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Motivation And The Young Writer: Reimagining John Dewey's Theory Of Experience

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MOTIVATION AND THE YOUNG WRITER:
REIMAGINING JOHN DEWEY'S THEORY OF EXPERIENCE

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2021

DEDICATION

For my grandparents,

Ruby Juanita Cryer and Quinton Lee Cryer

While you did not get to see me through to the end of this journey, your love and support even from those earliest years set me striding confidently forward in life.

MOTIVATION AND THE YOUNG WRITER:
REIMAGINING JOHN DEWEY'S THEORY OF EXPERIENCE

by

BILLY J. CRYER, M.A., M.L.S.

DISSERTATION

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ABSTRACT

Issues of motivation remain a perennial topic among teachers of English Language Arts and first-year college composition courses. While modern evidence-based research in educational psychology has yielded fruitful avenues for harnessing motivation in writing instruction, in recent decades, industrious composition scholars have also turned to history for insights on composition pedagogy.

In this study, I also embark on a historical excavation to glean from our composition forebears regarding motivation in writing instruction. In particular, I examine how the educational writings of John Dewey were translated into the English classroom during the Progressive Era. More specifically, I seek to recover how Progressive Era compositionists have theorized John Dewey's writings on experience and its practical pedagogical applications. Finally, I advocate for a reimagining of John Dewey's theory of experience as a way of providing insights for conceiving new pedagogical practices for addressing motivation in writing instruction in today's English Language Arts and college composition course. I will show that in reimagining John Dewey's theory of experience, teachers of writing today can construct a pedagogy of experience that engages students with writing in ways that tap into natural sources of motivation.

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CHAPTER 1: MOTIVATION AND THE PROGRESSIVE ERA LENS

Many years ago, upon turning the ripe old age of nine, I received the most unexpected of birthday gifts: a small desk and a typewriter. The desk was a somewhat dilapidated affair—its wooden surface pockmarked from years of wear—but it had a fresh coat of glossy dark brown paint and it rested sturdily on its feet next to my bed. And though the typewriter seemed to conspire against me at every turn (daily my little fingers fussed at jammed keys or the obstreperous ribbon of ink, or paper that rarely went down into the roller without resisting wrathfully), it was a functional typewriter and over the next several years it bore many sheaves of my crude, misbegotten imagination.

In retrospect, these two birthday gifts seem entirely unlikely—for I was born into a family of humble means: the middle of five kids who lived in a small trailer home next to a lonely dirt road deep into the feral, wooded Texas countryside. But my grandparents, who gave me the desk and the typewriter for my birthday, had been afflicted with a love of reading, and this love had passed down to my father who kept many books at home. I am not sure if my grandparents recognized in me the workings of this same love for reading, or if they simply wanted to nurture it. But with my desk and my typewriter came a simple invitation to write. I was not instructed what to write about. I found plenty of inspiration from my life experiences and from the books at hand, either from my father's collection or from the elementary school library. What my grandparents and my parents did was simply provide me with the resources and the space I needed in order to begin the process of developing as a writer and enlarging my small existence.

Today, as I think about the important issue of motivation in the context of composition studies, I often reflect back on this space that I was afforded as a child and the opportunity it provided me to forge my own purpose as a writer—and I wonder to what degree this impacted my motivation in writing over the course of the ensuing years of my formal schooling. As English teachers and composition instructors, we sometimes look on in dismay at all the time our students spend on social media or television, and we lament the loss of halcyon days when more sustained writing and reading encompassed a greater portion of daily life. There seems so little zest for writing among our students. In fact, often it appears that motivation in writing is found everywhere *but* in the English class. After all, are not students, sitting in the classroom with their cellphones crooked at an angle in the palm of their hands, engaged in writing—sometimes with the gusto and concentration that we only dream of seeing in assigned writing projects? To me this suggests that the natural impulse of young people to communicate their thoughts does not always get pulled up into the enterprise of the English class, but instead is rerouted into other channels where space and purpose are found with more abundance.

As I have sought to understand how space and purpose influence the formation of motivation in writing, I've found insight from entirely unexpected quarters: teachers and scholars from the early 20th century, the so-called Progressive Era compositionists. These pioneers in composition studies approached motivation in writing pedagogy from altogether different angles than scholarship from more recent decades. At the confluence of this rich scholarly activity in the early 20th century—conversations which included topics of space and purpose—is a unique focus on examining students' individual

experience in language development. Again and again, Progressive Era compositionists pointed to experience as a critical part of the discussion regarding motivation in writing instruction. This movement to conceive of composition pedagogy in terms of experience found its primary source in the writings of John Dewey, American philosopher and central figure in the Pragmatist philosophical movement.

My aim in this study is to recover how Progressive Era compositionists have theorized experience and its practical pedagogical applications. Specifically, I will advocate for a reimagining of John Dewey's theory of experience as a way of providing insights for conceiving new pedagogical practices for addressing motivation in writing instruction in today's English Language Arts and college composition course. I will show that in reimagining John Dewey's theory of experience, teachers of writing today can construct a pedagogy of experience that engages students with writing in ways that tap into natural sources of motivation.

RECOVERING AND REIMAGINING: METHODOLOGY AND PROJECT ROADMAP

"The work of reimagining has much to offer the field of composition and new media studies," writes Aimeé Knight ("Reclaiming Experience" 146). In setting out to reimagine how John Dewey's theory of experience can illuminate pedagogical practices in writing instruction today, I embarked on a historical exploration of the social milieu that gave birth to Dewey's theory of experience. I also sought to understand how teachers and scholars in the field of composition studies during the Progressive Era incorporated

Dewey's writings—particularly his writings on experience and education—in their own thinking and teaching.

Indeed, initially it was not even evident that I needed to examine John Dewey's writings. During my early research, I was drawn to the writings on pedagogy by several Progressive Era teacher-scholars, the publications of prominent early figures in composition studies such as Fred Newton Scott, Ruth Mary Weeks, Gertrude Buck, Sterling Andrus Leonard, and Louis Rosenblatt, among others. Gradually, it dawned upon me that these writers all shared a common theme: a frequent reference to one John Dewey. This was a stunning discovery. It was then that I began to fathom the extent of John Dewey's influence in the United States during the Progressive Era. The philosopher seemed to eclipse all other American thinkers of his time. "John Dewey," wrote Bertrand Russell in 1945, "is generally admitted to be the leading living philosopher of America." Russell added: "In this estimate, I entirely concur" (*The History of Western Philosophy* 819). Today, there may be no parallel, no single public intellectual who enjoys so universal an influence. Encountering John Dewey revealed the very source of the educational reform pulsing through society during the Progressive Era, and, more importantly, it set me on the path to discovering the philosopher's writings on experience and their relation to education.

This project is primarily a historical and theoretical study. My research took me to the Center for John Dewey Studies at Southern Illinois University Carbondale and the Bentley Historical Library at the University of Michigan to examine the Fred Newton Scott Papers. A number of unexpected discoveries came from my archival research. For

example, at the Center for John Dewey studies, I had a series of conversations with the curator—a PhD in philosophy—who pointed me to the influence of Charles Sanders Peirce on Dewey’s own development as a philosopher. C.S. Peirce is often credited with laying the groundwork for the philosophy of pragmatism, which William James and John Dewey later developed. Dewey’s pragmatism is built upon several epistemological premises provided by his theory of experience.

My archival research also illuminated several integral themes in Progressive Era education, such as the struggle of secondary schools to adequately meet the needs of students due to the controlling influence of college entrance requirements. Moreover, examining correspondences, drafts of essay manuscripts, and other primary source documents in the Fred Newton Scott Papers revealed key publications in the professional literature by Scott and his contemporaries on these educational issues. For example, I came across references to several journal articles about the Reorganization Movement in Secondary English, a precursor movement to the experience curriculum movement in English Studies. The Reorganization Movement was additionally tied to the very founding of the NCTE. I may not have encountered these important journal articles—and their insights about the educational movements during the Progressive Era—had I not spent time conducting archival research.

Finally, inspecting the archival records also provided a window into the more scholarly nature of academic work in composition studies during the Progressive Era, as is the case with Gertrude Buck’s letter dated April 23, 1910 to Fred Newton Scott discussing the usage of “gray” versus “grey” (Fred Newton Scott papers). More than 100

years later and the matter seems no more settled than in 1910, unfortunately, as I am eternally confounded by the two options and conflate them both indiscriminately. Importantly, however, the letters show Buck and Scott engaged in descriptive, rather than prescriptive, scholarly work regarding grammar and usage—a unique practice of the time that took its cue from new developments in educational philosophy. These new developments in educational philosophy, as I will show, were significantly influenced by the work of John Dewey, particularly his writing on experience as applied to education.

My project is also indebted to the pioneering work of many accomplished historians in composition—Katherine H. Adams, Arthur N. Applebee, James Berlin, John C. Brereton, Robert J. Connors, Sharon Crowley, Albert R. Kitzhaber, Thomas P. Miller, Susan Miller, James J. Murphy, David R. Russell, and many others. These scholars have shown how the discipline of composition studies during the Progressive Era began charting a new direction—separate from literary studies—with the goal of turning teaching practices away from traditional methods that in many ways did not prepare students for the ever-shifting broader society. More recently, important work by scholars such as Sharon Crowley have highlighted John Dewey’s general influence on composition studies as a discipline. Others, such as Stephen M. Fisherman and Lucille McCarthy have explored how Dewey’s writings can be recovered in order to improve classroom teaching practices, in particular. I seek to build upon all these scholars in specifically examining Dewey’s theories of experience and how these theories shaped pedagogical practices during the Progressive Era. My aim is to show how these insights

might be recovered in order to shed light on pedagogical practices today for harnessing motivation in writing instruction.

A careful examination of the educational terrain at the turn of the 20th century reveals a remarkable detail: John Dewey had a significant influence on the formation of our discipline of composition studies. His impact cannot be understated. But while Progressive Era composition studies was markedly Deweyan in nature, the philosopher's impact on the field today is less apparent. Certainly, there has been wide acknowledgement of the discipline's debt to Dewey's writings. "Dewey is everywhere in our literature" wrote Janet Emig in 1980 ("The Tacit Tradition" 12). Emig identified Dewey as one of the individuals who belong to "a cluster of scholars who make up the tacit tradition for writing and rhetoric research" (10). This group of scholars, according to Emig, share several characteristics, and among those is that "numerous persons, themselves active in the field, have *independently identified* these women and men as significant, cited them in their writings, and emulated them in their work" (10). Emig specifically points to Dewey's influence in the discipline's thinking about teaching both reading and writing. Barry Kroll writes that Dewey's writings have influenced both the theory and practice of the field of composition studies:

Dewey's notions of inquiry and reflective thinking played a key role in the movement to reemphasize invention and problem-solving strategies in the teaching of composition, as well as in the development of the fields of discussion and small-group communication. And his views of education as cooperative, participatory, student-centered learning have figured in such pedagogical

emphases as expressive writing and collaborative writing groups. (“Dewey, John (1859-1952)” 182)

For a figure who has been so influential on our own discipline, then, I find it remarkable that John Dewey’s discussion of experience has not been more fully woven into the cloth of scholarship in composition studies today. Stephen Fishman and Lucille McCarthy have pointed out that while there has been a renewal of interest in Dewey and his ideas in recent years, this interest has tended to focus on Dewey’s ideas on education and society in general, rather than specific applications of Dewey’s theories to classroom practice (*John Dewey and the Challenge of Classroom Practice* 2). Significantly, the only major practical studies in our own discipline that explicitly incorporate Dewey’s theories of experience occurred in the Progressive Era and in the years immediately following, well into the 40s—a period when general education, as Sharon Crowley writes, was “animated by a specifically Deweyan pragmatism, which held that learning occurs by means of engaging students in activities that induce them to reflect usefully and creatively on their experience” (*Composition in the University* 16).

While scholarship in composition studies that incorporated Deweyan theories on experience began to fade in the 1940s and 1950s, Dewey’s ideas on experience and education lived on in the field of education and have permeated much of the educational landscape today. In more recent decades, the experiential learning (or EL) movement can trace its roots back to Dewey and the Pragmatist philosophers. William James articulated a “radical empiricism,” which served as a starting place for experiential learning. James wrote that truth is formed from objective sensory data and the subjective interpretation of

this data through one's thoughts, memories, and experiences (Hornsby & Make 38). James emphasized that learning requires controlled, intentional reflection—or what has now come to be called metacognition (38). This “introspective observation” is what humans must always rely on in order to learn and acquire further knowledge—and is the basis for which later experiential learning was developed: “This continuous didactic between the mind and the material world refined by reflection established a foundation for experiential learning” (Hornsby & Maki 38).

John Dewey, building upon Williams's ideas of controlled, intentional reflection in learning, articulated a framework for learning that includes “promoting hands-on learning, using a problem-solving process, addressing real world problems, encouraging student interaction with each other and the content, engaging in direct experience, and using multiple subjects to enhance interdisciplinary learning” (Wurdinger & Carlson 8). Experiential learning today has expanded across multiple fields and there are multiple academic journals dedicated to the learning theory—including *Journal of Experiential Education*. Moreover, experiential learning has given birth to many new approaches to learning and teaching: project-based learning, problem learning, service learning, and active learning. These approaches all share similar principles, such as student-centered learning and adjusting curriculum to specific student experiences.

Additionally, I would suggest that the more recent field of user experience research and design, while having no clear delineation back to Dewey, has benefited from the groundwork that Dewey laid regarding experience. There is much room for further research in this area.

But it is Dewey's own writings on experience and their application to teaching and learning in the composition class that I want to examine. This study not only offers a fuller picture of composition practices during the Progressive Era regarding eliciting motivation in writing instruction, but it also explores Dewey's influence as a whole on our disciplinary heritage as teacher-scholars in composition. My project seeks to explore several key questions. How can historical inquiry be reframed to more fully glean from pedagogical practices from the Progressive Era? What are the classroom conditions needed for eliciting motivation in writing instruction? How do broader social conditions impact learning and motivation? How can a recovery of Dewey's writings on experience provide insight for teaching writing today?

Recently, Jeremiah Dyehouse and Krysten Manke have called for a renewed inquiry into Dewey's work in teaching and learning (particularly an examination of the experiments Dewey conducted while directing the Chicago Laboratory School) in order to "yield new viewpoints on contemporary educational practices" ("The Philosopher as Parent" 16). In looking to John Dewey's pedagogical insights, I will show how composition teacher-scholars as early as Dewey's own time began to reimagine their own teaching practices by drawing upon the philosopher's writings on education—particularly Dewey's writings on experience as applied to education. Such an inquiry into Dewey's writings on experience and education throws into contrast many challenges in education we face in our own time, but this historical glance backward also reveals something very encouraging: that as teacher-scholars hoping to harness insights about motivation, we are not moving forward entirely into *terra incognita*. We can profit greatly by looking at how

our ancestors in composition formulated Dewey's theory of experience into their own pedagogy. Their work can inform our own reimagining and reformulation of experience in addressing motivation in composition instruction today.

Here in Chapter 1, I orient my discussion on the Progressive Era and the emerging discipline of composition studies. I explore how Progressive Era teachers and scholars in composition theorized issues of motivation in writing instruction by frequently employing a unique metaphor—the metaphor of combustion. I show how this metaphor emerged from a new educational philosophy influenced by Dewey's writings on experience. I show how Dewey's philosophy of experience was shaped, among other things, from new scientific knowledge, the human as an organism responding to his or her environment. This discussion serves as a springboard to a deeper exploration in the following chapters of how Progressive Era teacher-scholars approached issues of motivation in writing instruction by way of Dewey's theory of experience.

In Chapter 2, "John Dewey and an Emerging Educational Paradigm," I explore the social backdrop that gave birth to Dewey's theory of experience. This includes an overview of the emergence of the pragmatist philosophical movement, which provided the core premises that John Dewey used in forming his educational philosophy of experience as he applied to education. I show how Dewey's theory of experience as applied to education was adopted by teachers and scholars in composition and translated into the experience curriculum among English teachers. I end with a discussion about how the experience curriculum in English sought to address two primary concerns among

Progressive educators—the broader social dynamics influencing education as well as issues of classroom teaching practices.

In Chapter 3, “The Student and Society,” I examine the first issue that the experience curriculum hoped to address in the Progressive Era: reforming education to better benefit the student as both an individual and as a member of society. I explore the formation of the National Council of Teachers of English and its initial goal of achieving reform in high school education. I show how the NCTE’s formation was intrinsically linked to Dewey’s influence on the field of education, and how progressive educators, along with Dewey, advocated for reforming schools in ways that respond to broader social conditions in order to meet the individual student’s intellectual and career needs. I explore how Dewey’s envisioning of a more democratic educational setting, while addressing the individual student’s needs more, also had greater benefit to society.

In Chapter 4, “The Chains of Conventional Academic Procedure,” I return to an examination of classroom teaching practices during the Progressive Era. I explore the second primary concern that Deweyan teacher-scholars sought to address with the experience curriculum: the common practice of fashioning classroom learning conditions that prevented students from drawing upon their own experiences. I show how teachers in the discipline of composition studies turned to Dewey’s writings on experience in order to identify specific teaching practices that contributed to preventing students from drawing upon their own experiences in the learning process. I then provide a closer examination of Dewey’s theory of experience and the importance of the role of individual purpose in teaching and learning.

In Chapter 5, “Toward a Reimagined Pedagogy of Experience,” I lay out three broad pedagogical implications to my excavation of Dewey’s writings on experience and its application to education during the Progressive Era. I explore how Dewey’s writings on experience might better inform pedagogical practices today, and I point to potential avenues for further research on integrating theories of experience in order to elicit greater motivation in writing instruction.

PRACTICAL EXIGENCIES: MOTIVATION IN TODAY’S WRITING COURSE

This project began, as is so often the case with teachers seeking to find solutions to pedagogical problems, as a practical endeavor. My own experience in the classroom for many years—both as student and teacher—has driven home a significant observation: that success in teaching and learning is intrinsically linked to issues of motivation. Moreover, motivation appears to be no simple matter. It is a subject as complex as the human condition. Gaining insights into motivation requires unknitting a tangle of overlapping and interconnecting conditions—the complex nature of the home and school environments, the broader social backdrop, and the relationship dynamics between students and the teacher (as well as the social dynamic among students themselves). For the English Language Arts and college composition teacher hoping to tap into sources of motivation to engage students more successfully in writing instruction, then, understanding motivation becomes of paramount value.

And by all accounts, attending to motivation may go a long way to improve the experiences that many students have with formal writing instruction today. The data is

troubling. One study conducted over a span of 15 years concluded that 95% of students entering college have “a negative view of the experience of writing in a school setting” (Allen 72). Additionally, 49% of the students found writing a boring activity (21). Common anecdotal experience from many primary and secondary school English Language Arts teachers seems only to corroborate the findings of research. Donald Graves echoes the experience of many high school teachers when he observes that his students view writing as a sweaty business: “The act is so painful that most delay writing a class paper until pure terror takes over” (31). Lucy Calkins voices a common observation among teachers regarding the reluctance of younger writers: “In our schools, students often tell us they don’t want to write. But they need not bother to tell us. We can feel their resistance as they eke out tense, tight lines of words and as they ask, ‘How long does it have to be?’” (11).

Recently, Patrick Sullivan has given a name to this phenomena of acute resistance in young people to engage in writing. He refers to this as the “aversion problem” (*A New Writing Classroom* 123). In initiating this scholarly conversation about motivation, Sullivan writes that he has noticed composition scholars write on the “aversion” often produced in students as a result of formal composition instruction. He quotes Linda Brodkey’s reflection on her own experiences as a writing instructor in her 1996 book *Writing Permitted in Designated Areas Only*:

While it seems to take longer in some cases than in others, composition instruction appears to have succeeded best at establishing in most people a lifelong aversion to writing. They have learned to associate a desire to write with a set of punishing

exercises called writing in school: printing, penmanship, spelling, punctuation, and vocabulary in nearly all cases; grammar lessons, thesis sentences, paragraphs, themes, book reports, and library research papers in college preparatory or advanced placement courses (qtd in Sullivan 122).

Not only does Brodkey provide a troubling diagnosis, she insists that this aversion is a direct result of classroom pedagogy. Sullivan, in tackling the aversion problem himself, also concludes that there is a firm correlation between the aversion problem and classroom pedagogy. “Is it possible,” writes Sullivan, “that the most lasting and significant learning outcome many students take away from English classes is a lifelong aversion to writing? Alas, I think it may be” (122). This is a sobering proposition. The very institution that ostensibly serves to foster proficiency in reading and writing in young people is now responsible for, by and large, achieving the very opposite—nurturing a visceral disinclination for these activities. Writing for school is often anathema to the average young person.

The aversion problem, however, is not just the English teacher’s dilemma. The aversion to writing and reading too often extends to an aversion of learning in general. In 1929, English philosopher and psychologist Alfred North Whitehead did not mince words when he wrote of students’ general apathy for reading, writing, and learning:

Speaking generally, during the last thirty years the schools of England have been sending up to the universities a disheartened crowd of young folk, inoculated against any outbreak of intellectual zeal. The universities have seconded the efforts of the schools and emphasized the failure (48).

The significant implication of the aversion problem is that the majority of young people often view the task of writing and reading a laborious, painful activity. Moreover, an aversion is not simply a neutral disinterest—like someone who has no inclination for football or basket weaving—but rather an aversion: for students, reading and writing are often fraught with connotations of anxiety and pain.

An aversion to learning in general has frequently been tied to learning conditions. Psychologists have long drawn connections between student learning and the aversive nature of the US classroom, in general. B.F. Skinner, in *The Technology of Teaching*, develops the thesis that U.S. education is largely aversive—students engage in the required movements of learning in order to escape punishment. In previous ages, aversive behavior was motivated by a desire of the student to be spared the threat of corporal punishment (15). But even the progressive movement in education led by John Dewey in the early part of the 20th century, argues Skinner, merely traded one form of aversive stimulation for another:

The child at his desk, filling in his workbook, is behaving primarily to escape from the threat of a series of minor aversive events—the teacher’s displeasure, the criticism or ridicule of his classmate, an ignominious showing in a competition, low marks, a trip to the office “to be talked to” by the principal, or a word to the parent who may still resort to the birch rod. (15)

One only hopes that the modern American adolescent does not live under the menace of the birch rod. What psychology demonstrates, however, is the highly complex nature of

the social fabric a young student inhabits—one marked by a skein of invisible power relations and often conflicting purposes.

But is this a new phenomenon, an educational crisis unique to our time? A glance at the history of composition studies reveals that Brodkey and Sullivan are not the first to discuss the problem of motivation: they are simply approaching the issue of motivation through the lens of “aversion.” The annals of education are replete with examples of teachers writing about the lack of motivation in their students. A careful examination of our own literature shows that discussions of the aversion problem surfaced even further back, when the discipline of English Studies was taking on a more practical, “composition” cast in the mid- and late-nineteenth century by the Scottish rhetoricians. Richard Whately in *Elements of Rhetoric* (1828) exhibits an acute awareness of the “pain” that young writers often experience during the composition process (292). Whately explicitly identifies the type of writing tasks given to students as the cause of their pain, and he provides suggestions for reducing this pain that students experience. Tellingly, Whately claims that the source of student aversion is found in specific teaching practices.

While modern scholarship in composition studies has provided much insight on motivation, I want to examine the writings of Progressive Era compositionists in the United States as a source of particular insight on addressing issues of motivation in writing instruction. This period of American thought was uniquely positioned to speak on the issue of motivation, as I will show. And there is no shortage of writing on the topic from these figures. We know, for instance, that the experiences of student writers during

the Progressive Era were not too far removed from the experiences of student writers today. “The Freshman usually comes to the writing of themes with more or less dread,” acknowledged Helen Ogden Mahin in a 1915 article in *The English Journal* (“The Study of English Composition” 445). While Mahin suggested that the typical college student was often “ashamed of his effort to express himself,” this lack of skill in expression was in part due to broader issues of motivation (446).

“The largest single problem with which the teacher has to deal to-day,” observed Sterling Andrus Leonard in his 1917 book *English Composition as a Social Problem*, “is that of getting adequate motivation into the composition period” (vii). Teachers in 1917 often lamented that “the ordinary student has found the task of linguistic expression a dull exercise” (v). Worse still: “In spite of years of training, our students fail to become easy, clear, and forceful writers” (v). Leonard’s book grew out of a dissatisfaction with current teaching methods during the early part of the 20th century. Of significance is that Leonard’s *English Composition as Social Problem* reflected a number of progressive educational theories fomenting at the time. In his book Leonard sought to translate some of these new educational theories in order to productively address the issue of aversion to writing among students. Leonard proposed unconventional teaching methods that specifically aimed to tackle issues of motivation in students.

But it is precisely *how* Leonard—along with many of his contemporary compositionists in the Progressive Era—discussed the issue of motivation in writing instruction that warrants closer examination. It is here that we discover the first glimmerings of John Dewey’s theory of experience. Like many unfamiliar concepts, we

first encounter Dewey's theory of experience indirectly. In this case, its manifestation is in the form of metaphor.

PROGRESSIVE ERA METAPHOR OF COMBUSTION

One of the most striking aspects of scholarship by Progressive Era compositionists is how little the term “motivation” appears in the literature—in the journal articles, textbooks, and the professional publications. Instead, in the writings of early compositionists there is a prevalence of metaphor to reflect on and theorize the topic of motivation in writing instruction. Progressive Era scholarship in composition studies tended toward figurative language, with the metaphor enjoying a privileged role. More specifically, when theorizing on the topic of motivation in writing, Progressive Era scholars frequently employed a particular metaphor: the extended metaphor of a chemical combustion.

Louise Rosenblatt articulates the metaphor of combustion in her seminal 1938 title *Literature as Exploration*. According to Rosenblatt, when a student sits down to write about something—such as a literary work he or she has read—what results is “a doing, a making, a *combustion* fed by the coming together of a particular personality and a particular text at a particular time” (xvi; my emphasis). While Rosenblatt is chiefly interested in examining the transaction between reader and literary text, she offers an observation about writing and speaking in general using a metaphor that frequently surfaces in the writings of many scholar-teachers of the time.

Progressive Era scholars developed the metaphor of combustion by employing the words “spontaneous” and “spontaneity.” “It is only as we get spontaneous and unstudied talking first,” wrote Sterling A. Leonard in 1917, “that we can hope to do effective work toward raising standards later” (*English Composition* 41-42). Charles Swain Thomas articulated a similar vein in *The Teaching of English in the Secondary School*, which appeared in 1917, the same year as Leonard’s *English Composition as a Social Problem*:

Perhaps more important than the way to do a thing is the impulse to do it. It may, therefore, be more important in some classes for a teacher to give first consideration to the creation of this laudable impulse to write. [...] One of our first attempts, therefore, should be to arouse a glowing interest in something specific; for interest *spontaneously* incites expression, and free expression is one of our chief aims. With the impulse established, pride in the performance may be later—perhaps concurrently—aroused. (54; my emphasis)

Leonard echoed Thomas by arguing that the teacher’s goal is to “arouse [an] impulse toward verbal expression” (*English Composition* 5). Leonard and Thomas argued that young people have a natural impulse to express themselves, and that such expression occurs naturally and spontaneously, given the right conditions. They contended that effective writing tasks can serve as good “stimuli to expression” (Leonard 17). These and many other teacher-scholars used figurative language to create a metaphor of chemical combustion to articulate a key observation about human nature, the biological impulse inherent in all young people to express themselves.

Chapter 3 of Louise Rosenblatt's *Literature as Exploration* is entitled "The Setting for Spontaneity." The chapter elaborates the metaphor of chemical combustion.

Rosenblatt asserts that the English teacher's goal is to "awaken an intimate personal response" in the student regarding the literary text (56). Moreover, teachers must work to create an atmosphere that "will make it possible for [the student] to have an unself-conscious, spontaneous and honest reaction" to the text (64). This mirrors Leonard's mandate that the primary goal in teaching writing is to first aim for "spontaneous and unstudied talking" in students.

The metaphor of chemical combustion surfaces again and again in Progressive Era discussions of motivation in writing instruction. Couched in the metaphor of combustion are specific claims about the young individual's latent desire to express him or herself—impulses that can be produced much like the result of a chemical reaction given the proper conditions.

SPONTANEOUS PERSONAL RESPONSE AND ITS BARRIERS

Composition scholars and teachers have often noted that the need for self-expression is a basic aspect of the developing individual. But how do we explain the mass aversion to writing in the school setting in light of children's natural curiosity and desire to express themselves? Children enter the educational system exuberant with curiosity. In addition to curiosity, a child exhibits a remarkable enthusiasm for self-expression. This includes self-expression through writing. "Children want to write," observes Donald Graves in *Writing: Teachers & Children at Work*. "They want to write the first day they

attend school. This is no accident. Before they went to school they marked up walls, pavements, newspapers with crayons, chalk, pens or pencils...anything that makes a mark. The child's marks say, 'I am'" (1). Peter Elbow has elsewhere noted that children learn to write before they learn to read (10). Children want to express themselves.

Here emerges a great mystery, however. A baffling conundrum takes shape when children begin their school careers. Edward Deci writes that the child's natural curiosity evaporates almost entirely:

But one of the most troubling problems we face in this culture is that as children grow older they suffer a profound loss. In schools, for example, they seem to display so little of the natural curiosity and excitement about learning that was patently evident in those very same children when they were three or four years old. What has happened? (quoted in Sullivan, 164).

A parallel condition is that the child's zest for self-expression has met a similar fate.

What has caused this transformation in children?

The instructional setting is often cited as the key source of the aversion problem. Recently, Donald Graves, suggests that the teacher him or herself often *serves as a barrier* between the student and the unborn composition:

We ignore the child's urge to show what he knows. We underestimate the urge because of a lack of understanding of the writing process and what children do in order to control it. Instead, we take the control away from children and place unnecessary roadblocks in the way of their intentions. (1)

For Graves, teaching practices often serve as roadblocks, or barriers, which prevents students from engaging in language in ways that are fueled by the “urge” of their own intentions. Progressive Era scholars, through the metaphor of combustion, also developed the idea that teaching practices can serve as a barrier. The metaphor of combustion implies that young people inherently possess a desire to express themselves, and that teaching practices can hinder that spontaneous personal reaction from taking place. Specific pedagogical practices can serve as a barrier to that process.

The argument that teaching practices can serve as a barrier to a spontaneous personal response takes many forms in Progressive Era thinking on writing instruction. In *English Composition as a Social Problem*, Sterling A. Leonard approaches this concept of barrier in several different ways. Leonard writes that “it appears necessary *first* to secure a mode of procedure which shall, so far as possible, do no harm—result in no choking and inhibition of children’s delightful spontaneity in expression” (53). The explicit claim in this sentence is that teaching practices often “choke” and “inhibit” the spontaneous personal response. Later, Leonard varies his analogy of how teaching can serve as a barrier to personal response. When working with “flagrant violations” of expressions in student writing, teachers must resist pointing out every error the student makes. Teachers must proceed “with tremendous inhibition of the impulse to tamper, if it is not to become a painful agent of stultification” (135). In acting as an “agent of stultification,” teaching practices thus serve as a barrier to the spontaneous personal response.

Leonard revisits his argument that teachers must approach student writing “with tremendous inhibition of the impulse to tamper” using the figurative language of choking:

We must certainly hold reasonable standards of correctness and clearness and good taste if we would help children to widely effective expression; but we must never limit our standards by narrow, prejudiced restrictions if we do not want them to encircle and choke all expressive impulse through the confusion and horror of constant proscription. (183)

Leonard uses still more figurative language to develop the idea that teaching practices can serve as a barrier to personal response: he argues that every young person can develop into effective writers, “provided he is not hemmed in too far by prescription” (189). The operative word here is “hemming.” For Leonard, teaching practices can “hem” or “choke” or “inhibit” or “stultify.” These are all actions that serve as a barrier that prevents students from engaging in language in ways that are meaningful to them. These actions all prevent the spontaneous response.

This charge of teachers placing roadblocks between the student and his or her intentions as a writer surfaces frequently in the literature of Progressive Era compositionists. Louise Rosenblatt exhorts the teacher to maintain a “scrupulous effort to avoid any academic procedures that may hinder a spontaneous personal response” (*Literature as Exploration* 260). Rosenblatt argues that in hindering this spontaneous personal response, teachers serve as a barrier:

The problem that the teacher faces first of all, then, is the creation of a situation favorable to a vital experience of literature. Unfortunately, many of the practices

and much of the tone of literature teaching have precisely the opposite effect [...]

They place a screen between the student and the book. (58)

Whether in a classroom discussion about a work of literature, or in the development of a written composition, teachers have the capacity to place a screen between the student and the unbidden ideas and concepts in that student's mind. The teaching practice is serving as a barrier to spontaneous personal response. The implication is that this can gravely hinder development of writing skills and affect motivation.

A spontaneous personal response, for Progressive Era compositionists, often refers to the student's ability to think and write about meaningful, personal experiences. When teaching practices stultify or hamper students, often personal, meaningful experiences are supplanted with impersonal, unmeaningful engagement with language. Gertrude Buck, in her 1901 article "Recent Tendencies in the Teaching of English Composition," wrote of the "alien standards" and "injunctions" and "hampering rules" of the rhetorical precepts from an earlier age. "We are often reminded that the average schoolboy has nothing to say to anybody about 'Pereunt et imputantur,' 'The vice of ambition' or 'Autumn thoughts,'" observed Gertrude Buck. "If left to himself, he would never voluntarily write a word on such a subject" (373). Buck concludes:

Yet every schoolboy has interests, *if one but knew them*—interests which, however trivial they may be in the teacher's eyes, are for him and to his spiritual peers worth communicating. There is a real demand somewhere for the experiences which he is eager to impart. And until this supply and this demand are brought into relations with each other, there can be no genuine writing. That the teacher's

function is that of the middleman in this process of communicating ideas is a conviction clearly implied in the doctrines that the student should write for a definite audience and upon a subject which interests both his audience and himself. (374; my emphasis)

Like her Progressive Era contemporaries, Buck insists that teaching practices can hamper or create a barrier between a student and his or her impulse for self-expression. Buck writes that personal experiences should, by and large, furnish material for writing.

Louise Rosenblatt in *Literature as Exploration* voices a similar claim:

In many English classes today the instructor never even glimpses the student's personal sense of the work discussed. The teacher may be interested in, let us say, *Pride and Prejudice* from the point of view of the history of the novel form in England, or he may be eager to discuss the relation of style and theme. The student, however, may be impressed by the revelation that then, even as now, the business of finding a mate was no simple matter and that then, even as now, personality clashes and the gap between generations were important. In many cases there is an unbridged gulf between anything the student might actually feel about the book and what the teacher, from the point of view of accepted critical attitudes and his adult sense of life, thinks the pupil should notice. (58-59)

Buck and Rosenblatt write of a situation in which a student is not permitted to engage meaningfully with language—is not permitted to summon personal experience in engaging with language. For Progressive Era compositionists, a crucial element in writing instruction requires achieving in students a “vigorous incentive to expression”

(Leonard 4). This “prime requisite” for developing proficiency in language development is no easy task. “We have a difficult way to steer between such correction as maims and kills the children’s joy in expression, on the one hand,” writes Leonard, “and ineffectual, unchecked, and unguided babble, on the other” (135).

Securing a vigorous incentive to expression requires some degree of agency in writing. This sentiment is repeated throughout the Progressive Era. William H. Maxwell, Superintendent of New York City schools, published many textbooks for teaching English, including the widely used text *Writing in English: A Modern School Composition*, published in 1900 with George Smith. The authors push back against traditional forms of teaching writing:

Interested observation and spontaneous thought require for their growth an atmosphere of freedom. Therefore it is that, in the early study of composition, we should aim not at finical remodeling of lay-figure sentences but at copious and natural expression; and should defer a studied manipulation of words and sentences until the student himself perceives the use of it.” (4)

Here Maxwell and Smith employ the metaphor of combustion in the goal of eliciting “spontaneous thought” in students.

In 1900 another popular textbook was published, *English: Composition and Literature*, by William Franklin Webster. In the book, Webster argued that the English teacher must establish “the conditions which call forth the full expression of thought.” In a similar vein to Maxwell and Smith, Webster urges the development of “copious and natural expression.” “To get started, to gain confidence in one’s ability to say something,

to acquire freedom and spontaneity of expression—this is the first step in the practice of composition” (vii). For Webster, Maxwell and Smith, and many other progressive educators, skill in writing required students to engage in “copious and natural expression.” And this required an element of freedom in the writing task so that students could draw upon personal experience.

THE SETTING FOR EXPERIENCE

From the historian’s generous vantage point, it is not surprising that Progressive Era compositionists adopted the metaphor of combustion to articulate and theorize the issue of motivation in classroom practices. The metaphor of combustion emerged from a larger epistemological social paradigm that was taking shape out of the rapid fluctuations in society that began during the Civil War and continued throughout the Gilded Age. This larger paradigm is what Paul F. Boller Jr. refers to as the gradual transition away from the notion of fixed forms toward one of perpetual change (*American Thought in Transition* 21).

The paradigm of fixed forms stemmed from a society that was chiefly rural and agrarian in nature and that was dominated primarily by religious influence. The rural life saw little changes. People’s understanding of the world was shaped by their religious faith, which often depicted a model of reality as immutable and fixed. However, beginning with the Civil War, the country began to experience profound transformations due to advances in science and technology and the impacts of these advances on the economy and broader social institutions such as education and politics. With the advent

of the Industrial Revolution during the Gilded Age, life in the United States began to shift from rural and agrarian to urban and industrial. By the start of the Progressive Era in the 1890s, the country looked radically different. John Dewey, who was born in 1859, witnessed these transformations and reflected in 1931 on the ruptures these changes brought to everyday life:

[Life now] moves neither at the tempo of the ox-cart nor of the horse, but at that of electricity, the motor cart, the airplane. Life has to adapt itself to the mechanical inventions which control the processes of nature rather than to the cycle of nature itself. Invention rather than routine and custom determines the course of events.

(“American Education Past and Present” 94-95)

In everyday economic, material experiences, the notion of fixed forms was giving way to that of perpetual change. Society was shifting, changing, growing—and rapidly so.

In the broader social arena (such as in education and politics), the paradigm of fixed forms was also being eroded. Just as advances in science and technology brought changes to the economy, these new developments in knowledge also wrought dramatic changes to broader society. The publication of Charles Darwin’s *The Origin of Species* in 1859 (the same year that John Dewey was born) gave shape to a scientific naturalism that challenged the religious view of life as fixed and immutable. As Jay Martin writes, a “naturalistic test of truth steadily undermined the religious test of truth that had prevailed before the [Civil] war” (*The Education of John Dewey* 29). Where before truth was immutable and revealed through a single source, now truth was a process of shared discovery and subject to correction. Inherent in this epistemological shift was the notion

that change was the constant. The very notion of truth—where knowledge was subject to constant permutation and revision—reflected this paradigm of flux and change.

According to the new scientific model of the universe, even nature reflected this paradigm of perpetual change. Evolutionary naturalism and the new methods of experimental science proffered a framework that viewed individuals as organisms shaping and being shaped by their environment. Indeed, Darwin's theory of evolution suggested that all existence—organic and non-organic—is in perpetual change. Ultimately, this revelation resulted in “the substitution of flux for fixidity and of chance for constancy” (Boller, Jr. 21). Similarly, David Hildebrand notes that the Darwinian model of nature viewed humans as “a complex congeries of changing, transactional processes without fixed ends” (“John Dewey” 3.1). The greater adoption of scientific methods served as the catalyst that resulted in “a transition from a static formalistic world view to a dynamic vision that conceived of everything in a perpetual process of evolution—a transition, in fact, from the security of an orderly and stable universe to one in constant flux and process of creation” (Boller, Jr. viii).

The new paradigm of perpetual change had significant implications for education. Albert Kitzhaber shows how evolutionary naturalism disrupted higher education:

By substituting the idea of dynamic growth for static notions, by stressing the functions of an organism, evolution causes profound changes in such diverse fields as economics, sociology, anthropology, literature, history, psychology, and in the case of one or two advanced theorists at the end of the century, in rhetoric as well.

Evolution challenged the *status quo*. (10)

No discipline was exempt from the influence of evolution, including the field of educational philosophy. New theories of learning began to emerge, constructed upon premises derived from evolutionary theory.

Progressive Era compositionists advocated for curriculum and pedagogy to be grounded in this new zeitgeist of the scientific method. “I call for an awareness of the scientists’ ways of thinking about human affairs,” wrote Louise Rosenblatt in her seminal 1938 title *Literature as Exploration* (xviii). Gertrude Buck was among the first scholars in the field of composition studies to draw upon psychology, biology, and other disciplines in natural sciences to inform her own research in rhetoric and composition, and her earliest adaptation of organic psychology appears in her dissertation on the metaphor, directed by Fred Newton Scott at the University of Michigan in 1897. In her dissertation, Buck questioned the prevailing conception of metaphor and other figures of speech as merely mechanical devices—but rather she argued that figures of speech are the product of a number of psychological processes (Mulderig 96). Buck concluded that thought and language should be viewed organically, as an aspect of the developing individual. Buck and her contemporaries influenced by naturalism “viewed the mind not as a mechanical, static entity, but as something biological and dynamic, constantly growing, developing, adapting to its environment” (Mulderig 95).

Evolutionary naturalism gave shape to the metaphor of combustion because it drew upon biological conceptions of humans as organisms. The Progressive Era use of the metaphor of combustion was a reflection of the new educational theories based on new understandings of the natural sciences—particularly biology. These theories saw the

student as an organism acting upon and being acted upon its environment. As Theodore R.Sizer wrote in his 1964 study *Secondary Schools at the Turn of the Century*, the new doctrine of evolution put forth a conception of the child as a slowly developing personality, demanding subject matter and method more suitable to the child's stage of development (12). These new insights were used to redesign school curricula, and disciplines that emerged from the new methods of experimental science, such as psychology, became more and more important in educational philosophy and curriculum development.

Of note is that the metaphor of combustion was not the only metaphor that emerged from evolutionary naturalism during the Progressive Era. Outside the discipline of composition studies, as David R. Russell points out, scholars and public intellectuals at the turn of the century adopted metaphors shaped by Darwinian evolution to theorize the role of communication in social reform. In the wake of social Darwinism, Russell explains, a generation of social reformers—including Jane Addams, Mary Parker Follett, Charles Horton Cooley, and John Dewey himself—“drew on organic metaphors to explain the role of communication in the shift from the small-town to the urban community” (*Writing in the Academic Communities* 201). These reformers believed that more efficient communication through expanded education and technology was integral in achieving social cohesion in mass society, particularly as more and more people moved from rural to urban populations in the rise of the industrial workforce. Improved communication would more successfully improve social conflicts and help to arrive more successfully at rational consensus based on science (202). The individual student in this

view is “a consciously functioning part of a rational, organic whole, a social being formed, as well as formed, by her environment” (202-203). The metaphor of combustion was thus in part shaped the influence of evolutionary naturalism on educational philosophy.

Metaphors themselves, as Albert Kitzhaber has pointed out, are particularly valuable in helping to introduce new concepts in the discipline. This form of figurative language is much more powerful than plain statement because “metaphor compels the reader’s mind to follow the processes of the writer’s mind and thus possibly traverse ground this is wholly new to him” (184). Composition scholarship in recent decades has approached the issue of motivation through various lenses. One such lens is through generative strategies such as brainstorming—strategies that are the fruits of the process movement. More recently, Patrick Sullivan has approached motivation through the lens of “aversion.” While this scholarship has done much to unlock insights on providing fertile pedagogical soil for theorizing motivation, the Progressive Era use of the metaphor of combustion presents a unique, dynamic framework for thinking about ways in which motivation is affected by internal and external conditions. Specifically, the metaphor of combustion provides a cogent exploration of young people’s natural impulse toward expression.

Ultimately, the metaphor of combustion helped Progressive Era scholars and teachers in composition discuss motivation productively. More importantly, in conceiving of the student as a biological organism engaged in functional transactions with an environment, the metaphor of combustion emphasized the importance of

experience in learning. This emphasis on experience is in large part the influence of John Dewey's contribution to educational philosophy. The metaphor of combustion was an outgrowth of Dewey's theory of experience—itsself constructed from key principles of biology from evolutionary theory.

And it is to Dewey's theory of experience that we turn to next.

LOOKING AHEAD

In this chapter, I have shown how Progressive Era compositionists discussed and theorized issues of motivation in terms of the metaphor of combustion. I discussed how this metaphor emerged as an outgrowth of a new epistemological paradigm caused by the ever greater adoption of scientific methods across society. I briefly explored how these new developments in science and technology impacted educational philosophy. Finally, I have hinted at how Progressive Era compositionists—using the metaphor of combustion—were drawing upon John Dewey's theories of experience (himself drawing upon insights from evolution) as a way to theorize pedagogical insights about motivation in writing instruction.

In the next chapter I explore in more depth the social landscape that gave birth to thinking regarding the role of experience in teaching composition during the Progressive Era. I will show how the philosophy of experience was essentially the application of Dewey's broader philosophical system, pragmatism. I will explore how pragmatism and its adoption of the scientific method as a mode of inquiry resulted in John Dewey's central epistemological tool—his philosophy of experience.

CHAPTER 2: JOHN DEWEY AND AN EMERGING EDUCATIONAL PARADIGM

In 1929 the president of the National Council of Teachers of English, Ruth Mary Weeks, organized a commission to begin the work of developing a curriculum based on new philosophical ideas sweeping across the country. The chair of the Curriculum Commission was W. Wilbur Hatfield, a founding member of NCTE and the long-time editor of *The English Journal* and *College English*. Representatives from six other organizations (including the National Education Association and the American Association of College Teachers) totaling more than one hundred people served on sixteen committees that comprised the commission (Ferry 75). When it was finally released in 1935 under the title *An Experience Curriculum in English*, the 312-page report put forth a radical new vision for teaching English, from primary school to college.

The report was a vigorous clarion call for creating an English curriculum in which students learn from experiences. “Experience is the best of all schools,” begins the report. “Certainly no one learns so thoroughly, and few learn so rapidly, in any other” (3). The English class, according to this school of thought, should center on the “experiences most people have” (3). Hatfield’s introduction to the report reveals a pedagogy that had moved in stark contrast from traditional ways of teaching:

This is intended to be a pattern curriculum. A pattern is not itself to be word; it is merely an instrument to assist in the cutting—often with allowances for the individual peculiarities of the wearer—of the cloth to make a dress or suit. So this outline of work in English from the Kindergarten to college is to be regarded as

illustrative, an exposition of important curriculum principles through their systemic application. (*An Experience Curriculum* v)

A key feature of the experience curriculum was that it attended to the “individual peculiarities of the wearer”—that is, the individual student and his or her particular background and interests. Hatfield wrote that the growing diversity among students across the country required a new approach to education, one that allowed for personal experience in learning. The report ventured a framework that entailed truly innovative approaches to teaching English composition and literature.

An Experience Curriculum took the discipline by storm. Four years after it appeared, the NCTE published a follow-up report entitled *Conducting Experiences in English*. The 394-page report was the work of over a thousand teachers and other participants. The upshot of the new experience curriculum was that it had become “the center of professional discussions in the conventions of the National Council and in local meetings everywhere” (Broening vi):

Principals, supervisors, and teachers everywhere report that their courses in English are based upon the experiences of their pupils. Book selection committees assert that every salesman claims that his new book is in harmony with *An Experience Curriculum in English*. University students state that professors of teaching of English are promulgating the philosophy of English as experience. (Broening v)

Indeed, these progressive notions of teaching from experience had reached such a fever pitch that disgruntled voices surfaced even 20 years after the appearance of *An*

Experience Curriculum. Carl G. Miller, in a sarcasm-laced piece entitled “Expert Teachers *Are* an Experience Curriculum,” dismissed the experience movement in education as largely a fad and insisted that “there is such a thing as an expert teacher whose regular sessions with pupils are vivid experiences in themselves” (308). Much earlier, Helen Ogden Mahin wryly illustrated the ongoing debate between traditional and progressive methods in allowing students agency in drawing upon their own experiences in their writing. Most students, wrote Ogden, would absorb as little as possible from class, obtain their credit with the minimum required effort, and “triumph over the authorities who would suborn their wills and seek to subjugate them in their heaven-bestowed right of free and individual expression” (“The Study of English Composition as a Means of Fuller Living” 449-550).

Nonetheless, the experience philosophy of education had taken root. Writing in *The English Journal* a couple years after the publication of *An Experience Curriculum*, Roy Ivan Johnson clarified that the experience curriculum did not come into being through any single publication or action of a committee, but rather as “the product of an educational philosophy that ha[d] been maturing in the minds of teachers for many years (Johnson 229). The effect of the publication of *An Experience Curriculum* was that it was “an effective means of bringing this [educational] philosophy into professional focus and hastening its crystallization in practice” (Johnson 230).

To be sure, there was no shortage of new educational philosophies during the Progressive Era. With each new wave of general philosophy that spread over society, a new educational philosophy was quick to follow. This demanded a shift in school

curriculum each time. The constant flux of curricula created a challenge for teachers. “It would be very convenient for educators,” wrote an exasperated Ruth Mary Weeks in a 1937 issue of *The English Journal*, “if life would stay put long enough to try out some particular educational program thoroughly” (“Content for Composition” 294). Weeks herself chaired the NCTE Curriculum Commission that put forth a new curriculum report in 1936 entitled *A Correlated Curriculum*, one year after *An Experience Curriculum* appeared. Weeks’s *A Correlated Curriculum* was one of the first proposals for integrating a true writing-across-the-disciplines teaching model at all levels of school. Unfortunately, as David R. Russell has noted, this model was never fully realized during the Progressive Era on a comprehensive scale (“Writing and Progressive Education” 200). But it incorporated and built upon many of the ideas from *An Experience Curriculum*.

Complicating this dilemma of constant new curricular trends, wrote Ruth Mary Weeks, was the fact that children themselves change during the process of education. Teachers thus must modify their programs as both the world and the student change. Weeks evoked an old proverb about not swapping horses midstream: “But curricular horses always have to be swapped in midstream—for life never stops sliding under our feet” (295). Weeks—who was a student of Fred Newton Scott at Michigan State University and who Suzanne Bordelon has called a “muted rhetor” (“Muted Rhetors and the Mundane” 332)—wrote how a new progressive educational paradigm had begun to emerge in order to meet these curricular challenges:

In the field of education, too, the new educational psychology considers the child as a living, acting whole, not just as a memory in which facts can be implanted,

but as a person who should live and learn, and learn and live; and educational methods are modified so that the child can learn by living and, in turn, apply his learning in new experience. In other words, the concept of an activity or experience curriculum has been born. Instead of teaching detached bits of subject matter, the teacher organizes activities in which the whole child can function and in which various English skills are part of a larger life-pattern. (295)

This “active” or “experience” educational method sought to include students’ own experiences as a starting place for teaching and learning. English teachers argued that experiences provided the best material for writing:

Experiences—vicarious or real—are the stuff of communication. Whenever an individual is emotionally identified with an experience, he has something to communicate. When he has a motive—a need to share his experience—he finds words in which to convey his ideas and feelings. Knowing what he wishes to share helps him to reject irrelevant ideas and to arrange details clearly and forcefully.

(Conducting Experiences in English 6)

Furthermore, according to advocates of the experience curriculum, experience furnishes at least 9 other benefits to the student as a developing writer: keenness of perception; readiness of ideas; adequacy of vocabulary; language skills necessary for free expression; intelligent methods of note-taking and of outlining; appreciation of excellence in performance; tentativeness of attitude toward what has been written; social maturity; and continuity of time in producing a piece of writing (6-7). Above all, experience-centered

courses in English are “intimately built on pupil’s everyday needs and dynamic interests” (*Conducting Experiences in English* 7).

In chapter 4, “The Chains of Conventional Academic Procedure,” I will provide a close examination of the specific tasks and assignments of the traditional English course and contrast those to the newer learning tasks informed by the educational philosophy of experience. As the emergence of *An Experience Curriculum in English* in 1935 demonstrates, however, a new educational paradigm was forming all around and progressive educators were embracing it *en masse*.

ADVENT OF DEWEYAN PRAGMATISM AS CATALYST FOR SOCIAL REFORMS

The Experience Curriculum in English was the fruition of a larger enterprise known as the progressive education movement. This movement itself was an organized undertaking of the Progressive Era, a period in our country’s history with a singular focus on enacting reforms to social institutions, including the American education system. As composition historian David R. Russell has argued, “Progressive education made profound theoretical contributions to writing instruction” (*Writing in the Academic Disciplines* 199). But understanding the origins of the new educational paradigm ushered in by the progressive education movement requires a closer examination of the broader currents shaping society at the turn of the 20th century.

As I briefly touched upon in the previous chapter, the Progressive Era was a time when the country was experiencing sweeping changes. This included the rapid growth and westward expansion of the country’s population and the disruptions brought about by

advances in science and technology, which facilitated the rise of the Industrial Revolution and the subsequent shift from a rural and agrarian society to a more urban and industrial society. All these changes, as David Hildebrand writes, came with many problems:

[There were] problems of unemployment, homelessness, and the lack of medical services for the poor; the indifference of the wealthy toward the poor and the working poor; the balkanization of the pluralistic societies into economically and culturally stratified suburbs; the isolation brought about by consumerism and hyper-individualism. (3)

A central problem during the Progressive Era was the growth of corporations, which frequently ran roughshod over the interests of the public. “Instead of being an era of active citizenry,” argues Katherine H. Adams, “this was an era of active businesses and acquiescent governments” (*Progressive Politics* 17). Thus, the Progressive Era is defined in part by a collective mobilization against the inhumane exploitations of industrial labor.

This required reforming government institutions:

By the 1890s, reformers hoped to create a new style of national democracy, involving strong but more trustworthy leaders responsible to an educated electorate. To end the era of the city and state boss and the favoritism shown to business, political reformers concentrated on voter registration and citizenship requirements, primary elections, and nonpartisan municipal governments as well as railroad and antitrust legislation. Social reformers supported the rights of labor, women’s suffrage, and universal education. (*Progressive Politics* xvi)

Thus, education also played a key role in the reform efforts of the Progressive Era.

Katherine H. Adams writes that the Progressive Era was a “a time in which an older view of governmental and business power was being questioned and that questioning led to the desire for a more active and complete form of education for the citizen” (*Progressive Politics* xvii). Reforming the U.S. education system to better prepare an informed citizenry to tackle these social problems collectively also became a priority among progressives.

Out of this confluence of broad social movements and their attendant problems emerged the philosophical school of thought known as pragmatism and its leading proponent, John Dewey. Early twentieth-century America was searching for guidance on these deeping economic and social issues, and pragmatism provided the philosophical underpinnings to tackling these problems. The Deweyan mold of pragmatism had as its chief aim that of implementing social reform in order to improve the quality of life for Americans. Much historical scholarship in rhetoric and composition—including recent work by Katherine H. Adams—has identified John Dewey as the most influential reformist figure in America during the Progressive Era (*Progressive Politics* 28). Jay Martin explains that the country’s unique circumstances set the stage for Dewey to surface as the nation’s leading public intellectual:

He was the person of his time, the one who learned to think about wealth and its consequences, the turmoil of the cities, the need for a new kind of education, the obligation to reform and reconstruct, and the importance of science and its practical applications in method and thought. All of these, so crucial to his time,

were at the very heart of his existence, perhaps more than any other person in America. (*The Education* 30)

Martin adds that Dewey was “noteworthy for the range of his interests and his ability to envision and then promote change on all levels of a densely interconnected society” (*The Education* 28).

Born in 1859 in Burlington, Vermont, John Dewey was the third of four sons in a middle class family. Dewey’s experience growing up in Burlington was emblematic of the demographic and economic shifts rippling across the country at the time. Like many places, Dewey’s home town was in transition and turmoil. The older, rural, untamed America could be found all around Burlington in the thinly populated hills and farmlands, which had been settled primarily by the English and Scots-Irish. As a university community, however, Burlington was undergoing a gradual transformation due to the university’s influence:

Founded in 1791, the University of Vermont was the fifth oldest college in New England. In Dewey’s youth it was regarded as a distinguished center of learning, especially for philosophy, rivaling or surpassing the curricula of the four earlier—also all-male—New England Colleges: Harvard, Yale, Brown, and Dartmouth. So the University of Vermont brought an elite to Burlington: a Protestant, Congregational, freethinking, educated class, which absorbed the more affluent and better-educated members of the city’s ruling business class. (Martin 33)

As Martin concludes, “one only had to walk around Burlington and its surroundings to see what America had been and to receive an education in what it was becoming—a very

mixed, stratified, and complicated country” (*The Education* 33). These changes in everyday life left a keen impression on the young Dewey, who was already waking to a sophisticated consciousness of the economic and social forces at work around him.

In high school Dewey studied Latin and Greek, and by the time he went to college he had become highly skilled as a writer. Dewey “thought with mathematical precision” and wrote “correctly, swiftly, and easily, in a very natural plain style (Martin 35). He entered the University of Vermont there in Burlington at the age of fifteen.

While in college, Dewey established himself as a voracious reader. Although many of his fellow students “chafed under the scrutiny and solicitude” of the librarian John Ellsworth Goodrich—who was also professor of rhetoric and literature and fiercely guarded the library collection—Dewey’s library records indicate that he read widely in both nonfiction and fiction (Martin 38). For example, he was passionate about William Makepeace Thackeray and his favorite novelist was George Eliot. In college Dewey also began assiduously reading journals, such as *North American Review*, *Edinburgh Review*, and the *Atlantic Monthly* (Martin 39). Importantly, Dewey discovered Matthew Arnold during this time, and was afterwards influenced by Arnold’s attempts to reconcile humanism and religion. This, along with Dewey’s later discovery of Hegel, in large part accounts for what Bertrand Russell described as Dewey’s signature approach of synthesis and unification in philosophy (“Dewey’s New Logic” 138). Another important discovery Dewey made while in college was Herbert Spencer, the English philosopher and biologist who further developed Charles Darwin’s theory of evolution. This led Dewey to become interested in positivist approaches to philosophy and social analysis. Finally, in reading

August Compt, Dewey first got the idea of science as “organized intelligence” and the “need for intelligent direction of social affairs” (Martin 41). Even as an undergraduate, then, the foundation for John Dewey’s pragmatist theory of knowledge was already being poured.

After completing his degree at the University of Vermont, Dewey had a brief career as a high school teacher of algebra, natural sciences, and Latin. During this period he began writing on philosophy and psychology. By the time Dewey started his graduate studies at Johns Hopkins University in 1882, he had already published two articles in the *Journal of Speculative Philosophy*, the leading philosophical journal in the United States (Martin 50).

Over his long career at University of Michigan, University of Chicago (where he directed the Laboratory School), and Columbia University, Dewey produced a truly prodigious oeuvre. He authored roughly 40 books and more than 700 articles that appeared in over 140 journals (Hildebrand, “John Dewey” 2). Well into his retirement, Dewey was writing, publishing, and delivering speeches at social events. He died in 1952 at the age of 92. As the leading public intellectual during the Progressive Era, Dewey articulated the concerns regarding the problems of his time with particular perspicuity:

The sense of unsolved social problems is all about us. There are problems of crime, of regard for law, of capital, of labor, of unemployment, of stability and security, of family life, of war and peace, of international relations and cooperations—all on a larger scale than the world has ever seen before.

(“American Education Past and Future” 94)

Of singular concern to Dewey was how the continuing innovations in science and technology strained the nation's capitalist economic model. Dewey grew increasingly alarmed by the rapacity of corporations, which battered on the working class:

Now there are vast and concentrated aggregations of wealth; there are monopolies of power; great unemployment; a shutting down of doors of opportunity, a gulf between rich and poor, and no frontier to which the hard put can migrate. In consequence, the problem of democracy is no longer chiefly governmental and political. It is industrial and financial—economic. It is infinitely ramified and the threads which bind the social structure together are subtle and invisible. (95)

This stark dystopian tableau of economic inequality that Dewey painted of early 20th century America seems in some ways only to have grown more sinister and grim during the ensuing century. Still, this is the backdrop to which the United States found itself at the turn of the century. And these challenges the philosophy of pragmatism was uniquely suited to address. In particular, Dewey's brand of pragmatism provided two key advantages to achieving social reform. Dewey's practical starting place in philosophical work was the first advantage to achieving social reform, and the second was Dewey's reconstruction of philosophy as a primarily social (and thus, ethical) enterprise.

Pragmatism's Practical Starting Place

The first advantage of Deweyan pragmatism is that it moved philosophical work to a more practical starting place. This was a defining characteristic of pragmatism in general—not just that of Dewey's own iteration of pragmatism. Charles Sanders Peirce—

who taught at Johns Hopkins University at the same time Dewey was studying there for his PhD—is generally regarded, along with Williams James, as laying the groundwork for the pragmatist school of philosophy. Peirce provided the theoretical reasoning for moving philosophy toward a more practical cast. He challenged the rationalist assumptions about the absolute objectivity of reality and of truth that philosophers generally held (Gary E. Miller 58). Peirce’s Pragmatic Maxim, for instance, “rejected the basic rationalist vision of a clearly defined and differentiated universe governed by fixed laws” (58).

Like Peirce, Dewey was unsatisfied with philosophy’s tendency to place more value on deductive approaches to inquiry, which often relegated philosophical exploration to greater and greater abstractions, such as the quest for first principles. In an essay published in 1893 in the University of Michigan newspaper *Inlander*, Dewey wrote how this self-inflicted state of affairs had reduced philosophy to a vitiated and unproductive endeavor:

It was Bishop Berkeley who remarked that philosophers threw dust into their own eyes, and then complained because they could not see. Well, philosophers have been pursuing their industry for the last twenty-five hundred years, and have by this time raised considerable clouds which have got not only into their own eyes, but into those of others. (“Why Study Philosophy?” EW 4:62)

For too long, the pragmatists argued, philosophy had been bogged down with approaching issues from a “top down” rather than a “bottom up” method. The top-down method was a theoretical starting point that came with assumed premises *prior* to any

actual philosophical inquiry. Dewey argued that such an approach led philosophical inquiry into “insoluble problems and dead ends” (Hildebrand, *Dewey* 4).

Dewey was especially critical of the dominant philosophical trend of German idealism and its fixation on endlessly teasing apart the complexities between thought and being. In his 1920 work *Reconstruction in Philosophy*, Dewey argued that this obsession resulted in “idle castle-building,” a complex structure of terminology that ultimately served no productive ends (149). “[M]uch of what philosophies have taught about the ideal and noumenal or superiorly real world,” wrote Dewey, “is after all, only casting a dream into an elaborate dialectic form through the use of a speciously scientific terminology?” (149). Dewey objected to this dichotomous framework because it placed less value on forms of knowing derived from sense-observations (or experience). Thus, this approach to philosophy was impractical:

The division of the world into two kinds of Being, one superior, accessible only to reason and ideal in nature, the other inferior, material, changeable, empirical, accessible to sense-observation, turns inevitably into the idea that knowledge is contemplative in nature. It assumes a contrast between theory and practice which was all to the disadvantage of the latter. But in the actual course of the development of science, a tremendous change has come about. When the practice of knowledge ceased to be dialectical and became experimental, knowing became preoccupied with changes and the test of knowledge became the ability to bring about certain changes. Knowing, for the experimental sciences, means a certain kind of intelligently conducted doing; it ceases to be contemplative and becomes

in a true sense practical. Now this implies that philosophy, unless it is to undergo a complete break with the authorized spirit of science, must also alter its nature. It must assume a practical nature; it must become operative and experimental.

(Reconstruction 150)

In moving philosophy away from a contemplative mode toward an operative and experimental mode, Dewey's primary achievement in his reconstruction of philosophy is methodological reform. Pragmatists believed that any one particular tenet of philosophy was less important than *how* philosophy should be approached. Pragmatism placed methodology at the center of philosophical work.

For both William James and Charles Sanders Peirce, method was paramount. As Louis Menand writes, "James presented pragmatism, after all, not as a philosophy but as a way of doing philosophy, and Peirce [...] described it as a method for making ideas clear and not as a place to look for ideas themselves" (*Pragmatism* xxv - xxvi). Likewise, Dewey scrutinized and challenged the epistemological substructures that underpinned prevailing approaches to knowing and the work of philosophy. As Fishman and McCarthy write, John Dewey brought an entirely different language to the work of philosophy, a grammar and a syntax that would more effectively achieve its own goals:

At his core, Dewey is a metaphysician attempting to fashion a language of process, a way of looking at the world; that is, he offers us, not a series of truths about reality, as did much classical metaphysics, but a method, a set of categories or questions with which to probe any perplexing situation. (17)

In short, Dewey sought to completely upend philosophy's relationship with epistemology. Louis Menand writes that Dewey's pragmatism acted as a termite—"undermining foundations, collapsing distinctions, [and] deflating abstractions" (*Pragmatism* xxxi).

This disruption naturally did not sit well with orthodox views or counter approaches to philosophy. Bertrand Russell, though he greatly admired Dewey as a scholar and as an individual, criticized pragmatism for "the substitution of 'inquiry' for 'truth' as the fundamental concept of logic and theory of knowledge" (*The History* 819). Yet Dewey argued that valuing inquiry and *how* to fruitfully engage in inquiry, rather than the resulting outcome of that inquiry, was the only sure way to productively tackle philosophical problems. These included social problems such as education. Dewey's pragmatic starting place required him to discover a radically different orientation to epistemology. As Dewey scholar Jay Martin has put it, "The only certainty was *in* the method of philosophy and the inquiry *into* truth, not the arrival *at* it" ("John Dewey"). Engaging productively in the work of philosophy necessitated developing a set of values about how to best approach knowing.

For this reason, Dewey placed a great deal of stock in the scientific method. He looked to the scientific method as emblematic of his pragmatist, recursive approach to philosophical work. In the arena of ideas, the scientific method is especially important because "ideas are more jealously guarded and tested in science than anywhere else" (*Experience* 86). Arriving at specific truths was less important to Dewey than establishing a robust, recursive method of engaging in inquiry—so that truths could be

revised in light of new information and theories could be self-corrected to accommodate emerging knowledge. This constant permutation of knowledge reflects a core idea in the writings of Dewey: his view of change and growth as a universal constant. The scientific method provides a mechanism for producing new knowledge in ways that offer optimal benefit to human societies. Moreover, for Dewey, the scientific method is an important way to understand human experience. The scientific method is a systematic heuristic for “intelligent exploration and exploitation of the potentialities inherent in experience” (*Experience* 86). For Dewey, the scientific method “is the only authentic means at our command for getting at the significance of our everyday experiences of the world in which we live” (*Experience* 88).

Ultimately, in reorienting the work of philosophy to a more experimental approach, Dewey sought to ‘emancipate philosophy from all the epistemological puzzles which now perplex it’ (*Reconstruction* 150). Additionally, in reconceiving philosophy as primarily a mode of inquiry unfettered by the yoke of the quest for first principles, Dewey diverted philosophical work away from impractical problems. If philosophy would have any value, it must tackle practical—i.e. real-world—problems. And there were many problems the country faced during the Progressive Era.

Pragmatism’s Meliorative Mandate

John Dewey’s practical starting place in practicing philosophy had many ramifications on his work as a philosopher and scholar. For one, Dewey’s practical starting place meant that his own philosophical writings were accessible to a large

audience. Charles Frankel attributes much of Dewey's influence to the fact that the philosopher offered a developed and coherent social philosophy which was accessible to the general public (Frankel 4). This success is due in part because Dewey delivered his ideas in a more accessible language. Of course, not everyone has agreed that Dewey's writing style is a paragon of prose. He has had his share of critics. Richard Hofstadter complained that Dewey's "style is suggestive of the cannonading of distant armies: one concludes that something portentous is going on at a remote and inaccessible distance but one cannot determine just what it is" (qtd in Frankel 9). Frederick A. Olafson, in turn, penalizes Dewey for an alleged lack of stylistic pizzazz: "[Y]ou will look a long time in the barren avenues of Dewey's prose without finding anything that even remotely suggests the spontaneity and panache that have become the accepted signs of authentic individuality" ("The School and Society" 173).

Nonetheless, whatever validity these criticisms may hold, Will Durant reminds us that Dewey was far more accessible than the average philosopher—particularly the writings of the most influential philosophical school of the time, the German idealists, who "excogitated magnificent spider-webs of metaphysics" (*The Story of Philosophy* 379). These philosophers had reached the "height and audacity in serving up pure nonsense, in stringing together senseless and extravagant mazes of words" (379). In America, George Santayana was perhaps the most prominent philosopher outside the school of pragmatism. Santayana likewise did not receive very high marks on the accessibility of his prose. "We must not allow ourselves to explore so enchanting a side-stream as that of the philosophy of Santayana," opined William Savery in 1939,

“overhung as it is with the magical beauty of essences” (“The Significance of Dewey’s Philosophy” 483). Dewey’s own accessible approach was an offshoot of his pragmatist starting place in philosophical inquiry. Dewey’s accessible style of writing reflected his broader goals of using philosophy as a way of improving society. He could not hope to contribute to bettering society if his writings were inaccessible to the average citizen.

This focus on applying philosophy to practical, real-world problems is another consequence of Dewey’s practical starting place as a philosopher. Dewey’s conviction that philosophy must attempt to solve real-world problems is a second major advantage his pragmatist philosophy provided in enacting social reform. In *Reconstruction in Philosophy*, Dewey argued that traditional philosophical work—of “distinguishing between the noumenal and phenomenal worlds and the epistemological task of telling how a separate subject can know an independent object”—did not attempt to solve real-world issues (150). Because this epistemological quicksand resulted in philosophical work that engaged in impractical problems, it meant that the work of philosophy was not being channeled into solving practical, real-world problems. Dewey articulated a pragmatic vision of philosophy, one that began by attending to solving practical social problems:

But would not the elimination of these traditional problems permit philosophy to devote itself to a more fruitful and more needed task? Would it not encourage philosophy to face the great social and moral defects and troubles from which humanity suffers, to concentrate its attention upon clearing up the causes and exact nature of these evils and upon developing a clear idea of better social possibilities;

in short upon projecting an idea or ideal which, instead of expressing the notion of another world or some far-away unrealizable goal, would be used as a method of understanding and rectifying specific social ills? (pp. 150-151)

David Hildebrand refers to this philosophical shift toward addressing practical problems as Dewey's "melioristic motive," or his belief that the purpose of philosophy is to make life better for humanity (*Dewey* 5). Meliorism is the idea that life is neither perfectly good nor bad, and that it can be improved only through human effort. Dewey's meliorism seems to naturally stem from his belief that philosophy should be practically oriented.

Charles Frankel writes that "Dewey was entirely unabashed in his conviction that philosophers exist not to solve their own special technical problems, but to throw light on the problems of men in society" (5). Moreover, Dewey "was sometimes only barely diplomatic in his expression of amusement or impatience at the pretension of professional philosophers to be exploring a realm of timeless truth above the battle" (5). For Dewey, all philosophy was social philosophy.

Sharon Crowley has summed up these two guiding principles of Dewey's approach to philosophy—his practical starting place and his melioristic motive—in her definition of pragmatism:

Pragmatism is an action-oriented, forward-looking philosophical orientation that eschews the search for first principles; that is to say, it is more interested in the questions "what shall we do?" and "what are the consequences of our actions?" than it is in metaphysical questions such as "what is true?" or "what is real?"

(*Composition in the University* 16)

Philosophy had become an overly technical discipline, divorced from social analysis and exploration of the consequences of ideas on everyday life. And John Dewey, like a prophet of old, unleashed a jeremiad upon his fellow philosophers—calling for a revival of the classical Greek approach to philosophy. Indeed, Dewey indicated that his favorite philosopher was Plato, who taught that it was a civic responsibility for philosophy to serve as a critique of civilization and guide it through changes of improvement (Frankel 22). For Dewey, philosophy must tackle the various social challenges that human beings face, challenges that affect social wellbeing as well as individual human experiences.

In many ways, Dewey's own life was emblematic of the type of individual he believed a philosopher should aspire to. He lectured extensively to both academic and general audiences as a public figure—both in the United States and abroad. Dewey also participated actively in various professional memberships: he was the founder and first president of the American Association of University Professors, first president of the League for Independent Political Action, and president of both the American Psychological Association and the American Philosophical Association. He played an integral role in founding the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, and he was very involved in the teachers' union movement in New York City (Hildebrand 1). Of significance also is Dewey's role in advocating for women's right to work as academics in higher education. When Dewey began his university career in 1884, women were still denied the right to attend graduate school at many of the eastern universities. At the University of Michigan where Dewey taught, however, women had already gained access to graduate studies for some time (Martin, *The Education* 85).

During his time at University of Michigan, Dewey “began to assemble a sociological critique of the widespread assumption that female delicacy could not tolerate without ill health the stress of higher education” (98). His essays “Education and the Health of Women” and “Health and Sex in Higher Education” (both published in 1886, in *Science* and *Popular Science Monthly*, respectively) disputed the view that higher education was harmful to women’s health. As an empiricist, Dewey argued that thorough scientific research should be conducted before sociological conclusions were reached.

Dewey worked tirelessly over the course of a long life—through his writings and his direct social activities—to turn the full apparatus of philosophy to the practical problems of society.

PRAGMATISM AND THE PROGRESSIVE EDUCATION REFORMS

As a reformist, John Dewey believed solutions to the problems that plagued society had to come from the US education system. For Dewey, education had the responsibility of developing the values and character in citizens that could direct the social forces taking shape during the Progressive Era toward good. He believed these social challenges would otherwise become forces of destruction and disintegration. “Unless education prepares citizens to deal effectively with these great questions,” wrote Dewey, “our civilization may collapse” (“American Education Past and Future” 94).

Because education was the key to solving the problems America faced, Dewey moved education to the very center of his philosophy of pragmatism (Miller, *The Meaning* 64). Education became ground zero for Dewey’s work as a philosopher.

Education is perhaps the subject that the philosopher thought about and wrote on the most. Indeed, positioning Dewey in his primary goal as a social reformer helps to bring into sharp focus how his writings on education contributed to the new educational paradigm emerging across the nation during the Progressive Era. When Dewey arrived at the University of Chicago in 1894, he was already establishing himself as a national figure on matters of education. During his tenure at Chicago between 1894 and 1904, Dewey chaired both the departments of Philosophy and Pedagogy, and he ran the University of Chicago Laboratory School where new theories in education and pedagogy were put to practice (Fishman & McCarthy 64-65). While at Chicago, Dewey published a string of essays and books that developed his theories on education. “My Pedagogic Creed” appeared in 1897 and *School and Society* in 1899. “The Educational Situation” and *The Child and the Curriculum* both were published in 1902. “The Significance of the School of Education” was published in 1904. After moving on to Teachers’ College at Columbia University, Dewey authored more influential works on education, such as *Democracy and Education* (1916). Even upon retiring in 1930, Dewey’s writings on education continued to flow. *Experience and Education*, a lodestone for Dewey’s thinking on the intersection of experience and education, appeared in 1938.

Dewey’s ideas were influencing the field of general education, with the goal of improving society overall. Arthur N. Applebee writes that in his writings on education, “Dewey presented a provocative and timely analysis of the interrelationships among education, the community, and the nature of the child, giving strong voice to what came to be known as the progressive movement in education” (*Tradition and Reform* 48). And

while general education was taking its color from Dewey's philosophy of education during the Progressive Era, the field of composition studies was particularly indebted to Dewey's ideas on education.

The diffusion of Dewey's progressive thought on education in the field of composition studies during the Progressive Era and the decades that followed can be credited to the efforts of Fred Newton Scott—professor of rhetoric at University of Michigan—and his students, among whom counted Gertrude Buck, Sterling Andrus Leonard, Ruth Mary Weeks, and Helen Ogden Mahin. Scott's mark on the early field of composition studies is remarkable: he was the first president of NCTE, established the only doctoral program in Rhetoric in the country during his tenure at Michigan, published many articles and textbooks, and attracted students from all over the country. Scott and Dewey were colleagues at Michigan for a handful of years before Dewey moved on to the University of Chicago. The scholars appeared to hold a mutual respect for each other. Jeremiah Dyehouse notes that Dewey and Scott collaborated in various capacities at the university, including in their role as founders and faculty advisors for the *Islander* student literary magazine ("Theory in the Archives" 254). Dewey, who as chair of his department wanted to expand the offerings in philosophy, so he persuaded Scott to offer courses in aesthetics (Martin, *The Education* 119). In 1894, Dewey penned a biographical sketch on Scott that appeared in the university's newspaper, *The Oracle*, a sort of encomium to Scott's intellectual accomplishments:

Mr. Scott is equipped with a working control of Sanskrit, Greek, Italian, Spanish, Danish and Russian, as well as a pretty complete outfit in the general theory and

method of philology. Meantime, he ha[s] become interested in psychology and philosophy, considered as helps to literary interpretation, and has a knowledge of these subjects which professed teachers of these branches would not sneeze at—knowledge turned to good account in his lecture seminary courses on Aesthetics, and in his discussions of the “Principle of Style.” The reader may judge for himself as to Dr. Scott’s industry. (“Fred Newton Scott” 121)

Dewey’s biographical sketch also shows that Scott shared Dewey’s own vision of a progressive education, and Dewey particularly points to how Scott’s approach to teaching English composition was a marked departure from traditional pedagogy:

When [Scott was] appointed in the autumn of ‘89 to an instructorship in English in the University this experience was at once utilized in the more efficient and practical organization of the essay work in the traditional grind of “Freshman English.” Students were surprised to find the work not only useful, but actually interesting. And, indeed, one of the characteristic features of Mr. Scott’s work in theoretical as well as practical rhetoric, has been his sense—a sense which he has imparted to his classes—that writing is not a pyrotechnic exhibition of fine phrases, or an ornamental addition to the bare truth of things, but the direct, natural reporting of what one has one’s self seen and thought” (121).

Dewey wrote that Scott’s theory of style and literature was evolving into a “comprehensive theory of the social character of literary expression” whose goal was the “movement of intelligence toward complete social expression” (121). For Dewey, this

was an important and practical development in teaching English composition and rhetoric, a practice that was aligned with his own ideas about teaching and learning.

Recently scholars have questioned John Dewey's direct influence on Fred Newton Scott's own thinking and writing on matters of education, citing their different educational backgrounds and their cooperative collaboration at Michigan as evidence they were simply like-minded on many issues (Dyehouse 259-260). Kitzhaber referred to Scott as the only original thinker among the most prominent scholars in rhetoric and composition during his time (*Rhetoric in American Colleges* 69). Nonetheless, it appears that Scott was at least familiar with Dewey's writings—along with the burgeoning writings in science and pragmatist philosophy—which helped to give shape to Scott's own ideas on various aspects of language instruction. Scott developed a reputation as a visionary in the discipline and as a highly celebrated teacher and colleague at Michigan. Lisa Mastrangelo has referred to Scott as a dinosaur whose influence on the discipline is immeasurable. She quotes Kent Sagendorph's book *Michigan: The Story of the University* to show the impact of Scott's contributions at the university:

Fred Newton Scott was an arch-type of the great teachers. He seemed like a magnet, attracting gifted students from all parts of the country. As his fame reached a zenith in the decade following World War I, it became apparent that a list of teachers, novelists, biographers and journalists who had "studied under Scott" was a long and impressive one. Scott wasn't trying to develop names. He was just teaching rhetoric, which to him was a comprehensive term meaning the

appreciation of all that is best in English as a means of self-expression. (qtd. in Mastrangelo 413)

While Scott's extraordinary energy as a teacher and scholar is widely recorded, the force of his progressive ideas on teaching lived on in the work of his students and his students' students. These teachers and scholars in composition studies, in their own writings, borrowed liberally from the theories of both Scott and Dewey. Gertrude Buck listed John Dewey (along with her advisor Fred Newton Scott) in the dedication page of her dissertation: "To Dr. Scott I am indebted for much stimulus and criticism in the preparation of this thesis; to Dr. John Dewey, now of the University of Chicago, for the fundamental philosophical conceptions embodied in it" (*Literature* iii). Sterling Andrus Leonard, a student of Scott at Michigan, quotes liberally from the works of Dewey in all his writings. "Of my indebtedness to other writers," wrote Sterling A. Leonard in the Preface of his 1917 monograph *English Composition as a Social Problem*, "obviously the greatest is to Professor John Dewey, who has stated with the most helpful cogency the ideals of education as a social problem" (xii). Louise Rosenblatt, author of the seminal 1938 title *Literature as Exploration* (published by the Progressive Education Association, where Dewey served as president) borrowed liberally from Dewey's theories. To begin, the overarching, "intertwined" themes of the book were democracy and literature, wrote Rosenblatt, and cited Dewey as an important figure in this topic (xv). Additionally, Rosenblatt drew upon Dewey's theories on emotion and reason to explore reading literature as "the process of reflection as a prelude to action in life itself" (216). Rosenblatt's own theory of literature as a transaction between reader and text was derived

from Dewey's writings on experience. Rosenblatt later wrote that William James, C.S. Peirce, George Santayana, and John Dewey "provided the base for reconciling my aesthetic and social commitments" (*The Reader* xi). Furthermore: "Dewey's *Art as Experience* especially left its mark" (*The Reader* xi).

Robert Pooley, who Donald C. Stewart refers to as Sterling A. Leonard's most famous pupil, was the author of *Teaching English Usage* in 1941, which reflected many of the ideas on grammar instruction that Scott and Gertrude Buck wrote about in their own articles and books on grammar—themselves drawing upon Dewey's theories of education in order to formulate their conceptions of best practices in teaching and learning.

Progressive Era compositionists turned to Dewey's writings on education because they found unique insight in addressing the challenges of teaching reading and writing in an increasingly more complex world. Unique in the educational philosophy of John Dewey was a call to consider the broader aims of education while also approaching learning from the perspective of the individual learner. This stance reflected Dewey's pragmatist orientation. Where traditional philosophical inquiry tended toward deductive methods, Dewey's more inductive approach meant that tackling social problems like education required starting from individual human experience. It is natural, then, that Dewey's philosophy of education would be constructed upon an epistemological framework founded on experience.

EXPERIENCE AND THE TEACHING OF ENGLISH

At the center of Deweyan thought is a complex of ideas the philosopher developed regarding human experience. Nearly every topic that Dewey considered—politics, ethics, art, education, etc.—involved a careful application of his theories of experience. The philosopher George R. Geiger has written that a single theme runs through all the material Dewey touched upon, and while that theme has many variations, all of them are part of “a long, discriminating celebration of experience” (*John Dewey in Perspective* 7). As a philosophical concept, though, there has been little consensus on arriving at a definition of experience. Glenn Savage suggests that there is a “fabulous haze” that surrounds the term (103). Experience is “a veritable tar pit of despair to many a philosopher,” writes Jay Roberts (9). More recently, rhetoric and composition scholars Jayson Seaman and Peter J. Nelsen have argued that the term “experience” has been “routinely misappropriated” (“An Overburdened Term” 5). They point out that Dewey himself later in life wrote that “culture” was a better term to use in some instances (5).

For Dewey, though, experience was a crucial aspect of his pragmatist framework for theorizing various social issues. David Hildebrand writes that Dewey conceived of experience as “the linch-pin to a broader theory of nature and humanity’s axiological place within it” (“John Dewey” 3.1). Experience essentially provided a way of doing philosophy. Drawing on William James’s “radical empiricism,” Dewey advocated for a practical, bottoms-up approach to philosophy by arguing that philosophers should avoid prejudicial frameworks and tacit assumptions about philosophical issues and accept

experiences as they are lived. As Hildebrand writes, Dewey viewed attending to human experience as a valuable mode of inquiry:

By recommending a more humble and mindful respect for experience, Dewey is not suggesting a surrender to irrationality; after all, it is in experience that one finds patterns of inquiry and logic useful for ordering and directing future events. Rather, he is suggesting that philosophy seek greater coherence with life *as* experienced throughout the day. (*Dewey* 5)

Dewey's emphasis on experience stems from his pragmatist approach to inquiry and also provides a productive means for philosophical work.

Throughout his writings, Dewey used many examples to illustrate that attending to experience helps to understand a fuller account of the many facets of a philosophical situation. In *Democracy and Education*, Dewey writes that a child understands what a hat is, not by simply looking at the hat, but "by using it as other persons do; by covering the head with it, giving it to others to wear, having it put on by others when going out, etc." (18). Dewey believed that it was less important to know what something is than to know how that something is experienced *as* ("The Metaphysics of Experience" 247). James Rachels writes that Dewey was influenced by Hegelian idealism and its "suspicion of any attempt to understand phenomena apart from their connections and relations with other phenomena" ("John Dewey" 153). This provided a productive way of understanding the various dimensions of an issue and how that issue integrates with other issues. Because education was at the center of Dewey's thinking, his writings on the subject incorporate a systematic application of his theories of experience. In *Experience and Education* (1938),

Dewey summarized decades of his own writings on education and experience to construct a comprehensive framework for an educational philosophy of experience.

Progressive Era composition teachers and scholars were the first generation to begin applying Dewey's writings on experience into their own theorizing on matters of pedagogy. Writing in *The English Journal* in 1926, Dora V. Smith declared that "[t]he immediate experience has the floor in the educational world of today" ("The Danger of Dogma" 419). By the 1930's, Dewey's ideas on experience had taken hold of the progressive wing of the discipline. As Robert J. Connors notes, the 1930s was a revolutionary time for education at all levels in America, and Dewey's educational theories became important during this decade (*Composition-Rhetoric* 288). Dewey's contributions to educational philosophy resulted in an emerging curriculum based on experience:

Texts began to appear that were psychologically more sophisticated, taking a more process-oriented approach to writing, paying more attention to students and their everyday experiences, attempting to link writing with vocational training and the real world. (288)

Dewey's writings on experience and education reverberated throughout the country well into the 30s and 40s. In sum, Dewey's influence on education in general during the Progressive Era was pervasive, particularly his philosophical theories of experience as related to education. Among progressive teachers and scholars of composition, Dewey's influence was especially indelible.

LOOKING AHEAD: TWO UNDERCURRENTS IN PROGRESSIVE ERA EDUCATION

The publication of *An Experience Curriculum in English* in 1935 highlighted two broad undercurrents in education during the Progressive Era. These undercurrents represented a growing voice among progressive educators in general, as well as English teachers in particular, regarding what they viewed as two major problems in education. The first problem was a sense that schools were not in harmony with broader society and, consequently, failed to meet the needs of both students and society. Progressive Era compositionists believed that a curriculum of experiences would address this challenge of preparing students for society:

The school of experience is the only one which will develop the flexibility and power of self-direction requisite for successful living in our age of swift industrial, social, and economic change. To inculcate authoritarian beliefs, fixed rules of conduct, unreasoned and therefore stubborn attitudes, is to set our youth in futile and fatal conflict with the forces of modern life. By meeting situations, modifying conditions and adapting themselves to the unchangeable, our boys and girls will learn to live in a dynamic and evolving world. Today, more than ever, the curriculum should consist of experiences. (*An Experience Curriculum* 3)

The second problem *An Experience Curriculum in English* sought to address was that English courses often did not permit students to draw upon vital experiences during the learning process. As I've shown in chapter 1, progressive compositionists often broached this problem using the metaphor of combustion. Educators argued that both of these problems (schools not being in harmony with broader society and teaching practices that

denied students' own experiences) stemmed from several factors: traditional methods of teaching, the effects of college entrance requirements, and the overall structure of schools as social institutions. Both of these undercurrents sprouted from the new educational paradigm taking shape, itself intricately connected to the developing theories of an educational philosophy of experience as articulated by John Dewey during the Progressive Era.

In the next chapter, "The Student and Society," I explore the first undercurrent among progressive educators, the concern about how education was not meeting the needs of students in relation to their place in society. In chapter 4, "The Chains of Conventional Academic Procedure," I examine in more detail the second undercurrent, how the teaching of English prevented students from drawing upon vital experiences in order to grow as a writer and as an individual. I explore how this problem resulted in specific teaching methods that prevented vital composition experiences from taking place—often the result of hampering caused by traditional teaching methods as well as forces outside the teacher's control, such as standardized examinations. In both chapters, I discuss how Progressive Era compositionists drew upon Dewey's theories of experience to envision a course of study in English that would meet the needs of both society and the individual student. I also show how in tackling these two issues, Progressive Era compositionists implemented specific teaching strategies that resulted in increased motivation in students for engaging in writing. In my final chapter, I will bring these two threads to bear upon issues of teaching in the modern classroom. I will show how

Progressive Era discussion on experience can be reimagined for motivation in writing instruction today.

CHAPTER 3: THE STUDENT AND SOCIETY

If there is an idea that encapsulates the moving spirit in education during the age of pragmatism, it may well be that of social reform. The Progressive Era is singularly characterized by its reformist efforts. During this period the nation accomplished a remarkable number of improvements to society—perhaps more than any other period in the history of our country. A dizzying array of mechanisms were implemented to directly address the problems that plagued society. These mechanisms included, among others, the establishment of labor unions, government regulations, non-profit agencies, and a wide variety of volunteer associations.

One such association was the National Council of Teachers of English. On December 1 and 2, 1911, roughly sixty-five men and women gathered in Chicago for the first annual meeting of the National Council of Teachers of English. The people assembled consisted of administrators and teachers of English whose primary goal was to address the effects of college entrance requirements on lower schools and to articulate their own vision of English instruction at the high school level (Fay 47). The origins of NCTE, thus, are intrinsically tied to a national movement during the Progressive Era to reform the country's secondary schools. This movement is known as The Reorganization Movement in Secondary English Teaching, and its motivating purpose was to protest college entrance requirements (Fay 46). *The English Journal* debuted in 1912—edited by NCTE secretary James F. Hosis—and its very first issues were dedicated to addressing the challenge of teaching high school English while under the domination of college examinations.

Albert Kitzhaber has written how tensions between colleges and secondary schools began in the early 1890s with the publication of the Harvard Reports, a series of reports published by a small committee of faculty at Harvard College who complained of the general lack of preparation in writing by entering college students. The first report, which appeared in 1892 as the “Report of the Committee on Composition and Rhetoric,” bemoaned the “stupefying” work of correcting student papers that Harvard faculty had to endure: “It is obviously absurd that the College—the institution of higher education—should be called upon to turn aside from its proper functions, and devote its means and the time of its instructors to the task of imparting elementary instruction which should be given even in ordinary grammar schools” (quoted in Kitzhaber 44). The reports were widely publicized, as Albert Kitzhaber writes: “Magazines and even newspapers took up the cry and joined in deploring the bad English used by American college students; the blame for this state of affairs was regularly fastened on the lower schools” (*Rhetoric in American Colleges* 46).

Here I must add that some composition historians provide a more complicated view of the Harvard entrance exams. John Brereton, for example, points out that the shock expressed by Harvard faculty at the quality of writing by incoming students was mostly for effect, as everyone teaching English there already knew that “the new examination in English did not reveal some long-hidden weakness so much as supply Harvard with new, objective evidence to use in order to improve the secondary schools, which was one of [Harvard president] Eliot’s ambitions” (*The Origins of Composition Studies* 27). Brereton argues that the Harvard composition program between 1880-1900

was truly unique in that it offered a wide array of coursework, a unique kind of writing instruction, and the composition faculty were eminent and highly visible teacher-practitioners rather than scholars. The Harvard composition program “marks the only time a major university made such a total commitment to student writing” (11). This commitment was due in part to the efforts of Harvard president Charles W. Eliot, who had long been an advocate of formal studies in English composition in a time when literature was emerging as the dominant subject in English (Applebee 32).

Nonetheless, the public outcry prompted by the Harvard Reports resulted in the National Council of Education appointing a committee on secondary education in 1892. This committee—known as the Committee of Ten—set about arranging a series of conferences in order to consider the problem of secondary school education (Applebee 32). The conference on English was presided over by Harvard president Charles W. Eliot. One of the efforts of the conference on English was standardizing English. The National Conference on Uniform Entrance Requirements in English met for the first time in 1894. What followed was a widespread adoption of college entrance examinations.

The entrance examinations in English at Harvard and those that followed in other institutions presented a number of problems for high schools. The first problem is that the entrance requirements dominated the high school curriculums. Fred Newton Scott, in his 1902 article “College-Entrance Requirements in English,” referred to the domination of colleges over secondary schools as a “feudal system of relationships” (366):

According to this view the university authorities live as it were in a moated castle, in proud isolation from the rest of the world. They lay down arbitrarily the

conditions upon which persons shall be admitted to communion with them. They let in whom they choose and keep out whom they choose. The life within the university has only an accidental relation to the life without. [...] To all appeals from the schools it has just one reply: "Fit pupils to pass our examination and the drawbridge will be lowered. (366)

Arthur N. Applebee writes that, while the entrance examinations were different for each college, the exams nonetheless dictated school curriculums for the year. Moreover, as the entrance requirements changed, the high school curriculum had to change with them (*Tradition and Reform* 30). In a 1912 article entitled "The Influence of Uniform Entrance Requirements in English," James F. Hosis provided an overview of the historical development of entrance requirements and their effects on high schools, and he concluded that college entrance exams prevented effective teaching in composition. Many high school principals and teachers declared that the "legitimate aims and work of the high school are interfered with" (102). High school educators remonstrated the implementation of such exams and insisted that college could implement a way of entering college would "not only not hinder but positively help the high school in performing its task" (102). Asserting the independence of secondary schools, Hosis argued that "the university can rightly ask only that the high school do well what it feels obliged to undertake" (103).

Another problem caused by the domination of secondary schools by college entrance exams was a blanket, one-size-fits-all curriculum. In 1917, the NCTE Committee on the Reorganization of English in Secondary Schools, chaired by James

Fleming Hosis, published a 181-page report entitled *Reorganization of English in Secondary Schools*. This report eventually became a “blueprint for a fundamental and nationwide reorganization of secondary school in English” (Fay 48). The report argued that entrance examinations created unnecessary uniformity in curriculum: “At present the English course in our high schools is characterized by a monotonous and unintelligent uniformity” (*Reorganization* 7). Most egregiously, progressive educators argued, such uniformity failed to take into account the many differences among students and teachers.

PREPARATION FOR LIFE

Perhaps the most vigorous complaint educators lodged against the entrance exams was that they prevented high schools from adjusting to broader social conditions, thus hindering high schools in their goal of providing the best education for students. A report of the Carnegie Foundation in 1910 summed up the issue:

[N]either colleges nor secondary schools are satisfied with their relations to each other. The college complains that the graduates of the secondary schools are superficial and unwilling to apply themselves to hard work. The secondary school complains that, although the colleges fail to train their own pupils effectively, they dominate the teaching in the lower schools so as to introduce methods unfitted to boys and girls, and by their failure to recognize the newer subjects of study, they greatly hamper the high schools in the attempt to adjust themselves to the needs of their own communities. (quoted in Hosis “The Influence” 96)

This tension between colleges and high schools was due partly to disagreements about the purpose of a high school education. Colleges often viewed secondary schools as feeder schools whose purpose was largely to prepare students for college. There was a broad national sentiment that preparing high school students for college was the ideal goal, whether or not a college education was eventually obtained. “A few years ago,” wrote John Dewey in 1906 in *The Educational Situation*, “a happy formula was current: the proposition that the best preparation for college was also the best preparation for life” (111). Many high school educators, however, considered secondary schools as a common school or “people’s college,” one that should prepare students for life. Progressive educators argued that what best prepares for life is not what necessarily best prepares for college. In his prefatory remarks in *Reorganization of English in Secondary Education*, James F. Hosis protested “the folly of insisting that the high-school course in English shall be a college-preparatory course” (5). Because the Progressive Era was witnessing such drastic shifts in society—including a vast influx of students entering high school and new vocations brought about by scientific and technical innovation—high school educators believed it was their responsibility to prepare students for the world they would meet upon graduation. High schools wanted to teach new vocational subjects as well as more courses in fine arts. College entrance exams forced high schools to dedicate their resources to the subjects available in college. High school teachers argued that this was not an acceptable situation, particularly since so few students would go on to college—roughly 4% of high school students (Berlin, *Rhetoric and Reality* 33).

Many teachers and scholars felt that the term “preparatory school” was part of the problem. “I have often wished that the term ‘preparatory,’ together with the ideas that cluster about it, might be dropped for a season from our educational vocabulary,” wrote Fred Newton Scott in “What the West Wants in Preparatory English” (10). Scott argued that the term ‘preparatory’ was responsible for a fallacy in education: “the prevalent belief that the chief purpose of secondary English is to prepare the student to enter the university” (10). Scott referred to this fallacy as an “evil” and he pointed out that in many Midwestern states, such as his own state of Michigan, students were admitted to college through a program of school certification. As John Brereton writes, these Midwestern high schools would receive certification from local colleges if they met certain requirements, and students from certified schools were automatically eligible for admission into the local college (*The Origins* 27).

Ultimately, high school teachers believed that in order to prepare high school students for life, the curriculum had to gain freedom from “the domination of the college-entrance ideal” (Hosic, *Reorganization* 5). Many college educators threw in their support of this cause. Fred Newton Scott argued that the high school English teacher should be “free to arrange his work solely with reference to the needs of his pupils” (“College-Entrance Requirements” 370). The high school teacher should not be responsible to the university for “some set of formal requirements” but rather for “developing to the utmost the minds and character of the pupils in his charge” (370).

NCTE REFORMS

Through the collective efforts of the NCTE, both high school English teachers and their many allies in higher education advocated vigorously and tirelessly for reform. These educators launched a campaign on several fronts. First, they argued that there should be more representation of teachers on the Uniform Conference on College Entrance Requirements in English. This body, which controlled the college entrance exams, consisted of 12 college professors, 2 principals from Eastern private schools, and 2 principals from public high schools. There was no representation by actual high school English teachers (Hosic, “The Influence of Uniform” 96).

NCTE members also argued that the implementation of college entrance requirements didn’t account for the very complex nature of the high school English class. Fred Newton Scott wrote that those who created the examinations failed to take account of the complexity of the English language and its attendant challenges of teaching composition and literature. He argued that the discipline is so full of unsolved problems that it is essentially a “pedagogical porcupine” (qtd. in Stewart “Profession in Perspective” 17). W. Wilbur Hatfield—who succeeded Hosic in 1922 as editor of *The English Journal*—argued for more progressive teaching methods in English, referring to the subject as “that congeries of social arts known as English” (“Social Change and English” 536). As Robert Pooley later wrote, “English composition is not a single ability, but is rather an assemblage of skills, habits, judgments, and attitudes, involving an inextricable union of subjective content and objective form” (“The Objective Measurement” 462).

In part, it was in response to the college entrance requirements that the field of composition studies began to rapidly professionalize at the beginning of the 20th century. The first doctoral program in rhetoric and composition emerged under the leadership of Fred Newton Scott at Michigan during this time. *The English Journal* (now known as *English Education*) appeared in 1912, splitting off into *Elementary English* in 1925, and the College Edition in 1928, which later became *College English*. The NCTE acted as a unifying and motivating force for all of these professional activities.

Despite the challenges caused by the college entrance exams, Arthur Applebee writes that it's important to take a balanced view on the issue. To begin, as Kitzhaber pointed out, the entrance requirements exacted a certain standard of preparation in English for entering college students, which required high schools to increase the quantity of work in English (Kitzhaber 200). Applebee concludes that the Committee of Ten and the Uniform Conference on College Entrance Requirements in English that first established widespread college entrance requirements played a significant role in the struggle to win recognition for English studies in high school (*Tradition and Reform* 38). Credit must be given to both, says Applebee: "to the Ten for unifying the subject and raising its prestige, [and] to the National Conference [on College Entrance Requirements in English] for adding the compulsion that insured its prosperity" (*Tradition and Reform* 38). On the heels of this spreading and strengthening of English courses came the developing professional literature and an active involvement in professional organizations. Articles on the teaching of English began to appear regularly in journals, primarily *The English Journal* (45). In this sense, Applebee echoes John Brereton's

nuanced perspective on Harvard's role in the conflict between colleges and secondary schools during the Progressive Era.

Eventually educators were successful in achieving reform regarding the entrance requirements. The entrance exams in their existing form were slowly phased out. Robert S. Fay writes that the reorganization movement was successful for several reasons: they established the NCTE which provided an effective and lasting means of communication; they functioned with efficiency and communicated clear objectives and proceeded with careful planning and organizing; and they assumed a scientific point of view: "They put facts before generalizations and experience before philosophy. They put no stock in authority for its own sake, but sought answers through careful, objective investigations" ("The Reorganization Movement" 50).

Progressive educators, in short, embodied the pragmatist ideas that were gaining a foothold on society. The reorganization movement, and the formation of the NCTE that it resulted in, represented a prevailing sense among Progressive Era educators that education should be flexible enough to respond to social changes in order to meet the needs of students. When *An Experience Curriculum in English* appeared in 1935, the authors of this new report paid tribute to the groundwork that had come of *Reorganization of English in Secondary Schools* in 1917:

This [reorganization] report urged that high-school curricula and teaching methods be adapted to the needs of the great mass of the pupils rather than to preparation of a few for entrance to college. It went quite as far toward our present experience-curriculum ideal as any considerable number were then willing to follow. Its

sturdy common sense and its vigorous statement have made it, even down to the present, one of the strongest influences in the shaping of high school English work. (*An Experience Curriculum* ix)

In the years since the publication of the reorganization report, there had been many changes in education: the junior high schools had emerged as an accepted institution, education had become professionalized, and many new resources were available for teaching of literature and composition. Of course, the reorganization report only addressed high schools—grades 7 to 12—whereas *An Experience Curriculum in English* aimed for a more comprehensive program of education in English. The new report argued that “any thoroughly effective training in English must be planned from Kindergarten up” (ix).

In *An Experience Curriculum*, just like in *Reorganization of English*, educators argued that schools should be calibrated to broader society. Margaret Grove Ferry writes that the link that connected the reorganization movement and the experience curriculum “was the belief that English teaching must be suited to the needs, ideals, and conditions of the time” (“Curriculum Committees” 76). Progressive Era compositionists believed that a critical function of education was to prepare students for a rapidly shifting society.

And, as I have shown in the previous chapter, society was seeing significant shifts during the Progressive Era. A primary goal of the NCTE and education reformers was to make a high school education more common. Katherine Adams points out that in 1900, only 6.3% of Americans graduated from high school (*Progressive Politics* xvii).

Urbanization was a particular challenge to high school education reform efforts. In

Secondary Schools at the Turn of the Century, Theodore R.Sizer writes that the Civil War ignited a surge of industrial growth, resulting in larger, more concentrated communities in order to maintain this industry. Rural communities were being drained:

In 1860, of a total population of 31,443,321, slightly over 6,000,000 lived in urban communities—that is, with populations over 2,500. In 1890 the population, now numbering 62,947,714, showed over 22,000,000 urban dwellers. In 1860 there had been but 392 communities over 2,500 population; in 1890 the number had increased to 1,348. (60)

This rapid urbanization created challenges for both rural and urban communities. The exodus from rural communities meant fewer resources to allocate toward provisioning a high school education. The urban areas, in contrast, while they had more and more resources, struggled to meet the demands of the proliferation of young people to receive a high school education:

In 1890, 202, 963 students attended 2,562 public high schools, while by 1900 the figure doubled: 519, 251 students attended 6005 public high schools. By 1912, enrollment reached 1,000,000. (Berlin, “Writing Instruction” 186)

These ruptures in society were accompanied by large influxes of immigrants as well as the challenges of economic imbalances. Additionally, society was still recovering from the scars of World War I and the Great Depression. Progressive educators believed that English instruction in the early twentieth century needed to make learning more relevant to life and to make students more responsible and creative participants in their world (Byers 31). As such, these teachers oriented their material and methods in ways to engage

individual students with their various communities. This new educational model would consist of a curriculum of experiences. “The best preparation for anything,” wrote James F. Hosis, “is real effort and experience in the present” (*Reorganization* 5).

INTEGRATION OF SCHOOL AND LIFE

With the appearance of *An Experience Curriculum in English* in 1935, a new set of concerns began to emerge among teachers regarding the function of school in society. Many progressive educators felt that new social conditions, coupled with traditional modes of teaching, resulted in an educational experience that presented too discontinuous and fragmented a conception of the world for students. Ruth Mary Weeks in “Pattern-making in Education” wrote of this concern in 1937:

Do present curricula clearly picture to the child the world in which he has to live and develop in him the faculties that he will need to use? Do present curricula offer to the child during his school years a well-rounded life which makes him a happy and balanced individual? Put in other terms, these questions mean: Are the various subjects of instruction organized into a meaningful pattern? (188-189)

Weeks argued that school at all levels of education—primary, secondary, and tertiary—presented a total curricula that was “a disjointed and patternless array of departmental offerings—a sort of jigsaw puzzle whose disconnected courses we ask the child to put together for himself into a meaningful picture” (189). The Progressive Era compositionists referred to this as a problem of integration or correlation.

John Dewey wrote extensively about the problem of integrating the work of school into the life of the individual student. He held a sense that “modern life is too specialized, too episodic, its stops and starts robbing our activities of meaning and energy” (Fishman and McCarthy 7). For Dewey, “present-day recreation and labor, art and commerce, science and politics, school and home are too marked off, too discontinuous” (7). In “My Pedagogic Creed,” written in 1897 early in his career, Dewey claimed that the way in which the school presented the curricula and structured students’ overall learning and social experiences at school affected the intellectual and psychological growth of the students. For this reason, schools must take great pains to design the architecture of this social sphere:

[T]he school, as an institution, should simplify existing social life; should reduce it, as it were, to an embryonic form. Existing life is so complex that the child cannot be brought into contact with it without either confusion; he is either overwhelmed by the multiplicity of activities which are going on, so that he loses his own power of orderly reaction, or he is so stimulated by these various activities that his powers are prematurely called into play and he becomes either unduly specialized or else disintegrated. (446)

In particular, claimed Dewey, “the school life should grow gradually out of the home life; that it should take up and continue the activities with which the child is already familiar in the home” (446). Dewey argued that the school must “represent present life—life as real and vital to the child as that which he carries on in the home, in the neighborhood, or on the playground” (446). For Dewey, the school is an extension of family life, and

school should be organized as a form of community life. Educators should fashion learning experiences that are integrated into the student's conception of social life, rather than learning experiences that disrupt the unity of that conception of social life. "[W]e violate the child's nature," argued Dewey, "and render difficult the best ethical results by introducing the child too abruptly to a number of special studies, of reading, writing, geography, etc., out of relation to this social life" (448). Dewey claimed that the true center of correlation on school is not any specific subject—such as science, literature, history, or geography—but rather the center of correlation is the child's own social activities (448).

Much of education fails, Dewey contended, because school is presented simply as a place where information is to be learned, where certain habits are to be formed, but in such a way as if the value of all this lay in a remote future. Dewey argued that education "is a process of living and not a preparation for future living" (445). This argument that education is an on-going process aligns with Dewey's emphasis on growth, and experiences are a key element of Dewey's notion of growth. For Dewey, education "must be conceived as a continuing reconstruction of experience; that the process and the goal of education is one and the same thing" (450).

Already in 1897 Dewey was developing a conception of education that required a careful approach to engaging individual students with their social spheres. *An Experience Curriculum*, appearing some four decades later, developed on these ideas for the teaching of English. The curriculum criticized traditional models of education that created "the artificial separation of one subject from another, and, even more potently, the divorce of

all school study and drill from dynamic experience” (11). Moreover, the curriculum hit upon a common contradiction among traditional teaching: while educators often claimed that the purpose of education was to prepare students for successful future living by rich present living, educators too often proceeded to offer only intellectual activity, mostly in the form of re-thinking other men’s thoughts (11). The experience curriculum called for a more active, engaged form of learning that involved more than just exercising the intellect:

Truly rich living, and real living, includes much more than purely intellectual activity or (and) the practice of technical skills. Normal living is a composite of dynamic experiences in which the will, the feelings, the memory, and reason are all exercised as a single organism. Such typical life experiences as running an errand for mother, organizing a baseball team, giving a party, producing a play, conducting an election campaign or a community drive, all have other elements quite as prominent as the intellectual. (11)

The experience curriculum argued that these dynamic experiences are the materials that the warp of life is composed of—and that these experiences must accompany the woof of intellectual activities such as fact-learning, reflection, and acquisition of needed skills in order to create a well-woven fabric of life (12). Ultimately, the school must manage to create a functional combination of the dynamic experiences of active life and the intellectual activities of the curricula (12). Both are required for optimal learning.

One of the causes of the lack of integration, argued many Progressive Era educators, was the continuing specialization of knowledge and the practice of imparting

knowledge as discrete school subjects unrelated to each other. Progressive Era compositionists were wary of the effects of specialization on school curriculum. NCTE president Ruth Mary Weeks was among many progressive educators who advocated for more integration of subjects in schools:

Our departmentalized education is a lovely dome of many-colored glass which reflects life from a myriad of facts and angles. It would be a tragedy if we replaced this rainbow glory not by the white radiance of blended knowledge but by the dull grays of partial peering. (“Pattern-making” 193)

“[U]nless genuine educational synthesis is forthcoming,” Weeks prophesied, “the world is faced with catastrophe” (194).

In an effort to create a more integrated social and educational experience for students, progressive compositionists conceived of a correlated curriculum along the line of Dewey’s theorizing of socially integrated education. *A Correlated Curriculum* appeared in 1936—a year after *An Experience Curriculum*—and offered a framework for providing integration. Ruth Mary Weeks, chairman of the correlated curriculum report, wrote that the goal of the correlated curriculum was “to organize education in terms of meaning and not of matter” (“Pattern-making” 189). This was a unique way of teaching that maintained continuity of the students’ social spheres, which Dewey and progressive educators believed was important for effective learning. Where traditional teaching consisted of material that was “often of an adult character far beyond the interest and comprehension of the child,” the correlated curriculum started with students’ own interests and experiences (“Pattern-making” 190). *The Correlated Curriculum* advocated

integrating curricula in a way that transcended subject divisions. Students would undertake a series of investigations guided by the teacher, though answering their own questions that would lead out into “all the widening circles of social and subject-matter ramifications entailed in completing the original investigation” (190). For teachers, this approach allowed the student a more organic, integrated, less fragmented engagement with the world. It also meant that students’ starting place for learning would be their immediate interests and experiences.

CHALLENGES TO SOCIAL INTEGRATION

A significant challenge to providing an integrated curriculum, according to Dewey, is the nature of schools themselves as social institutions. In *The Educational Situation* (1906), Dewey argued that schools were much like any social organism, fraught with opposing forces that complicate their own development. There are two principles continuously at work in all human institutions, argued Dewey: “one is toward specialization and consequent isolation, the other toward connection and interaction” (107). For example, wrote Dewey, the country’s historical socio-political development has followed this pattern. First, the nation during its infancy moved toward separation, toward “marking off our own life as a people to avoid its submergence, to secure for it an individuality of its own” (107). This movement was followed up with the pendulum swinging in the other direction:

Reciprocity, the broadening of our business life through increased contacts and wider exchange, becomes the commercial watchword. Expansion, taking our place

in the sisterhood of nations, making ourselves recognized as a world-power, becomes the formula for international politics. (107)

Science is another example of this social pattern. As a new field in the sciences begins to emerge, a period of specialization allows the discipline to develop on its own. But eventually “it is necessary to devote ourselves to tracing the threads of connection which unite the different specialized branches into a coherent and consecutive whole” (107).

Dewey remarks that the most active sciences seem to be spelled with a hyphen: astrophysics, stereo-chemistry, psycho-physics, etc. (107). Dewey wrote that a certain degree of isolation and detachment is required to “secure the unhindered and mature development of any group of forces” (107).

The US education system, argued Dewey, had also undergone a period of isolation, which was an important phase which allowed the school system to become “disentangled from absorption in other institutions: the family, government, the church, and so on” (108). However, this has produced some challenges. One of these is that the work of the school becomes too marked off from the rest of society, the business of teaching and learning too insular an activity. Schools become disembodied social organisms:

Attention has come to be concentrated upon the affairs of the school system as if they concerned simply the system itself, and had only a very indirect reference to other social institutions. The school-teacher often resents reference to outside contacts and considerations as if they were indeed outside—simply interferences. (108).

This echoes Fred Newton Scott's earlier claim that "life within the university has only an accidental relation to the life without" ("College-Entrance Requirements" 336), demonstrating that such social forces also hold true for colleges and universities. Dewey argues that much of the friction that exists in school arises out of the conflict between the two forces: one side primarily works to maintain the structural integrity of the system, while others "are clamorous for more radical changes—the changes which will better adapt the school to contemporary social needs" (*The Educational* 108). Dewey argues that neither force can (or should) be eliminated, and that they must—through the agency of democracy—continuously work toward self-improvement as society shifts. This continuing development as a social organism mirrors the continuous development that takes place in each individual human.

Dewey formulated this theory about the nature of social organisms and the attendant challenges of schools for adjusting to meet social demands during the reorganization movement. His book *The Educational Situation* sought to address the growing idea that schools were not functioning as a social institution calibrated to broader society, thus failing to meet the needs of students. While not laying blame entirely on colleges for the problem, Dewey supported progressive educators who advocated for introducing into high schools "courses in commerce, in the fine and applied arts, and in technological training" (115). Significantly, Dewey calls for broadening the high school curriculum only insofar as the new, more inclusive curriculum was scaffolded into the schoolwork as a seamless integration of the student's conception of the world:

Even those studies which are popularly regarded as preparing distinctively for life rather than for college cannot get their full meaning, cannot be judged correctly, until the life for which they are said to be a preparation receives a fuller and more balanced representation in the school. While, on the other hand, the more scholastic studies, if I may use the expression, cannot relate themselves properly so long as the branches which give them their ultimate *raison d'être* and sphere of application in the whole of life are non-existent in the curriculum. (115-116)

Integration of school and society for Dewey meant that at every step teachers must demonstrate how the material students learn are relevant to broader life outside of the classroom, how that knowledge correlates with other aspects of the students' lives. One practical application of this theory for pedagogy was that it required engaging students in meaningful writing tasks that drew upon the students' lived experiences.

The isolation of schools from broader society created a second major challenge, wrote Dewey. This challenge was the belief held by many educators—as well as many members of the community—that schools had no stake in the problems that rocked society beyond the walls of the classrooms. Not only did Dewey disagree with this idea, but he insisted that schools were intricately wound up in broader social issues. Dewey argued that social problems *were* problems of education.

There is a curious quirk in human nature which makes us think of social problems as something external although their effects are something personal and private.

We as educators need first of all to recognize that the social problems are something of our own; that they, and not simply their consequences, are ours; that

we are part of the causes which bring them about in what we have done and have refrained from doing, and that we have a necessary share in finding their solution. Moreover, we have it not just in any outside way called "social" but in the educational interest which is an integral part of society. ("Education and Our Present Social Problems" 131)

Dewey wrote that social problems were not things like thunderstorms or cyclones to be looked at from outside; rather, social problems arise from general social causes, with general social effects, and thus require to be dealt with socially. Dewey argued that educators should realize the identity of interest which bonds schools and broader society together. "If we begin to study the social problem where the educator is at home so to speak," says Dewey, "we shall learn that our interests as teachers are one with those of those other persons" ("Education and Our" 133).

Perhaps the most important way for tackling social problems for Dewey was through the medium of democracy. Democracy, thus, becomes an important aspect in theorizing schools and is an integral component of Dewey's theory of experience.

THE ROLE OF DEMOCRACY IN SOCIAL INTEGRATION

If the Progressive Era witnessed an unprecedented number of improvements to social life, these reforms were made possible by a democratic system of government. Certainly, pure democracy is not without its challenges. Plato was suspicious of a pure democracy for its potential to devolve into a tyranny of the masses (see *Republic* and *Gorgias*). He downgraded the spoken and written arts of rhetoric and literature for their

potential to sway the masses into irrational acts. George Santayana, a native of Spain, was struck by the capacity of a democracy to manifest as an invisible source of oppression: “There is no tyranny so hateful as a vulgar, anonymous tyranny. It is all-permeating, all-thwarting; it blasts every budding novelty and sprig of genius with its omnipresent and fierce stupidity” (qtd. in Durant 659). The compulsion to group conformity can be relentless and merciless. Plato and Santayana perhaps would find even more justification in their convictions were they living today astride the social mobilations made possible by technology. Theresa Jarnigan Enos has claimed that virtual spaces, in cleaving human discourse from time and space that occurs in normal interactions between everyday citizens, has given birth to challenges of comity (211).

But Dewey believed that democracy is the most ideal situation as it provides a mechanism for self-correction and continual development of a social organism: “Democracy permitted free debate, the public examination of alternatives, the treatment of laws and institutions as subject to scrutiny and correction” (Frankel 17). Because democracy was so important to maintaining and correcting the problems of society, Dewey believed that it was crucial to foster democratic values and habits in the schools. The teacher should nurture a spirit of cooperative enterprise among students and this should also be reflected among teachers in the operation of the schools:

Desire to work with others, for mutual advantage, must be made the controlling force in school administration and instruction. Instead of imbuing individuals with the idea that the goal is to sharpen their powers so that they can get on personally, they must be trained in capacity for intelligent organization so that they can unite

with others in a common struggle against poverty, disease, ignorance, credulity, low standards of appreciation and enjoyment. (“American Education Past and Future” 97)

As Dewey wrote in 1933 in *The Educational Frontier*, the task of education was to prepare individuals “to take part intelligently in the management of conditions under which they live” (qtd. In Applebee, *Tradition and Reform* 115). Dewey believed that education serves to help students understand the social forces around them and to equip the students with the intellectual and practical tools to direct those forces. Fostering deliberative, democratic habits among young people while in school was the best way to solve social problems. As William Keith and Robert Danisch write, Dewey’s philosophy of democracy was participatory, through and through: “It required an involved community of inquirers capable of reflective thought regarding pressing problems and collective action aimed to improve difficult conditions” (“Dewey on Science” 27). Sharon Crowley has written that an important aspect of Dewey’s deliberative model of education is that it “gives individuals a stake in the outcome, not only of their own lives, but of the affairs of the entire polity” (*Composition* 164).

Even though Dewey insists that fostering a sense of community in schools is of paramount importance, he also points out that schools should value the individual, particularly the individual’s capacity for independent thought. “Democracy will be a farce unless individuals are trained to think for themselves, to judge independently, to be critical, to be able to detect subtle propaganda and the motives which inspire it” (“American Education Past and Future” 98). This focus on nurturing independence of

thought in part helps to temper the tyranny of autocrats and the fevered masses, while also enabling solutions to social problems to emerge from individual members of society. Attending to the individual student while fostering a spirit of collaborative enterprise among the group are the two broad aims of the educator, writes Dewey.

For John Dewey and Progressive Era compositionists, calibrating schools to social conditions and orienting students to their places in broader society was aligned with an educational philosophy of experience. Dewey wrote in *Experience and Education* that most people would “prefer democratic and human arrangements to those which are autocratic and harsh” (34). He elaborated:

Can we find any reason that does not ultimately come down to the belief that democratic social arrangements promote a better quality of human experience, one which is more widely accessible and enjoyed, than do non-democratic and anti-democratic forms of social life? Does not the principle of regard for individual freedom and for decency and kindness of human relations come back in the end to the conviction that these things are tributary to a higher quality of experience on the part of a greater number than are methods of repression and coercion of force. Is it not the reason for our preference that we believe that mutual consultation and convictions reached through persuasion, make possible a better quality of experience than can otherwise be provided on any wide scale? (34)

LOOKING AHEAD: PEDAGOGICAL PRACTICES AND EXPERIENCE

In this chapter I have shown how the reorganization movement reflected a prevailing sense among Progressive Era educators that positioning schools and students in their broader social contexts was critical to both the wellbeing of individual students and to society in general. This became an important tenet of the educational philosophy of experience that developed during the Progressive Era and crystallized in 1935 with the publication of *An Experience Curriculum in English*. More germane, Progressive Era compositionists believed that attending to issues of motivation in writing is not simply a matter of curricula and specific pedagogical methods. It is also—perhaps more importantly—a matter of broader issues: the social conditions in which students find themselves, the way learning is correlated into students’ larger sense of the world, and to what extent students are engaged with their broader social spheres. For progressive educators, the thread that tied all these discussions together was human experience.

In the next chapter, I explore the second major undercurrent in education during the Progressive Era. I examine classroom instruction specifically and explore how traditional academic procedures contributed to specific learning experiences that affected student motivation in writing. I show how progressive educators incorporated Dewey’s educational theory of experience to construct new guiding principles in teaching English composition and literature.

CHAPTER 4: THE CHAINS OF CONVENTIONAL ACADEMIC PROCEDURE

A few years before the 1935 publication of *An Experience Curriculum in English*, W. Wilbur Hatfield (who was general editor of the report) gave an address to the assembled members of NCTE. Hatfield exhorted English teachers to conceive of a new curriculum of “life experiences adapted to schoolroom circumstances” (“The Ideal Curriculum” 183). In order to achieve greater integration of schoolwork with students’ lives, Hatfield called on English teachers to break free from the “chains of conventional academic procedure” (183). Hatfield’s metaphor exemplifies how progressive educators since the reorganization movement had identified specific problems in education that affected teaching and learning, including the work of the English class. Hatfield’s metaphor particularly serves as an apt springboard for examining the various chains—or specific academic practices—that hampered student motivation in writing instruction and thus severely curtailed learning. These particular educational practices account for the second broad undercurrent in Progressive Era education: the claim by teachers that traditional educational procedures prevented students from drawing upon lived experience in the learning process.

What were these academic procedures? How did they deny students their own lived experiences? In this chapter I will discuss how many progressive educators argued that traditional teaching practices, including the use of standardized examinations, prevented students from drawing upon lived experience in the classroom. More importantly, I show how this inability of students to draw upon experience in the work of the English class often removed any genuine occasion for writing, thus subverting the

students' own purpose as writers. I explore how Progressive Era compositionists often turned to John Dewey's discussions of experience as a way to articulate this problem and theorize ways to supply genuine occasions for writing. Finally, I show how providing more genuine occasions for writing restored the student's own sense of purpose as writers, thus securing greater motivation in writing.

REFORMING TRADITIONAL EDUCATION

The experience curriculum represented an attempt to reform the teaching of English in the United States at all levels. These efforts, as I have mentioned, were led by a cabal of progressive educators, including Fred Newton Scott at University of Michigan and his acolytes, Gertrude Buck at Vassar College, Sterling Andrus Leonard at University of Wisconsin, Charles Fries, Helen Mahin, and Ruth Mary Weeks, who became a prominent high school educator in Kansas City. All these individuals published widely in the journals, participated actively in educational organizations, and left a profound impact on the field of English studies—particularly the teaching of composition. However, these individuals in English studies were part of a larger coalition to reform education in general—to move away from traditional forms of education. But exactly what were these educators trying to reform? What was “traditional” education?

Broadly speaking, education toward the end of the nineteenth century had shifted from a more oral and elite institution to a more print-based form of education that was available to a wider swath of the population. These two shifts came with important ramifications and challenges.

For most of the nineteenth century leading up to the Progressive Era, college was restricted to the elite. The purpose of college was to prepare individuals to take leadership places in society, and the three main career choices were law, medicine, and the ministry. In terms of the curriculum, the course of study was nearly identical in all colleges: students studied rhetoric as well as classical languages and literature (Latin and Greek), moral philosophy, and a smattering of mathematics and science (Berlin, “Writing Instruction” 185). Katherine H. Adams notes that at the beginning of the 19th century, college students typically studied rhetoric for four years. They studied precepts by Aristotle, Cicero, and Quintilian in order to apply these insights to regular oral performances (*Progressive Politics* xi). Centering education on rhetoric served students well as they would need this knowledge and skill of public persuasion and deliberation in their career in law, medicine, or the ministry. During this time there were almost no courses in English literature, as classical literature dominated the curriculum (Brereton, *The Origins* 3). Moreover, there was no formal study of English composition, as students learned to write English through learning to write and speak the classical languages (Halloran, “From Rhetoric to Composition” 154). Proponents of the classical form of education claimed that studying ancient languages, as Brereton notes, “provided mental discipline and trained the powers of the mind [due to] the extremely close attention to details of language, both oral and written” (*The Origins* 4).

The shift in higher education away from predominantly elite institutions in which the form of learning was primarily oral in nature was caused by a remarkable increase in higher education enrollments as well as the changing nature of knowledge during the

Progressive Era (Brereton, *The Origins* 5). The period after the Industrial Revolution was a period of rapid economic growth. In 1862, Congress passed the Morrill Act, which established state institutions that were designed to “apply the findings of science to the managing of economic affairs” (Berlin, “Writing Instruction” 185). These land-grant institutions dramatically changed the landscape of higher education. The gates to a college education were now open to a much wider population. James Berlin notes that in 1920, there were 597,880 students attending college. By 1930, the number had nearly doubled to 1,100,737—and by 1940, there were 1,494,203 individuals in college (Berlin, “Writing Instruction” 186). The Industrial Revolution had also created a new array of careers like engineering and accounting, for which classical training in rhetoric and Latin was not necessary (Adams, *Progressive Politics* xi). Rather, the new curriculum needed to prepare and provide a “productive work force” (Berlin 186). University was no longer just for the elite, but for a wider population—including women and minorities. As Thomas P. Miller writes, the modern discipline of English took shape “as it expanded beyond the traditional elite and took up the modern mission of educating a more heterogeneous public” (*The Formation* 254).

The growth of the middle class and increasing college enrollments during this time also contributed to the shift away from oral to print as the dominant form of learning. As S. Michael Halloran has pointed out, “The larger numbers of students made the old system of oral recitation and disputation unworkable” (“From Rhetoric to Composition” 166). Written work could be evaluated more easily and efficiently than oral compositions. The influence of German universities also contributed to the shift from oral to print

modes of learning. The German model valued research and the publishing of findings. It was a text-based model of higher education rather than an oral-based model.

The major consequence of the shift away from the traditional oral form of learning toward a text model was that the study of rhetoric was replaced by the study of English literature. This was the birth of the modern English department. By the closing of the nineteenth century, the discipline of English became primarily the study of literary texts (Halloran 176). At Harvard, Francis James Child, Boylston Professor of Rhetoric and Oratory “held a largely undisguised contempt for rhetoric” and became a driving force in establishing literary study as the central focus of Harvard’s Department of English” (Halloran 175). The switch to English literature from rhetoric resulted in a fundamental shift in intellectual pursuit, a move away from the production of original texts (for oral delivery) to that of analyzing texts of literature for interpretation. As Sharon Crowley notes, composition is “primarily a productive or generative art rather than an analytic or interpretive one” (*Composition* 13).

The substitution of rhetoric for English literature had two significant impacts. First, the work of composition in the university suffered a steep decline in prestige. This was because the ascendance of English literature resulted in the “privileging of theory over practice and research over teaching” (Crowley, *Composition* 3). Here the influence of the German university model, which privileged the print medium of research, was unmistakable. Composition was a utilitarian endeavor that aimed to teach procedural forms of knowledge rather than just declarative forms of knowledge (Ambrose et al., *How Learning Works* 18). While composition was originally taught by regular college

faculty, after the advent of English literature in the early years of the 20th century the composition courses were given to probationary faculty because full-time faculty realized that there was no future in teaching subjects that produced no research (Crowley, 4). As Brereton writes, “the writing faculty did little rhetorical research, produced no advancement in knowledge, and earned themselves a reputation as teachers, not scholars, a serious handicap in the new university” (*The Origins* 10).

The second significant impact of substituting rhetoric for literature was the loss of all the benefits of training in rhetoric on the student’s intellectual and social development. It is important to recall that the previous oral/elite model of the university also involved the study of literary texts—Latin and Greek literature. However, the classical texts served as instructional material to help students compose oral deliveries. The classical model engaged students with their everyday experiences and with their communities in the process of producing oral compositions. On the other hand, shifting from rhetoric to English literature stripped away this social dimension. As John Brereton writes, “it seems more accurate to say that the nineteenth-century college had a more balanced mix of oral and written work, and that the university dropped much of the oral emphasis and consequently valued the written word much more” (*The Origins* 4). In limiting the scope of study solely to literary texts, the former three-dimensional enterprise of studying and practicing rhetoric was narrowed and flattened into a two-dimensional activity of literary analysis. I will refer to this disciplinary restructuring—somewhat ruefully—as the Great Compression. S. Michael Halloran argues that during this transition, “The greatest loss was of the sense of a large social purpose for writing, a social role for which rhetorical art

was necessary equipment” (“From Rhetoric” 177). The rhetorical tradition of engaging college students as active citizen orators “was virtually abandoned by the colleges in favor of a socially and politically unaware rhetoric of composition” (Halloran 178).

It was this narrowed emphasis on literary texts that the progressive movement in English studies worked against. While most colleges at the start of the Progressive Era reflected the new model of the English department, a growing contingent of progressive compositionists began a coordinated challenge to this paradigm. At University of Michigan, Fred Newton Scott had an appreciation for rhetoric and thus held a more balanced view of the English Department as involving scholarly work in literary studies as well as rhetoric and linguistics (Halloran 175). Progressive compositionists in the Deweyan mold sought to reintroduce into the English curriculum the social dimension provided by the study of rhetoric. They argued that the text-focused mode of the new English department divorced students from their social environments and, for the same reason, prevented students from drawing on experience in learning.

Compositionists noticed that this shift resulted in a curriculum and pedagogy that often thwarted student growth as writers and individuals. “The futility of much of our past teaching has been due to our mental blindness to the social function of language,” Sterling A. Leonard wrote in *English Composition as a Social Problem* (ix). Leonard argued that since language is fundamentally a social tool, then the teaching of language must be done in a highly social way: “If we are to make our training real, we must naturalize it, which is to say that we must socialize our teaching of composition” (ix). Instead of simply lecturing to students, Leonard argued that teachers should have students

interact with each other as a class in order to discuss each others' writing. Additionally, writing topics should not be limited to literary analysis, but students should also write on a variety of everyday experiences. In the popular high school textbook *Elementary English Composition*, first published in 1900 by Fred Newton Scott and Joseph Villiers Denny, the authors claimed that “the indifference of the pupils to their English composition is due in part to the isolation of written from spoken discourse” (iv). “The artificial separation of two things which naturally belong together,” they argued, “takes the heart out of both of them” (iv). Progressive compositionists often pointed out the importance of the social aspects of composition work. Uniquely, Scott and Denney’s textbook incorporated a large number of oral exercises in responding to literary texts.

In sum, the shift from rhetoric to English literature as the primary model of education in the later part of the nineteenth century had dire consequences on student intellectual and social development because it “flattened” the social world all around the student. For progressive compositionists, this focus on literary texts removed the social purpose of writing that the study of rhetoric provided. In removing the social function of language, the new text-exclusive approach to the English class also removed any genuine occasion for writing for the student.

A GENUINE OCCASION FOR WRITING

Gertrude Buck argued in 1901 that a central problem in traditional education is that the writing tasks too often failed to produce “a genuine occasion for writing” (“Recent Tendencies” 380). Buck was describing a problem which consisted of a cluster

of practices that required students to write without any appreciable meaningful engagement with the material. These practices were a result of traditional teaching methods, including the use of standardized examinations. Here I explore four of these specific conventional academic procedures that removed a genuine occasion for writing. The practices are 1) assigning meaningless writing themes, 2) requiring students to engage in desiccating literary analyses, 3) imparting nonfunctional information, and 4) overvaluing mechanical correctness. All four of these practices, in failing to provide any real occasion for writing, often prevented the “spontaneous response” on the part of the student. Wherever these classroom practices existed—in the words of Sterling Leonard—they served as “agents of stultification.”

Academic Procedure 1: Assigning Meaningless Writing Themes

During the Progressive Era, composition teacher-scholars frequently complained that students were forced to write on topics that were too remote from their interests or beyond their range of personal experiences. As I have shown in the previous chapter, “The Student and Society,” this practice was in large part due to the influence of college entrance examinations on high school curriculums. All too common, however, was the practice of assigning writing tasks on topics that didn’t allow students to tap into any real personal experience. Gertrude Buck in her 1901 article “Recent Tendencies in the Teaching of English Composition” wrote that, traditional composition theme assignments asked students to write on topics such as “Pereunt et imputantur,” “The vice of ambition” or “Autumn thoughts” (“Recent Tendencies” 373). Buck contended that this type of

theme topic failed to help students grow as writers because the students had no lived experience with these topics—they were meaningless writing exercises. The practice of requiring students to write on such impersonal topics had a long tradition in education at both the grade school and college levels. Richard Whatley in his 1828 *Elements of Rhetoric* sternly objected to “the subjects usually proposed for School or College-exercises” (22). Such composition theme topics included “Virtus est medium vitiorum” and “Natura beatis omnibus esse dedit” (24). Whatley wrote that such topics resulted in a “stiff, artificial, and frigid manner” of writing (22). Interestingly, Whatley’s admonition reveals that even during the pre-Great Compression, oral model of education, large precincts of educators often resorted to impersonal writing exercises. Perhaps this suggests that efforts to engage students more fully with their society did not always work—especially when the writing tasks had no meaning for the students.

James F. Hosis in a 1912 *English Journal* article summed up the view of many of his progressive contemporaries by concluding that “[t]he work of the school is too far removed from the actual linguistic needs of everyday life” (111). The work done in school was so divorced from students’ immediate experiences and interests that motivation in writing was greatly hampered. Albert Kitzhaber referred to this problem as “writing in a social vacuum” (*Rhetoric in American Colleges* 223). These writing assignments tasked students with “writing as an academic exercise to illustrate certain abstract principles or fulfill certain specifications imposed neither by the needs of the student nor by the requirements of the subject or situation” (223). Ruth Mary Weeks wrote that frequently assigned composition themes were so removed from students’

everyday experiences as to be meaningless: “Again the series of detached, meaningless assignments—fitting into no pattern, springing from no interest, arising from no occasion” (“Content for Composition” 299). These writing tasks ultimately failed to provide an avenue for drawing upon experience in writing.

In contrast, Progressive Era compositionists believed that students should write about topics drawn from their own experiences. For example, Scott and Denney’s 1900 textbook *Elementary English Composition* recommended that students write on typical situations in real life (v). James Berlin has noted that Scott and Denney taught writing within a complete rhetorical situation, a “situation that was thoroughly social without denying the importance of the individual” (“Writing Instruction” 195). Scott and Denney emphasized the relationship between the writer and his or her real-world experiences.

Likewise, Sterling A. Leonard in his 1917 *English Composition as a Social Problem* proposed a similar approach to composition topics. He wrote that writing themes should be informed by the common activities that students talk and write about in and outside school. He pointed to a study conducted at University School at Columbia, Missouri, which identified four major categories of interest in young people: 1) hearing or reading stories; 2) plays and games; 3) construction or handwork; and (4) careful observation of human activities (*English Composition* 6). Leonard argued that each of these categories “provides a great deal of material for expression” (6). Importantly, writing on these topics would allow the students to draw upon experience. For Leonard, written composition must always be the expression of “realized experience” (*English Composition* 82).

This injunction to limit the topics of composition theme to personal experience is reflected in earlier rhetorical training, such as in Richard Whatley's *Elements of Rhetoric*.

[B]ut in the exercise to the pupil's mind, it matters not how insignificant the subject may be, if it will but interest him, and thereby afford him such exercise.

[...][T]he younger and backwarder each student is, the more unfit he will be for abstract speculations; and the less remote must be the subjects for proposed from those individual objects and occurrences which always form the first beginnings of the furniture of the youthful mind. (25)

Whatley, much like his descendants in the Progressive Era, cautioned against assigning themes “on any subject on which one has hardly any information, and no interest; about which he knows little, and cares still less” (22). These exercises Whatley calls “artificial” and argues that they “will be greatly inferior” to real occasions for writing, such as writing a letter to a friend (22). “[O]n these *real* occasions,” Whatley wrote, “[the student] will find that he writes both better, and with more facility, than on the *artificial* occasions” (22). Whatley prescribes “subjects for exercises as are likely to be interesting to the student, and on which he has (or may, with pleasure and without much toil, acquire) sufficient information” (23). Specifically, Whatley suggests writing topics on subjects the student is learning about in school, such as a person or event in a history class; subjects drawn from conversations the student has heard (with interest) from others; and subjects drawn from everyday events between the student and his or her friends (24). These are similar to the writing topics that Sterling Leonard and his

progressive contemporaries suggested a hundred years later. Such topics provided a genuine occasion for writing.

Academic Procedure 2: Requiring Desiccating Literary Analysis

If requiring students to write on topics that were too far removed from their experiences or interests prevented a genuine occasion for writing, so did the practice of approaching literary study in the traditional fashion. The first written entrance exams at Harvard University began in 1872 and required students to be familiar with half a dozen literary texts (Crowley, *Composition* 66). Students were required to write a short composition from a list of possible topics. For example, the 1879 entrance exam listed the following composition prompts:

- I. The Character of Sir Richard Steele.
- II. The Duke of Marlborough as portrayed by Thackeray.
- III. The Style of “Henry Esmond.”
- IV. Thackeray’s account of the Pretender’s visit to England.
- V. Dueling in the Age of Queen Ann. (Crowley, 68)

Sharon Crowley points out that these questions would seem entirely alien to students whose schooling did not introduce them to the prescribed texts (68). Students would not only have to be familiar with the texts, they would also have to be familiar with the literary history. On average, half the applicants failed the exams—for insufficient knowledge of the literary text as well as insufficient writing skills as determined by Harvard (67).

The entrance exams at Harvard reflected two key points. First, the exams themselves were the apotheosis of the educational model that shifted from the oral to the textual mode. This was manifested in the exam's privileging of both the arcane details of literary texts as well the mechanical correctness in the student compositions. I will explore the overvaluing of mechanical correctness in more detail below. This fanatical obsession with the details of literary texts, however, caused a great deal of mischief to English teachers in their work of teaching composition.

Ruth Mary Weeks, in typical searing wit, excoriated the common practice of subjecting students to the "desiccating analysis" of literary texts ("Teaching the Whole Child" 11). For Weeks this method "secures neither comprehension nor appreciation" of literature (11). Fred Newton Scott wrote that college examinations meant that high school teachers had to foist upon students material in ways that didn't provide a way for students to draw upon appreciable experience. Scott argued that the exams, rather than situating students with their own lived experiences in relation to the literary texts, instead "call[ed] for facts, or else for delicate critical discriminations, outlines of plots, and pallid little essays on the character of Dunston Cass" ("What the West Wants" 13).

James F. Hosis voiced a similar concern about teaching literature under the domination of college entrance exams. Hosis argued that the usurpation of the high school English classroom by college entrance requirements resulted in the perverting of the conditions for authentic, meaningful writing:

But when officials of a distant college or examining board undertake to lay down specific requirements in English and to set questions upon theme, the results are

very likely to be unfortunate. Teachers of high-school pupils read the requirements and the sample-question sheets, and then set to work to drill their pupils in the facts likely to be called for. A flood of over-edited classics sweeps over the schools. The whole tradition of method in English is set in the direction of a mere matter of fact, the detritus thrown up by the literary stream, and as a result real literary study is driven out and vital composition practice is scarcely attempted. (*Reorganization of English* 6)

This dearth of “vital composition practice” was the result of requiring students to write on topics and about literary texts in ways that did not allow them to draw upon personal, lived experience. Hosic argued that most of the composition exercises in high schools dominated by college entrance requirements are “ill-adapted to the interests and capacities of the children” (“The influence” 110). Rather, students “are given all sorts of formal composition exercises in which they have little interest” (110). The consequence was that there was no genuine occasion for writing, along with any profit in expressional growth that comes with meaningful writing.

It is curious to find that desiccating analysis of literary texts is frequently viewed as so damaging to students that its effects harm the very soul. W. Wilbur Hatfield wrote that while there was clear need for reform in composition, “it is even more urgent in literature, where we now so complacently murder thousands of minds and spirits every year” (“The Ideal Curriculum” 190). Alfred N. Whitehead, eminent English philosopher and educational theorist, was unequivocal in his claims about the effects of the desiccating analysis of literature on the soul: “The great English Universities, under

whose direct authority school children are examined in plays of Shakespeare, to the certain destruction of their enjoyment, should be prosecuted for soul murder” (Whitehead 64). Likewise, John Dewey wrote that this sort of studying to gather knowledge on a topic without meaningful connections to the students’ lives jeopardizes the very soul:

What avail is it to win prescribed amounts of information about geography and history, to win ability to read and write, if in the process the individual loses his own soul: loses his appreciation of things worth while, of the values to which these things are relative; if he loses desire to apply what he has learned and, above all, loses the ability to extract meaning from his future experiences as they occur? (*Experience* 49).

Vehemently, progressive educators protested the traditional form of teaching literature because such mind-numbing analysis of literary texts contained no value in itself. Moreover, whatever potential value provided by habitual reading of literature was lost because such an approach to literature produced no lasting enjoyment nor appreciation for literature in students. “Many emotional responses are quenched by pedagogic loquacity,” wrote Ruth Mary Weeks. “There is a fine art in leaving a student alone with a thing of beauty” (“Teaching the Whole Child” 14). For this reason, many progressive educators advocated permitting students a choice in the books they read, and encouraged students to begin with a spontaneous personal response, or, as Louise Rosenblatt suggested, “a free, uninhibited emotional reaction” (*Literature as Exploration* 72). *An Experience Curriculum in English* strongly advocated for choice in reading: “An experience which our pupils should have very frequently is choosing for themselves what

they will read” (21). Moreover: “Prescription must be lessened or loosened in classroom reading and practically abolished in outside or ‘home’ reading” (21). Progressive educators believed that habitual reading could not be nurtured through compulsion of particular texts.

In contrast, traditional teaching of literature placed an “undue importance on the particular form in which the expression of the student’s reaction is couched” (Rosenblatt, *Literature* 64). Rosenblatt insisted that the student should be free to express him or herself freely. For Rosenblatt, “[t]he instructor’s function is, rather, to help students realize that the most important thing is what literature means to them and does for them” (64). This approach orients the text away from the teacher and toward the student, inviting the student to summon authentic personal reactions in the literary experience. Ultimately, desiccating analysis denies students the ability to draw upon vital, lived experience and thus removes a genuine occasion for writing. Consequently, this destroys appreciation for the material.

Academic Procedure 3: Imparting Functionless Information

A third practice that removed a genuine occasion for writing was requiring students to learn material that Hughes Mearns in 1930 referred to as “functionless information” (“Salvation by Information” 66). This type of teaching practice involved subjecting students to rote memorization of facts and information that had no real meaning to the student. In a separate 1930 article entitled “Educating the New Child,” Hughes Mearns listed examples of common homework assignments for twelve-year-olds.

Mearns believed these assignments “represent[ed] the emphasis of the old education upon isolated book information” (696):

- Memorize the percentage of equivalents of $1/12$, $1/9$, $1/7$.
- What are the capitals of Turkey, Soviet Russia, Hungary?
- Name the chief exports and imports of Barcelona.
- Define *chyle*, *chyme*, *pylorus*, *lacteals*, *sacrum*.
- How many furlongs in 180 yards?
- In 1917 President Wilson decided to declare war upon Germany. Mark this statement true or false.
- List the predicate nominatives in the first twenty-five pages of *Evangeline*.
- Write an essay on Grant’s chief qualities as a general.
- Parse major in the sentence “He called him major.”
- Trace the course of the Dneiper River.
- Memorize Gunga Din.
- What is the official title of the chief governing officer in Egypt, Persia, Turkey, France, Russia? (696-697)

“I have not listed the really absurd ones,” Mearns added. He argued that the “Old Guard” stressed teaching material that was unuseful and irrelevant, noting that “[f]ew children thrive on a diet of isolated information” (697). In an elegiac fit of apostrophe, Mearns laments the cruelty of a curriculum of useless information:

But what about you, desperate parent, for whose children no progressive school is available? What, you may well ask, are you going to do? You whose young

daughter is memorizing (in the glorious name of Science!) the names of the eighty-eight chemical elements, from argon to zirconium, with symbol, atomic weight, and valency of each, although she will never once see them or feel them or smell them or even use them? You whose child is now sitting up far into the night writing interminable lists of predicate nouns found in *Evangeline*? You whose little lad comes home from his first experience of school depressed beyond your consoling by a " failure " in so-called "English" when you know, in your hours of intimate communion with him, that he has a finer sense of language values than any mere gerund-grinder may ever discover? What are you to do whose needs are immediate? ("Salvation by Information" 72).

This type of knowledge, Mearns insisted, is functionless information. Mearns believed that the average school was a "museum of dead information" (70). Mearns passionately exhorted his reader to instead envision school as a place of true learning: "Think what warm, live and pregnant associations might have been put into the mysterious spirit-mind of youth instead of the dry verbal dust of forgotten distinctions of the pedants" ("Salvation by Information" 70). This "dry verbal dust" is similar to the "dried specimens," or functionless information in student writing, that Richard Whatley condemned in *Elements of Rhetoric* (23). While the student may "freely transplant" ideas and information from other sources, Whatley wrote that this information must "take root in the soil of [the student's] own mind" (23).

Progressive Era teacher-scholars were especially critical of traditional composition textbooks and the egregious amount of useless information students were expected to

imbibe in the form of abstract rhetorical precepts and innumerable grammatical concepts. J. Scott Clark, in the introduction to his 1892 textbook *A Practical Rhetoric*, referred to these more traditional texts as a “labyrinth of abstractions” (qtd. In Kitzhaber, *Rhetoric in American* 208). In too many textbooks, wrote Clark, the student is led through a “theoretical maze” of such concepts as “Invention,” “Taste,” “Deduction,” “Partial Exposition,” etc. (208). Clark’s own textbook was an attempt to simplify the work of composition and rhetoric.

Robert J. Connors in *Composition-Rhetoric* writes that these traditional texts are replete with “static abstractions” (291). Students in the 19th century were instructed to adhere to abstract rhetorical principles such as Unity, Coherence, and Emphasis. Mastering a few principles might have been achievable for a young writer. Alas, there were also injunctions to Clearness, Purity, Force, Beauty, Completeness, Effectiveness, Energy, Correctness, Smoothness, Dignity, Variety, Economy, Order, and Ease. And let us not forget Sincerity and Restraint. Connors writes that this piling up of static abstractions, while they are admirable goals, are ultimately “devalued by their sheer numbers and [are] made pedagogically troublesome by their difficulty of definition” (291). Connors argues that these textbooks were ineffective because without deep reflection on good models of writing, students got lost in the “fun-house mirror of static abstractions” (292). For Connors, these rhetorical precepts can only live for students “in a thick nutrient stew of examples, synonyms, antonyms, experiences, experiments, [and] considerations” (292). Students could only absorb so many concepts at a time, and they

needed lots of examples and models, as well as time for reflection and for incorporating these concepts in meaningful writing contexts.

James F. Hosic also decried the complex nature of the traditional composition course. He insisted that the composition course “consists too much in the learning of definitions, rules, and formulae, with illustrations more or less remote from the pupil’s interest and everyday expression” (111). Ruth Mary Weeks claimed that many composition textbooks were ineffective due to the sheer volume of concepts to be imparted. Weeks argued that “[t]he average composition text covers too much too briefly; the average teacher tries to teach too much all at once. (“Adapting Instruction” 291). Likewise, Helen Ogden Mahin sharply denounced the common practice of teachers who would “pour out a flood of theory upon” the student, often without assisting the student to accomplish the writing task (“Composition in the Open” 105). This flood of theory had no useful meaning for the student.

Fred Newton Scott wrote that college entrance requirements were partly to blame for this state of affairs. He argued that colleges demanded secondary school graduates be as academically accomplished as candidates for doctoral degrees: “They are expected to be ripe scholars, exact observers, skilled logicians, cultured critics, and masters of the English language in all particulars” (17). Scott concluded that expecting secondary schools to produce such erudition was the “impossible dreams of pedants” (17). “Let us try to imagine boys and girls as they actually are,” insisted Scott, “not as they pedagogically ought to be” (“What the West” 17). For Scott, this meant that the writing activities in the English class should start with the students’ experiences and interests,

and that assessment should not be on any single product of writing but rather on the growth the student achieves from his or her starting place.

Progressive educators argued that when students are overloaded with complex material, they become cramped and are not able to draw upon personal experience in the learning task. This results in the impossibility for any genuine occasion for writing. “[W]hat our composition courses need is simplicity,” argued Ruth Mary Weeks (“Adapting Instruction” 291). Weeks—along with many like-minded progressive contemporaries—conceived of a much simpler curriculum in composition, one that would provide the shallow waters students needed in order to build confidence, precision, and fluency in writing: “I am convinced that if we wish our really deficient students to write and speak better, we shall have to simplify our requirements” (291). Progressive compositionists believed that young writers should write as young people—not as older people. In college, students would gradually expand the range and complexity of their writing, but organically, and always directed by the scope of experiences of the student him or herself.

John Dewey himself wrote often about the evils of teaching functionless information. He recalled his early schooling in Burlington, Vermont, where the instruction consisted of primarily “a mere pronouncing and mispronouncing of the words, a lifeless, monotonous, droning utterance of syllables [rather] than the intelligent, appreciative, sympathetic experience of thought” (qtd. in Martin 34). Dewey frequently called this form of teaching useless information like trying to pass a brick to students (*Democracy and Education* 7) or attempting to ladle out knowledge in doses (*Experience*

82). Dewey objected to the one-sidedness of traditional education, “where teachers dispensed received knowledge while learners passively ingested it” (Crowley, *Composition* 163).

For progressive teacher-scholars, functionless information was cut off from the student’s experience. Requiring students to learn and engage with this information was tantamount to what Kitzhaber referred to as “writing in a social vacuum” (*Rhetoric in American Colleges* 223). The social function of language in this situation is often cut off, and any genuine occasion for writing has been removed.

Academic Procedure 4: Overvaluing Mechanical Correctness

The fourth educational procedure that resulted in the loss of a genuine occasion for writing was an undue emphasis on mechanical correctness. One of the manifestations of this emphasis on mechanical correctness was in the form of myriad grammar rules students were required to learn. Edwin Woolley’s *The Mechanics of Writing* (1909), for instance, enumerated 590 rules using dense grammatical terminology. Woolley’s grammar books, like the majority of composition texts at the time, were bursting at the seams with arcane rules of grammar for writing.

Katherine H. Adams argues that these books “created expectations for freshmen far beyond those of learned writers; they made grammar into an academic obsession” (*Progressive Politics* 12). Arthur N. Applebee has noted that the traditional practice of teaching grammar reflected a curriculum “by taking up the methods and approaches which had dominated the teaching of the classical languages” (*Tradition and Reform* 6).

Progressive Era teacher-scholars argued that these grammar rules were impractical, essentially serving as unfunctional information. Ruth Mary Weeks wrote that grammar drills created “a deadly intellectual blank” in students (“Content for Composition” 298). Because the textbooks often presented grammatical concepts as isolated from practical examples, students often found little use in the grammatical concepts—still less the exorbitant quantity of rules. As Katherine H. Adams has pointed out, progressive educators believed that formal study of sentence construction apart from meaning should be eliminated from the curriculum (*Progressive Politics* 16)

A more harmful manifestation of this emphasis on mechanical correctness was in responding to student writing. Sterling A. Leonard criticized this “random, fowl-like pecking at small verbal infelicities” (*English Composition* 51). “We must encourage prompt condemnation of guerrilla pettifogging wherever we discover signs of it,” Leonard added (164). Robert Connors has written of these “suspicious patrols” through sentences in search for errors (*Composition-Rhetoric* 115). By placing undue emphasis on the students’ correctness in writing, the social function of language was removed. The student’s genuine attempt to communicate his or her ideas on a topic met a wall. Leonard wrote that “[w]e have apparently failed oftenest because we have let our conscientiousness prescribe such a host of corrections that the child is unable even to remember them” (*English Composition* 122). Leonard was among a group of progressive educators who advocated focusing only on a small number of errors when providing feedback to student writing:

It is reasonably certain that success here depends almost wholly on the teacher's willingness to pass by not only a host of minor mistakes and infelicities of expression, but even for some time a large part of the positive and very bad errors the children are guilty of. For it is evident that we must concentrate our forces on one point, or very small and closely related group of points, for a far longer time than we generally do at present, instead of attacking several at once, diffusing attention, and confusing our pupils. (123)

For Leonard, this approach allows the teacher to place a balance between valuing mechanical correctness and valuing the student's genuine attempt to communicate thoughts and feelings to an audience. This balanced approach helped preserve a genuine occasion for writing, rather than forcing students to write in a social vacuum. Focusing on maintaining the core function of language—the student's primary purpose for writing as an act of communication between writer and audience—was a key idea in discussing motivation for Progressive Era compositionists. Fred Newton Scott in dour and elegiac language asserted that in burying the student under a host of rules and prescriptions in feedback, the communicative function of language was snuffed out, which quashed the student's impulse to expression:

He is a complex of rich fundamental instincts and habits ready to respond normally and copiously to any natural stimulus. And now upon this seething cauldron of communicative impulses, the school, as ordinarily conducted, clamps the lid of linguistic ritual. The teacher approaches the pupil as if he were a great emptiness to be filled and a great dumbness to be made vocal. Ignoring, or at least

undervaluing, the gestures and poses and cries in modulations that are the child's natural medium of expression, the teacher proceeds to unload upon him the colossal structure of our speech—one of the most complicated, the most ingenious, the most abstract, the most delicate of all the creations of human reason. In almost all respects it is at the opposite pole from the language that he is accustomed to in practice. (“English Composition as a Mode of Behavior” 26)

Alfred Kitzhaber referred to this practice of placing an undue emphasis on mechanical correctness as adhering to “the doctrine of mechanical correctness” (*Rhetoric in American* 222). For students attempting to write where the doctrine of mechanical correctness holds sway, often no genuine use of language is achieved.

For this reason, Progressive Era compositionists insisted that attention to mechanical correctness had to be paired with genuine use of language by students. This could be accomplished by fashioning tasks that engaged students' interests and experiences. Sterling A. Leonard argued that where the student is fueled by personal interest, the work of drill or memorization becomes “a vigorous and cheerful giving of sturdy attention” (*English Composition* 144). Similarly, Ruth Mary Weeks argued that developing correctness in students can only arise out of meaningful writing: “No! Grammar, punctuation, and usage drill will never function, will never seem something to use in daily life, until it is taught in connection with some ideational content that has a living meaning” (“Content for Composition” 299). “The child will care about correctness,” Weeks added, “only in something where the correctness is part of some significant meaning” (298).

These four chains, or academic procedures, prevented any genuine occasion for writing because the social function of language was removed. This is what Kizhaber meant by teaching that required students to write in a social vacuum (*Rhetoric in American Colleges* 223). As Gerald P. Mulderig argues, this approach to writing instruction “ignored language as a means of communication based in the mental processes of a speaker and a listener” (“Gertrude Buck’s Rhetorical Theory” 96). Gertrude Buck maintained that the artificial writing of the classroom displaced its social function and instead reduced writing to an “unnatural, perverted function” (“Recent Tendencies” 379-380). Other Progressive Era compositionists wrote in a similar vein. Sterling Andrus Leonard insisted that “composition occurs, not in a vacuum, but in a social situation” (“English Teaching” 5). Leonard argued that teachers must understand this basic principle of language as a means of communication between a writer and his or her audience, “without which our jargon of unity, coherence, and mass, pureness, propriety, and precision, and all the remaining apparatus of correctness is actually empty and meaningless” (5). Fred Newton Scott likewise exhorted his fellow English teachers to keep ever at the forefront the social function of language, its primary purpose of communicating ideas between a writer and audience:

The main purpose of training in composition is free speech, direct and sincere communication with our fellows, that swift and untrammelled exchange of opinion, feeling, and experience, which is the working instrument of the social instinct and the motive power of civilization” (“What the West” 19).

Ultimately, conventional academic procedures placed too much of an emphasis on a minutiae of details about language or literary text and not enough emphasis on engaging students in meaningful acts of communication. When the social function of language is thus diminished, students often grasp unsuccessfully at a genuine occasion for writing. The student's own sense of purpose as a writer often becomes undermined and, consequently, motivation and learning suffer. As Hosic argued during the reorganization movement, traditional methods of teaching often prevented "vital composition practice" (*Reorganization of English* 6).

RESTORING THE SOCIAL FUNCTION OF LANGUAGE

But the result of writing without a genuine occasion was often more disastrous than a mere lack of motivation on the student's part. This was most apparent when teaching practices were primarily under the domination of standardized examinations. Despite the wide-spread adoption of college entrance requirements after the appearance of the Harvard Reports in 1892, students consistently scored poorly on the exams wherever implemented. College educators saw no marked improvement in the quality of writing coming from high school students. Fred Newton Scott in "What the West Wants in Preparatory English" argued that the exams resulted in neither greater literary appreciation nor an improved command of the mother tongue:

On the other hand, it is the experience of most teachers with whom I have discussed the question, that such essays, especially as they appear in examination papers, are for the most part the merest fluff and ravelings of the adolescent mind,

revealing neither the student's independent thought, nor except casually, his command of English. (14)

James F. Hosis in "The Influence of the Uniform Entrance Requirements in English" essayed a similar lament about the quality of writing of entering college students. He placed the blame on colleges rather than high schools—particularly the way entrance examinations prevented effective teaching of composition in the schools:

Many [high school] teachers are trying to follow the entrance requirements but are doing it in a mechanical fashion. As a result, many of our boys and girls finish the high school with a repugnance for reading good literature, and with utter inability to write decent English. I receive about two hundred new students each year in my department, and I find many of them very poorly equipped for writing their everyday ideas, and for expressing the ideas with which they deal in my own subject" (110).

Fred Newton Scott argued that this practice accounted for a good deal of poor writing. Students who write with no genuine occasion "create verbless sentences and ludicrous malapropisms" and "plunge from the sublime to the ridiculous" ("English Composition" 470). Gertrude Buck wryly demonstrates the mental process of students when authentic situations for writing have not been furnished:

His compositions are fashioned, so far as possible, with a view to sustaining the teacher's peculiar tests. Not that he sees any reason in them, but, being the teacher's, a due regard for marks constrains him. This perfunctory and external conformity is probably far from satisfying his taskmaster, who feels that the real

occasion has here proved itself a failure; but surely this is not the student's fault. He is doing his best to fulfill all requirements, so far as he understands them, and the woodenly vacuous result should, he feels, be highly approved by his over-lord, for there is not a loose sentence in it! (377)

What Buck refers to as “woodenly vacuous” writing, F. Newton Scott calls “an outward sign of an inward lesion” (“English Composition” 470). The student, in writing his themes, fails “to find an outlet for his restless thought” (470):

Unable to launch his message such as it is, either in the natural, free-and-easy style of ungirt speech, or in the strictly ordered march of a logical development, he devises a kind of scrambled language of his own, compounded of trite phrases and mangled idioms, which is neither fish nor flesh nor good red herring. (470)

The solution to writing in a vacuum was simply to fashion more authentic writing conditions for students. “If the student writes both better and more easily when he has a real occasion for writing than when he composes an exercise to exemplify some rule for composition previously enjoined upon him,” wrote Gertrude Buck, “then let the teacher, so far as possible, replace this artificial situation by natural conditions for writing” (732). For the social function of language to be restored, there should be “spontaneous writing, namely, the communication of a certain content to the mind of another person” (378).

This echoes Scott's call to focus on engaging students with “direct and sincere communication” and “swift and untrammelled exchange of opinion, feeling, and experience” (“What the West” 19). Louise Rosenblatt wrote that it was important to create an atmosphere that “will make it possible for [the student] to have an unself-

conscious, spontaneous and honest reaction” to the text (64). Sterling A. Leonard’s mandate was that the primary goal in teaching writing is to first aim for “spontaneous and unstudied talking” in students. When Progressive Era compositionists insisted that writing instruction should prioritize a free and continuous flow of thoughts and nurture a “vigorous incentive to expression” they are placing more value on the act of meaning-making, and they only incorporate grammar drills and literary analysis where meaning-making is built into the work itself.

For progressive era educators, restoring the social function of language meant that students must be able to draw upon personal experience in their writing tasks. Sterling A. Leonard insisted that “true and living experience is the best source of expressible ideas” (*English Composition 2*). He adds that “there seems to be no justification for assigning as composition subjects—whatever their importance in other schoolwork—sterile, dry matter that does not represent to the children realized and vital experience” (14). In English class, “composition is the expression always of realized experience” (82).

For this reason, Ruth Mary Weeks implored a social approach to writing instruction when she argued that “a child should write only when he has reason to write and speak only when he has something to say” (“Adapting Instruction” 293).

“The time has come to bring composition down to the world in which we live,” wrote another prominent compositionist during the Progressive Era, Dora V. Smith, “to acquaint boys and girls with the problems of their homes and their communities, and to allow them to express their interest in them—an interest, which, we are led to believe, surpasses that of the imaginative tale and the trivialities of childish experience”

(“Dogma” 417). As F.M. Rarig wrote in a 1935 review of *An Experience Curriculum in English*, “The English language is a functioning tool, and its use should be taught through functional activities” (506). This injunction by Buck, Leonard, Weeks, and Smith has profound implications on the type of writing tasks students should engage in. Restoring the social function of writing produces genuine occasions for engaging in writing and other forms of communication.

EXPERIENCE AND GROWTH

The theoretical rationale that underpinned these new educational practices—providing a genuine occasion for writing by centering teaching around the student’s interests and range of experiences—was drawn heavily from John Dewey’s theories of experience as related to education. While Dewey’s educational theory of experience is constructed of a matrix of intersecting concepts, Progressive Era compositionists particularly gleaned from Dewey’s concept of the role of experience on learning as a mode of growth.

The concept of growth is as central to Deweyan thought as experience. “What Dewey saw and revered as the finest of all things, was growth,” Will Durant reminds us (*The Story of Philosophy* 685). For Dewey, the very purpose of living is not obtaining perfection, but the ever-enduring process of perfecting, maturing, and refining of the self (685). Education is a part of growth, and growth is tied up with experience. Dewey wrote that teaching and learning is a “continuous process of reconstruction of experience” (*Experience and Education* 87). This idea of learning as a “continuous,” ongoing process

is synonymous with Dewey's belief that learning takes place in the vehicle of change and growth. "[T]he educative process can be identified with growth," wrote Dewey, "when that is understood in terms of the active participle *growing*" (36). For Dewey, experience is the element in achieving the movement of growth. "Every experience is a moving force," wrote Dewey (*Experience* 38).

Importantly, the trajectory of growth—and thus learning—depends on experiences giving way to still further experiences. Every experience lives on in subsequent experiences, affecting the quality of future experiences. Dewey argued that "every experience affects for better or worse the attitudes which help decide the quality of further experiences, by setting up certain preferences and aversions, and making it easier or harder to act for this or that end" (37). In the context of learning, discrete experiences impact educational growth. That is to say—any present growth in learning is due to a series of fruitful experiences that have given way to further fruitful experiences. For Dewey, learning and development occur in this organic pattern of growth:

Just as no man lives or dies to himself, so no experience lives and dies to itself.

Wholly independent of desire or intent, every experience lives on in further experiences. Hence the central problem of an education based upon experience is to select the kind of experiences that live fruitfully and creatively in subsequent experiences. (*Experience* 27-28)

But not all experiences provide this educational growth, according to Dewey:

The belief that all genuine education comes about through experience does not mean that all experiences are genuinely educative. Experience and education

cannot be directly equated to each other. For some experiences are mis-educative. Any experience is mis-educative that has the effect of arresting or distorting growth of further experience. An experience may be such as to engender callousness; it may produce lack of sensitivity and of responsiveness. (*Experience* 25-26)

An education based on experience focuses on growth in a particular direction. The question educators must keep in mind is whether an experience “promotes or retards growth in general” (36). The teacher, in arranging learning experiences, should ask: “Does this form of growth create conditions for further growth, or does it set up conditions that shut off the person who has grown in this particular direction from the occasions, stimuli, and opportunities for continuing growth in new directions?” (36). Not only does the quality of an experience affect its continuation in a concatenation of future experiences, Dewey argues that every experience also influences in some degree the objective conditions under which further experiences are had (37). For example, if a child has a series of fruitful experiences reading, this may result in the acquisition of still more books at home that the child has access to—and possibly even a desk and a typewriter may show up on his or her 9th birthday. The objective conditions thus have been altered to facilitate even more fruitful experiences and growth in the direction of reading and writing.

Of course, objective conditions intersect with issues of social and economic wellbeing. This is why the second undercurrent in the progressive education movement—situating schools and students to broader society—was a core concern: an

acknowledgement that the function of schools can have a direct impact on the future social and economic wellbeing of the student, ideally for the better.

In conceiving learning as a process of experience giving way to growth, John Dewey takes from emerging scientific insights during his time about human beings as organisms. Dewey wrote in *Experience and Education* that in discussing matters of education, that, “amid all the uncertainties there is one permanent frame of reference: namely, the organic connection between education and personal experience” (25).

Progressive Era compositionists took Dewey’s conception of the organic nature of experience and growth to help theorize explanations for a lack of motivation in the English class as well as poor growth in writing abilities among students. Educators under the Deweyan mold believed that traditional educational approaches stunted and arrested growth and learning because experiences in the English class often did not live fruitfully and educatively into still further experiences. Rather, the conventional chains of academic procedure produced experiences that were miseducative. When students were given tasks that provided no genuine occasion for writing, this experience frequently did not survive into more fruitful future experiences and, thus, growth in learning was diminished.

One way to create more fruitful learning experiences, for many progressive educators, was to shift the axis of purpose in the classwork away from the teacher and closer to the student. This allowed students to draw upon their own interests and range of experiences in the learning process. For Deweyan educators, imbuing students with the agency to forge their own purpose in the writing tasks resulted in more fruitful

growth in learning.

PURPOSE

Much of the conflict between traditional and progressive education centered on how experience was tapped into during the learning process. Progressive educators argued that learning required attending to conditions both external as well as internal to the student. Both were sources of experience in education.

According to Dewey, there are two primary external sources of experience that students draw upon in learning and growing: their natural environment and their social landscapes. Students are “constantly fed from these springs” (40). Educators thus are tasked with taking advantage of the surroundings, physical and social, “so as to extract from them all that they have to contribute to building up experiences that are worth while” (40).

However, the problem with education—as Dewey believed—was not a lack of external factors in providing experience, it was that traditional education often disregarded the internal factors in students as a means of experience. “The trouble with traditional education,” argued Dewey, “was not that it emphasized external conditions that enter into the control of the experiences but that it paid so little attention to the internal factors which also decide what kind of experience is had” (*Experience* 42). Traditional educators, in taking upon themselves the responsibility for providing the external learning environment, “did not consider the other factor in creating an experience: namely, the powers and purposes of those taught” (45). Ultimately, argued

Dewey, “traditional education rested upon a conception of organization of knowledge that was almost completely contemptuous of living present experience” (82).

But what does a system of learning look like that considers the “powers and purposes” of the student? For Dewey, this began with shifting the center of gravity so that it rested somewhere between the external conditions of the learning environment and the student’s interests and range of experiences. A Deweyan education of experience “assigns equal rights to both factors in experience—objective and internal conditions” (42). For Progressive Era educators, the student’s own purpose in the learning tasks becomes an important agent in fruitful educational experiences leading to growth in learning.

An important hallmark of progressive education, Dewey wrote, is “its emphasis upon the importance of the participation of the learner in the formation of the purposes which direct his activities in the learning process” (*Experience* 67). The question of purpose was especially salient during the Progressive Era because it dovetailed with a much-debated topic: the nature of power and the freedom of the individual student. Traditional education maintained rigid social structures in the schools, which often was reflected in classroom pedagogical methods. Many progressive educators criticized these methods as depriving students of freedom. However, Dewey articulated a nuanced definition of freedom: “The commonest mistake made about freedom is, I think, to identify it with freedom of movement, or with the external or physical side of activity” (*Experience* 61). While this external and physical side of activity cannot be entirely separated from the internal side of activity—i.e. the outward expressions of thought,

desire, and purpose can be limited when external restrictions are placed—the fact remains, argued Dewey, that “an increased measure of freedom of outer movement is a means, not an end” (61). Dewey claimed that freedom is best defined as it relates to purpose: “The only freedom that is of enduring importance is freedom of intelligence, that is to say, freedom of observation and of judgment exercised in behalf of purposes that are intrinsically worth while” (61).

For Dewey, “the formation of purposes and the organization of means to execute them are the work of intelligence” (67). Moreover, purpose involves “the power to carry deliberately chosen ends into execution” (63). Dewey’s conception of education, thus, meant placing value on freedom of intelligence—on understanding the role of purpose in learning. Promoting active participation among students in forming their own purposes as learners contained value on multiple fronts. First, it encouraged students to understand the school—like any other social institution—as a cooperative enterprise. Giving students more responsibility in shaping their purposes as learners helped to foster collaborative habits that were crucial for participating in a healthy democracy.

Marking off space for students to forge their own purpose in the work of the English class also allowed the students to draw upon a greater amount of personal, lived experiences. This often provided a genuine occasion for writing, a more educative experience that was more likely to live fruitfully on in subsequent experiences, thus maximizing learning and growth. In arguing for a curriculum of experiences, Progressive Era compositionists called for allowing students to fashion their own purpose in the writing, which, in part, required permitting students wherever possible to cull from their

own vast reservoir of experiences and range of interests as a starting place for writing projects.

English teachers and compositionists argued that fostering purpose begins with valuing students' intentions as writers. Gertrude Buck believed that "instructors should sincerely respect what students try to accomplish in their writing" (Mulderig, "Gertrude Buck's" 98). In valuing the purpose and intentions of writers, the writing tasks themselves had to be designed to encourage students to act on their impulse to free expression. Dewey wrote that "[a] genuine purpose always starts with an impulse" (*Experience* 67). Traditional education, argued Dewey, "tended to ignore the importance of personal impulse and desire as moving springs" (70). Compositionists during the Progressive Era thus advocated that writing should start with spontaneous expression and unstudied talking, because such impulses often sprouted from the individual with purpose already fully formed.

The metaphor of combustion was constructed around this theory that purpose serves as a powerful catalyst for motivation in writing when conditions are set up to encourage students to fashion their own purposes in the writing task. However, for Dewey, nurturing the impulse needed for students to identify their own purposes is just a starting place for learning. "The goal of the educator," writes Dewey, "is to transform an impulse into a purpose through reflective, intelligent activity" (69). Students achieve intellectual and developmental growth when their purposes are guided by reflective, intelligent activity—with the help of the teacher.

Of course, fostering reflective, intelligent purposes is no easy matter. Teachers must be careful not to impose their own purpose on students, writes Dewey: “It is possible of course to abuse the office, and to force the activity of the young into channels which express the teacher’s purpose rather than that of the pupils” (71). Dewey’s legacy as an educational theorist rests in part on his child-centered conception of education. He worked to dismantle the common practice of the educator imposing his or her own purpose on the student. However, many educators in the progressive education movement undervalued their own role in helping students forge their own purposes in engaging with the learning material. In *Experience and Education*, Dewey criticized many progressive educators who he believed took his progressive philosophies to the extreme. While traditional education often placed too much emphasis on external authority in the content of the classroom, many of the newer schools tended to deemphasize organized subject matter of study. These educators proceeded “as if any form of direction and guidance by adults were an invasion of individual freedom” (22). Dewey argued that this was an illogical approach often motivated by a reaction against former teaching philosophies, rather than toward actual solutions:

When external authority is rejected, it does not follow that all authority should be rejected, but rather that there is need to search for a more effective source of authority. Because the older education imposed the knowledge, methods, and the rules of conduct of the mature person upon the young, it does not follow, except upon the basis of the extreme Either-Or philosophy, that the knowledge and skill of the mature person has no directive value for the experience of the immature. On

the contrary, basing education upon personal experience may mean more multiplied and more intimate contacts between the mature and the immature than ever existed in the traditional school, and consequently more, rather than less, guidance by others. (21)

The goal in teaching was, instead, establishing contacts between teacher and student “without violating the principle of learning through personal experience” (21). This meant that the student should take part in discovering (and rediscovering) and forming (and reforming) his or her purpose in learning projects. This discovery can be facilitated with the careful guidance of the teacher. But Dewey suggests that the most effective learning is achieved when the student’s purpose begins with his or her own interests and range of experiences—and by virtue of the teacher’s guidance, the student is brought more and more into the subject material through the lens of his or her purpose:

When education is based in theory and practice upon experience, it goes without saying that the organized subject-matter of the adult and the specialist cannot provide the starting point. Nevertheless, it represents the goal toward which education should continuously move. (*Experience* 83)

Securing purpose through reflective, intelligent activity is achieved through the guidance of the educator, who takes the student’s experience as a starting place. “The planning must be flexible enough to permit free play for individuality of experience,” writes Dewey, “and yet firm enough to give direction towards continuous development of power” (58).

Dewey argues that valuing the student's purpose may require more negotiation on the part of the teacher regarding the nature of the class work. For Dewey, intellectual and personal development occurs best "through reciprocal give-and-take" (72). This reciprocal give-and-take, above all, should mirror the activities of other social institutions in a democracy. Dewey argued for structuring schools so that the work of learning is understood in terms of a "community held together by participation in common activities" (55). In such cases, the teacher exercises authority not "as a manifestation of merely personal will," but instead "as the representation and agent of the interests of the group as a whole" (54). Dewey provides an extended metaphor for this ideal power structure in the classroom. Kids who join in a sports game, such as baseball or basketball, subject themselves to rules that order their conduct. The participants don't feel that these forms of social control restrict their personal freedom—since without the rules there is no game. An individual may at times feel that a decision isn't fair, may even get angry, but the objection is not to the rule, but rather to a perceived violation of the rule. In such cooperative games, "it is not the will or desire of any one person which establishes order but the moving spirit of the whole group" (54). Dewey points out that the control is social, but that individuals are part of the group, not outside of it. And just as the work of the coach is to help the student athlete perform better within the rules set out by the game, so can the English teacher serve to help the student be more successful in the class work that the student himself or herself has participated in giving shape to.

John Dewey conceived of a system of education that organized the work of the classroom as "a social enterprise in which all individuals have an opportunity to

contribute and to which all feel a responsibility” (56). By encouraging students to form their own purposes in the learning process, teachers could foster among students the sort of active, collaborative problem-solving that Dewey believed was crucial for a healthy democracy. Nurturing these democratic habits and values in school served to create a society that consisted of better, richer experiences for students to draw upon in learning. Likewise, placing a value on helping students forge their own purposes in learning asked students to draw more upon their own interests and range of experiences. For many Progressive Era compositionists, Dewey’s notion of a classroom as a social enterprise in which all participants should contribute and take responsibility reflected how language works, how it is a socially constructed phenomena, and that skill in writing is best acquired when engaged as a distributed, social activity with no single point of authority. This view of writing instruction encouraged the practice of peer assessment and helping students to take more responsibility as learners, in identifying their own criteria for assessing their work, with feedback from peers (including the teacher). This social arrangement of the classroom also permitted and encouraged students to explore their own purposes as writers, guided by the teacher toward reflective, intelligent rediscovery of newer purposes.

LOOKING AHEAD

In this chapter I have shown how Progressive Era compositionists argued that traditional educational structures often removed a genuine occasion for writing, which subverted the student’s own purposes as a writer, thus diminishing motivation—and,

ultimately, resulted in poor development of writing and reading skills altogether. I examined four specific ways that conventional academic procedures removed a genuine occasion for writing by serving as agents of stultification in writing development. Finally, I explored Dewey's discussion of the role of purpose in learning as a fulcrum for envisioning new educational procedures based on experience that yield greater participation from the student in the work of the classroom. I showed how these educational practices provided a theoretical base for fashioning classroom experiences for eliciting greater motivation in writing instruction.

In the final chapter, "Toward a Reimagined Pedagogy of Experience," I explore the implications of my development of ideas by outlining three broad pedagogical goals for reimagining educational practices for the contemporary English Language Arts and first-year college composition classroom.

CHAPTER 5: TOWARD A REIMAGINED PEDAGOGY OF EXPERIENCE

I have sought to demonstrate in this study that the field of composition studies has a rich heritage of writing on experience that can be built upon for reimagining pedagogical practices today. While the landscape of composition studies since the Progressive Era has expanded to accommodate a continuously shifting field of theoretical frameworks and methods—and while ultimately no single pedagogical framework can offer a unified vision for all the diverse conditions where learning in written composition occurs—our inherited writings on experience nonetheless remain fertile soil. Charles Frankel wrote in 1977 that “the new and fertile ground Dewey broke has not as yet been fully cultivated” (Frankel 38). More than 40 years later, this soil is fed by the sunlight of new social issues, and Dewey’s writings on experience have yet to be fully cultivated for their pedagogical insights. In this chapter I wish to unpack potential implications of my examination of Progressive Era writings on experience and outline here three broad pedagogical goals for a reimagined pedagogy of experience in the modern classroom.

In weaving together my discussion, I propose that a reimagined pedagogy of experience should necessarily take up the two broad undercurrents in education during the Progressive Era: the importance of situating schools and students to broader society and structuring writing tasks that attend to the students’ individual interests and range of experiences. These two undercurrents were inherently central to the experience curriculum during the Progressive Era, and I suggest that they remain so for a reimagined pedagogy of experience today—particularly in that, as I have shown, approaching the

complex work of education from these two directions is key in shoring up strategies for addressing motivation in writing instruction.

My discussion will also examine more recent developments in composition studies and where they converge with John Dewey's writings on experience. I specifically touch upon the Meaningful Writing Project movement, the writing in communities movement, and the service-learning movement—and I show how these recent movements in composition studies can provide guideposts for incorporating a reimagined pedagogy of experience in writing instruction. The three pedagogical goals that I lay out below each overlap and dovetail in ways that reinforce the role of experience in learning.

PEDAGOGICAL GOAL 1: DEVELOP FRAMEWORKS FOR DESIGNING WRITING TASKS THAT PROVIDE SPACE FOR STUDENTS TO FORM AND REFORM THEIR OWN PURPOSES AS WRITERS

As I have shown, John Dewey's writings on the relationship between learning and individual purpose provide a cogent starting place for fashioning writing experiences for students today. One way to reimagine a pedagogy of experience in the writing class is by developing frameworks for crafting composition work that privileges the student's own purpose as a writer wherever possible. There is a direct link between intellectual growth and the student's ability to form his or her own purposes in the learning activities.

“Growth in judgment and understanding,” wrote Dewey, “is essentially growth in ability to form purposes and to select and arrange means for their realization” (*Experience* 84).

Such a framework would serve as a set of guiding principles for seeking ways to build out from the student's own range of interests and experiences. This framework should be nimble enough to accommodate individual interests and experiences of students, as well as the teacher's own evolving educational practices. No two teachers' framework would necessarily look the same. The contemporary disciplinary landscape provides a rich multitude of conversations and theorizing from which to mine for thinking about the role of purpose in writing instruction. Much composition scholarship today touches upon issues of purpose, often indirectly or tangentially. One example is the prominent disciplinary dialogue regarding authorial agency. Implicit within discussions of authorial agency lie inherent issues of individual purpose. These writings can serve as fountain springs in conceptualizing a framework for designing writing tasks that place a value on student purpose.

The Meaningful Writing Project is an example of one recent movement in composition studies that takes up the issue of agency. In their 2016 study *The Meaningful Writing Project*, authors Michele Eodice, Anne Ellen Geller, and Neal Lerner define the Meaningful Writing Project as a way of teaching writing that is “rounded in students' experiences and the many ways they can make meaning of those experiences” (3). The authors, just as Progressive Era compositionists, place a premium on student experiences as a way to conceptualize teaching and learning. And while the authors do not attempt to approach their discussion of agency through a specific examination of experience or the role of purpose in learning—nor is there a reference to John Dewey in

their study—they nevertheless provide a cogent discussion of agency that holds potential insights on issues of experience and purpose in teaching composition.

In their study, Eodice, Geller, and Lerner attempt to map the specific qualities that make a writing task meaningful. They conclude that meaningful writing projects “offer students opportunities for agency; for engagement with instructors, peers, and materials; and for learning that connects to previous experiences and passions and to future aspirations and identities” (4). Agency comprises one of three frameworks (along with engagement and learning for transfer) for exploring ways to create meaningful writing experiences. The authors note that agency in particular involves providing students opportunities or freedom to pursue topics of personal interest, to connect those topics to issues they were passionate about, and to make connections to their future writing and professional identities (33). These ideas about the role of agency in creating learning experiences in which students draw upon topics of interest and make connections for transfer to future learning are all central tenets in Dewey’s writings on education and experience.

Additionally, Eodice, Geller, and Lerner point out that agency often involves two opposing aspects: one is in which students are *allowed* or *given an opportunity* to do something—such as being allowed to choose their own writing topics or given the opportunity to write in a particular form they want to (36). Conversely, meaningful writing also happens when students are *forced* or *required* into some action—such as forced to find multiple valid sources or required to come up with an original research question (38). The authors conclude that “[p]erhaps the ultimate sweet spot is found

between instructor requirements and students' freedom to choose" (38). Students in the survey reported that they valued guidance without hard-defined boundaries. The authors suggest that there is a tenuous relationship between guidance and boundaries: "Too little of the former, and the students are 'floundering'; too many of the latter, and students are denied the agency to explore meaningful topics" (39). These are ideas that Progressive Era compositionists grappled with, often using the metaphor of combustion and spontaneity of expression. Sterling A. Leonard evinced a similar conclusion when he wrote "[w]e have a difficult way to steer between such correction as maims and kills the children's joy in expression, on the one hand and ineffectual, unchecked, and unguided babble, on the other" (135). At the center of Leonard's admonition and the conclusion of Eodice, Geller, and Lerner is a nuanced rumination on the role of agency and choice in writing development. As Patrick Sullivan points out, choice is something that scholars writing in motivation often agree is important for motivating students to learn ("A Lifelong Aversion" 175).

While Eodice, Geller, and Lerner in their discussion of the Meaningful Writing Project provide potential springboards from which to construct frameworks for designing meaningful writing experiences, they could profit greatly by turning to Dewey's theory of experience to bolster their own findings. For example, when Eodice, Geller, and Lerner write that "learning connects to previous experiences" (4), they are echoing Dewey's core principle of continuity in experience. An exploration of Dewey's key concepts regarding experience might help proponents of the Meaningful Writing Project better map experiences to meaning. While Eodice, Geller, and Lerner briefly highlight the role of

purpose in a meaningful writing task, they could strengthen this discussion with an examination of Dewey's extensive own theoretical conception of the role of purpose in learning. Additionally, in their discussion of transfer, Eodice, Geller, and Lerner could look to Dewey's writings on growth—particularly how some experiences can be miseducative—to underpin the theoretical rationale of their recommendations about transfer.

Nonetheless, the Meaningful Writing Project exemplifies how rich our inherited scholarship in the field of composition studies is—and how our own discipline continues to build upon the works of previous generations, whose voices often become lost to the obscurity of time. In placing into conversation these old and new voices, great value can be derived for energizing contemporary discussions on motivation in writing instruction.

PEDAGOGICAL GOAL 2: ADOPT FLEXIBLE, RECURSIVE ASSESSMENT METHODS THAT ARE GROUNDED IN EXPERIENCE AND INCORPORATE EXTENSIVE STUDENT CO-PARTICIPATION.

The process movement offered new ways to envision assessment by examining *how* the student approaches writing rather than *only* examining the specific writing product itself. John Dewey's theories of education in large measure sought to show that *how* students experience the work of learning is just as important as the product of that work. Of course, Dewey—always resisting dualisms and binary thinking—argued that placing value on both the process *and* the product are integral for learning. As such, it makes sense that reconfiguring assessment practices for a reimagined pedagogy of

experience may require decoupling assessment from product-only or process-only mindsets. There is much to be gained in exploring assessment methods that examine the habits and attitudes surrounding the work of writing as much as any specific set of criteria used for assessing student writing itself.

This reimagined assessment approach reflects Dewey's own recursive, pragmatic framework for tackling philosophical problems. Just as Dewey sought to shift philosophy from truth to inquiry as (Bertrand Russell pointed out), I call for a shift in writing assessment that is more recursive—that looks inward upon its own functions and reassesses its relationship with broader goals of learning. Such an assessment method may need to upend the prevailing assumptions about the purpose of education and the English course. Reimagining assessment according to an educational framework of experience would value the longitude and latitude of the variety of conditions for writing. It may need to assess what Dewey calls “collateral learning,” or the “formation of enduring attitudes, of likes and dislikes” (*Experience* 48). That is, the assessment method could attempt to evaluate students' experiences as writers and their own achievement of purpose in the writing activity.

A pedagogy of experience, as such, may also invite students to participate in forming the criteria for and assessing their own work. Progressive Era compositionists made similar proposals more than a century ago. In 1901 Gertrude Buck worked to dismantle the traditional model of assessment practices by suggesting that students should assess their own writing. She argued that this is what already happens outside the class when students have real occasions for writing and speaking:

If, therefore, it occurs to him at all to question his own performance of this task, he will naturally do so in terms of the end which he has proposed to himself. He will ask himself, not “Are there enough figures of speech to satisfy the teacher?” “Have I written short sentences interspersed with longer ones, as the text-book says to do?” “Did I make correct use of the method of obverse iteration?” but rather, “Have I told the thing so that Fred or Jim will know just how it happened?” “Will he see it as I did?” “Will he understand what I mean?” (“Recent Tendencies” 376)

Buck’s example suggests that issues of assessment are intrinsically tied to issues of agency and whether space has been provided in order for the student to forge his or her own purpose in the writing task. Buck’s discussion also shows how Progressive Era compositionists were theorizing innovative approaches to assessment based on new ideas about education as promoted by Dewey and other prominent educational theorists of the time. The rationale for incorporating students in the assessment aspect of writing stemmed from emerging theoretical views about the relationship between the individual and society and the social nature of learning. In *English Composition as a Social Problem*, Sterling A. Leonard develops the central thesis that students should criticize each other’s writings and their own writings in the classroom, that this mirrors how language is learned in broader society.

This early form of peer assessment in writing instruction is a manifestation of a precursor movement during the Progressive Era which eventually gave way to the social turn in composition studies throughout the 1990s. Long before the Great Depression,

compositionists were theorizing the socially constructed nature of knowing and its implications for teaching writing as a social act. These pioneer compositionists based their teaching according to a theory of social practice that, according to Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger in *Situated Learning: Legitimate Peripheral Participation*, “emphasizes the relational interdependency of agent and the world, activity, meaning, cognition, learning, and knowing” (50). This view of learning holds that meaning is often socially negotiated—that even knowledge, in part, arises out of this social construct: objective forms and systems of activity operate on one hand, and individual subjective and intersubjective understandings of those forms and systems exist on the other (50-51). Modern theorizing in the social turn may find roots in John Dewey’s own philosophical writings on society—in particular his transactional theory about the relationship between self and society.

Today, we find many movements in composition studies that have built upon insights from the social turn in order to conceptualize new assessment practices. One such movement we can turn to is the Writing in Communities movement, which encapsulates the pedagogical goal of valuing the conditions surrounding learning. In particular, the Writing in Communities movement seeks to enhance learning by building a sense of community among learners.

“Teachers know that the most valuable learning occurs in classrooms where a sense of community exists,” write Deborah Dean and Adrienne Warren in “Informal and Shared: Writing to Create Community” (50). Dean and Warren, pointing to the nature of learning as a social process, argue that growing as a writer works best in a community

setting (50). Writing in a community promotes deepened understandings and more meaningful interactions among the community members—as well as a shared purpose. These conditions result in improved learning (51). Even the specific norms of behavior in a community—such the rules for responding to writing—helps to build a sense of community and thus promote better learning (52).

The writing workshop is one prominent practice in the Writing in Communities movement that offers insight for re-envisioning writing assessment. The writing workshop offers the enhanced learning that comes with shared purpose and common norms of behavior of a community of learners. The writing workshop also reflects the social nature of knowledge creation. As William F. Hanks writes, “Learning is a process that takes place in a participation framework, not in an individual mind” (qtd in Lave and Wenger 15). Christopher C. Weaver argues that the writing workshop also mirrors the academic community, that knowledge is “a matter of consensus arrived at through persuasion and negotiation” (“Interpretive Communities” 202).

Another benefit of the writing workshop is that it fosters several habits of mind for developing effective writing skills as well as important skills as a thinker. First, it encourages critical self-examination on the part of the learner. In “Learning Culture: Writing in Community,” the anthropologist Robert D. Whittemore writes that the writing workshop mirrors the methodological conditions of the ethnographic participant-observer: “the self as an instrument, who does not rush to judgment or conclusions, but instead attends, shares, questions, observes, ruminates and data collected, all the while learning how better to be a reciprocating presence in the lives of others” (142). This

fosters productive habits of mind in which students take ownership of writing where they possess their own purpose. Where students are engaged in ownership, they pay more attention to mechanics of writing. Also, as Whittemore argues, the practice of writing informally in a workshop helps the writer develop habits of tapping into his or her own thinking effectively: “To write this way is to make ample room for private first thoughts, the meandering associative capacity of any mind” (146). Finally, the writing workshop also allows teachers to learn with students and model the curiosity, industry, and open-mindedness that learning requires (Whittemore 143). Patrick Sullivan has written about how developing certain habits of mind is key in motivating students in the work of writing instruction (*A New Writing Classroom* 149).

Turning to Dewey’s theories of experience as applied to learning could inform contemporary writing workshop practices. In particular, Dewey’s conception of optimal education as a “co-operative enterprise” consisting of “contributions from the experience of all engaged in the learning process” (*Experience* 72) helps the important work of developing a shared purpose in the classroom. This sense of shared purpose could help form habits of mind that produce greater motivation in individual students. The recent publication “Frameworks for Success in Postsecondary Writing” by the Council of Writing Program Administrators, NCTE, and the National Writing Project advocates for attending to particular habits and attitudes on the work of writing instruction. The Framework describes the rhetorical skills as well as “habits of mind and experiences that are critical for college success” (Council 1). These habits of mind include curiosity, openness, engagement, creativity, persistence, responsibility, flexibility, and

metacognition (Council 1). Many of these habits, such as the call for metacognitive reflection in learning, reflect Dewey's own preoccupations and could be incorporated into the writing workshop.

PEDAGOGICAL GOAL 3: DEVELOP STRATEGIES FOR FASHIONING THE WORK OF EDUCATION—BOTH IN AND OUTSIDE THE CLASSROOM—AS A HIGHLY COOPERATIVE, DEMOCRATIC ENTERPRISE

For John Dewey and Progressive Era educators, questions of education were intrinsically linked to broader social conditions. The wellbeing of schools themselves—and society in general—required a healthy democracy because this system of government allowed for social problems to be addressed more efficiently and with a greater representation of individual human interests. A democracy permitted social institutions such as schools to be nimble enough to respond to the ever-shifting conditions of broader society. Thus, for educators during the Progressive Era, schools needed to model the democratic process by fostering the collaborative behaviors that are necessary to tackle current and future problems in society. Schools served as the primary vehicle for reproducing these democratic dispositions and values. The Reorganization Movement in Secondary English is an example of just how linked schools were to outside forces and why it was important that schools be able to respond to those outside forces. The Reorganization Movement also showed how important democracy is in creating conditions that provide better educative experiences for students.

A reimagined pedagogy of experience for today would continue the liberal arts tradition of preparing students to become engaged participants in their various communities. Such an approach would be a reaffirmation of the vital role education has always played in the development and formation of critical, reflective, collaborative habits necessary for a healthy democracy. As Thomas Deans writes, “much of our classroom practice is motivated by a commitment to prepare all students for reflective and critical participation in their personal, cultural, working, and civic lives” (*Writing Partnerships* 11). This view of education is a reflection of Dewey’s own revival of the classical Greek view of philosophy—the role of philosophy as a civic enterprise whose purpose is “the critique of a civilization and the instrument for guiding historical change intelligently” (Frankel 5). Education in this philosophical mindset is a return to Aristotle’s emphasis on education as training for individuals to “intervene in the public sphere” (Deans 10). It recenters education to what Isocrates, Cicero, Quintilian, and many other classical thinkers argued as the “need to connect rhetorical practice to civic responsibility” (Deans 10). Indeed, the philosophy of pragmatism was a call to return to the classical philosophical ideals that education must be able to adjust to broader social conditions and in turn prepare students to become civically engaged members of their communities.

Community engagement (or service-learning) is one recent movement in composition studies that brings into focus an awareness of the role of education in considering social issues beyond the classroom. At its heart, community engagement is a “pedagogy of action and reflection, one that centers on a dialectic between community

outreach and academic inquiry” (Deans 2). Community engagement meets learning goals while also addressing pressing community needs. Through community engagement activities such as writing for nonprofits, tutoring children, and community service work, students develop many skills and habits that result in stronger community connections. Research suggests that students who participate in a community engagement component in a course score higher in self assessments of citizenship skills—including listening and verbal skills, leadership skills, and capacity for tolerance. They also acquire greater confidence that they can make a difference in their communities (Deans 2-3). Additionally, students who participated in an academic service-learning program “report a deeper commitment to their communities, better preparation for careers, improved conflict management, and greater understanding of community problems” (4).

Importantly, community engagement promotes collaborative inquiry and critical reflection in students—which are important qualities in a Deweyan vision of the school as a microcosm of the larger democratic society. Thomas Deans points out that John Dewey’s writings affirm the critical task of connecting the individual with society: “He is a philosopher of social action rather than of detached knowledge and, therefore, never fails to connect his theories of individual learning to the larger context of how individuals should relate to society” (33). Deans writes that while most definitions of democracy focus on political factors—government structures and individual civil rights—Dewey’s definition emphasizes cultural factors such as civic participation, open communication, and social interaction (33). In short, community engagement “puts liberal education in service to democracy” (7). This pedagogy of action and reflection furthermore boosts

motivation in the classroom (Deans 2), while simultaneously permitting students to give shape to their own purposes—both in the work of the class and in the social causes they support.

Turning to Dewey's theories of experience can enrich this new pedagogy of action and reflection by recentering the role of democracy in the work of community engagement. Fostering democratic values, for Dewey, was the optimal way to solve social problems. In particular, Dewey believed that democratic problem-solving was crucial in overcoming one of the chief problems in society, entrenched dualisms. As George R. Geiger has pointed out, Dewey was often troubled by dualities—those of mind-body, subject-object, individual-social, ends-means, etc. Dewey did not sit well with this “uneasy fusion of originally separate entities” (*John Dewey in Perspective* 8). For Dewey, such divisions are not necessarily intrinsic or in the nature of things. More importantly, such binary, dichotomous, dual thinking not only complicates teaching writing (such as the binary process/product views of composition), it also prevents solutions to broader social challenges. Nathan Crick has written that “the work of Dewey enables us to break from the dualisms of the past and take seriously the connection between communication, experience, and time” (“Composition as Experience” 265). Returning to Dewey's theories of experience and its emphasis on democratic problem-solving may help clear away the dust.

FURTHER RESEARCH

The three pedagogical goals I have outlined above are merely a starting place for reimagining a pedagogy of experience in today's English Language Arts and college composition class. My excavation of Progressive Era practices on teaching according to John Dewey's theory of experience has only revealed outlines and adumbrations—long-buried structures of practices that future generations of educators have built upon. Further archeological excursions are needed to more fully lay open the past and fetch out the contents of this remarkable period in our discipline's history and in the history of our country. My hope is that this study will serve as a springboard for future research—both theoretical and empirical—in reimagining the teaching of writing instruction.

In particular, further examination of key concepts in John Dewey's philosophical writings surrounding education may yield potential insights for reimagining writing instruction. Just as Dewey's theories on individual purpose comprise a core part of theorizing pedagogical practices based on experience, I have also been intrigued by Dewey's philosophical exploration of meaning-making. Richard Pring has written that pragmatism itself is "essentially a theory of meaning" (6). Pragmatism suggests that meaning often lies in the effect something has. I think more work can be done in researching the connections between experience, purpose, and the work of meaning-making, and what this may tell us about learning and teaching. Additionally, exhuming Dewey's writings on experience and placing them into context with today's issues in education may help to provide insights and guidance on where to find inspiration in our pedagogy in the form of other recent movements in education. One development in

higher education is the first-year experience movement. This movement places a premium on improving the quality of experiences of entering college students, and, as such, may be aligned with Dewey's vision of education.

CHALLENGES

A reimagined pedagogy of experience is not without its challenges. Dewey often emphasized that his conception of education based on experience is not easy to implement: "the road of the new education is not an easier one to follow than the old road but a more strenuous and difficult one" (*Experience* 90). To bring to fruition such a model of education, for example, requires more individualized attention and instruction for each student. This may mean that classes need to be smaller and that more teachers may need to be hired—and these and other adjustments may require much greater investment from society.

Dewey's own sense of the greatest challenge facing an education based on experience was the conflict between schools of thought among educators. For Dewey, these warring schools of thought about education often lose sight of the problems facing education because the focus is too often turned away from education and instead in upon each other:

[T]hose who are looking ahead to a new movement in education, adapted to the existing need for a new social order, should think in terms of Education itself rather than in terms of some 'ism about education, even such an 'ism as "progressivism." For in spite of itself, any movement that thinks and acts in terms

of an 'ism becomes so involved in reaction against other 'isms that it is unwittingly controlled by them. For it then forms its principles by reaction against them instead of by a comprehensive, constructive survey of actual needs, problems, and possibilities. (*Experience* 6)

Even thinking of education in terms of “progressive” and “traditional” can be a pitfall for finding solutions to problems of education:

[T]he fundamental issue is not of new versus old education nor of progressive against traditional education but a question of what anything whatever must be to be worthy of the name *education*. I am not, I hope and believe, in favor of any ends or any methods simply because the name progressive may be applied to them. (*Experience* 90)

Dewey often criticized progressive schools of thoughts for taking his ideas too far to the extreme, just as he criticized traditional forms of education for not placing enough value on the individual experiences of students. One of Dewey's chief hallmarks as a philosopher was in scrutinizing binary approaches to thinking and the limitations of rank dualisms. In his seminal psychological treatise “The Reflex Arc Concept in Psychology” (1896), Dewey criticized the reflex arc framework—which dominated psychology at the time—for artificially separating discrete functions in the stimulus-response model of human behavior. Dewey's critique of the reflex arc in psychology highlighted the inherent dualisms in psychological thought of the time (Hildebrand 15). In turn, Dewey's reconstruction of the reflex arc in psychology was an attempt to “create a new synthesis from the opposition between physiological and introspective psychology” (Hildebrand

14-15). This goal of creating a synthesis from the opposition of contrasting schools of thought is a fundamental feature of pragmatism. Dewey's own conception of education based on experience, in many ways, reflects his pragmatist philosophy: it is deeply practical. It seeks to overcome dualisms and find common ground wherever possible in order to solve problems.

Similarly, envisioning a pedagogy of experience for today may require forging bridges across ideological commitments in order to tackle structural problems in education. One of the greatest challenges educators face today—just as they did during the Progressive Era—are the myriad outside social forces that determine much of the educational experiences that occur within the school. During the Reorganization Movement at the turn of the 20th century, educators highlighted how outside forces such as college entrance requirements had a direct impact on the quality of learning experiences in the classroom. Today, the complexities of our social structure exist at a much larger scale, and outside forces continue to affect student learning experiences in more complex ways. In higher education, for example, the extraordinary rise in tuition costs and the plight of contingent faculty—these issues are controlled by outside forces and directly impact the experiences of students. A reimagined pedagogy of experience would prepare students to face these and many other social challenges with courage and wisdom.

CONCLUSION

When we look back across the generations of new developments in composition pedagogy, everywhere we find teachers and scholars in composition who continue to tap into John Dewey's writings on education in order to theorize better classroom practices. I have explored in this study how Progressive Era compositionists took up the topic of motivation in the classroom by way of John Dewey's theories of experience. I have shown how educators during this period rarely used the word "motivation" to dialogue about ways to engage students meaningfully with the work of writing. Teachers and scholars during the Progressive Era instead often relied on metaphors—such as the metaphor of combustion—and they theorized about the student's larger sense of his or her place in society. In short, the work of engaging students as writers was not simply a matter of motivation alone, which is often discussed as if motivation were a very focused, targeted activity surrounding classroom practices and issues that stem immediately from the classroom. Rather, for many educators during the Progressive Era, motivation was part and parcel of a wholly broader discussion. Examining motivation itself was unproductive: it had to come packaged with discussions of the broader conditions under which schools exist, the general welfare of the community and society at large. These discussions could not be separated into discrete parts in order to provide a cogent examination of the issue of motivation in writing instruction. In this sense, productive theorizing on motivation today may need to synthesize contrasting discussions in the field of education, just as Dewey aimed to do in "The Reflex Arc Concept in Psychology" and in much of his later writings.

The Progressive Era represents an extraordinary period in the history of our own discipline, and the parallels between our own challenges in education (and broader society) today and those faced by our distant forebears remain uncannily familiar. We have much to learn from our own experiences as teachers and scholars. The work of historical inquiry in our discipline exists to throw light upon our own problems by looking back and gleaning from how previous ages encountered similar problems. John T. Gage has argued that it “is important to see one’s own time through the perspective of others” (ix). Robert J. Connors in “Dreams and Play: Historical Method and Methodology” shows how palpable an influence the experiences that come from the past can have on the present:

[A]lthough what we face as teachers and scholars every day is always new, it is never completely new. Others have been here before, facing similar problems and choices. The story of their hopes, ideas, struggles, disappointments, and triumphs can tell us about our own stories. We may not learn how ours will end from how theirs ended, but we can gain valuable insight into people and their conditions, their motives, and their responses to problems. (32)

Connors writes that contrasting the present with the past serves to “stimulate questioning, excitement, and curiosity” (16). In revisiting the experience curriculum and recasting Dewey’s theory of experience in the light of a new educational terrain, I hope these discussions will stimulate questioning, excitement, and curiosity regarding ways to craft conditions for motivation in writing instruction.

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