

## Introduction: John Dewey's Legacy for Philosophy of Education

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[See table of contents](#)

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## Introduction: John Dewey's Legacy for Philosophy of Education

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It is my pleasure to introduce this special issue of *Philosophical Inquiry in Education* on *John Dewey's Legacy for Philosophy of Education*. The articles in this issue provide six different and complementary perspectives on Dewey's philosophy of education and its contemporary relevance. Each of these papers originated as contributions to the inaugural conference celebrating the reopening of the Center for Dewey Studies at Southern Illinois University, Carbondale, held in October 2023 on *John Dewey and His Legacy for Education*. These papers represent only a small selection of the variety of work presented at that conference, of particular interest to the readers of this journal and the members of the Society that it serves.

John Dewey began publishing on education almost 140 years ago, and he died more than 70 years ago; nevertheless, in many respects his philosophy of education is as fresh today as it was during his lifetime. Dewey places schooling in a wider political context; in a time where schools are a particularly fraught focus of political contestation, his thinking offers us crucial insights and resources for a thoroughly democratic approach to education. Dewey also places the student into a wider moral context; to the perennial questions about what kind of students our schools shall produce, Dewey gives us power tools for conceiving the role of education in forming students' moral and intellectual character. In a time where philosophy of education is sometimes seen as a secondary, applied field in philosophy, Dewey shows us both that philosophy *as such* is a general theory of education, and also that philosophy of education is deeply intertwined with our philosophical understanding of religion, nature, art, ethics, and politics. The contributions to this special issue orient us towards all these insights of Dewey's, with an eye on our current needs and problems.

We begin with Sarah Stitzlein, past president of the John Dewey Society, on "Teaching Controversial Issues in a Populist and Post-Truth Context." Stitzlein recommends a Deweyan pragmatist, inquiry-based pedagogical approach to teaching controversial, potentially divisive issues. In our contemporary political context, fraught with populism and "post-truth" concerns, this approach promises to create more effective, deliberative classroom discussion than traditional approaches to teaching controversial topics.

Ryan Brooks and Laura Mueller continue the critical discussion of education and politics in "Democracy, Human Capital, and the Neoliberal Arts." They argue that current attempts to defend the value of the liberal arts and to institute diversity, equity, and inclusion falter, due to the context of the neoliberal university; despite their seeming Deweyan spirit, they reproduce the very logic of the problems to which they are supposed to respond. Another look at Dewey's theories of democracy, growth, and waste through an institutional lens allows them to provide a deeper critique of the neoliberal university that could foster more productive changes.

Guy Axtell, in "A Deweyan Critique of the Critical Thinking versus Character Education Debate," gets at the contribution of Deweyan pragmatism to philosophy of education by using it to critically assess the debate over whether education should aim to teach critical thinking skills or inculcate intellectual virtues. Axtell shows that

Dewey provides resources for a nuanced take on this debate that shows we need not an either-or debate but rather a both-and (with caveats) integration of approaches. What's more, Axtell shows how Deweyan pedagogy must embrace rather than avoid political contestation of the content of critical thinking and intellectual virtue.

In "Education as Morals in Dewey's Philosophy," Robin Friedman provides a synoptic reading of the relation of education and morals through more than two decades of Dewey's thinking, from *Democracy and Education* (1916) through *Human Nature and Conduct* (1922) to *Experience and Education* (1938). He shows the significant role of morals in education, according to Dewey, arguing that Dewey's philosophy of education is the basis of a philosophy of *life*. Friedman emphasizes the interconnectedness of Dewey's philosophy, and hints at crucial connections to Dewey's naturalistic metaphysics.

The next article in this special issue follows up on this hint by digging deep into the details of Dewey's naturalist metaphysics. Sarah Warren asks how Dewey's *Experience and Nature*, first published 100 years ago next year, can support an environmental pedagogy through a better understanding of nature and our experience of it. "Neither 'True Being' Nor 'Cosmic Pyrotechnics': Dewey's Naturalistic Metaphysics as Ecological Pedagogy" mines Dewey's metaphysics and theory of experience for insights on how to teach biodiversity preservation in the context of our embodied meaning-making in the world, with the ultimate aim of supporting environmental progress through education.

Campbell Scribner wraps up this special issue by exploring one of the texts in Dewey's corpus that has proved most challenging for interpreters of Dewey's naturalism. "The Legacy of *A Common Faith* in the Thought of Philip H. Phenix" explores the pedagogical upshot of Dewey's exploration of religion and "the religious" element in experience by looking at its uptake in the work of Philip H. Phenix. Phenix was a prominent mid-twentieth century philosopher of education who made significant use of, but also repeatedly criticized, Dewey's *A Common Faith*. Scribner explores the sources of Phenix's critique of Dewey's purported failure to deal with transcendence, which he attributes to Phenix's reading of modern physics and existentialist theology.

It has been a great pleasure to preside over the reopening of the Center for Dewey Studies, to make new connections and renew old ones with Dewey scholars around the world. Continuing the work that led to this special issue, the coming years will see workshops, conferences, events, and new publications coming from the Center. We look forward in 2025 to celebrating the centennial of the publication of *Experience and Nature*, and in 2027 the centennial of *The Public and Its Problems*. We are currently working to complete for publication Dewey's *Additional Lectures in China* and further edited collections of new work on Dewey. Throughout our future work, Dewey's legacy for the philosophy of education will remain a central theme.

### About the Author

**Matthew Brown** is a professor of philosophy and the Jo Ann & Donald N. Boydston Chair of American Philosophy at Southern Illinois University (Carbondale). He is also the Director of the Center for Dewey Studies, which focuses both on the study of John Dewey's life and works as well as carrying on the living legacy of John Dewey. Matthew is the author of *Science and Moral Imagination: A New Ideal for Values in Science* (University of Pittsburgh Press, 2020), which explores the role of values in science and the scientific basis of values from a broadly pragmatist perspective.