FRANK MARGONIS

17. ELIOT WIGGINTON'S RELATIONAL PRAGMATISM

The project pedagogy developed by Eliot Wigginton and his students offers an exciting example of John Dewey's philosophy in motion. Students are given significant responsibility to carry out the production of a magazine, and in the process, they must routinely pose and solve the problems they encounter along the way. However, it's also clear that Wigginton's pedagogy surpassed Dewey's philosophy in ways that I find most profound. For the portrait Wigginton offers us of the creation of the *Foxfire* pedagogy involves more than the development of a new curriculum: the students and Wigginton had to forge new ways of interacting with one another, displacing sometimes dysfunctional relationships with educationally rich and meaningful exchanges. And it's this story of the importance of relationships as a vehicle for learning and knowing that one cannot find in Dewey's works.

Wigginton's willingness to set out educational goals for his English class and pursue them—the bold experimental spirit which Dewey admires—led to the creation of an educational program that Wigginton only later described and theorized. Following his pedagogical intuition, and specifically, his sense that the students and he should work together to create the pedagogy for their English class, Wigginton steered students through the process of making critical decisions and the process of negotiating with one another in pleasing and educative ways. This essay will focus upon two themes in Wigginton's pedagogical work: he utilizes an open-ended problem-solving orientation, like that recommended by Dewey, both as a way of creating a new pedagogy and as a way of teaching; and he also attends to the quality of the relationships he has with students and the students have with one another, viewing them as sites of learning and knowledge creation, and as sources of support and sustenance.

Wigginton's attentiveness to relationships can help teachers develop an awareness of the some fruitful relational practices, and it can help us locate key relational strategies that might be adapted to other educational events. I would like to draw attention to several relational practices that Wigginton's pedagogy embodies: he seeks to open pathways of communication with students, and he successfully deepens those relationships by eschewing the teacherly tendency to talk down to students, and instead relates to them as responsible and able people. Throughout the narrative Wigginton provides, he "tends" his relationships with students, seeking to keep them them trusting, meaningful, and rich. The organizational structure Wigginton

and the students created to run the English class and publish the magazine further structured their educational interactions and gives them the continuity needed for a group of students to surpass an individualistic orientation and lose themselves in the intersubjective play of a collective enterprise.

ACTIVE STUDENTS SOLVING PROBLEMS

When Wigginton turned to John Dewey's philosophy, he found a good deal of confirmation for the directions his pedagogy had already assumed, and appropriately so: the researching, writing, and publishing of the magazine, *Foxfire*, stands as a remarkable example of the sort of project pedagogies that Dewey's philosophy inspired. The overlap between Dewey's and Wigginton's perspectives is significant: both men think broadly about the processes of education; in Wigginton's words, he seeks pedagogies which foster "students who have an insatiable curiosity about life and the way the world works, and who will go on learning independently and eagerly long after they have left our classrooms behind, just as they did before they entered them" (Wigginton, 1985, p. 202). This broad way of thinking about education places a premium on active student engagement. Pedagogies which do not successfully engage youth can actually discourage youth from developing a lifetime commitment to learning, in contrast with pedagogies that enlist their full concentration—calling upon them to make big judgments about what they want to achieve and what they need to do to carry out their ambitions. Both men also believe that pursuit of one's ambitions is best carried out by employing the scientific method, which Dewey described as a process in which knowers or students define the problems that confront them, seek hypotheses that might allow them to solve their problems, experiment by implementing the most promising hypotheses, and then observe the results to determine if the hypothesis indeed was confirmed (Dewey, 1980, p. 157).

Dewey's version of the scientific method is both an epistemology and a theory of learning, and in both the student and the knower are deemed to be highly active. Just as Dewey's epistemology critiqued what he called the "spectator conception of truth," his theory of learning critiqued any teaching method which placed students in a passive position (Dewey, 1988, p. 144). Dewey thought philosophical portraits of knowers as passive recipients of incoming stimuli, such as that provided by John Locke, had misled educators into putting students in desks and asking them to absorb knowledge handed to them by the teacher and the textbook:

The fallacy consists in supposing that we can begin with ready-made subject matter of arithmetic or geography, or whatever, irrespective of some direct personal experience of a situation….But the first stage of contact with any new material, at whatever age of maturity, must inevitably be of the trial and error sort. An individual must actually try, in play or work, to do something

with material in carrying out his own impulsive activity, and then note the interaction of his energy and that of the material employed. (Dewey, 1980, p. 160)

Dewey portrayed learning as one step in the active process of living, because he followed the Darwin-inspired assumption that humans are one more organism struggling to control their environment in the struggle to survive (Dewey, 1910). Motivation to learn occurs when individuals are unable to have their needs met or when their environment presents them with puzzling or threatening information, and educators should rely upon the ways in which humans are motivated by the resulting disequilibrium in their situations; problems which arise out of students' situations call forth the students' full concentration and a concerted effort to set things right. Both learning and knowledge, for Dewey, come about in the active process whereby individuals and groups of individuals seek to formulate the problems they face and seek to solve those problems. What Dewey refers to as the process of "trial and error" might be viewed as an early stage of the scientific method, where individuals grope—sometimes clumsily—to get an initial understanding of their situation and the possible responses they might enact en route to restoring their equilibrium. Dewey thinks the process of trial and error enlists all the individual's abilities: perceptual and physical abilities are joined with reflective efforts to pose hypotheses and test them.

Subject-matter pedagogies, which call upon students to assimilate already-organized information, often ignore the need to enlist what educators sometimes refer to as "the whole child," and—in the process—expect youth to assertively assimilate already-organized knowledge without having experienced the disruption of their situations that would lead them to pay attention. As a consequence, Dewey often complains that subject matter pedagogies teach youth to have a "divided attention":

As a consequence of the absence of the materials and occupations which generate real problems, the pupil's problems are not his; or, rather, they are his only as a pupil, not as a human being….A pupil has a problem, but it is the problem of meeting the peculiar requirements set by the teacher. His problem becomes that of finding out what the teacher wants….Relationship to subject matter is no longer direct. (Dewey, 1980, pp. 162–163)

Consequently, Dewey often tells educators to make sure that the problem a student focuses upon is indeed *the student's* problem. Dewey asks, "Is the experience a personal thing of such a nature as inherently to stimulate and direct observation of the connections involved, and to lead to inference and its testing? Or, is it imposed from without, and is the pupil's problem simply to meet the external requirement?" (Dewey 1980, p. 162).

Wigginton likewise complains of teachers who seek to motivate students by offering extrinsic motivations, such as, the threat of a low grade, and consequently,

he relies upon something like Dewey's conception of the scientific method for exactly the same reasons Dewey advises: he wants students to be actively involved in framing and solving their own problems, problems that matter to them (Wigginton, 1985, p. 202). Moreover, Wigginton and the students developed group processes of solving problems where the problems of the group were shared by individuals. Wigginton appears especially pleased with the pedagogy of *Foxfire* at the point that individual problems and individual motivation come to be fused in the cooperative efforts of students to accomplish their shared objectives (Wigginton, 1985, pp. 105, 115).

EXPERIMENTING WITH SOCIAL RELATIONSHIPS, CREATING NEW PEDAGOGICAL GAMES

Some of the most profound aspects of Wigginton's pedagogy can only partially be theorized using Dewey's conception of an active student, for Wigginton's practice involved a great deal of attentiveness to the quality of the relationships students had with one another and with Wigginton.[1] He provides rich descriptions of his pedagogical relationships, in an effort to come to grips with the strengths and weaknesses of the relationships: do they allow substantive exchange of ideas? Do they facilitate learning? Do they allow for productive critique and correction? In the narrative Wigginton relates, Dewey's problem-posing orientation guides both the effort to create the magazine *Foxfire* and the relational aspects of jointly running the English class. In the discussions surrounding Dewey's pragmatic conception of truth, commentators generally expect problems to be framed somewhat narrowly, with a focus upon explaining a natural or social phenomenon, such as, why does water boil, or why does segregation develop in cities? Wigginton extends the pragmatic method beyond the tasks of seeking knowledge: it also becomes a way of seeking pedagogical answers and mediating social relationships. As a consequence, the pedagogy Wigginton describes in *Sometimes a Shining Moment* has the unique trait of exemplifying a group process which makes the quality of social interactions themselves an ongoing part of the investigation.

Sometimes a Shining Moment begins with a careful documentation of the breakdown of productive educational relationships in Wigginton's classrooms. Utilizing a rich style of description and an attunement to the mood of the classroom, Wigginton traces the social, economic, and political dynamics that led some class sessions to "spin crazily out of control" (Wigginton, 1985, p. 31). In Wigginton's words, "the friendlier I was in class…, believing that would generate cooperation, the more liberties the students took and the harder it became to accomplish anything" (Wigginton, 1985, p. 31). Even though Wigginton is sometimes offended by how students act, he does not hold them personally responsible, and he does not locate the problem in their individual character, but instead, he continually focuses upon how the larger context—including the students' relationships with him—leads to

the frustrating behavior. Notice in the following passage how he explains both the students' actions and his own as part of a larger social dynamic. He says that when his classrooms spun out of control,

> I'd crack down, kicking students out of class for several days at a time, or using my grade book and my power to fail them as a retaliatory weapon ("one more word out of you and I'll give you a zero for the day"), and the mood would turn sullen and resentful and no sharing and learning would take place. They would be captives, praying for the bell to ring….It was impossible. I began to regard them collectively as the enemy—and I became the prisoner—not they. (Wigginton, 1985, p. 31)

In this passage, the students' actions and Wigginton's actions appear to be part of a dance, where the moves of each member are in response to the other party. Wigginton renders this unflattering self description, with a degree of objectivity, because he is focused on understanding the relationships with students and their limitations. He says that the "mood" turned "sullen and resentful," so no "sharing and learning" took place. Wigginton describes the patterns of exchange he and the students are caught up in as if he must yield to the power of these relationships, either adapting to what they give him, or seeking to redefine the relationship due to the limitations of the ones of which he is apart.

The friendly relationships he and the students had developed worked to *open* the pathways of communication between the students and himself, and this is an important achievement, because many student-teacher exchanges in high school remain skeletal and superficial, that is, students often respond to teachers self-defensively, sharing as little information as possible. Such superficial exchanges are often the result of hierarchies teachers establish in classrooms. Because Wigginton sought to get along with the students from the very beginning, he learned a good deal about the youth with which he was working; for example, he learned that some of the students really did not care about English class: "Lots of them will never leave this area of the country except perhaps to go to war—they will never read or write—they will help with a gas station and love it—that's all they need" (Wigginton, 1985, p. 26). Such information was surely daunting to a teacher hoping to convince youth of the importance of appreciating poetry, moreover, the friendly patterns of exchange that led youth to share such sensitive information with Wigginton gave him no authority to require that students read poetry, or do the many difficult things that classroom events require; this was neither Wigginton's decision nor the students' decisions, but the rules they inherited from their society for friendly interactions. Because Wigginton had no authority to require that students do things they found onerous, they had to seek out new relationships that would keep the pathways of communication open while developing new ways for Wigginton or students to exercise the authority required to get students to work.

This humble view of relationships—which acknowledges their power over us and the ways they make some events possible and others impossible—led Wigginton to turn to his students in exasperation and ask for help in retrieving their faltering class. When Wigginton posed the question to his class—which was in effect, "how do we make this English class work for the rest of the year?"—they all knew the relationships they were enacting could not be sustained in a way that would lead to learning, and they had to search for new relationships, new rules of exchange (Wigginton, 1985, p. 32). In contrast to Deweyan descriptions of the scientific method, the problem Wigginton posed for the students was remarkably broad: it encompassed a question about how they could meet the obligations of an English class, "teaching students to write grammatically correct, forceful prose, and poetry" (Wigginton, 1985, p. 48); it included the sense they may need to dream up novel methods, since schooling often did not work for the students; it included the desires and the social proclivities of the people in the room. In effect, Wigginton asked the students, "how can we do English well, given who we are and the situations of our lives?" This involved the students and Wigginton envisioning writing activities they might learn from and enjoy, as well as the relationships with their peers and Wigginton that would be productive; once those possibilities were envisioned, the students would enact them, assess the consequences, and revise their approach. Wigginton makes it clear that this process of relational experimentation is a inherent aspect of the pedagogy's success, not simply the route by which they reached a desirable end, that is, Wigginton represents the process of relational experimentation as never ending:

> The process of examining ourselves, English and what it's for, school and what it's for and sampling activities went on all year. In fact, ten years later at Rabun Gap, I and new students were still at it—still tearing things apart and putting them back together in different ways. Still experimenting. Still talking. Still testing. (Wigginton, 1985, p. 32)

Wigginton says that when he first posed the problem of the class to the students, they had very little to say (Wigginton, 1985, p. 32). Moreover, he says they spent months of class time in discussions concerning possible approaches for the English class; even though this trial-and-error period might have been described as floundering in many teachers' eyes, it is the sort of searching that Dewey associates with real learning. The discussions the students and Wigginton engaged in built upon the communicative openings they had already achieved. By posing the question of the class to the students, Wigginton paved the way for a deepening of their relationships, because he addressed them as able and responsible people, whose help he needed.[2] The pragmatic approach he adopted with the group granted students real power to envision possibilities, argue for them, and then try them out, in way that Dewey would fully approve.[3] He trusted them to honor his concerns when he said the class would need to teach them English, and he showed students that he was willing to take on even their most cynical criticisms about

schooling by assigning them an essay to say what they liked, and did not like, in their school experiences. When the students self-defensively refused to fully share their perspectives, he solicited similar essays from older students who were not in his class, and then gave his students excerpts from the older students' essays to help prime the discussion, and that worked: students vocalized the many ways they had felt insulted in schools, and they articulated practices that had worked for them (Wigginton, 1985, pp. 32–36). By stumbling around, looking for examples of schooling done well, they were hoping to gain a handle on those activities which might facilitate a well-run class.

At one point, while the students and Wigginton were working on the *Foxfire* pedagogy, Wigginton learned the power of addressing youth as responsible and strong people; when a student taught him how to plant ginseng beds, he learned a basic lesson which combined ontological considerations (concerning the character of the students and himself), with ethical aspects (concerning the ways in which teachers and students ought to treat one another). Wigginton's lesson occurred when he was treated to a day in the woods with his student, where the student acted as an exemplary teacher: he taught Wigginton how to recognize and dig up the plant, ginseng, and then he gave Wigginton room to carry out the instructions; he was pragmatically complimentary when Wigginton performed well, and he feed Wigginton's curiosity by sharing his knowledge of the woods. Wigginton says, "there was absolutely no arrogance about his manner. Just an easy self-confidence and assurance and a resulting gentleness (Wigginton, 1985, p. 72) As a result of this experience, Wigginton sensed there was a new parity between the student and himself, and it appears as though his new level of appreciation offered him an ethical standard that would influence his efforts to work with students. In short, he had learned a new sense of student-teacher equity: "He had his area of knowledge and ignorance, and I had mine, and in that respect we were equal, each potentially able to share something with the other, to the enrichment of both" (Wigginton, 1985, p. 72). Moreover, Wigginton credits this experience with a student stalking ginseng for his growing awareness of student abilities, which in turn, led him to relinquish classroom authority over to students whenever possible, which again involves reasoning that Wigginton and his students are part of a larger social dynamic, where a decrease in his effort will be matched by an increase in the students' efforts (Wigginton, 1985, p. 94).

Wigginton's embrace of an egalitarian ethic, and his earlier efforts to lure his students into a difficult conversation, where they would need to feel safe while criticizing the school, might both be considered aspects of what it takes to *tend the gaps* between students and teachers. Beginning with an existentialist conception of humans, Gert Biesta (2006, pp. 29, 48, 51) argues that learning occurs in the spaces between people and that these places of conversation and intersubjective engagement are fragile and must be carefully maintained. Throughout the narrative Wigginton provides, he shows an acute sensitivity to the spaces between his students

and himself; he seeks to make it likely that students will want to talk with him about educationally-rich topics. He shows this tendency to tend the gaps when he seeks out informal, friendly relationships with students; he shows it again with his strategy of exposing them to commentaries older students had of schools, which emboldens them to add their own criticisms of schools. By learning to view students as equals, Wigginton renders the gaps between students and himself more robust, for as students become responsible to carry out their jointly shared pedagogy, they have need to initiate a good many comments as they become aware of what needs to be done.

Building upon the ongoing and informed flow of communication amongst Wigginton and the students, the group developed a organizational structure for the English course, which appears to have accomplished multiple goals: all the participants are given a structure which brought them together to carry out literacy related tasks; group discussions and decisionmaking come to be organized by the structure; and responsibility for carrying out the tasks of the magazine came to be diffused. The students and Wigginton decided there would be a rotating group of class officers, who had responsibilities including the planning of class activities, representing student perspectives, and running class every Friday. The organizational structure of the class included a bulletin board, which would allow students to decide on a theme and post pictures, poems, or whatever they wanted to express the theme (Wigginton, 1985, p. 44). Once they decided to carry out the magazine idea, this project gave them multiple communicative and educative events, such as, determining a name for the magazine, writing letters to solicit submissions from students in other high schools, and experimenting with poetry—the best poems qualifying to be placed in the magazine. The projects brought urgency and meaning to the communicative events, and made it far more likely that students would approach their English endeavors with interest and focus.

As Wigginton and the students began to get more interested in the local history and lore section of the magazine, a class project of superstition called out performances from students and community members alike:

> Community students asked members of their families for help, while dorm students bedeviled community adults on the campus farm or in the school's kitchen. Each time a new superstition was brought in, it was posed with the others on the bulletin board, signed by the student who had collected it, creating a master list that included, "if you kill a toad, your cow will go dray," or …. (Wigginton, 1985, p. 53)

As Wigginton, the students, and community members became progressively excited by the *Foxfire* magazine's focus on local stories, knowledge, and crafts, they discovered that there was something very special about regionally-based understandings, for a good many people found these ideas intrinsically interesting. By learning about their roots, Wigginton said the students sometimes experienced,

a "peculiar, almost mystic kind of resonance that comes—and vibrates in one's soul like a guitar string—with an understanding of family—who I am and where I'm from and the fact that I'm part of a long continuum of hope and prayer and celebration of life that I must carry forward" (Wigginton, 1985, p. 75). Such profound layers of meanings are the fruits of intergenerational relationships, and they found these rich layers of meaning through the process of trial and error extoled by Dewey.

CONCLUSION

The wealth of meaning and understanding that Wigginton's project pedagogy set in motion was indeed made possible by the task of creating a magazine, and indeed, this ambitious aim set the students and Wigginton on uncharted paths of exploration. Yet, that exploration only took a fruitful and engaging direction because the students and Wigginton attended to the quality of their interactions with one another; surely, the many powerful interviews, conversations, planning sessions, and lessons constituted the bulk of the learning and knowledge that occurred. If Dewey's scientific method was primarily designed to help reach truth, we might say that Wigginton's educational intuitions drew him less toward truth and more toward meaning, and the importance of productive relationships in creating meaning for his students and himself. When it comes to fostering intrinsically interesting educational experiences, meaning is probably more important than truth.

Wigginton definitely showed that a pragmatic approach to pedagogy is greatly strengthened by his attentiveness to the quality and depth of relationships. It is also worth asking whether his relational sensitivities would strengthen pragmatic approaches to epistemology.

NOTES

[1] Dewey largely ignored the pedagogical character of student-to-student relationships and student-to-teacher relationships. His momentary references to student-teacher relationships clues us that he was not considering the possibilities that students would rebel against a teacher due to ethical, cultural, or political concerns. When Dewey does talk about relationships, he often assumes that the relationships between students and teachers are benign and that the student will wish to please her teacher. See, for example, Dewey, 1980, pp. 183–184.

[2] Elizabeth Ellsworth (1997) shows the power contained in the "address" educators employ in relation to students. By addressing students as able and responsible, Wigginton increased the likelihood that such qualities would be called out of them.

[3] Dewey (1988, pp. 134–135; 1980, pp. 185–186) complained that, all to often, education was viewed as preparation for life and not as life itself, and consequently, he argued that students ought to be given real responsibilities.

REFERENCES

Biesta, G. (2006). *Beyond learning*. Boulder, CO: Paradigm.
Dewey, J. (1910). *The influence of Darwin on philosophy*. Bloomington, IN: IndianaUniversity Press.

Dewey, J. (1980). *The middle works, 1899–1924, Volume 9*. Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press.

Dewey, J. (1988). *The middle works, 1899–1924, Volume 12*. Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press.

Ellsworth, E. (1997). *Teaching positions*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.

Wigginton, E. (1986). *Sometimes a shining moment*. New York, NY: Anchor Books.