The Practice of Democracy and Dewey’s Challenge

The struggle over corporate hog farms serves as a metaphor for rethinking literacy policies and remaking democracy in our classrooms.

Nearly a century ago, John Dewey (1916) wrote that democracy requires continuous and thoughtful attention. He laid a challenge at the steps of schools, entrusting teachers with the future of this country:

*I appeal to teachers in the face of every hysterical wave of emotion, and of every subtle appeal of sinister class interest, to remember that they above all others are consecrated servants of the democratic ideas in which alone this country is truly a distinctive nation—ideas of friendly and helpful intercourse between all and the equipment of every individual to serve the community by his own best powers in his own best way.* (p. 210)
The issue today is how to address Dewey’s challenge in times of greater centralized control over our lives in and out of classrooms. One approach is to consider how other groups have practiced democracy when facing heavily funded, scientifically authorized, and government sanctioned corporate interests and to take up their examples as metaphors for how we as teachers might serve as the midwives for the rebirth of democracy for this and coming generations (Dewey, 1916–1917). In rural Pennsylvania, for example, communities struggle to keep themselves socially, economically, culturally, and politically viable in the face of homogenizing global media, the closings of manufacturing plants, the openings of national and international retail chains, and the pending corporate lawsuits that challenge communities’ rights to protect themselves against these intrusions. In the county where I live, Corning Asahi just moved 1,000 manufacturing jobs to China; Wal-Mart is building a second superstore less than ten miles from its first; and Synagro Corporation has a suit pending concerning the county’s “tipping fees” charged against companies that bring sewage sludge to dump as fertilizer on local fields.

Many groups have formed to represent citizens in such struggles across our county and state. Their efforts afford three lessons for others who face similar challenges. First, they identify direct connections between science and the market as the determining factors in decisions about our lives. Second, they identify corporate entities as stops in the agricultural global economy as stops in the production of pork for public consumption. They are considered to be a logical extension of the manufacturing system for commodities in which science and efficiency are understood to be the most direct road to profit. As James Adams, the president of Penn Agris (a farm-industry trade organization) explained, “The corporate system is designed to get large quantities of high quality meat to dinner tables at the least cost” (as quoted in Avril, 2002, p. A1). This seems reasonable enough.

To act on this design, however, agricultural corporations buy land, hire managers, and then ship 3,000 to 5,000 piglets from corporate breeding farms to the fattening farms to raise each hog’s weight from 10 to 250 pounds. Farm managers load the hogs with considerable amounts of grain and restrict their movement. The job of these hogs is to eat and poop. Each hog creates eight times as much waste as one human, placing a great strain on communities’ ecosystems. The massive amount of excrement produced on corporate farms is typically piped into nearby open-air “lagoons,” which hold up to 25 million gallons of waste each. As the waste builds up in the lagoons, farm managers periodically spray the manure over nearby farmland. This practice begins a series of reactions in the air, water, and soil. Because the hogs are fed growth supplements that contain heavy metals, their manure contains a high concentration of these metals, and when the manure is sprayed over farmland, the metals are absorbed into the soil and enter local watersheds. The current and potential neighbors for corporate hog farms are not eager to deal with these reactions. One Pennsylvania farmer told The Philadelphia Inquirer:

I don’t like the way they treat the animals. I don’t like the conditions for the farmer. I don’t like the smell. There is no escape from that. I don’t like the potential to damage the water supply. I don’t like the amount of antibiotics they use to keep the animals alive. (Avril, 2002)

In more than 80 townships across Pennsylvania, citizens have banned corporate hog farms in local communities. For example, the citizens of Locust Township watched their council members pass a zoning amendment that proclaimed: “Traditional farming by families and non-corporate entities offers stability and encourages the rural quality of life enjoyed in Locust Township while intensive animal agriculture may cause environmental degradation and has endangered citizens and property in other states” (Locust Township Council Minutes, August 25, 2001). A community member reported, “I just...
The hope that I see for democracy lies in the vivid demonstrations of literate democratic habits of mind and core democratic values among these citizen groups.

By 2002, 10 townships outlawed corporate farming altogether. “No corporation or syndicate may acquire or otherwise obtain an interest, whether legal, beneficial, or otherwise, in any real estate used for farming in this Township or engage in farming” (as posted on Franklin County Coalition Web site www.celdf.org/lcc/sus-manual.htm). To enact the ordinance, the township councils relied on the work of local citizens, the Franklin County Coalition report, and similar state laws from nine midwestern states. They justified the act through provisions of state law (The Second Class Township Act, Article XV and XVI, code 53 P.S. 66501 and 66601), which requires townships to provide for the protection and preservation of natural and human resources and to promote, protect, and facilitate public health, safety, and welfare.

The hope that I see for democracy lies in the vivid demonstrations of literate democratic habits of mind and core democratic values among these citizen groups. They are poring through texts—legal, scientific, and economic—to learn more about themselves while testing their understandings of their history, cultures, and values. By doing so, they assert their autonomy to develop their own life plans and to take responsibility for their lives. Note that their commitments to family farms, community well-being, and local business in the early coalitions’ documents convey a search for a fundamental equality among community members. They sought and continue to seek to level the playing fields among real and corporate citizens in each township in order to allow majority rule after careful deliberation. These citizens compared their emerging self- and community awareness against the social structures put in place to guide those lives and found that federal and state standards were not representations of their collective wills. Rather, distant governments encouraged absentee corporations to build in local communities, privileging corporate rights to make profits over the community’s rights to health, safety, and quality of life.

During the citizens’ affirmations of local cultures and searches for
alternatives to what the state and corporations had to offer them, they became aware that those structures and their lives could be more in their control. This growing awareness and their continued study caused citizens to form coalitions across previously antagonistic groups. Old and young, farmers and townspeople, left and right politically came together to limit the growth or possibility of corporate hog farms in their communities. The strength of these coalitions is demonstrated in the legal successes in some communities. Moreover, some of the coalitions have pushed beyond hog farms to larger issues. All of these acts are examples of sophisticated literacy at its best, and they belie the rhetoric of a literacy crisis in rural America. When the circumstances arose that demanded sophisticated literacy, these citizens used their literacies collectively as political agents to participate in the decisions that affect their lives. This is democracy at its best. What makes their use of literacy and democracy unique is their choice to rely on ethics, history, and culture in order to direct their action. To set these ethical judgments in context, the citizens have taken inventory of the histories of their townships and the cultures that are present or ones that might arise because of the struggles. The citizen groups weighed scientific and economic facts against the cultural and historical ones that they have uncovered about themselves and their communities. In the 10 townships, the councils have determined that the consequent effects of corporate farms on community health, history, and culture stink too much to allow it to happen. And they have not let it happen—both Senate Bills 826 and 1413 have been defeated.

A METAPHOR FOR LITERACY EDUCATION

Many teachers from preschool to college face a similar dilemma as those who struggle over corporate hog farms in Pennsylvania. We are told that others know better about our work and how to do it, and our lives and how to live them. For example, in elementary schools, educational publishers tell teachers what materials are needed for instruction. Educational scientists explain how teachers must teach. And now state and federal governments define when and how to assess our teaching and students’ learning. Government intrusions into classrooms extend from preschool programs (consider President Bush’s Plan to Prepare Children for Kindergarten, www.hhs.gov/news/press/2003pres) to universities (see Rep. John A. Boehner’s [R-OH] and Rep. Howard P. McKeon’s [R-CA] The College Cost Crisis, http://edworkforce.house.gov/issues/108th/education/highereducation/CollegeCostCrisisReport.pdf). No Child Left Behind legislation installs educational publishers (the market) and educational psychologists (scientists) as the official authorities on reading education in elementary school classrooms across the United States. Schools veer away from requirements for scientifically based instruction through designated commercial materials at the peril of their federal funding (Edmondson et Shannon, 2003). At each level of schooling, people who do not live in our communities require that we adapt to their suggestions and mandates because they know better than we do how to educate America.

Questions about Science and the Market

The first lesson from the struggle over hog farms is to raise questions about the power of science and/or the market in schools and reading programs. I don’t mean that the citizens doubted the scientific conclusions or the economic predictions about hog farming. None of the coalitions’ reports, newspaper editorials, or ordinances rejected science or capitalism. The farmers hope to improve their farming through the prudent use of science, and all know that their communities must generate capital to continue to exist. However, the majority in each of those communities refused to elevate the scientific and market facts above the facts that they discovered and developed about their lives in their communities. Communities acting on this bold decision to trust themselves did not automatically accept the modern tradition that objectivity is always preferable to subjectivity. Rather, they sought and continue to seek to subordinate science and the market to their subjective, ethical analyses of their situations. To take this step, they realized that science and economics are social constructions and not natural, universal, or eternal. They realized that people developed science and the market over time and that people work to maintain them as disciplines of authority in our lives. The idea of the market is only 400 years old, beginning with the rise of the merchant class in Renaissance Europe. The scientific method (the foundation of scientific objectivity) is not much older than the house that those grandparents built on their farm in Locust Township.

We are told that others know better about our work and how to do it, and our lives and how to live them.
Although the excesses of advertisers should have taught us to be wary of the marketplace (Shannon, 2001), few of us have practice in raising questions about science. Many (perhaps most) equate science with truth and progress, based on understanding the sanctity of “the scientific method.” Science defines itself not by its results, but by its method and use of reason. Statistician Karl Pearson (1896), who invented the chi-square test of statistical significance, is often credited with the elaboration of the scientific method at the turn of the last century:

*The scientific method consists in the careful and often laborious classification of facts, the comparison of their relationships and sequences, and finally in the discovery by aid of the disciplined imagination of a brief statement or formula, which in a few words resumes a wide range of facts. Such a formula is called a scientific law. (p. 77)*

That “disciplined imagination” is now defined as experimentation—forming a hypothesis to make predictions about some phenomenon, testing that prediction against one or several control groups, and accepting, rejecting, or revising the hypothesis based on the results with the intention to add significantly to the development of an explanation of the world and all that is in it. This scientific method bears little resemblance to the science that Copernicus, Newton, Darwin, and Einstein practiced. This variability suggests that there are many methods of science that are based on processes of thought and data collection practices shared with many other disciplines (Kuhn, 1970). Paul Feyerabend (1993) wrote, “Science is one of many forms of thought that have been developed by man, and not necessarily the best. It is conspicuous, noisy, and impudent, but it is inherently superior only for those who have already decided in favor of a certain ideology or who have accepted it without ever having examined its advantages and its limits” (p. 241).

At its best, science is a human endeavor that requires a combination of imagination, creativity, prior knowledge, library research, perseverance, and often blind luck—the same combination of intellectual resources available to all in differing amounts when trying to solve problems. Members of the coalitions across Pennsylvania used all of these capacities in defense of their communities against corporate hog farms. Teachers use all of these capacities to address the moment-to-moment challenges they face in their classrooms 180 days each year. Scientists might be more systematic in their use of the capacities, but they are not engaging in special practices unavailable to others.

Teachers or groups of teachers who raise questions about science and/or the market as the determining factor for reading education need not reject them completely. Rather, they can work to understand how science and the market offer opportunities and constraints as they face the complexities of teaching within the dynamic interactions of local and global social systems, the biographic and cultural stories that play in and out of their own and students’ lives, and multiple visions of the future. Moreover, they can ask questions about why and which groups struggle so hard to maintain the authority of the scientific method and the market in classrooms. By raising such questions, teachers seek to validate multiple ways of thinking about teaching, learning, and reading.

**Money for Research**

Recognizing that science is anthropomorphic leads to a second lesson. These rural citizens identified ties between the science of hog farming and the money in the hog farm industry. This is science at its worst. The struggle over hog farming in Pennsylvania demonstrates that science has social entailments just like ethics, history, and culture. The connection became obvious to the citizens when scientific facts appeared on both sides of the hog farm issue. The citizens could produce reports and hire experts who would attest to the negative environmental impact of corporate hog farms, and the state and industry funded their own experts and reports that “proved” that the smell and the water contamination are manageable and can be tolerated.

This connection does not suggest that all scientific research is tainted. However, one of the most dramatic trends influencing the direction of science during the past century has been its increasing dependence on funding from government and industry (Rampton & Stauber, 2001). Today, mainstream scientists are engaged in expensive research, which requires considerable financial support from grant agencies or corporations. This trend is noticeable in the soft as well as the hard sciences (National Science Board, 1998)—and our field is not immune. It would not be difficult to track the variation in reading research topics during the last three decades to the ones mentioned in federal calls for proposals for research. The editors of the International Reading Association’s *Reading Research Quarterly* just im-
pлементed a conflict of interest standard to ensure to its readership that connections between science and money will be completely disclosed for all articles published in the journal. Stephen Metcalf (2002) detailed the connections between market and science behind the scenes of No Child Left Behind. The smell of money, then, contradicts the objectivity of the scientific method. In other words, the collective interests created by the concerns of the funding agencies compete with the individual interests created by the scientific method.

What Freedom?
The third lesson is to expand the notion of freedom. The corporations, professional organizations, and government officials who promote corporate hog farms promise more pork on our tables and value efficiency and profits most highly. They present a “freedom to farm” package that offers all farmers license to farm as they see fit, diminishing their accountability to the community and the rights of other community members to hold farmers accountable for their actions. From the state’s point of view, corporate hog farms mean more stable local and state economies. Rather than accept this promotion, however, the citizens of these 10 townships decided that they are willing to eat less pork and to pay more for it. They value clean water, fresh air, and local control. They have established a different set of criteria on which to base their present and to work for their desired futures.

This power to develop the criteria before choosing is a freedom seldom mentioned in the debates about schooling and reading instruction.

In order to formulate ideas about the future, we must state the values that we intend to realize and identify the threats to those values. Following the lead of the rural coalitions, we can ask ourselves individually and collectively—do we share the values of those who are telling us what materials to use, how to teach, and when to test as if they know better than we do what to use, how to act, and when and if we are successful? I choose the pronoun we consciously for two reasons. I am a teacher at a university whose authority over my instruction is being threatened by commercialism, government policies, and scientific facts. Second, I am a citizen who sees that my personal concerns about my freedom when teaching are really a part of a larger social problem that threatens many groups and individuals in my community and other communities around the nation (and the world). I am, we are, in this struggle together with the farmers, merchants, workers, artists, and many others.

Because the stakes are so high, these struggles are often loud and not always polite. The battle over literacy education is no exception, and, of course, it is not waged among equals. Advocates of some positions have considerably more power than others in the debate. That power—be it from government sovereignty, think-tank money, or professional organizations—makes those positions more available to teachers and the public. Selected expert testimony makes those positions seem more legitimate than alternatives. Historically, this imbalance in power has enabled educational publishers to basically dictate the future of literacy instruction, as teachers and others abdicate their responsibilities and allow their futures to be made by default (Shannon, 1989). More recently, narrow elite circles have enforced their positions within literacy education without effective responsibility to those who must try to survive the consequences of their decisions and their defaults (see the September 2003 issue of Language Arts for different positions on what matters in literacy education and who struggles for its control).

Consider three predominant positions in reading education: moral literacy, high standards/high-stakes testing, and best practices.
Moral Literacy

Moral literacy has a long history dating to colonial times when the sole purpose of learning to read was to avoid that Old Deluder Satan. Recently, the McGuffey Readers of the nineteenth century are making a comeback because some groups value the protestant and capitalist moral messages included in the stories and the drill and practice pedagogy. As Former Secretary of Education William Bennett (1996) concluded, American youth need "a maximum dosage of moral tutelage from parents, teachers, coaches, clergy and other responsible adults" (p. 57) to overcome rampant crime, poverty, drug use, and teenaged pregnancy. Leaving little to chance, Bennett and other advocates of moral literacy have designed and published anthologies, curricula, television programs, Web sites, and professional textbooks with which adults can teach children and youth the appropriate moral maxims. By learning to read this corpus of work, students become morally literate people who know "what virtues look like, what they are in practice, how to recognize them, and how they work" (Bennett, 1993, p. 11).

Within moral literacy, the assumption is made that texts have single and fixed meanings. Moreover, advocates assume that individuals, and not society, are completely responsible for society’s troubles. With current Secretary of Education Rod Paige stating that Christian values should be reproduced in public schools, moral literacy has the power of government, business, and conservative think tanks behind it. Paige explained, "In a religious environment the value system is set. That’s not the case in public school where there are so many different kids with different kinds of values" (as quoted in Schemo, 2003, p. A24). The choices left to teachers and students within moral literacy are limited to the methods through which the morals will be ingested. Visit William Bennett’s Book of Virtues Web site and television show. Note

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John Dewey and Democracy in Education

Dewey viewed democracy in human affairs as an ideal arrangement that can be fully realized through education. His concept of democracy in education requires human beings to work together to solve complex problems, to think freely and critically, and to act decisively and cooperatively. Democracy in education requires that students learn habits of openness, reflection, and dialogue and that teachers and students have universal access to culture, the collection of shared meanings. Access to “new” ideas broadens, deepens, and transforms old ways of thinking and acting. These ideas enhance individuality, while also enhancing receptivity to the thoughts, experiences, and angles of vision of others. Exposure to different ideas frees teachers and students from mental traps, such as dogmatism, and opens up new ways of thinking. Teachers become students of their students, challenged to consider and make each student's angle of vision or way of handling the ’same old world’ available for understanding and critique.

Dewey argued against authoritarian methods of education that he believed led to mistrust of human nature and divisive behavior, resulting in humans who are not allowed to think or act for themselves. Teachers who subscribe to authoritarian education lack faith in the capacity of humans to learn and to grow, and their students remain at a standstill so that teachers and students alike become victims of self-fulfilling prophecy.

- The Center for Dewey Studies. The Center for Dewey Studies at Southern Illinois University at Carbondale collected and edited Dewey’s works and has a wealth of source materials. The Center’s Web site provides access to resources, publications, audio samples, and videos of Dewey’s classical works and life at http://www.siu.edu/~deweyctr/index1.htm

—Karen Smith
the sponsors. Bennett’s absolution of the state and business from moral responsibility in the dilemmas presented garners considerable financial sponsorship for moral literacy projects and products.

Literacy as Cultural Capital

Current advocates of high standards and high-stakes testing emphasize one of the original nineteenth century rationales for common schools—schools can benefit both the individual and society by educating productive workers. Former Secretary of Education Richard Riley (1997) wrote:

“Literacy can help give people the tools to make the most of their potential and prepare them for the twenty-first century, when a fully literate workforce will be crucial to our strength as a nation. It is in the interests of all of us to do all we can to ensure the reading success of every young child by the end of the third grade. (p. 83)

According to this position, most of America’s competitive advantage in the world economy faded by the mid-twentieth century, making American bureaucratic organization of business and school into “liabilities rather than assets” (Marshall & Tucker, 1992). Throughout the mid-1980s, philanthropic organizations negotiated and brokered consensus among politicians, business leaders, and media pundits concerning the necessity for school reform, sponsoring public meetings and hearings on these matters and inviting select expert testimony. Without authority over public education, but supportive of this position, the Clinton Administration funded the development of national standards in most academic subjects and offered financial incentives to states if they would follow this lead.

Although earlier versions of high standards and high-stakes testing (America 2000 or Educate America) afforded schools and teachers more leeway in designing their literacy programs than the current policies of No Child Left Behind, the values and assumptions remain the same across the three documents. The goals for reading instruction were set in place and the type and timing of assessments were scheduled without consultation with school administrators or teachers. Under Bush’s No Child Left Behind, many teachers find that their choice of instructional materials is limited to a few official alternatives and that the penalties for lack of student progress are detailed. These additions blur the lines between this position and moral literacy because there is now one definition of responsibility and duty.

Best Practices

Much of the substance of the best practices position on literacy education is captured in the final words of the National Academy of Science report from the Commission on Reading: “America will become a nation of readers when verified practices of the best teachers in the best schools can be introduced throughout the country” (Anderson, Hiebert, Scott, & Wilkinson, 1985, p. 120). In that statement, reading is seen as a goal in itself, a practice not necessarily tied to the American character or economy, but one to bring often undefined and unquestioned benefits. The statement presents two challenges for American education: how to verify the best practices and how to introduce those practices across the country. These questions directed reading educators since the turn of the last century (Shannon, 2002). Then as now, progressives believed that science would light the way to universal literacy. Then as now, members within this position struggled over the definition of science—some requiring the application of the scientific method and others arguing that verification can only be made through systematic and intentional observation and evaluation of learners’ actual uses of reading in their everyday lives.

During the Clinton Administration, the federal government gathered groups of experts to proclaim that the scientific method is the only official means to verify best practices for teaching reading and to select appropriate research findings to name those practices. These groups provided scientific legitimacy for current federal reading policy. Although many reading educators question the government’s methods and motives in convening these groups (Allington, 2002; Coles, 2003; Cunningham, 2001; Garan, 2002), the critics share the values of the best practice position. That is, most critics consider reading a goal in itself and seek the right science to establish the best practices.

Some advocates of best practices suggest that schools become a marketplace of ideas in which administrators and teachers sift among recent scientific evidence to determine the best practices. In this free market of ideas, the best practices will drive all other methods from schools. The marketplace metaphor
assumes at least three conditions are in place at all times:

1. Teachers have real choices among literacy programs and methods.
2. Teachers are aware of the consequences of those choices.
3. Teachers have equal access to information about choices and then equal opportunities to make choices.

It is not news to report that these conditions are not and have never been available in most schools across the country. Without this possibility of complete rationality in school, the marketplace fails to be a fair and equal means of making decisions. Powerful groups can press their values upon teachers and students through simple, bureaucratic, and technical control. Consider the New York City controversy over phonics instruction as an example of this power. The federal government objected to the NYC school district’s selection of a particular commercial program because it had not been verified as best practice through the scientific method. They made their funding for additional reading instruction contingent on the reconsideration of the selection, and the school district added more acceptable alternatives to its curriculum; whether the government is willing to accept this compromise remains to be seen. By design and/or default, then, teachers’ choices are limited within the best practices position.

WHAT CAN WE DO?

None of the popular positions—moral literacy, literacy as cultural capital, or best practices—affords us the time or space to develop our own criteria for how we want to live in and out of our classrooms. Within those positions, we are too busy delivering someone else’s vision and values to discover our own. We are faced with the similar dilemma as the rural Pennsylvania communities, needing to struggle to keep our schools and classrooms socially, culturally, economically, and politically viable in times of increasingly centralized control. By acting democratically and using our sophisticated literacies, however, we can push beyond what’s given to us. It is not necessarily easy to name our values. It is often difficult to recognize that our values are in play when we teach. Like the work of scientists, the work of teachers is complex, messy, and subjective. Often our values are deeply embedded in our practice and sometimes our values contradict one another. Often it seems impossible to think outside the boxes that others in authority draw for us. But when our values do not match theirs, naming our values, finding others who share them, and working to participate in the decisions that affect our teaching are democratically literate practices worthy of our time and energy. Some existing groups demonstrate how we might start. The Coalition for Educational Justice unites parents, students, and teachers in efforts to transform the public schools in Los Angeles. They seek a school system that values the cultural backgrounds of its students while it opens new cultural, economic, and social doors for them. Their recent victories include a successful campaign to force the Los Angeles school board to admit that high-stakes testing is inherently unfair to the majority of the students it serves. Marylanders against High Stakes Testing (MAHST) uses letters to editors, holding elected officials accountable at the polls, and sponsorship of public forums (even in grocery store checkout lines) to fight standardized test abuse in Maryland. Their motto is MAHST— “the H may be silent, but we are not.” Rethinking Schools, a national network of activist teachers formed in 1986, organized originally around issues of basal readers, standardized tests, and biases in textbook-dominated curriculum. Through continuing coalition building, members have developed positions and campaigns opposing racism in schools, inequitable school funding, and privatization and commercialization of public schools. On their Web site (www.rethinkingschools.org), they affirm that “classrooms can be places of hope, where students and teachers gain glimpses of the kind of society we could live in and where students learn the academic and critical skills needed to make the vision a reality.”

The remaking of democracy in our classrooms might begin with our engagement in democratic practices. Like the coalitions that struggle over hog farms in Pennsylvania, we can make sense of our values and use them to evaluate the existing and possible approaches to literacy education. We can find others who share at least our questions to help us explore the opportunities and constraints of policies and programs that others have set for us. From these uses of our literacies, we can enhance our chances to participate in the decisions about reading education that affect our lives at school and point us toward the future. Are we ready to
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practice democracy concerning the dignity and quality of our own lives at school in order to accept Dewey’s challenge to help new generations reinvent democracy?

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