

Article

Dewey on Seriousness, Playfulness and the Role of the Teacher

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Abstract: The chapter that John Dewey dedicates to consideration of play and work in the curriculum in *Democracy and Education* echoes his thoughts on the same subject in *How We Think*, which preceded *Democracy and Education* by six years. Dewey closes *How We Think* with a more expansive treatment of the topic and is keen not only to recast the traditional dichotomy of work and play as distinct kinds of educational activity but to challenge the hierarchical status of the accompanying mental states of seriousness and playfulness. Dewey argues that a combination of playfulness and seriousness represents the ideal mental attitude of the artist: teaching is an art, therefore the teacher is an artist and the ideal mental attitude of the teacher to his or work combines the playful and the serious. It is the task of the teacher to inculcate such habits of mind in his or her students for whom it is implicitly the ideal mental state for learning. It is in the light of this that we should understand what characterises play and work as features of educational activity. Consideration of what Dewey meant is accompanied by an example from contemporary educational practice intended to illustrate Dewey's sense of purposeful activity in which a playful approach creates the kind of embodied experience that will help students to achieve desired educational outcomes. This will lead to reflection on how the role of the teacher as an artist might be conceived, resisting both the temptation towards an instrumental characterisation of playfulness derived from the application of discoveries in cognitive science to classroom practice and goal-directed notions of seriousness. I will argue that alongside the conventional classroom skills of the teacher, what is required is an authentic presence that is attuned to the nature of what is being taught, together with a concern for the outcomes to be achieved. Such an attunement would allow for playfulness and humour as well as seriousness. It is an attunement between both the individual and others in mutuality and with him or herself. These thoughts will be developed via extended reflection upon two scenes from Alan Bennett's *The History Boys* (2006). These scenes draw attention to the importance of conversation for both the teacher/student relationship and as a medium for playful and serious exploration of academic content. If we only think of the Deweyan attitude of the artist in an impersonal sense then the kind of seriousness that is internal to the personal expression of claims about art, ethics, morality, politics, even history, remains unheard, at least in an educational context. It is to this that I turn through consideration of conversation and mutuality in the work of Stanley Cavell via Michael Oakeshott's observations about seriousness and playfulness in conversation and further comments offered by Paul Standish on what it means to say something.

Keywords: seriousness; playfulness; artist; conversation; teaching

Take a look at a child playing, or an artist, musician, or athlete. Are they serious about what they are doing? You bet. But they are playing too. The highest activities of human beings and some of their greatest accomplishments, in fact, are play . . . The philosopher John Dewey got it right: “To be playful and serious at the same time is possible, and it defines the ideal mental condition.”

—John Morreall 1997 [1] (p. 11)

1. Play and Work in the Curriculum

John Dewey’s comment that the ideal mental state harmonises seriousness and playfulness is often quoted approvingly with little questioning of its assumptions or implications. There is a danger in such statements that their aura of wisdom, far from offering a valuable insight, dissuades us from thinking with greater care about what is being claimed. For what or whom is it an ideal mental state? Is its value to be reckoned in instrumental or non-instrumental terms? How would such thinking manifest itself in the activities of the classroom? This can be seen from the perspective of the teacher too: what role does the teacher have in facilitating this state? What kind of teaching methods will be employed? And from here we might be led to ponder on how this bears on the kind of personal qualities the teacher must possess and how the relationship between teacher and students is to be imagined. Given the topic that is my concern, it is clear that one way to proceed in the discussion of these questions would be to assemble a commentary on the various ways in which Dewey writes about play and work and playfulness and seriousness. Indeed, there is a significant secondary literature that would be pertinent to this for example Greene (1989) [2], Jackson (2000) [3], Granger (2006) [4], (Hansen, 2006, 2007) [5,6]. This would be an interesting and valuable project, but it is not the primary concern here. Instead the purpose of the present paper is to forge new lines of enquiry, in particular in relation to how playfulness and seriousness are manifested in contemporary education.

Dewey’s discussion of the nature of play and work in the curriculum in *Democracy and Education* ([1916], 2011) [7] reflects his thinking on some of these questions. Dewey dedicates a chapter to consideration of ‘Play and Work in the Curriculum’ in which he argues against thinking of the two as distinctive features of human activity with only the latter suited for educational purposes, highlighting what Thomas S. Henricks (2015) [8] has described as “the unfortunate consequences of schools’ attempts to separate these two themes” [8] (p. 156). This was more than a purely theoretical issue for Dewey; at the time of writing, in the early twentieth century, pressure had been brought to bear on more conventional schooling from a number of different sources, most notably the educational reformers in the Manual Training Movement. Dewey was also responding to current research in child psychology and his own teaching experience in the classroom. As a result of this wider reconsideration about what should be taught, new kinds of activity, which Dewey refers to as “active occupations” (2011) [7] (p. 108), had been introduced into schools and the curriculum. Dewey itemized these as,

. . . work with paper, cardboard, wood, leather, cloth, yarns, clay and sand, and the metals, with and without tools. Processes employed are folding, cutting, pricking, measuring, modelling, pattern-making, heating and cooling, and the operation characteristic of such tools as the hammer, saw, file etc. Outdoor excursions, gardening, cooking, sewing, printing, book-binding, weaving, painting, drawing, singing, dramatization, storytelling, reading and writing as active pursuits with social aims (not as mere exercises for acquiring skill for future use) [7] (p. 109).

Not everyone agreed that such activities were suitably educational and Dewey himself voices concern and spends considerable time and effort rethinking their educational worth. Dewey acknowledges that the inclusion of more practical activities in the curriculum and school environment, particularly those associated with play such as games, drama and construction, had made school much more enjoyable for children and made managing them far less onerous as well as seemingly enhancing their learning. However, the down-side was a suspicion that schools were being tempted

to use such activities simply to make life easier and provide relief from the strain and tedium of formal school work. Such activities therefore needed a more rigorous justification. To do so would require reconsideration not only of how we understand play as an active occupation but also how we understand work, particularly in the educational context. Play and work were to be understood not as antithetical but as only appearing so in the light of “undesirable social conditions” [7] (p. 112).

Clearly one of the dominant factors in such a picture is that of economic necessity. It is Dewey’s thought that our conventional notions of work and play have become distorted by the pressures of economic necessity in a modern industrial society. Dewey believes that what he terms ‘active occupations’ potentially possess much greater educational value; whilst in life they might be valued as enjoyable and pleasurable outlets, in an educational context they have the capacity to engage the whole pupil, bodily, emotionally and imaginatively, thus affording opportunities for intellectual and social development. Therefore absence of economic pressures in the educational context of the school means activities which normally possess an instrumental value in wider society can be pursued for their own sake and enable such growth to occur. Dewey suggests that by incorporating these activities into the curriculum the natural outcome of acquiring knowledge through activities done for their own sake will be to enhance the experience of learning, with play activities no longer carrying the stigma of lacking purpose and work activities no longer carrying the stigma of drudgery and coercion. Play and work will co-exist as harmonious characteristics of activities done for their own sake within the educational context. Finally, and importantly, “work which remains permeated with the play attitude is art—in quality if not in conventional designation” [7] (p. 114).

2. Seriousness and Playfulness

However, in *How We Think* (1910) [9], the emphasis on the relative importance of play and work as physical activities and their interconnectedness is internalised as Dewey considers the relationship between playfulness and seriousness as states of mind. It is Dewey’s claim that “Playfulness is a more important consideration than play” [9] (p. 162), in that playfulness is “an attitude of mind” [9] (p. 162) whereas play is only “a passing outward manifestation of this attitude” [9] (p. 162). We might wonder why Dewey appears to privilege the attitude over the activity. The answer seems to lie in Dewey’s picture of child development in which the child’s playful attitude towards things in the world is understood as an expression of the plasticity of freedom and which Dewey generally refers to more specifically to as “free mental play”. The kind of playfulness that Dewey initially imagines is that of pretend play in early childhood in which things acquire meaning through becoming “vehicles of suggestion” [9] (p. 162), for example when “the child plays horse with a broom and cars with chairs” [9] (p. 162). Again, Dewey is mindful of the suspicion that such activities are often viewed as no more than child’s play in which the child loses themselves in “an imaginary world alongside the world of actual things” [9] (p. 162) and feels compelled to provide an educational rationale for activities whose value for the child seems wholly reflected in their serious absorption as well as seeking to accommodate these seemingly antithetical states. To do so, he argues work should also be understood as an attitude of mind, an orientation towards activity. The psychological equivalent to characterising activities as work is to characterise the attitude of work as seriousness.

Dewey develops this thought through his interpretation of the general view that the origins of art are to be found in children’s play. This leads him to suggest that “harmony of mental playfulness and seriousness describes the artistic ideal” [9] (p. 220). The unspoken assumption therefore is that children’s play is itself a harmonization of seriousness and playfulness. In this Dewey echoes the thoughts of other philosophers and writers who have sought to express not only something important and vital about childhood but also a sense of what is lost and what must be rediscovered in adulthood through the paradoxical juxtaposition of the playful and the serious. Such thoughts are exemplified in the following quotes,

“Children at play are not playing about. Their games should be seen as their most serious minded activity”.

—Michel de Montaigne

“Man is most nearly himself when he achieves the seriousness of a child at play”.

—Heraclitus

“Man’s maturity: to have rediscovered the seriousness he possessed as a child at play”.

—Friedrich Nietzsche

Dewey is not taking up these thoughts directly. His point is not so much that these qualities have become lost but are divided and displaced in contemporary industrial society. It is from a distorted and divided perspective that adults construct the educational experiences of children. What seems conjoined and natural in the young child becomes dichotomized and estranged in the adult. Thus Dewey must work with dichotomy, estrangement and paradox in order to resolve them in the ideal mental state. An education that seeks to replicate the natural responsiveness of the child to its world but within the classroom in its broadest sense, is the desired aim.

What precisely does he hope to achieve? As Henricks suggests, “Work is activity that focuses on products or results. Play focuses on processes” [8] (p. 156). Therefore one thought is that he is illustrating an ideal blend of process and product within the classroom environment. Given he understands schools as having essentially failed to achieve this Dewey seeks a model for the kind of engagement he advocates. What permits him to do so is that in the general picture of adult necessity that forms the background to classroom activity, one type of individual stands out as not having succumbed so utterly to these necessities: the artist. The artist retains the childlike capacity to respond openly with both seriousness and playfulness to the world and is able to turn responsiveness into the products of art. The picture is of an ideal synthesis of artistic inspiration and artistic technique that produces the successful the work of art, together with an assumption that the work of art will be complete. Too much concern for or too little skill in the execution of technical aspects and the work will be unsuccessful. Likewise if not enough inspiration or imagination has gone into the work of art, it will also be judged a failure, revealing little about its subject matter. Its final form will be an expression of its means and ends. In Deweyan terms it is in the harmony of means and ends that we have the attitude of the artist. Importantly for the more general account of thinking within the classroom that Dewey is articulating, this attitude “may be displayed in all activities, even though not conventionally designated arts” [9] (p. 220). Thus “History, literature, and geography, the principles of science, nay, even geometry and arithmetic, are full of matters that must be imaginatively realized if they are realized at all” [9] (p. 224).

3. The Role of the Teacher

Given this is the ideal balance of mental forces that Dewey wants students to exhibit, what then is the role of the teacher? Dewey first identifies teaching as an art and then characterises the true teacher as an artist whose claim to be one “is measured by his ability to foster the attitude of the artist in those who study with him, whether they be youth or little children” [9] (p. 220). This might immediately give us cause for suspicion as it appears to suggest the teacher’s primary concern is not with what is learned—the end product—whatever it may be, but in developing the right attitudes towards the work i.e., Dewey is expressing a concern for the style or skills of learning and not the specific subject content of what is learned. However, ultimately Dewey argues that “the difficulty and reward of the teacher” [9] (p. 221) is “to nurture inspiring aim and executive into harmony with each other” [9] (p. 221). Thus the task of the teacher is not simply to develop the right kind of orientation towards activities but to achieve an ideal balance between the inspiration and vision necessary to engage and

animate students and provide them with the guidance essential to acquiring mastery over the means of executing that which they have been inspired to produce within a particular subject or academic discipline. It is both a difficulty and a reward. It is not easy but it is worth pursuing.

Dewey's proposal appears to imply that each subject, in its own way, is best taught through an ideal blending of the playful and the serious. The problem is not Gradgrindian facts as such but the way in which those facts are presented and taught, leaving little room for imaginative play upon them. The role of the teacher is to create opportunities for this in the classroom. It is the playful that engages the interest of the student, encourages inquiry, exploration, experimentation, encourages students to question their assumptions about a topic, unsettles prior knowledge and opens up students to the possibility of new knowledge. It is the serious that ensures learning is absorbed in terms of clearly identifiable ends. The student may be puzzled, curious, bewildered, amazed, encouraged to speculate and so forth but this will be in order to meet those ends. Thus while Dewey seeks to liberate both the student and the teacher from the drudgery of unsatisfactorily motivated tasks so that the experience of learning will be much the better for the ideally playful orientation towards varied educational activities, the student's experience of education still reflects a purposeful harmony of process and product. It is important that such purposefulness does not become programmed and that, as Paul Standish reminds us (2003), Dewey views education as involving a "freeing activity" [10] (p. 227) in which the teacher is able to "let his mind come to close quarters with the pupil's mind and the subject matter" (Dewey, 1916 [7] (pp. 108–109) in Standish [10] (p. 227)).

A good example of how pedagogical practice can be understood as harmonising the serious and the playful in this purposeful way is found in *Outstanding Teaching: Engaging Learners* by Andy Griffith and Mark Burns (Griffith and Burns, 2012) [11]. In the chapter 'Sir, I really enjoyed that lesson' Griffith and Burns discuss how outstanding teachers make use of play and playfulness in order to enhance the learning experiences of their students. They give lots of fun examples of techniques employed, techniques that help students feel more secure and "more likely to take the kinds of risk that enable accelerated learning" [11] (p. 114), making them "more open to speculating, hypothesising, creating and being open to sharing their learning" [11] (p. 114). Their claim is that,

Play is a serious business. Encouraging play and playfulness will help students not only get more enjoyment from their learning but also more progress. Using playful methods in our teaching can get students to be more alert, more interested, more engaged and into more flow. Play can also become a more desirable habit for both teachers and students, enabling them to value playful ways of exploring learning and living [11] (p. 120).

In the course of offering useful advice to the teacher about such things as targeted use of games, acquiring a sense of humour and relaxed persona, modelling playfulness and developing clowning and stand-up skills, they present an example of how play is used by a teacher to enable more serious work, in this case the practical study of a Shakespeare text,

Anne Riley knows that when she wants her GCSE English students to act out a scene from *Romeo and Juliet* she has to warm them up first. She gets students to simply walk past each other. Then she asks them to walk past each other and make eye contact. And then she asks students to walk past each other with a swagger. She gradually builds engagement before any dialogue from the script is spoken [11] (p. 98).

As described the serious educational work is the acting out of the scene. Its educational aim might be, for example, to examine the nature of Shakespeare's characterisation or how themes are represented through staging, how vocal techniques and use of physicality can help to establish character, context, tension etc. Committed and engaged involvement will then enable the students to write with insight about the play, drawing on their own experience. This is the engagement that is referred to. The teacher breaks down the component parts, particularly those that are difficult to sustain or require the students to be warmed up. Thus it is a step by step introduction to what is required in the scene to make it

convincing—the making and breaking of eye contact, the use of appropriate body language, movement and gesture, hopefully leading to convincing and appropriate expression of dialogue.

Of course it is not enough to simply do the exercises. You can walk, make eye contact, swagger, badly. The students may be embarrassed and not take it seriously, undervaluing the work. Their work itself may be ineffectual. The teacher knows this. The exercises target what is most difficult—holding eye contact in close proximity, keeping a straight face, enjoying the swagger, playing with it threateningly. They are therefore something more than just a warm-up. In gradually building engagement the exercises will come to constitute part of the scene and are bound up both with the representation of the text through its physical and vocal embodiment and with taking it seriously.

This might appear to present a good example of what Dewey was seeking to justify. It draws on an activity like drama, it harmonises the preparatory process and the end product, reflecting a harmony of seriousness and playfulness in the students themselves and between teacher and students. As a result of their engagement the students will be able to successfully respond to the formal educational demands that will be made on them, for example in being able to answer an exam question in a literature paper with insight and understanding. However, as I have described it, a further aspect has been introduced in the idea that the work itself required a certain responsiveness that is internal to what it means to work well within the subject. It is something more akin to the seriousness of the child at play, absorbed and completely at home in the playfulness of the work, enjoying it in the moment for its own sake and not just for what will be produced as a result of it. Akin, but not identical with; rather, the work itself may condition how we understand what is appropriately serious and playful in our approaches to it and to only see it in instrumental terms will be to distort our understanding of what is significant in the work and what it demands of us. This therefore raises a question about whether Dewey's harmonising of seriousness and playfulness risks an unintended instrumentality that obscures important aspects of the relationship of teacher and student to subject content that are not so easily accommodated by such dominant approaches.

4. The Problem of Seriousness

As exemplified in the discussion of Griffith and Burns, it seems natural to focus on the nature of play and the playful, how they are understood and represented, how they are to be employed, what their educational value is and how they are to appropriately illuminate and enhance the student's experience of education and learning. After all, As Fiachra Long has pointed out (2013) [12] (p. 19), the ancient Greeks linked the word *paidia*, meaning play, to the word *paideia*, meaning education and formation, with both words referring back to the Greek word for child, *pais*. We have long since progressed beyond the narrow Aristotelian, not to say puritanical, view of play as merely recreational, in the light of the work of Dewey, Lev Vygotsky, Jean Piaget, D.W. Winnicott and others. Rather, as Long argues, "it is perhaps better to think of play as enhancing the creativity of any activity and lessening its drudgery and for this reason 'child's play' is a feature of all human behaviour" [12] (p. 19) As exemplified by imagination, creativity and humour, the speculative and light-hearted spirit of playfulness is a familiar feature of educational discourse and would seem to reflect the attitude of the Deweyan artist. However, it is currently more likely to be discussed and justified in the light of cognitive psychology and neuroscience, having been liberated from its progressive Deweyan roots and latter-day suspicions of its detrimental effect on serious academic learning and the acquisition of knowledge. Notwithstanding this rehabilitation and embracing of play and playfulness in providing the means towards more respected contemporary educational ends, I want to introduce what I will call the problem of seriousness and how it might shed some light on what Dewey intends when talking about the teacher as an artist. In doing so I hope to unsettle the conventional sense in which he understands the relationship of process to product, means to ends as an essentially purposeful one. To do so we need to look beyond the ways in which Dewey appears to derive his idea of seriousness from the characterisation of work.

What appears to be missing from Dewey's account of how we orientate ourselves to educational activities is a sense of the different ways we might be claimed by what we are doing, more specifically that our orientation to activity may not be so tidily packaged. For example it matters that on occasions our orientation, understood as that which drives us to express ourselves, is something more than interest or curiosity and is attuned to the ethical significance of what we are teaching and studying. This may make non-instrumental or non-purposeful claims on both teacher and student alike i.e., that what we are expressing and how we express ourselves matters to us, is personally important and is not solely in response to the demands of conventional academic ends. This may permit a harmony of playfulness and seriousness but it may also draw out considerable tensions between the attributes of mind idealised in the attitude of the artist as an educational ideal and a seriousness that is appropriate to the material and which may find expression in non-serious forms. This need not just be an ethical response. It could equally be religious, aesthetic, political, but it is the ethical that resonates in what follows.

5. Seriousness and Playfulness in *The History Boys*

This is illustrated in two scenes from Alan Bennett's *The History Boys* (Bennett/Hytner, 2006) [13]. *The History Boys*, which began life as a stage play at the National Theatre in London before being made into a film, follows the preparation of a group of teenage boys for their entrance examinations for Oxford and Cambridge. The film itself defies easy categorisation. It is both serious and funny. Stylistically, it appears at first glance to be naturalistic but it is also the case that where the school context, notably but not exclusively the classroom, becomes a place for a kind of excess, naturalism gives way to a style of performance that is more exaggerated and larger than life than would be the case in a standard classroom. This can be seen not only in the musical performances and dramatic improvisations but also in the reciting of poetry and the uses to which it is put. This more overtly theatrical style serves not only to heighten the dramatic impact of the film but also directs us to one of Bennett's concerns, namely the value that our experiences in education have for our lives in general. One of the key themes, the clash of perspectives on the purpose and aims of education, is played out in the relationships the boys enjoy with on the one hand, Hector, their unconventional English teacher from whom they get "culture", and Irwin, the smart supply teacher brought in by the head teacher to give the boys "polish" and "edge". Let us now turn to the two scenes.

5.1. Scene 1

The scene takes place an hour into the film. Hector has been forced to share a class with Irwin. We do not see a lesson as such, but a discussion about the content of a lesson. The boys are silent, uncertain as to what is expected of them, very aware that the two teachers demand very different orientations towards the activities that take place in their classrooms. Irwin proposes they discuss the Holocaust. What emerges are two vigorously argued perspectives on the nature of seriousness within an educational context. On the one hand is the view that the Holocaust is a subject like any other and therefore permits a detached, speculative, exploratory play in its treatment. On the other is the thought that it is not an event like any other, therefore how one discusses it and what can be said about it demands a seriousness that is internal to acknowledgment of the horror it represents which is characterised by thoughtfulness and not cleverness.

The scene begins awkwardly. The boys are paralyzed by uncertainty about what is expected of them and are unable to make a decision about what they should discuss, the normal procedure in their General Studies lessons. As Tibbs (played by James Corden) says, "Depends if you want us to be thoughtful, or smart". Irwin suggests discussing the Holocaust. This provokes Hector to question how it is possible to teach such a subject. Crowther's response to this, that it can be treated as a subject and therefore studied like any other, prompts Scripps to point out that it is not a subject like any other. Hector is clearly quite horrified by the educational rendering of the experience of the Holocaust in which schools go on trips to concentration camps and children eat crisps and drink coke, to which

Crowther responds that in this respect such places are no different from other educational attractions that cater for school visits. What troubles Hector is that nothing about our normal everyday life and behaviour seems appropriate at the sites of such monumental suffering and evil. This leads briefly to speculation about what might be appropriate. Hector's embracing of the idea that silence may be the only appropriate acknowledgment is scorned by Dakin who is at this point infatuated with Irwin's cleverness and disillusioned by Hector's shambolic pedagogy. Hector's forceful reaction to Dakin is to denigrate his comment as flip, glib journalism. However, Hector's own idea for acknowledging the Holocaust, as an unprecedented horror like no other, is criticized in turn for being conventional and banal.

The discussion then turns briefly to the ethical nature of the language of criticism. To speak of placing events in proportion or context in order to provide explanations is seen by Posner as tantamount to explaining away the events of the Holocaust, reducing their significance to one of cause and effect, thus trivializing the significance of what took place. What he perceives as a failure of seriousness is legitimized by educational practices and values; Irwin is impressed by these arguments as if they are moves in a more disinterested conception of conversation and more than once murmurs "Good point" in response. Both Posner and Scripps object to this. Posner tells Irwin he is not making a 'good point' but means what he says whilst Scripps insists that what matters in the discussion is that what is said is true. Irwin's reaction is to tell Scripps to distance himself from the material, insisting that the job of the historian is to provide a perspective on events and to do so with no guarantee that this will not change as new interpretations are put forward. Nothing in this respect can be definitive, everything is open to revision, including the meaning of the Holocaust. In educational terms, providing and working with perspectives on historical events requires an appropriately academic critical distancing of oneself from the material that one is studying and about which one is speaking regardless of the nature of those events and what constitutes 'primary evidence'. We must do so in order to ensure our views do not become rigid and dogmatic but are open to reflection, re-evaluation and fresh perspectives. This implies that Irwin does not take their first person protestations seriously, regarding them as the expression of entrenched opinion, no matter how sincerely expressed. Academic study is to be conducted in the third person through argument and the provision of perspectives. From Irwin's perspective Hector's point of view is old-fashioned and clichéd. Far better to look for fresh insight that will shed new light on source material and which treats the Holocaust as just one topic amongst many about which they may or may not be questioned. The scene ends with Dakin sidling up to Irwin and sycophantically telling him how he's won the argument, putting Hector in his place, as if that is what was at stake in the conversation.

5.2. Scene 2

Bennett and Hytner balance the outcome of the discussion on the Holocaust with a scene in which we are shown how the seriousness appropriate to subject content can be expressed in more personal terms. The boys have been on a trip to a ruined monastery. On their return Hector is summoned to the Head teacher's office. His tendency to inappropriately touch the boys when giving them a lift home on his motorbike has been spotted and reported. The headmaster is furious but does not want to risk damaging the school's reputation by sacking Hector. Instead Hector's retirement will be brought forward and the incident hushed up. Hector exits and goes into the classroom to teach an after-school lesson. Posner has stayed behind and so they have a one to one lesson on a poem by Thomas Hardy, "Drummer Hodge". Having learned the poem, about a young soldier who dies and is buried in a foreign country, Posner recites it off by heart and they discuss it. Hector makes the connection between himself and Hardy when Posner asks him how old he was when he wrote the poem to which Hector replies, "about 60, my age I suppose. A saddish life, though not unappreciated". The significance of compound adjectives for Hector, mentioned earlier in the film by Dorothy Lintott, becomes apparent. Having described Hodge as "uncoffined" to indicate the rough and ready nature of his death and burial, Hector gives further examples of Hardy's use of the grammatical form—"Unkissed. Unrejoicing.

Unconfessed. Unembraced". It is evident he is talking about himself and in describing the technique as giving the poem a sense of "not sharing" and being "out of it" he expresses something of his own experience to which Posner can relate through his reading of the poem—"I felt that a bit". Hector then says "the best moments in reading are when you come across something—a thought, a feeling, a way of looking at things that you'd thought special and particular to you. And here it is set down by someone else, a person you've never met, maybe even someone long dead". He describes the experience as being "as if a hand has come out and taken yours". As Hector reaches out his own hand, Posner motions as if to reach out and touch it, before hesitating. It is a moment of empathy and shared understanding. As Posner recites the last verse once again, its usefulness lies beyond Irwin's exhortations to turn such knowledge into gobbets to be inserted into essays but exists as an expression of a shared understanding of what it feels like to be an outsider, not quite "in the swim".

Can Dewey help us understand what distinguishes Hector and Irwin in exemplifying how seriousness and playfulness are present within the classroom? Both are unorthodox and the film makes both visions of education compelling. Whilst Hector's approach will offer the greater integrity, the boys also need Irwin's approach to give them a chance of successfully passing their entrance examinations. However, if the two visions are complimentary there is also a tension between them that requires acknowledging. It is too simplistic to think of this as a tension between the intentional/purposive and the aimless, despite Dakin's reference to Hector as a "shambles". Hans Joas (1996) [14] in *The Creativity of Action* speaks of Dewey and "the non-teleological interpretation of the intentionality of action", that is, having purposes but not specifically fixed ones. Hector's teaching does not lack intention or purpose, rather it lacks the fixed purposes and goal-directed thrust of Irwin's. There is something attractive and dynamic about the scenes in the film depicting Irwin's lessons with the boys. His methods encourage the free play of thinking on subject matter, the boys are engaged and he encourages them to make good use of the knowledge of both high and low culture that Hector has provided for them to make interesting connections. In seeking to touch their souls and be touched in return, Hector's teaching risks exposure and rejection; Irwin's risk is that of professional failure.

Where then does this leave us with regard to Dewey's harmonising of the serious and the playful in his description of the mind and learning? Does Dewey's line of thought take a similar course to the kind of view that characterises contemporary thinking about pedagogy, subject knowledge and subject content which is that what matters is students acquiring designated knowledge by any means possible? Irwin in this respect exemplifies mainstream attitudes to teaching and learning, one that Dewey's perspective would seemingly countenance. It is interesting how we are told in the film that Irwin ultimately becomes well-known as a television historian and yet, as Scripps observes, his methods essentially involved the application of a formula for turning conventional ideas on their head and arguing the contrary in a convincing manner i.e., there is something nonserious about Irwin's teaching despite appearances to the contrary.

I gave an example earlier that described how teachers should model playfulness. Such exhortations operate with a tacit assumption that playfulness and seriousness are not only distinguishable but that what we understand as seriousness and take to be serious does not require the same sort of attention. After all, who needs advice on how to be serious? It is all too easy to be serious; the problem is not a lack of seriousness but its totalizing presence in the demand that all experiences in school must be educational and accountable as such. It is this which means we require reminders to relax and be playful. It is of course important that these playful experiences are themselves educational. This was Dewey's concern also. In this respect it might be useful to think of a further contrast in the teaching of Hector and Irwin, between what is personal and impersonal. As indicated Irwin's method involves a distancing of oneself from subject matter in order to acquire a critical perspective on it. Hector reflects a concern for what is personal in education. It is an approach to subject content rather than a distancing from it. It is a place for exploration of personal thought and feeling in discussion. It is Irwin who theatricalizes his teaching whilst Hector seeks more authentic experiences in the classroom. In this respect there are a number of things about the scene that are worth mentioning. It takes place

in a social setting. It is staged in a democratic circle which could also be understood as a place for performing. The teachers provide an opportunity for the students to speak. What the scene provides is a contrast between speaking personally and speaking impersonally. The latter is a recognizable feature of education, the former less so. I do not mean that students do not have passionate discussions about issues but the personal voice—"it isn't 'good', sir. I mean it"—is not the voice desired by the ends of education whereas the impersonal voice—"Good point"—is. However, it seems to me that the impersonal voice is not the voice that expresses the attitude of the artist. The artist's voice is a personal voice married to the skilled use of technique. This attunement between what the artist seeks to express and how this is achieved is what enables the personal voice to emerge and provides the value found within the artistic activity. For the teacher this is the same. It is this that makes Dewey's claim to artistry in teaching credible, not the more impersonal management required to harmonise playfulness and seriousness.

I do not think that Dewey conceives of the different subjects in the spirit of each being just like any other and therefore suited to an impersonal imposition of a style of pedagogy, the kind of thing that is happening across academy chains in England, for example, where schools within a chain come together to ensure subjects are taught in more or less the same way across the members of the chain. In seeking to introduce the imaginative and the playful there is an awareness that the experience of education can be so much more than, for example, teaching to the test. The danger represented here, however, is not one of drudgery but of the "flip" or the "glib", not only in what marks the difference between the provision of occasions for making a good point and the provision of opportunities to mean it but from the teacher's perspective having a bearing upon the planning of lessons and the employment of strategies and techniques.

The kind of attunement I am advocating is both an attunement to the deeper significance and possibility of what it means to be a teacher as manifested in what one seeks to develop in one's students but also to oneself and one's own voice. Both are important and we see that in *The History Boys*, not only in the playing out of the two perspectives but also in the sense that it forces us to consider our own voice as teachers. If we only think of the Deweyan attitude of the artist in the impersonal sense then the kind of seriousness that is internal to the personal expression of claims about art, ethics, morality and politics remains unheard, at least in an educational context.

Such an attunement allows for playfulness and humour as well as seriousness. It is an attunement between the individual and others in mutuality and with him or herself. This suggests there is something important about the nature of conversation that takes place between teacher and students. It is to this that I want to turn through consideration of conversation and mutuality in the work of Stanley Cavell via Michael Oakeshott's observations about seriousness and playfulness in conversation and further comments offered by Paul Standish.

6. Conversation

What remains unclear is how the teacher is to achieve the harmonization of seriousness and playfulness and what its value is. What is it about the artist that makes it worth pursuing? Furthermore, none of this explains why the artist is the model. Why not the scientist? Why not the mathematician? Why not the historian, an Irwin, if academic models are to serve as models of thinking in the classroom? Or even the philosopher, playing with ideas, testing theories with thought experiments, reasoning rigorously? Why not anyone committed to unsettling preconceived ideas, encouraging speculative thinking, provoking students to new ways of understanding? Perhaps we can get a sense of its worth in Chris Higgins's discussion of a well-known quote from Michael Oakeshott. Higgins turns to Oakeshott in the light of comments by Dewey on what it means to see teaching as a vocation. Oakeshott is explaining his imagining of human activity through the metaphor of conversation,

The image of human activity and intercourse as a conversation will, perhaps, appear both frivolous and unduly skeptical. This understanding of activity as composed, in the last resort, of inconsequent adventures, often put by for another day but never concluded, and

of the participants as playfellows moved, not be a belief in the evanescence of error and imperfection but only by their loyalty and affection to one another, may seem to neglect the passion and the seriousness with which, for example, both scientific and practical enterprises are often pursued and the memorable achievements they have yielded . . . Although a degree of skepticism cannot be denied, the appearance of frivolity is due, I think, to a misconception about conversation. As I understand it, the excellence of this conversation (as of others) springs from a tension between seriousness and playfulness. Each voice represents a serious engagement (though it is serious not merely in respect of its being pursued for the conclusion it promises); and without the seriousness the conversation would lack impetus. But in its participation in the conversation, each voice learns to be playful, learns to understand itself conversationally and to recognise itself as a voice among voices. As with children, who are great conversationalists, the playfulness is serious and the seriousness is only play (Oakeshott, [1959] 1991, [15] (pp. 492–493) in Higgins, [16] (pp. 439–441)).

What leads Higgins to quote Oakeshott at length is his wondering what members of the conversation can be if not ‘question-answerers and problem-solvers’ [16] (p. 439), that is, thinkers whose criticality is understood through a particular set of concepts and associated practices that are suited to educational norms. Oakeshott’s point, argues Higgins (2010), is that no one voice i.e., no one discipline, of the likes of science, literature and history should dominate the “ongoing conversation through which human beings attempt to understand themselves . . . The voice of science, for instance, must not be allowed to reduce the conversation to inquiry; nor should the voice of practicality be allowed to take over the conversation . . . ” [16] (p. 439).

Higgins is impressed by Oakeshott’s picture of conversation as a ‘stirring image of self-understanding through serious play’ [16] (p. 441), writing that,

When Oakeshott says that children are great conversationalists, he does not mean that they are friendly and chatty, he means that they are interested in the different ‘voices’, that they are interested in self-understanding, and they have not yet learned the pernicious adult distinction between labour and leisure. They still know how to be serious in their play and playful in their seriousness . . . Teaching offers a constant check against the dominance of one voice, and against the tendency for the great human questions to become mere academic topics. Teaching forces one to see one’s discipline from the eyes of the uninitiated and to ponder how the voice of one’s discipline contributes to the conversation [16] (p. 441).

Dewey is not describing a discipline and its practices but a mental state so what he says need not be at odds with this picture of conversation. But without looking at what is of value in what follows or is produced as a result of that mental state it might appear to be a rather empty assertion. This need not be the case. Dewey’s thought is that such a spirit of enquiry is best enabled if it is carried out in the spirit with which the artist works, open to new ideas, open to making new associations, leading to moral and intellectual growth and development. However, the example of Hector is intended to prompt a different kind of thought about how we should understand the harmonization of seriousness and playfulness. This takes us beyond the playful as a pedagogical strategy to be employed as enabling the more serious business of learning. Rather it is internal to learning and the experience of education that it is open to both serious and playful approaches and perspectives.

An observation made by Stanley Cavell develops this further. Cavell said of his experience of J.L. Austin’s classes in the mid-1950s that,

After I had “given up” (so I called it) music for philosophy, working in Austin’s classes was the time for me in philosophy when the common rigors of exercise acquired the seriousness and playfulness—the continuous mutuality—that I had counted on in musical performance. This may have meant to me that what was happening in Austin’s classes was not, as it lay, quite philosophy (Cavell, 2010) [17] (p. 323).

It is interesting that when looking back at this period in later life, Cavell also identifies it as the moment when he not only discovered his own philosophical voice but what would be serious for him in pursuing philosophy, the idea of returning the human voice to philosophy, bringing with it a responsibility for as well as a possibility of meaning what we say and having a voice in our own lives and history. In taking the human voice seriously Cavell is taking its possibilities seriously and this includes the playful as much as it includes the serious. Therefore there is a sense in which Cavell's encounter with Austin both liberates him and gives him new found responsibilities and the mutuality of seriousness and playfulness in our language and relationships reflects that. Dewey argues that the role of the teacher is to inculcate the artistic ideal of harmonising the two and the success of the teacher is measured by his or her ability to achieve this. I do not know how this would be measured or assessed other than by experiencing the atmosphere in a classroom and bringing one's own judgments to bear on what is taking place, the spirit in which it is done and what is appropriate.

Cavell provides us with a valuable picture of what the relationship between teacher and pupils might look like in his discussion of marriage. It is in his writings on film that Cavell develops his thinking on marriage, in particular *Pursuits of Happiness* (1981) and *Contesting Tears* (1996) [18], where he explores classic Hollywood films from the 1930s and 1940s which share the common theme of a relationship in crisis. If we view these films through a Cavellian eye we might take them to be asking what constitutes a marriage, to which Cavell's answer is that it is constituted by a "willingness for remarriage" (Cavell, 1996) [18] (p. 11), what David Rudrum (2013) describes as "an everyday commitment to reaffirming and rediscovering what brings and binds the couple together" [19] (p. 151). Cavell expresses it as follows,

What makes marriage worth reaffirming is a diurnal devotedness that involves friendship, play, surprise and mutual education, all manifested in the pair's mode of conversing with each other (not just in words), which expresses an intimacy or understanding often incomprehensible to the rest of the depicted world, but in which consists the truth of the marriage (2005) [20] (pp. 121–122).

It should be said that whilst many and varied forms of claim are captured in the idea of conversation it would be a mistake to think of its seriousness only in terms of its being earnest or 'deep'. Whilst it must admit of these possibilities it is also present in the willingness to play, in friendship, to surprise and be surprised and in a mutual education. Its seriousness is found in its intimacy and the openness of each to the other.

In this way the relationship between teacher and students might capture something of both Dewey and Oakeshott. It does, however, leave open how we are to understand the nature of seriousness in such conversation. I want to draw on an example from Paul Standish for how we might understand it, which I believe takes us beyond the impersonal sense in which we might understand it as purposefulness but as something internal to our capacity to respond and attend to each other. Standish asks us to imagine the following encounter between an adult and a young child,

You are sitting at your desk at home working and a small child, not quite two years old, comes hurriedly into the room. He is distressed, struggling to say something, barely able to find any words, and you listen, able to discern only fragments of sense. But, it is clear, he is imploring you to listen, repeating these same sounds excitedly, and finally they coalesce into a sentence you can understand; "Ella put the dinosaur down the toilet". He has come to you, it turns out, not to seek your help in rescuing the dinosaur, for his mother, you soon find out, has already done that. He has come to tell you what has happened. He is registering from your reaction the importance of what has happened, and in so doing finding out something about what the world is like. But he is also, in finding something to say, discovering the world as something we can speak about and discovering himself as having something to say . . . Having something to say, and realising that one can say something, are breakthrough moments in the life of the young child, where they are not

just repeating or playing with the sounds that they hear but saying something about the world . . . This is having something to speak about, and it is difficult to imagine what, in the absence of this, a conversation could be like (2015) [21] (p. 492).

What Standish draws out is how significant it is for understanding conversation that we experience ourselves as having something to say. What is important is not just being able to say things but finding there is a world to say something about. They are mutually dependent and come to light together. Both are necessary for seriousness. This is what drives Posner to express his frustration with Irwin, because Irwin's "Good point" fails to acknowledge the nature of Posner's seriousness in expressing his point of view. My point is not that all conversation is of this kind but that what is to count as conversation, and what is to count as seriousness in the classroom must admit of this possibility and is not to be determined solely by lesson objectives and learning outcomes. It is perhaps this that justifies the model of the artist more than that of the scientist or the mathematician, that it is internal to our evaluation of the work of the artist that he or she has something to say, that there is something worth attending to. It is not simply that the artist's purposefulness is what matters but that its purposefulness is directed towards something whose completion requires a finished state in order that it might say something meaningful, playfully or otherwise. That Dewey does not fully explicate this is to be regretted. It suggests a limitation in what he takes to be serious and playful in human activity in an educational context which derives not from limitations in what it means to be playful but what it means to be serious. Nevertheless, that Dewey directs us towards this as a means of articulating our experience in a spirit of freedom and in the light of our capacity for growth is to be welcomed.

It is evident that although I have returned to Dewey in my concluding comments, the nature of the content I am addressing and the style of the writing that is being addressed seeks to look beyond the framework that Dewey provides in his discussion of seriousness and playfulness. Dewey's undeniably affirmative attitude towards the importance of both seriousness and playfulness is couched in rather somber tones. The blandness of his prose and its flat descriptive style serves to restrict the way in which the serious and the playful can be realised in his writing and therefore how their mutuality can be understood. In the hundred years since *Democracy and Education* was written, the significance of play and seriousness, and their interrelation, has come to take new forms and present new challenges, both within the educational context and the wider social and cultural setting. Dewey knew nothing of confessional and reality television, social media and the internet; he knew nothing of the politics of soundbites and spin; he knew nothing of virtual reality. Our world is one in which the equivocation between play and seriousness is peculiarly significant for our lives and world. It is incumbent on anyone interested in taking ideas from Dewey forward for the twenty-first century to be ready to move beyond the letter of what he says to see how these ideas might be developed in new ways and contexts. As such it is appropriate to consider those ideas in their limitations. The approach to their subject matter of writers like Alan Bennett and philosophers like Cavell allows such themes to emerge more vividly through the care with which their words are chosen and what they take to be serious in so doing. Both have distinctive voices through which their perspectives on human life is expressed. Their voices are both personal and impersonal, crafted and animated, serious and playful, ethical and aesthetic. This is not to deny the significance of both work and play, playfulness and seriousness for Dewey's understanding of the art of teaching. Dewey's reflections on seriousness and playfulness provide the very useful bare bones for a general framing of their significance. The aim of the paper has been to put flesh on this, and bring it to life.

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