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**CULTIVATING DEMOCRATIC HABITS OF COMMUNICATION  
IN THE SOCIAL STUDIES**

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by

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## Abstract

This study is a philosophical analysis of John Dewey's *habits of communication* in relation to contemporary education. In this conception, habits are the result of active modifications made by an organism to better thrive within a given environment, while communication can be understood as an inclusive act between participants and objects in which meaning is produced. The most sophisticated habits are social, as they involve *transactions* between organisms and their environments. Habits become incorporated within an organism at a subconscious level through adaptation and subsequent reflection. While much has been written about conscious reflection in education, one thesis of this study is that a better understanding of how students acquire habits, particularly habits of communication, can provide fruitful directions for contemporary educational theory and social studies teacher education.

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## Introduction

My interest in John Dewey emerged toward the end of my master's program at Eastern Michigan University. At the time, I was also teaching social studies at a public high school in Detroit, in a high poverty neighborhood with a student population that was overwhelmingly African-American. On a suggestion from one of the Eastern faculty members, I began reading Dewey's (1938) *Experience and Education*. I was immediately struck by how relevant Dewey's arguments were about considering both the wishes of the society and the student in formulating curriculum. In my master's program, I had been exposed to readings that argued for moving away from teacher-centered approaches and focusing more upon the experiences and desires of the students themselves. I was deeply sympathetic to these arguments, as I had daily experiences with many students who were largely disengaged from the standard social studies curriculum. At the same time, as a practicing teacher, I did not believe the extreme versions of this position were particularly practical or beneficial for students who were already academically deficient and lacking the social capital needed to thrive in society's dominant culture. In this context, Dewey's assertions about finding ways to integrate students' experiences with established curriculum goals was deeply appealing, as it seemed to be a way to cut through curriculum debates and point the way toward a more productive approach to social studies.

At the same time that I began reading *Experience and Education*, I was beginning to work on a final project for one of my classes – a special topic course on the subject of *Fear* and the discourses and practices of fear surrounding education policy and practice. For a final project in this course, I conducted a qualitative study consisting of interviews with some of my Detroit students about their experiences with violence and their perceptions of fear surrounding these experiences. The results were fascinating, as my students seemed on one level to

understand that their lives were surrounded by violence, yet most of them had limited experience in other social or cultural environments, so that they had little to draw upon when making comparisons and deriving meaning from their personal experiences in relation to a larger social context. Many students insisted that Detroit, in particular their own west side neighborhood, was tough and commanded respect – many noted that one needed to be careful about how they conducted themselves on the local streets. On the other hand, these same students were often defensive about assertions that their neighborhood was unusually violent or dangerous.

More importantly for this current project, within the intersection of Dewey's ideas and my field research I began to make connections to Dewey's assertions about curriculum – particularly about neglecting neither students' experiences nor the broader goals of society. I began experimenting with the curriculum of my *global issues* class. I began asking students to share their experiences with violence, and used these class discussions as the basis for an inquiry into macro-social statistics on violence – locally and regionally as well as nationally. We analyzed violent crime statistics for Detroit compared to surrounding cities, and the nation as a whole. We explored perceptions of Detroit in the local and national media, and reflected upon these points of view in relation to their own feelings about violence in their neighborhood.

Through the interface of personal experience and curriculum objectives, my students were able to make greater meaning about their own experiences, while simultaneously connecting their experiences to the broader social world. Within this experience, Dewey's ideas came to life as vital ways to enrich the educational experience of my students. In this context, Dewey's philosophy was not detached or separate from the world of lived experience. Rather, I was able to see how an engagement with Dewey's philosophy provided ways to enrich meaning making for my students within the social studies classroom.

In this project, I explore Dewey's use of *habit* in relation to how humans make meaning through *communication*. Dewey argues that humans develop habits as active adaptations, which allow them to more robustly thrive within their physical and social environments. However, if not carefully crafted, habits have a tendency to become rigid and inflexible. In Dewey's time, modern life was disrupting the thick community contexts that contribute to productive *habits of communication* for many citizens. Formal schooling represented a potential space where deficits in such habits could be addressed, as the school could possibly serve as an intermediary between the individual and society – helping students make meaning in a social world that, through increasing centralization of government and political power, was becoming ever more difficult to understand within a local context. This disruption was compounded by the emergence and proliferation of mass media, which contributed to perceptions of a shared social world that was largely disconnected from direct, personal experience.

As will be explored in the chapters ahead, Dewey sees communication not primarily as transmission of information, but rather as a participatory act in which meaning is made in common between two or more people. From this perspective, what Dewey (1930/1999) calls “lost individuals” can be understood as people who have diminished opportunities to make meaning of their social world through direct engagement with others due to the aforementioned societal changes.

When examining the present, we can generalize that opportunities to make meaning, at least within the arena of civic life, has severely diminished for most citizens to an even greater degree compared to during Dewey's time. Civic participation in the form of voluntary associations has diminished steadily in the past few decades, as have voting percentages, petition signing, and numbers of citizens running for political office (Putnam, 1995, 2001). Putnam

(2001) attributes these changes to various factors, including pressures of money related to decreased earning power, suburbanization and sprawl, along with electronic entertainment, which has contributed to privatizing leisure time. Arguably, a decrease in voluntary organizations due to factors such as sprawl and privatized entertainment has led to an increasing separation between areas of civic participation and the rest of life. Social theorist Zygmunt Bauman (2001) goes so far as to say that politics have now become a barrier to “real life.”

Research suggests that socialization is strongly influenced by media exposure, as mass media often sets the agenda for what is considered valuable or appropriate within social engagement (Dill, 2009). With the proliferation of mobile digital devices, leisure time is likely to move toward more privatization – increasing the power of mass media to influence social meaning (Barber, 2007; Turkle, 2011).

The current cultural conditions are a far cry from what Dewey (1939/1976) calls democracy as “a way of life,” as opportunities for citizens to make meaning of civic and political dimensions of experience have become attenuated. As Barber (2007) asserts, being an effective citizen requires being socially embedded. The life of a consumer, by contrast, is radically individuated – and the aforementioned factors are leading society toward ever-greater individuation under the ideology and discourse of the consumer.

With respect to social studies education, concerns over lost individuals are most directly relevant when it comes to children. Marketing through mass media induces discontent, which promotes consumerism, and marketing to children has increased dramatically over the past generation – growing from \$100 million in 1983 to \$15 billion in 2004 (Schor, 2004). This has correlated with a soaring degree of behavioral and emotional problems in children over the same period (Dill, 2009; Schor, 2004). Children throughout these years have also spent much less



time engaged in free play (Dill, 2009; Levin, 2011) and are likely to spend more time playing with commercial toys that encourage scripted forms of play that inhibit the imagination when compared to previous generations (Carlsson-Paige, 2012). These children also spent less time visiting others and having household conversations than previous generations (Schor, 2004). The consequences for social meaning making are not often considered in debates about media effects. This work is intended to examine Dewey's habits of communication in light of the above societal changes and their implications for social studies education. I do not examine the direct consequences of media engagement, but rather explore the consequences for meaning making communication in an increasingly commodified social landscape, and how social studies education may be able to address these challenges.

This work employs foundational lenses to examine Dewey's habits of communication and its significance for social studies education. By foundational, I specifically mean the lenses of philosophy, sociology, and history. My primary lens is philosophical, although I also bolster my philosophical analysis with recent research in sociology in order to situate Dewey's theories in a 21<sup>st</sup> century context. I also use a historical lens to explicate Dewey's theories on democracy in light of their social and historical context of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Because John Dewey is revered in social studies education, I assume the reader will be broadly familiar with Dewey as connected to progressive forms of education. I also assume most readers will be largely amenable to these arguments. However, this work is intended to offer interpretations of Dewey's theories that may challenge some prevailing understandings in contemporary scholarship. It is my hope that invoking Dewey will make these assertions, which in regard to media and technology may be controversial, both more palatable and more convincing.

Lastly, I want to acknowledge some avenues of scholarship that I do not undertake. In the first chapter, I begin by suggesting that Dewey derived his conception of intersubjective communication from George Herbert Mead. As my research progressed, I came to the conclusion that Dewey's conception of communication diverges from Mead's in important ways that made further exploration of Mead's work less focal. That being said, an examination of Dewey's habits of communication in conversation with Mead's work and the subsequent sociological tradition of *symbolic interactionism* would be a fruitful project for future research.

It should also be noted that Dewey was not the first social thinker to address concerns about American individualism, nor was he the first to highlight the role of daily interactions in the formation of character and disposition. Nearly half a century before Dewey began publishing, Alexis de Tocqueville (1789/1840) articulated many of these same concerns in his two volumes of *Democracy in America*. Tocqueville astutely identified connections between participation in local government and voluntary associations as crucial facets of a larger social fabric that helped American citizens form a public, democratic spirit. Tocqueville, like Dewey, also recognized individualism as offering the possibility of social progress by dissolving outmoded traditions. Yet at the same time, Tocqueville was concerned that individualism may eventually erode the social fabric and vital traditions that worked to form and maintain democratic dispositions. Both Dewey and Tocqueville were concerned about acquisitive dispositions contributing to political apathy, and both worried that atomism and dissociation could eventually lead to the tyranny of mass opinion and greater centralized political authority. Indeed, many of the concerns expressed by Dewey concerning the lost individual and the *great community* were first expressed by Tocqueville (although he used different terminology). I make passing comparative references to Tocqueville in chapter 4, but I do not explore these

connections in-depth. Such work would be useful and productive for future scholarship, as would investigations that place Deweyan communication in conversation with more contemporary theories of communication.

As indicated above, this is largely a work of educational theory applied to social studies education. As such, there is an emergent quality to my theoretical revelations, and I have chosen to leave this aspect of the work intact, rather than rewrite the chapters to be absolutely consistent. It is my hope that this will give the work a more genuine feel, and that the reader will be better able to understand my evolving engagement with Dewey.

## Chapter 1:

### **Locating Dewey's "Lost Individual" Through 21<sup>st</sup> Century Education**

Dewey uses the term "lost individual" to describe citizens who were unable to make connections between themselves and the larger social and political environment. Today's prevailing model of education privileges a narrowly utilitarian curriculum that contributes to the production of lost individuals by neglecting the importance of habit-forming features of education. Dewey's conception of individual growth through habit formation can help educators address lost individuals by illuminating the role of habits, particularly habits of communication oriented toward common understandings, in achieving growth. The role of communities in this process is explored, as is the role of particular educational practices that may help or hinder meaning making communication.

In the first half of the twentieth century, Dewey (1930/1999) used the term "lost individual" to describe citizens who had become disconnected from social and community bonds and were left to fend with diminished social support in an increasingly confusing social and political environment. The new economic order of assembly-line industry, mass-media communications, and mass consumer culture along with rapidly increasing urbanization had, in many cases, disrupted community connections that had helped to forge strong and secure individuals. For Dewey, humans are inherently social and derive their sense of individuality from social and environmental transactions. Yet in the absence of strong community bonds, other environmental factors gain greater influence. Dewey (1930/1999) asserts, "the individual cannot remain intellectually a vacuum. If his ideas and beliefs are not the spontaneous function of a communal life in which he shares, a seeming consensus will be secured as a substitute by

artificial and mechanical means” (41). The “artificial and mechanical means” that Dewey criticizes include the then-emerging world of popular entertainment that was separating leisure from community life, turning art and esthetics into a means of individualized escapism rather than something that was communally experienced, shared, or produced. Lost individuals indulged in escapist entertainment and were politically apathetic because, according to Dewey (1930/1999), they were unable to make connections between their own circumstances and the formative features of the larger social and political world.

The fragmentation of the social world has been greatly accelerated by the “information revolution” and the continued march of neoliberal globalization. Today, individuals find themselves in a social and political world that is vastly more diffused and, ultimately, more confusing. Kosnoski (2010) states,

Because of the inability to situate oneself in one’s fragmented and dispersed social environment, local problems seem unconnected to any specific causation, therefore attempts to address them inevitably remain partial, momentary, and fragmentary. This leads to frustration, disempowerment, and the further turning inward of political perspective. (p. 3)

The disconnection between individuals and their social environment has grown more severe in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century. Dewey’s explication of lost individuals can be understood as an incipient analysis of the atomized or “individualized” (Bauman, 2000b) individual who is detached from local connections and immersed in mass culture.

Centralizing tendencies within the culture have also effected education. Over the course of the twentieth century, the national government has played a steadily increasing role in education policy (Linn, 2010; Ross, 2006). Neoliberal logic, which promotes the expansion of

market forces, underpins assumptions of efficiency behind standardized tests. In the vision of education promoted by policies such as *No Child Left Behind*, students are treated consumers and future workers who must obtain the proper skills to compete in the global economy, while goals of educating students for citizenship are largely, if not entirely, neglected (Giroux, 1991; Onosko, 2011; Ross, 2006).

I argue Dewey's conception of the lost individual and his proposed solutions for reconstruction can help both school and society address issues of depoliticization and individualization. To demonstrate this, I will first examine Dewey's formation of the self, which is forged through transactions with the physical and social environment. Next, I will explore Dewey's process of growth achieved through the acquisition and modification of *habits* by way of inquiry and reflection. The development of democratic habits is neglected in the prevailing vision of 21<sup>st</sup> century education, which is increasingly focused on a narrow set of core content and skills. While a Deweyan approach to education is not averse to content or skill acquisition, it also identifies habit-formation as a central feature of education. By focusing on overly narrow measures and neglecting student growth, the prevailing model of education contributes to the production of lost individuals.

### **Dewey's Formation of the Self**

Dewey grounds the formation of the self in a naturalistic metaphysics, in which individuals are in continuous transactions with their environment. He rejects the transcendental self, instead Dewey asserts that humans are inherently social and derive their sense of individuality from social and environmental transactions. Dewey (1964) explains, "through the influence of the social environment each person becomes saturated with the customs, the beliefs, purposes, skills, hopes and fears of the cultural group to which he belongs" (p. 10). Individuals

learn about the world through these transactions, which modify their impulses and help form what Dewey calls *habits*. This concept underscores a complex interplay of conscious and subconscious elements. Dewey (1922) defines *habit* as:

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. (p. 40)

Habits can be understood as sensitivity to particular stimuli, as they suggest certain dispositions of behavior and tendencies toward action. They are acquired through prior activity, and are in many ways synonymous with, though not reducible to, will. These habits constitute the self, as they form the foundation from which all bodily and mental functions are derived. Individuals draw their habits, and hence, their individuality, from their culture. This makes a direct link between the vibrancy of a local culture and the individuality of its citizens.

The concept of habit breaks down mind/body dualisms, as habits are simultaneously physical and mental as well as moral in nature. Dewey (1922) asserts,

Our ideas truly depend upon experience, but so do our sensations. And the experience upon which they both depend is the operation of habits... Thus our purposes and commands regarding action (whether physical or moral) come to us through the refracting medium of bodily and moral habits. (p. 32)

Moral judgment resides in the habits that have been acquired through lived experience in adaptive reactions to environmental stimuli.

Dewey emphasizes the formative nature of social forces on human conduct, yet he also

identifies a process whereby individuals differentiate themselves from one another. The beginning of individuality, according to Dewey, emerges through what he calls *impulses*-- natural reactions to stimuli that take shape through interactions in particular environments, working to form new habits in some cases, while modifying existing habits in others. The character of an individual consists of habits formed through modification of impulses and is subsequently dependent upon the quality of their experiences. Dewey (1922) asserts, “everything depends upon the kind of experience that centers in him. Not the residence of experience counts, but its contents, what’s in the house” (p. 292).

Habits persist until the environment rejects them. As this occurs, individuals must continually adjust their habits as they strive to harmonize themselves with their environment (Uffelman, 2011). Individuality emerges through diverse experiences achieved primarily out of active participation in processes of communication. While conscious reflection is necessary in this process, it is a secondary phenomenon that occurs only after a disruption of habits. Lehmann-Rommel (2000) explains, “participation in the daily activities comes before observation and reflection and comprises emotions, intentions, intuitions, desires, needs, and habits” (p. 192). The ‘felt sense’ of a problem induces reflection, triggering thought that can ultimately allow one to adjust habits (Dewey, 1933) – altering attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors. This “transactional constructivism,” (Biesta & Burbules, 2003) involving transactions between an individual, their environment, and the subsequent interplay between subconscious habits and conscious reflection, allow individuals to achieve *growth*.

Transactional relations are not a one-way imposition upon the individual. In a thriving environment with vibrant transactions between the individual and the social, the individual is also able to alter social conditions. When flexible habits and careful reflective thinking have



been cultivated, what emerges are intelligent, “embodied, enculturated agents” (Colapietro, 1999) able to exert control over their environment. Flexible, intelligent habits are “vehicles of power” (Hildreth, 2009, p. 791) that open up a field of agency where individuals become empowered to affect their environment in positive ways. The extent of an individual’s control depends upon acquiring complex habits of inquiry and reflection, which are “marked by plasticity or flexibility and openness to new conditions that liberates the original impulse behind the habit to seek new forms of expression” (Bergman, 2005, p. 48). Acquiring these intelligent habits depends upon opportunities for continuous transactions within a vibrant community open to the potential of shared communication.

Individuality is an achievement, but not the achievement of an isolated individual. Rather, it is accomplished by an individual as part of a community that has practiced the communal habits of inquiry and reflection and thereby imparted such habits to individuals. Those individuals affect the environment in turn, bringing new ideas and perspectives into the social environment that disrupt customs and traditions and promote growth among their fellow citizens. Hence, Dewey’s dissolution of the dualism between individual and social, as the two thrive together.

In the self forged through habits, Dewey opens experience to what Christopher Lasch (1988) calls a “conversational relationship with the past” where one “seeks neither to deny the past nor to achieve an imaginative restoration of the past but to enter into a dialogue with the traditions that still shape our view of the world” (p. 178). This dialogue is performed by individuals in transactional relations with others as they continually construct meaning together while modifying their own habits to adapt to changing circumstances. Habituated agents continually use the ‘funded knowledge’ of the past as a basis for intelligence engagement and

modification of customs and traditions. Through this communicative process, one's world of meaning is enriched as connections with the world grow. Thus, Dewey's self is distinguished from both the traditional unified self as well as the fractured self sometimes described in poststructural analysis, where the self is argued to be articulated entirely through discourse without any further grounding. By contrast, Dewey's self can be understood as neither fractured nor in unity, but rather in *continuity* as "we are constantly seeking to unify the story of our lives aesthetically" (Garrison, 1997, p. 145). The self tends toward stability over time as increased experience and understanding offer the individual greater control, understanding and mastery over a multitude of environments.

### **Centrality of Communication to Growth**

Dewey's self in continuity helps illuminate how educators can foster agency among students, while highlighting the role of local community and its traditions in this process. In both classrooms and communities, communication both within and between groups opens up possibilities for rich learning experiences where members articulate their own impressions, receive feedback from others and modify their positions, attitudes and beliefs. As Dewey (1924/1958) posits, "when communication occurs, all natural events are subject to reconsideration and revision; they are re-adapted to meet the requirements of conversation, whether it be public discourse or that preliminary discourse termed thinking. Events turn into objects, things with a meaning" (p. 166). In this process, connections are made that not only enrich understanding of the immediate matter but also imbue a broad range of topics with added meanings by virtue of the connections made through the communicative process. In this way, communication enriches experience, connecting with participants' impulses and honing their habits toward more effective social action.

The act of give-and-take, of speaking and listening, produces meaning, but this meaning is not derived merely from the exchange of information. Although information exchange is important, a more crucial point of communication is the actual meaning created *within* the exchange. Meaning is achieved primarily through participation in the constructive process, the *activity itself*. Dewey (1924/1958) asserts

Meaning is not indeed a psychic existence; it is primarily a property of behavior, and secondarily a property of objects. But the behavior of which it is a quality is a distinctive behavior; cooperative, in that response to another's act involves contemporaneous response to a thing as entering into the other's behavior, and this upon both sides. (p. 179)

Dewey draws from Mead's analysis of intersubjective communication, which is based upon an anticipatory structure where individuals adjust to what they anticipate from the 'other' in what Biesta (1999) calls a "matrix of coordinated action" (p. 483). As transactions continue, meanings get co-constructed and reconstructed as they are exchanged and become shared. It is this active process of participatory communication where the self is forged and meaning is achieved for both individuals and groups.

Communication also can be a consummatory experience – a pleasurable end in itself (Dewey, 1924/1958). Meanings are not only enhanced in this process, they become shared. Barriers are broken down and communal action, including further processes of inquiry, become easier to achieve. Through communication, an individual's habits become more flexible and varied, making further adjustments easier along with making individuals more sensitive and responsive to one's environment. It is through this process of active participation in thriving transactional communities, while continually engaging in processes of common meaning-making

with others, in which Dewey's lost individuals can be "found," or more precisely, how individuals are able to construct meaningful connections between themselves and the larger social and political world.

### **The Meaning Making Functions of Communities**

Focusing on Dewey's (1927/1946) concept of communication clarifies his contention made in *Public and Its Problems* that possibilities for creating the "Great Community" rest upon the vibrancy of local communities composed primarily of face-to-face interaction. When Dewey's concerns about lost individuals are considered in conjunction with his notion of democracy as "the idea of community life itself" (p. 146), it becomes clear that daily interactions within local communities are crucial to forming democratic habits and dispositions. However, Dewey offers few details as to the particulars of these community transactions. Scholarship in the latter half of the twentieth century, much of it loosely associated with communitarianism, can offer some specifics.

Robert Putnam (1995, 2001) charts the loss of voluntary associations, finding steadily diminishing participation in voluntary associations in the latter decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Parent-teacher organizations and other public meetings have also endured decreased participation, with attendance falling by almost half between 1973 and 1994 (Sander and Putnam, 2010). Putnam's analysis is based upon the concept of *social capital*, or the factors of social organizations that facilitate mutually beneficial social action. Putnam (1995) concludes "members of associations are much more likely than nonmembers to participate in politics, to spend time with neighbors, to express social trust" (p. 73). Supporting research suggests social capital "is a by-product of the social interactions with a citizen's discussants" and is an important factor in facilitating political involvement (La Due Lake and Huckfeldt, 1998, p. 581).

Ray Oldenburg (1999) discusses the importance of informal gathering places, or what he calls *third places* (neither work nor home) to the vitality of local community life. Sites such as bars, taverns, coffee shops, and bookstores are places where patrons gather and local connections, often subtle and informal, are made while deliberative democratic dispositions are cultivated. A *third place* is not just any bar or coffee shop, Oldenburg argues, but can be distinguished by its largely local clientele, its vibrant conversation, and its lack of outside distractions such as televisions or video games. Conversation is the main activity and younger members learn by observing the interactions of their elders and, over time, join in as full participants.

Oldenburg's examination of third places aligns with a Deweyan understanding of democracy as more than a system of government, but also as a way of life (Dewey 1939/1976) embodied in the daily practices of citizens. These practices are nurtured by a "thickly interwoven social fabric" (Elshtain, 1996, p. 508) of relations which "signifies the possession and continual use of certain attitudes, forming personal character and determining desire and purpose in all relations of life" (Dewey, 1939/1976, p. 226). Together with voluntary associations, third places are anchors of local neighborhoods and communities where thick connections encourage public responsibility in ways that are difficult to replicate through bureaucratic or other means (Lasch, 1995). Oldenburg's analysis speaks to the importance of fostering democratic habits through continual direct engagement with familiar and perhaps not so familiar 'others' on matters that range from trivial concerns to those of serious social import. Such communicative experiences foster habits of patience, openness, and the ability to participate meaningfully in conversation by listening carefully and speaking in turn. This also broadens participants' horizons as they transact with diverse others.

From the perspective of Deweyan communication, the continuous meaning making that occurs within voluntary associations and third places through direct conversation allows individuals to create meaning by making connections between their own lives and the larger world. These practices foster individuality even as they simultaneously make positive contributions to the community. This suggests theorists concerned about the state of democratic life should examine how the daily practices of citizens and students contribute to meaning making communication along with, as Oldenburg suggests, exploring how some practices encourage individuals to isolate themselves from meaningful engagement. This can point educators toward directions for achieving deeper connections between students and communities and, consequently, improving meaning making among both youth and adults. Town forums and public meetings are still commonplace in local communities. These in conjunction with a variety of local settings, including but not limited to those highlighted by Putnam and Oldenburg, provide models for communication as common meaning making and may also hold potential for fostering school and community connections, where democratic dispositions could be cultivated by students through authentic participatory communication.

The above conclusions suggest a deeper inquiry into the practices that are fostered by daily communication practices is warranted. If the goal of educators is to cultivate individuality through robust social engagement, then more attention must be paid to the consequences of communication practices and the habits and dispositions that are fostered through such practices.

In contrast to the democratic dispositions cultivated in voluntary associations and third places, much of the prevailing contemporary cultural ethos encourages “an unprecedented state of impatience” (Anton, 2011, p. 5) where people attempt to accomplish an ever-greater amount of tasks each day. Electronic devices allow people to “multitask,” which may help increase

efficiency but may also foster practices that contribute to more narrowly utilitarian forms of interpersonal interaction. A focus on speed and efficiency and a hurried lifestyle do not encourage civic participation or spending one's leisure time in third places. Rather, trends toward increasingly isolated home entertainment and, more recently, the popularity of mobile digital devices can be seen as an extension of the commodification and privatization of leisure (Bauman, 2000b), in which users are encouraged to create a personalized world of mediated interaction based upon their own pre-constructed interests and preferences for social interaction and commodified entertainment. This offers the atomized individual a sense of empowerment through greater consumer choice, along with being able to carefully control social interaction in both manner and degree.

From a Deweyan perspective, such practices may diminish the disruption of habits and consequently discourage growth and the formation of democratic dispositions. While technology itself is not to blame, assuming that individualized practices will not affect user's dispositions and worldviews is based upon an impoverished conception of how humans create meaning. This understanding, present in much of the scholarship in technological and media literacy (Jenkins, 2006; Kellner and Share, 2007; NCSS, 2009; Rheingold, 2009), separates mind and body by reducing experience and agency to conscious will divorced from one's daily practices and experiences. This perspective derives from assumptions that communication is merely the transfer of information, where it is presumed that information can be received whole through a screen or digital device.

While individualized preferences and practices do not preclude processes of common meaning making, they obscure the potential of information within this process, which is better understood as a by-product of discussions, debates, and other direct transactions. Christopher

Lasch (1995) explains “when we get into arguments that focus and fully engage our attention, we become avid seekers of relevant information. Otherwise we take in information passively – if we take it in at all.” (p. 163). Today’s students and citizens are awash in information, but without the contextual shared communication that allows information to be transformed into meaningful knowledge, individualized entertainment practices and mobile digital devices are likely to only heighten the quagmire of lost individuals. A more robust understanding of Dewey’s conception of habits, particularly the meaning making functions of the habits of communication, can point educators and social theorists toward more fruitful engagement with the role of habitual practices and how they work to foster the components of individuality as well as a social spirit that makes one more likely to engage in communicative transactions with diverse others. The model of thick communication provided by interwoven communities can serve as a guide for the kind of connections that could be made manifest in daily practices for both citizens and students.

### **Avenues for Educational Reconstruction**

Deweyan pragmatism asserts educators and policy-makers must make choices on what practices to value and emphasize in schools (Cherryholmes, 1999). In order to make intelligent choices, educators must examine the consequences of what is currently valued. A preponderance of lost individuals immersed in processes of individualization can be understood as a consequence of current educational and social policy and practices. With respect to education, two features exemplify how schools contribute to producing lost individuals.

The first practice is standardized testing. Enforced consequences of *No Child Left Behind* and *Race to the Top* have the effect of narrowing the range of practices within classrooms by constraining the freedom of teachers and, subsequently, of learners (Onosko, 2011). Such testing mirrors the aforementioned ethos of efficiency that strips communication of its meaning making



elements and reduces it to the transmission of decontextualized bits of information that can allegedly be directly transmitted from teachers to students. By focusing on narrow outcomes, students are largely precluded from constructing their own meaning as teachers are compelled to move their practices away from activities that would promote meaningful understandings and connections in favor of exercises in rote learning.

In such environments, students are not encouraged to see how communication toward shared meaning can cultivate deeper understandings of social problems as issues are explored and revisited in a revolving and evolving process. Students instead learn to equate formal learning with the acquisition of decontextualized and personally meaningless information to be endured in order to achieve the utilitarian goals of earning a credential or degree that will hopefully lead to gainful future employment (Giroux, 1991, Onosko, 2011; Ross, 2006).

The second variable that contributes to the production of lost individuals is less obvious and less explored in educational scholarship. That is, the push for technological ubiquity in schools. Many proponents of technology reject the behaviorist learning assumptions of standardized testing and instead embrace constructivist learning, in which students are encouraged to explore and collectively deliberate about shared problems. Such tasks can encourage students to engage in constructive communicative that facilitates robust meaning making.

Yet the habits that are fostered as a result of digital immersion remain largely unexplored. Technology enthusiasts tout relevance to students' lives as a primary reason to immerse students in learning through digital technology (Jenkins, 2006; NCSS, 2009; Rheingold, 2008). However, the broader habits of usage privilege models of interaction that, outside of the controlled environment of the classroom, valorize utilitarian as opposed to meaningful engagement (Turkle,

2011) and encourage consumerism (Bauman, 2000b; Schor, 2004) along with the ever-faster acquisition of information that is often untethered from social meaning making processes. In their habit-forming functions, digital technology may foster practices that are more consistent with the utilitarian logic of standardized testing rather than practices associated with the meaning making communicative engagement of participatory democracy. One example is blogging, which has been argued as an effective tool to extend classroom conversations beyond school hours (Rheingold, 2009). While blogging can offer clear benefits for learning, the practice may have vastly different meanings in other social contexts. Outside of school, students may find the often isolating and exclusive world of blogging to be a productively adaptive feature of contemporary life, while never considering the individualizing habits that are fostered through such practices.

While not dismissing the obvious benefits to inquiry and potential meaning making, educators should not treat digital technologies as inherently progressive. A Deweyan lens suggests thinking not only about the immediate use value, but also about what habits are inculcated in such usage. Teachers should not only use digital technology in meaningful ways, but also engage students in critical, reflective explorations of the habit-forming functions of social practices, digitally mediated or otherwise. While relevance to students is a factor for educators to consider, this alone is not a sufficient rationale for digital ubiquity in schools. From a Deweyan perspective, the focus of educators should be on developing socially spirited habits among students, and the use of digital technology can be justified to the extent that it facilitates this process.

## Conclusion

Dewey (1938) asserts that schools cannot fix the social order alone, but could be an important locus for social improvement. One way education can address concerns about lost individuals is by fostering deeper connections between students and the local community. Place-based education scholars (Smith, 2002; Theobald and Curtiss, 2000) advocate involving students in direct inquiry projects assisting their communities. Such projects “can help overcome the disjuncture between school and children’s lives” (Smith, 2002, p. 584) which is an important step in addressing lost individuals. In direct local experiences, citizenship can be crafted without didactic lectures as students make connections and find agency through participation in community projects. Academically, these local connections can be used to further enlarge their world by connecting local concerns to those of regional, national, and international scope. It is this process, expanding outward from the local to the global, that Dewey (1927/1946) identifies in his vision of the Great Community. Place-based learning, service-learning projects, and other community education initiatives are all profitable avenues for further inquiry in addressing lost individuals.

Deweyan communication suggests discussion and shared communication are vital practices that challenge the notion of reducing learning to a series of decontextualized skills. Such practices should be viewed as a crucial piece of a larger educational ecology that extends beyond the classroom into the broader social fabric of the community. From this perspective, intersubjective communication is at the very heart of meaning making and, hence, also the learning process. This suggests a much stronger role for student-to-student discussion and cooperative learning projects, in addition to interdisciplinary learning and the aforementioned community education initiatives – all of which offer students opportunities to make meaning

together while using formal and informal learning in an integrated manner. This promotes an orientation toward the common good by tackling common problems (Barber, 2000), which cultivates “socially-spirited habits” (Dewey, 1916/2009) and teaches civic-mindedness (Parker, 2006b) – characteristics that begin to address concerns about lost individuals. Calls for digital and technological literacy should be considered as a factor within this learning ecology. From a Deweyan perspective, such practices should not be viewed as isolated skills to be obtained regardless of context, but rather as one set of tools among others that can potentially deepen social meaning for students in particular contexts.

However, formal schooling cannot address lost individuals alone. While educators can create safe and productive spaces for student meaning making, these experiences will not necessarily translate into productive worldly citizenship. Merging such dynamic classroom approaches to lived experience in local communities offers increased possibilities for students to find themselves in relation to the larger world. Schools can play a crucial role here by thinking more carefully about crafting habits and dispositions that are geared toward inquiry and open communication, as well as direct engagement. A stronger focus on cultivating these habits within schools, while fostering school-community relations are some important ways to address the quagmire of lost individuals.

## **Chapter 2:**

### **The “Dewey-Lippmann Debates” and the Role of Democratic Communication**

This chapter explores the disagreements surrounding the “Dewey-Lippmann debates” beginning with Carey’s original characterization of Lippmann as a positivist seeking a world of objective, accurate information in contrast to Dewey, who identifies the contingent and constructed nature of knowledge achieved through processes of communication. This analysis re-examines Lippmann and Dewey’s positions in light of subsequent arguments that challenge Carey’s assertions and support Lippmann’s perspective. I conclude that Carey’s critics are correct that Lippmann held a more nuanced position on democracy than Carey acknowledges. However, Carey’s critics also largely misunderstand his Deweyan arguments about the meaning making functions of communication. By highlighting the role of the habits of communication in Dewey’s democratic analysis, I offer a response to the critics of participatory democracy, while suggesting directions for the future of social reconstructionist education.

In the 1980s, communications theorist James Carey (1989) offered an analysis of modern democracy, which he characterizes as the “Dewey-Lippmann debates” in order to frame two divergent conceptions of democracy. In his analysis, Carey depicts Walter Lippmann’s democratic vision as one dominated by experts who utilize scientific objectivity to prescribe policy for the masses. According to Carey, Lippmann offers a positivistic view of knowledge, in which he regards communication as a form of transmission geared toward accurate information transfer. In contrast, Dewey’s view of democracy was a more contingent vision formed through citizen participation in discussion and inquiry. Carey posits that Dewey locates another role for communication beyond mere transmission – it is also a way for participants to construct meaning

through the *process itself*. Carey (1989) identifies this as a “ritual view of communication,” which is “directed not toward the extension of messages in space but toward the maintenance of society in time; not the act of imparting information but the representation of shared beliefs” (p. 18). In Carey’s reading of Dewey, the purpose of news and journalism is not to accurately depict reality, as with Lippmann, but to offer narratives that activate inquiry among affected groups.

Carey’s analysis of the “Dewey-Lippmann debates” has been appropriated by many scholars to argue for a stronger participatory democracy against the elitist conceptions attributed to Lippmann (Bernstein, 2000; Bybee, 1999; DeCesare, 2012; Lasch, 1995; Peters, 1989).

However, others have problematized Carey’s conclusions by challenging the legitimacy of Carey’s analysis and, subsequently, the practicality of the Deweyan democratic model.

Communications theorist Michael Schudson (2008) delivers the boldest criticism, arguing that Carey misrepresents Lippmann’s position on the role of experts, who were “not to replace the public, but rather experts were to provide an alternative source of knowledge and policy to the parties and pressure groups” (p. 1040). Schudson (2008) criticizes Carey’s articulation, derived largely from Dewey, of a culture of direct communication and political participation, stating that although Lippmann removed the public from direct decision-making, this is the “step representative democracies around the world have taken and managed” (p. 1033). Schudson contends that Lippmann’s democratic model is both reasonable and viable given the complex requirements of modern society.

Other scholars directly critique facets of Dewey’s democratic conception. Sociologist Mark Whipple (2005) asserts that Dewey “largely failed to reconcile his democratic ideal with the empirical constraint of large-scale organizations” (p. 156). Such criticisms have been echoed in education scholarship. Westhoff (1995) argues that Dewey failed to explain how direct

communities could expand and link up to form the “Great Community.” Schutz (2001) posits that Deweyan democracy is viable only in local contexts and is impractical as a larger social model. Similarly, Stanley (2006) believes Dewey’s response to Lippmann was “both obscure and inconclusive” and Dewey “never adequately addressed the practical problems that Lippmann raised regarding the core assumptions of liberal democracy” (p. 99). Stanley’s aim is to evaluate Deweyan democracy toward exploring the continued relevance of “social reconstructionist education” in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. While Stanley credits Dewey’s focus on developing critical capacities in education, he judges Dewey’s larger social analysis as inadequate. On the whole, the above accounts are all at least partially sympathetic to Dewey’s position, yet they agree that Dewey’s model was never adequately articulated nor reconciled with the size, scope, and complexity of modern society.

In this chapter, I argue that the criticisms surrounding Dewey’s conception of democracy can be critically addressed by returning to Carey’s original framing of the “Dewey-Lippmann debate,” particularly his focus on the role of communication. While Dewey does not offer a straightforward prescription for the problems of democracy, I believe this was a deliberate and justifiable move. Dewey instead offers avenues of inquiry to be pursued experimentally (Cherryholmes, 1999), which has been interpreted by critics as being vague and unfocused. By attending to Deweyan habits, particularly the habits of communication, I will highlight the role of local publics in the formation of the “Great Community,” while addressing Stanley’s concerns by identifying potential implications for the future of critical approaches to education. I will begin by contextualizing the historical period for the debate, after which I will offer my own analysis of Lippmann and Dewey’s visions for democracy, followed by a discussion and evaluation that responds to Dewey’s critics and suggests directions for what Stanley calls social

reconstructionist education. Though some of the critiques leveled against Carey are valid, his focus on the role of communication helps to illuminate Dewey's vision of the "Great Community" that has been subject of criticism.

### **Social Order, Technocracy, and Progressivism**

The late nineteenth and early twentieth century was a time of rapid change and massive upheaval in the United States. The country was rapidly industrializing and urban centers were exploding with population growth, while new inventions from electricity to the automobile were changing the dynamics of business, social interaction, and daily living. These new inventions connected to earlier developments, including the telegraph and the continued expansion and commercial integration of railroads – making conditions rife for the growth of massive corporations that could harness efficiency through larger economies of scale. Under these conditions, the parochial political systems of local communities were increasingly inadequate both for regulating interstate business, and for dealing with massive social changes.

Robert Wiebe (1967), in his book *The Search for Order*, argues the above factors lead to the Progressive movement and ultimately, to a greatly expanded role for the federal government. Wiebe identifies the "bureaucratic approach" (p. 145) as a central feature of progressivism, whose proponents were middle class reformers looking to unify society by creating a stronger central government and an expanded use of what he calls the "scientific method." According to Wiebe (1967), progressives advocated the scientific method as a national substitute for the nineteenth century character-oriented common knowledge of the community. Wiebe (1967) explains:

The ideas that filtered through and eventually took the fort were bureaucratic ones, peculiarly suited to the fluidity and impersonality of an urban-industrial world. They



pictured a society of ceaselessly interacting members and concentrated upon adjustments within it. Although they included rules and principles of human behavior, these necessarily had an indeterminate quality because perpetual interaction was itself indeterminate... Thus the rules, resembling orientations much more than laws, stressed techniques of constant watchfulness and mechanisms of continuous management. (p. 145)

This progressive rationale of a national society based on bureaucratic efficiency, according to Wiebe, provided the thrust for piecemeal political reforms that were implemented slowly over the first two decades of the twentieth century.

Later works complicate Wiebe's monolithic characterization of progressivism, but identify many of the same cultural dynamics at work during this era. In *Rebirth of a Nation*, Jackson Lears (2009) describes this era as a time when notions of rebirth and regeneration animated the social spirit and intellectual thought of reformers, political leaders, and media correspondents. Within this time of great upheaval, Lears pinpoints competing, though often intersecting, trends within progressive thought. These trends can be broadly categorized as a managerial version of progressivism, which was embodied in concepts such as Taylor's notion of scientific management within business – this form of progressivism largely aligns with Wiebe's analysis. The second trend of progressivism had a more populist orientation, which worked to “empower ordinary citizens and curb plutocratic rule by promoting antitrust legislation, railroad regulation, public ownership of utilities, popular election of U.S. Senators, and other measures designed to invigorate democratic citizenship” (Lears, 2009, p. 199). These two strands of progressivism are difficult to separate, as they coalesced at various points.

However progressive thought in the early twentieth century is characterized, for the

purposes of this chapter World War I (WWI) emerges as a key period for both Dewey and Lippmann. Wiebe (1995) pinpoints WWI as a turning point for arguments advocating people-centered democracy. The war demonstrated the growing power of the national government to assert power over the people by using media control to craft allegiance to the war agenda. The citizenry's ostensible gullibility in the face of war propaganda, along with steadily decreasing voter turnout in national elections – from around 80% in the 1890s to under 50% in the early 1920s – signified a widely perceived crisis of democracy (Weibe, 1995). The democratic writings of both Lippmann and Dewey emerge out of this sociopolitical milieu. In the post-WWI American landscape, the themes tackled within what is now characterized as the Dewey-Lippmann debates were dominant in national discussions of the challenges facing modern democracy in the 1920s.

### **Lippmann on Democracy**

In his later writings, Lippmann expresses a Tocquevillian concern with the potential consequences of majority rule:

Those who believed in democracy have always assumed that the majority should rule. They have assumed that, even if the majority is not wise, it is on the road to wisdom, and that with sufficient education the people would learn how to rule. But in Tennessee the people used their power to prevent their own children from learning, not merely the doctrine of evolution, but the spirit and method by which learning is possible. They had used their right to rule in order to weaken the agency which they had set up in order that they might learn how to rule. They had founded popular government on the faith in popular education, and then they had used the prerogatives of democracy to destroy the hopes of democracy. (Lippmann, 1963, p. 7)

Lippmann references the matters surrounding the Scopes Trial of 1925, in which John Scopes was put on trial for teaching evolution in the public school system in violation of Tennessee state law. This example is instructive, as it indicates the end-road of Lippmann's increasingly negative stance toward the decision-making ability of average citizens that first emerged in the 1920s. Lippmann's (1963) later writings expressed increasing disappointment with the ability of average citizens to comprehend the complex dimensions of social issues and take effective action. This example also demonstrates how Lippmann's earlier experiences shaped his view of democracy. Lippmann observed the decision-making process of everyday citizens and it was unbalanced, unpredictable, and dangerous to the stability of liberal democracy. He was also cognizant of the steady growth of government bureaucracy over the preceding decades that had made government more complex. This only reaffirmed his hesitancy about more direct forms of democracy.

Evidence of Lippmann's more pessimistic turn toward the possibilities of majority rule became clear in the early 1920s with the publication of the book *Public Opinion*. To understand why this was the case one must examine Lippmann's experiences surrounding the First World War. As an editor of the *New Republic* magazine during the lead-up to World War I (WWI), Lippmann and other progressives at the magazine were firm supporters of America's entry into the war. They believed it was America's opportunity to take a new leadership role in the world by spreading the democratic way of life. Progressive support for the war spoke to many progressives' foundational belief in social progress through the spread of democracy (Noble, 1951). Progressives envisioned the 19<sup>th</sup> century celebration of what some characterize as *rugged individualism* being cast aside in favor of a new social understanding of the individual as part of the community. Once this understanding was accepted by the culture, the government and

economy would be reformed to reflect a more direct form of democracy and Americans' interest in acts of governance at both the local and national levels would be revitalized. This faith allowed many progressives to downplay concerns about the centralization of power articulated by more pessimistic theorists of the era such as Max Weber (1946).

The realities of WWI shook the faith of many progressives, particularly Lippmann. In 1917, he left the *New Republic* to become a spokesman for the War Department and also worked for the State Department. From the inside, Lippmann was able to see how the U.S. government used propaganda to promote and maintain support for the war. In the *New Republic* after the war, Lippmann (1919) states

The deliberate manufacture of opinion both for export and for home consumption has reached the proportion of a major industrial operation.... When the story is told, it will cover a range of subjects from legal censorship to reptile press, from willful fabrication to the purchase of writers, from outright subsidy to the award of ribbons.... The art of befuddlement engages able men and draws large appropriations. (cited in Eulau, 1954, p.101)

Lippmann was disturbed at how easily the public was manipulated, and how those in power had perfected the “art of befuddlement.” This experience frames his conclusions about the possibilities of democracy throughout the rest of his career. His primary concern becomes finding a way to control a government that was becoming “a self-perpetuating oligarchy and an uncontrollable bureaucracy which governs by courting, cajoling, corrupting, and coercing the sovereign but incompetent people” (Lippmann, 1963, p. 19). From this analysis, the ideas outlined in *Public Opinion* and *The Phantom Public* can be understood as practical ways to maintain some measure of pluralism within a system that was quickly becoming dominated by

elites, as Lippmann recognized the growing influence of special interests on public opinion.

By the 1920s, Lippmann (1963) openly rejects his former faith in democracy, claiming it “prevented democracy from arriving at a clear idea of its own limits and attainable ends” (p. 113). In his view, the world had simply become too complex for any one group to be responsible for it. In a complex world mediated by mass communication, the deep understandings forged by direct engagement were no longer functional for the average citizen. Instead, much of their social and political knowledge was formed through what Lippmann (1922/2010) calls ‘stereotypes’: “In the great blooming, buzzing confusion of the outer world we pick out what our culture has already defined for us, and we tend to perceive that which we have picked out in the form stereotyped for us by our culture” (p. 48). In Lippmann’s estimation, these stereotypes created an insurmountable barrier for most citizens, who were generally more concerned with leisure and recreation as opposed to social and political affairs. While Lippmann implicitly acknowledges the constructed nature of knowledge, defying Carey’s (1989) characterization that he advocates a “spectator theory of knowledge” (p. 82), Lippmann did not believe the average citizen had the capacity or the interest to overcome the stereotypes promoted through the manufacture of consent by the mass media.

Lippmann’s solution, however, was not to turn over decision-making to any particular group of experts. Rather, he envisions a balance of power based upon decisions made by a plurality of groups. Primary explication of a particular issue would be in the hands of the expert group in most direct contact with the situation. Lippmann (1925) refers to these expert groups as “insiders.” These insiders, rather than dealing with abstractions, would be in direct contact with matters, affording them a detailed and nuanced understanding. This move addresses the problem of having decisions guided by stereotypes. Lippmann (1963) states, “only the insider can make

decisions, not because he is inherently a better man, but because he is so placed that he can understand and can act” (p. 114). Lippmann advocates a central role for contextual decision-making, defying many characterizations of his position while reflecting the influence of pragmatism on his thinking. This influence allows him to distance his position from traditional elitist conceptions:

Aristocratic theorists...like the democratic theorists...miss the essence of the matter, which is, that competence exists only in relation to function; that men are not good, but good for something; the men cannot be educated, but only educated for something.

(Lippmann, 1963, p. 114)

Lippmann (1925) devises a conception of government run by various insider groups, each dealing with matters in which they were most competent. In this way, no one group would attain a controlling share of power. These groups would be responsible for distilling issues for public consumption, helping the public to stay informed and participate in matters such as voting. Through exchanges of information and public debate between insider groups, the public would stay informed while insider groups negotiated priorities among social concerns, leaving deeper analysis and solutions to the insiders closest to the matter. These groups would offer consultation and advice on policy matters to political bodies such as Congress.

The role of the public would be to judge “whether the actors in the controversy are following a settled rule of behavior or their arbitrary desires” (Lippmann, 1963, p. 112). This is consistent with Carey’s characterization of Lippmann as promoting a passive citizenry. It was the job of Lippmann’s public to detect partisan opinions that would taint solid policy decisions and to offer their support or opposition to policies, thereby influencing the direction of insider decisions and actions. The role of education would be to increase the number of citizens able to

join the ranks of expert insiders, while teaching the requisite skills necessary to make judgments about insider positions to all citizens.

In this model, one of the most important functions for the public would be to intervene in times of crisis when expert insider decisions have failed. Lippmann (1963) explains,

In this theory, public opinion does not make the law. But by canceling lawless power it may establish the condition under which law can be made. It does not reason, investigate, invent, persuade, bargain, or settle. But, by holding the aggressive party in check, it may liberate intelligence. Public opinion in its highest ideal will defend those who are prepared to act on their reason against the interrupting force of those who merely assert their will. (p. 110)

In this formulation, the chief duty of the public would be to interject during times of crisis to hold excessive power interests in check; ensuring balance is maintained within the decision-making process of expert insiders.

In summary, Lippmann's democratic solution composed of various groups of experts in context demonstrates that he understands the constructed and contextual nature of knowledge. Nevertheless, he remains pessimistic about the possibility of a more participatory democracy. His concern for mass media's ability to manufacture consent suggests that Carey's (1989) characterization of Lippmann's view of communication is correct – Lippmann envisions communication primarily, if not singularly, as a form of information transfer. Though Lippmann's analysis is formidable, his solution calls for a citizenry that would overtly act only during moments of crisis – demonstrating that his solution does not apply his insights about knowledge construction to the average citizen. This inconsistency in Lippmann's thinking explains, though does not entirely justify, Carey's (1989) assertion that Lippmann does not hold

a constructed theory of knowledge. Ultimately, Lippmann under-conceptualizes how average citizens could acquire the competencies necessary to function effectively as citizens through participatory communication. This would be left for Dewey to articulate in his response to Lippmann.

### **John Dewey and Habits of Communication**

Dewey was also profoundly affected by the events of the First World War. Like Lippmann, Dewey was optimistic about the possibilities of spreading democracy throughout the world, leading him to support America's entry into WWI. He later came to regret this decision (Westbrook, 1991). During the war, Dewey became disillusioned by the conduct of the American government at home, which used mass media to manufacture support while cracking down on public dissent. When the League of Nations failed to become a reality, Dewey was left to reexamine his position. Yet unlike Lippmann, Dewey retained faith in the possibility of a more direct form of participation in modern democracy.

Dewey (1922/1988a) deeply respected Lippmann's analyses, calling *Public Opinion* "perhaps the most effective indictment of democracy as currently conceived ever penned" (p. 337). Dewey recognizes that Lippmann's concerns were very close to his own. He also understands, in contrast to Carey's (1989) assertion, that Lippmann was not arguing for a political system narrowly controlled by a small group of elites. In his review of *The Phantom Public*, Dewey (1925/1988b) states,

In effect Mr. Lippmann's argument is a powerful plea, from a new angle of approach, for decentralization in governmental affairs; a plea for recognition that actual government, whether or not we like it, must be carried on by non-political agencies, by organs we do not conventionally regard as having to do with government. (p. 217)



Dewey judges Lippmann's proposals to be improvements over the existing state of affairs, but believes a more robust solution was possible that entails a more radical dissemination of decision-making.

Dewey (1927/1946) articulates this vision in his book *Public and Its Problems*. Here, Dewey identifies many challenges to the formation of a stronger democratic culture, including the complexity of public issues, public apathy, increasing distractions that turned people away from civic matters, and ever-increasing mobility of populations that was uprooting local communities. But where Lippmann declared these issues insurmountable due to modern conditions, Dewey believed the power of participatory communication could address issues of apathy, capacity, and capability among citizens.

Dewey's understanding of communication allowed him to offer a more dynamic conception of the public than Lippmann. Lippmann's conceptualization anticipates a public constructed by today's mass media – a static conglomeration of all citizens from which polling derives or infers “public opinion” as a recognized social construct. This identifies the public as a unitary mass, while pinpointing communication purely as a form of transmission. In this understanding, opinions are understood as pre-constructed, fixed, and the possession of isolated minds. Such a conception is rooted in classic liberal theory, which identifies individuals as isolated and rational decision makers out to maximize individual preferences. Lippmann's inability to see past the limits of this liberal conception ultimately constrains his analysis of democracy and its potential under different social circumstances.

By contrast, Dewey asserts that a public forms only as a result of shared communication. He states “events cannot be passed from one to another, but meanings may be shared by means of signs. Want and impulses are then attached to common meanings” (Dewey, 1927/1946, p.

153). Through social communication, participants are able to construct meaning and increase their understanding of the indirect consequences of social and political action. In Dewey's vision, the public was not singular, but rather consisted of overlapping groups that arose to address particular matters. These publics were viewed as active and contextual, with the meaning of a public found in "what it can do, where it can go, how better it can operate" (Stob, 2005, p. 237). Unlike Lippmann's conception, which posits an isolated psychological and cognitive notion of construction, Dewey's conception of the public demonstrates an understanding of the social construction of knowledge and its democratic implications. In Dewey's formulation, opinions cannot be understood in isolation from the communicative processes that produced them. As Crick (2010) asserts, "Every act of communication requires an individual to give form to what had previously been formless, and in doing so changes the attitude of that person toward his or her own experiences as they relate to the experiences of others" (p. 67). To Dewey, it is social experience, or in Deweyan terms the *transactional* experience, through collective communicative action where the public and, thus, public opinion is formed within particular contexts.

In Dewey's conception, the public's problem was that it was in eclipse due in no small part to civic apathy, along with what was a growing predilection for distraction and amusement. These were concerns for Dewey as well as Lippmann, though Dewey locates the problem beyond isolated psychological constructs, seeing these concerns as products of culturally constructed habits, particularly the prevailing habits of communication. Dewey (1927/1946) asserts,

Knowledge is a function of association and communication; it depends upon tradition, upon tools and methods socially transmitted, developed and sanctioned. Faculties of

effectual observation, reflection and desire are habits acquired under the influence of the culture and institutions of society, not ready-made inherent property. (p. 158)

In Dewey's (1927/1946) conception of habit, he provides an embodied understanding of behavior where "every act affects a modification of attitude and set which directs future behavior" (p. 159). For Dewey, habits are not a matter of passive socialization, but rather are the result of active engagement on the part of participants within an environment in order to more productively thrive within it, so in his view the widening prevalence of disengagement in public affairs was an active response to removing decision-making from localities and concentrating power in centralized bodies. These moves were creating a more "bewildered" public, because local connections to forming civic knowledge were being severed, while the power to enrich understandings through shared communication was not understood or substantively employed.

The emerging mass culture also encouraged problematic habits that worked against shared communication while promoting passivity in civic affairs. As long as communication was viewed and practiced as a unidirectional transfer of information, rather than a shared process where meaning is constructed through participation, the public would remain "shadowy and formless, seeking spasmodically for itself, but seizing and holding its shadow rather than its substance" (Dewey, 1927/1946, p. 142).

Dewey contends that the insiders of Lippmann's analysis, particularly scientists, philosophers, and academics, best exemplify human intelligence in action. This was not because they possess superior intelligence, but because they have acquired specialized habits through exclusive training. These habits include carefully examining issues, openly sharing and building knowledge through exchanges with peers, and testing conclusions and modifying their understandings based on the consequences of application. These intelligent habits of inquiry and

communication represent a refined version of what Dewey argues should be imparted to all citizens as constitutive habits of a re-emergent public sphere.

Where Lippmann would divide power among specialized groups and improve education to bring more people into their ranks, Dewey suggests extending these intelligent habits to the entire population. People in local communities do not need to have the same specialized knowledge as scientists, but they do need to understand how scientists acquire knowledge, along with participating directly in informal inquiry processes through public discussion and deliberation. As Carey (1989) explains, “inquiry...is not something other than conversation and discussion but a more systematic version of it” (p. 82). While Dewey (1927/1946) explicitly distinguishes inquiry from mere conversation, Carey is correct to recognize the two concepts along one continuum. With the assistance of formal education and experience, the intelligent habits of inquiry for everyday citizens could become more systematic, although perhaps never as rigorous as expert methods. Through their own application of social communication, localities could put public issues through their own process of inquiry.

Experts also play a role in Dewey’s formulation. The job of experts is to distill facts for the public to decide upon (Dewey, 1927/1946, p. 202). Where Lippmann’s experts would inform central decision makers, Dewey’s experts would instead inform the citizenry. Through modern communication, experts can provide continual information to local communities where issues can be discussed and debated in order to inform government action. As broader issues involve more local communities, these groups can use modern technology to facilitate cross communication and mutual inquiry, where “different groups interact flexibly and fully in connection with other groups” (Dewey, 1927/1946, p. 147), exchanging information and building shared understandings toward the aim of broader political action. This, in essence, is a

brief sketch of Dewey's "Great Community."

Dewey (1927/1946) further explains why a democratic citizenry must be continuously involved in public affairs:

Opinions and beliefs concerning the public presuppose effective and organized inquiry. Unless there are methods for detecting the energies which are at work and tracing them through an intricate network of interactions to their consequence, what passes for public opinion will be "opinion" only in its derogatory sense rather than truly public, no matter how widespread the opinion is.... Opinion casually formed and formed under the direction of those who have something at stake in having a lie believed can be *public* in name only. (p. 177)

Where Lippmann positions citizens as spectators to a decision-making process performed by experts and politicians, Dewey argues that the formation of public opinion is dependent upon participatory communication by citizens themselves, as such opinions are not the possession of singular minds in isolation from one another. The process of inquiry in the public is achieved primarily through conversation and deliberation where people exchange knowledge and ideas and work toward shared understandings. Dewey contends that for people to understand public issues, they must be active participants in the formation of potential solutions, as well as participants in the judgments of their effectiveness in operation. Anything less would be subject to manipulation by special interests, as citizens would not have developed the habits of inquiry necessary to fulfill their functions when called upon. Dewey (1927/1946) further explains, "emotional habituations and intellectual habitudes on the part of the mass of men create the conditions of which the exploiters of sentiment and opinion only take advantage" (p. 169). In Dewey's evaluation, the best way to guard against the accumulation of power and public

manipulation was to activate full and free communication among the citizenry, which would continuously foster intelligent habits of inquiry. He rejects Lippmann's notion of citizens that become active only during crises, as communicative inquiry requires a continuous process that is central to the habit-forming functions of the public. To call upon citizens only occasionally was, in Dewey's evaluation, a guarantee that citizens would not have the necessary habits of communication to adequately respond when needed.

Lippmann's recommendation of calling upon citizens only in crisis suggests he did not fully embrace a pragmatist view of mind as transactional and active, but rather at least partially held a Cartesian view of minds as isolated, in which opinions were considered to be pre-constructed and ready-made for implementation when called upon. Dewey's conception of mind and public opinion, by contrast, is largely consistent with contemporary deliberative democratic theory, which asserts "preferences are not fixed in advance; they can be informed with balanced briefing materials and expert knowledge and transformed through deliberations" (McAfee, 2012, p. 24). This understanding demonstrates Dewey's bi-level conception of agency (Whipple, 2005), in which habitual action precedes reflective thought. For complex understanding to emerge, Dewey asserts that citizens must engage in democratic communication, from which reflective activity emerges secondarily as disruptions occur and participants are compelled to adjust their habits. Habitual activity and subsequent reflection work to broaden and complicate the opinions and beliefs of participants as they develop more flexible habits as a result of continuous situational adjustments within the communication process. This explains Dewey's (1927/1946) focus on participatory action by citizens as a pre-condition for a re-emergent public – a point he sums up succinctly by stating, "the cure for the ailments of democracy is more democracy" (p. 146).

Dewey (1927/1946) also posits that a distant government can never adequately serve localities as well as the judgment of local people, stating that “tools of social inquiry will be clumsy as long as they are forged in places and under conditions remote from contemporary events” (p. 181). Dewey echoes Lippmann’s assertions about contextual analysis but carries this reasoning to a more politically radical and more philosophically consistent conclusion by arguing that citizens themselves should be directly involved in decision-making in local contexts. Where Lippmann uses an analysis informed by pragmatism to make adjustments to the prevailing state of liberal democracy, Dewey pushes for the possibility of profound transformation by arguing for a new level of participation in government by everyday citizens that was fully consistent with the pragmatist conception of knowledge and mind.

### **Discussion**

Dewey has been criticized for lacking specific details as to how his democratic vision could be enacted. It is true that Dewey never provides a specific recipe for democracy. While Whipple (2005), Schutz (2001), and Stanley (2006) are correct that Dewey does not provide a specific blueprint for large-scale implementation of the “Great Community,” their expectation of specificity misunderstands Dewey’s arguments about the experimental and contextual nature of democratic communication. Dewey (1927/1946) anticipates such critiques in *Public and Its Problems*:

The prime condition of a democratically organized public is a kind of knowledge and insight which does not yet exist. In its absence, it would be the height of absurdity to try to tell what it would be like if it existed. (p. 166)

For Dewey, the particulars of his democratic vision must be enacted through experimental inquiry within particular contexts. To argue for narrow specifics is to misunderstand Dewey’s

experimentalism in application to social and political affairs, and to demand from Dewey static conceptions of knowledge and mind that his experimentalism challenges.

Nevertheless, much of what Dewey argues at the end of *Public and Its Problems* helps to clarify his vision of democracy as the “Great Community.” Against the above criticisms, Dewey (1927/1946) offers a guiding principle for his democratic vision: free and full communication among the citizenry and participation in civic affairs. Dewey sees communication as the key way citizens make meaning, and as a way to forge the communicative habits necessary for democratic participation. As a consequence, he provides a place to start in forging his democratic vision – local communities and direct face-to-face interaction. Dewey posits a “rooted cosmopolitanism” (Bernstein, 2000, p. 221) that recognizes the democratic habit-forming functions of local communities and direct communication, which serve as preconditions for the emergence of the Great Community. By highlighting shared communication in local contexts, the roadblocks inhibiting free and full communication and participation could begin to be addressed.

In the past generation, research on democracy has supported many of Dewey’s assertions while challenging the conclusions of many of his critics. Dewey’s critics assert his model of democracy is impractical for large-scale society, but recent research suggests many of the problems of modern democracy can be attributed to the assumption that politics must be centered at ever-greater levels of government. Democracy scholar Harry Boyte (2009) argues that the relocation of politics in the state, increasingly evident throughout the twentieth century, “reversed 2,000 years of history about the meaning of politics” (pp. 8-9). This relocation of politics in the state is now generally understood as the norm, with Dewey’s (1939/1976) arguments about democracy as a way of life now identified as radical and unrealistic. It was this



positivistic turn toward expert political knowledge embedded in state institutions, according to Boyte, that began to marginalize civil society. Boyte (2009) states “experts claims to unique authority based precisely on outsider ways of knowing eroded the civil fabric of society” (p. 7). While neither Lippmann nor Dewey would be pleased with the current state of American democracy, only Dewey saw the danger of encroaching expert knowledge superseding that of everyday citizens.

Recent scholarship on deliberative democracy reinforces some of Dewey’s conceptual points while addressing his critics. In their research on democratic deliberation, Fagotto & Fung (2012) find four benefits of deliberative processes: 1) They strengthen the fabric of local communities by helping to build trust and encourage positive social interactions; 2) They improved public judgment by helping participants better understand issues, including opposing viewpoints; 3) They improved communication and accountability between citizens and local officials; 4) They addressed insufficient governmental resources by allowing localities to tap a broader range of resources from within communities (pp. 139-145). These benefits support Dewey’s conception of communication as a meaning-making process. By becoming participants in shared communication processes, citizens improve their knowledge about issues and become better judges of policy, all while bettering understanding differing opinions and being able to better hold politicians accountable. Research within social education on deliberative processes, notably Parker (2006, 2010), Hess (2009), and McAvoy and Hess (2013), have also found that working through issues discursively improves understanding for both students and citizens – even of complex national issues, while increasing recognition and sympathy for other perspectives.

All of this suggests that criticisms about the impracticality of direct political participation

on a large-scale misses the mark. Although town hall forums are not practical on a national scale for every issue, participation in deliberative forums at the local level foster more knowledgeable and engaged citizens – even on matters of national scope. Dewey’s emphasis on transactionally constructed knowledge through communication and experimentation becomes crucial, because research suggests that direct participation on every issue is not necessary. According the above evidence, periodic participation in deliberative forums, if normalized as a form of citizen participation, would vastly improve both culture and politics and begin to address many of the concerns of modern democracy. From a Deweyan perspective, the habit-forming functions of periodic participation would make citizens better prepared to critically engage mass media, while preparing participants to play more vocal and active political roles at times when greater participation becomes more crucial, such as during times of crisis or when elections are drawing near.

Dewey’s experimental pragmatism also offers productive avenues for addressing Stanley’s concerns about the future of what he calls “social reconstructionist education.” Stanley (2006) ends his arguments for the future of social reconstructionist education on a decidedly Deweyan note:

Dewey, unlike the Reconstructionists and many progressive educators, believed it was possible to cultivate the formation of the democratic mind by attending to requirements of competence for social action, without the need to direct instruction toward a specific aspect of social welfare or conception of a preferred social order. (p. 88)

Stanley rightfully highlights Dewey’s emphasis on contingent processes of social experimentation, rather than in preconceived outcomes. Stanley’s position is consistent with Dewey’s in advocating for an open-ended educational process where students acquire critical

competencies to deal with the contextual complexity of modern social life. However, Dewey's concept of habit offers greater specificity than Stanley on how students and citizens can achieve critical competence. Dewey's understanding of the habit-forming functions of experience leads to the recognition that students' social and critical competence cannot be isolated from the social, communicative environments they are immersed in, both within and outside of schools. This calls for educators to attend carefully to the kinds of habits that are promoted in classrooms, while also finding ways to promote healthier social environments outside of school where more productive communicative habits can be cultivated. The examples offered by Fagotto & Fung (2012) and others point toward ways to make the outside world more productively pedagogical through direct immersion in deliberative communication, thereby reinforcing democratic habits.

While Dewey emphasizes local communities and face-to-face communication as the starting point of democratic life, he also recognizes that certain habits promoted by the culture made this more difficult to achieve. A look at Dewey's later political writings reveals that he was attempting to confront the impediments to his democratic vision by attending to communicative habit-formation in various contexts. Dewey's (1930/1999) *Individualism Old and New* addresses American attitudes and habits of individualism that were impediments to shared participatory communication. His arguments for locating the "lost individual" and achieving the "Great Community" should be understood as related components of one political project. As the individual finds his place through communicative participation, his command of the world grows, as do his connections. As more individuals become active civic participants that enrich their local communities, these connections extend outward and the Great Community begins to form. At levels of both individuals and communities, Dewey emphasized the importance of instilling productive social habits as a first step toward his democratic vision.

The role of formal education is vital in Dewey's formulation, as this is the primary habit cultivating institution, particularly for children whose habitual behaviors are still relatively malleable. In his last major work on education, *Experience and Education*, Dewey (1938) warns against the problematic habits that may be promoted by student-centered learning methods. Dewey's concern is that such methods would promote individualism and egocentrism rather than a social, cooperative attitude.

From this perspective, the role of critical education is to do more than develop critical capacities, it must also engage students in habit forming functions that are conducive to active citizenship and the free exchange of opinions and ideas through shared communication. This suggests attending more carefully to the implicit, or hidden curriculum within the classroom, including that of progressive schools that often receive support from advocates of social reconstructionist education. Critical educators must also confront the problematic habits of individualism that are encouraged by contemporary consumer culture. This suggests direct engagement in communities as well as developing complex communicative habits within schools, particularly social studies classrooms.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, Carey's critics are at least partially correct in defending Lippmann from some of Carey's more definitive assertions. Specifically, Lippmann does not hold an entirely objective view of knowledge as Carey asserts. Rather, he understands that citizens construct knowledge out of the information they encounter. Lippmann's primary concern is that political issues had become divorced from direct experience, leading individuals to construct understandings through stereotypes as opposed to forming their own knowledge through direct experience.

However, in contrast to his critics, Carey correctly perceives that Dewey holds a more profound understanding of how communication can address the challenges of modern democracy. Dewey's transactional conception of knowledge leads him to the understanding that participation in processes of shared communication about social and political issues can begin to address Lippmann's concerns of stereotypes by helping citizens forge connections between direct experiences and the larger world and make meaning of social and political issues.

The challenge for contemporary social studies education is to foster these communicative processes in classrooms, while creating connections with the local community for their students to extend such pedagogy beyond the classroom. Social studies educators must also find ways to cultivate the habits necessary to encourage students to work toward shared understandings. This, at least in some respect, involves a direct challenge to contemporary consumer culture, particularly mass media's fixation on positioning social and political life as a contest between rivals, rather than as a shared, inclusive search for greater understanding.

### Chapter 3:

#### **Cultivating Democratic Habits of Communication in the Social Studies**

The National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS) position statement on *Curriculum Guidelines for Social Studies Teaching and Learning* provides a conceptual outline for contemporary social studies curriculum, asserting that social studies learning should be *meaningful, integrated, value-based, challenging, and active*. The position statement's arguments are largely consistent with a Deweyan approach to social studies, though the statement's lack of theoretical grounding makes it vulnerable to appropriation in ways that could be problematic or, in Deweyan terms, *miseducative*. By filtering the statement's conceptual framework through Dewey's pragmatism, such vulnerabilities can be articulated, while offering a deeper exploration of both the possibilities and challenges for implementation in contemporary social studies education.

The National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS) position statement on *Curriculum Guidelines for Social Studies Teaching and Learning* provides a conceptual outline for contemporary social studies curriculum. The purported goal is to “promote civic competence” in order to “help young people develop the ability to make informed and reasoned decisions for the public good as citizens of a culturally diverse, democratic society in an interdependent world” (NCSS, 2008, p. 211). The statement reaffirms the importance of social studies in the wake of *No Child Left Behind* – the consequences of which, the statement argues, have led to reduced class time spent on social studies teaching and learning.

The NCSS framework asserts that social studies learning should be *meaningful, integrated, value-based, challenging, and active*. Specifically, social studies can be made

*meaningful* by connecting curriculum to students' lives and by having students investigate social problems and issues in all of their complexities. By *integrated*, the statement argues for incorporating all of the disciplinary facets of social studies, while promoting robust analysis of multiple perspectives. The NCSS also advocates *value-based* instruction that "consider[s] the ethical dimensions of topics and address[es] controversial issues while providing an arena for reflective development of concern for the common good" (NCSS, 2008, p. 212). Providing *challenging* material, according to the statement, requires students to create both written and oral responses, while being assessed on multiple dimensions of learning, including measuring both skills and abilities. For *active*, the statement asserts that students should be engaged "directly and actively in the learning process" (NCSS, 2008, p. 212) through research and analysis, along with mutually respectful engagement that promotes learning communities within both the classroom, as well as experiences outside of the classroom such as service-learning projects. On the whole, the statement offers a concise yet powerful vision for 21<sup>st</sup> century social studies education.

The intent of this chapter is to analyze this position statement from the perspective of Deweyan pragmatism. Though the position statement's assertions are largely consistent with a Deweyan approach to social studies, its lack of theoretical grounding makes it vulnerable to appropriation in ways that could be problematic or, in Deweyan terms, *miseducative*. By filtering the statement's conceptual framework through Dewey's pragmatism, such vulnerabilities can be articulated, while offering a deeper exploration of both the possibilities and challenges for implementation in contemporary social studies education.

Central to Dewey's conception of curriculum is the need for teachers to cultivate what he calls intelligent *habits*. For Dewey (1916/2009), to form a habit

means that an individual undergoes a modification through an experience, which modification forms a predisposition to easier and more effective action in a like direction in the future. Thus it also has the function of making one experience available in subsequent experiences. (p. 23)

The conception of habit is at the heart of what Biesta and Burbules (2003) identify as Dewey's *transactional constructivism*, which emphasizes the continuity of experiences between organisms and their social and physical environments. This understanding distinguishes Dewey's pragmatist conception of learning from some other forms of social constructivism that focus primarily upon the cognitive dimensions of social interaction (Biesta & Burbules, 2003). By contrast, Dewey's transactional constructivism places the embodied dimensions of learning at the forefront, with cognitive factors being a secondary, yet still crucial, dimension.

Dewey's distinguishes his conception of habit from traditional understandings of habit as socialization. By contrast, Dewey's habit involves active agents who modify habits in order to better navigate physical and social environments. This approach emphasizes dynamic interactions, or *transactions*, between individuals and the physical environment, including social engagement involving all five senses, as focal components of a fully enriched educational experience. These transactions, along with subsequent reflection, allow individuals to achieve *growth* as they develop habits that enable them to more deftly navigate their physical and social environments.

The role of the teacher in this process is to encourage the acquisition and development of more intelligent habits. Dewey (1933) categorizes three habits of particular focus for educators that cultivate a social spirit among students: *open-mindedness*, *whole-heartedness*, and *responsibility*. A student with a developed habit of *open-mindedness* "actively welcomes



suggestions and relevant information from all sides” (Dewey, 1916/2009, p. 144) while listening carefully and thoughtfully to their peers. Dewey suggests that people become less open-minded as they grow older, so cultivating this habit means “retention of the childlike attitude” where “close-mindedness means premature intellectual old age” (p. 144). The second habit is *whole-heartedness* (which Dewey also calls *single-mindedness*) meaning “completeness of interest, unity of purpose” (p. 145), which Dewey distinguishes from habits promoted by a traditional, teacher-centered curriculum that, he asserts, creates divided interest in students. The last habit is *responsibility*, which he also calls *intellectual thoroughness*, meaning to take into account the consequences of one’s decisions or actions (p. 147).

While a theory of curriculum rooted in Deweyan pragmatism is broadly consistent with the position statement, focusing specifically on Dewey’s conception of habit formation will afford a deeper and more specific investigation into the conceptual significance of the NCSS position statement while enabling an analysis of its potential consequences if appropriated for particular purposes. A profound application of Deweyan pragmatism within the context of contemporary social studies requires attending to social and cultural dynamics that may work against a robust acquisition of the five categories nominated by the NCSS statement as habits, in Dewey’s sense, by students.

### **Meaningful**

The NCSS (2008) position statement asserts that social studies can be made *meaningful* by relating lessons to the “age, maturity, and concerns of students” while helping students “connect social studies content to their lives” (p. 211). Linking these assertions to Deweyan habits provides more specificity while also highlighting potential pitfalls for teaching and learning. I will begin by articulating a Deweyan account of how meaning is made by students.

The concept of *communication* is central to Dewey's transactional constructivism and, hence, to understanding how students make meaning in Deweyan pragmatism. Contrary to the dominant notion of communication as a direct transmission from one person to another, Dewey (1916/2009) contends that *meaning must always be made* rather than merely received:

No thought, no idea, can possibly be conveyed as an idea from one person to another....

The communication may stimulate the other person to realize the question for himself and to think out a like idea, or it may smother his intellectual interest and suppress his dawning effort at thought. But what he directly gets cannot be an idea. Only by wrestling with the conditions of the problem at first hand, seeking and finding his own way out, does he think. (p. 131)

From this perspective, even in situations where it appears that information is being directly transmitted, such as in a classroom lecture, some mental construction must occur for meaning to be made of the information. This analysis is consistent with most forms of constructivism beginning with Piaget, but Dewey insists that direct transmission is an impoverished way to make meaning through communication. A more robust form of meaning making is possible if attention is steered away from transmission and is focused instead upon active transactions among and between individuals and their environment. Dewey (1924/1958) states that "where communication exists, things in acquiring meaning, thereby acquire representatives, surrogates, signs and implicates, which are infinitely more amenable to management, more permanent and more accommodating, than events in their first estate" (p. 167). Dewey's conception of communication distinguishes his transactional constructivism from other forms of social constructivism, as Deweyan communication cannot be reduced to language or mere mental constructions (although both elements are crucial), as making meaning is a process that involves

an individual in transactional relations with the social and physical environment using all the body's senses to construct meaning. Dewey's theory of communication draws partly upon G. H. Mead's (1934) analysis of intersubjective communication, which is based upon anticipating responses from others toward the goal of coordinating mutual action. Educational theorist Gert Biesta (1999) elaborates on Mead's concept of *gesture* within the process of intersubjective communication:

In the "conversation of gestures" individuals do not adjust themselves to each other's actions as such (which would be the *sequential* account of interaction), but to what they expect that the (beginning) action of the other will lead to. The reaction is based on a behavioral interpretation of the acts of the other. It is based, in other words, on the meaning of these acts. This means that for Mead social interaction is basically meaningful – or better, meaning-guided – interaction. (p. 480)

From this perspective, meaning is made not through the transmission of information, but through the *act of communication itself*, which involves verbal communication and the senses of participants, along with any pertinent objects in the physical environment. The attempt to coordinate activity leads to a process of meaning making involving what Dewey (1924/1958) calls the *body-mind* in all its senses and faculties. For teachers, this refocuses meaning making away from individual subjects and repositions it instead on promoting social and environmental transactions that will lead to coordinated action on the part of students (Vanderstraeten & Biesta, 2001). Understanding this process can enrich learning experiences for students, while fostering a social spirit that will help them develop habits of open-mindedness, whole-heartedness, and responsibility. As students coordinate action, their attempts to anticipate the intentions of one another will lead them toward whole-hearted engagement in the learning process, while their

need to understand the intentions of one another will foster open-mindedness through the process of coordinated action.

While the position statement's assertion that social studies curriculum should connect with students' lives is consistent with a Deweyan position, the manner in which this is actualized by classroom teachers is crucial. Without a grounding in Deweyan pragmatism, it would be easy to interpret the position statement's arguments for connecting content with students' lives as a call for students' pre-constructed interests to determine the content of the social studies curriculum, as is advocated by proponents of what is sometimes called student-centered learning. An example of this can be found in another position statement – the NCSS (2009) *Position Statement on Media Literacy*, which argues that the increasing presence of digital media technology in the lives of students makes it necessary to make such technology a pervasive feature of social studies education. The statement asserts “if we hope to make learning relevant and meaningful for students in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, social studies classrooms need to reflect this digital world” (NCSS, 2009). This position statement presumes that connecting the outside world to classroom learning requires catering to students' pre-constructed interests that they bring from outside, while specifying the specific manner in which their interests should be actualized. With the increasing presence of mass media and commercialization in the lives of students (Barber, 2007; Schor, 2004), such a perspective disempowers teachers by leaving habit formation largely in the hands of commercial culture, which educational theorists recognize as a dominant force in cultural habit formation for today's youth (Garrison, 1997; Giroux, 2004). From a Deweyan perspective, this position is problematic because the habits encouraged by mass media and the continuous use of mobile digital devices can often work against cultivating a social spirit, and instead promote habits of atomized individualism (Barber, 2007; Metro-Roland

& Farber, 2010, Norris, 2010). Dewey (1916/2009) identifies activities that cultivate individualistic, competitive habits as *miseducative*, as they lead students away from a social spirit and open-minded engagement with others.

Dewey's conception of communication as meaning making, which leads to the formation of intelligent habits, avoids this quandary. For Dewey, students' interests are not static but, like meaning in general, become transformed within processes of communication. In this process, habits are also altered. Garrison (1997) posits that educating students "means altering their dispositions to act so that they may make better voluntary choices for themselves" which requires "altering bodily habits and, thereby, desire" (p. 139). Cultivating a social spirit requires setting opportunities for coordinated social action among students, so their interests can be moved toward educative experiences.

This perspective envisions a strong role for the teacher, who must comprehend a multitude of contextual factors to decide what experiences will best promote growth. The teacher must modify educational stimuli to promote desirable traits, while helping students avoid miseducative experiences. Dewey (1933) explains that "the teacher has to protect the growing person from those conditions which occasion a mere succession of excitements which have cumulative effect, and which, therefore, make an individual either a lover of sensations and sensationalism or leave him blasé and uninterested" (p. 40). Demands of the contemporary curriculum make this ever more difficult to achieve. The intrusiveness of media and popular culture into students' lives arguable promote a "succession of excitements," while the specter of high-stakes standardized testing makes it increasingly difficult to invest the necessary time for students to create meaning through social transactions and thereby forge intelligent habits.

This is not to suggest that a Deweyan approach to social studies *a priori* denies a place

for digital technology or even for some limited form of standardized assessment. Rather, it is to say that neither of these facets of curriculum as currently employed considers the cultivation of intelligent habits. From a Deweyan perspective, curriculum cannot, to a large extent, be standardized but must be adapted to suit the needs and interests of students in particular contexts. But, this understanding should not reduce students' interests and experiences to any one dimension, nor should it generalize all students as monolithically attached to any particular information medium. For students' interests to guide curriculum, the teacher must get to know them as individuals and understand their interests, but must ultimately use their knowledge and experience to guide students toward powerful, social learning experiences that will help them make meaning with one other toward the objective of growth, otherwise understood as the development of socially spirited habits.

### **Integrated**

The second category, *integrated*, argues that social education should “draw from currently valid knowledge representative of human experience, culture, and beliefs in all areas of the social studies” (NCSS, 2008, p. 211) while pulling from a wide range of sources, including those of the local community. The statement asserts that students should become proficient in inquiry methods, along with analyzing and evaluating data, toward the goal of promoting creative, rigorous, ethical thinking on the part of students. These goals are largely consistent with a Deweyan approach to social studies. Attending to how integrated learning can foster educative habits will allow more explanation of how these goals can be achieved.

A Deweyan approach to integrated social studies is consistent with the position statement, but would take its assertions beyond mere interdisciplinary learning. Dewey (1916/2009) argues that an important goal of learning should be to break down the barriers

between formal schooling and the outside world. By dividing life inside and outside of school into separate domains, many opportunities for meaning making are lost. Dewey (1916/2009) contends “ordinary experience does not receive the enrichment which it should; it is not fertilized by school learning. And the attitudes which spring from getting used to accepting half-understood and ill-digested material weaken vigor and efficiency of thought” (p. 133). For Dewey, formal learning represents an opportunity for students to cultivate intelligent habits that will not only enhance their discrete knowledge and skills, but will also allow them to grow in a full range of intellectual and emotional dimensions, becoming citizens that increasingly enrich the civic and social world around them as they become empowered to make greater meaning through increased connections.

Dewey (1916/2009) envisions a central role for social studies, particularly history and geography, in helping students acquire meaning, as these subjects provide the background, context, and outlook for social life. As such, everyday experience can be enriched through the expansion of meanings made possible by engagement with social studies. Citizenship is a crucial aim, but for Dewey (1909/2010) citizenship cannot be isolated “from the whole system of relations with which it is actually interwoven” (p. 13). For Dewey (1916/2009), everything from training in history and science, along with workrooms and laboratories, in addition to social experiences in playgrounds and other spaces within the community, all involve communication that can work to cultivate the democratic habits necessary for citizenship by broadening students’ “perception of connections” (p. 287).

The social studies offer ample opportunities for cultivating habits by beginning with students’ direct experiences in playgrounds and other social settings. The teacher can begin by finding ways to induce reflection on matters of immediate experience, thereby encouraging

students to “remak[e] the meaning of what was previously a matter of course” (Dewey, 1916/2009, p. 287). By encouraging students to think more carefully about social scenarios, and encouraging them to more conscientiously take notice of sensory stimuli, the social studies educator can help students expand social meaning, which, over time, can be extended to more abstract matters.

Dewey’s concerns about cultivating a social spirit extend beyond his educational writings into his work on social and political theory. In *Individualism Old and New*, Dewey (1930/1999) expresses concern over the “quantification of life” (p. 12) that coincided with the development of technocratic mass society. As industrial life became the norm for greater numbers of people, many had become cut off from the multitude of conversations and embedded social relations that provided opportunities to make connections between their lives and the larger social structure. Compared to agrarian life, work in factories and on assembly lines was largely disconnected from communal discourses and offered less opportunity to make such connections. Life under these circumstances became increasingly focused on the quest for material wealth, and the broader concerns for the social and emotional development of individuals became submerged. The result was what Dewey (1930/1999) calls “lost individuals” who “do not find support and contentment in the fact that they are sustaining and sustained members of a social whole” (p. 28). Such individuals were the product of a society that was too narrowly focused on standardization and efficiency, and less concerned with developing strong and secure individuals that could contribute to enriching society in ways that extended beyond purely economic measures.

While the economic individualism that concerned Dewey continued to be a persistent feature of American thought throughout the twentieth century, it took on renewed social and political import with the emergence of what has become known as *neoliberalism*. Often



identified with the presidential election of Ronald Reagan in 1980, neoliberalism asserts that markets, based on the aggregated decisions of individuals, operate more efficiently than government planning, which leads to arguments in favor of private market investment over public governmental spending. After the publication of *A Nation at Risk* (1983), neoliberal arguments for greater quantification and standardization in schools became increasingly prevalent. The passage of *No Child Left Behind* codified these arguments by tying standardized tests to high-stakes consequences, which forced complicity from school districts.

The result for 21<sup>st</sup> century education is that schools and subject matter have become more quantified and standardized (Giroux, 2004; Onosko, 2011; Ross, 2006). There is concern that lessons may become increasingly separated to meet discrete objectives and specific standards, and integration in the curriculum might be greatly reduced if not entirely lost. As the position statement notes, these developments have also lead to reduced instructional time for social studies and, in many districts, have also lead to reduced recess time for elementary students as schools struggle to avoid the punitive consequences of failing standardized tests.

From a Deweyan perspective, these developments are deeply problematic, as they make it increasingly difficult to devise an integrated curriculum that allows students the time and opportunities to explore, create, and ultimately to make meaning of their social experiences. Where Dewey once envisioned formal schooling as a vehicle for addressing some of the more troubling aspects of industrial life, today schools, on the whole, are moving away from that potential and are instead increasingly contributing to the production of lost individuals. This shift may be fueled by neoliberal policies toward education that increasingly position it as an individual good for social mobility and, as a social good, chiefly as an engine for human capital (Labaree, 1997).

The 21<sup>st</sup> century offers even greater challenges for making social connections, partly due to standardized testing, and partly due to changing social conditions outside of schools. For many youth, unstructured playtime has been greatly reduced compared to previous generations (Levin, 2011), while social engagement between children has also been reduced – often being replaced by commercial toys and devices that encourage “scripted” play (Carlsson-Paige, 2012). These developments make intelligent social habits more difficult to cultivate, as children have less social experience to reflect upon and from which to construct flexible habits. All these variables combine to make the cultivation of socially spirited habits a daunting task for social educators.

While Dewey (1938) rejects arguments made by George Counts that schools can singularly institute a new social order, he does identify formal schooling as an important asset in societal reconstruction. Schools can serve this function by fostering more intelligent habits in students, beginning with a curriculum that integrates experience from the outside world into schools that could subsequently work toward enriching the meaning of social life by encouraging and refining student reflection and deliberation on social matters. The importance of incorporating experiences outside of school cannot be overstated, as these experiences work synergistically with formal learning to cultivate intelligent habits that are the basis of socially spirited individuals who are willing and able to enrich the social and civic world.

Schools can work toward a Deweyan conception of integrated learning by encouraging community education initiatives, such as service-learning projects and placed-based educational experiences. For Dewey, holistic learning experiences within schools can be offered in conjunction with breaking down the barriers between formal learning and the community, creating integrated experiences that contribute to forging intelligent, socially spirited habits.

## Value-Based

The position statement encourages social studies educators to explore ethical issues in order to “help students understand the role that values play in decision-making” (NCSS, 2008, p. 212). It suggests fostering the common good by providing opportunities for students to examine multiple perspectives and make critical value-based decisions that “encourage students to development a commitment to social responsibility, justice, and action” (p. 212).

These ideas are again consistent with a Deweyan perspective. For Dewey (1933), reflective thinking is permeated with value judgments, and such concerns are often neglected in curriculum:

Other teachers succeed in training facility, skill, mastery of the technique of subjects.

Again it is well – so far. But unless enlargement of mental vision, power of increased discrimination of final values, a sense of ideas, for principles, accompanies this training, forms of skill ready to be put indifferently to any end may be the result. Such modes of technical skill may display themselves, according to circumstances, as cleverness in serving self-interest, as docility in carrying out the purposes of others, or as unimaginative plotting in ruts. (p. 288)

For Dewey, improving students’ value judgments is central to the notion of cultivating intelligent social habits, as the habits of open-mindedness, whole-heartedness, and responsibility are moral traits. However, these traits cannot be instilled by moral dictation – they can only be cultivated by involving students in direct, contextual experiences. To teach morals or values in a decontextualized manner is to invite misappropriation, as such morals only have import in particular circumstances.

To cultivate intelligent social and moral habits, students must refine their ability to reflect

upon their experiences. Dewey (1933) asserts that when reflection is properly exercised, one can scrutinize a situation more carefully in order to ascertain all of the pertinent variables that may affect future action. This process begins by exploring a situation in order to gather more information. Once adequate data is gathered, one deliberates about various possibilities of action in what Dewey calls a *dramatic rehearsal*. Finally, an individual settles on a course of action and implements it, while judging its consequences.

Dewey contends that, through a refinement of this process, students can become better and more moral decision-makers, learning to organize their habits for more intelligent action. Dewey seizes on the breakdown of habits as the pivot point that initiates reflective thinking. In other words, a disruption in routine is the trigger for conscious reflection. Within the classroom, Dewey charges the teacher with intentionally creating situations of uncertainty in order to activate the reflective process among students. To the student, this may be experienced as something new or unusual that merely sparks curiosity, or it may be something that is more impactful, even emotionally unsettling and upsetting. From here, the teacher's role is to guide students through a thoughtful and systematic process of reflection, deliberation, and exploration of issues in order to arrive at more complex and nuanced understandings of social matters. This teaches students to form more intelligent habits by having to explore a situation socially and experimentally to effectively master the altered environment. Within this process, students reconstruct their own habits and achieve growth.

Because acquiring habits is an embodied process, the teacher must align students' experiences to the values and habits they wish to promote. Dewey (1922) posits "only deliberate action, conduct into which reflective choice enters, is distinctively moral, for only then does there enter the question of better or worse" (p. 279). Thus, cultivating a social spirit requires

creating a social learning environment oriented toward common action. Dewey (1916/2009) explains,

When learning is a phase of active undertakings which involve mutual exchange, social control enters into the very process of learning. When the social factor is absent, learning becomes a carryover of some presented material into a purely individual consciousness, and there is no inherent reason why it should give a more socialized direction to mental and emotional disposition. (p. 244)

Giving students common problems to solve that require unique contributions from each individual cultivates a social spirit among the group, as members must align the contribution of each individual into a coherent whole. As individual members introduce new ideas or disagree on the merits of proposed action, disruptions occur that trigger reflective thinking by group members. What Dewey (1938) calls the “collateral learning” involved in this process conditions impulses and attunes habits toward responsibility for the common good, as within this social process students must continually adjust to the unexpected ideas and suggestions of others. As students reflectively adjust to the ideas and positions of other group members, the habit of open-mindedness is developed.

In traditional learning, by contrast, problems and moral decisions are often decontextualized and abstracted from concrete situations. For students, the concern becomes “finding out what the teacher wants” (Dewey, 1916/2009, p. 129). For Dewey, the “collateral learning” in such instances is detrimental to moral judgment, as students are not asked to attune themselves to their peers or to work together on problem solving. As a result, students learn to become either docile or manipulative. From this perspective, cultivating value judgment in this manner works against moral growth and promotes habits of competitive individualism.

While the position statement argues for examining controversial issues toward developing a concern for the common good, a Deweyan approach suggests that the manner in which this is done is crucial. Contemporary students often come into schools with established and potentially inflexible perspectives on social issues, often received from their parents. Teachers who introduce controversial issues immediately without first attempting to cultivate a social spirit among students may find that such approaches shut down the reflective process rather than foster it, as time (Knight-Abowitz, 2000) and extensive interactions (England, 2011) are necessary to build trust in collaborative endeavors that cultivate a social spirit. A more productive way to begin from a Deweyan perspective would be for students work on common problems that may not involve, or may only indirectly involve, subject matter that is deeply controversial. Such scenarios call for content that leans toward the new and unusual, as opposed to matters that may be emotional upsetting, at least initially. If given common goals to achieve socially, the disagreements and disruptions that will inevitably occur are less likely to evoke animosity, and are more likely to cultivate habits of open-mindedness where students listen carefully and thoughtfully to one another. As a common social spirit is cultivated, teachers can use the accumulated social capital within the classroom to introduce more potentially divisive issues. The conflicts that arise from tackling controversial issues in a classroom where a social spirit has been cultivated can be catalysts for further growth, as students must struggle to empathize with perspectives that may be vastly different from their own.

### **Challenging**

The position statement argues for creating a *challenging* learning environment by engaging students in reflective discussions where students listen carefully and thoughtfully to one another, while exposing students to multiple perspectives and assessing them on various

dimensions of learning. This is consistent with a Deweyan approach, but creating a challenging environment is no easy task. For Dewey, this requires a teacher who is well trained in what he calls the *art of instruction*.

For Dewey, a challenging environment is needed to cultivate intelligent habits, and a crucial part of this cultivation is finding ways for students to develop disciplined minds. Dewey (1916/2009) explains “the undisciplined mind is averse to suspense and intellectual hesitation; it is prone to assertion. It likes things undisturbed, settled, and treats them as such without due warrant” (p. 155). As a student’s mind becomes more disciplined, they become more comfortable with unsettled situations. The art of instruction begins by teaching students to recognize disturbances as times to focus one’s thinking and attend to matters with careful attention and investigation. This is accomplished not primarily by creating conscious recognition within students. Rather, it is achieved by altering their physical activity – by creating puzzling scenarios that change their behavior and encourage them to examine the problem with closer scrutiny.

Dewey also urges teachers to be aware of cultural tendencies that may disrupt such processes. He shows concern that many teachers do not afford adequate time to think through problems – this practice subsequently fosters habits of superficial and speedy judgment (Dewey, 1909/2010). In today’s social studies, multitasking is sometimes lauded as a crucial skill for contemporary life (Jenkins, H, Clinton, K, Purushotma, R, Robison, A.J. & Weigel, M., 2009; NCSS, 2009). While such a skill may be contextually useful, teachers should also be aware of the underlying habits that may be fostered by activities and assignments that require quick responses and fast thinking. A Deweyan approach, while not dismissing multitasking outright, promotes cultivating careful and sustained attention to problems, which requires “spending

enough time with the data of an experience, with the texture and density and grain of it, so that it can emerge in all its complexity” (Rodgers, 2002, p. 854).

Cultivating disciplined minds begins by offering students problems that are large enough to challenge thought, but also small enough to offer familiar points of entry for students so their interest is piqued in some way. Thus, teachers must know their students well in order to craft problems that can meet these conditions. Teachers must understand their individual students, along with having a deep knowledge of their subject matter as their focus must be on interpreting their students’ understanding; a lack of solid content knowledge would divert too much of the teachers’ attention toward understanding subject matter and would subsequently detract from the continuous process of gauging student progress (Dewey, 1916/2009). Problems should be social in nature and organized so all individuals can participate and offer unique contributions. Properly calibrated, such problems will slow down thinking for students as they are drawn to carefully examine the problem at hand.

Within the process of group problem solving, the teacher’s role in challenging students is crucial. As a problem arrests thinking for students, the teacher must cultivate a systematic approach to examining the issue with students, who may initially be scattered and unfocused in their analysis. Dewey (1916/2009) states

Except where there is a disciplined disposition, the tendency is for the imagination to run loose. Instead of its objects being checked up by conditions with reference to their practicability in execution, they are allowed to develop because of the immediate emotional satisfaction which they yield. (p. 279)

Dewey charges some progressive schools of his era with letting the imaginations of students run loose. This fosters undisciplined minds and is detrimental toward learning the habits of good



judgment. Such approaches, according to Dewey, confuse impulse with purpose. In order to cultivate careful reflective thinking, impulses must be brought under control, as learning to channel impulses into productive action is the first step toward forming intelligent habits.

Dewey (1938) states that the “crucial educational problem is that of precuring the postponement of immediate action upon desire until observation and judgment have intervened” (p. 25). For Dewey, the matter of cultivating judgment is not primarily cognitive, but one of forming habits that are more productively responsive to problems. Teachers can encourage this process by leading students toward systematically examining problems through the use of hints, suggestions, and questions – all of which are geared toward scaffolding students as necessary to form working hypotheses toward solving the issue. After a dramatic rehearsal of the hypothesis, students should test their hypothesis in action while judging its consequences. Here again, guidance from the teacher is necessary. Periodically throughout processes of investigation and exploration, the teacher must find creative ways to arrest thinking and insure that students are stopping to make sufficient meaning of their experiences (Dewey, 1933). Such processes are complex, contextual, and ever changing, making their successful execution quite difficult. Hence, Dewey’s identification of instruction as an *art*.

### **Active**

The position statement urges social studies teachers to engage students in active learning, including having students form and test hypotheses about real-world problems, along with getting involved in service-learning projects in the local community. It encourages teachers to foster a learning community within the classroom that supports an environment of mutual respect. These assertions are again consistent with a Deweyan approach. The concept of habit allows a substantive exploration of why an active environment, such as that promoted by the

NCSS position statement, is crucial for rigorous learning in contemporary social studies.

To understand the necessity of an active environment, it is necessary to dig deeper into Dewey's conception of habit. As previously noted, habits are not primarily cognitive – they are tendencies toward action that have been incorporated into the organism at a subconscious level. In *Experience and Nature*, Dewey (1924/1958) explains that physical activities form the basis for mental ones, as

they supply mind with its footing and connections in nature; they provide meanings with their existential stuff...Every thought and meaning has its substratum in some organic act of absorption or elimination of seeking, or turning away from, of destroying or caring for, of signaling and responding. It roots in some definite act of biological behavior; our physical names for mental acts like seeing, grasping, searching, affirming, acquiescing, spurning, comprehending, affection, emotion are not just “metaphors.” (p. 290)

From this perspective, the roots of understanding begin in physical activity, which is consistent with contemporary research in philosophy and cognitive neuroscience (Johnson, 2007; Lakoff & Johnson, 1999). Disruptions within activity trigger conscious reflection and a subsequent reformulation of action that ultimately alters habits. Consciousness, to Dewey, only arises due to such disruptions, which heighten bodily senses and mental attention in order to make sense of a problem or unsettled issue within the environment. As an organism successfully adjusts, modifications of habits become incorporated into the organism at a subconscious level. This means that *most thought does not occur at a conscious level*. This explains Dewey's emphasis on habit formation, along with his insistence on an active curriculum as the basis for cultivating habits, as intelligent action is not primarily predicated on conscious understanding so much as subconscious intelligent habits. Through ongoing experience that disrupts habits and triggers

reflection, Dewey contends, it is possible to cultivate more intelligent, unconscious habits.

However, an active curriculum does not always mean overt physical activity. For example, observation, if undertaken in a wholehearted manner, can be considered an active process that consciously uses the senses of the eye and hand to observe and record information about an experience or phenomenon (Dewey, 1933). For humans, communication through language is also an active process that may or may not involve corresponding overt physical activity. Because meanings cannot be directly conveyed through words, language, for Dewey, always implies shared action between people attempting to coordinate action (Dewey, 1924/1958).

Communication through language is the primary way for humans to vary and multiply the numbers of acquired habits, while also making them more flexible and adaptive (Dewey, 1924/1958). For social studies curriculum, this shifts the focus away from the acquisition of skills and content toward acquiring adaptive habits through communication oriented toward common action. To achieve this, “the material of the text should be attacked indirectly by a flank movement... a lively give-and-take of ideas, experiences, information, between the members of the class should be the chief reliance” (Dewey, 1933). The disruptions that occur within communication require participants to adjust their habits, making them more flexible for future transactions. The habit of open-mindedness is cultivated by engaging continually with multiple perspectives on issues. In the hands of a skilled educator, students will cultivate this habit by working with others on common problems. As consciousness is triggered in relation to surprising or interesting material, curiosity will bring students wholeheartedly into the process of investigation, while students will also begin to take responsibility for group outcomes and see themselves as a common unit that can more substantively and effectively solve problems

together rather than individually.

It is these conscious acts that, over time, will modify subconscious habits toward open-mindedness, wholeheartedness, and responsibility. Through processes of communication, students will come to subconsciously appropriate more flexible, socially spirited habits through engagement in common problem-solving activities. As they achieve growth, students will begin to respond in different ways to stimuli. Disruptions, which may initially have encouraged a student to shy away, will now intrigue them and draw them in more readily. In addition, as their connections with the world grow, students will find enriched meaning in all facets of life, even everyday activities, which will cause further ruptures that present additional opportunities for reflection. Dewey (1922) identifies this process as learning the “habit of learning” (p. 105).

### **Conclusion**

I have argued for a Deweyan approach to social studies curriculum using the conceptual framework of the NCSS (2008) position statement on *Curriculum Guidelines for Social Studies Teaching and Learning*. The position statement states that curriculum should be *meaningful, integrated, values-based, challenging, and active*. It argues for making learning meaningful by connecting curriculum to students’ lives. This aligns with a Deweyan approach, though a Deweyan perspective also argues for attending to habit-formation within this process. While connecting curriculum to students’ experiences is vital, teachers must also be aware of cultivating habits that lead to student growth, which will ultimately expand and transform their understandings of what they consider meaningful.

The position statement also advances the importance of integrated curriculum that incorporates all facets of social studies, along with resources from the community. Such an approach is crucial from a Deweyan perspective, as reflection and inquiry will inevitably extend

beyond any particular discipline. Cultivating the socially spirited habits of open-mindedness, wholeheartedness, and responsibility requires expanding the social connections and transactions of students. Community education initiatives and other projects that erode barriers between school and the outside world are vital to this endeavor, as are expanding opportunities for social activity in the classroom. Both formal learning within the classroom and informal learning in the community can be leveraged to help students make meaning and develop more intelligent habits.

In its arguments for value-based instruction, the position statement asserts that the ethical dimensions of social life are crucial for students to explore. A Deweyan approach posits that the best way for students to learn how values influence decision-making is to become better moral decision makers, and this is best achieved through developing socially spirited habits.

Judgments of value cannot be generalized from a Deweyan perspective but rather must be rendered in particular circumstances. Because of this, the habits of wholehearted engagement and open-minded analysis of all pertinent variables are crucial in making sound judgments.

The position statement also argues for creating a challenging environment that involves reflective discussions that incorporate multiple perspectives. A Deweyan approach suggests that such a classroom should be problem-centered, with such problems being carefully crafted by the teacher to offer familiar points of access, while also offering new or unusual material that will pique curiosity and challenge thought. As students are drawn in to careful and systematic observation, they will begin to cultivate a more disciplined mind that is signified by socially spirited habits.

Lastly, the position statement calls for an active environment of direct engagement by students. A Deweyan approach to curriculum puts active learning at the center through the concept of habit, which identifies reflective thinking as an emergent property that derives from

disruptions within transactions between organisms and their physical and social environment. Verbal communication is an advanced form of activity that allows meaning to become more flexible and multiplied, but even verbal communication never disconnects from its roots in physical activity. As consciousness is activated due to ruptures in the otherwise smooth flow of transactions, individuals must adjust using their senses, along with mental reflection. As this occurs continually, habits become subtly modified. Processes of complex social communication offer the most profound opportunities for fostering the habits of open-mindedness, wholeheartedness, and responsibility through the repeated adjustments that inevitably occur within the process of achieving common goals.

The position statement contends that these guidelines provide a framework for promoting “civic competence” in the social studies classroom (NCSS, 2008). While this is also consistent with a Deweyan approach, cultivating socially spirited habits offer the possibility of fostering a more profound objective – that of achieving *freedom* for students. Dewey distinguishes his conception from the negative freedom of classic liberalism, which identifies freedom as a release from constraints. In contrast, Dewey (1938) identifies a positive form of freedom that denotes power to act in the world:

Freedom from restriction, the negative side, is to be prized only as a means to a freedom which is power: power to frame purposes, to judge wisely, to evaluate desires by the consequences which will result from acting upon them; power to select and order means to carry chosen ends into operation. (p. 23)

When the habits of open-mindedness, wholeheartedness, and responsibility are cultivated, students achieve the freedom to exert greater control over a multitude of environments. This control is actualized by being better able to predict consequences and, therefore, taking

increasingly intelligent action leading to societal improvement. A focus on Deweyan habits makes clear that this freedom is undeniably social, as both habits and subsequent judgments about value depend upon multiple inputs and continuous adjustments in context to new ideas and perspectives.

A Deweyan approach to curriculum offers a challenge to both traditionalist and progressive conceptions of education, both of which tend to see freedom as lack of restriction. By contrast, Dewey's (1922) positive freedom asserts that institutions, often recognized as sources of oppression, are necessary for achieving freedom. This freedom would become actualized in practice as "embodied, habituated agents" (Colapietro, 1999) modify institutions to better handle the challenges of contemporary school and society. The road to freedom for students begins by repositioning curriculum away from a focus on content and skills and toward the acquisition of intelligent, socially spirited habits.

## Chapter 4:

### **Reconceptualizing Media Literacy in the Social Studies: A Pragmatist Critique of the NCSS Position Statement on Media Literacy**

The NCSS Position Statement on Media Literacy (2009) argues that media literacy can facilitate participatory democracy if students' interest in media is harnessed. The statement conceives of media technology as neutral and under-conceptualizes aspects of media technologies that foster atomized individualism. Narrowly grounded in New Media Literacies, Critical Media Studies, and Medium Theory scholarship, it offers a limited understanding of media as merely conduits for message transmission and concludes that media technology will create a more democratic society if students are encouraged to participate in it. The authors' pragmatist reconceptualization examines media not only as transmission but also as a space where common meanings are constructed. The authors offer a critical review that advances an alternative [direction for](#) media literacy in which learning for participatory democracy includes analyzing not only medium, messages, and content but also media forms and their relations to transactional tendencies within the broader society.

The National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS) Position Statement on Media Literacy (2009) articulates a stance on media literacy that portrays a globally interdependent and media-dominated world where the skills of media literacy are increasingly important. It depicts traditional classrooms as out of touch with students and advocates greater media inclusion and media skills as necessary solutions: Classrooms must “reflect the digital world” in order to “make learning relevant and meaningful for students in the 21st century” (p. 187). Thus, media literacy must engage both print and multimedia devices as facets of curriculum. The statement



further asserts that “media culture is our students’ culture” (p. 187) because children spend about two hours daily with screen media before age 6 and increasing thereafter. Social studies teachers can either choose to “fear these changes and try to protect our students from things we don’t understand or appreciate” or “take advantage instructionally of the wealth of experiences that young people have making media choices” (p. 187). The position statement acknowledges the importance of democratic citizenship and argues such skills are now inextricably linked to media education. This suggests that citizenship entails analyzing and critiquing media messages as well as producing media. The statement argues for a more inclusive understanding of “legitimate” texts – to include everything from text messages to video games.

The statement collapses three distinct (though overlapping in some respects) media literacy paradigms derived from unique theoretical traditions without clearly identifying them or their distinctions. This amorphous, unarticulated grounding in frameworks of scholarship results in problematic inconsistencies. The dominant paradigm tacitly drawn on in the position statement is New Media Literacies (NML), which emphasizes agency of individuals to make intelligent, rational decisions on media use for personal and social benefit. An ancillary paradigm employed, unacknowledged, by the statement is Critical Media Studies (CMS), specifically scholarship drawn from critical pedagogy, which tends to focus on structural media power, influence over users and audiences, and the relative agency of individuals to negotiate or resist media messages. CMS emphasizes media power to manipulate users and, hence, the importance of learning skills for critical media analysis. Medium Theory (MT), the third paradigm subtly and highly selectively deployed by the position statement, emphasizes critical thinking – but, unlike the other two, also focuses on the practices, broader societal tendencies, and worldviews conditioned by different media forms. From this perspective, particular media

forms privilege seeing and analyzing the world in certain ways while downplaying or minimizing others. For example, moving from a print-based to a visual culture alters our awareness of events and our understandings of the world with consequences for both politics and democracy (Postman, 1985).

Despite epistemological differences, all three paradigms advocate fostering media literacy toward a more participatory form of democracy, a goal consistent with the NCSS position statement. We offer an alternative [theoretical](#) paradigm—pragmatism—that we believe is [a more educationally powerful grounding for media literacy and democracy than the NCSS statement’s unarticulated and limited basis in NML, CMS, and MT](#). Like the other paradigms, pragmatism shares the goal of strengthening democratic culture and participation. However, its greatest value is in positioning judgments in light of goals by projecting outcomes (Cherryholmes, 1999). [By explicitly acknowledging the distinct paradigms deployed, and by exploring the assumptions embedded in the position statement through examining the scholars cited, our pragmatist critique offers the possibility of projecting the consequences of employing the positions statement’s recommendations for participatory democracy. In our framework pragmatism operates as a mode of critique that helps identify the limitations and contradictions in the position statement while pointing the way toward expanded avenues of inquiry within media education.](#) Compared to limitations in the NCSS position statement, a pragmatist perspective on media education can [suggest directions that more fruitfully connect media literacy to the larger goals of strengthening participatory democracy.](#)

Pragmatism has been called the epistemology of democracy (Putnam, 2009) because it requires a broad and inclusive inquiry into matters within specific contexts. Pragmatism [favors](#) democratic [practices](#) because [they](#) afford the most open road to inquiry, which offers the best

[way](#) of achieving desired goals. But, democracy requires more than a democratic structure; it also requires a moral [or aesthetic](#) vision, as democracy is “essentially a claim about what kinds of cultures should prevail and essentially a commitment to those social processes that produce commitment to this claim” (Stuhr, 2003, p. 3). [This moral or aesthetic vision of democracy](#) requires fostering particular dispositions and *habits* (Dewey, 1922). This Deweyan perspective agrees with recent scholarship (Parker, 2003; Hess, 2009) that a chief goal of social studies education is to cultivate dispositions oriented toward publicly spirited common good through deliberative processes.

[Pragmatism offers a poststructural perspective that freely appropriates from other epistemological traditions as they become contextually useful for achieving desired outcomes \(Cherryholmes, 1999\).](#) The pervasiveness and complexity of today’s media environment require exploring multiple paradigms of scholarship to examine their potential contributions in connecting media literacy and participatory democracy. Because pragmatism is inclusive and values broad inquiry, a pragmatist lens for social studies education productively considers possible consequences for employing each paradigm [considered in the position statement](#). This kind of inquiry reflects on not only how each attends to matters of *media content* but also *media forms* themselves (Meyrowitz, 1998) in order to judge how they foster democratic habits as part of a fully conceptualized understanding of their potential for media education.

Media literacy often focuses on the transmission or content aspects of media, but Dewey’s ([1924/1958, 1927/1946](#)) analysis of communication [posits](#) that mass media do more than transmit messages; they also construct the world in conjunction with the transactional practices of users. Therefore, a pragmatist media analysis not only examines how messages are transmitted and interpreted but also how media texts and forms affect other phenomena,

particularly common meaning-making and collective or social memory. Each conceptual [paradigm](#) of media literacy posits a different vision of the relationship between mass media, technology, individual citizens, and democratic society. A pragmatist [framework](#) on media and communication, drawn from Dewey ([1924/1958](#), [1927/1946](#)) and Cherryholmes (1988, 1999), will be employed in a critical review of the [New Media Literacies](#), [Critical Media Studies](#), and Medium Theory paradigms [tacitly used by](#) the NCSS position statement. [My overall purpose is to point to](#) an alternative vision of media, technology, and democratic citizenship based in discourse and community rather than in the ubiquitous consumption of media technology. [A pragmatist framework finds value in each of the theoretical paradigms undergirding the NCSS position statement. However, by explicitly illuminating the assumptions and limitations of each, we paint a more complex picture of the work necessary to use media education as a springboard to a stronger participatory democracy.](#)

### **New Media Literacies**

A central claim of the position statement is that media education and civic education are now “inextricable” (NCSS, 2009, p. 187), connecting digital interaction with participatory democracy and suggesting educators should use media technology to help students “think of themselves as cultural producers and participants” and provide them with the “digital, democratic experiences necessary to become active participants in the shaping of democracy” (p. 187). The underlying rationale of this claim about media and the future of democracy is worth examining.

The position statement [chiefly cites the work of](#) NML scholar Henry Jenkins [in support of its main thesis that promoting “participatory culture” \(a phrase taken from Jenkins\) within media education will lead to a stronger participatory democracy. The statement also cites in](#)

[passing, or just includes as references, a few other scholars whose work also relates to NML and participatory culture \(Buckingham, Goodman, Rheingold\). Understanding the assumptions embedded in “participatory culture” requires looking beyond the position statement into the cited source material.](#) In his book *Convergence Culture*, Jenkins (2006) acknowledges that contemporary media technology mainly involves recreation, yet he is confident there is strong civic potential, [believing the recreational focus of contemporary media technology can be turned toward matters of civic import.](#) He examines Internet fan communities and finds participants have pooled information to discover story plots or inside gossip: “Imagine the kinds of information these fans could collect, if they sought to spoil the government” (p. 29). Jenkins asserts such events are starting to occur within the blogging community, who are “pooling their information and tapping grassroots expertise, by debating evidence and scrutinizing information, and challenging assumptions” (p. 226).

The way to establish future political activity, according to Jenkins (2006), is to engage students in places where they are already empowered, such as in video games. [Popular culture, Jenkins asserts, may lead to more substantive forms of citizenship through the agency derived from participation and control of new media forms.](#) Jenkins (2006) believes new media technologies offer the key to breaking through the current political malaise: “When will we be able to participate within democratic processes with the same ease as the imaginary realms constructed through pop culture?” (p. 245).

Jenkins (2006) valorizes Internet “communities” based on individual freedom, [recognizing the fluidity of these “communities” that are based on voluntary participation from individuals that join and leave at will.](#) He adds that “people make passionate but often short-term investments in these online communities; they can always move elsewhere if the group

reaches conclusions that run counter to their own beliefs or desires” (p. 242). The ability to leave a group at will is described as a positive feature of online groups, offering the atomized individual maximum freedom of movement dissociated from abiding ties or commitments.

[Although democracy benefits from communication between people who disagree, the Internet and blogosphere have polarized society.](#) Jenkins (2006) believes [this](#) problem will be resolved as democratic society makes its way through an “apprenticeship phase” of Internet use.

This idea is central to Jenkins’ rationale for participatory culture:

The ability to learn by sharing insights or comparing notes is severely diminished when everyone else already shares the same beliefs and knowledge.... A knowledge-based culture would enhance democracy and global understanding [by] model[ing] new protocols for interacting across our differences.... We are still learning what it is like to operate within a knowledge culture. We are still debating and resolving the core principles that will define our interactions with each other. (p. 249)

As this passage illustrates, NML scholars [like Jenkins](#) believe that democratic societies must take it on faith [that](#) Internet communities will [foster a new age of](#) civic participation [if given](#) time to mature. This developmental logic, grounded more in hope than actual evidence, underpins the technological faith [inherent in](#) the NCSS position statement.

From a pragmatist perspective, there are several problems with the position statement’s reliance on the NML paradigm based in Jenkins. First, it is based on a model of atomized individualism. [Jenkins’ vision of participatory culture identifies the individual freedom and mobility of digital technologies as a pure social good that merely increases the possibility of political participation.](#) This can be seen in contrast to a long line of scholarship connecting participatory democracy to communities of socially embedded individuals. A pragmatist

conceptualization of democratic society attends to *transactional* relationships between individuals and communities (Dewey, [1930/1999](#); Dewey & Bentley, 1949), where democratic dispositions are nurtured by a “thickly [interwoven social fabric](#)” (Elshtain, 1996, p. 508) of relations within a community with civil society acting as a mediating space between individuals and the nation-state. Previous scholarship on democratic culture has charted the dissolution of civil society through the loss of voluntary associations (Putnam, 2001) and *third places* (Oldenburg, 1999)—community sites such as bars, taverns, coffee shops, and bookstores where patrons gather and local connections, often subtle and informal, are made [and deliberative democratic dispositions are cultivated – all of which help to integrate a community and contribute to the vitality of social and political life. In contrast to the utilitarian conception of citizenship offered by Jenkins and the position statement – where convenience and individual choice are assumed to offer purely positive social benefits – the “thick” civic connections noted above point the way toward an understanding of democracy as habits or a way of life which “signifies the possession and continual use of certain attitudes, forming personal character and determining desire and purpose in all relations of life” \(Dewey, 1939, p. 226\).](#)

From the perspective of NML as deployed in the NCSS position statement, strengthening participatory democracy relies less on civic life and practices than bypassing physical civic life, embracing a future society based largely on technologically engaged but physically diffuse, atomized individualism. This paradigm takes it on faith that current democratic problems will be solved through increasing technological immersion over time, but this may be an unwarranted conclusion. By failing to engage with relevant physical social concerns identified in previous scholarship on democratic culture, the NCSS position statement suffers from a fundamental under-conceptualization and misses an opportunity to call needed attention to tensions and

complications implicit in the interface between technology, democracy, and education.

Because the NCSS position statement, based heavily on Jenkins' scholarship, conceives of technology as neutral, it exclusively emphasizes the positive potential of media technology to foster wide democratic discourse and communitarian bonds. This paradigm equates easy, convenient communication through new media forms as inherently superior while ignoring the deeper meaning of the social practices privileged by the forms themselves—practices that may encourage aggressively individualistic dispositions that can undermine mutuality and a sense of shared experience. Democratic participation through discussion and debate is necessarily slow, as “debate within any but a tiny group, regardless of its cognitive quality, is destined to be time-consuming solely because of its *sequential* character” (Scheuerman, 2001, p. 50). Democracy on a social scale, then, is necessarily a process that requires deliberation and careful scrutiny along with steadfast commitment (Barber, 1984; Dewey, [1916/2009](#); Gutmann & Thompson, 2004). These are conditions that may not lend themselves to faster processing or more convenient access.

Internet interactions frequently are based upon atomized (and often anonymous) individualism, where one can “attend to just what one wants or needs right now and...dismiss or disregard the rest” – which is why most websites “either gratify the one making the choice (reaffirming his or her judgment), or get quickly dismissed for something that does” (Metro-Roland & Farber, 2010, p. 207). Electronic media technology has created “more control over other people and an easing of another person's imposition, growing disburdenment from having to be there, to listen, to stay when all this may be a pain” (Borgmann, 2006, p. 155). In online social environments “there is neither any need to be afraid of being alone, nor a threat of exposure to other people's demands, of a demand for sacrifice or compromise, of having to do



something you don't feel like doing just because others wish you to do so" (Bauman, 2010, p. 8). If American democratic culture has long privileged the ease of exit over the strife of exercising sustained voice within a local context (Hirschmann, 1970), digital communities take the convenience of exit to a new extreme. As an unintended consequence, the digital "participatory culture" celebrated in the position statement could lead democratic society further away from the kind of sustained physical, contextual, and communitarian associations that many thinkers going back to Tocqueville (1830/2000) in the 1830s have identified as necessary for the vitality of participatory democracy.

Pragmatist views on education and society starting with John Dewey have stressed that citizens must be prepared to expose private passions and personal choices to criticism and dialogue with those that disagree. While this is possible in the NML model, it is neither emphasized nor encouraged in the media forms embraced. In contrast to [the position statement's endorsed](#) conclusions about "Web 2.0," users may be more likely to withdraw into their own personal interests (Crick, 2009), creating a "Daily Me" (Sunstein, 2007) of news and interactions centered on pre-constructed interests rather than interacting with diverse others on issues of mutual import. This effect can be interpreted as a digital manifestation of the hyper "individualism" that Alexis de Tocqueville (1830/2000) feared would gradually enervate the democratic public sphere. As evidence, a recent meta-analysis by Konrath, O'Brien, & Hsing (2011) found empathy among college students has fallen sharply since 2000, while attitudes of individualism and narcissism rose over the same period—a change they attribute to growing media presence in the lives of youth. This suggests a deeper exploration of assumptions about technology and society than contained in the NCSS position statement is warranted.

The position statement also contains a [problematic](#) separation of ends and means. The

stated end is participatory democracy, but the means of attaining this future are heavily mediated by the commercial products and services of multinational corporations; the citizen's role mainly appears to be to adjust to these new "realities" and make consumer choices. James Carey (1997) argues,

We have a computer society...without any citizen participation in its construction or ratification up to now. It has been accomplished by fiat, by the designs and interests of the few, and it is mere silliness to suggest that if we educate people in computers an impotent citizenry will suddenly be empowered. (p. 300)

The NCSS position statement advances an educational mission based in faith in the possibilities of progress through technology without demanding that educators attend to the commercialized context of virtually all technology in use today. By contrast, a pragmatist vision of education for democracy emphasizes how participatory democracy can be fostered through increasing chances for participation in democratic deliberation and decision-making by citizens oriented toward achieving common meanings through communication. Media technologies can be useful communication tools to these ends, but civic education that embraces them as an unalloyed social good is very unlikely to yield either actively participating citizens or savvy media consumers. School districts have already spent billions of dollars on digital technology (Amiel & Reeves, 2008; Cuban, 2001; Oppenheimer, 2003), all of which must be serviced, maintained, and continually updated. Faith alone in technological progress is not enough to warrant the NCSS position statement's monolithic celebration of media technology in schools, given financial and possible social costs.

None of this critique is to say that NML offers nothing of value to social education. Teachers inclined toward inquiry methods benefit from media tools as they engage students in

activities that critique media messages and generate student media texts—affording students deeper understandings of the nature of mass media through content analysis. These are useful skills, but they are limited by the paradigm’s assumptions. While NML could help teachers and students make sense of the popularity of new media from users’ perspectives and may offer an entry point to media literacy for some youth, particularly those who strongly identify with new media and may respond negatively to a critical interrogation of practices and messages, the power dynamics that create and maintain media could go largely unquestioned. The scope of inquiry appears chiefly focused on the transmission aspects of media while the socio-political and economic aspects are downplayed or ignored in favor of multimedia immersion. Ultimately, this is what makes the NML paradigm deployed in the NCSS position statement an insufficient platform from which to connect media literacy to broader understandings of participatory democracy.

### **Critical Media Studies**

The NCSS position statement asserts digital immersion has helped make media a powerful form of “public pedagogy” influencing views on the world and social norms. Citing McChesney (2002), the statement highlights the danger of media consolidation and the power this gives a few transnational corporations to influence media content. [To address this issue, the position statement cites Kellner and Share \(2007\), who](#) encourage exploration of alternative forms of media such as blogs and wikis [and argue](#) that media pedagogy should teach students to “read media messages and produce media themselves in order to be active participants in the contemporary democratic society” while engaging students in analyses of “ideology and power” to explore “how media are used to position audiences and frame public opinion” (NCCS, 2009, p. 188). These useful additions shore up some of the limitations of the statement’s basis in

NML. [The statement cites in passing, or just includes as references, a couple other scholars whose work also relates to CMS and the role of power in media \(Giroux, Luke\).](#) However, [the statement bypasses](#) one of McChesney's (2002) main goals [widely shared in CMS theory](#)—public reclamation of TV and radio airwaves. By eliminating this facet of CMS theory, the statement overlooks an important aspect of inquiry for media literacy into the increasingly concentrated commercialization of media.

The position statement selectively uses [CMS](#) arguments surrounding “public pedagogy” – particularly the stance that “media culture is a form of pedagogy that teaches proper and improper behavior, gender roles, values, and knowledge of the world.... Its pedagogy is frequently invisible and absorbed unconsciously” ([Kellner and Share, 2007](#), p. 4). [Because Kellner and Share \(2007\) are cited in the position statement and their articulation of media literacy exemplifies the CMS position, a closer look at their work is warranted.](#) In their conception, media literacy helps students become “aware of how media construct messages, influence and educate audiences, and impose their messages and values” and gives students opportunities to produce media in order to understand the process behind the construction of media messages (p. 4). They argue educators must move beyond mere inclusion of media technology to a fuller conception of media influence that “should build on and not leave behind traditional print media.... development of new multiple literacies should build upon and not abandon contributions within the field of media education that have emerged to counter the growing impact of broadcast media” (p. 6). These authors also draw attention to media's power to shape perceptions and understandings as well as influence values and social norms. Their usage of media literacy becomes largely a tool of resistance to the dominant influence of media and its possibilities of persuasion.

Kellner and Share (2007) call for a project of “radical democracy” that draws upon critical media analysis and how active audiences engage with media texts. In this framework, students recognize the positionality of media texts by interrogating authorship and purposes as well as learning to identify injustices within dimensions of gender, race, and class. Electronic media can serve to either “liberate or dominate, manipulate or enlighten” (p. 9). Therefore, media messages should be examined as “a cultural struggle between dominant readings, oppositional readings, or negotiated readings” (p. 8).

Critically examining media messages and analyzing positionality are useful facets of a media literacy project. After all, how mass media construct and convey particular social messages is a concern for citizens of all ideological stances, conservative to progressive.

However, other aspects of [the CMS paradigm appropriated by the NCSS position statement](#) limit its persuasiveness. [The position statement argues that students must be “empowered” to read and produce media “in the name of participatory democracy” \(NCSS, 2009, p. 188\). This is useful as far as it goes, but by not connecting media literacy to broader social practices, the position statement endorses](#) problematic assertions that are shared by NML proponents as well as [CMS scholars like Kellner and Share](#)—that “radical democracy” can be accomplished mainly through media participation and the deployment of critical thinking, which allows students to read texts in oppositional ways. This invariably reduces the myriad practices of culture and the systems of communications within it to battles between contending ideologies. This kind of analysis can be useful but on its own cannot explain the multitude of practices that surround communication, many of which cannot be fully understood through power analysis. Kellner and Share offer the possibility of counter-hegemonic readings of media texts, but how this practice builds toward participatory democracy is not clear.

From our alternative Deweyan pragmatist perspective, this conflictual, oppositional predilection reduces the possibility of finding common understandings necessary for a participatory democratic future. Media immersion advocated in the NCSS statement may privilege this predilection in curriculum and classroom practices. The CMS paradigm helpfully draws attention to the politics and economics of global neoliberalism, but its dualistic frame of hegemony and opposition reinforces the conflictual terms dominant in so many commercial mass-media forms, further contributing to a world where deliberation among differences becomes evermore difficult to achieve. There is explanatory power in the CMS framework, but its longstanding ideological assumptions limit the educational potential for transcending oppositional discourses.

Like NML, CMS privileges media as transmission and largely ignores the surrounding social practices. In the push for reading messages of resistance, the CMS paradigm downplays how media forms have altered community practices throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Kellner and Share (2007) position medium theorists who do attend to forms, such as Neil Postman, as promoting a “protectionist approach” to media literacy that “takes away the potential for empowerment that critical pedagogy and alternative media production offer” (p. 6). Their argument implicitly assumes that media forms themselves are neutral, used either for purposes of hegemony or catalyzing resistance. This binarism ignores the “vectoral” nature of media forms (Carey, 1989) that often privilege certain relationships and rituals and while minimizing others, [such as the aforementioned valorization of atomized individualism promoted by electronic media technologies.](#)

Given today’s media environment dominated by shrinking numbers of increasingly powerful media conglomerates, critical readings of media are crucial for the larger aims of

participatory democracy. A Deweyan pragmatist [perspective](#) agrees with the value of examining media messages through fostering critical thinking, but participatory democracy in the age of mass media cannot be chiefly reduced to these activities. Democracy is not just a matter of criticality; it is also a matter of affirmative practices that generate space for common meaning-making and inclusive discourses. The CMS scholars cited [or referenced](#) in the NCSS statement bemoan the decline of a public sphere, but this paradigm as deployed in the statement pays little attention to the media forms that facilitate a lifestyle of hyper individualism, dismissive factionalism, and privatization that disempowers communities. [Pragmatism as an alternative suggests moving beyond individual student empowerment toward group inquiry into how communities can be bolstered in an increasingly fractured, individualized, and commercialized world. Rather than reducing media literacy to a form of resistance through willpower as CMS scholars seem to suggest, pragmatism suggests an embodied approach that attends to the dispositions and habits encouraged by media practices toward the larger end of fostering both individuality and communitarian growth among students who, in turn, may be able to nurture communities for further democratic possibilities. This would require moving media literacy beyond mere content analysis into a greater recognition of the meaning-making functions of all communication, suggesting an expanded role for media education that includes historicizing media technology and its relationship to democratic practices in both the past and present.](#)

The CMS [paradigm](#) has much to offer social studies education. It advances powerful methods for interrogating media messages, finding contradictions, and creating oppositional readings. It also emphasizes student skills for producing their own media that could conceivably question or challenge dominant media messages and promote more diverse accounts of public life. From our pragmatist perspective these are important skills for media literacy curriculum,

but the CMS paradigm is limited because little attention is paid to the forms themselves. In such a curricular approach it is not clear if students ever would explore how technological forms have affected the ways citizens make and communicate common meanings about their world, outside of ideological stances of opposition and resistance. The CMS lens usefully draws educational attention to power relations that form and disseminate media messages, particularly in an age of mass media consolidation where media conglomerates have so much influence over the shape of cultural norms and understandings. However, by itself the paradigm is insufficient because it inadequately addresses the broader social effects of media forms.

### **Medium Theory**

The NCSS position statement makes only cursory [use](#) of Medium Theory, the third paradigm [undergirding its assumptions](#). [It cites only the work of Marshall McLuhan, invoking his](#) “medium is the message” to suggest students should explore how messages change in different media forms and calls for an examination of *media grammar* as part of media literacy. [These assertions are useful](#), but only represent one dimension of McLuhan’s meaning, [which](#) is more fully understood as describing how electronic-information media change culture.

McLuhan (1972) asserts that “the effects of technology do not occur at the level of opinions or concepts, but alter sense ratios or patterns of perception steadily and without any resistance” (pp. 68-69). As people immerse themselves in new media forms, their understanding or experience of the world is altered. [McLuhan’s broader meaning is not addressed by the position statement and no further exploration of Medium Theory is offered](#). [However, because this paradigm offers unique insights into media literacy that can productively contribute to a pragmatist reconceptualization, a deeper examination of Medium Theory is warranted](#). [This requires moving beyond the cited material of the position statement](#).



The work of Meyrowitz, a scholar not cited by the position statement, demonstrates how Medium Theory directly challenges assumptions of technological neutrality: “Each medium is a type of setting or environment that has relatively fixed characteristics that influence communication in a particular manner—regardless of the choice of content elements and regardless of the particular manipulation of production variables” (Meyrowitz, 1998, p. 103).

According to Medium Theory, new technologies are more than mere tools—they act to reshape the world by creating new environments for social interactions. A more detailed explanation is offered by Meyrowitz (2009):

Medium theory does not argue that a medium can have influence without any content; nor does it claim that a medium’s characteristics magically “determine” the medium’s impact on passive humans. Medium theory does claim, however, that the same or similar content often has different influences in different media and that changes in modes of communication usually lead to new ways of interacting that match the potentialities and constraints of new media. (p. 35)

This approach examines both interpersonal relations and broad societal or institutional changes that result from new media forms. These relations are *transactional* rather than determinative—human practices alter electronic media forms, which foster further changes in human practices in a reciprocal manner.

Meyrowitz (2009) argues that television has had a profound effect on modern society by reorganizing access to social information through reshaping people’s social and psychological relationship to physical location. He states: “Television and other electronic media have diluted shared place-based experiences while creating broader, but shallower, commonalities with people elsewhere who share televisual and other forms of electronic information” (Meyrowitz,

2009, p. 35). Such changes have allowed people to broadly identify with distant others, while allowing people in localities to see how they are viewed by others. Television [has](#) also normalized behaviors of watching and being watched by others, which has facilitated increasing acceptance of surveillance in both public and private realms. Changes facilitated by television as a “watching device” and a “secret-exposing machine” rather than a vehicle for the transmission of messages illuminates what is largely misunderstood by other theoretical accounts (p. 40). This understanding of television embraces a pragmatist view of communication as a process of meaning-making, rather than merely transmission of content.

Television has also contributed to altering public discourse through a cultural focus on image over ideas, which has had considerable impact on democratic politics. Neil Postman (2000) illustrates this argument using Ronald Reagan:

[He] could not have been president were it not for the bias of television.... [He](#) was magic on television. His televised image projected a sense of authenticity, intimacy, and caring. It did not much matter if citizens agreed with what he said or understood what he said. This does not in itself suggest that he shouldn't have been president or that he did his job poorly. It is to say that television gives power to some while it deprives others. (p. 51)

Politics filtered through the medium of television facilitates a greater concern with sense impressions than with systematic argument, creating intimacy and familiarity that alters political judgments by citizens who begin to analyze politicians using similar criteria as they would for friends. Such developments have contributed to a public more cynical about media manipulation, both on the political left and right. Even if a more critical attitude toward media results, it simultaneously makes political argumentation more difficult as people find it easier to dismiss evidence or points of view that do not already align with their own. Creation of common

meanings and understandings are obstructed by the dynamics and social consequences of TV.

While CMS scholars attribute these developments to ideology, Medium Theory advocates analyzing the relationship of society to the constraints imposed by media environments. From this perspective, NML and CMS “are too focused on message content while being insufficiently attentive to the unique characteristics of each media environment and to the range of technological affordances and constraints within which both power struggles and user choices operate” (Meyrowitz, 2008, p. 656). The point is not to argue against the presence of ideology. Rather, adding Medium Theory to media education helps to contextualize and historicize social changes CMS scholars tend to reduce to ideological struggles.

Medium Theory offers a more nuanced analysis of the democratic potential of digital media technologies. Most new media technologies are “private in the sense that they do not require a community context” (Postman, 2000, p. 152). This is not to say Internet virtual “communities” do not serve important psychological and social functions. However, these communities are voluntary and highly fluid, emphasizing the atomized individual and immediate, utilitarian [\(or pleasurable\)](#) benefits. The fractured and individualized nature of the Internet, seen by NML and CMS [scholarship](#) as liberating, amplifies both the positive and negative changes brought about by television. New media more easily bring geographically isolated people together, which can be liberating for those who feel constrained within local communities. Yet, they simultaneously keep people separated from face-to-face communication. For example, the web-enabled cell phone offers a constant sense of communication detached from location but also creates a sense of dislocation from the immediate physical environment. The public square becomes the backdrop for virtual-space updates and less the locus for intentional public engagement. Such developments also “undermine many of the traditional

forums for local collective political action” (Meyrowitz, 2003, p. 100). Linking media literacy to participatory democracy requires exploring conflicting tendencies of personal liberation and collective dissolution. As communication with distant (sometimes anonymous and faceless) others becomes easier (and possibly more desirable), political action takes on a wider but also more diffuse and often more ephemeral scope.

Perhaps more important, the individualized nature of activity on the Internet makes political action less likely to involve dialogue across differences, favoring polarization and reinforcing beliefs of like-minded individuals over deliberation and discussion by those whose opinions may differ. When communication is viewed as making common-meaning rather than transmission, it can be argued new media technologies often make the kind of civic communication valued in the pragmatist paradigm more difficult by making it harder (even less desirable) for disparate groups to work toward consensus and shared meanings. When every utterance is regarded as an attempt to manipulate rather than convince others, democratic communication breaks down because it may be seen as not worth the bother.

Medium Theory illuminates possibilities for participatory democracy predicated on reclaiming certain ritualistic aspects of oral culture:

To say that communication begins in ritual is to say it begins in conversation in the sense that it is *embodied*. Conversation requires the actual presence of bodies.... It is to enter a social relation activating and displaying all the capacities of the body.... The oral and conversational then displays the body in its full apprehensive range; it utilizes not only sound but also sight, touch, smell, not only the aural but also the visual and gestural.

(Carey, 1997, p. 314)

Substantive civic conversation works by requiring a full human recognition of the other. It is

harder to demonize and dismiss other people, or at least sustain vitriolic animosity against them, when we have to spend time in close proximity due to a common stake in a public space.

Beyond electronic-media sound bites, rational persuasion and negotiation are more likely to reemerge.

Dewey (1927/1946) believed the electronic technologies of his day could be harnessed to foster [the “Great Community”](#)—yet he also believed communication could never be fully detached from local face-to-face interaction. Building on Dewey and medium theory, electronic media technology can play a crucial role in a project for participatory democracy but only as an extension and amplification of a culture of rigorous and ongoing face-to-face conversation. Perhaps there is no better example than the Occupy Wall Street movement—social media and digital communication tools allowed diverse and disparate communities of people who otherwise might have remained distant or divided to gather together in specific physical locations for collective political action and to generate common discourses across ideological, cultural, and class differences. This kind of democratic participatory vision requires fundamental social habits and attitudes that are not based in digital media environments. Media literacy, from this pragmatist perspective, should entail educational inquiries toward [illuminating these tensions and making explicit the practices that accompany media immersion in particular contexts](#). The NCSS statement’s emphasis on media technologies as transformative in and of themselves, thus, is an educational misstep.

Attending to Medium Theory more substantially than it is treated in the NCSS statement would encourage educators to move beyond merely celebrating technology immersion and engaging students in critical questions about media. What advantages and disadvantages arose from past changes in communication technology? What kinds of changes do we see happening

now or what others can we predict? How have past changes affected conditions of democracy and how might current changes do so? [Such critical questions are consistent with a pragmatist reconceptualization of media literacy.](#)

### **Discussion**

Each paradigm we have reviewed offers different points of value. NML directs attention to the increasing importance of new media technologies in the lives of students, which would be problematic to ignore. Dewey (1938) contended that educators should neither ignore students' interests nor make them the singular basis of curriculum. Interest in mass media can serve as a starting point for interrogating media *content*, and producing media texts can lead to a better understanding of the *grammar* of media forms—training students to become more careful and critical readers of media messages—but these outcomes require going beyond simply more access and immersion advocated by the NCSS position statement.

The CMS position offers important insights on media consolidation and the powerful sway of media conglomerates in shaping the social worlds in which students live. The CMS emphasis on understanding media power to communicate messages that work to construct reality is a powerful corrective to limitations in the NML approach that tend to overemphasize the emancipatory features of media usage. Given the ever-increasing [reach](#) of transnational media corporations, these key aspects of CMS are a crucial basis for any media literacy project.

[However, CMS, like NML, is limited by its focus on media as a neutral conduit for information transfer.](#) For students to obtain a more significant understanding of how media affects people's lives and the world, communication media forms themselves [and the surrounding social practices](#) must be critically examined. [Using](#) Medium Theory, [this](#) entails both historicizing relations between technology and society as well as exploring [contemporary](#)

social dynamics involving media and society. [This paradigm](#) is an important corrective to the limitations of the CMS approach that tend to conceive media and society as a dualistic battle between [hegemony and](#) resistance. Media education that attends to [Medium Theory](#) would guide students to explore how these contestations themselves are a contemporary cultural construction [that often obscures deliberative processes of common meaning-making.](#)

[By not acknowledging the contradictions and limitations of the disparate media literacy paradigms, and by collapsing the profound challenges of democracy into a straightforward matter of promoting “participatory culture,”](#) the NCSS position statement missed [an](#) opportunity to advocate for media education [that is](#) rigorously connected to civic learning, longstanding communitarian traditions, and the newly emerging features of participatory democracy. [While we acknowledge that a short position statement cannot directly engage with scholarship to the same extent as a scholarly essay like this one, even the statement’s limited citations and incorporated passing references reflect a problematic theoretic and conceptual basis.](#) Its overreliance on a particular interpretation of New Media Literacies, its partial incorporation of Critical Media Studies, and its [neglect](#) of Medium Theory result in a one-sided celebration of immersion in media and digital technologies. This review provides [a](#) fuller and more nuanced interpretation of these media-education paradigms. A pragmatist approach—synthesizing the valuable features of NML, CMS, and Medium Theory—offers a more educationally useful vision of media literacy for participatory democracy.

[The purpose of this article is to explore an alternative theoretical basis for media education in the school curriculum. Recommending or illustrating particular pedagogical practices or classroom activities is beyond this scope, though doing so would be a fruitful direction for future practice-based research. However, this pragmatist framework can be used to](#)

reflect on ideas for including a more powerful conceptualization of media education in the school curriculum more broadly. A pragmatist approach suggests a broader examination is needed into the tensions between the dissolution of communities and the requirements of participatory democracy, with such an inquiry becoming an important feature of media education. Rather than seeing media as a neutral conduit for content transmission, pragmatism appropriates the call from Medium Theory to explore the vectoral nature of media forms. The curriculum needs to frame media as more than a vehicle for acquiring information but also as environments that shape the nature of social interactions with consequences for civic life. If participatory democracy depends upon citizens reaching common understandings through deliberative processes, the ways new media forms affect common understandings should be a focal point of media education. The ways media technology can facilitate democratic participation cannot be assumed but are rather a topic of ongoing inquiry by teachers and students (just as they are for scholars). Pragmatist media literacy looks beyond just content analysis and seeks to examine changes in habits and dispositions when “instantaneousness and simultaneity tend to become constitutive features of human existence” (Scheurman, 2001, p. 48) due to the continued proliferation of mobile, digital technologies. The potential benefits of new media technology should be balanced against the difficult task of promoting “thick” communities and socially embedded individuals in a world of increasingly atomized individualism made possible by new communication technologies. A pragmatist reconceptualization of media literacy suggests expanding the role of media education in the social studies curriculum to help students make connections between technological and social change in a way that supports the communitarian need for stronger participatory democracy.



## Chapter 5:

### Cultivating Habits of Discussion and Deliberation in the Social Studies

This chapter explores classroom discussion and public deliberation using the lens of Deweyan communication, or what I call *transactional communication*. This approach recognizes communication as an inclusive act between participants and objects in which meaning is produced. Within this process, opinions about issues become modified as new meaning is mutually constructed and made in common. I assert that transactional communication offers potential for cultivating habits that can make both classroom discussion and public deliberation more productive, as current deliberative [democracy](#) advocates have only identified individual, conscious approaches to altering the dynamics of communication. By contrast, transactional communication suggests social studies educators and public deliberation proponents can better foster communicative habits by attending to the environmental factors that promote or inhibit discussion and deliberation.

Discussion has long been recognized as an important teaching method within the field of social studies. Titled variously as *public issues* (Oliver, Newmann, and Singleton, 1992), *controversial issues* (Hess, 2005, 2009; Massialas & Cox, 1966), *deliberation* (Hanson & Howe, 2011; McAvoy & Hess, 2013; Parker, 2006a, 2006b), *reflective decision making* (Engle & Ochoa, 1988) or simply *discussion* (Calfee, Dunlap, & Wat, 1994; Gail & Gillett, 1980; Henning, Neilsen, Henning, & Schulz, 2008; Hess, 2004; Hunt & Metcalf, 1955; McMurry, 2007; Parker & Hess, 2001; Passe & Evans, 1996; Singleton & Giese, 1996; Wilen, 2003), all emphasize the benefits of talking and listening within social studies education. Proponents cite its positive influence on developing students' content knowledge and critical thinking skills

(Engle & Ochoa, 1988; Hess, 2002, 2004; Hunt & Metcalf, 1955; Massialas & Cox, 1966; Newmann & Oliver, 1970), its ability to clarify and modify students' opinions and attitudes (Gail & Gillett, 1980; Hunt & Metcalf, 1955; Newmann & Oliver, 1970; Rossi, 2006), including increasing respect for diverse others (Engle & Ochoa, 1988; Hess, 2004, 2009; Parker, 2006a, 2010; Wilen, 2003), and understanding new perspectives (Henning, Neilsen, Henning, & Schulz, 2008). Discussion is also recognized as a positive predictor of both civic knowledge and political participation among students (Hess, 2004, 2009).

Among the many purported benefits of discussion, of particular concern for this chapter are connections between the use of discussion in social studies and the practice of *deliberative democracy* in public life. [Advocates of deliberative democracy](#) challenge liberal conceptions of democracy that treat citizens' opinions as [merely](#) preformed and not requiring [developmental](#) explanation or interrogation. Liberal conceptions are *aggregative* in that they consider public opinion to be an aggregation of individual opinions [as organic entities found already formed whole](#). In contrast, deliberative democrats contend that citizens should discuss their policy preferences prior to public action. Deliberative proponents assert that people can learn more about public policy and become better decision makers through an exchange of reasons. This acknowledges tacitly, if not always explicitly, a social role in the formation of individual attitudes, which challenges liberal conceptions of the atomized, or [discrete and](#) isolated, individual. Recent research in social studies education advocates teaching a deliberative conception of democracy (Parker, 2006b, 2010). In one example, McAvoy and Hess (2013) state that teachers should work to counteract the divisive political climate fostered by mass media, and this can be achieved in part by using discussion to teach the skills and dispositions needed for deliberative democracy. Similarly, Hanson and Howe (2011) argue for challenging aggregative

liberal conceptions of democracy by including deliberative approaches to decision making in social studies classrooms.

John Dewey is often cited as a central figure by discussion proponents (Engle & Ochoa, 1988; Newmann & Oliver, 1970; Parker, 2006b, 2010; Parker & Hess, 2001; Rossi, 2006). However, he is infrequently cited in deliberative scholarship outside of education, mentioned only as “inspiration” (Gutmann, 1987), and figures prominently in only a few accounts (Boyte, 2004; McAfee, 2012). However, none of the sources within deliberative democracy *or* classroom discussion utilize Dewey’s *habits of communication* in providing grounding for their work. In this chapter, I assert that an explication of Dewey’s habits of communication can offer new insights for deliberative advocates in both the classroom and the public, while suggesting new directions for research.

### A Deweyan Conception of Habits

Dewey (1922) defines *habit* as

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. (p. 40)

For Dewey, habits are formed through prior activity and operate unconsciously until a disruption within the environment triggers conscious reflection and a subsequent adapted behavior. As what was once an adaptation due to conscious reflection becomes routine, it gets incorporated into the organism as a habit. Such habits are not simply created by repetitive behavior. Dewey sees them as more than mere psychological conditioning, though habit may share some

characteristics with conditioning. Rather, they are the result of active modifications made by an organism that allows “active control of the environment through control of the organs of action” (Dewey, 1922, p. 14). Once incorporated, a habit operates naturally, allowing the organism to divert attention to other matters – attending to new disruptions in the environment that require conscious reflection. For Dewey, the process of refining habits through conscious reflection is how individuals achieve growth, as habits become more varied and complex through continued experience. This interplay of unconscious habits and conscious reflection explains how individuals gain power to act effectively in an ever-changing social, cultural, and political environment.

This explanation of habit focuses primarily on an individual level, but for Dewey the most complex habits are social – involving communication with others. Communication means more than merely the transmission of information. Even more crucial is the role of communication in making common meaning between two or more participants. Dewey (1924/1958) explains,

The heart of language is not “expression” of something antecedent, much less expression of antecedent thought. It is communication; the establishment of cooperation in an activity in which there are partners, and in which the activity of each is modified and regulated by partnership. To fail to understand is to fail to come to into agreement in action... Meaning is not indeed a psychic existence; it is primarily a property of behavior, and secondarily a property of objects. But the behavior of which it is a quality is a distinctive behavior; cooperative, in that response to another’s act involves contemporaneous response to a thing as entering into the other’s behavior, and this upon both sides. (p. 179)

Dewey's understanding of communication is based on an intersubjective anticipatory structure, where two (or more) participants within an interaction attempt to align their actions – gestures and utterances – to the anticipated response of the other in order to coordinate action toward a common goal.

Late in his life, Dewey replaced the term *interaction* with *transaction* (Dewey & Bentley, 1949). For Dewey, interaction conveys a notion of isolated elements within an event that act and react sequentially – retaining their separateness throughout. Dewey argues that this is a misleading characterization of engagements between humans and their environment. By contrast, *transaction* highlights the assertion that events are not entirely reducible to their constituent elements. Dewey's work on transaction is an extension of a project he began much earlier in his career, in which he criticizes the stimulus-response model in psychology, [which](#) assumes a passive organism that only reacts to stimuli (Vanderstraeten, 2002). [For Dewey,](#) the organism is not passive but rather actively engages with [stimuli](#). [In addition, Dewey \(1896\)](#) [contends](#) that there is an anticipatory merging within a transaction that transcends the isolated elements assumed in the traditional understanding of stimulus and response. [In this conception,](#) communication, and hence meaning, is not something to be transmitted and perceived but rather must be *achieved* through participatory action. Communication involves participants and relevant objects within an environment in an organic totality in which meaning is constructed within the act itself. While separate elements within such events can be dissected and analyzed reflectively, acts of communication cannot be entirely reduced to their constituent parts. It is this notion of transaction within the realm of intersubjective communication, or what may be more effectively termed *transactional communication*, that will be explored in this chapter. This is a radical perspective, for it explicitly moves the creation of meaning away from isolated,

conscious, individual subjects into the realm of [social](#) action, or *transaction*. It is within transactional communication that habits of discussion and deliberation can be crafted.

However, the richness and productiveness of transactional communication cannot be assumed. Rather, its quality is dependent upon the communicative habits of participants. Dewey asserts that both education (1916/2009) and community life (1927/1946) can be made more intelligent by improving habits of judgment through communication – enhancing meaning and improving democratic decision-making. Dewey (1933) identifies two habits that are particularly relevant for promoting a “social spirit” toward [participation in](#) transactional communication: *open-mindedness* and *responsibility*. Someone who has developed the habit of *open-mindedness* “actively welcomes suggestions and relevant information from all sides” (Dewey, 1916/2009, p. 144) while listening carefully and thoughtfully to other perspectives. The second habit is *responsibility*, which means to take into account the consequences of one’s decisions or actions (p. 147). An individual who has cultivated complex and pliable habits of open-mindedness and responsibility is able to enrich the social world around them. They are better able to engage thoroughly, listen carefully, and respond thoughtfully – better earning the trust of others and helping to foster an environment conducive to mutual understanding and coordinated action. A group that has developed these habits [is](#) better able to work through disagreements, find common ground, and initiate coordinated action to achieve common goals. It is cultivating these habits of transactional communication that can be beneficial to both classroom discussion and deliberative democracy.

Dewey (1916/2009) considers school a form of social life rather than something separate from the rest of society. Because of this, he argues for reducing the barriers between formal and informal learning. Thus, the arguments for including deliberation in both school and society

resonate with a Deweyan perspective. As will be explored ahead, deliberative democrats in both school and society recognize the need to modify orientations toward discussion and deliberation to increase their effectiveness but are left with only limited resources to achieve their goals. I argue that a focus on Deweyan habits of transactional communication can provide conceptual clarity and make both classroom discussion and public deliberation more intelligent by better explaining how democratic dispositions can be cultivated. I will begin by providing a broad overview of public deliberation and classroom discussion respectively, followed by a more in-depth explanation of Dewey's habits of transactional communication. I will conclude by detailing how a reconstructed foundation in Dewey's habits of communication can improve both classroom discussion and public deliberation.

### **Deliberative Democracy**

Deliberative conceptions of democracy arose in the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century largely in response to growing concentration of power within government and the simultaneous shrinking of the public sphere (Boggs, 1997), particularly the diminishment of civil society (Putnam, 2001). Deliberative democracy challenges prevailing aggregative conceptions of democracy by arguing that policy preferences should not be entirely determined prior to public engagement. Rooted largely in the work of Jurgen Habermas (1962/1989)<sub>2</sub> and to a lesser extent John Rawls (1971), its most well-known articulation is *Democracy and Disagreement* by Amy Gutmann and Dennis Thompson (1996). These authors contend that deliberation about public policy should center on an inclusive exchange of reasons:

We define deliberative democracy as a form of government in which free and equal citizens (and their representatives) justify decisions in a process in which they give one another reasons that are mutually acceptable and generally accessible, with the aim of

reaching conclusions that are binding in the present on all citizens but open to challenge in the future. (p. 7)

This inclusive approach to policy-making welcomes input through the notion of accessibility, meaning that proposals should be written in generic language that most citizens could readily interpret. It also recognizes that results are provisional, keeping open the possibility of revisiting policy decisions in the future as necessary (Gutmann & Thompson, 2004, p. 6).

To deliberative democrats such as Gutmann and Thompson (1996), the process of providing justification offers a way to better manage fundamental value conflicts compared to aggregative conceptions. Aggregative approaches take individual preferences as given and do not ask citizens to justify their positions or beliefs. In this way, it aims at moral neutrality (often supported by claims of expert objectivity). In contrast, deliberative democracy asks citizens to justify their preferences publicly, which aims at a thin form of common good, as participants must “acknowledge the possibility that they may change their preferences” (Gutmann & Thompson, 2004, p. 20). Gutmann and Thompson (2004) contend that through this process, participants can better understand the moral value of opponents’ proposals, while potentially developing or enlarging their own views. This could encourage more public participation in policy making while, in their view, imbuing policy decisions with more legitimacy.

In the wake of *Democracy and Disagreement*, a great deal of research has been conducted into the potential benefits of deliberation. Gastil (2004) finds that participation in face-to-face deliberative exchanges can promote civic participation by strengthening beliefs in the usefulness of civic engagement. These encounters can increase public trust, along with bolstering faith in both fellow citizens and public institutions (Gastil, Black, Deess, & Leighter, 2008). Mutz (2002) states that “cross-cutting social networks” where citizens must confront



divergent points of view, prompts reflection about one's own beliefs and increases understanding and appreciation of multiple perspectives on public issues. Black (2008) asserts that a process of identity negotiation occurs within deliberative engagement, which helps participants understand multiple perspectives through exploring how they are tied to other participants, as well as the larger group. Kingston (2012) finds that deliberation creates a "recognition of shared values that lie beyond or beneath ostensibly conflicting opinions and impulses" and this recognition "does lead toward a collective understanding of the possibility of tolerable, potential action" (p. 120). Participants in the study, according to Kingston, discovered that they were members of a civic community defined not only by history but also by a *continuing history* that they were helping to create through their deliberative actions: "Instead of seeing politics as a matter of bargaining about preferences, they see politics as a different matter – of deciding what kinds of communities they are making for themselves" (Kingston, 2012, p. 231). These conclusions lend support to claims advocating deliberative democracy as a way to increase civic engagement and potentially reignite a diminishing public sphere. Kingston's research also asserts that participants may not only increase their knowledge and understanding, but deliberation may also foster changes in attitudes and dispositions, which has potential to reframe the dynamics of political polarization. Political polarization has become a prevalent concern among democratic scholars across disciplines that wish to increase public interaction among citizens (Barber, 2000; Gutmann & Thompson, 2010; McAvoy & Hess, 2013; Sunstein, 2007).

Deliberative scholars have begun to offer more pointed examinations of the factors that affect attitudes and dispositions toward discussion and deliberation. Goodin [and](#) Niemeyer (2003) argue that the pre-deliberative process where information is gathered and scrutinized is crucial for reshaping civic attitudes. Marques and Maia (2010) state that everyday political

conversations are crucial for helping citizens become more effective deliberative participants, and these skills foster deeper and more transformative forms of deliberation. Similarly, Conover and Searing (2005) note that unstructured political discussions foster better understanding, mutual respect, and deeper listening, but this becomes difficult to maintain when discussing deeply controversial issues, as participants are often reluctant to substantively engage views that seriously challenge their own positions or beliefs.

Investigating the possibilities of overcoming polarization and disagreement has become an important aspect of deliberative research. Ryfe (2002) contends that overcoming polarized positions requires building a shared sense of values *before* engaging in controversial discussions. Facilitators and participants, he says, must work to maintain this feeling of shared values throughout the process. Gutmann and Thompson (2010) suggest that fostering a *compromising mindset*, a mindset that is more open to trusting others and to respecting differences, requires time along with opportunities to work together in order to be achieved. Similarly, Laszlo and Laszlo (2005) state that in order to move from disagreement to new levels of meaning, it is best not to thrust immediately into deliberative engagement. They compare good conversation to an improvisational jazz session, where discussion is “like a dance created and recreated, step-by-step, idea-by-idea” (p. 358). Deliberation, from this perspective, must be built on past successes achieved through engaging participants in collaborative inquiry and allowing mutual trust and caring relations to emerge prior to deliberation. They make a case for *generic* dialogue that builds trust and creates bonds before immersing participants in *strategic* dialogue, or deliberation that focuses on achieving specific goals (Laszlo & Laszlo, 2005).

Lastly, Fagotto and Fung (2012) argue for a process they call *embedded deliberation*, in which participants consider a wide range of issues over several years. They assert that through

this process, participants increase their awareness and understanding of public issues, build mutual trust, and improve their quality of judgment about policy matters, all while increasing accountability among politicians, as citizens immersed in the deliberative process increase both their willingness and ability to demand accountability from government. Such an approach, the authors acknowledge, requires an infrastructure of supporting civic organizations and local governments.

As I noted in the introduction, contemporary scholarship on deliberative democracy makes little mention of John Dewey. One notable exception comes from Noelle McAfee (2012), who identifies three distinct forms of deliberation. The first she calls the *Preference Model*, which is an aggregative conception in which preferences are given in advance – this is closest to the aggregative model that prevails in contemporary culture. The second she calls the *Rational Proceduralist Model*, which encourages deliberators to adopt an impartial, objective viewpoint and collectively decide which of the proposals before them is most rational. McAfee (2012) locates this approach in the Habermasian tradition and is the deliberative conception that underpins Gutmann and Thompson’s account. McAfee (2012) registers concern that this approach may encourage participants to become more interested in winning the deliberative contest rather than collectively solving problems: “In its search for unanimity, deliberation becomes a contest, a battle of arguments, in which the best argument wins” (p. 28).

McAfee’s (2012) solution is her third approach – the *Integrative Model*, to which she credits the democratic theory of John Dewey. In this approach, participants are encouraged to deliberate together, potentially leading to an interest in public welfare that overrides their initial preferences. McAfee (2012) states “instead of seeing politics as a bargaining about preferences, they see politics as a difficult matter of deciding what kinds of communities they are making for

themselves” (p. 31). This approach recognizes that as citizens spend time investigating problems together, their views of other peoples’ opinions change as participants begin to see themselves as a unitary public. Deliberation still occurs within this model, though this approach suggests building a community spirit among groups and utilizing this spirit to promote common understanding during potentially controversial or polarizing deliberation.

Distinctions between the Habermasian tradition of procedural, rule-oriented deliberation and the Deweyan moral, contextual approach to democratic interaction have been identified by other democratic scholars (Biesta, 1995; Lehmann-Rommel, 2000; Ralston, 2010). In one example, Kadlec (2007) argues the Habermasian tradition of deliberation focuses narrowly on universal goals of consensus, while a Deweyan process is open-ended, which encourages exploration and mutual understandings that reduce conflict and could potentially transcend differences.

This review of literature on deliberative democracy suggests that research in the field is leading, perhaps unwittingly, toward understandings of deliberation that are consistent with Deweyan conceptions. Much of the above work cites the influence of interactions prior to deliberation, along with the need for a serious investment of time among participants engaged in collaborative action in order to build trust. These findings are consistent with Dewey’s (1939/1976) understanding of democracy “as a way of life” rooted in cultivating habits of engagement through continual social interactions. While the Habermasian tradition recognizes a distinction between *understanding* and *strategic orientations* within deliberation (Rojas, 2008), it remains largely silent on how to cultivate these dispositions. Rojas (2008) states “political conversation is not only about how often we talk, and with how many, but also about the manner in which we choose to speak and listen to those with whom we discuss politics” (p. 471). From

this perspective, deliberative orientations are a matter of *individual, conscious choice* on the part of participants. This leaves deliberative proponents without useful avenues for improving deliberative dispositions, outside of moral dictation advocating more conducive behavior on the part of contributors.

Though the field of deliberation democracy may be moving in a Deweyan direction, without a stronger engagement with Dewey's habits of transactional communication, the process of building trust within deliberative groups is likely to be left as either a matter of individual choice (as in Rojas' account) or simply defies adequate explanation and is left as a mystical (or chance-based) process. This diminishes the potential of effectively implementing deliberation in future research – making it less focused and more haphazard or, in Deweyan terms, less intelligent. By utilizing Dewey's theories on democracy, particularly his conception of habits formed through transactional communication, many of the conclusions reached in the previously cited deliberative research can be cohesively explained, while simultaneously suggesting avenues for further investigation and research. From a Deweyan perspective, the conclusions found in deliberative research about the role of time (Fagotto & Fung, 2012; Gutmann & Thompson, 2010) and mutual exploration (Laszlo & Laszlo, 2005; Ryfe, 2002) prior to deliberative engagement become less mysterious. As participants make meaning together, their mutual understandings may naturally begin to transcend polarized positions.

In contrast to envisioning dispositions as a matter of individual conscious will, a Deweyan position identifies them as primarily a matter of subconscious habits. Rather than hoist responsibility onto the backs of individuals, a Deweyan approach suggests examining the environmental conditions surrounding deliberation. Rather than taking participants' orientations at face value, a more productive approach would be to foster environmental conditions that make

it advantageous for participants to jointly investigate issues, particularly with those they may disagree with on social policy or other important matters. This would allow participants to immerse themselves in the process of transactional communication without the immediate pressure of working out a policy decision. As these participants achieve common goals together, they are likely to build trust and also more likely to become more understanding and less strategic in their orientations toward one another. Through the process of transactional communication, participants will begin to develop an open-minded attitude toward their fellow members, while increasingly taking responsibility for the group's trajectory. This will make coordinated action within deliberations easier to achieve.

Using Dewey's understanding of communication suggests radicalizing standard deliberative accounts. This approach recognizes that the process of common action, or transaction, is one of literally *making* common meaning. While the process begins with separate entities, within transactional communication new meaning is made for all participants – suggesting a vastly different process than one of working through or compromising on two distinct positions as in Gutmann & Thompson's (2010) account. While transcending disparate positions is never guaranteed, [a transactional conceptualization](#) suggests deliberative scenarios would generally benefit from even more time and mutual investigations into public issues. From this perspective, opinions should never be considered static and final and should not be rendered even tentatively so until an immersive process of communication has taken place. Transactional communication also contends that opinions on public issues should not be considered the possession of isolated individuals and should be understood as changeable within intervening processes of mutual exploration. Transactional communication offers the understanding that individual opinions, as with meaning generally, are never static, but continue to evolve due to

changes in experience.

More must be said on the particulars of cultivating habits that can make this process of transactional communication more productive within deliberation. However, before delving deeper into the issue of cultivating habits, I want to take a closer look at the literature on discussion and deliberation in school settings, with an emphasis on the field of social studies where deliberative conceptions have resonated most strongly with both scholars and practitioners.

### **Discussion and Deliberation in Social Studies**

For the past several decades, discussion has been recognized as a powerful tool for social studies learning. Newmann and Oliver (1970) argue that discussion is an “important vehicle for transmitting factual information, for deciding how incomplete our evidence is and what sort of information is urgently needed” (p. 4). Their perspective reflects Dewey’s (1916/2009) influence, who recognizes that communication often precedes more formal inquiry, as it helps participants clarify common problems and identify issues that require further investigation. The authors pinpoint exchanging views as beneficial for developing increasingly complex understandings of public issues. They acknowledge that, for discussion to be effective, participants must be willing to examine their own assumptions and assume an open attitude toward sharing ideas. However, they do not develop a position on *how* to cultivate an open attitude beyond suggesting that teachers should facilitate student exchanges. They rightly highlight the dispositions needed for effective discussion, but like many deliberative democrats, they seemingly take dispositions to be a matter of conscious action undertaken primarily by individuals.

Oliver, Newmann, and Singleton (1992) contend that conversation must be non-

combative if it is to be productive, stating, “some sense of group and interpersonal sensitivity must be nourished and maintained” (p. 103). This can be accomplished, they assert, by encouraging student-to-student talk, with the teacher interjecting to ask questions or offer points of clarification. These additions increase the power of their earlier positions and are largely consistent with other prominent past accounts of classroom discussion (Engle & Ochoa, 1988; Hunt & Metcalf, 1955; Massialas & Cox, 1966) as well as with a Deweyan understanding. However, these authors do not explore the philosophical dimensions of *why* student-to-student talk is effective in helping to achieve a non-combative environment.

In contemporary social studies [research](#), the most prominent scholars of discussion and deliberation are Walter Parker and Diana Hess. Parker and Hess (2001) argue for “teaching with and for discussion”—meaning that discussion is both a useful classroom method as well as an important outcome for meaningful democratic participation. With respect to *teaching with* discussion, the authors cite its usefulness in teaching content knowledge, interpersonal skills, and critical thinking. They provide a sophisticated constructivist explanation for the benefits of teaching with discussion, arguing that it is the basis for thinking: “Language is not a conduit through which meaning goes its own way. Understandings and decisions do not first appear in the head, then get themselves channeled through words.... We talk our way into understandings, decisions, agreements, or disagreements” (Parker & Hess, 2001, p. 286). [The](#) authors acknowledge the communicative aspects of social interaction as crucial to achieving understanding. Like Oliver, Newmann, and Singleton, Parker and Hess also identify student-to-student talk as crucial in classroom discussion. Parker and Hess (2001) also assert, drawing from Vygotsky, that internal dialogues are products of previous external interaction, which leads them to promote a variety of discussion types both inside and outside of school. In particular, Parker



(2006b) suggests increasing opportunities for substantive student discussion in a variety of venues within school, from student councils to informal groups and clubs. This position is again consistent both with Dewey's (1924/1958) perspective on the formation of the individual mind through social communication, as well as with the role of community transactions in forging increasingly complex social understandings within individuals through communication processes.

Within the social studies classroom, Parker (2006b) focuses on two specific types of discussion, which he identifies as *seminar* and *deliberation*. Seminar is oriented toward an open-ended social exploration of an issue or text, while deliberation is geared toward deciding among competing alternatives – similar to public deliberation. Parker (2006b) contends that these two discussion practices are complementary: “The knowledge-deepening, evidence-oriented, horizon-broadening functions of seminars provide an enlightened platform for public decision making, and vice versa” (p. 13). Seminar is useful for beginning explorations on a topic as well as for digging deeper into social problems or issues, where deliberation is beneficial for understanding other perspectives and working toward agreement on common problems. This leads into the assertions made by Parker and Hess (2001) about teaching *for* discussion.

Parker and Hess (2001) contend that seminar and deliberation are useful for democratic engagement, particularly building skills and behaviors of interaction across differences.

McAvoy [and](#) Hess (2013) cite a societal trend toward political polarization in the last generation to which they credit various factors including rising income inequality, increasing immigration, rapidly rising costs of political campaigns, and increasingly homogeneous communities. Parker (2006b) registers concerns about a society that encourages withdrawal from deliberation across differences, creating “gated mental and physical communities” with isolated citizens who are

uncomfortable with differences (p. 15). Parker (2010) articulates the need to encourage deliberation across differences to combat isolation and polarization:

A society aspiring to political community of this kind needs an education system that inducts young people into a civic culture of speaking and listening to people they may not know or like, whose behavior and beliefs they may not warm to, with whom they may be unequally related due to histories of discrimination and servitude, and with whom they may have no occasion otherwise to be in discussion, or even in the same room, but with whom they must be involved in political discussions – governance – on the public’s problems. (p. 2817)

A combination of seminars and deliberation along with other forms of conversation, Parker and Hess assert, is the best way for social studies educators to prepare students for a globalizing, multicultural world of interaction across differences (Parker & Hess, 2001; Parker, 2006b), and a key way to counter social trends of political polarization (McAvoy & Hess, 2013). They distinguish the techniques of seminar and deliberation from *debates* and *bull sessions*, which teach students to argue rather than listen closely to other perspectives (Parker & Hess, 2001). By contrast, seminars in which a text is carefully examined can “if things go well, productively disequilibrate discussants while creating a bond – a community – among them” (Parker & Hess, 2001). Hess and Posselt (2002) assert that the classroom must have “relations of trust” for meaningful discussion to occur (p. 292), and seminar is one way to begin building that trust.

In terms of scholarship on deliberative democracy, Parker and Hess’ positions on discussion and deliberation align with McAfee’s (2012) Integrated Model influenced by Dewey, which is the most open and inclusive deliberative model that recognizes the importance of social interactions and discussion beyond immediate deliberative engagement. They recognize the

benefit of utilizing a broad framework of conversational models beyond deliberation that allow students to build social relations and trust. In the work of Parker, there is also an emergent focus on the habits and dispositions necessary for deliberative participation.

Parker's (2006b) later work begins to move toward a Deweyan understanding of habit, arguing for *humility*, *caution*, and *reciprocity* as *ways of being* that can allow participants to listen more substantively across differences. Parker (2010) contends that teachers should cultivate habits of *reciprocity*, which involves taking the perspective of the other (p. 2829); *humility*, which means to "listen from the point of view that I am most likely missing something" (p. 2829); and *caution*, which suggests responding only after a thoughtful consideration of what the speaker has said (p. 2830). Parker is unsure whether these habits can be effectively taught but suggests using strategies of explanation and demonstration. Teachers can model these strategies in context, and students can attempt to utilize these techniques when engaging in discussion.

Like deliberative scholars, Parker and Hess recognize the value of careful listening and a willingness to substantively engage with others that may have vastly different worldviews and social values. They identify the importance of fostering attitudes that open participants to having their views challenged without registering offense or, at least, without severing bonds of trust. They also point toward some classroom practices, seminar and deliberation, that have the potential to foster a more trusting community within the classroom. However, they are unable to indicate specifics as to how deliberative habits can be cultivated. Parker moves in this direction with his explication of humility, caution, and reciprocity as ways of being, but he is only able to offer the strategies of explanation and modeling, along with explicit practice, as ways to cultivate them. While these suggestions are useful, Parker's methods for imparting these ways of being

suggest that he has only considered modifying dispositions by direct, conscious action. While Parker and Hess offer a largely Deweyan account of classroom discussion, delving deeper into Dewey's understanding of habits, particularly the habits of transactional communication, can yield productive understandings about fostering habits for and with classroom discussion, as well as public deliberation.

### **Dewey's Habits of Deliberation**

Dewey argues that habits form within an individual as a result of past modifications made to better navigate environments. Hence, from a Deweyan perspective, if one wants to cultivate sophisticated habits of transactional engagement, including reciprocity and responsiveness to others, one must alter the environmental dynamics to make utilizing these dispositions an adaptive environmental feature. Before going further with this point, a more detailed explanation of the role of habits within the communication process is necessary. Dewey (1924/1958) explains that habits are as much bodily as they are mental:

When men begin to observe and think they must use the nervous system and other organic structures, which existed independently and antecedently. That the use reshapes the prior materials so as to adapt them more efficiently and freely to the uses to which they are put, is not a problem to be solved: it is an expression of the common fact that anything changes according to the interacting field it enters. (p. 285)

This quote explicates what Dewey calls the *body-mind*, indicating that mind is an emergent quality of transactions between organisms and their physical and social environments. Such engagement involves the body in all its senses and faculties in a search for meaning. Habits should be understood in the context of body-mind, rather than merely as attitudes – which is a cognitivist conception that ignores much of the bodily basis for meaning making. Educators

should be aware of these factors when considering how a particular environment may foster or inhibit transactional communication.

Dewey (1924/1958) identifies three plateaus of interacting fields in nature, each involving greater discrimination of meaning. The first and simplest is physical matter – the raw material that makes up the universe. The second is life, including plants and animals. The third and most sophisticated is *association, communication and participation*. This final plateau is “internally diversified, consisting of individualities. It is marked throughout its diversities, however, by common properties, which define mind as intellect, possession of and response to meanings” (p. 272). In Dewey’s understanding, both mind and individuality emerge from communal processes of meaning making. From this perspective, *making* meaning is at the very heart of communication. In other words, it is the transaction, or the act of communication itself that is primary, with individual minds and personalities – what is often called individuality – as useful but subsequent distinctions. From this perspective, transactional communication is more than discussion but involves *live creatures* (Dewey, 1934) and all of their meaning making tools, including physical cues such as body language and gestures, in a search for common meaning – such meaning cannot be entirely reduced to linguistic utterances.

As previously explained, habits do not operate consciously – they are predispositions toward action that have been subconsciously incorporated into an individual due to past experience. Consciousness, to Dewey, is a momentary or temporary state triggered by an indeterminate event, which precipitates a moment of hesitation in which an individual consciously reflects on a new variable, a problem, or puzzle, in the environment. In this suspension of action, an individual uses their habits as a basis from which to devise a solution to the problem or puzzle.

This explanation is again individualized, but transactional communication, or communication as an act of making common meaning, is greatly extended through the use of language. While communication cannot be reduced to language, the use of language plays a formative role in transactional communication. Language allows actors to better anticipate future consequences due to communally sharing past experience. Dewey (1924/1958) explains,

By an intra-organic re-enactment of partial animal reactions to natural events, and of accompanying reactions to and from others acquired in intercourse and communication, means-consequences are tried out in advance without the organism getting irretrievably involved in physical consequences. Thought, deliberation, objectively directed imagination, in other words, is an added efficacious function of natural events and hence brings into being new consequences. (p. 291)

Dewey (1933) describes what he later calls “dramatic rehearsal” which occurs within the reflective process. In his revised edition of *How We Think*, Dewey (1933) explains this process in terms of an individual in isolated, reflective thought, who considers the potential consequences of competing lines of action before deciding how to proceed. However, the above example demonstrates that the process of deliberation before a decision is thoroughly social in nature and dependent in part upon the feelings, knowledge, and wisdom of participants.<sup>1</sup>

Dramatic rehearsal for an individual is limited by one’s imagination (Fesmire, 1995), which is determined by the extent of one’s experience. However, such limits are vastly expanded in acts of transactional communication, allowing a group to make far more connections in meaning and thereby far powerfully and accurately anticipate potential future consequences.

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<sup>1</sup> In *Experience and Nature*, Dewey (1924/1958) explains that even individual deliberation is not really isolated, as individuals depend upon past experience in deciding how to proceed. As humans are social creatures, past experience inevitably involves conditions of association and communication, and these social experiences become part of the fund of knowledge for an individual to draw upon even when deliberating upon matters in relative isolation.

Transactional communication not only helps to more intelligently guide future actions, it also cultivates habits:

Communication not only increases the number and variety of habits, but tends to link them subtly together, and eventually to subject habit-forming in a particular case to the habit of recognizing that new modes of association will exact a new use of it. Thus habit is formed in view of possible future changes and does not harden so readily.... By a seeming paradox, increased power of forming habits means increased susceptibility, sensitiveness, responsiveness. (Dewey, 1924/1958, p. 281)

While transactional communication allows more intelligent, conscious action, it simultaneously cultivates more productive subconscious habits. As meaning is literally *made* in common, participants are able to make connections between their personal experience and those of others. These connections are consciously made during, for example, a problem that requires sharing experience toward coordinated action. Deliberative participants who are given a problem in which they must carefully consider the perspective of others in order to find a viable solution will listen with greater care than those who are merely instructed to listen carefully. As contributors consider a problem together, they subconsciously begin to orient themselves to the perspective of the other within the process of working out the problem. It is here that what Dewey calls *open-mindedness*, or what Parker calls *reciprocity* and *humility*, are cultivated, as it is the process of coordinated action itself that cultivates the habit. While the process requires conscious social activity in the form of a common problem, the attunement to the other in the form of modified habits is dependent primarily on the problem requiring a common solution with unique input from all involved participants – making these socially spirited habits environmentally adaptive.

This position brings into focus assertions already made by discussion proponents, but allows a more precise targeting of the mechanisms at work. For example, discussion educators emphasize the benefit of student-to-student talk, particularly for fostering understanding among differences and creating a trusting classroom community. Through Dewey's transactional communication, the assertions about student-to-student talk can be confirmed and more precisely specified. As noted above, students should be engaged in activities that encourage them to offer unique contributions – this will foster more *open-mindedness* or *reciprocity* as the students coordinate action. Using Parker's terminology, this suggests generally privileging seminar over deliberation in the classroom, at least initially to “scaffold” the process until a common spirit has been fostered among students. From this perspective, the most productive way to introduce deliberation would be to let it emerge out of mutual exploration. This would encourage not only a more contextual and nuanced examination of the material, but would help buffer situations from unwanted hostility, as students would already be invested in finding a common solution. In the hands of a skillful educator, such investigations could be carefully planned to create ruptures within the course of inquiry. If utilized in this manner, deliberation could help foster a stronger classroom community, rather than creating rifts that would make future coordinated action more difficult. Creating such an environment would not be easy – it would require an educator who knows their students well, and is a master of content knowledge. Even then, the process would never be entirely predictable.

The teacher can also play a role in cultivating habits after transactional communication has begun. The habits of transactional communication must be continuously fostered, and a skilled teacher recognizes that there are times to intervene within the process. An example of this is offered by Parker (2010) in which he observes a teacher using interjecting statements,



which “slows the movement toward decision, directing students in a more careful consideration of the problem and a fair hearing of alternative solutions” (p. 2820). Parker, along with earlier discussion proponents (Engle & Ochoa, 1988; Hunt and Metcalf, 1955) recognizes interjecting questions as an important aspect within classroom discussion, but does not identify its potential for cultivating habits that he wishes students to appropriate. By suggesting they should stick with a point or argument and explore it further, the teacher is promoting more careful judgment, which will lead students back into the process of mutual investigation. While this one question alone will not suffice, the point to be made is that skilled teachers can use such questioning to continually alter the environment as necessary to steer students toward behavior and practices that will continue to cultivate and deepen the desired habits.

### **Conclusion**

Taking Dewey’s transactional communication seriously means that deliberation must be recognized within a broader transactional ecology of communication. This transcends discussion and deliberation as particular methods and considers them in a broader field that includes communication in various forms – verbal and gestural, formal and informal. This is similar to conclusions made by discussion proponents but extends these conclusions into considering all projects that require students to work together to reach common solutions. In this conception, communication is not simply a series of mental and linguistic acts but also a form of action where something is made in common. In pedagogy, this conception should be considered not only in relation to verbal discussion but also all projects that may involve substantive communication, including group work in all subject disciplines, art projects, service learning, and much more.

Within classroom discussion, transactional communication suggests privileging forms of

conversation that allow students to mutually explore material and offer their own unique contributions – this is closer to what Parker (2006b) calls seminar, rather than deliberation.

From this perspective, deliberation is best not engaged head-on, but in indirect ways – introducing it within the midst of exploration, or letting it emerge out of such inquiries.

Transactional communication reframes the notion of moral disagreement by suggesting that more than a mere disagreement about a public issue is at stake. Within this process, more than opinions may change; you can also have altered individuals and an altered environment as a result, as transactional communication contends that all participants become modified within the process. Of course, the extent that this occurs is dependent upon the habits that are present before engagement, and the habits that are fostered within the process. The significance of these conclusions is no less for public deliberation than for classroom discussion. Deliberation researchers have noted the importance of time and building trust before engaging in potentially polarizing deliberation – Dewey’s transactional communication suggests approaches that may more effectively build these habits and allow common meaning to be more productively achieved.

So far [this section has](#) focused on cultivating habits through altering the environmental factors of mutual engagement, but transactional communication does not preclude a conscious investigation of habits and other factors that would help success be achieved. However, it does suggest how public deliberators and social educators can best approach it – by making the creation of a productive social environment itself a matter of mutual exploration. In addition to using the direct, conscious strategies advocated by Parker, deliberation proponents can openly problematize communication for participants – encouraging them to consciously consider the meaning of careful listening and turn-taking within group communication and construct common

meaning about the factors that could foster an environment conducive to substantive discussion and deliberation.

The specifics of transactional communication and how fostering these habits can improve both classroom discussion, along with more inclusive forms of democracy, should be a topic of future field research. Given the subtlety and complexity of the phenomena in question, such research would likely be interpretive in nature. It would most likely have to take a holistic approach that recognizes the role of the broader environmental factors – what I earlier called the transactional ecology – in fostering the depth of communication in a particular situation. Research could also more closely examine teachers and deliberative facilitators and the various ways that they are able to create an inclusive environment that fosters habits of transactional communication. And, more could be explored about the particulars of this process, such as the benefits and specific timing of interjecting questions, what topics best foster socially spirited habits in particular circumstances, and much more. Envisioning discussion and deliberation through transactional communication offers a new perspective that reframes the purpose of the classroom while offering renewed emphasis on the importance of communication-centered forms of learning in the social studies classroom.

## Chapter 6: Conclusion

In this work, I have explored the significance of Dewey's habits of communication on contemporary education, with an emphasis on social studies education. Dewey's conception of habit differs from traditional conceptions that associate it with something acquired passively through repeated exposure or repetitive activity. Influenced in no small way by the work of Darwin, Dewey turns the idea of habits from a focus on socialization, to an emphasis on *adaptation*. Dewey's asserts that habits are active modifications made by organisms to more robustly thrive within an environment. To Dewey, the origins of habits are both biological and social. Humans have biological impulses to stimuli, but social interactions work to channel these impulses in various directions. Through continuous *transactions* between an organism and their physical and social environment, habits are formed as the organism navigates the social and physical terrain.

The other key concept in this work is communication. Dewey's understanding of communication also differs from the standard conception that identifies it as the transmission of ideas from one person to another. For Dewey, by contrast, communication is better understood as an inclusive act between participants and objects in which meaning is produced. Though information exchange is necessary within this process, it is the mutual act of using information that produces meaning. For humans, the most complex habits involve communication with other humans primarily through language, but also through other communicative forms such as gestures, body language, and even pheromones. Thus, the vibrancy and sophistication of an individual's habits of communication are dependent upon immersion in environments that encourage individuals to cultivate these habits through social meaning making communication.

I came to a more profound understanding of Dewey's habits of communication over the

course of this project. I began by drawing heavily upon educational theorists like Gert Biesta, who argues that Dewey derived his understanding of intersubjective communication from George Herbert Mead. While it is clear that Dewey and Mead exerted a great deal of influence on each other as personal friends and colleagues at multiple institutions, as I probed deeper into the works of Dewey, I came to believe that Biesta's interpretation was not the whole story.

Late in his career, Dewey increasingly used the term *transaction*, rather than interaction, to describe social engagement. He felt that the term *interaction* did not adequately articulate the social process of communication between humans. Dewey came to believe that human communication was an act that was not fully reducible to its constituent parts, and that describing it as give-and-take did not fully account for the melding of meaning that was possible when two or more humans engaged in vibrant and robust meaning making activity.

Dewey's late turn to the conception of transaction within communication was an extension of work he began much earlier in his career, in which he critiques the idea of stimulus and response regarding humans and the environment. Dewey (1896) argues that the phenomenon could not be understood as separable, that through experience humans learn to anticipate and predict responses and factor this into their actions. When multiples humans do this simultaneously, the result is a process of meaning making that transcends separate individuals and therefore cannot be reduced to the intersubjective acts between them.

Dewey offers only one piece of direct evidence in which he asserts that his conception of transaction moves beyond Mead's analysis. In a footnote within *Knower and the Known*, Dewey and Bentley (1949) argue that "George H. Mead's "situational" is often set forth in transactional form, though his development is more frequently interactional rather than transactional" (p. 133). In this, his last book, Dewey and his co-author Arthur Bentley begin to make a sustained case for

seeing human-environmental engagement through a *transactional* lens. The analysis of social communication within this book is only incipient, though in correspondence between Dewey and Bentley (1964) during this time, Dewey expressed his desire to rework his entire philosophy in terms of transaction. In these letters, Dewey urges Bentley not to rely too heavily on the philosophy established in Dewey's seminal works like *Experience and Nature* and *Logic: The Theory of Inquiry*, as Dewey and Bentley's revelations on the conception of transaction would require Dewey to make major revisions to these works. Dewey was nearing his ninetieth birthday during this time and, sadly, died before he was able to undertake these revisions.

Dewey's habits of communication in light of his insights about transaction have implications for curriculum theory, and I develop this material in chapter 3 in relation to social studies education. Dewey's pragmatism can be considered a form of constructivism, but it is distinct from other forms in some respects. I appropriate Biesta and Burbules (2003) term *transactional constructivism* to distinguish Dewey's learning theory from cognitivist conceptions that are often attributed to Piaget. In Dewey's transactional constructivism, humans are active agents that create meaning, but this process is not primarily a cognitive one. Rather, the quality of meaning is dependent upon the flexibility and robustness of the habits of participants within the process of activity. These habits are developed through long-term, continual exposure in, ideally, a multitude of socially and physically stimulating environments.

To be clear, cognitive reflection, both individual and social, is crucial for the learning process, but the quality of this action is itself dependent upon acquired habits. Within the classroom, habits amount to a covert or hidden curriculum that, if cultivated toward Deweyan ends, involves students acquiring a predilection to listen more carefully to their classmates and teachers in order to build ideas through mutual contributions. Communication comes to the fore

in these circumstances, as teachers can cultivate such habits by structuring classroom environments in ways that stimulate robust communication among and between students and their teachers. This can be achieved in a multitude of ways, though one promising avenue is structuring group tasks in ways that require unique contributions from each group member, ideally that align with the particular strengths and interests of each contributor. As a result of such transactions, students must begin to adjust their habits to more substantively engage with one another. Over time, immersion in such environments would enrich their learning experiences far beyond the content of any particular lesson, as student would become more productive and powerful learners (and teachers) in a variety of circumstances, including but not limited to those of formal education.

In many respects, Dewey's transactional constructivism is similar to popularly espoused forms of social constructivism in education. For example, both emphasize the importance of the personal and social context of the learner, and both encourage various forms of discussion and cooperative learning. However, there are also important differences that should be illuminated. While both perspectives stress the importance of social and physical environments, only transactional constructivism stresses the development of habits, rather than content as the primary focus of learning. This requires restructuring the environment in ways that require students to adapt their behaviors for deeper social engagement, not merely getting students to interact and learn information from one another (although this is also important). While social constructivist theories move toward meaning making education, the theory is still conceived in terms of communication primarily as a form of transmission.

At its base, transactional constructivism offers a more profound move away from cognitivist theories of meaning in comparison to social constructivism, as acquiring more robust

social habits is primarily a matter of action conducted by active, “embodied, habituated agents” (Colapietro, 1999). Social constructivism, by contrast, tends to emphasize language as a largely determinative feature of educational interactions. While language is crucial in the communicative actions that take place in educational environments, transactional constructivism pinpoints meaning making as a process that involves the whole body. These bodily transactions – what I come to call *transactional communication* – both form habits and are dependent upon them. Here, communication is understood primarily as a form of action, with transmission of information being a relevant, though secondary, factor.

Dewey (1916/2009) highlights his incipient framework for transactional communication in *Democracy and Education* when he calls for teachers to cultivate “socially-spirited habits” in students. This suggests that social studies education, in a Deweyan framework, should be at the forefront of students’ formal educational experiences. This also suggests that beyond the core discipline of social studies, the broad conception of social education should be considered a meta-discipline that is weaved throughout the entire educational experience of students.

I will finish by detailing some of the specific conclusions derived from this work, beginning with critiques of current educational practices and following with implications for alternative practices. I will begin with the subject of standardized testing, which is problematic from the perspective of Deweyan habits of communication. Specifically, it closes off opportunities for mutual meaning making by reducing learning to an isolated, individualized affair. It constrains learning to the acquisition of a series of decontextualized bits of information and skills and encourages teaching practices that promote competitive, individualistic habits among students, rather than socially spirited ones. In Dewey’s (1930/1999) terminology, standardized testing fosters “lost individuals,” and the discourse advocating such practices is at



least partly a result of conceiving of communication solely as a means of transmission, rather than as a process of making common meaning.

Another concern in education from this perspective is the discourse surrounding some forms of student-centered learning, which tend to overemphasize the pre-constructed interests of individual students. In Deweyan terms, such approaches confuse impulse with purpose (Dewey, 1938) and foster individualistic habits (Dewey, 1930/1999) that are detrimental to mutual meaning making. By contrast, fostering robust habits of communication require teachers to channel students' interests toward socially spirited ends. This is a difficult task for teachers, who should neither ignore students' interests nor accept them as final or static, but rather must *use* students' interests to creatively move them toward personal and intellectual *growth* by making unique contributions to group efforts.

As detailed more substantively in chapter 4, media and technology education, which the NCSS (2009) position statement on media literacy considers an end in itself, is also problematic. From the perspective of Deweyan habits of communication, the increasing influence of media through the presence of mobile, digital devices offers potential for both helping or hindering common meaning making communication, depending upon the context. Most of the debates involving media literacy are concerned with content. While media content is important to consider, reducing media literacy to this dimension is problematic, and is rooted in assumptions of communication primarily as a vehicle for transmitting content. Less considered is the possibility that such technologies may also foster individualistic habits that hinder meaning making communication beyond any immediate context. Considering habits of communication within the context of media and technology education suggests that research on media literacy within the social studies should entail exploring *how* meaning making is impacted in particular

contexts due to various technologies, along with a historical examination of how communication has been impacted over time by technological change. Educational practices must also be varied enough for students to be able to robustly communicate in various forms, so as to be able to critically reflect on the how media impacts social interaction and meaning making communication.

Considering implications for habits of communication within social studies education, teachers and administrators can start by increasing opportunities for substantive communication among and between students, and between students and teachers, along with other adults. As previously noted, structuring activities in ways that promote coordinated action, including contributions from individual students toward group goals, offer the most potential. This places on obvious emphasis on methods of discussion and cooperative learning. It also suggests connecting social studies more rigorously to place-based education, service learning, and other approaches to community education. These ventures should not be considered merely ends in themselves, but rather teachers should harness such opportunities for how such educational practices can contribute to fostering robust habits of communication among their students.

From this perspective, social studies education must offer a deeper engagement with the covert or hidden aspects of curriculum and schooling – what Dewey (1916/2009) calls “collateral learning.” Habits are dispositions or orientations toward the world that affect all other facets of learning – including the acquisition of knowledge and skills that are currently valorized in dominant educational discourses. Ultimately, socially spirited habits are signified by students when they listen more carefully to others, become confident in offering their own assertions while being open to revision and, perhaps most importantly, when they begin to become invested and intrigued by unsettled situations rather than turned off by them. Social studies teachers play

a crucial role in developing such habits through the structure of class environments, the nature of activities they ask students to undertake, and the careful, targeted use of questions, hints, and suggestions to students within activities.

Chapter 5 applies some of these ideas to the topic of discussion in social studies education. Within the scholarship on discussion, the work of Walter Parker (2006b, 2010) and Diana Hess (2002, 2004, 2009) is indispensable. As noted in the chapter, Parker and Hess build upon earlier work on discussion and cooperative learning (Hunt & Metcalf, 1955; Massialas & Cox, 1966; Newmann & Oliver, 1970) that recognizes the importance of student-to-student interactions and fostering dispositional habits in creating effective discussion. Parker (2006b, 2010) goes furthest toward exploring specific techniques that may cultivate habits of communication. He asserts that habits can best be fostered by using explanation and modeling, along with explicit practice by students of techniques modeled by the teacher. While these are useful suggestions for teachers to employ, they are limited by Parker not fully considering Dewey's conception of habit.

Parker considers developing habits only by conscious effort by teachers and students. Yet a Deweyan approach to cultivating habits suggests that habits are better understood as a covert part of the learning process, which must be developed indirectly by inducing individuals to modify their dispositions in order to better succeed within a given environment. This again comes back to the central role of the teacher in creating and fostering environments, through extensive planning that attempts to connect individual interests with larger curricular goals. This also requires careful attention to where students are within the process of activity, in which a teacher may use a question or a suggestion to subtly lead them toward deeper explorations of material and more carefully listening to others. While conscious activity is certainly necessary in

this process, it is the orientation required to perform the activity that cultivates habits, not any particular content under discussion. And while it is wise for the teacher to make their practices explicit at times, this should be subsequent to successes and secondary to students' own reflections on their achievements. In other words, students will attain more robust habits of communication through using tools in context, and reflecting on their success in using them subsequently. For a teacher to be explicit in these matters too soon would rob students of ownership over their own realizations of how they were able to achieve group success.

Lastly, because Dewey does not draw a sharp distinction between formal school learning and informal learning outside of school, two of the chapters, 2 and 5, also investigate the larger public sphere. Citizenship education is not merely a goal of formal social studies learning, but is also a topic for those concerned about citizens no longer undertaking formal education. With respect to conclusions about citizenship in the public realm, public opinion as measured by mass media through polling data is, like much of the discourse in formal education, based upon the conception of communication as the transmission of information. It is also based on assumptions of liberal individualism that have come under fire in formal education through social constructivist theories of learning. However, understanding communication as a meaning making process underscores the importance of moving away from static conceptions of public opinion and toward deliberative forms of civic engagement. This could potentially begin to address issues of polarization within the broader culture. Habits of communication must be developed within adult citizens, no less than within students, and public pedagogy toward this end would follow a similar trajectory to that of formal education. As demonstrated by research on public deliberative engagement (Fagotto & Fung, 2012), deliberation is most effective when it is an emergent aspect of mutual investigations of an issue. Habits of communication provide a

theoretical grounding for further research in deliberative democracy in the public realm, as well as in social studies classrooms.

This work lays out a theory that points the way toward future testing in real-life classrooms. In the future, I intend to investigate the dimensions of fostering habits of communication in social studies classrooms at various grade levels. Because this theory depends upon the particular needs and interests of students, it would be impossible to provide a universal blueprint for how to enact such a curriculum. However, case studies can be explored with a focus on master teachers who have learned how to promote intellectual and emotional growth through careful questioning that considers a multitude of dimensions, including the particular intellectual place of the child, their interests, their relation to other group members, and curriculum goals. Such examples could serve as further catalysts for how to develop such pedagogical perspectives more robustly within pre-service and novice teachers, and may also provide clues for how such techniques can be bolstered in college methods courses, along with actual classrooms.

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Wilén, W.W. (2003). Conductive effective issue based discussions in social studies classrooms.

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### EDUCATION

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Ph.D., Curriculum and Instruction: Language, Culture, & Society  
Ph.D., Social Thought, Minor
- 2009                    **Eastern Michigan University**, Ypsilanti, MI  
M.A., Social Foundations of Education
- 2002                    **The University of Michigan-Dearborn**, Dearborn, MI  
Teaching Certification, Social Studies 7-12
- 1999                    **The University of Michigan-Dearborn**, Dearborn, MI  
B.A., Sociology, B.A., Psychology

### PEER-REVIEWED PUBLICATIONS

- Mason, L. (2013). Science fiction in social education: Exploring consequences of technology. *Social Education*, 77(3). 132-134, 156.
- Mason, L & Metzger, S. (2012). Reconceptualizing media literacy in the social studies: A Pragmatist critique of the NCSS position statement on media literacy. *Theory & Research in Social Education*, 40(4): 436-455. Doi: 10.1080/00933104.2012.724630
- Mason, L. (accepted pending revisions). Locating Dewey's "lost individual" through 21<sup>st</sup> century education. *Philosophical Studies in Education*, 44.

### TEACHING EXPERIENCE

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Instructor – Penn State
- 2011-2012            SS ED 412W Teaching Secondary Social Studies II-  
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- 2010-2011            SS ED 411 Teaching Secondary Social Studies I-  
Instructor – Penn State
- 2009                    CI 495C Pre-Service Teacher Field Experience- Penn State Field  
Supervisor
- 2003-2008            Social Studies Teacher, Central High School, Detroit Public  
Schools, Grades 9-12
- Courses taught: U.S. History, Geography, Government, Global Issues, Economics