



CHICAGO JOURNALS

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Source: *American Journal of Education*, Vol. 118, No. 3 (May 2012), pp. 369–379

Published by: [The University of Chicago Press](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/664739>

Accessed: 26/06/2014 10:03

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Forum

Individuality, Equality, and Creative Democracy—the Task Before Us

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One Law for the Lion & Ox is Oppression. (William Blake [1793] 1988, 44)

Every semester I teach a typical social foundations of education course titled “Schooling in American Society.” I often begin class by discussing reproduction. I distinguish biological reproduction, the passing on of our genetic inheritance, from social and cultural reproduction. The latter reproduces social customs, norms of conduct, social practices, tool use, and language as well as beliefs and values. I observe that education is the site of cultural reproduction before distinguishing between schooling and education. Education is ubiquitous and inevitable; schooling is an institutionalized activity usually confined to designated times and places. Public schooling is subject to public regulation and control, presumably for the common good. I conclude by observing that true democratic education seeks educational equality as a way to educate individuals capable of criticizing and recreating society—not simply reproducing the status quo. Surprisingly, many of my student teachers find the notion of creative democracy puzzling. They assume our democracy is complete and only requires preserving. This essay arises out of my efforts to reply to their perplexity.

Let us concentrate on the ideas of sameness and standardization. There is profound wisdom within William Blake’s epigraph above. The insights of John Dewey illuminate this wisdom in the context of creative democracy. We must assail the very idea of one-size-fits-all standards as a vehicle for educational equality in a democratic society, especially in such a society’s public school

Electronically published March 20, 2012

American Journal of Education 118 (May 2012)

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0195-6744/2012/11803-0005\$10.00

system. I argue that equality is the antithesis of sameness, at least in the sense of democratic equality, or what Dewey sometimes calls “moral equality.” Democratic moral equality celebrates *incommensurably* unique, one-time-only *qualitative* individuality. When we interpret equality in terms of *quantitative* sameness and one-size-fits-all standards, it destroys democratic moral equality while corrupting the ideal of equality of educational opportunity.¹

The marvelous industrial idea of the nineteenth century was the refinement of natural resources into standardized, hence readily interchangeable and replaceable, parts for the national production function. The marvelous post-industrial idea of the twenty-first century is the refinement of human resources into standardized, hence readily interchangeable and replaceable, parts for the global production function. Schools serve as the site for smelting and refining human resources.

For those who value socially responsible democratic individualism, the standardization demanded by the logic of human capital and human resource theory leads to malicious miseducation. It profoundly threatens any idea of a vibrant and creative democracy. Standardization presumes notions of sameness that degrade the democratic ideas of equality, individuality, and free expression they putatively support. It is a fine instance of reified bureaucratic, technocratic, business concepts and structures. It leads to what I call “the new structural feudalism.” Essentially, today’s feudalism fuses bureaucratic systems thinking and contemporary capitalism to feudalistic social structures.

The old feudalism was primarily land-rights based rather than a commodity exchange. Obviously, the new feudalism has different assumptions. The old feudalism provided for a substantial public commons, whereas the new feudalism seeks to enclose and privatize the public sphere. The new structural feudalism assumes we may refine and render everything, including people, fit to circulate as a commodity. Medieval feudalism assumed a predetermined, fixed, and final hierarchical military, economic, priestly, and political order that no one from top to bottom could alter. The new structural feudalism establishes a similar social order in which participants understand that altering the establishment is immoral, either a violation of God’s law, natural law, or both. Instead of the Divine Right of kings anointed by God, we get the Divine Right of the capitalist elite anointed by the market. Today’s money managers interpret the will of the market to wealthy capitalists like the priests of yore interpreted God’s will to the princes.² Meanwhile, the military protects the market much as the medieval knight defended the old feudal manor.

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The new structural feudalism benefits mostly the new aristocracy, the wealthy capitalists. Today, schools assume the task of standardizing human capital as a commodity suitable for ready exchange that fits docilely into the existing sociopolitical-economic order rather than democratic individuals charged with challenging and changing the status quo. The new structural feudalism may yet defeat the dream of expansive, creative democracy while leaving all of democracy's ideological ideals in place, although depleted of their democratic import. It may do so by reducing the notion of moral equality to standardization and sameness, thereby making a travesty of genuine individuality as creative self-expression.

Three short essays by John Dewey inspire this article. The first two, "Mediocrity and Individuality" and "Individuality, Equality, and Superiority," appeared in 1922 in successive issues of the *New Republic* (Dewey [1922] 1983). Dewey critiqued the foundations of modern liberalism, because he thought we had only secured the conditions for democracy. He rejected the concept of an atomistic individual cut off from social influences and rejected the notions of innate rationality and innate free will. Instead, he was committed to the social-cultural construction of minds and selves. The third essay, "Creative Democracy—The Task Before Us" (Dewey [1940] 1991), expresses Dewey's dream of a more democratic society. He thought democracy must constantly re-create itself, which requires educating unique, creative individuals who constantly reconstruct society. All three essays oppose the idea of democratic equality as meaning sameness and standardization, which Dewey thought made a farce of genuine individuality.

Dewey's critique of Enlightenment individualism and defense of more enlightened social-cultural constructivist notions of individuality resonate throughout his writings. Dewey's critical insight is that we are not born with rationality, free will, a self, or a mind. Lacking room for details, let us content ourselves with two simple statements of his position. Dewey affirms: "Freedom or individuality, in short, is not an original possession or gift. It is something to be achieved, to be wrought out" (Dewey [1926] 1984, 61). He devoted entire books to defending this claim. His assault on atomistic individualism and the notion that we are born with anything more than vague biologically innate instincts has obvious implications for his thinking about democracy for the simple reason that the fundamental Enlightenment ideas employed in the founding of "American" democracy are mostly false. That is why he declares in the second paragraph of "Creative Democracy—The Task Before Us," that such democracy as we do have was the "product of fortunate conditions [that] have now to be won by conscious and resolute effort" (Dewey [1940] 1991, 224). The task before us, then, requires re-creating the very idea of democracy and the democratic individual. It also involves rethinking the very idea and ideal of democratic equality.

Perhaps the greatest barrier to reconceiving democracy is that we simply assume we got it right from the start and now have all the democracy we need. Dewey declares: “The depth of the present crisis is due in considerable part to the fact that for a long period we acted as if our democracy were something that perpetuated itself automatically; as if our ancestors had succeeded in setting up a machine that solved the problem of perpetual motion in politics” (Dewey [1940] 1991, 225). To carry out the task before us, we need genuinely creative democratic citizens, which standardization can never achieve.

To see how standardization captures and constrains educational thinking about equality, democracy, and the democratic individual, let us look at the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) passed in 2001 amid massive bipartisan support. NCLB is the latest federal legislation enacting standards-based schooling reform, which relies on the theory that setting high standards and establishing measurable outcomes will improve schooling in America. NCLB requires states to develop standards of learning and standardized assessments in basic skills for all students in specified grades in order to receive federal funding. These assessments rely almost exclusively on norm-referenced, high-stakes standardized tests. As a consequence, there is a strong tendency for curricula to align with these tests, while teachers feel they must teach to them and administrators force compliance. Schools that fall below the standard suffer punishment. It provides an almost perfect example of business inspired systems world thinking.

Who can object to high standards, clearly stated standardized objectives, and outcomes measured by standardized tests? Who thinks we should not hold students, teachers, and schools accountable to such standards? Is there anyone committed to democratic, fair, and equal treatment for all children who could object? John Dewey, that is who. Let us see why.

Dewey’s philosophy of education shows us why democratic equality executed as sameness makes a mockery of our nation’s claims to embrace strong individuality and democratic ideals. In “Creative Democracy—The Task Before Us” Dewey claims that the quest for democracy remains far from complete. Our task today is to intelligently secure the democracy that only good fortune promised us in the beginning. To do so properly, we must artfully recreate it. The task before us requires even more energy than what was called for in Dewey’s day. Much of the task in schools and the rest of society involves overcoming culturally entrenched conceptions of such key democratic ideas as “equality” that were malformed from the beginning. Our heritage provides both opportunity and obstacle.

Dewey goes on to emphasize that “the task can be accomplished only by inventive effort and creativity” (Dewey [1940] 1991, 225). Releasing individual creative potential can accomplish such ends: “The democratic faith in human

equality is belief that every human being, independent of the quantity or range of his personal endowment, has the right to equal opportunity with every other person for development of whatever gifts he has. The democratic belief in the principle of leadership is a generous one. It is universal" (226–27). Dewey has more faith in human individuality than today's politicians and pundits ever muster in their Fourth of July speeches. He does not suggest that every individual should have an equal opportunity to take his place in the existing social order or be treated according to exactly the same standards. That is the goal of NCLB and contributes to the new structural feudalism. Instead, Dewey asserts that each individual has a right to have his unique potential actualized to the fullest extent possible so that he may make his unique contribution to not only preserving but also improving society by bringing his unique voice to public dialogue.³

Dewey wants to rethink the dominant discourse about equality. For him, equality, at least moral equality, does not mean sameness. Nor does it mean an equal opportunity to become refined as a standardized, interchangeable, and replaceable part schooled to fit into a predetermined role in the existing production function. He emphasizes uniqueness and difference. We must praise genuine individuality and responsible self-expression. Dewey urges us to realize that "democracy is a personal way of individual life; that it signifies the possession and continual use of certain attitudes, forming personal character and determining desire and purpose in all the relations of life. Instead of thinking of our own dispositions and habits as accommodated to certain institutions we have to learn to think of the latter as expressions, projections and extensions of habitually dominant personal attitudes" (Dewey [1940] 1991, 226). Dewey stresses the release of human creative potential to preserve, transform, and ameliorate society. Each of us is a singularity with our own special needs, desires, interests, awareness, purposes, and projects. Each is capable of performing the role of leader depending on the occasion and his particular talents. We must cease believing that leadership means government by an elite group of experts. Instead, we must seek government not only *for* but also *by* the people.

Interpreting equality as sameness destroys moral equality, the development of one-time-only individuality, and the release of unique creative potential to carry out the task of re-creating our democracy. It leads to the notion that equal opportunity means everyone has the right to compete for a desirable place in a prearranged social structure. It reduces the ideal of equality of educational opportunity to standardized curricular objectives, a standardized curriculum, and the determinations of standardized tests—none of which recognizes unique human possibility. NCLB, for example, conceptualizes equal educational opportunity as standardization.

To see what is wrong with standardization, let us consider the two essays

from the *New Republic* mentioned earlier. They should reprint these today since they are more relevant than ever. The opening paragraph of “Mediocrity and Individuality” addresses the ambiguity of the word “individualism.” Dewey concludes: “Individuality is the surer word; it carries with it a connotation of uniqueness of quality or at least of distinctiveness. It suggests a freedom which is not legal, comparative and external but which is intrinsic and constructive. Our forebears who permitted the growth of legal and economic arrangements at least supposed, however mistakenly, that the institutions they favored would develop personal and moral individuality. It was reserved for our own day to combine under the name of individualism, laudation of selfish energy in industrial accomplishment with insistence upon uniformity and conformity in mind” (Dewey [1922] 1983, 289). Dewey extols and defends individuality as qualitative singularity and not as the quantitative legal constructions of business, industry, or government. He is concerned with the moral, creative, uniquely expressive individual and not human capital. While Dewey believes subsequent events in the United States debased the indispensable idea of individualism, our forebears also mistakenly permitted the growth of forms of individualism not conducive to genuine democratic individualism. Life is fraught with the tragedies (and comedies) of unintended consequences. Nowhere is this truer than in the field of education.

Dewey is completely aware of the dangers of a democracy that eventually eradicates all distinction and drowns individuality in unreflective ideological conformity: “Now that we have reached the point of reverence for mediocrity, for submergence of individuality in mass ideals and creeds, it is perhaps not surprising that after boasting for a long time that we had no classes we now boast that we have discovered a scientific way of dividing our population into definite classes” (Dewey [1922] 1983, 289). We must avoid reification; that is, naturalizing contingent social relations as if they were necessary and then using the results to rationalize injustice while suppressing genuine individuality. Standardized testing is a big part of the problem.

Standardized tests tell us nothing about the particular individuals we seek to educate. For instance, they leave us ignorant of unique ability or distinctive, one-time-only achievement. Small wonder we do not educate for it. Dewey wonders: “But why has it been so generally assumed among our cultivated leaders that a purely classificatory formula gives information about individual intelligence in its individuality?” (Dewey [1922] 1983, 290–91).⁴ The specific needs, desires, and interests, along with moral, artistic, and cognitive development give each individual a unique perspective on existence; hence, the unique ability to make a unique contribution. Dewey answers his own question this way: “We are irretrievably accustomed to thinking in standardized averages. Our economic and political environment leads us to think in terms of classes, aggregates and submerged membership in them. In spite of all our

talk about individuality and individualism we have no habit of thinking in terms of distinctive, much less uniquely individualized, qualities” (291). The deep-seated cultural and political custom of thinking only in terms of standards, combined with a false sense of what statistics can achieve, has devastating effects on our deliberations about the democratic individual and democratic education.

Dewey’s particular target in “Mediocrity and Individuality” is intelligence testing, which comprised the first wave of a cascade that has swept away any concern with individual personality in schooling. Of these tests he observes: “An I.Q. as at present determined is at most an indication of certain risks and probabilities. Its practical value lies in the stimulus it gives to more intimate and intensive inquiry into individualized abilities and disabilities” (Dewey [1922] 1983, 293). They are still determined this way. The problem with all such tests is that “the quality of individuality escapes them” (292). Dewey devises a well-constructed example of what he means: “Life insurance is impossible, for example, without extensive statistical investigations, establishing quantitative mean norms. Individuals are graded as to their degree of insurable risk based on these norms. But no one supposes that the result determines the fate of any particular person” (292–93). Unfortunately, high-stakes testing does, in fact, reify its constructs and seal the fate of millions when used as gatekeeping devices.

Dewey realizes that standardized tests are best at determining whether an individual has the aptitudes and achievements most useful to fit preassigned roles in the new structural feudalism. We have known for so long that these tests incorporate the biases of the ruling classes while universalizing and concretizing their ideologies and interests in many ways (gender, race, cultural background, and such) that we have almost given up talking about it. Such tests can also oppress the development of genuine individuality by keying social success toward a relatively small array of attributes approved by the aristocratic classes and away from those attributes that might threaten existing power structures by releasing unique potential. It forbids us from educating genuine individuals who might see the re-creation of a rich civic and political democracy as their life’s task.

Dewey reiterates, deepens, and expands on his thinking in “Individuality, Equality and Superiority.” Dewey devotes his second essay to a “reexamination of the fundamental ideas of superiority and equality” (Dewey [1922] 1983, 295). The opening paragraph attacks the notion of equality as standardized measurement by declaring, “the results of mental testing proves the extent to which we are given to judging and treating individuals not as individuals but as creatures of a class, a quantitative class which covers up truly individualized traits. . . . ‘Equals’ are those who belong to a class formed by like chances of attaining recognition, position and wealth in present society” (295). These

quantitative classes sort students into predetermined social classes by educating for probable destiny. Instead of sorting and accommodating physical and mental abilities, disposition, and habits to the economic, governmental, and religious institutions of present society, a democratic education would affirm qualitative moral equality to actualize unique human potential to re-create society.

In typical pragmatist fashion, Dewey remarks that there are “as many modes of superiority and inferiority as there are consequences to be attained and works to be accomplished. . . . But the idea of abstract, universal superiority is an absurdity” (Dewey [1940] 1991, 226). One problem with our standardized objectives, curricula, and tests is that they only examine a very small set of cognitive abilities and achievements while ignoring many valuable moral and aesthetic skills and dispositions. Meanwhile, the culture requires the accomplishment of an endless and potentially expanding array of work. That means we need distinctive capacities not only to creatively execute preexisting social functions but also to modify them while inventing new ones. Instead, we wish to preserve the new structural feudalism: “When classifications are rigid, the quantitative, the more or less, phase of superiority is inevitably conspicuous. Castes are ranks or grades of superiority; within each caste the hierarchical order of higher and lower is repeated. . . . [It] is evidence of the hold upon us still exercised by feudal arrangements. Our new feudalism of the industrial life which ranks from the great financier through the captain of industry down to the unskilled laborer, revives and reenforces the feudal disposition to ignore individual capacity displayed in free or individualized pursuits” (296). The new structural feudalism of the industrial, now postindustrial, life may yet defeat the old dream of democratic social relations. Certainly, it is defeating democratic individualism in our nation’s public schools.

Since *Nation at Risk* in 1983 (National Commission on Excellence in Education 1983), the rhetoric of public school reform has concentrated on global economic competition. Business leaders and politicians far outnumber educators at the most influential national schooling summits. Listen carefully to the public discourse about schooling. We are constantly talking about the economy, whether in today’s recession or the high times of the 1990s. In fact, the vocabulary of business efficiency, competitiveness, human capital theory, and standardization pervades every kind of public conversation.

Within the new structural feudalism, people are valued by the position they occupy, which assumes some people are not only born cognitively and physically superior to others but, in the case of capitalistic Calvinism, morally superior as well. Dewey wishes to rethink superiority and inferiority in terms of a more organic, functionalist model: “Sometimes in theory we conceive of every form of useful activity as on a level with every other as long as it really marks the performance of needed service. In these moments we also recognize

in idea at least that there are an infinite number of forms of significant action” (Dewey [1922] 1983, 296). Dewey wishes to carry over an important idea from the functioning of organic bodies to the body politic. For the human body to function well, every subfunction must function well. There is a tendency to place the brain above every other function of the body. However, if the bowels fail to function, so too will the brain. The same holds for every other organic function. Dewey the Darwinian knew very well that if any function is necessary to biological survival and reproduction, then it is as needed and valuable as any other function. A student teacher in my social foundations class reminded us that garbage men would always be necessary. I replied that if we truly need such women and men to sustain a healthy society, then we should honor, respect, and pay them well.

We have lost the meaning of the word “democracy” with its faith in distinctively unique individual qualities and, as Dewey puts it, “faith in corresponding unique modes of activity that create new ends, with willing acceptance of the modifications of the established order entailed by the release of individualized capacities” (Dewey [1922] 1983, 297). Instead, “now we welcome a procedure which under the title of science sinks the individual in a numerical class; judges him with reference to capacity to fit into a limited number of vocations ranked according to present business standards; assigns him to a predestined niche and thereby does whatever education can do to perpetuate the present order” (297). Instead of standardization and sameness, Dewey’s philosophy of education emphasizes incommensurable, qualitative difference.

According to Dewey, if we can reaffirm the democratic faith in qualitatively unique individuality we can rethink aristocracy:

Democracy in this sense denotes, one may say, aristocracy carried to its limit. It is a claim that every human being as an individual may be the best for some particular purpose and hence be the most fitted to rule, to lead, in that specific respect. The habit of fixed and numerically limited classifications is the enemy alike of true aristocracy and true democracy. It is because our professed aristocrats surrender so gladly to the habit of quantitative or comparative classifications that it is easy to detect snobbery of greater or less refinement beneath their professed desire for a régime of distinction. For only the individual is ultimately distinctive; the rest is a matter of common qualities differing merely in degree. (Dewey [1922] 1983, 297–98)

Dewey envisions an aristocracy composed of anyone who has fulfilled his unique potential in such a way as to make a unique, creative contribution to the community.

Here is an example of such an aristocrat drawn from my years working with a wonderful teacher, Eva Stranger (a pseudonym), in a fourth-grade

reading and writing workshop. For two hours a week in Eva's class, students wrote and composed stories. Every six weeks they would "publish" a story in a class collection. Students at all levels in this full inclusion, mixed-ability classroom wrote good stories and carefully corrected spelling and grammar. Students also often read stories sitting in "the author's chair." Eva usually occupied this rocking chair, and everyone understood that when a fellow student was reading a story the rest should provide the same attention and respect they did her. In addition, everyone wanted others to listen when they read. Things were a bit different with Tom (a pseudonym) who had Down syndrome. He authored his stories by talking them through with a teacher's aid. When time came to "read" stories, Tom invariably provided a dramatic narrative where he acted out the story often playing the role of several characters. He knew no inhibition in his performances, and they were riveting. When it was Tom's turn to tell stories, there was an electric atmosphere of carnivalesque excitement in the class. Squeals of laughter, often tinged with pathos, accompanied every performance. Children and adults alike always wildly applauded performances. My point is that for the particular purposes of dramatic narrative, Tom was the aristocrat in this community; that is, the one most fitted to rule, to lead. When asked if Deweyan models of progressive education can actually work in the classroom, I always answer yes because I have seen it.

Moral equality is the moral of my story. It is what a democratic educational philosophy can get you, if you have the moral imagination to see it and the moral disposition to do it. Dewey thought that any "intelligent defender of democratic equality" could see that "moral equality cannot be conceived on the basis of legal, political and economic arrangements. For all of these are bound to be classificatory; to be concerned with uniformities and statistical averages. Moral equality means incommensurability, the inapplicability of common and quantitative standards. It means intrinsic qualities which require unique opportunities and differential manifestation; superiority in finding a specific work to do, not in power for attaining ends common to a class of competitors, which is bound to result in putting a premium on mastery over others" (Dewey [1922] 1983, 299). Intelligent defenders of democratic equality should reject fixed and inflexible quantitative standards and eschew any curriculum or curriculum standards intended to align with such standards, classifications, and such. That means we must reject NCLB and the like (e.g., National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education [NCATE]) in favor of more democratic modes of education.

Notes

1. I would like to thank the reviewers of this journal for requesting that I clarify the relation between sameness and equality as well as other important ambiguities in the original draft of my essay. Errors remaining are my own.
2. See Harvey Cox (1999).
3. Significantly, many dictionaries define “unique” in terms of being without a like or equal.
4. In part, Dewey is thinking of intelligence in its etymological sense; that is, “inter” (between, among) and “legere” (to chose).

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