John Dewey’s Reception in “Schönian” Reflective Practice
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INTRODUCTION
Contemporary discourse on professional learning tends to claim John Dewey’s paternity for what has become a tradition of “Schönian” reflective practice.¹ I wish to challenge this claim to Dewey’s legacy and to demonstrate how “reflective practice” discourse suggests a limited and, at times, distorted reception of his thought. Positively, I suggest some directions for reconsidering how Dewey’s theories of experience, habit, and the ideal offer more expansive, more integrated notions of professional growth.

RECEPTION OF DEWEY IN REFLECTIVE PRACTICE DISCOURSE
It is not my purpose here to add to the panoply of interpretations of Donald Schön’s notion of reflective practice,² nor do I intend to offer a full explication of Deweyan reflective inquiry. I wish, rather, to consider what, as I argue, is a problematic misappropriation of the latter. Dewey is frequently pointed to as a primary philosophical anchor for Schön’s notions of reflection-on-action, reflection-in-action, responding to problematic situations, problem framing, problem solving, and the priority of practical knowledge over abstract theory. These concepts are purportedly derived from Dewey’s theory of inquiry, “the centerpiece” of his “revolt against these dualisms” (“Dewey’s Legacy,” 119–39). Asserting that Dewey’s Logic: The Theory of Inquiry³ provides the foundation for the notion of professional “thought intertwined with action,” Schön suggests that Deweyan inquiry involves doing two actions simultaneously: “mental reasoning and action in the world” (“Dewey’s Legacy,” 119–39). In a sense, then, Schön is arguing for the contiguity and synchronicity of thought and action (“thought-in-action”).⁴ (I consider below to what extent Dewey sees thought and action as two activities happening at once or as conduct that is more phenomenologically integrated.) Asserting additional support for this lineage, Schön likens Dewey’s theory of inquiry to a framework for design. Inquiry is thus considered essentially “a broader sense of designing,” a “process of making things…under conditions of complexity and uncertainty.”⁵ As Deweyan inquiry, reflective practice, for Schön, involves designing “the meaning and frame [of] the problem of the situation, thereby setting the stage for problem-solving.”⁶

Yet highlighting Dewey’s application of “scientific method” to “human, social, and political problems” (“Dewey’s Legacy,” 122), Schön distances himself somewhat from Dewey in this regard:

Dewey never fully confronts the ontological differences in our ways of seeing situations and construing them as problematic or not….As a consequence, he does not attempt the difficult task of explaining how the methods of the natural sciences are like and unlike the methods of commonsense inquiry. (“Dewey’s Legacy,” 122–23)
For Schön, these “ontological differences” are between distinct types of reflection: “knowing-in-action, reflection-in-action, and reflective conversation with the situation” (“Dewey’s Legacy,” 123). Yet despite these purported distinctions in the objects of reflection, Schön still asserts his hold on Dewey’s legacy of reflective “knowing” in problematic situations (“Dewey’s Legacy,” 122, 133, 138, n. 17). The emphasis on the experience of knowing is considered a derivation from Dewey’s focus on the “real world,” the “unique technical universe” of problems that emerge from professional experience (“Dewey’s Legacy,” 127). Inquiry into concrete problems that create confusion or indeterminate disequilibrium is thus considered the center of Dewey’s thinking. So, for Schön, professional growth begins with a kind of Deweyan “doubt” that problematizes the situation and, through careful planning and situational discernment, settles this doubt and recalibrates the situation for the better. A natural outcome of this re-equilibration is that it “brings a new problematic situation into being.” Schön concludes, then, that “the proper question after a round of inquiry is not only ‘Have I solved this problem?’ but ‘Do I like the new problems I’ve created?’” Professional inquiry is thus considered an enduring rhythm of creating (designing) by framing “different facts,” followed by “technical problem solving.”Repeatedly, proponents of reflective practice’s centrality for professional growth assert Deweyan antecedents for an experimental mode of “taking action and then reflecting on the results,” combining “knowing and doing...through a process reflection-in-action.”

Schön and his followers base their advocacy for reflective practice, in part, on what they consider to be Dewey’s reversal of the traditional privileging of “abstract theory over practical skills and wisdom in everyday affairs.” Schön even maintains that Dewey “went so far as to question the very existence of thought” (“Dewey’s Legacy,” 121), basing this interpretation on Dewey’s statement: “I doubt whether there exists anything that may be called thought as a strictly psychical existence...[but] even if there be such a thing, it does not determine the meaning of ‘thought’ for logic.”

It is, however, important to consider the specific language and qualifications in this passage that Schön reads as Dewey’s going “so far as to question the very existence of thought.” First, Dewey is referring to “thought as a strictly psychical existence.” By this he means that thought is always in relation to something else, to what I will suggest is habit’s dynamic, organic relation to the contextual environment. Next, Dewey stipulates that he is referring to “the meaning of ‘thought’ for logic.” As I note, Dewey considered human experience as highly variegated; for him, the experience of logical inquiry, of “knowing,” does not begin to exhaust the complex field of professional experience. I am therefore suggesting that we should be careful not to generalize Dewey’s view of thoughtful professionalism as being primarily rooted in his theory of logical inquiry.

**Experience, Habit, and the Ideal**

Dewey’s holistic phenomenology makes it difficult to do justice to his thought when isolating one aspect of experience, as I suggest Schön and others have done in focusing on what they characterize as the centrality of his problem-based, situational
inquiry theory. And this difficulty is compounded by the sheer vastness of Dewey’s oeuvre written over some sixty years of his adult life. In trying to surmount these challenges, I wish to highlight several conceptual themes that run across much of Dewey’s work that will distinguish his notion of reflection from that of Schön’s. I focus here on his concepts of experience, habit, and the ideal. Each of these concepts lends expression to the way Dewey collapses the traditional distinctions between *techne*, *phronesis*, and *arete*, as he sees skillful technique, intangible practical wisdom, and personal (and professional) virtue as a holistic framework for action, thought, and meaning.

As Victor Kestenbaum notes, Dewey seeks, in Wallace Steven’s language, to “subtilize experience = to apprehend the complexity of the world, to perceive the intricacy of appearance” — and not only the experience of logical inquiry. There is much in professional experience that Dewey argues far “outruns the seen and touched” of the specific constituent elements of a problematic situation. I am therefore suggesting that the claim to Deweyan roots for Schön’s prescriptive, sequential, calculative reflection on distinct problems belies Dewey’s holistic theory of a broader professional life-world. Dewey explains that, to avoid decontextualized “distortion,” experience must be recognized as inclusive, variegated, and integrated: “The fact of integration in life is a basic fact, and until its recognition becomes habitual, unconscious and pervasive, we need a word like experience to remind us of it, and to keep before thought the distortions that occur when the integration is ignored or denied.” Here Dewey introduces his holistic notion of experience, asserting that “we need a word” that captures the “habitual, unconscious and pervasive” integrative texture of our lives. Dewey is not simply referring to the diverse roles we play, but to the complex, intrinsic, contextual integrity of experience, implying that logical scientific inquiry is but one aspect of professional experience and that overdetermining a specifically framed problem has its potential liabilities: “Science will then be of interest as one of the phases of human experience, but intrinsically no more so than magic, myth, politics, painting, poetry and penitentiaries….Imagination is as much to be noted as refined observation.” Experience transcends not only “refined observation” but also conscious denotations:

> Experience is something quite other than “consciousness,” that is, that which appears qualitatively and focally at a particular moment….It is important for a theory of experience to know that under certain circumstances men prize the distinct and clearly evident. But it is no more important than it is to know that under other circumstances twilight, the vague, dark and mysterious flourish….What is not explicitly present makes up a vastly greater part of experience than does the conscious field to which thinkers have so devoted themselves.

Dewey is suggesting that reflection on experience requires a more transversal logos, drawing on all aspects of experience, rather than only on a logos of logic. As Calvin Schrag notes in a Deweyan key:

> Expressive action should thus not be restricted to the deliverance of meaning through conscious motivation and reflective, deliberative acts. The sources of human motivation, and the layers of meaning that encircle them, are drawn from a wider context and a wider space, in which acquired habits, established customs, and historical trends mix and mingle.
Schrag here echoes what Dewey calls a comingling of “political, religious, aesthetic, industrial, intellectual” contexts of experience with their wide range of “savors, colors, weights, tempos and directions” — an integration that suggests that “[e]xperience as method warns us to give impartial attention to all of these diversifications.”

This inclusive, intricate theory of experience is informed by Dewey’s concept of habit. Like the word “experience” Dewey’s use of “habit” stems from the fact that “we need a word” for a complex integrated amalgam:

[W]e need a word to express that kind of human activity which is influenced by prior activity and in that sense acquired; which contains within itself a certain ordering or systematization of minor elements of action; which is projective, dynamic in quality, ready for overt manifestation; and which is operative in some subdued subordinate form even when not obviously dominating activity.

Habit “projects” us forward even as we carry with us a cumulative, experiential past into the present. It is a propulsive “predisposition” and “special sensitiveness” constituting certain “standing predilections and aversions” in our encounters. These habitual sensitivities have a dynamic rootedness as they change and grow with experience. In his most succinct encapsulation of the concept, Dewey states that habit “means will.” As willful, continual, and projective, Dewey’s concept of habit is a function of both character and conduct, thus unifying “motive and act, will and deed.” He expresses this best in Art as Experience: “Through habits formed in intercourse with the world, we also in-habit the world. It becomes a home and the home is part of our every experience.”

Among the values required as a dimension of professional habit is what Dewey calls “conscientiousness.” Conscientiousness is more than reflectivity with regard to standards of value, though it may encompass it:

The truly conscientious person not only uses a standard in judging, but is concerned to revise and improve his standard. He realizes that the value resident in acts goes beyond anything which he has already apprehended, and that therefore there must be something inadequate in any standard which has been definitely formulated. He is on the lookout for good not already achieved.

In this sense of conscientiousness, reflection takes place not simply when a problem confronts us, it is a necessary process for the realization of something different, not as a solution, but as a pursuit of an unknown but desired outcome. It is the enduring deferral of static, known standards, in the pursuit of something that transcends those standards.

For Dewey, desire’s valuing and reflective judgment’s valuation of alternatives are ineluctable aspects of deliberation even when we direct our attention to practical needs: “In all cases of deliberation, judgment of value enters; the one who engages in it is concerned to weigh values with a view to discovering the better and rejecting the worse.”

This ubiquity of values in deliberation extends to the most practical professional matters, making reflection more than an expression of a
Reflect on how to improve students’ learning experiences, senses of community, or self-confidence are examples of this staking of the self. “Precisely the same” practical issues achieve their moral import as we identify with the value-laden dimensions of professional conduct.

It is true that deliberative reflection often begins in doubt, but the choice to be made is not limited to how to frame and solve a problem or how to resolve a doubt:

The choice at stake in a moral deliberation or valuation is the worth of this and that kind of character and disposition. Deliberation is not then to be identified with calculation, or a quasi-mathematical reckoning of profit and loss. Such calculation assumes that the nature of the self does not enter into question, but only how much the self is going to get of this and that. Moral deliberation deals not with quantity of value but with quality.\(^3\)\(^4\)

The projected qualitative nature of an outcome suggests a kind of presence of less tangible ideals within a professional’s thinking. This contextual frame for professional reflection, then, though concerned with consequences, transcends answers to the question of “what will work” or of what will produce more client, parent, student, or supervisor satisfaction.

Contrary to the way he is frequently invoked, Dewey does not assume the constancy of problematic instability and the sustained need to problematize professional experience. Discovering what ignites a student’s love of reading, responding to a distraught parent, preparing for an observation are not necessarily “problem-framing” and “problem-solving” experiences. They may be opportunities to sense intimations of ideals in professional experience when virtues like sensitivity, conscientiousness, and collegiality are expressed in action and cultivated in professional learning. These professional events may be what Dewey would call “pivot points” in a professional’s pre-reflective flow of sympathetic action.\(^3\)\(^5\)

Schön, on the other hand, maintains a clear distinction between “the problems of the high ground” and those “in the swamp.” It is an “either, or” situation in which “the practitioner must choose.” The operative question is: “Shall he [she] remain on the high ground where he[ she] can solve relatively unimportant problems according to prevailing standards of rigour, or shall he [she] descend to the swamp of important problems and nonrigorous inquiry?”\(^3\)\(^6\) Though Schön attributes this distinction between “high ground” and “low ground” to Dewey, a juxtaposition such as this would constitute one of the very dualisms that Dewey seeks to unravel. Dewey’s concepts of habit and experience dissolve the disparity between rigor and relevance when we consider that interaction with and formation of abstract ideas are as much a part of experience as are concrete, tangible interactions with problematic situations. Learning, even “theoretical” learning, is within professional experience,
bequeathing dynamic, habitual sensitivities, motivations, and conduct. Seeing habit and experience holistically calls for a professional conduct that considers how abstract concepts and theories are potentially integrated within practice, even as conscientious habit projects the professional forward to take risks, frame problems, and produce change. For Dewey, learning is not purely an experience of logical, practical knowing; it is also an aesthetic, evocative, emotional experience propelling the learner forward with an increasing desire for deeper inquiry and with more fluid, sensitive, thoughtful, practice.\textsuperscript{37} Dewey is as concerned with intangibles as he is with the definite, framed constituent elements of a problematic situation.

Many assume a view of Dewey’s thought, however, that caricatures his pragmatism as “a can-do, go-getting, commonsensical disposition…subjecting every argument or insight to the test of what works.”\textsuperscript{38} Some go so far as to blame Dewey’s “evolutionary naturalism” for “the many social ills that have plagued the nation’s landscapes of learning,” placing excessive emphasis on “scientific inquiry and democracy that often bypass theological questions.”\textsuperscript{39} But, as has been demonstrated by Kestenbaum, Dewey maintains an enduring place for the intangible, transcendent ideal in experience, including the experience of deliberation.\textsuperscript{40}

I cite two of Dewey’s important complementary works that express his notion of the ideal.\textsuperscript{41} The first is a chapter in \textit{Outline of a Critical Theory of Ethics} titled “Goodness as Struggle” in which Dewey articulates the dynamics of the “struggle for the ideal” in experience:

> [W]hen morality lies in striving for satisfactions which have not verified themselves to our sense, it always requires an effort. We have to surrender the enjoyed good, and stake ourselves upon that of which we cannot say: We know it is good. To surrender the actual experienced good for a possible ideal good is the struggle.\textsuperscript{42}

The struggle for the good is a staking of ourselves. It is venturing, committing to an unknown. It is not a calculated assurance; it is letting go of assurance, an active encounter between habit and ideal.\textsuperscript{43}

In \textit{Human Nature and Conduct}, Dewey develops his notion of the ideal further, demonstrating how the ideal is not a goal that we set based on a determined or projected resolution to a problem. It is rather an “indefinite context” of “felt significance” on which we can only cast a narrow, limited light:

> The “end” is the figured pattern at the center of the field through which runs the axis of conduct. About this central figuration extends infinitely a supporting background in a vague whole, undefined and undiscriminated. At most intelligence but throws a spotlight on that little part of the whole which marks out the axis of movement.\textsuperscript{44}

This contextual, diffuse, emotional experience of the ideal is wedded to the intellectual, reflective pursuit of an “end” through deliberative inquiry. The emotional and the intellectual — “wish and thought”\textsuperscript{45} — form the seamless context in which planning, decision making, and action are “sustained and supported” by the ideal: “This ideal is not a goal to be attained. It is a significance to be felt, appreciated. Though consciousness of it cannot become intellectualized (identified in objects of a distinct character) yet emotional appreciation of it is won only by those willing to
think.” The experience of the ideal expands and edifies habit as new “appreciations and intimations” are “wrought into the texture of our lives.”

What is missing in the Schönian perspective on Dewey, then, is a conception of professional experience that goes beyond responsiveness to discomfort and to perceived problems. It would be important that professional reflection reaches a point where it involves what Charles Scott refers to as the “critique of ideals...a displacement of [one’s] own way of viewing and valuing things.” For Dewey, professional practices draw ideals into experience. Ideals function to bring meaning to experience as they serve as moral, educational, theological, or aesthetic contexts for conduct. In professional experience and professional learning, we can become more aware of “the capacity of immediate sensuous experience to absorb into itself meanings and values that in and of themselves — that is in the abstract — would be designated ‘ideal’ and ‘spiritual.’”

A thorough articulation of a Deweyan approach to professional growth and reflection would exceed the scope and purpose of this essay. I have tried to show the need for reconstructing the claim that Schönian reflective practice applies the central aspects of Dewey’s thought. To integrate Dewey’s thinking into the discourse on professional reflection it would be important to contextualize his Logic as a significant but not the central expression of what he considers to be the intricacies of human experience in general and of professional experience in particular. If we decenter Schön’s interpretation of Logic and recenter Dewey’s concepts of experience, habit, and ideal, we can extend and deepen our practices to include a greater sense of the transcendent intangibles that outrun our palpable everyday encounters with the problems in our professional lives. Recontextualizing problems as part of a broader texture of professional experiences, habits, and ideals can then foster a deeper sense of ourselves and of our practices.


5. Ibid., 31.

6. Ibid.

7. Dewey, in fact, devotes substantial attention to the relationship between scientific inquiry and common sense throughout his works.


11. Ibid., 31.


13. Ibid.


19. On the need for the reflective moral dimension see Leitch and Day, “Action Research” and Higgins, “Reflective Practice to Practical Wisdom.”


22. Ibid., 7


33. Ibid.

34. Ibid.


45. Ibid., 248.

46. Ibid., 261.

