Education: Misunderstood Purpose and Failed Solutions

Paul A. Wagner and Lillian Benavente-McEnery
University of Houston – Clear Lake

There is so much quarrelling surrounding education today it seems people have lost sense of what needs arguing about, where there is a need for more research and where there are grounds for general agreement. Grounds now exist for shared agreement on matters of educational purpose. Moreover, there has in fact been much agreement on such matters over the years. With one flag to salute, people in education should be in a much better position to strategize on those tactics most likely to achieve our common pragmatically issued goals.

Will the Bickering Ever End?

Recently, Martin Bickman (2003) tried to sum up much that is wrong in education. He describes public education as a battleground wherein traditionalists such as Diane Ravitch and E.D. Hirsch expose the nonsense of the "self-expression" curriculum as advocated by opponents (Kohn, 1999) of standardized curriculums and standardized testing.

Bickman believes there is a cycle wherein subject matter is emphasized in the schools at the expense of personal expression and then at other times personal expression predominates at the expense of subject matter. Bickman's battleground metaphor is meant to underscore the severity of the tension that exists between the two competing sets of true believers. Moreover, for thinkers such as Bickman, the battle never abates. As one group dominates current educational practice the other side busily lays the groundwork for its surge back into fashion. Writers such as Bickman are so convinced of the inevitability of the debate, readers come to doubt any possibility of a synthesis emerging from the previous thesis and antithesis.

The Debate

Since this is not a review of the recent work of Bickman, subsequent remarks will speak more generally to the alleged competing needs between rigor of subject matter mastery on the one hand and the need for social and personal development on the other. Anyone familiar with the educational theorizing of Western and Middle Eastern antiquity will recognize the stirrings of such distinctions even then.[1] However while the distinctions were acknowledged, there were no appearances that the two themes stood in opposition to one another, at least not in the minds of theorists.[2] For example, Talmudic writings more than two thousand years ago, made the distinction between becoming educated in order to address the world as an adult and becoming trained for some occupation.[3] Indeed this distinction underlies much of the rationale for the religious practice of bar mitzvah. Similarly, the Greeks during the Golden Age of Athens, saw the purpose of education to be self-actualization, to use Aristotle's term, and identified other training as something one was led to through prudential reason and acquired wisdom. Specifically it is through the effective use of prudential reasoning that each learns what excellencies each may have. Subsequently it is up to the learner to learn how to use those "excellencies excellently" – again to borrow language from Aristotle's *The Politics*. Consider too, the example of Spanish Jews in Maimonides' time. Maimonides reports that advances in medicine, science and even

religion kept apace as complimentary parts of a Great Conversation benefiting both individuals and community (Herschel & Neugroschel, 1983).[4] Under such a worldview there is no reason for such an unwarranted dichotomy to arise.

Evidence of Successful Programs

Agencies such as the Hamilton Fish National Institute on School and Community Violence as well as the Safe and Drug-Free Schools expert panels have sought to identify programs as having "demonstrated" success or to be "promising" based on a rigorous examination of the research. For example, the latter identified elementary school-based intervention and prevention programs such as *Second Step: A Violence Prevention Curriculum* as "exemplary." Programs such as *Peacemakers* and *Peers Making Peace* and *Aggression Replacement training* and others were labeled as "promising." The former identified such programs for elementary programs as *Teaching Students to be Peacemakers*, *Kid Power* and *I Can Problem Solve* as having demonstrated success. There are research articles available from the websites and program directors of these programs. (More information is available from the Safe and Drug-Free Schools and Hamilton Fish National Institute websites).

There is a trend toward requiring schools receiving funding to use programs that have had demonstrated success or are at least promising. With this trend has come an increased urgency for programs to "prove themselves worthy" and an increase in the number of research and evaluation studies on programs and their effectiveness.

Did Such Cultures Get It Wrong?
Should Education Really Be about Self – Esteem?

In the contemporary United States things seem on the surface at least, to be quite a bit different. There is an evident dichotomy between those who champion personal development and those who champion an understanding of the world within which we live. Notice the difference between the nodding heads and weeping eyes of those in the audience of a standard self-help television show and compared that vision to the wide - open eyes and critical commentary of say, Nova series viewers on public television. The first group cares very much about mastery over psychological forces while the second hopes to understand the world of physical forces. There are no absolute grounds for preferring one subject over the other. Nevertheless, the two audiences and their respective subject matter interests seem worlds apart. However, in the highest reaches of the ivory tower there are many who understand this apparent chasm need not exist. For example, there are non-reductionistic biologists such as Stephen Rose (1998), Richard Lewontin (2000) and

Stephen J. Gould (2001) and spiritually inspired physicists such as Henry Schaeffer III (2003) and Sir John Polkinghorne (1994) who believe the forces of the world all need explaining and the life of inquiry doesn't require one to choose between in the words of William James' (1982), "soft-mindedness" and "hard mindedness" or C.P. Snow's (1964), *The Two Cultures*.

It is possible to read Diane Ravitch (2003) as someone far from conservative in curricular matters but committed instead to intellectual responsibility. Similarly E.D. Hirsch is no adversary of self-esteem.[5] Rather his quest is simply to show that subject matter competence is the most reliable path for developing student confidence and… self-esteem. Neither Ravitch (2003) nor Hirsch (1999) express hostility towards the idea that education can and should lead to personal development. Indeed, to that end, both Ravitch and Hirsch argue roughly that by instilling in students a full acquaintance with the Great Conversation of Humankind, intellectual skills and a passion for truth, they will likely develop both confidence and personal understanding. For Ravitch and Hirsch, participation in the world of the humanities, arts and sciences develops student understanding of the external world as well as an understanding of the social skills to deal with self and others. Though the expression "the great conversation of humankind" is not one used by either Ravitch or Hirsch the spirit behind the idea seems common to both.[6]

The term "Great Conversation of Humankind" had become common parlance in America at least since the time when the *Encyclopedia Britannica* began publishing its *Great Books* series back in the 1950s and *Great Book Clubs* began springing up around the country's urban centers. At present the idea has fallen into some disrepair among some American educators, not because it lacks substance but rather because like so many other ideas it has been bundled together with a set of uncompromising and sometimes offensive ideologies. This bundling of ideologies has unfortunately led to the downfall of many otherwise good ideas in America's current and ongoing "Culture War" and so it is with the concept of the Great Conversation. It has been weighed down not so much by defaults of its own but with ancillary conceptual baggage with which it has often been tied. For example, the Great Conversation is not inherently tied in with the alleged elitism of Mortimer Adler's (1998) *Paidea Proposal* of the 1970s.[7] Nevertheless, those who for good reason object to elitism may instinctively protest the perennial notion of a Great Conversation as well. The minimalist notion of the Great Conversation (MGC) advocated herein is not a

carrier of any elitism. It is, in a sense, not father's sense of the Great Conversation but something much closer, dare one say, to Great Grandfather's notion.

By avoiding the distractions posed by ancillary conceptual baggage such as Adler's *Paidea Proposal* and focusing instead on what is most central to the notion of a Great Conversation the idea can still be reasonably persuasive as establishing a universal goal or purpose for education (as distinct from training, schooling or socialization).

At its crux, the idea historically behind the Great Conversation says that all humans are naturally engaged in pursuing on some level, big questions such as what is the world made of, how do things come into being, what is happiness, what is the best form of organization and so on (Bass, 1997; Gale and Densmore,2003; Sobol, 1997). These big questions are cross-culturally relevant and they bring participants in the Conversation together. Think about it. What separates people more than anything is a refusal to join with others across cultures or to reach across historical epochs and participate earnestly in the Conversation. Participation in the Great Conversation leads to a bringing together (Eads and Wells, 1989). It is difficult to imagine anyone who does not agree with at least this minimalist notion of the Great Conversation (MGC) and recognize its benefits for all. The gist of the idea of a Great Conversation arose a multiplicity of times in human history when local cultures recognized that both truth and the search for truth could not be constrained by local jingoism.

The Great Conversation of Humankind is not a technical term designating a single way of looking at education. And, more specifically, the MGC identifies simply that realm of learned discourse where together and in non-exclusionary fashion, humans attempt to answer big (and perhaps some not so big) questions of physics, religion, mathematics, happiness, engineering, prudential reasoning, morality, architecture, the nature of formal and informal languages, evolution and development, love, the purpose of social systems and so on. To deprive students the information and skills needed to participate in the Great Conversation isolates them from full participation in community immediately and the world community generally. MGC focuses attention on the central educational goal of bringing everyone together to participate in dialogue to seek some form of shared truth and to avoid error or unnecessary grounds for fundamental divisiveness.

To be isolated from participatory interaction with community and the intellectual tools ranging from math and logic to heuristics, symbol and metaphor that make MGC possible is certain to impair any individual's personal development. Indeed, what could be more destructive to personal understanding and expression in the long run more than an inability to see both self and the world as others see each?

Bickman (2003) correctly distinguishes Alfie Kohn's (2004) approach to instruction and testing as quite different from that of say, E.D. Hirsch (1987). Note however that while Kohn and Hirsch may differ on means of instruction and assessment it is not at all clear that they differ with regards to the purpose of education.[8] Indeed a careful reading of each shows that there is little difference between the two when questions pertain to the *purpose* of education. For example, Kohn, as much as Hirsch, recognizes the need to bring students into the MGC. Kohn explains that by teaching students to treasure good questions, to seek truth and most importantly to not settle for conventional answers to test items students develop skills that truly equip them for life long learning or in other words life long participation in MGC (Kohn, 1998).[9]

Admittedly, Hirsch (1999) has more confidence in standardized testing than Kohn for insuring the acquisition of necessary intellectual tools but this does not mean that there is sharp disagreement between he and Kohn on what those intellectual tools are (O'Neill and Tell, 1999). Again whether one compares diverse cultures or historical epochs there is ample evidence throughout for the centrality of MGC as the defining purpose of education. Note, the focus here is on education and not on associative notions of schooling, training and socializing. The latter three all have legitimate roles in a community. Each though also has purposes distinguishing it from education. For example, consider that in early Talmudic writings of the ancient Jews, the idea of MGC is essentially expressed as participation in derashah, a process of unending homiletic sharing. This process of unending homiletic sharing is very much like the experience of High Table discussions that often occupied the time of Oxford and Cambridge dons in a sharply different culture. Questions that precipitate discussion in the two environs may differ but, the focus on dialogue and the passion for truth and destruction of error are preeminent in both venues. And to that extent, both are equally legitimate exemplars of MGC.

To return to the fleeting and apparent differences between writers like Kohn and Hirsch in matters of educational purpose, it is instructive to remember that Kohn and Hirsch both praise the intellectual skills encompassed by doubting and subsequent contribution to the MGC. In short, these authors, to the extent that they are said to represent

distinct entrenched personal interests each seemingly want the same thing in the end: namely, a level playing field wherein all students can learn to contribute to the intellectual well being of both self and community. Similarly, in working toward a common conception of the related notion of schooling (at least in the United States), Williams (1989) reminds educators that it is wise to keep in mind that it is not the content that constitutes the entirety of the curriculum but the very process of democratic deliberation over what should be taught. Many authors are adversarial when it comes to assessment methodology, strategies of classroom management, responsiveness to the community's social concerns and preferred subject matter (Apple,2001, p.325) but this does not necessarily carry over to an equally diverse array of visions for educational purpose generally.[10]

Battlefield metaphors such as Bickman's distract from the common goal all educators share or at least should share, when designing teaching/learning strategies. If educators do not agree on purpose, if there really is some perennial battlefield afoot on *that* then, educators are destined forever to talk past one another. And, in the end it will be the students who suffer in the wake of such disharmony. Fortunately, things are not as bleak as all that. Battlefield metaphors, at least with regards to educational purpose are at best, anachronistic.

If there are any outsiders to this shared vision of the purpose of education they come not from the ranks of the intellectual community but from the ranks of politicians. Politicians from both side of the aisle who use educational accountability as a rallying cry to induce voter support (Mitchell and Boyd, 2001). There are also those die-hard behaviorists who see in education nothing more then a set of strategies for securing predictable behavioral patterns in witless students. The politicians, anachronistically minded behaviorists and bureaucrats are the ones who have created a battleground atmosphere surrounding public education. Their obsessive focus on techniques and measurable outcomes mutes discussion of educational purpose. Nevertheless, the country's intellectuals seem to remain generally of one mind when it comes to purpose.

The Consequences of Divergence of Opinion in Matters of Purpose

Even when a sense of purpose is agreed upon as it is within the community of leading educationist thinkers, if the people in power namely politicians, school board members and the courts are in disarray on such matters, little can be accomplished (Woodbury and Newsome, 2002: Cuban, 1988). An inability to achieve minimal

agreement between thinkers and power-brokers on matters of educational purpose leads to conceptual chaos when deciding on matters of pedagogical style, tactics, methodologies, featured studies and so on (Mitchell and Boyd, 2001; Stallings, 2002). The most distracting concern for the country is not whether a perennial battle exists between advocates of self-esteem on the one hand and subject matter mastery on the other but rather the ineffectual grasp of many power brokers in the matter of educational purpose itself.

In educational studies, whenever in doubt, it never hurts to return to the work of John Dewey to reestablish one's conceptual moorings. As long ago as 1902, Dewey showed that the pull between rigor and erudite self - reflection should cease as experts recognize that education is meant both to teach students "stuff" as well as when and how to use that stuff, or as Dewey once said, "Intelligence becomes ours in the degree to which we use it and accept responsibility for consequences" (Dewey, 1957). In this sense Dewey, as philosopher William Frankena (1965) points out, is echoing Aristotle who thought that schools should teach students both theoretical reasoning as well as prudential reasoning. It is not much of a reach here to say that Aristotle, the classicist and Dewey the Progressive are each urging attention to personal development as much as to subject matter mastery. The two ideas are seen as flip sides of the same coin. Here there are at least rudimentary grounds for agreement on the purpose of education even though the historical span involved is over two thousand years and half a world apart. Admittedly, Aristotle is more willing to identify subject matter in the fashion of knowledge silos than is Dewey but that does not mean that either he or Dewey discounted the full flourishing of the individual in every imaginable way.[11] Again, rather than a battlefield reflecting perennial and inevitable tensions Dewey and Aristotle in relative agreement on purpose every bit as much as apparent adversaries such as Sykes, Ravitch, Hirsh, Noddings, Kohn and Jane Roland Martin are today – again at least as far as the big matter of educational purpose.[12] The consequence of bringing students into the MGC is that students can subsequently live personally and socially effective lives as a result (Kierstead & Wagner, 1992). Techniques for getting to MGC remain controversial but the destination rests secure. As Immanuel Kant observed summing up the spirit of MGC long ago, "Education includes the nurture of the child and, as it grows, its culture" (Kant, 1960).

The controversy that troubles current educational practice occurs not within the lofty thoughts of major intellectual theorists but within the incommensurate mandates created by bureaucratic

fiat and the self-seeking priorities of classroom engineers. In particular, programs like "No Child Left Behind" have failed to create an atmosphere of shared purpose but have instead fostered a survivor mentality (Easley, 2005; Dagley, 2002). In this enterprising "every person for him or herself mentality" that is created by "No child left behind" any alleged focus on shared purpose drifts into oblivion as each actor in the educational system does whatever is necessary to save his or her job. Where once teachers and educators manned the helm of a system for *educating* students, now a new breed of social engineers is emerging and tensions between the two are increasing. For example, as Hirshland and Steinmo (2003) point out that there has long existed a struggle between "…the country's basic democratic and egalitarian principles on the one hand and its localist and republican institutions on the other." The result they contend, "…is that American policy at the national levels ends up characterized by a type of national schizophrenia."

As a result, there is now much to be gained by hired guns willing to adopt any and all manipulative strategies that promise to produce whatever results those in power seek. In this new enterprising atmosphere is the goal of MGC diminishing in importance? And if so, is this to the betterment or the detriment of the nation's students?

Is Education for the State and by the State?

A host of questions have emerged with fresh vigor in the wake of "No Child Left Behind" and other similar ill-advised programs (Thomas, M.D. and Bainbridge, 2002). Issues of social engineering, institutional control and personal accountability are eclipsing any previously shared understanding of the purpose of education. In contradistinction to this conceptual ethos, Russian novelist Count Leo Tolstoy (1967) who once ran a famous school on his own estate wrote in sympathy with what we are calling MGC as follows, "…the purpose of our educational institutions lies chiefly in the dissemination of understanding among all classes, and not in the conservation of understanding in some one class which has taken exclusive possession of it."

The masters of social engineering excuse their preoccupation with control by pointing out that without control there can be no effective education. True enough. But when the focus becomes control itself rather than education, the means becomes the end and the end becomes neglected. Educators exist primarily to develop minds and not orchestrate behaviors. It is worth recalling that nearly two hundred years ago, German philosopher Immanuel Kant (1960), himself a very self-disciplined personality, cautioned educators, "But on the whole

we should try to draw out from their own ideas, founded on reason, other than to introduce such ideas into their minds." This notion drawing out reasoned thought appears again and again in the literature still today(Cahan,1994,p.158) To Tolstoy and Kant both the notion of a hired gum approach to education would be an anathema. There is as Robin Barrows (1984) explains a sharp difference between principles of classroom management and control and principles concerned with developing the mind. In an educational institution, all principles should be subordinated in the end to those which develop the mind.

Classrooms and schools are best thought of as sanctuaries and temples of learning. They should not be thought of, even metaphorically, as laboratories for social engineering or some sort of relatively civilized battlefield. Social engineering focuses on control of outcome in the tiniest detail. In contrast, the academic freedom central to education necessitates allowances for individuality in material and skills acquired. Moreover, teachers must understand, as Australian John Passmore (1980) remarks, that they are drawing out from students (rather than driving in) much of what is said to be learned. Students need to be educated by teachers; neighbors need to be informed by teachers of the purpose and practice of education (Hatch, White, & Faigenbaum, 2005) And finally, teachers need to participate in the training of school board members in policy management and resource development. Together all stakeholders in education should begin with an understanding of the nature of MGC. Teachers must reclaim their rightful voice in all of this (Weiner, 2003).

As argued above, in the case of Dewey and Aristotle, the ancient Jews and Oxford Dons, intellectuals of all stripes from around the globe and dating back darn near forever, have been largely of one mind when it comes to discerning the purpose of education. In contrast, those (usually from outside the school system) with a far less intellectual turn of mind see schools principally as tools for socializing, training, civic architecture, control over possible sources of community unrest and a host of matters at best only remotely related to education. An over-emphasis on these schooling issues can distract from student subject matter acquisition as much as they do from matters of self – esteem and personal development. The issues which set schooling objectives against MGC have a more deleterious effect on educational practice than any dialogue among true educational theorists about the proper balance between self-esteem and personal

development on the one hand and subject matter rigor on the other.

Though John Dewey died fifty some years ago, he continues to be the leading educational thinker that nearly every serious student of education in the United States turns to in order to find some pragmatic spin on the truth of what ails education today. Though a philosopher of considerable note, Dewey wrote about education neither as an intellectual, a bureaucrat, a social engineer or a person of political ambition. Rather when it came to education, Dewey wrote to the audience that mattered most, teachers and the lay educated public. In his educational writings, Dewey combined his epistemic insights with his enthusiasm for progressivism and democratic practice (Dykhuizen, 1973). This intellectual foundation led Dewey (1961) to conclude that in the end it was not specific subject matter that should determine the manner and course of instruction but rather the need of each individual to flourish *as an individual* within some sort of participatory democracy. In short, education for Dewey "…means supplying the conditions which foster growth (Dewey,1916, p.56)."

For Dewey, the individual's potential and the instructor's experience should dictate subject matter, assessment, and instructional and management strategies.[13] Attention to the student's future contributory role in a participatory democracy prescribes the necessary coherence for fulfilling educational purposes in a world of diversity (Dewey, 1941). In short, for Dewey what was needed for the fulfillment of educational purpose is for each person to get on with others in a life of collective flourishing "…as an affair of civilization not of individual intellect" (Dewey, 1957). To grasp Dewey one must grasp his academic philosophy as well as his more ideological works in education. To see Dewey as an ideologue alone is to sell Dewey short. One cannot understand Dewey by reading only his thoughts on the curriculum. For Dewey the philosopher, the curriculum should be driven by the society people collectively want and by the intellective tools people need to share in order to shape the world around them (Dewey, 1902). Even though Dewey is co-founder of a unique approach to philosophy, namely pragmatism (along with C.S. Pierce (1986) and William James (1997) and continuing into the present through the works of W.V.O. Quine (1995) and Hilary and Ruth Putnam), there is also something of an Aristotlean (as well as Kantian) commitment in Dewey as commentator William Frankena (1965) has aptly pointed out.[14] The apparent agreement between Dewey and Aristotle is important to note since it underscores the consistency of vision of educational purpose across national boundaries and historical

epoch, argued for throughout this discussion. Like Aristotle, Dewey recognized that the state existed for some purpose. That purpose can be simply re-stated in a recent motto from the US Army, namely, to help each and every individual "become all that he or she can be." For Dewey and Aristotle alike, human flourishing is the end to which the state and its educational practices must aim (Frankena, 1965). For both Dewey and Aristotle, humans are rational or better yet, *intellective* beings who possess a capacity to *figure out* how to engage the world rather than merely grope their way through existence. However, Dewey in contrast to Aristotle, is less convinced that the concept of human flourishing could be defined in a one size fits all manner as Frankena (1965, p.191.) explains, "Dewey advocates… unifying method and subject-matter and adapting both to the child…"

Whereas Aristotle thought that certain subject matter was necessary for intellective development, Dewey through his emphasis on experiential learning was an early champion of diversity in learning styles and immediately relevant experience as the principle means for fulfilling intellective development. Despite these differences between Aristotle and Dewey each seems nevertheless to aspire to a common goal overall, namely to bring about the flourishing of the individual through something herein branded as MGC (Frankena, 1965).For example, Dewey emphasized that the State and its educational resources should be mustered to help each individual participate as fully as possible in a democratic state. This in turn would result in the flourishing of the state as much as that of the individual (Dewey, 1936). In what initially may appear to be a contrast between the two, Aristotle saw the flourishing of the state as preeminent as a means for insuring the flourishing of an optimal number of citizens and Dewey saw the development of the individual as preeminent in bringing about the flourishing of the State. But having acknowledged such an apparent contrast the question remains whether it represents a distinctly different notion of educational purpose between the two. Scholars may quarrel whether Aristotle or Dewey was more willing than the other to sacrifice the educational well being of the few to secure the flourishing of the many, but in fact, each shows a sincere commitment in principle to doing the best for all (Frankena, 1965). For Dewey it was to do the best for the individual through the state and for Aristotle it was to do for all individuals what can only be achieved by individuals contributing to the state (One cannot help recalling John F. Kennedy's words when reflecting on this aspect of Aristotle, "Ask not what your country can do for you but what you can do for your country".) In short the apparent contrast on

matters of purpose between Dewey and Aristotle is as illusionary as the contrast Bickman alleges exists between contemporaries such as Kohn and Ravitch.

For both Aristotle and Dewey, as well as Kohn and Ravitch, MGC designates a template of educational purpose albeit roughly but not inaccurately. MGC identifies educational purpose as extending student vision beyond the limits of any jingoistic horizon and thereby taking the student a step further away from error and unsuccessful engagement with the world.

It must be acknowledged prior to concluding these remarks that Dewey deliberately avoided the phrase the Great Conversation of Humankind. A close reading of Dewey reveals that while his commitment to democracy underscored the ideas of universal commitment and respect for all who participate in the Great Conversation he was wary not to use any language that would identify him with the teaching techniques or subject limitations espoused by the likes of his contemporaries Robert Maynard Hutchins and Mortimer Adler.[15] Nevertheless, as this portrayal of MGC shows, Dewey and Aristotle are seen as very close in matters of educational purpose each espousing a form of MGC, just as Frankena (1965) explains.

Egalitarianism and the Great Conversation

It is not much of a stretch to claim that MGC constitutes at least one end or aim of education generally. MGC excludes no one and entertains the possible meritoriousness of every imaginable lifestyle within the context of relevant conditions. Focus on participation in MGC makes irrelevant combative metaphors. It is not a fight teachers wage when hosting the Great Conversation it is rather an invitation to share with others the search for truth and techniques for minimizing error. What could be more fulfilling of personal purpose and intellectual authenticity?

The focus on respect for all participants, universality of participation, passion for truth of some kind and appreciation for big and meaningful questions (Yeh, 2001; Weiner 2000; Woodbury and Gess-Newsome, 2002) is what makes MGC the touchstone for all educational thinkers in matters of purpose.

The conceptual contours of MGC unite Ravitch, Hirsh and Kohn with the likes of Aristotle and Dewey and nearly all other serious students of educational purpose from the dawn of written speculation about education. MGC *evolves.* Throughout the evolution of MGC a principle of natural selection operates. This principle of natural selection, initially discussed by Richard Dawkins (2004) and Susan Blakemore (2000), determines

whether or not stuff learned ("memes" is the technical term currently in fashion for such all such stuff) constitutes knowledge and the utility of such knowledge now and in the foreseeable future. MGC leads inevitably to the adoption of socially constructed facts and skills (memes). This process of reason-governed evaluation leads MGC to ever more reliable evaluations of whether or not the stuff being learned should constitute knowledge - specifically in immediate problem-solving contexts. Finally, the MGC leads to a continuing re-evaluation of itself just as it does to all intellectual commitments freely embraced and tentatively held.

Equally as important as learning any stuff or how to use such stuff, there is a moral element inevitably emergent from full participation in the MGC. The moral element is intellectual integrity. Authentic participation in MGC demands dissatisfaction with anything less than truth. This dissatisfaction or, to put things more positively, this passion for truth compels participants to always keep an open mind and not settle for a facsimile of truth (Dewey, 1929).[16] The practical upshot of this moral commitment in the schools is that students must ask again and again two questions namely: "How do you know?" and "What do you mean by the term X?" These two questions are at the heart of MGC. Without those two questions participation in the Great Conversation of Humankind amounts to no more than collective and often contentious efforts at propagandizing. Without the active utilization of these two questions self-expression becomes nothing more than winning at all costs. Without the active utilization of these two questions standardized curriculums and testing become little more than measures of successful propagandizing.

In 1929, John Dewey declared at a national meeting of the Progressive Education Society that, "The challenge for America in the future is the moral, not the technological" (Kierstead & Wagner, 1992). Questioning *how one knows* or what others *mean* by this or that term are, for Dewey, moral imperatives. The asking of such questions is not just an effective teaching technique. (And again this commitment to questioning was equally important in the streets of ancient Athens.) So in declaring the centrality of the moral, Dewey was underscoring that education is neither about simply learning stuff nor even about self–expression alone. Rather for Dewey, education is a venue wherein we learn to advance our shared interests and common bond. All this occurs under the auspices of a gathering and common understanding of the world's furniture, how it is arranged and some idea of whether or not we humans should be in the business of rearranging this or that object, force or

process. It is through the traditional academic disciplines as well as through new research protocols and speculative reflection that insights and intellective tools become available to participants in MGC. This is as true in kindergarten classrooms as it is in the great research laboratories of the world.

If there is a battlefield mentality surrounding our collective sense of public education, it exists only because we have forgotten that the technological means for measurement and management must forever remain subservient to the moral. Techniques of instruction and assessment must never be allowed to overshadow the purpose of education (Weiner,2000; Sobol,1997). Education itself is ultimately about making a better world. To borrow again that well-known platitude from the United States Army, education is about making each person all that he or she can be. Or as Sobel writes (1997, p.635) "…a true education makes people competent, wise and just." The stuff each learns and uses in a classroom must be seen as subservient to this much larger goal. This vision is what continues to unite most educational thinkers in what we have herein described as MGC.

Education, genuinely understood as MGC, leads inevitably to an appreciation for both democracy as well as to a respect for others. Inasmuch as education prepares each person for a life of excellence it leads as well to a better shared community.

When education is seen as bringing people into the Great Conversation of Humankind, the role of active participation looms large. Understanding the potency and responsibility of genuine participation in the Great Conversation leads participants to further understanding of the responsibilities involved generally when participating in a democracy. The two sets of responsibilities go hand in hand.[17]

In Search of Truth

Curriculums focusing on self-expression alone lead students away from a sense of cooperation, mutual respect and a sense of personal responsibility for insuring the well being of others. Curriculums focusing on standardized content and testing foster a totalitarian understanding for the purpose of education and isolate students one from another (Boaler, 1997). Truth and further shared understanding are not the products of standardized approaches to education. Rather in a standardized approach often the best one can hope for is acquiescence to whatever is declared true by those in power (Apple,2001; Mitchell and Boyd, 2001).

No one ever won a Nobel Prize by acquiescing lock, stock and barrel in the truths downloaded by those in power. Nobel prizes in the sciences are awarded to people who learn how to

participate in the Great Conversation and who know how to pursue a line of questioning more successfully than anyone previously. In short, focus on either a personal development curriculum or a sterile and homogenous subject-focused curriculum is guaranteed to fall short of the ultimate of bring students into the Great Conversation of Humankind and perhaps more importantly, effective participation in democracy. As Dewey (1938) concludes in *Experience and Education*, "I am not… in favor of any end or methods simply because of name… The basic question concerns the nature of education."

Through MGC students learn that education is a venue where they are to learn both stuff and skills and yet most importantly, respect for the accomplishments of the human spirit – accomplishments in both their individual and collective manifestations. With each new individual understanding of some phenomenon, the MGC itself advances.

Footnotes

[1] For further examples, see Christopher J. Lucas, *Our western educational heritage*, (1972) with special emphasis on chapters 1 – 3, and W. T. S. Gould, *People and education in the third world,* (1993).

[2] For example, Philip Birnbaum, *A book of Jewish concepts* (1964, pp. 223-224), Suresh Chardra Gosh, *The history of education in ancient India: c. 3000 B. C. to A. D. 1192*, (2001), and Henry Schmidt, *Education: Pt. I history of education ancient and modern*, (1842).

[3] Phillip Simpson's translation Aristotle's *The politics,* (1997, ch. 1 & 5).

[4] See also Arbel's *Maimonides* (2001).

[5] See for example Hirsch's *Cultural literacy* , (1988, p. 29, pp. 98 – 102), and *The schools we need and why we don't have them* , (1999, pp. 100 – 104).

[6] See also A. Kohn's *Beyond discipline,* (1996), and *What does it mean to be well-educated?* (2004).

[7] See also M. Adler's, *The Paidea program* (1998, 2 nd ed.) and *The Paidea program* (1984).

[8] For example, see Hirsch, *Cultural literacy* (1987, p. 18) and Kohn's *What does it mean to be well-educated?* (2004, pp. 2 – 10).

[9] Confucius' The Great Learning in W. Bachin's (ed.) *Classics in education* anticipated almost word for word the MGC when he wrote, "More study without thought is useless, but thought without study is dangerous…mind should be set on the search for truth…illustrate virtue, regenerate the people…from the emperor to the people all must consider the cultivation of the person the root of all else." (1966, pp. 163 - 164. The natural and universal access of all peoples to the "Great Learning" Confucius speaks of is underscored by Ibn Khaldoun's remarks on the possibility of people achieving what has been

[10] For example, as long ago as 1970, hero to student radicals, Paul Goodman dismissed the standardized testing minded writing, "…it is authoritarian to manipulate people for their own good and incidentally expend them for the cause by somebody else's strategy" in his *New reformation* (1970, p. 152). See also Paolo Friere's *Education for critical consciousness* (1974, pp. 32 - 40).

[11] See for example, Randall Curran's *Aristotle and the necessity of public education* (2000, ch. 2), and Jerome Papp's *Naturalizing philosophy of education: John Dewey in the postanalytic period* (1998, p. 20).

[12] See Frederick Kierstead and Paul A. Wagner's *The ethical, legal and multicultural foundations of teaching* (1992, ch.2).

[13] See for example, Dewey's discussion of the two fold path constituting the map prepared by the instructor and the student's grasping of the purpose of maps generally and the use of a particular map in a given case in his *The child and the curriculum* and *The school and society* (1902).

[14] See Hilary Putnam's *Pragmatism: an open question* (1995), and Hilary Putnam and Ruth Putnam's Dewey's logic: epistemology as hypothesis and Education for democracy both found in Hilary Putnam's *Words and life* (1995).

[15] The personal animosity between ??? on the one hand and ??? on the other can be seen in ???'s (January 1937) rant against the two in his President Hutchin's proposal to remake higher education," *The social frontier*, and see to Hutchin's re??? (March, 1937) Grammar, rhetoric and Mr. Dewey," *The social frontier.*

[16] For an excellent commenting on Dewey's thinking in this matter see Israel Scheffler's *Inquirer*, (1986, Part III, ch. 9, pp. 363-374).

[17] For a more detailed discussion of these paralleled responsibilities see R. S. Peter's *Ethics and education* (1967, pp. 185 – 194, 205 – 219).

References

Adler, M. (1998). *The Paidea proposal*. New York: Touchstone.

Apple, M.W. (2001, May). Standards, subject matter, and a romantic past. *Educational Policy, 15* (2), 323-334.

Barrow, R. (1984). *Giving teaching back to teachers.* London, Ontario: The Althouse Press.

Bickman, M. (2003). *Minding American education: Reclaiming the tradition of active learning.* New York: Teachers College Press.

Blakemore, S. (2000). *The meme machine.* New York: Oxford University Press.

Boaler, J. (1997). *Experiencing school mathematics.* Philadelphia: Open University Press.

Cahan, E. (1994). John Dewey and human development. In R. Parke, P. Ornstein, J. Rieser, & C. Zahn-Waxler (Eds), *A century of developmental psychology* (pp.145-167). Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.

Cuban, L. (1988). Constancy and change in schools (1880s to the present). In W.P. Jackson (Ed), *Contributing to Educational Change* (pp. 85-105).

Dagley, D. L. (2002). Federal and state legislation. *The yearbook of education law* (pp.231-72).

Dawkins, R. (2004). *The ancestor's tale.* New York: Houghton Mifflin.

Dewey, J. (1902). *The child and the curriculum.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Dewey, J. (1916). Democracy and education: An introduction to the philosophy of education. In J. Boydston (Ed), *The middle works of John Dewey* (vol. 9). Carbondale : Southern Illinois University Press.

Dewey, J. (1941). *Interest and effort in education* . Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press.

Dewey, J. (1936). *Moral principles in education.* New York: Houghton Mifflin.

Dewey, J. (1938). *Experience and education.* Bloomington, IN: Kappa Delta Pi.

Dewey, J. (1957). *Human nature and conduct*. New York: The Modern Library.

Dewey, J. (1961). *Democracy and education*. New York: Philosophical Library.

Eads, M. & Wells, D. (1989, February). Grand conversations: An exploration of meaning construction in literature study groups. *Research in the Teaching of English, 23* , 4-29.

Easley, J. (2005, August). The political tension of education as a public good: The voice of a Martin Luther King, Jr. scholar. *Education and Urban Society, 37* (4), 490-505.

Gale, T. & Densmore, K. (2003, April-June). Democratic educational leadership in contemporary times. *International Journal of Leadership in Education, 6* (2), 119-136.

Hatch, T., White, M.E. & Faigenbaum, D. (2005, May). Expertise, credibility, and influence: How teachers can influence policy, advance research, and improve performance. *Teachers College Record, 107* (5), 1004-35.

Hirschland, M.J. & Steinmo, S. (2003, July). Correcting the record: Understanding the history of federal intervention and failure in securing educational reform. *Educational Policy, 17* (3), 343-364.

Frankena, W. (1965). *Three historical philosophies of education*. Chicago: Scott, Foresman & Co.

Gould, S. J. (2001). *The structure of evolutionary theory.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Herschel, J.A. & Neugroschel, J. (1983). *Maimonide: a biography*. New York: Farrar Strauss and Giroux.

Hirsch, E. D. (1987). *Cultural literacy: what every American needs to know*. New York: Houghton Mifflin.

Hirsch, E. D. (1999). *The schools we need and why we don't have them*. New York: Anchor.

James, W. (1982). *The varieties of religious experience.* Harmondsworth: Penguin.

James, W. (1997). *The varieties of religious experience.* New York: Simon & Schuster.

Kant, I. (1960). *Education.* A. Churton, trans. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press.

Kierstead, F. & Wagner, P. A. (1992). *The ethical, legal and multicultural foundations of teaching* . Madison, WI: Brown and Benchmark.

Kohn, A. (1998). *The schools our children deserve.* New York: Houghton Mifflin.

Kohn, A. (2004). *What does it mean to be well-educated?* Boston: Beacon Press.

Kykhuizen, G. (1973). *The life and mind of John Dewey.* Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press.

Lewontin, R. (2000). *The triple helix gene, organism and environment.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Mitchell, D.E. & Boyd, W.L. (2001, January). Curriculum politics in global perspective. *Educational Policy, 15* (1), 58-75. O'Neill, J. & Tell, C. (1999, September). Why students lose when tougher standards "win": A conversation with Alfie Kohn. *Educational Leadership.*

Passmore, J. (1980). *The philosophy of teaching*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Peirce, C.S. (1986). *Philosophical writings of Peirce*. New York: Dover.

Polikinghorne, Sir J. (1994). *Science and Christian belief: the faith of a physicist*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Quine, W.V.O. (1995). *From stimulus to science.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Ravitch, D. (2003). *The language police*. New York: Knopf.

Rose, S. (1998). *Biology beyond determinism.* New York: Oxford University Press.

Schaeffer, III, H. (2003). *Conflict or coherence*. Athens, GA: University of Georgia, The Apollo's Trust.

Sobol, T. (1997, Summer). Beyond standards: The rest of the agenda. *Teachers College Record, 98* , 629-36.

Stallings, D.T. (2002, May). A brief history of the U.S. Department of Education, 1979-2002. *Phi Delta Kappan, 83* (9), 677-83.

Simpson, P. (1997). Trans., Aristotle, *The politics*, Chapel Hill, N. Carolina, U of N.C. Press.

Snow, C. P. (1964). *The two cultures*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Tolstoi, L. (1967). *On education.* Leo Weiner trans. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Thomas, M.D. & Bainbridge, W. L. (2002, June). No child left behind: Facts and fallacies. *Phi Delta Kappan, 83* (10), 781-2.

Weiner, L. (2000, Fall). Democracy, pluralism, and schooling: A progressive agenda. *Educational Studies, 31* (3), 212-24.

Williams, R. (1989). *Resources of hope.* New York: Verso.

Woodbury, S. & Gess-Newsome, J. (2002, November). Overcoming the paradox of change without difference: A model of change in the arena of fundamental school reform. *Educational Policy, 16* (5), 763-782.

Yeh, S.S. (2001, December). Tests worth teaching to: Constructing state-mandated tests that emphasize critical thinking. *Educational Researcher, 30* (9), 12-17.

Author Notes
Paul A. Wagner, Ph.D.,
Director, Project in Professional Ethics
Professor, Educational Foundations
School of Education and Philosophy
School of Humanities and Human Sciences
University of Houston – Clear Lake
Houston, Texas, 77058
Wagner@cl.uh.edu

The author is former Executive Secretary of the Philosophy of Education Society, former Vice President of the Association of Philosophers in Education, president of the Texas Educational Foundations Society and member of the Ethics Committee for the American Association of Public Administration.

Lillian Benavente-McEnery Ed.D.
Assistant Professor
University of Houston-Clear Lake
Houston , Texas 77058
281-283-3539
mcenery@cl.uh.edu

The co-author is an assistant professor in the literacy, language, and library science department and co-director of the university Reading Clinic in the Center for Educational Programs at UH-Clear Lake.

Note from the 2015 Executive Editor, Constantin Schreiber
May 14, 2015. This article was first published at the original *Current Issues in Education* website, located at http://cie.asu.edu/articles/index.html. In 2009, *CIE* changed online platforms to deliver the journal at http://cie.asu.edu. The original *CIE* website was from then on only used as an archival repository for published articles prior to Volume 12. After the new *CIE* website moved to a different server in 2014, the original website and original article URLs could not be accessed anymore. Therefore, this article had to be repurposed into the published format you are viewing now.

All content from the original publication has been preserved. No content edits occurred. Spelling, grammar, and mechanical errors that may be found were present in the original publication. The *CIE* logo and publisher information in use at the time of the article's original publication is unaltered. Please direct questions about this article's repurposing to cie@asu.edu.

Current Issues in Education
Mary Lou Fulton College of Education
Arizona State University