishing and curious way, the book unified all my years of classroom teaching” (p. 7). I can imagine many teacher colleagues having similar aha moments when they discover a theorist who has provided the “why” underlying their past practices. They might say that the theorist gives them the language to explain what they do; for example, words like experience and continuity could be understood and used in new ways by teachers engaging with Dewey’s theory.

In the years after Harriet left the early childhood classroom, she dug deeply into Dewey’s ideas as she enlarged her scope and viewed other teachers’ classrooms through a Deweyan lens. In 1982 she completed her dissertation, entitled *Unfolding and Connecting Dewey’s Thought from a Teacher’s Perspective*. Nowhere in *Experimenting with the World*, however, does she suggest that teacher colleagues need to model themselves on her actions. Creating a “critically examined philosophical framework” is something individual teachers accomplish on their own, selecting a theorist (or theorists) that suits them. Harriet is not advocating that teachers study the work of a specific theorist, although she might say that discovering Dewey was essential in her case; she is

describing and explaining her own processes and inviting readers to raise their own questions as they create their own frameworks of teaching.

Teaching as Unfolding Experience

There are no facile definitions or understandings within a Deweyan framework. Experience may be “the transaction between the individual and the environment” (p. 58), but each word in the definition represents underlying ideas and connections that make *defining experience* an ever-evolving process. The process, like the definition, is never static, but instead aims toward a harmony or balance that is dynamic in multiple dimensions. In Dewey’s words, “[experience] recognizes in its primary integrity no division between act and material, subject and object, but contains them both in an unanalyzed reality” (Dewey, EN p. 10, as cited in Cuffaro, p. 55).

My own understanding of experience started, as I noted earlier, when I read *EE* to prepare for a class in early childhood education several decades ago. I took from that reading, and from subsequent discussions of *EE* with students and colleagues, the dynamism of experiences and the impossibility of separating past from present experiences, as each one builds on the others. I found Harriet’s discussion (pp. 55–61) immeasurably illuminating because I gained a clearer understanding from it of what makes an educative experience dynamic.

I came to understand that in addition to the knowledge being imparted or discovered, there are aspects of an educative experience, such as feeling and quality, that are not always verbalized; rather, they are sensed. And they are sensed in frequent, everyday encounters, not in rarefied epiphanies separate from the continuity of daily existence. In the context of schooling, one can imagine numerous—perhaps countless—instances in which children and teachers contribute to each others’ experiences. In the next section a rich example from dramatic play demonstrates such contributions.

Dramatic Play Epitomizing Experience

No one has ever watched a child intent in his play without being made aware of the complete merging of playfulness and seriousness. (Dewey, AE 279, as cited in Cuffaro, p. 85)

In a focal chapter of her book, Harriet offers an elaborate anecdote entitled “The Drama of Island Life” (pp. 85–97), which so profoundly illustrates experiences in early childhood classrooms. Not surprisingly, the context is dramatic play, and the time frame is five days, a week in school. My purpose here is not to analyze or interpret the entire anecdote, as readers will want to do that on their own. Instead, I include excerpts from it and from Harriet’s insights that gave me the feeling and quality of playfully serious experiences as well as knowledge about how experiences unfold or develop in time and space.

On the first day of the week, the teacher suggests that children take a new direction in their block play (p. 86):

Teacher: I've been thinking—what would it be like if all the floor in the block area became a river?

Yvonne: So what do we do, swim all the time?

Richard: You could fish, too.

Yvonne: I don't want to fish. I want to make a school.

Richard: You could do that.

Yvonne: (incredulous) In the river?

Todd: Wait, wait!! I have an idea! An ocean, an ocean. All the floor an ocean.

Children pick up on Todd's enthusiasm, and the teacher provides a literal grounding by asking, "What about islands?" Todd concurs, and the children are clearly excited; one exclaims, "Islands, hurrah!" Because the task is complicated, teacher and children move to the block area to solve the multiple problems involved.

Note what follows during the rest of the work period: Chalk lines are drawn as boundaries, but these sometimes shift as children negotiate the space they need for their own islands, sometimes working up close to them and at other times taking a look at them from a distance. Eventually buildings are constructed: a school, a fish store, an airport, a hospital, homes. Some children work alone, others, in pairs; and a few begin working on details for their structures. For example (p. 87),

Steven made colorful, monster-like fish for his store with paper and crayons which he then cut out. Amy made blankets from material and drew and cut out "medicines to make people better" for her hospital.

Embedded in these rich interactions among teacher and children are the elements of everyday experience in the classroom: the shared feeling of excitement, the identification of problems, the experimentation leading to block constructions that take on different meanings to different children or different meanings to the same children over time. The island drama continues for five days, and the children's interests change during that period. On the third day, Steven, for instance, becomes discouraged when his fish store fails to attract customers and loses its meaning as a desired object. He later decides to build a weather station for which he sees a greater need.

On the same day, children decide to have a boat that carries people from island to island so that they do not have to swim. The following day there is a discussion about how people will know when the ferry is coming, and Todd suggests, “Let’s have a schedule like real ferries have.” Thus the narrative of the island drama grows and builds upon experiences inside the classroom and out until the fifth and last day, which, according to classroom custom, is the day that blocks are put away. Children at first engage in the usual activities of fishing, swimming, going to school, and so on. Soon, however, the storm that Steven predicted the day before has become “the biggest hurricane I ever saw” (p. 90).

What a clear and persuasive example of how experiences are complex wholes that build upon each other and cannot be separated from feelings and experimentation. Steven and Todd soon negotiate with the teacher about creating lightning by flicking the lights on and off. Swimming doctors save people who fall into the ocean. Children have reunions with each other following the capsizing of the ferry. Yvonne rolls her eyes and exclaims, “BOY, we *really* have to clean up today!” (p. 90). Indeed, populated islands made of blocks must create quite a mess.

Individual children have quickly taken up threads of the ongoing drama, illustrating the Deweyan construct of habit, defined in part as attitudes and dispositions that may lead to assertive and immediate action (p. 19). When making suggestions about the direction of play, Steven is predisposed to being inventive on a broad stage, seeding the idea of the hurricane that creates the mess, whereas Yvonne shows a disposition to being grounded and practical, declaring a real need for cleanup. Both are ready to transform their thoughts into communal action.

Yvonne and Steven, their friends, and their teacher illustrate that experiences in the classroom context do not belong to what Dewey calls social individuals; rather they belong to members of a community. The following week, the teacher helps keep memories of the communal experiences alive by initiating conversations that include reflections on the class’s island drama. Drama seems the perfect word, since children not only have immediate views to express about their vivid experiences; in the months that follow, they also remember together key dramatic incidents (for example, the wind turning the ferry over). They remember too that people cannot typically swim from island to island; hence, in a future shared drama, a bridge (rather than a ferry) may be the experimental solution to a new but related problem (p. 91). New problems are solved in light of past experimentation and experiences, anchored in feelings and memorable interactions among social individuals. The playful drama will have playful and serious reverberations well into the future.

Taking from Harriet Cuffaro’s Wisdom Today

The insights and deep knowledge so intricately woven into *Experimenting with the World: John Dewey and the Early Childhood Classroom* offer a platform from which to consider experiences of children and teachers in present times. Some researchers have conceptualized teaching as an observable and standardized set of behaviors (Pianta & Hamre, 2009), and teachers have been

cast in a range of roles, for example, technician, assessor, or curriculum maker. Harriet—and Dewey—would cast teachers as curriculum makers who “make” curriculum only with reference to the children they teach, the circumstances or situations in which the children live, and the unique experiences that are created communally.

Early in her book, Harriet lauds the shift from seeing the teacher as one who implements the ideas of others to recognizing teachers as imaginative thinkers (p. 9):

For too long teachers have been described as faceless constants, not unlike furniture found in the classroom, mechanically enacting and implementing the ideas and plans of others. What was too often neglected or understood in these portraits were the conditions and systems that implicitly and explicitly silenced teachers and thwarted the emergence of imaginative teaching.

In fact there have been times in the last few decades when teachers were portrayed as imaginative, professional, and relatively autonomous. The era of the “open classroom” of the 1960s and ’70s (Silberman, 1973) is an example, as is the period in the 1990s when the teacher as researcher was acknowledged and foregrounded (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1992).

At the same time, when bureaucratic systems have required teachers to implement narrow instructional goals and have thereby “implicitly and explicitly silenced teachers” (p. 9), teachers have continued to be cast and recast as “faceless constants.” Early childhood teacher educators know from recent visits to classrooms and centers for children under age eight that the world that nurtured the “drama of island life” has simply become hard to find. Problem-setting and -solving are not typically shared by teachers and children, and even in some prekindergartens, extended play with blocks is not present.

The sense of time that teachers experience in 2014 is often shaped by a commercially published curriculum adopted by the school or school district. Classroom experience is therefore often segmented according to a fixed daily schedule, with little time and space for child choice. Children do not experience the creation of a communal story over a period of days and then remembered, and perhaps recreated, over a period of months. Thus teachers and children today seldom experience education as a continuous whole, what Dewey calls an “affair of histories” (p. 58), which may develop as unique dramas over stretches of time.

In 2014 the prevalence of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) in public schools in the United States has led some practitioners (often under duress) to define education as teaching particular skills in a restrictive time frame to prepare students for college. These skills in themselves—for instance, reading for meaning, writing about memorable experiences, discussing, and arguing—may be valuable. Still, teachers who create curriculum with children and their social contexts

in mind feel the need to recast the purposes of CCSS to make space and time for imaginative teaching.

Concluding Thoughts

What Harriet’s work, and particularly her book, offers educators is a way—a kind of metaphorical path—to recast contemporary purposes of education. Her historical and philosophical anchors may be decades old, but her ideas about teachers and teaching, seen through a Deweyan lens, are still current. Regardless of era or year, grounding one’s practices in a philosophy that is personally resonant is vital (p. 99):

Having Dewey enter my teaching was similar to listening to and trying to have a conversation with a reason-maker of teaching, to hear another story about teaching, and while listening, to compare, contrast, question, and try out reasons for my teaching.

Like children engaged in classroom dramas, teachers continually “try out reasons” for the experiences that build the stories of their lives. In Harriet’s teaching life, she eventually raised questions, tried out reasons, and rethought the questions in dialogue with Dewey. Other teachers, in contrast, might create their own theories after years of practice, with or without an ongoing dialogue with a particular theorist.

In the course of reading her book, I too felt invited to engage in conversations about my own teaching life so that I could weave part of my story into Harriet’s. As I shared earlier, a small scene in that story consisted of my learning and teaching Dewey’s *EE*. I remembered other scenes from my days as a preschool teacher, offering four-year-olds experiences like cutting fruit, creating art with found objects, or walking together to the supermarket to orient ourselves to the community. I wondered how many of those experiences had any influence over time, how many were educative. My career as an early childhood teacher was short in comparison with Harriet’s, so our collective story seems better woven together through our writing as teacher educators. Woven into much of my writing is the language of children, each child distinctive from the other, creating dramas, trying out reasons in play and other settings, demonstrating abilities to pose and solve problems (Genishi & Dyson, 2009). The stories Harriet and I individually told about children were placed in classroom contexts so that thoughtful teachers were always close at hand; though perhaps not visible at every moment, they set the stage and knowledgeably decided on next curricular steps. Children and teachers we have worked with and known in diverse early childhood settings have placed Harriet and me in similar but separate spaces over an extended period of time, making possible our collective story. Collective and individual stories are indeed affairs of history (p. 58). They develop over time, as Harriet has beautifully illustrated. The feeling of time passing as children and teachers build experiences together is evident throughout the pages of her book. The broad and human-oriented definition of *development* here is not highly specialized, professionalized,

or restricted to the discipline of psychology; nor is it predetermined or constrained by stages or fixed landmarks, now called benchmarks. Rather, this process of development begins with an invitation to feel, sense, question, think, experiment, reflect, and more. It is open to incorporation of individual and social histories/stories that have been experienced, interpreted, and remembered in multiple ways. Development in this sense is educative and truly open ended.

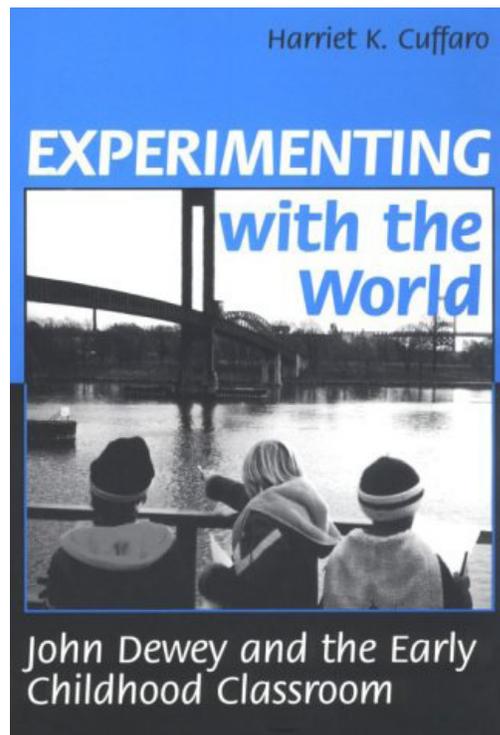
Teachers are of course essential to development and to creating educative experiences. If teachers put themselves on a metaphorical path to recast contemporary purposes of education, they may at the same time reflect on Harriet's metaphor of the teacher as a bridge, a metaphor that is as nuanced as it is visible and concrete. A strong bridge, the result of careful problem-solving and construction, makes it possible for children and teachers to go from one place to another securely. Still, it seems important not to take the metaphor too literally. Teachers may provide a bridge, but Harriet's view of curriculum within a Deweyan framework suggests a uniquely complicated bridge that children engage in building communally with their teachers. Like educative experiences, an educative bridge is continuous and dynamic. Teachers guide its evolution over time, balancing the provision of support and knowledge with the incorporation of children's ideas and preferences.

Finally, the photograph on the cover of the first paperback edition of *Experimenting with the World: John Dewey and the Early Childhood Classroom* provides an apt and reassuring image, I think, to close with (at right). In the foreground, there is a small footbridge close to a group of investigative children. In the background are two other bridges, different in size and structure, familiar elements of the New York City skyline.

Each child has distinctive experiences, stories, and destinations, always interwoven with those of teachers. The work of Harriet Cuffaro ensures the possibility that these stories will be rich with purpose, imaginative thought, and experimentation over a long period of time.

Endnote

Page numbers within the text, for example "(p. 9)," refer to pages in Harriet Cuffaro, 1995, *Experimenting with the World: John Dewey and the Early Childhood Classroom*. References to Dewey's works follow APA style, with the addition of the abbreviations that Harriet used, e.g., EE for Experience and Education.



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